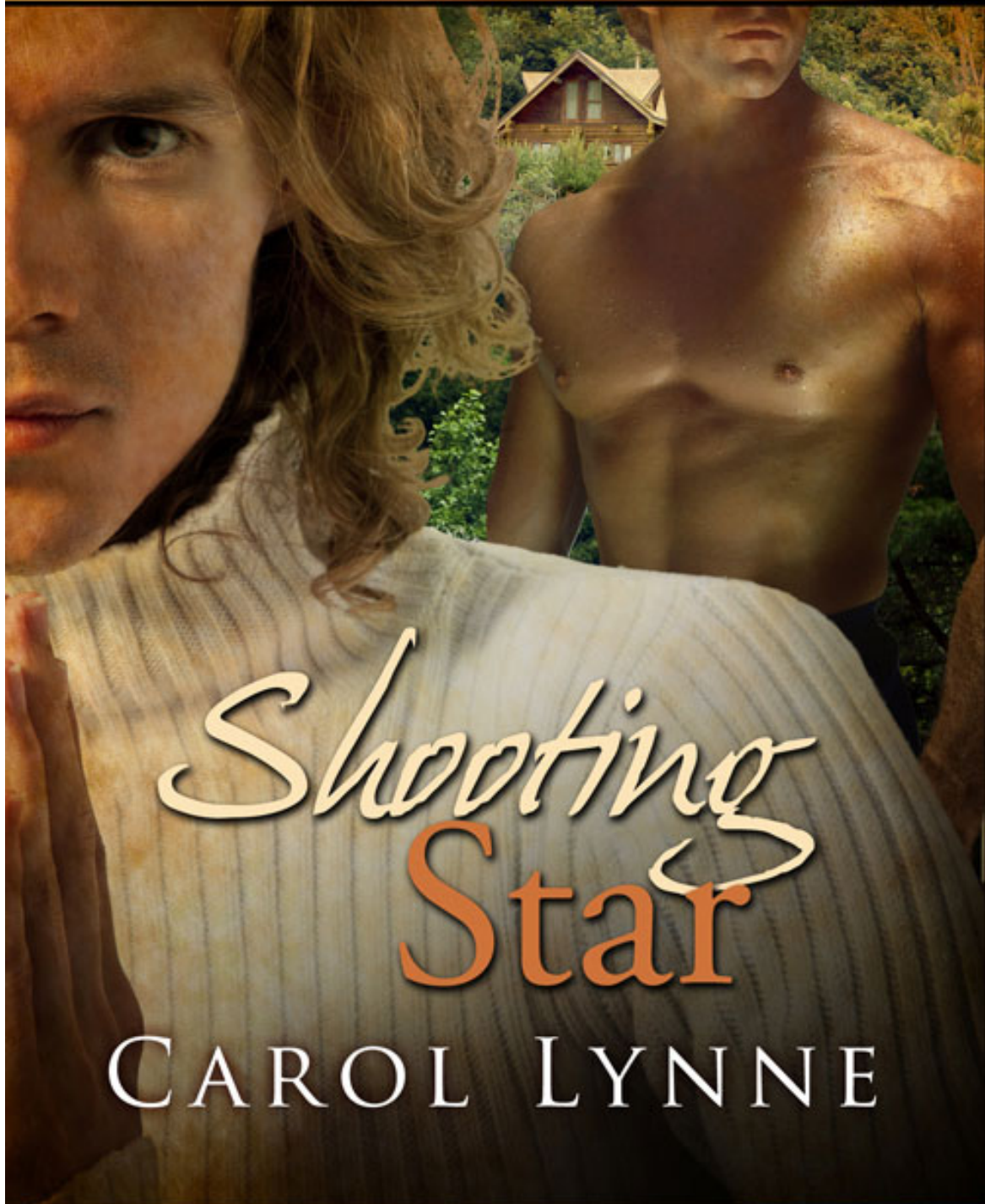




CATTLE
VALLEY



Shooting
Star

CAROL LYNNE

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Shooting Star

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Cattle Valley

SHOOTING STAR

Carol Lynne

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Chapter One

With Ezra James' birthday barbecue in full swing, Brac Riesling tried to stick to the shadows. Everyone he'd met since arriving in Cattle Valley had been incredibly nice, but Brac was starting to tire of always being on his best behaviour. Not that he wanted to fart or burp, but if the occasion arose, it would be nice to know it could pass without ending up in the gossip rags.

He took another sip of his beer and stared out at the grazing cattle in the pasture. The tableau in front of him reminded him of home. Although he rarely got home to Iowa, he thought of it daily.

At first his parents had been thrilled that Brac had managed to make a name for himself in Hollywood. Landing a coveted role on the top rated soap opera of all time had pushed him into the public eye, but it wasn't until he'd been named one of the sexiest actors in Hollywood that the reporters began digging into his personal life. When news of his homosexuality broke, Brac had tried to lay low. Unfortunately the reports refused to let the story die without wanting every detail. They'd shown up at his family farm, and taped his parents without them even knowing it, all in an effort to get an exclusive story. Brac had paid a lot of money to have a tall fence constructed around the majority of the property, but it had done little to ease his parents' peace of mind. He would have loved to go home more often, but reporters tended to follow him. In an effort to save what was left of his relationship with his folks, Bob and Carol Hostetler, he'd been relegated to a once-a-year visit in January.

Brac walked closer to the heavy decorative wooden fence that separated the ranch and yard from the pasture. After setting his empty plastic cup on the ground, he climbed up and sat on the top of a thin, two-by-four-inch board. It took a few moments to get comfortable, but with his feet resting on the next board down, Brac finally managed it.

After inhaling, Brac grinned. "Smells like home," he whispered to the clear evening sky.

"Better watch yourself. There's a bull in that pasture that would love nothing more than to knock you off that fence and stomp you to the ground."

Brac glanced over his shoulder. "What's his name?" he asked the stranger.

"Midnight," the handsome man said. He stuck out his hand. "I'm Jax Brolin, foreman of the EZ Does It."

Brac climbed down from the fence and shook Jax's hand. "Brac." He stared back out towards the field. "Midnight's a pretty name."

"Sure is, but his full name is Midnight Massacre." Jax chuckled. "Just kidding. He's not like the bulls at the Back Breaker. Midnight's more of a lover if you know what I mean?"

"So if he were to actually knock me off the fence and stomp me to the ground, he'd at least lick me afterwards?" Brac smiled. "It might be worth it. I've had a bit of a dry spell lately." As soon as he'd said it, Brac winced. Talking too much was how he always managed to get himself into trouble. "You know I was just kidding, right?"

Jax slapped Brac's shoulder. "Relax. You don't have to be on guard here. We're a laid-back bunch. No one's going to run to the press. Hell, most of us hate those fuckers."

"Because of what happened two years ago?" Brac hated to get nosy, but he doubted there were many gay men in the country who hadn't been glued to the unfolding story of the grandstand collapse. Out in the real world the town of Cattle Valley was whispered about in gay circles, almost like an imaginary place.

"Yep." Jax glanced up at Brac from underneath his black Stetson. "We're a pretty private group of people. The accident hit us hard, but it was the reporters traipsing around town, trying to dig up dirt, that brought us together."

Brac had a feeling he'd just been warned not to pry. "I understand."

Jax stared at him for several moments before nodding. "Good." He gestured towards the parties behind him. "We lost one of our own in the accident. If you need a place to hide from reporters, you're welcome here. Last time some nosy sonofabitch came around trying to dig up a story on Jim Becker, Ezra ran him off before he could make it up the drive." Jax laughed. "Believe me, when someone as big as Ezra runs you off, you don't come back."

"Thanks." Brac was surprised by the offer, but appreciative. "It's Kit I worry about. I've spent the last nine years being photographed and lied about, but it's all new to her." He wanted to make sure Jax knew the truth of the situation. If the man had offered him refuge, it was the least he could do. "There's nothing going on between us. Kit's my best friend, and I'll do anything to make sure it stays that way."

Jax shook his head. "No need to explain. Just thought I'd put the offer on the table."

"I appreciate that."

Jax gave a tip of his cowboy hat before walking off. Brac watched the retreating man until he disappeared in the crowd. He turned back to the pasture and leaned his forearms against the top rail, thinking over Jax's offer.

"You should go back to the party," a deep voice said from behind him.

Brac glanced over his shoulder to find Al Jessup, the deputy assigned to protect him from the paparazzi while he was in town. He returned his attention to the pasture. "I'm sure everyone's real nice, but I've been to enough parties to last a lifetime. Besides, I bet the reporters are still scurrying around Malibu trying to find me."

When Jessup didn't reply, Brac assumed he'd given up and gone back to the party. The sun had dropped below the horizon, thrusting the pasture into deep shadow. Eventually, Brac decided to go back to the party and show his appreciation for the invitation. He said one last goodbye to the yet unseen Midnight and turned around. He'd taken half a dozen steps before he noticed Jessup, crouched down in the darkness.

"Are you watching me?" Brac asked, coming to a stop.

Jessup stood and crossed his arms over his massive chest. "It's the only reason I came."

Brac stepped closer to the deputy. Normally he'd be all over the handsome man, but there was definitely an invisible 'not interested' sign pinned to Jessup's chest. It was obvious by Jessup's lack of conversation and grumpy expression that he didn't like Brac. "It was Ryan's idea to assign me to you. If you don't want the job, tell him."

"Didn't say that."

"Of course you didn't. You've barely spoken to me since we were introduced. Are you like this naturally, or is there something about me you don't like?"

Although Jessup's facial expression didn't change, Brac noticed a softening around Jessup's big brown eyes. "I'm not comfortable around people."

That was it. No further explanation. Brac wondered if he'd ever get more than one sentence answers from the man. "I'm likely to annoy the hell out of you then because it seems I'm constantly surrounded by people. Not that I enjoy it, but it comes with the job."

Jessup continued to stare at Brac. Eventually, he tipped his head in acknowledgement.

Brac sighed. He'd always had a thing for the strong silent type, but Jessup took it to a whole new level. It sent chills through Brac's body. He reached out and rested a hand on Jessup's forearm. "Are you uncomfortable around me?"

"Yes."

"So it's not just crowds you don't like," Brac surmised. He dropped his hand back to his side. "Too bad."

Brac started to walk off when Jessup spoke. "People don't usually touch me."

Brac slowed his step but didn't turn around. "Because you don't welcome it or because they're afraid to?"

"A little of both, I think," Jessup said, following Brac.

To say Jessup was socially awkward would have been an understatement, but Brac could tell there was a great deal of pain inside the big man. "I don't know your past, but I think you'd find life a lot easier if you opened yourself up more. Not everyone's out to hurt you. Some of us just want a simple conversation." He glanced over his shoulder. "Maybe more."

* * * *

From the shadows beside the barn, Jessup watched Brac talk easily with a table of people. In the golden glow of the overhead fairy lights, Brac's features mesmerised him. Each time Brac laughed gooseflesh broke out on Jessup's body. He'd mentally replayed their earlier conversation at least twenty times, looking for a clue as to why the man made him feel so much.

Since his release from the Syrian prison that had unjustly contained him for more than three years, Jessup had made it a point not to get involved with people. The overcrowded conditions at the prison had forced him to fight for his safety on a daily basis. Even sleeping was dangerous when housed in a cell with five other men, but it was nothing compared to the treatment he'd received at the hands of prison guards.

Nightmares of his incarceration were still an on-going issue, one he didn't care to have anyone witness. Jessup ran his hand over the spot on his arm that still tingled from Brac's earlier touch. When he'd first been brought back to the United States, more than nine months earlier, Jessup wouldn't even allow the military doctors to get close enough to examine him. He'd eventually been found unfit for continued duty and was released from his government contract.

For months he'd wandered the country trying to find peace from the images that continued to haunt him. He'd eventually landed in Cattle Valley, hoping for a fresh start.

Despite the welcoming he'd received in the community, Jessup hadn't been able to let down his guard long enough to really get to know anyone, so why now? What was it about the man across the yard that made him want to try again?

It had been years since he'd owned a television, so Brac's star status meant nothing to him. Perhaps it was the physical contact. Jessup was tempted to lift his arm to his nose to see if Brac's touch had left a smell.

With a disgusted shake of his head, Jessup stuffed his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. He'd been given a job by a man he respected. The last thing he needed was to get sidetracked by his awakening libido.

* * * *

Brac woke to raised voices. Unlike the previous days, Hawk's deep timbre wasn't moaning in ecstasy – instead he appeared to be arguing with someone.

Brac threw off the covers and reached for his jeans. The idea of Hawk raising his voice to such a degree disturbed him. The thought of Kit being at the receiving end of Hawk's anger gutted him.

Racing from the room, Brac headed for Kit and Hawk's bedroom. When he saw the open door and empty room, he changed direction and rushed to the living room. He found Kit on the couch, her arms wrapped around her waist, but no sign of Hawk.

"Where'd he go?" he asked Kit.

"He's on the porch, yelling at a group of photographers," Kit whispered.

"Fuck!" Brac ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "How'd they find us so fast?"

Kit shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"It does if someone from this town sold us out," Brac countered.

"They didn't." She looked up at Brac, who was pacing back and forth across the room. "I'm sorry."

With a sigh, Brac sat beside Kit on the couch. He brushed the blonde hair out of her face and kissed her cheek. "I'm the one who's sorry. I should've known better." Brac had enjoyed his few days in Cattle Valley. Sure, he occasionally felt eyes on him as he moved about town, but not once had he been asked for an autograph. "I should go," he said, rising from the sofa.

"Don't," Kit begged, reaching for Brac's hand. "Maybe Ryan can keep the reporters out of town."

"Oh, sweetie, Ryan can't set up road blocks just because I can't take the heat." Although he hadn't been fired from *Pirates' Cove*, he'd been informed his character would be involved in an explosion. Brac knew exactly what that meant. The show's writers would no doubt bandage his character up from head to toe and wait for the outcome of the internal investigation into the alleged harassment charges against Brac. If the allegations were found to be true, Brac would be fired and another actor brought in to take his place. He'd seen it happen countless times.

"But where will you go?" Kit asked just as Hawk stormed back into the house.

Brac's first thought was going home to Iowa, but he quickly ruled that out for obvious reasons. "The foreman at the EZ Does It told me I could hide out there if I needed to."

"That might not be such a bad idea," Hawk said. "The important thing is separating you and Kit otherwise I fear the rumours will never die down. Best friends or not, I don't think Kit could handle winding up in the tabloids as your lover again."

"Let me make a few calls." Brac squeezed Kit's hand before letting go. He noticed big tears rolling down Kit's cheeks and melted. "Don't cry. No one could keep me from you for long. In another week, there'll be some other scandal and the reporters will move on. But until then, keeping you out of their nasty games is imperative."

Brac retreated to his bedroom and quickly found the piece of paper with Jessup's phone number. He picked up his cell and called the man who'd featured in his nightly jack-off sessions.

"Jessup."

"Jessup, its Brac. Reporters showed up on Kit's doorstep this morning."

"Shit," Jessup grumbled.

"If you're not on duty, I was hoping you'd help me get to the EZ Does It without leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for the paparazzi."

"I'll be there in ten minutes." Jessup hung up without another word.

Brac shoved his phone into his pocket and began packing. He wasn't sure how Jessup was going to manage to spirit him away to the ranch, but he didn't doubt the man could do it.

"So, when are you leaving?" Kit asked from the doorway.

"Jessup said he'd be here within ten minutes." Brac pulled his small suitcase out of the closet. He glanced at Kit. "Is Hawk mad at me?"

"What? Why would he be mad? He's as sorry as I am that they followed you here." Kit walked into the room and wrapped her arms around Brac's waist. "I hate that you have to leave."

"I'm not going far," Brac reminded her.

"I know," she mumbled and hugged him again. "I just wanted you to like Cattle Valley."

"I do." He kissed the top of Kit's head and released her. "That's one of the reasons I'm only letting the paparazzi drive me to the outskirts of town." He smiled down at her. "Once the reporters give up, I'll be back."

Kit helped Brac pack his clothes. They were just finishing up when they heard a police siren outside the window. "Holy crap," Kit said, darting from the room.

Brac picked up his suitcase and followed. When he peeked out the front window, he was surprised to see three police cars in front of Hawk and Kit's house. He watched as Ryan and two deputies began waving their arms at the photographers in an obvious attempt to get them to leave.

"Look who I found at the back door," Hawk said from behind Brac.

Brac released the blinds and turned to find Jessup standing in the living room. He gestured towards the front of the house. "Is that part of the plan?"

"Distraction," Jessup said. "Got your stuff?"

Brac held up his suitcase.

"Let's go."

After a quick goodbye to his friends, Brac followed Jessup through the kitchen to the back door. "What's the plan?"

"Open the door and run like hell to my truck. Hopefully the reporters will be so busy bitching about freedom of speech they won't realise we're gone until it's too late."

Brac appreciated the fact that the bigger man didn't try to take his suitcase from him. Instead, Jessup opened the door and motioned for Brac to go ahead of him. Brac took off and didn't stop until he'd made it through the back gate. He tossed his suitcase in the bed of the dark blue Ford F250 pickup. He scrambled into the passenger seat and ducked down as Jessup jumped in behind the wheel.

"So far so good," Jessup said, pulling down the narrow alley.

It wasn't until they were on their way Brac realised something. "Shit! I forgot to call the EZ Does It to let them know I'm coming."

"Taken care of," Jessup replied.

As soon as they cleared town, Brac sat up in the seat. "Thanks for doing this."

"Is it worth it?"

"Yeah. Anything that saves Kit from public scrutiny is worth it." Brac fastened his seatbelt for the remainder of the short drive.

"No, I meant all of it. Is being an actor worth living your life under a microscope?"

Brac bit the inside of his cheek. He'd wondered the same thing lately. "Sometimes." He looked over at Jessup. "In the beginning it was definitely worth it. What kid doesn't dream of growing up and running off to Hollywood to make it big? Unfortunately, it isn't until you actually become famous that reporters and photographers follow your every move. By then you have contracts that've been signed and people counting on you to support them. What kind of person would I be if I just walked away from my obligations because I don't like what journalists are saying about me?"

Jessup turned and drove under the EZ Does It ranch sign. "Do you like the work?"

"Acting has always been my first love. It's the other bullshit that gets old real fast. It's the parties and schmoozing with jerks because they can give you work that I can't stand. I honestly had no idea that acting was only a small part of becoming an actor."

Jessup stopped the truck at a gate beside the barn and honked his horn. Within moments Jax strolled out of the barn. "Glad you decided to take me up on the offer," Jax said through Jessup's open window.

"I hope I'm not being a bother. With any luck, this'll all die down quickly." Brac reached for the door handle to get out. "Will I be staying in the bunkhouse?"

"No," Jax answered. "No offence, but I'm not sure how much work my cowboys would get done with you hanging around. I told Jessup you could use the line cabin."

Line cabin? "Guess I didn't realise this place was big enough to have a line cabin."

Jax chuckled and shook his head. "It's not. Ezra built it years ago to get away from people." Jax slapped the side of the truck. "I'll open the gate. Just follow the path until you get to the fork. Go left. There's not much of a road anymore, but we try to keep a path mowed. Keep following the path and you'll eventually find it."

"Please thank Ezra for the use of his refuge," Brac said on their way past the gate.

"Will do. We'll keep people out from this end."

The dirt path wasn't bad until they reached the fork Jax spoke of. Brac was glad he wasn't driving as the truck bounced over rocks and ruts. "I'm gonna owe you a new truck by the time we reach the cabin."

"I thought you were a country boy. You mean to tell me you've never been four-wheelin'?"

Brac thought back to the short conversation he'd had with Jessup a few days earlier. "I don't remember telling you I was from the country."

Jessup leaned over the wheel, suddenly pretending to concentrate on the road. "I needed to know who I was guarding," he mumbled.

For some reason the information pleased Brac. "What else did you find out about me?"

"Just the basics." Jessup's face flushed.

Brac grinned. "Let's see," Brac began. "You read about me coming out of the closet shortly after I started work on *Pirates' Cove*. You also probably already know that I had a very public break-up with one of my co-stars two years ago. By the way, in case you're interested, I haven't had a steady guy since Randal."

"Why would I be interested?"

Because I'm throwing myself at you, Brac wanted to shout. He gathered what pride he had left and turned to look out the passenger window. "No reason," he mumbled.

Jessup actually made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. "Are you that hard up?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Brac got the distinct feeling he was being made fun of. Well, fuck that.

"What exactly is it about me that you find attractive enough to put an offer like that on the table?" Jessup asked. "If it's just my dick, well, I think I can help you out there, but I've got absolutely nothing else to offer you."

"You think I'm proposing to you or something? Get real. I just thought you might be interested in getting to know me." Brac shook his head. "Forget I mentioned it."

"Not likely," Jessup said, barely loud enough for Brac to hear.

They pulled into a small clearing. "That's one hell of a line cabin," Jessup said.

Although not fancy, the cabin was a one-and-a-half-storey house with a nice-sized covered front porch. Cabin or not, Brac fell in love with the place on the spot. Although he hated the circumstances that brought him to the EZ Does It he couldn't wait to relax and enjoy his surroundings. "It's perfect," he whispered.

Chapter Two

After a quick run into town to pick up groceries, Al Jessup walked down the path towards the pond. In the two days since Brac had discovered the fishing hole, he'd spent practically every waking moment with a rod in his hand.

Jessup didn't understand the draw. The few times he'd fished it had been out of necessity. He'd certainly never sat for hours hoping to catch something only to turn around and toss it back into the water.

Topping a small rise in the landscape, Jessup moaned. Brac was sound asleep under an overhanging tree, his bare chest a temptation the deputy didn't need. Resisting the sexy man had been hard enough without seeing him half-naked. Jessup's gaze travelled down the length of Brac's chest, from the small tanned nipples to the thin strip of dark blond hair that disappeared under the low-slung denim shorts.

Jessup cupped his hardening cock and gave a slight squeeze. On more than one occasion since they'd arrived at the cabin, Brac had offered himself as a bed warmer. Jessup would have taken Brac up on the offer in a heartbeat if sleeping together hadn't been part of the deal.

In all of his thirty-six years, Jessup had only slept overnight with one man, a fellow mercenary, James 'Priest' Evans. Like Jessup, Priest understood the nightmares a man accustomed to killing people could experience. Although Priest was still Jessup's best friend, there had never been anything romantic between them. When they'd been together on assignment, they'd used each other for sex, nothing more. For years he'd found his non-committed relationship with Priest comforting. It wasn't until he'd spent three years in prison that he'd begun to yearn for more than a friendly fuck from his best friend.

Upon his release, Jessup had made a point to search Priest out and offer himself to the man he'd spent three years dreaming of. Not one for emotional ties, Priest had declined Jessup's offer for anything more than friendship and the occasional fuck. In an effort to convince himself it would be enough, Jessup agreed to Priest's terms. However, when Priest initiated physical contact they both realised Jessup's experiences in Syria had left him psychologically impotent.

Jessup shook his head and grinned. It was obvious his cock no longer had a problem sustaining an erection. He wondered if it was Brac, or time, that had healed his libido. Did it matter? One night filled with Jessup's brand of nightmares would be enough to send Brac running back to Hollywood.

"Is that for me?"

Jessup's gaze moved back up Brac's body to meet the handsome man's sleepy stare. He released his hold on his cock and took a step back. "I bought a couple of T-bones while I was in town. Thought I'd grill 'em up for dinner."

"Okay." Brac moved his hand down his bare chest to rest over the bulge trapped behind his fly. "I'm not really hungry at the moment. Why don't you join me?"

Shaking his head, Jessup took another step towards the dirt path that led back to the cabin. There was something about Brac's offer that scared him. "Not a good idea." He took off at a fast clip, running away from the desire that threatened to overwhelm him.

He made it to the cabin in half the time it had taken him to reach the pond. Jessup shut the back door and leaned against it. "No!" he reprimanded himself. Already the reporters were beginning to clear out of Cattle Valley. He had no doubt the last of them would be gone before the end of the week, and Brac would move on.

Jessup reached for his phone. He was in dire need of a reminder as to why he couldn't give in to his desire for Brac. He punched in the familiar number and waited for the recording.

"You've reached the office of Alice Weaver. Please leave a name and number after the beep and Alice will return your call as soon as possible."

"It's Bob Goldsmith. I need an appointment." Jessup hung up and waited.

Within moments, his phone rang. "Hey."

"It's been a while," Priest said, his voice as deep as Jessup had remembered.

"Yeah." Now that he had Priest on the phone, Jessup wasn't sure what to say. "How've you been?"

"What's going on?" Priest asked, suspicion creeping into his voice.

"Nothing. Babysitting some television star. You?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"Right. Sorry." How could Jessup have forgotten Priest's number one rule? No questions. Ever.

"I'd ask if you had another dream, but since it isn't even eighteen-hundred hours yet, I doubt that's the case. So I'll ask again, what's going on?"

Jessup rubbed his eyes. Priest wasn't the kind of man you could talk feelings with, not that he had feelings for Brac, so why had he called? "Just reminding myself where I came from," he eventually mumbled.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"There's a reason guys like us don't make good lovers," Jessup tried to explain.

"Lovers or boyfriends? Because they're two entirely different things. I happen to know you're a good lover, so you must be thinking about something other than fucking. Who is he?"

Jessup was taken off guard by Priest's observation. "He's no one. Just some guy who'll be gone before you know it."

Priest was quiet for several moments. "Does he make you hard?"

"Fuck you." There was no way Jessup would discuss the state of his dick with Priest.

Priest groaned. "That's answer enough for me. I think you should go for it. I would."

Jealousy rose up in Jessup, but instead of being upset at the thought of Priest fucking someone else, it was the idea of Brac getting fucked that bothered him. "Drop it."

"Did you let him touch you?"

"Priest," Jessup warned. He remembered his body's reaction to Brac's brief touch the night of Ezra's barbecue.

"Don't Priest me. If whoever this guy is can touch you without you jumping out of your skin, fucking let him." Priest sighed. "You deserve to be touched. Hell, unlike me, you probably deserve to be loved."

Jessup hated hearing his friend talk like that. They'd never delved into Priest's past or whether or not he'd ever had someone to love. As far as he knew, no one had got close enough to the man to risk asking. "I'm sure there's someone out there for you to love. People are always going on about soul mates. Who knows, maybe they really exist."

"If they do, I've probably already killed mine," Priest whispered, his voice dropping even lower.

Jessup heard the sound of breaking glass in the background. "Something happening?"

"Yeah. Gotta go. Call me later and let me know how it goes with the babysitting job."

Priest hung up before Jessup could say anything more.

With a shake of his head, Jessup hung up the phone. He didn't miss the constant danger of his old job, but he knew Priest lived for it.

"Can I come in now?"

Startled, Jessup moved away from the door and spun around. Brac stood on the other side of the glass with a scowl on his handsome face. "Sorry," Jessup said, opening the door.

Brac strode into the kitchen and straight to the fridge. He pulled out a beer and finished half the bottle in one gulp. "Why didn't you tell me you had phone coverage out here?"

"Because I knew you'd call your agent and tell him where we are." Jessup crossed his arms and waited for Brac to deny it.

"My professional life depends on me staying in touch with Hal. Do you have any idea how much shit's going on in LA right now?" Brac held out his hand. "Let me use your phone. Hell, you can listen in on the conversation if you're so worried I'll give away our secret location."

Jessup didn't want to cave to Brac's demands, but he understood the necessity of checking in with his agent. In truth, he hadn't wanted Brac to find out all was well in LA and he could go back to work. Selfish or not, Jessup felt the best place for the star to be was under his watchful eye. "Here." He handed over the phone after putting it on speaker.

Brac rolled his eyes. He finished his beer and tossed the empty bottle into the trashcan. "I can't believe you're really going to listen," he mumbled, punching numbers.

Jessup didn't answer. Instead he went to the refrigerator and removed the steaks and bottled marinade he'd bought at the store.

"Hal Walker Agency."

"Hi Marlene, it's Brac. Can you put me through to Hal?"

"Sure thing, sweetie, although I wouldn't want to be you right now."

"No one wants to be me right now," he mumbled after he was put on hold.

"Where the fuck have you been!" a loud voice screamed through the phone.

"Hiding out," Brac replied. "I don't have coverage out here. I think it's time to find a new provider that has more than six cell towers. So what's going on with the investigation?"

Jessup rubbed the T-bones down with salt and pepper before pouring the marinade over the top. Although he had his back to Brac, he was listening closely to every word.

"It's not good," Hal said. "I went to the studio to talk to Ike and saw Jeremy Brouchard leaving his office."

"Randal's boy toy? Why would he be meeting with Ike?" Brac asked.

"That was my question, but Ike wouldn't answer me." Hal sighed into the phone. "I think Ike was auditioning him."

"Why do you think that?"

Jessup glanced over his shoulder to find Brac pacing back and forth across the kitchen. He couldn't help but wonder if it was the mention of Randal's boyfriend or the fact that the boyfriend had auditioned that seemed to put Brac on edge.

"Because Ike told me Randal had been in to see him," Hal explained. "Is there something going on between the two of you?"

"No. Why?" Brac stopped walking when he made eye contact with Jessup.

"Randal wants you off the show. Ike didn't tell me why, but he said Randal was prepared to back up the extra who filed the harassment case if you weren't removed from the cast."

"What?" Brac shouted. He ran his hands through his hair, pulling at the loosely curled locks. "You think he's trying to get Jeremy on to take my place?"

"Yep," Hal answered.

Although Jessup had no stake in Brac's career, he hated the thought of anyone being railroaded out of a job. He knew nothing about how things worked in the entertainment industry, but he had a feeling backstabbing was a way of life for most of them.

"I should call Randal," Brac replied.

"I wouldn't advise it. I don't know what kind of game the man's playing, but it stinks to high heaven. I already have feelers out for shows looking to jack up their ratings. Maybe we'll get lucky and land you a spot on a primetime series or something."

"What about the press? Is it starting to die down?"

Hal chuckled. "Yeah, Jessika Cook was arrested again last night for drunk driving. She's in the hot seat today."

Jessup felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. He didn't like the thought of Brac hightailing it back to California, not one bit. He still wasn't sure why his body reacted to Brac the way it did, but after talking to Priest he wanted to investigate it further.

"That's welcome news," Brac answered. "Regardless, I plan to stick around Wyoming until you hear something from Ike." Brac turned his back to Jessup. "Do you think Randal

remembers how much shit I have on him? Why isn't he afraid I'll go to the press if he threatens my job?"

"I don't know. That's why I asked if there was something going on between the two of you. Let me do some poking around. Call me in the morning. Hopefully I'll have something by then."

"All right. Talk to you later." Brac hung up and set Jessup's phone on the table. "Holler when dinner's ready," he mumbled before leaving the room.

Jessup cursed under his breath. The good mood that had followed Brac the last several days had evaporated after one phone call. Picking up the plate of marinated steaks, Jessup headed outside to fire up the grill. Maybe he could think of a way to get that smile back on Brac's gorgeous face.

* * * *

Swaying back and forth on the front porch swing, Brac stared out at the surrounding trees. Oddly, he wasn't upset at the idea of being replaced on *Pirates' Cove*. He'd begun to tire of the storylines months earlier anyway. It was the thought of Randal betraying him after everything they'd once shared that hurt.

The more he thought about it, the madder Brac became. Not only had Brac covered up Randal's drug problem for years, but he'd never told another soul how Randal got the job on the soap. All it would take was one phone call to Ike, but blackmail wasn't something he was comfortable with. Neither was breaking up Ike's marriage to save his own ass.

The screen door opened and Jessup stuck his head out. "Dinner's ready. You feel like eating on the deck?"

"Sure," Brac replied, making no move to get up. "How far would you go to save your job?"

Jessup looked surprised at the question, but after several heartbeats he walked over and joined Brac on the swing. "That depends, I guess."

"On what?" Brac fought to keep his hands to himself, when what he really wanted was to feel Jessup's muscular arm wrapped around him.

"On how much you want the job. I heard you say you had some kind of dirt on Randal, but would exposing him make you feel good about yourself? A job is a job. But you can't put

a price on a man's self-worth. I have a feeling Randal knows you could use whatever information you have on him, but I'm pretty damn sure he also knows you're a good man and won't stoop to his level."

"The job's not that big of a deal. Hal's always turning down offers on my behalf. It's more than that." Brac met Jessup's gaze. "I loved him once. I'd have had his back until the day I died." He shook his head. "I guess I just wasn't expecting him to do something like this to me. There's a part of me that wants to hurt him back."

"Sure there is. Eye for an eye and all that. But I think what you have to look at is who you'll be doing more damage to, you or him? I'm betting the answer would be you."

Without thinking, Brac reached for Jessup's hand, but before he could touch the man, Jessup jumped to his feet. "Dinner's getting cold," Jessup said, walking into the house.

Brac stood and followed. "Why do you do that?"

Jessup continued on through the kitchen to the back door. "I told you, I don't like to be touched."

Brac stopped long enough to grab several bottles of beer out of the fridge before joining Jessup at the table. He pulled out the deck chair and took a seat, offering one of the beers. "I don't do it to piss you off, you know?"

"I know." Jessup slid one of the steaks onto Brac's plate. "And it's not just you, so don't take it personally."

"Well I do," Brac answered honestly. "I see the way you look at me."

"Lookin's not the same as touchin'." Jessup took a drink of his beer. "I don't react well."

"Why?"

"Because I don't." Jessup set his bottle down and stabbed a piece of steak with his fork.

Brac heard pure pain in Jessup's response. He reached out and placed his hand on the centre of the table. "Is it the same if *you* touch *me*?"

"Are you that hard up?" Jessup asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Brac held his tongue. He was one of the few men in Los Angeles who didn't let his dick rule him so Jessup's comment didn't hold the heat it could have. Despite the apparent rebuff, he didn't move his hand, waiting, willing Jessup to touch him.

Jessup cleared his throat. Brac expected another comment but when none came, he peered up and met the man's confused eyes. Jessup held Brac's gaze for several moments before looking away. "Why is this so important?"

"I don't know," Brac whispered, "but it is."

Jessup made a noise that sounded remarkably like a growl, but finally, finally, Brac watched as the sun-bronzed hand landed on the table next to his. He didn't look up. He barely breathed until he felt the soft brush of Jessup's thumb against his skin.

"This is stupid," Jessup mumbled.

Brac shook his head. "Doesn't feel stupid to me."

"I'm not some kind of charity case, you know? I know you Hollywood types like a good cause, but I won't be one of them," Jessup growled.

Once again Brac remained silent. Instead, he concentrated on the warmth slowly covering his hand as Jessup became even bolder. It wasn't until Jessup's entire palm rested on the back of Brac's hand that he spoke. "That feels nice."

Although he didn't say it for fear of scaring Jessup away, Brac had never felt so connected to another human being. Kit meant the world to him, but even she hadn't brought on the emotions currently ripping their way through Brac's soul. He'd slept with his fair share of men but never had he felt the warmth of trust Jessup was gifting him. Brac itched to turn his hand over and entwine his fingers with Jessup's, but he knew it would take baby-steps to fully gain the man's trust.

Eventually, Jessup removed his hand and stood. "Need another beer?"

Brac stared into Jessup's brown eyes, hoping to find something of what he'd felt in their depths. Confident that the brief moment between them had also affected Jessup, Brac nodded. "Sure."

* * * *

Before retrieving beer from the refrigerator, Jessup quickly made his way to the small half-bath on the main floor. He turned on the faucet and splashed cold water on his face before studying himself in the mirror. Just like it had the night of Ezra's party, his skin tingled from the physical contact with Brac.

The possibility of enjoying a sexual relationship with a man again was at the forefront of his mind. Not just any man—Brac. Jessup pressed his half-hard cock against the edge of the sink. Snippets of his sex life before Syria crept into his mind.

The torture he'd endured had spoilt the one thing in life he'd always craved. Being bounced from foster home to foster home had taught him from an early age not to engage emotionally with people. Love wasn't part of his vocabulary, but fucking sure was. The physical release of a round of raw sex was all he needed to remind himself he was still human. Maybe Brac was the one person who could kick-start his libido.

Jessup was under no illusion that Brac would stick around for more than a few weeks, nor did he want him to. Like everything else in his life, it was best not to get attached. He'd lived by that belief his entire life. Despite his sizeable bank account, he'd never considered buying a house. Renting was the way to go as far as he was concerned. When things didn't work out, he moved on, simple as that. Messing around with Brac would be even easier because it was Brac who'd be leaving town. He grinned at the bonus, because although things in Cattle Valley weren't perfect, they were as near to it as Jessup had ever known.

After turning off the water, Jessup grabbed two bottles of beer and rejoined Brac on the deck.

"This is really good," Brac said, cutting another piece of meat.

Jessup was thankful Brac wasn't planning to dwell on their earlier contact. Although he hoped to work his way up to more than simple hand-holding, Jessup refused to be the kind of pussy who talked about his thoughts and feelings. Those were his and as long as he kept them to himself no one could use them against him. He glanced up from his plate long enough to nod in thanks before starting again on his cold dinner.

One thing prison life had taught him was to be grateful for food, no matter what it tasted like. In Syria he'd been given only enough to survive. The mouldy bread and greasy broth he'd been served once a day had quickly helped him come to the conclusion that as long as your belly was full it didn't matter how it got that way.

"You play cards?" Brac asked.

"Not for years. I prefer dice."

"Like craps?" Brac took a sip of his beer and sat back in his chair, food seemingly forgotten.

"No, just games."

"What's your favourite?"

"Steal Your Thunder." In the past, Jessup had spent hours sitting at a table with other soldiers while on missions. Dice were easily carried and didn't succumb to the elements.

"Would you teach me how to play?"

"Maybe after you finish the dishes." Jessup couldn't help but grin. Brac hadn't done the dishes since they'd stepped foot on the EZ Does It ranch.

"You've got yourself a deal." Brac shifted in his chair. "You know I would've done them before but you always jump up as soon as you've shovelled the last bite of food in your mouth and rush to the kitchen."

"I don't linger," Jessup mumbled, still eating. "But I'll take care of the cooking from now on if you'll do the clean-up."

"Or we could do both together," Brac offered. "I've always found it relaxing to cook with someone."

"I'm used to doing it by myself," Jessup countered.

"Yeah, that doesn't surprise me." Brac stood and picked up his plate. "You finished with the salad?"

Jessup nodded, and Brac took the bowl away. Alone on the deck, Jessup sighed. There seemed to be a war going on inside him, and he still wasn't sure which side would win. What was it about Brac that made him want to reach out one moment and run like hell the next?

Chapter Three

"What is that?" Brac asked.

"A cane pole. Don't you know anything about fishing?" Jessup sat under the tree beside Brac and pulled out a small container of worms. He'd had to go all the way to Sheridan for the pole, but he was tired of Brac bugging him about going fishing.

"Yeah, but I thought only eight-year-olds used those damn things." Brac shook his head and turned up his nose as he watched Jessup thread a big juicy worm onto his hook. "That's disgusting."

"Keep talkin'. We'll see who catches dinner tonight," Jessup said. He met Brac's gaze and grinned. He was beginning to get more and more comfortable around the handsome man. Too bad their time was quickly coming to an end. "I didn't see any photographers in town," he admitted. Actually, he hadn't seen paparazzi for the last two days, but decided to keep the information to himself until he figured out a few things.

"No shit? Does that mean I have to leave?" Brac asked with a chuckle.

After swinging his line out into the water, Jessup scooted a smidge closer to Brac. The fact that he was willing to fish at all had been the answer he'd been waiting for. "Not unless you want to. You could always stick around for Cattle Valley Days. I haven't been to one, but Ryan said it's a helluva time."

Brac brushed his shoulder against Jessup. "Are you asking me on a date?"

Jessup thought back over his statement. He hadn't intended to ask Brac on a date, but he had to admit the idea of accompanying the man appealed to him. "Maybe. Guess that depends on what you'd say."

"Guess that depends on if you'd let me hold your hand," Brac countered.

Setting his pole beside him, Jessup rested his hand on his thigh, palm up. *Don't freak out*, he told himself several times.

Brac hesitated for several moments, his hand hovering over Jessup's. "You sure?"

Jessup shrugged. "I hope so."

Brac lowered his hand until it rested palm to palm against Jessup's. He slowly threaded his fingers through Jessup's much darker ones. "This okay?"

Jessup nodded, his throat clogged with emotion. He hadn't jumped or shied away from Brac's touch. As a matter of fact, he'd welcomed it. "It's nice," he admitted.

"Yes, it is." Brac looked out over the sparkling water. "Do you think we could work our way up to a kiss before nightfall?"

"I'd like that. It's been...a long time." Nearly four years, but Jessup kept that bit of information to himself. While he was in prison, he'd clung to the memories of his last night spent with Priest. It hadn't been romantic, or emotional, just another hard fuck with the closest thing he had to a friend, but the memory had kept him going while in prison.

Still holding hands, Jessup leaned in and touched his lips to Brac's. He froze at the contact, waiting for the panic to set in. When nothing but desire coursed through his veins, Jessup loosened up enough to give Brac a proper kiss. He brushed his tongue against Brac's lips and waited for entrance.

Brac sighed as he opened his mouth and accepted Jessup's tongue.

The grip Brac had on Jessup's hand became almost unbearable as the kiss deepened into an erotic tongue play Jessup would've never thought possible. Even Priest didn't ignite such overwhelming mind-numbing lust in him, never had. Jessup shook his hand free and wrapped his arms around Brac, pushing him back onto the soft grass.

Jessup's passion overrode his sense of fear. He insinuated himself between Brac's thighs and pressed his aching cock against Brac's. Jessup was nearly out of his mind until he felt tight bands wrap around his waist. His body went rigid the moment he felt trapped. In a heartbeat, Jessup went from turned on to gasping for breath. He tried to push away from the force holding him in place.

"Fuck!" Brac yelled.

Once free, Jessup retreated to safety on his hands and knees. His body shook as he struggled to calm his breathing. Time stood still as he fought his way back from the dank cell. He pushed away the memories of the beatings he'd suffered at the hands of the guards. *Wyoming not Syria*, he reminded himself. He wiped the sweat from his face and tried to gather his wits. When he chanced a look at Brac, his heart plummeted. *Shit. What have I done?*

Holding his groin, Brac was doubled over, vomiting onto the grass.

It seemed even Brac's sex appeal only went so far in helping Jessup forget his past. Not only had he made a fool of himself, but he'd injured an innocent man in the process. Jessup

rose to his feet and walked over to Brac's side. His knees almost buckled at the expression on Brac's face. "I'm sorry," he whispered, not knowing what else to say.

He expected Brac to cuss him out for what he'd done, but instead Brac's eyebrows drew together in confusion. "What did I do wrong?"

Jessup couldn't handle the disappointment he detected in Brac's voice. What could he possibly tell the man? Somehow 'you reminded me of my time in prison' didn't sound right. "Can I help you back to the house?"

Brac shook his head. "I think I'll lay here for a while longer." He finished the sentence by spitting on the ground.

Not only had Jessup hurt Brac but he couldn't even remember doing it. "I'll get you some water."

"No. I'll be fine. Just sit down."

The last thing Jessup wanted to do was sit and watch Brac recover from an injury he'd delivered. Running away was the obvious option, but before his capture, retreat hadn't even been part of his vocabulary. Where the hell was his courage? Chalk it up to one more thing he'd lost in Syria.

"Please?" Brac asked.

Jessup sat several feet away from Brac and rested his hands on his knees. He plucked a blade of grass from beside his ankle and began to separate it into thin slivers. The right thing to do was to explain his actions, but would someone who wasn't there understand them? "I was working a job in Syria when I was arrested. I'd been hired to observe a particular group of protesters that the United States wanted information on. All I was supposed to do was watch them and the Syrian people's reaction to them. The next thing I knew I was picked up by a small group of undercover police officers and arrested. I suffered three years of hell before they finally released me."

"And it's because of that hell that you don't like physical contact?"

"Yeah, something like that." Jessup realised Brac wouldn't understand what he'd gone through unless he spelled it out for him, but Jessup wasn't prepared to travel down that road. "Anyway, I'm sorry if I hurt you."

Jessup stood and gathered the fishing supplies he'd brought to the pond. "I'll go start lunch."

* * * *

Recovered from the blow to his balls, Brac gathered his fishing gear. A noise off to his left caught his attention as he started down the path towards the cabin. "Jessup?"

When no answer came, he continued down the meandering path. He still hadn't figured out what to say to the deputy. Hell, maybe he shouldn't say anything. No. He had to address what had happened if the two of them had any hope of continuing what they'd started by the pond. And, damn, did he want to continue. The passion between them had nearly set Brac on fire.

The noise came again, only closer. "Hello?" he called out. "Jessup?"

A rabbit jumped out of the brush, causing Brac's heart to skip a beat. "Fuck. You scared me, asshole."

Feeling stupid, he tuned out the sounds coming from the brush and returned his attention to Jessup and his mouth. Memories of the man's tongue started to make him hard, no small feat after the blow he'd received earlier.

Brac pressed the back of his hand against the front of his shorts and nearly poked his eye out with the fishing pole. He did it again, dodging the pole. He might return to the cabin blind, but at least he'd have a smile on his face. The second touch felt so good, he wanted more.

After a quick look around, Brac dropped the pole and tackle box. With his hands free, he hurriedly unzipped his shorts and shoved both of them down the front of his briefs. "Aaahhh," he sighed when his palm met the length of his cock.

Closing his eyes, Brac imagined Jessup's hard naked body. Although he hadn't seen Jessup without clothes, *yet*, he had felt it against him. "Want it," he moaned, running his free hand over the spongy tip.

Whether it was the near perfect body he knew was under the clothes or the pain and sadness he detected under the skin, Brac wanted more of Al Jessup. He wanted to run his tongue down the length of the man's chest to the prize he'd felt poking against him earlier.

Brac huffed out a loud breath as his speed increased. If only he could break through Jessup's walls. Brac couldn't put his finger on it, but he knew there was a loving man underneath the gruff exterior and he wanted more than anything to release Jessup from the self-imposed prison he'd built around himself.

"Jessup!" he yelled at the point of climax. The intense orgasm dropped him to his knees right there in the dirt. Shit. He had to get a handle on his feelings. It was completely possible he'd never get through to Jessup and the two of them would part company without experiencing the joy of fucking.

"What happened?" Jessup panted, tearing down the path at a full run.

Brac blinked several times, still lost within his thoughts. "What?"

Jessup stopped in front of Brac and stared down. "I thought you were hurt," he mumbled.

Brac realised he was still holding his cock. His hand was covered with thick strands of cum, leaving no doubt of what he'd been up to. "Sorry." He released his cock and looked around for something to wipe his hands on.

Jessup fell to his knees in front of Brac and grabbed him by the wrist. "What's this?"

Brac looked away, unable to meet Jessup's gaze. He felt warmth on the back of his hand and glanced back to see Jessup's tongue travelling up the length of his fingers. Surprised at the gesture, Brac couldn't help but stare as Jessup continued to clean the drying cum. Maybe breaking down Jessup's walls wouldn't be as hard as he'd thought. It took trust to ingest another man's seed. "I'm clean," he whispered.

Jessup grinned. "That's a damn good thing because I didn't even think to ask." He shook his head. "You make me want to do a lot of things I never would've attempted before." He pressed Brac's hand against his chest. "For the record, you taste good."

Chuckling, Brac bent over and planted his mouth over Jessup's for a deep kiss. "Good to know," he whispered, pulling out of the kiss.

"I shouldn't have run away like I did." Jessup ran his hands through Brac's hair. "I want things, but I can't trust myself not to hurt you. I proved that to myself earlier."

Brac skimmed his lips over Jessup's, needing the brief contact. "I'm fine. It'll just take a while to figure out the boundaries, but I think it'll be worth it."

A bush rustled and Jessup released his hold on Brac's hair and jumped to his feet. Brac grabbed Jessup's hand and stood. "Don't worry, I'm sure it's just another rabbit. I had one scare the crap out of me earlier."

Jessup continued to survey their surroundings. "Let's get back to the house. Guess since neither of us caught anything we'll be having hamburgers again."

"Or you could take me into town?" Brac pleaded. "You said there aren't any reporters, and I'd really like to see Kit. Maybe we could invite them to dinner."

Jessup seemed to study Brac for several moments. "Does that mean you're ready to move back to town?"

Careful not to make a wrong move, Brac leaned against Jessup's chest. "No. Maybe I'll talk to Ezra about renting the cabin until I have to go back to California."

Jessup pressed his cheek against Brac's. "And when do you think that'll be?"

"I don't know. Honestly, I don't even want to think about it." Damn, he wished he could wrap himself around Jessup and hold on forever. The revelation surprised him. He wondered if he felt that way because it was such a farfetched dream. Closing his eyes, Brac pressed his face against Jessup's neck, trying to brand the man's smell on his psyche.

When he felt Jessup's hands land on his hips, Brac felt like rejoicing. "Take me on a date. A real one," he whispered.

Jessup cleared his throat before dropping his hands from Brac's hips. "I've never – what would I need to do?"

The lost expression on Jessup's face told Brac how serious he was. "You've never dated?"

A muscle in Jessup's jaws flexed. "I'm not really the dating type."

Brac studied Jessup for several moments. Why would such a good-looking man not date? "Ever?"

Jessup bent over and picked up Brac's fishing pole and tackle. "Even one date requires a certain level of trust that I was never prepared to give." He started down the path.

Brac jogged to catch up. "So you've never trusted anyone?"

After passing the fishing pole to Brac, Jessup settled the tackle box in his left hand and reached for Brac's hand with his right. "I trust Priest, and I'm learning to trust you. I think that's enough."

Brac slowed and tugged on Jessup's hand until he followed suit. "Priest? Is that the guy you were talking to on the phone a couple days ago?"

"Yeah."

A lump formed in Brac's throat. He mentally crossed his fingers and hoped for the best. "Is he actually your Priest?"

Jessup erupted in laughter. It was the first real laugh Brac had heard from the often sullen man. "I take that as a no," Brac mumbled. He wished he could've drawn the laughter out of Jessup without mention of the mysterious Priest.

"Priest is as far from religious as you can get. His name's James Evans. They call him Priest because he's the last person most men see before they die." Jessup grinned. "He plays on it, too. Tells them to confess their sins while they still have a chance."

There was something in Jessup's eyes that spoke of a great amount of affection for this Priest guy. "He's a killer?" Brac didn't know Jessup's story, but the thought of Jessup trusting Priest over him didn't sit well. Priest didn't sit well.

Jessup released Brac's hand and narrowed his eyes. "So was I, only we prefer the term soldier."

Shit! "Sorry. I didn't mean..." *Fuck!* Brac was getting damn tired of the taste of his foot.

Jessup gave a sharp shake of his head. "Call your friends and have them meet us at The Grizzly Bar," he ordered in a gruff voice.

Brac knew he'd screwed up. "I said that out of jealousy more than anything else," he confessed.

Jessup started down the path. "No reason to be jealous."

Brac waited for Jessup to explain but when nothing else was said, he jogged to catch up. With the easiness they'd shared gone, Brac wondered if he was wasting his time in trying to break down Jessup's walls. He'd seen the tattoo on Jessup's forearm. Perhaps if he learned the significance, he'd have a better idea.

When they reached the deck, Jessup turned and took the pole from Brac and stood it against the house next to his cane pole. He dug into his pocket and removed his cell phone before handing it to Brac. "I'm gonna take a quick shower while you call Kit."

Moment gone, Brac nodded. He waited for Jessup to disappear before making the call.

"Hey," Kit answered on the third ring. "How're you doing?"

"Fine. I was wondering if you and Hawk would be interested in dinner tonight at The Grizzly Bar?"

"Yes! I can't believe your warden is letting you have a night out," Kit teased.

"It was my idea. I miss you guys. And Jessup said he hasn't seen any paparazzi around."

"Yeah, I think they gave up. I called Jessup yesterday and asked if I could come out to see you, but he said it would be better if I waited."

"You called Jessup?" Brac hadn't been told his best friend wanted to see him.

"Yeah. I've called him every day. Why?"

"He didn't tell me." Brac hated being kept in the dark. Damn Jessup. "So, can you meet us?"

"Seven okay? Hawk's in his office working, but I'm sure he could use a break."

"Seven's fine. It'll give me a chance to get cleaned up." And have a discussion with Jessup. How dare he keep him from seeing Kit.

"Later," Kit trilled before hanging up.

Brac walked into the cabin and set the phone on the kitchen table before heading upstairs. "Jessup!"

The bathroom door opened and Jessup sprang out in nothing but a towel, gun in hand.

Brac held up his hands. "Don't shoot."

Jessup scanned the hallway before lowering the gun. "Someone here?"

"No," Brac managed to say, his gaze riveted on Jessup's scarred naked chest. The scars, more than anything Jessup had said, brought home to Brac the torture he'd suffered in prison.

"Then why the hell did you yell my name? I told you I was gonna take a shower."

Speechless, Brac nodded. He took several steps forward and reached out, needing to touch the physical reminders of the pain Jessup had suffered.

Jessup stepped back. "What're you doing?"

Brac looked up and met Jessup's eyes. "Let me touch you," he whispered.

"Why?"

"Because I don't think I'll breathe again if I don't." Brac couldn't explain how he felt, but he yearned to heal Jessup from the inside out. It wasn't a normal reaction for him. Usually he walked away from uncomfortable situations or didn't allow himself to get into them in the first place. But there was something different about Jessup. Something that called to Brac's nurturing instincts that, until then, had been reserved for Kit.

Jessup grabbed Brac's wrist and brought it to his chest, thereby allowing Brac to touch him while still maintaining control. He slowly guided Brac's palm from one scar to the next, never breaking eye contact. "Not what you're used to," he mumbled.

Brac allowed his fingers to brush the puckered skin. He felt more than scars, and his body reacted accordingly. "No, not what I'm used to but amazing nonetheless." He broke eye contact and leaned in to follow the movement of his hand with his lips.

Jessup gave a quick inhalation of breath at the contact.

Moving to the scarred nipple, Brac bathed the misshaped skin with his tongue. He was surprised when Jessup released Brac's wrist and buried his fingers in Brac's hair. Smiling, Brac glanced up to find Jessup's eyes closed. "This okay?" He knew it was by the deputy's reaction, but he needed to hear the words.

"God, yes."

Brac rested his forehead against Jessup's chest and closed his eyes. "I wanna take you in my mouth. Damn, I want that more than my next breath."

Jessup reached between them and loosened his towel, allowing the thick terrycloth to fall to the floor.

Taking the gesture as approval, Brac kissed and licked his way down the muscled body. He reached for the dropped towel and used it to rest his knees on as he got his first look at Jessup's cock. Fuck, the man was gorgeous. Curved ever so slightly to the right, Jessup's cock was darker than the bronzed skin on his upper body and as big, if not bigger, than the biggest man he'd ever been with.

Brac swallowed his accumulated drool before touching the tip of his tongue to the drop of pre-cum that clung to the head of Jessup's cock. Careful to keep his hands flat on Jessup's groin, Brac took the crown into his mouth.

He wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around the deputy and squeeze the man's ass while he sucked him off, but he figured it would be another fight or flight trigger for Jessup.

After teasing the slit of Jessup's cock with his tongue, Brac took the length further into his mouth. When Jessup's body began to shake, Brac glanced up, hoping he wouldn't be dislodged from his afternoon snack.

Without taking his mouth off Jessup's cock, Brac tried to ask the question. "Okay?"

"Been too long. I'm struggling to hold it together," Jessup ground out between clenched teeth.

"Don't," Brac instructed.

Jessup's hips bucked, shoving his cock further down Brac's throat. "Can't...hold it." He started to pull out, but Brac followed the movement.

Brac curled his fingers around Jessup's hips in an effort to keep him in place. He wanted Jessup's cum, but more than anything, he wanted Jessup to trust him.

"No. Too. Fast."

Jessup howled as the first strand of seed shot down Brac's throat. Swallowing as fast as he could, Brac tried desperately to enjoy every drop. The volume and consistency told him it had been a while since Jessup had jacked off. The same couldn't be said for him. Brac's hand seemed to be permanently attached to his cock since arriving at the cabin under Jessup's watchful eye.

Brac released Jessup's hip and began to clean the cum that still clung to the softening flesh. He loved the way the prominent veins felt against the flat of his tongue and before he knew it, Brac wanted to do it all over again. Would he ever get enough of Jessup? Ghosts, demons, whatever Jessup called them, Brac had a strong feeling he'd do anything to help the deputy work through his past.

"Stand up." Jessup put his hands under Brac's arms and helped him to his feet.

Brac stared into Jessup's brown eyes and waited to be pushed away again. What Jessup didn't know yet was how determined Brac was not to let that happen.

Instead of pushing Brac away, Jessup reached between them and unzipped Brac's shorts. Without a word, Jessup ran his hand down the length of Brac's erection trapped behind his boxer briefs.

Begging for more was on the tip of Brac's tongue but he remained silent. Whatever spell Jessup appeared to be under, the last thing Brac wanted was to break it. A grunt sounded from deep within Jessup's throat as he pushed his hand under the waistband of Brac's underwear.

Jessup's touch was everything Brac had fantasised it would be. He rested his forehead against Jessup's shoulder and enjoyed every squeeze, pull and slide Jessup gifted. "Feels so good," Brac whispered.

"Yes, it does," Jessup returned. "Thought about touching you."

"Glad you gave in." Brac's hips began to snap back and forth as he fucked Jessup's hand. "Close," he warned.

Jessup groaned and scraped his short thumbnail across Brac's sensitive crown. "Fill my hand."

Not one to let a moment pass him by, Brac did as instructed, shooting bursts of cum. He started to sag but was held up by a strong arm around his waist. If only he could hold Jessup in return. Brac vowed to make the dream a reality before he slipped any further under Jessup's spell.

Chapter Four

Al Jessup's body still felt like it was vibrating as he drove up the mountain towards the lodge. The impact of Brac's blowjob had thrown him. He'd promised himself he'd enjoy what he could of Brac before the Hollywood star traipsed back to California. Unfortunately, the intimacy the two of them had shared earlier threatened his resolve to let Brac go without ties when it was time.

"Okay?" Brac asked from the passenger seat.

Jessup nodded. "Just thinking."

"About?" Brac slid across the bench seat to sit next to Jessup.

The last thing Jessup wanted was to pour his heart out to someone who may not feel the same way. His feelings were starting to grow for Brac, but those same feelings began to erect yet another wall around his heart.

There had been two people in his life he'd really cared about – Priest and Mrs Gibbs, the foster mother who'd raised him for the first five years of his life. Priest had made his position quite clear before and after Jessup's release from prison – fuck buddy, nothing more.

Although Priest's rejection had hurt, Jessup knew it was Mrs Gibbs' betrayal that had shaped him into the untrusting, unfeeling man he'd become.

"Jessup?" Brac prompted. "Did I do something wrong?"

Jessup shook his head and put a hand on Brac's thigh. "You can't spend your time wondering whether or not you've done something wrong. I'm fucked up. I've told you that. Whatever went on between us earlier, you can't let yourself make more of it than it was."

He felt Brac freeze beside him before scooting back to the passenger window. "I hear ya," Brac mumbled.

Jessup wanted to haul Brac back to his side, but decided a little distance was a good thing. It wouldn't do for either of them to start getting attached. He didn't even know if it was possible for him to give enough of himself to make something work between them because Brac could be called back to LA at any moment. *Yeah, better to keep distance between us.*

Kit and Hawk were getting out of their car when Jessup pulled into the parking lot. "They're here," Brac said, his voice a little too excited for Jessup's comfort.

"Yep," he mumbled, taking the keys out of the ignition. Before he'd opened his door, Brac was out of the truck and rushing towards Kit. Jessup watched the two friends hug with a heavy feeling in his chest. He wasn't sure if it was the trace of jealousy he felt or the desire to be as close to another human being as Kit and Brac seemed to be. Either way, Jessup didn't like it.

He slammed the pickup door harder than necessary and joined the small group at the foot of the lodge steps. Hawk gave Jessup a friendly nod while Kit and Brac talked a mile-a-minute.

Hawk chuckled and gestured towards the friends. "Irritating, isn't it?"

Pocketing his keys, Jessup gave a non-committal answer. "Is what it is, I guess."

Hawk started up the steps, stopping only long enough to grab Kit's hand. "I'm hungry. The two of you can continue your conversation inside."

Kit laughed and followed Hawk up the steps, leaving Brac and Jessup at the bottom. Jessup gestured towards the retreating backs. "After you."

Brac stared at Jessup. It was obvious he wanted to say something about their brief exchange on the drive up, but instead of just coming out with it, he chose to let out a huff and trot up the steps.

Once again Jessup wanted to run after Brac and fully explain his reasons for slamming the brakes on their budding relationship. Never would he have thought the word 'relationship' was even in his vocabulary, so why had he just thought it? What was it about Brac that made him long for something he'd given up on over thirty-three years earlier?

"You comin'?"

"Yeah." Jessup started up the steps. "Sorry about earlier," he mumbled as he reached for the massive hand-carved double door.

"Don't worry about it. Like you said, it was nothing." Brac pushed past Jessup and entered the lodge.

Jessup swallowed and finally reached for Brac. "Wait."

Brac glanced down at the hold Jessup had around his wrist. "Why? So you can make me feel even worse than I already do?"

"No." Jessup sighed and released Brac. "Let's get through dinner, and we'll talk on the way home."

"You know what? I can't do the casual thing with you, so I might ride home with Kit and Hawk. Since the photographers are gone and Cattle Valley Days start this weekend, Kit's dying to have me back."

Jessup felt like he'd been slapped. "Whatever you want," he mumbled. "I'll...um..." He gestured over his shoulder towards the parking lot. "I'm just gonna go. You have my number in case you see any signs of trouble."

Before Brac could say more, Jessup turned and left the building. He didn't slow until he reached the safety of his truck. "Fuck," he yelled, slamming his fist against the steering wheel.

* * * *

By the time Brac joined Kit and Hawk in the Grizzly Bar, he was in a sour mood. Even Kit's bright smile couldn't chase away the hurt of Jessup's dismissal.

"Oh, baby, what's wrong?" Kit asked, reaching for Brac's arm and pulling him down to the chair beside her. "Where's Jessup?"

Brac shrugged. "He decided not to join us." He didn't tell Kit it was supposed to be their first date. When Jessup had told him he didn't know how to date, he hadn't been kidding.

Hawk cleared his throat and pointed towards a group just entering the restaurant. Brac recognised the two men and boy from the pictures Kit had shown him.

"I'll go over and cuddle Joey while the two of you talk." He stood and kissed Kit. "Order me a medium-rare fillet with fries."

"Love you," Kit whispered against Hawk's mouth after he kissed her again.

"Love you," Hawk returned.

Kit watched Hawk cross the restaurant with a smile on her face. The simple gesture made Brac feel even worse. Maybe he wanted love so badly he was willing to settle for a man like Jessup who carried around a shitload of problems like a goddamn shield.

"Have you slept with him?" Kit asked.

"Hawk? Hell no!"

Kit slapped Brac's arm. "I wasn't talking about Hawk." She turned her gaze towards the man who was blowing raspberries on the small boy's stomach. Stabbing a finger in

Hawk's direction, Kit shook her head. "Hawk would never cheat. Since he's found Joey, he's turned into a real family man."

Brac grinned. "Don't sell yourself short. I think you have more to do with Hawk's change in lifestyle than anyone. After all, even with a son, Hawk could still be fucking anyone who caught his eye."

A waiter stepped up to the table. "What can I get ya?" he asked.

Brac hadn't even opened the menu. He ordered a simple steak salad with dressing on the side much to Kit's chagrin. "And bring me a Michelob with a Jack chaser."

While Kit gave the man her and Hawk's order, Brac watched Hawk. He'd known the man for several years, but the Hawk of today was nothing like the playboy who used to have men and women going in and out of his house at all hours of the day and night. Hawk was proof that love could change a person if they were open to it. That wasn't to say Brac was in love with Jessup, but dammit, he felt more for the deputy than he'd felt for anyone else.

"So what's going on with you and Jessup?" Kit asked.

Brac looked away from the scene across the room. "I like him, but he's really screwed up."

Kit chuckled as she settled the napkin in her lap. "Aren't we all at some point in our lives?"

"Not like Jessup." He'd already told Kit about Jessup's time in prison, but not in detail. "I've sucked his cock, but haven't been allowed to hold him." Brac picked up the salt shaker and sprinkled his cardboard coaster with a few grains as the waiter came back to the table with their drinks. It took him about two seconds to tilt his head back and pour the Jack Daniels down his throat. He handed the shot glass back to the waiter. "Thanks."

"Another?" the waiter asked.

"Nope. One's my limit." Brac followed the whisky down with a gulp of his beer before settling the mug onto the coaster. He returned his attention to Kit. She was staring at him with a confused expression. "What?"

"Why haven't you held him?" she asked.

"Because he freaks out. Something to do with the torture he endured." Brac shrugged. "I thought if I took things slow I'd gain his trust, but he told me on the way over not to expect anything from him." A bark of laughter erupted from his throat. "Less than an hour after having his cock in my mouth, he told me not to make more of it than what it was."

"I think you more than like this guy."

Brac took another drink of his beer. "Why would you say that? I've given my fair share of blowjobs to guys without expecting anything in return."

"Exactly. The fact that you're hurt over Jessup's rebuff tells me he's different than the others." Kit reached over and threaded her fingers through Brac's. "Jessup didn't want me to tell you this, but I think you need to hear it."

"What?"

"The reporters have been gone for days. When I called to see when you were coming back to town, Jessup told me the country air seemed to be good for you. He asked me to just let you be for a few more days." Kit squeezed Brac's hand. "Ryan told me Jessup took a few days off so he could continue to stay with you even though the threat had passed. That doesn't sound like someone who isn't interested in getting to know you."

Brac brought Kit's hand to his mouth and kissed it. "You always see the good in people."

"I didn't used to." Her gaze went to Hawk. "He was the first man I ever trusted enough to open up to. It wasn't until I spelled out my fears and my past that the two of us were able to start building something." She smiled before breaking eye contact with the handsome man across the room. "Have you done that with Jessup?"

"Not really. I mean, we talked a little after Hal called to tell me I wouldn't be going back to *Pirates' Cove*, but not in any real detail. He'd probably freak if he knew how much I want to get close to him."

The waiter came with their food and Kit released Brac's hand. "Sounds to me like the two of you need to sit down and talk."

Brac remembered Jessup's offer to talk on the way home from the restaurant. "Yeah, guess I should've talked to you before I went and pissed him off."

* * * *

From his position in front of the Sheriff's building, Jessup watched the tail end of the parade that officially kicked off Cattle Valley Days. He'd spotted Brac earlier weaving his way through the crowd with Kit and Hawk right behind him.

Despite the navy blue baseball cap and dark sunglasses, Jessup had picked Brac out of the crowd immediately. He'd fought the urge to go after the man he couldn't seem to shake from his dreams.

"Nice parade," a familiar voice said from behind him.

Jessup spun around and came face to face with the man he couldn't get off his mind. "Yeah." He stuck his hands in his front pockets. "How've you been?"

"You want the truth or what I figure you want to hear?" Brac asked.

"Truth'll do."

"I've missed you, but I'm pissed that you haven't returned any of my calls."

Jessup wasn't sure what to say. He'd listened to Brac's messages over and over again just to hear his voice, but he hadn't been willing to risk more of his heart than he already had.

Brac took off his sunglasses and took a step towards Jessup. "If you want nothing more to do with me, tell me, and I'll go back to LA and lick my wounds. But if you feel the least bit like I do, give this thing a chance."

Jessup glanced around to make sure they weren't drawing attention. "I'll be off duty at seven, in time for the street dance. If you want to talk, meet me back here. If not, I'll go on home."

"I'll be here at six-fifty-five just in case you decide to get off early." Brac tilted his chin up and stepped even closer, putting them within kissing distance. "Kiss me and give me something to look forward to."

Brac's lips looked so inviting Jessup couldn't help himself. He gave in to his body's desire and kissed him, ending the brief press of his lips with a subtle swipe of his tongue. Before he could pull back, Brac kissed him again, thrusting his tongue deep into Jessup's mouth. Fuck, the man tasted good. Brac had obviously sampled the pastries at Brynn's Bakery earlier. He brushed Brac's tongue with his own as he pressed his body against Brac's solid frame.

When he felt Brac's erection grind against him, Jessup broke the kiss. "Eyes," he reminded Brac.

Brac nodded, sucking his bottom lip into his mouth. "That was nice."

The wail of the Sheriff's SUV siren sounded as Ryan drove past them, signalling the end of the parade. "I'd better get back to work." Jessup ran the back of his fingers down Brac's

cheek. "You're starting to get a little red. Maybe you should go by the pharmacy and get some sun block if you're going to be out all day."

Brac smiled, his perfect white teeth almost blinding in the late morning sunlight. "I will."

* * * *

After a day sweating in the July heat, Brac took a quick shower. He took the time to thoroughly clean himself, hoping to get some action if his talk with Jessup went well. His persistent erection reminded him of how long it had been since he'd come and how much he was looking forward to seeing the deputy.

A knock at the door drew his attention. Brac grabbed his towel and secured it around his waist. "Come in."

Kit came into the room, dressed in a pale pink sundress and high heels. "It's six-thirty."

"I'll be ready in a minute. Trying to decide what to wear."

With a grin on her face, Kit strode to the closet and removed a thin white T-shirt with a deep V-neck that barely rode to Brac's belly button and a pair of super low-rise jeans. "Leave off the underwear. Give the man a glimpse of what he can have if he plays his cards right."

Staring at the chosen outfit, Brac shook his head. "You trying to make me look like a wanton slut?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Kit handed Brac the clothes before walking over to the dresser, putting her back to Brac. "How does Jessup do his job if he can't stand to be touched? I mean, he's a cop. Surely he does a fair amount of touching people."

"Touching someone and being touched are two different things to him it seems, but I think it's being restrained in any way that really freaks him out. I guess as long as he's on the right side of a pair of handcuffs he's okay." Brac dropped his towel and started to dress. "Hey, go through my stuff and get me a bracelet."

Kit started going through the small box that held Brac's jewellery as he quickly pulled on the jeans and T-shirt. He studied himself in the full-length mirror and shook his head. There was at least a three-inch gap between the bottom of his shirt and top of his jeans. "I don't think this is going to work," he mumbled.

Kit returned to his side and handed him two leather bracelets. She studied him for several moments, her gaze roaming up and down his body. If he didn't know her so well, he would be offended by the attention she seemed to pay his groin. "If you can't get Jessup to jump your bones wearing that, you can pack it up and go back to California knowing the man just isn't right in the head."

"It feels too much like I'm throwing myself at him," Brac tried to argue. He ran his hand over the prominent veins leading towards his cock which rested just beyond the waistband.

"Some men are thick-headed. You have to put what you have right there in their faces to make them forget about everything but getting in your pants."

"Fine, but if I end up looking like a fool, I'm blaming you."

"Okay by me. Of course if you don't come home tonight, I get all the credit."

"If I don't come home tonight, I'll give you anything you want." Brac kissed Kit's temple. "Now let's go before I'm late."

* * * *

Before going out to meet Brac, Jessup went through the process of getting Priest on the phone.

"Damn, you're needy lately," Priest said when he answered the call.

Jessup rolled his eyes. Running off at the mouth wasn't anything new when it came to his best friend, and even though Priest complained, Jessup knew the man enjoyed keeping in touch. "Have a question for you."

"Shoot," Priest answered with a chuckle.

"Do you think it's possible for someone like me to fall in love?"

"Sure I do. I told you that last week."

"No," Jessup said, remembering the conversation. "You said I might get lucky enough to find someone to love me, but that doesn't mean I can return that love."

"When did you turn into such a goddamn pussy? If you love the guy, let him fucking know and stop whining. Just because your momma never loved you doesn't mean you're not lovable, asshole."

The mention of the mother who'd dumped him in a cardboard box in an alley moments after his birth sliced through Jessup like a hot knife through butter. Without a second

thought, Jessup ended the call. It was just like Priest to open a wound that would never heal. For years Priest had tried to convince Jessup he had nothing to do with the actions of the woman who'd given birth to him. The problem was Priest didn't know the word subtle.

The phone in his hand began to vibrate. Jessup glanced at the display. He had a mind to leave his best friend hanging, but one thing he'd learned after spending time with Priest was not to leave things unsaid. "Look," he began. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I'm done talking to you for now."

"You're loveable," Priest whispered in the softest voice Jessup had ever heard him use. "And you wouldn't be loveable unless you had the capacity to love within you."

A lump began to form in Jessup's throat. "Let's hope the guy standing outside waiting for me thinks so."

"I'm sure he does."

"Be safe," Jessup said before hanging up. He shoved the phone into his pocket and headed out of the locker room.

Pushing open the double glass doors, Jessup got his first look at Brac since their kiss earlier. "Damn," he mumbled under his breath. Never had he seen anything as sexy as Brac Riesling in a pair of form-fitting jeans. Jessup licked his lips, his entire body on alert. "Hey."

With a spark of mischief in his eyes, Brac started towards Jessup. A small red dot appeared in the centre of Brac's chest, on the bare skin revealed by the low-cut shirt. It only took a split second for Jessup to react. "Get down!" He launched himself towards Brac. Jessup felt the slam of the bullet before he heard the shot echoing through his ears.

Unconcerned with his own safety, Jessup curled himself protectively around Brac. "Don't move."

Within moments Jessup heard the sounds of running feet. He prayed it was help and not the gunman coming to finish the job. His eyes started to drift shut as he was pulled off of Brac.

"No!" Jessup screamed, scrambling to hold onto Brac.

"It's okay," Ryan's voice penetrated Jessup's confused mind. "Ambulance is on the way."

Jessup somehow managed to remain conscious while Brian Allenbrand tried to get Brac into the Sheriff's station.

"I'm not leaving him," Brac argued with the deputy.

Still on his stomach, Jessup attempted to lift his head. All he cared about was Brac's safety and there was only one other man he trusted. "Give me my phone," he panted. It was becoming increasingly harder to breathe.

"You're in no condition to call anyone," Ryan said, applying pressure to Jessup's back.

"Give me my fucking phone," he managed to get out. Jessup knew he'd be the only one to get hold of Priest.

With a growl, Ryan dug into Jessup's pocket and set the phone next to him on the sidewalk. "Stubborn sonofabitch," he grumbled.

Jessup called the number for Alice Weaver and waited for the recording. "It's me," he wheezed. "Shot. Need you here." Ending the call was the last thing Jessup remembered before his world went dark.

* * * *

Brac was seething as he stared out the interrogation room window. He'd had to stand on a chair and even then he could only see out of a small corner of the wired glass. He hit the window with his fist when the paramedics started to strap Jessup to the gurney. "No!" he screamed, knowing what Jessup's reaction would be if he woke in the ambulance.

He heard the door open but didn't take his eyes off Jessup.

"Come away from the window, honey," Kit said, pulling on Brac's shirt.

"Go tell them they can't strap him down." Brac glanced down at Kit before turning his attention to Hawk. "Please, make them understand."

"You're bleeding," Kit said, trying to pull Brac down from the chair.

Brac continued to hold Hawk's gaze. "Please," he mouthed again.

"I'll see what I can do, but they're meeting the helicopter at the football field. I doubt there's any way they'll let him fly to Sheridan without them."

"Tell them what'll happen if he wakes up like that." Brac climbed down. He'd told Kit and Hawk about Jessup's reaction to Brac's legs around his waist, so Hawk was at least familiar with Jessup's mental state when it came to feeling bound.

As soon as Hawk left the room, Brac slapped Kit's hands away from his shirt. "I'm fine. It's Jessup's blood, not mine."

For the first time since he'd met her, Kit grabbed Brac, displaying a great deal of strength. "It's not all his blood. Now fucking stand still," she ordered, lifting Brac's shirt.

Brac lifted his arm and looked down to see fresh blood oozing from his side. He blinked several times before realising what had happened. For some reason the proof that the bullet had passed through Jessup and grazed him filled his heart with hope. "I'm fine. Doesn't even hurt."

"You need stitches."

"No, I need to get to Sheridan," Brac argued.

"Not possible," Ryan said, coming into the room. "Whoever shot Jessup is still out there. Dr Brown's outside. We can get him to stitch you up at the clinic and on a plane within the hour."

"No, I'm not leaving town. Not like this." As far as Brac was concerned, he was finished with Hollywood. First his parents had suffered because of his celebrity status, then Kit and now Jessup.

"Be reasonable."

"I can't just run and hide, Ryan. It's my fault he was shot. I need to go to him." Brac ran his hands through his hair. Why didn't anyone understand?

"I promise you Jessup will get everything he needs once he gets to the hospital. He put his life on the line for you, the least you can do is stay safe until we find this guy."

"Fine, then take me back to the cabin. At least I'll still be close if Jessup needs me." There was no way Brac would abandon Jessup.

"Keep your phone on," Hawk said. "I'll go to Sheridan and call you with updates."

"My phone doesn't work out there. I always used Jessup's," Brac explained.

Ryan handed Brac Jessup's phone. "He made a call to someone just before he blacked out."

Brac had no doubt as to whom Jessup had called. He clutched the phone to his chest. "Do you think he'll ever forgive me?"

"Of course he will, honey," Kit soothed, taking Brac's hand.

"Why don't you go with Hawk to Sheridan? If Jessup wakes up, tell him I'm sorry, and to please call me when he's up to it."

Kit turned to Ryan. "Who's going with Brac to the cabin?"

“It’ll just be me, although I might give Rio a call while you get stitched up.” Ryan gestured to the door. “The faster we get out of here, the faster Hawk and Kit’ll get to Sheridan.”

Still clutching Jessup’s phone, Brac nodded. “Then let’s go.”

Chapter Five

A noise woke Jessup. He opened his eyes and stared up at the biggest black man he'd ever seen. Dressed in black with a brilliant white collar, the man continued to stare down at him before finally grinning. "You look like shit."

"You're so kind," Jessup replied to Priest. "Nice disguise, by the way."

"Gets me into anywhere I need to be." Priest started to sit in the chair next to Jessup's hospital bed but quickly changed his mind. "Shame about the kidney. Guess I can mark you off the list of potential donors if I'm ever in need."

Despite his teasing comments, Jessup could see the worry in Priest's eyes. He reached out and bumped his hand against Priest's. The action drew a bite of pain, but Jessup recovered before giving himself away. "I'm fine. Thanks for coming."

Priest rested his forearms against the raised bedrails and leaned over Jessup. "Any idea who did it?"

Jessup had been over the events hundreds of times since he'd woken the previous day. "No, none of it makes sense. I came out of the station and Brac was standing there. He started towards me and I saw the red laser land in the centre of his chest." Jessup shook his head. "He's a goddamn television star. Why would someone equipped with a fucking laser sight try to kill him?" The more worked up he became, the harder it was to catch a decent breath.

Priest held up his hands. "Calm down or you'll have this place swimming with doctors and nurses."

"I'll be in here for at least another three days. I need you to watch over Brac for me." He reached out and put his hand on Priest's arm. "Brac hasn't told me, but I think he's scared. The sheriff and his partner have been taking shifts at the cabin, but I'd feel better if you were there."

He was probably crazy for putting Priest in the same room with Brac – after all, the man loved to fuck like a machine – but maybe putting the two of them together was the only way to prove to himself that Brac deserved his trust.

Warning Priest off would only make it a challenge for his old friend, so Jessup kept his mouth shut.

"What about the shooter? You want me to look for him?" Priest asked.

"No. Brac's my primary concern right now. Keeping him safe means everything. If the shooter discovers where he's being housed, I've no doubt he'll try again. I'm counting on you to make sure that doesn't happen."

Priest stood, dislodging Jessup's hand and scratched the top of his bald head. Jessup stared at the lone dark finger that refused to bend. Priest had broken the finger in a remote area of Laos during one of his missions and had refused to abandon the job long enough to seek medical attention. At the time Priest's only reply had been to thank God it hadn't been his trigger finger.

Jessup waited for Priest's answer. He had no idea what his friend had been working on before he'd received the call, so the fact that he had come said volumes for his unspoken feelings for Jessup.

Priest sighed. "Give the guy a call. Tell him what to expect so I don't scare the shit out of him when I show up."

"I will."

After a nod, Priest started for the door. Before he made it out of the room, he turned back to Jessup. "Think he'd be willing to give me some inside information on that show he's on?"

"Was on. He just found out his contract won't be renewed. Honestly, no, I wouldn't bring it up."

"You're fucking kidding me. He was the best thing on that show," Priest said before throwing the heavy door open with ease and disappearing into the hall.

It wasn't until the door shut that Jessup realised Priest's mistake. Jessup hadn't mentioned Brac's full name, so how did Priest know so much about him?

* * * *

Brac punched the hospital phone number into his new cell phone and prayed Jessup wasn't resting. The phone rang four times before Jessup finally picked up.

"Hello?"

"It's me. I didn't wake you, did I?" Brac asked.

"No. I've been trying to call you. Where've you been?"

For some reason the irritation in Jessup's voice warmed Brac's heart. "Your phone ran out of juice and since I didn't have the charger, I just had Rio pick me up a new cell when he went to Sheridan. If you have a paper and pen, I can give you the new number."

"Hang on."

Brac heard noise in the background as Jessup obviously searched for something to write on. An expletive sounded before Jessup got back on the phone. "I can't reach a pen right now."

"Well don't hurt yourself. I'll call you back around dinner time. Have one of the nurses get you a pen before then." Brac wandered out of the living room. He liked Rio and Ryan, but was tired of them shadowing him everywhere. "When're you getting out?"

"Three more days." Jessup cleared his throat. "I tried calling earlier..."

"I know, but like I told you, your phone is dead," Brac said, cutting Jessup off.

"Well, what I wanted to tell you was that Priest's on his way to the cabin."

"Priest?" *Fuck*. Brac wasn't ready to meet the only man Jessup ever spoke of. "Why? I haven't seen anyone skulking around. Even Rio and Ryan are starting to look bored out of their minds. I don't think it's necessary to bring someone like Priest in."

"Because I trust him to keep you safe. And don't kid yourself. Rio and Ryan used to do the same thing Priest does. The only difference is Priest still hasn't retired."

Brac glanced towards the living room. It was hard to imagine Rio and Ryan as mercenaries. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. Anyway, Priest'll be there any second. He wanted me to warn you before he showed up."

"Why? You mean so Ryan doesn't shoot him?"

"That and because he's kind of...intimidating when you first see him. There are different types of mercenaries for different jobs. Most of us are blenders because we can ease our way into a situation without attracting attention, but Priest is known as an enforcer. He's the guy you bring in when you want your opponent to know you're serious."

"You've lost me. Is he scary-looking or something?"

Ryan appeared in the doorway. "There's a black Range Rover coming down the road."

"He's here," Brac said into the phone.

"Who's here?" Ryan asked.

"Give the phone to Ryan," Jessup instructed.

"But we haven't finished talking." Brac wanted to know what was so scary about Priest before he came face to face with the man.

"You'll find out soon enough, but I really need to tell Ryan who's about to walk into the house. Getting my best friend shot isn't the plan. We'll talk again later."

Brac handed Ryan the phone just as a loud knock seemed to vibrate the entire cabin. "I'll get it. It's Jessup's friend."

Ryan grabbed Brac's arm, keeping him in place. "You're not going anywhere until I find out what the fuck's going on."

Brac waited while Jessup explained the situation to Ryan.

"Priest? As in *the* Priest?" Ryan glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah." He nodded his head. "Okay, no I've never met him, but he's about to break the door down." Ryan headed out of the room.

Brac quickly followed, feeling better. At least it seemed Ryan knew of Priest. That had to be a good sign.

"Stay back there," Ryan ordered before returning to his conversation with Jessup. "All right. Talk to you later." Ryan tossed the phone to Brac. "Brace yourself."

Brac's jaw dropped when Ryan opened the door. Priest was so big and tall that only the lower half of his face was visible beyond the doorframe. He automatically took a step back when Priest ducked and walked into the cabin. Holy shit.

Ryan tilted his head back and held up his arm. Instead of shaking Priest's hand, he appeared to show Priest a particular tattoo inked onto his inner forearm. "Ryan Blackfeather. It's nice to finally meet you."

Priest flashed his own inner arm before replying, "Any trouble?"

"Nothing," Ryan said with a shake of his head. He turned and gestured to Brac. "Let me introduce you. Brac, this is Priest, the one man you'd never want to cross."

"No shit," Brac mumbled to himself. Priest had to be all of seven foot. With the rest of his body built like a professional wrestler, Priest was the most intimidating man he'd ever met.

Priest crossed the room to stand in front of Brac. "So you're Brac."

Brac could only nod. He'd never considered his six-foot-one frame small, but damn, he felt like a toddler next to Priest. "Yes, sir," he answered automatically.

Priest tossed his head back and laughed. The sound echoed through the cabin, sending chills through Brac. How the hell was he supposed to spend the next three days with a man who fucking terrified him?

"You're the first person to call me that. Well, the first person I wasn't holding a gun on, that is." Priest held out his hand.

Brac stared at the oversized hand and immediately thought of Sasquatch. He tried to remember his manners. Jessup had asked for Priest's help and it wouldn't be right to offend the man.

"I don't bite."

When Brac finally put his palm against Priest's in a welcoming greeting, Priest leant down and winked. "Unless you're into that kinda thing."

Brac released Priest's hand. "Can I get you a beer or something?"

Priest grinned, obviously picking up on Brac's unease. "Don't suppose you have any Earl Grey?"

"Ummm, yeah, I think so." Brac made a break for the kitchen, hoping Priest wouldn't follow. As he pulled the box of tea packets out of the pantry, he heard that loud laugh again. Brac doubted he'd ever get used to the sound. He set the box on the counter and filled a pan with water.

"Ryan said to tell you he'd check in with you later," Priest said, coming into the room.

"Thanks." Brac gestured to the stove. "Sorry, I don't think Ezra has a tea pot."

Priest strode to the back window and moved the curtain aside. "Hot water's hot water. As long as the tea's Earl Grey, it's all good."

After turning the burner on, Brac grabbed a beer out of the fridge before taking a seat at the kitchen table. With Priest's broad back to him, Brac got his first good look at the tattoo running from the base of Priest's skull to disappear under the collar of his white dress shirt. *Never. Turn.* "What's the rest of the tattoo say?" he asked without thinking.

Without turning around, Priest unbuttoned his shirt and let it fall off his shoulders but not off. *Your. Back.* "Wow." Talk about paranoid. After reading the tattoo, Brac briefly focussed his attention on the newly exposed bulging muscles. He wondered if Priest's body was really as sculpted as it appeared or if the dark colouring of his skin just showed them off more.

Priest pulled his shirt back up and re-buttoned it before turning around.

"So why turn your back to me?" Brac asked, taking a sip of his beer.

"Because you don't pose a threat to me." Priest walked over and pulled a chair out. Although the chairs were substantial, Priest chuckled and shook his head as he gingerly sat down. "I always feel like I'm living life in a little girl's playhouse," he commented.

"I'd imagine so. Do you have to have furniture custom made?"

Priest crossed his arms over his chest, drawing attention to how well-tailored his clothes were. "I don't own a house, so there's no need to have anything made. I've learned to adapt to my surroundings."

"So where do you go when you're not working?" Brac had thought it odd that Jessup rented an apartment instead of owning a home, but Priest didn't even have that.

"I'm always working," Priest muttered.

When the water on the stove started to boil, Brac stood. "I'll get you that tea."

"Two bags if you have them."

"Yeah, but we'll have to call out for more." Brac reached into the cupboard and started to remove one of the tea cups Ezra had on hand. After a second thought, he pulled down one of the much larger coffee mugs. "This okay?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

Brac poured the water and retrieved the entire stack of Earl Grey from the compartmentalised wooden box. He set everything on the table in front of Priest. "Wasn't sure if you needed more than two," he offered, resuming his seat.

Priest unwrapped three of the tea bags and dropped them into the water. "So, Jessup told me you won't be on *Pirates' Cove* anymore. What's up with that?"

"You watch *Pirates' Cove*?" Brac was surprised that someone in Priest's line of work would be interested in a daytime soap opera.

"Sure. You do a lot of sitting around waiting when you're a mercenary." Priest added two teaspoons of sugar from the centre of the table. "So you didn't answer my question."

Randal's betrayal still hurt and it wasn't something Brac liked to dwell on or talk about. He shrugged like it was no big deal. "My ex wanted me gone so he could bring his new boy toy in, so I believe he paid one of the extras to file a false harassment claim against me."

Priest sneered. "I knew there was a reason I never liked that fucker. I don't know him personally, but he's always come off like a jerk on the show."

"He wasn't always like that, but, yeah, that's a pretty good assessment of who he's become. It seemed the more popular the show became, the more outrageous his demands." Brac didn't mention Randal's affair with the producer or his recreational drug use, although the last couple of times Brac had seen him out he'd wondered just how recreational the drugs had become. *And why the fuck am I defending that asshole?*

"So what's next for you?" Priest asked.

Brac finished his beer and tossed the can into the trash.

"Aren't you going to recycle that?" Priest asked with a horrified expression.

With a sigh, Brac dug in the trash until he came back out with the can. "Sorry." At home recycling was second nature, but he'd had more important things on his mind since arriving in Wyoming. He rinsed the can and set it beside the sink.

"I was offered a spot on *The Jackals*, but I decided against doing another hour-long series." He found a plastic grocery sack and dropped the can inside before pulling another beer out of the refrigerator.

"So what do you want to do?" Priest asked.

"No fucking clue. I told my agent to put feelers out for guest spots and movie roles. I think if I could do a couple of those a year, I'd have more than enough to live on and only end up working a couple of months total."

Priest took a sip of his tea. "Why the sudden change in direction?"

Brac wasn't about to tell Priest of his hopes for the future. "Just time for a change. I like it here. The town's friendly when someone's not shooting the people I care about," he added.

"You care about Jessup?" Priest asked, staring at Brac.

Squaring his shoulders, Brac nodded. "I'd like to care about him a lot more if he'd let me, but I have a feeling you'd know something about that."

"I know he doesn't think he has the capacity to love or be loved."

"Do you believe that?" Brac asked.

"Doesn't matter what I believe. It's what Jessup believes that matters," Priest shot back.

Brac bit his bottom lip, trying to work up the nerve to ask the question he'd been dying to know the answer to since he'd first heard Jessup mention Priest. "Do you love him?"

Priest's eyebrows shot up. "You're a nosy little bastard, aren't ya?"

"I answered your questions, now it's your turn to answer mine," Brac boldly stated.

"I'm here, aren't I? If you had any idea how hard it was to get away or how long I've travelled to get here, you wouldn't be asking."

"So the answer is yes, you *do* love him." Brac felt his hopes of building a future with Jessup beginning to crumble.

"I'm not in love with him, but he's the closest thing to a friend I have. We've known each other a long time."

"So how can you know him the way you claim to and not be in love with him? There are so many things about Jessup to love. I started falling the first week."

"Maybe we're not talking about the same man. I mean, don't get me wrong, but other than his body and unwavering loyalty, I'm not sure what else there is to Jessup."

Brac slammed his beer on the table, offended on Jessup's behalf. "You're an asshole. I can't believe Jessup considers you his best friend." Brac stood and stormed out of the room. By the time he reached the stairs leading to his room, Priest's laughter began to echo through the house once more. "Bastard."

* * * *

The smells wafting from the kitchen into the bedroom began to gnaw at Brac's empty stomach. "Damn him."

Knowing he couldn't spend the next three days hiding, Brac left the bedroom and stomped down the steps. He entered the kitchen and found a grinning Priest at the table.

"I was hoping you'd join me for dinner." Priest stood and retrieved a platter of grilled chicken and roasted vegetables from the warming oven. "Have a seat. Unless, of course, you'd rather take your plate upstairs."

"This is fine," Brac growled, pulling out a chair.

Priest set two glasses and a pitcher of ice water on the table before joining Brac at the table. He filled his plate and poured his water before saying anything further. "Tell me what you see in Jessup?"

"Evidently a hell of a lot more than you do," Brac grumbled.

"Such as?"

"He pretends to be grumpy, but I think he uses that as a shield to keep people away. However, if you catch him first thing in the morning, when his face is still plastered with

sheet wrinkles, he's extremely kind. It's like the mask he usually wears hasn't had time to slip into place. It's those moments I look forward to each day."

"Is there more?"

"Sure. If you walk in on him reading the cartoon section of the newspaper you're more than likely going to catch him smiling. That is, of course, until he catches you watching him." Brac popped a roasted potato slice into his mouth. He'd have moaned at the taste if he hadn't been trying so hard to show Priest no reaction to the prepared food.

"And...?" Priest prompted.

"Do you seriously need me to list everything there is to love about the man?"

"It's your list, not mine," Priest reminded him.

"He stayed out here to watch over me even though his job should've ended when the photographers and reporters gave up and left town." He speared a carrot with his fork. "As a matter-of-fact, he took time off work those last couple of days. He didn't have to do that. He did it because he was worried about me."

"No, he did it because he wanted to fuck you and was trying to move past his demons enough to pounce," Priest ground out between clenched jaws.

For the first time since they'd met, Brac detected a hint of jealousy in Priest's voice. "And you don't like the idea of him fucking me, is that it?"

Priest relaxed his expression and shrugged. "I don't appreciate that a spoiled brat from California can make him hard when I couldn't." Priest dropped his fork onto his plate. "There, are you satisfied?"

Brac sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. "First of all, I'm from Iowa, not California. And secondly, why do you care so much who he gets hard for if you're not in love with him?"

"Because I've always been the one to take care of satisfying him. Did you know that before he went to Syria he used to beg me to fuck him? Or that he refuses to sleep with anyone because he cries in his sleep?"

Brac swallowed around the lump in his throat and shook his head. "He cried in his sleep *before* he went to prison?" Several times Brac thought he'd heard whimpering noises coming from Jessup's room at night, but he'd assumed the man was reliving the torture he'd suffered.

"He might tell you he has nightmares, but it's the crying that embarrasses him. The only way I know about them is because we've shared some close quarters while on assignment. He's never once voluntarily spent the night with me though."

"What makes him so sad?" Brac's heart broke at the thought.

Priest took several bites of his chicken without answering Brac's question.

"Are you afraid you'll betray his trust if you tell me?" Brac asked.

"No," Priest finally answered. "I know he was found in a cardboard box in a dumpster outside a fire station when he was only a few hours old, but that's all he's ever told me." He glanced up from his plate. "It doesn't pay to broadcast your weaknesses in our line of work." Priest returned his attention back to his plate. "Whether it's that or something else, I don't know, but he's convinced he's not worthy of love."

Brac noticed the moisture gathering in Priest's eyes. "You love him, don't you?"

"I suppose I love him as much as I can love anyone. But don't get your panties in a twist. I'm not looking for a partner. My life's my own to destroy. Having someone count on me isn't in my future."

Going back to his dinner, Brac let silence settle around them. Despite Priest's earlier comments about Jessup, he had a strong feeling Priest knew exactly why Brac had fallen so hard and fast for Jessup. Like it or not, Priest was about to get a run for his money if he thought he could scare Brac away from Jessup.

Chapter Six

Before turning the light off over his bed, Jessup grabbed the phone and the slip of paper with Brac's new number on it.

"Hey," Brac answered. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Bored out of my mind, so I thought I'd go ahead and try and get some sleep. Are you getting along with Priest any better?" He grinned. The satisfaction he felt after Brac's complaining phone call earlier still sung in his veins.

"I guess," Brac replied. "Hang on."

Jessup heard Brac tell Priest he was going to take the call upstairs. The friendly pitch of Brac's voice irritated him.

"Okay," Brac said, getting back onto the phone. "We were watching a movie, but I've already seen it."

"Priest's watching a movie?" In all the years Jessup had known Priest, he'd never heard of the man sitting still long enough to watch a movie.

"*True Grit*, the new one, not the old one. Priest said he remembered seeing the original so he was interested in the remake. I tried to tell him it was good but not even Jeff Bridges could compare to John Wayne." Brac chuckled. "I think Priest agrees because he's done nothing but complain about not being able to understand a word Bridges says."

Jessup rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand. "Sounds to me like things are a lot better between the two of you."

"Yeah," Brac mumbled. "We had to set some ground rules, but since then we've been getting along okay."

"What kind of ground rules?" Jessup started to sit up but the pain wouldn't allow it. "Has he come on to you?"

Brac laughed. "No, we agreed not to talk about you other than general information."

"You were talking about me?" Jessup didn't like the sound of that. Priest knew a lot of shit about him.

When Brac didn't answer, Jessup began to wonder exactly what Priest had told him. "Brac?"

"It seems neither of us is good at handling jealousy, so we've come to an understanding. He doesn't talk about fucking you, and I won't resort to trying to kill him in his sleep."

Jessup couldn't hold back his amusement. "It's been a long time since he's fucked me so if he's trying to tell you different, don't believe it."

"Doesn't matter to me if it was last month or twenty years ago," Brac said, irritation in his voice. "Would you like to think about him fucking me?"

"No!" Jessup barked. Deep in the grip of the green-eyed monster, Jessup was tired of the test he'd set up for Brac. "Are you sure he hasn't tried?"

"I may be a foot shorter than he is, but I'm still quite capable of saying no."

"And have you?" Despite Priest's intimidating size, he did have a way of charming a man that was uncanny. Never, in all the years he'd known Priest, had he ever seen the man get turned down.

"Is there a point to this?" Brac asked. "Lesson one, don't assume everyone cheats."

"Wouldn't really be cheating since we've never fucked," Jessup reminded Brac.

"Maybe in whatever fucked up rule book *you* follow. But in *my* book, if you really like someone and wanna build something with them, you don't go around fucking other guys. Of course I'm just a flake from Malibu so what would I know."

Jessup wanted to follow up on that build something comment, but decided to let it drop. He still wasn't convinced it was possible. "Would it help if I told you I miss you?"

Brac sighed into the phone. "Actually, that would help a lot."

"Good." Jessup decided to change the subject again before Brac started to ask questions. "So have you caught any fish lately?"

"I wish. I haven't been out of this house since the shooting. I don't suppose you would talk to Priest about that, would ya? Despite being a grown man, he seems to think my opinion doesn't hold a lot of weight."

Jessup settled back against his pillow. It sounded like Brac was trying to get along with Priest, but Priest was being his usual cantankerous self. "If I tell him it's okay for you to fish, he'll have to go with you."

"Speaking of, anything on the guy who shot you?"

"Nothing. Although, unfortunately, the papers have picked up the story."

"Yeah, Hal called. Sorry about that. I know how much you value your privacy."

"It's not about privacy, Brac. I've pissed off a hell of a lot of people over the years, and I can think of more than one of them who would love nothing more than to see me dead. Thankfully, the reports didn't mention me by name. They were all about the attempt on your life with a side note about your bodyguard being shot in the process."

"My bodyguard." Brac hummed. "I bet if they thought you were my boyfriend they would've dug up every bit of information on you they could find."

"Then let's not do anything to give the press that assumption," Jessup was quick to say. The need for anonymity was just as much for Brac's safety as his own. He hadn't been kidding about people wanting to kill him. It was something he hadn't considered when it had been just him. He was more than used to looking over his shoulder, but would he be willing to put someone else in the position to do the same?

"No, we couldn't possibly act like a real couple, not that we even are," Brac said in a sarcastic tone.

"Are you saying you'd rather I go somewhere else once they spring me from this place?"

"I didn't say that."

"Good, because I'd rather be with you than back at my apartment alone."

"Gee, thanks." Brac huffed. "Get some sleep."

Jessup hated hanging up with tension between the two of them, but hollow promises wouldn't do either of them any good. "Ask Priest to bring you to the hospital tomorrow."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He'll take the appropriate precautions, and I'd really like to see you."

Brac growled into the phone. "You're one of the most infuriating men I've ever known. One minute you do everything you can to push me away, and then the next you say shit like that. Which is it, Jessup? You want me or not?"

"It's not that cut and dried. Of course I want you. Who the hell wouldn't? But there's a lot of things to consider."

"Such as?"

"Your job. Not only do I refuse to live my life under the microscope that comes with dating a celebrity, but it's suicide for someone like me and in turn, dangerous for you. That should be enough right there, but I come with a hell of a lotta baggage that even you may not be able to help me overcome."

"Won't know unless we try," Brac pointed out.

"We can talk about it once I'm released. Pouring my heart out over the phone isn't going to happen." Jessup wasn't even sure he'd be able to open up to Brac in person, but he had no doubt any sort of relationship between them would fail without it.

"Fine. I guess I'll just wait to see you until you get released then, because I can't stand being close to you without touching you, and I can't do that until I know what the hell's going on."

Great. Jessup took a deep calming breath. He'd called Brac in the hope of having a little phone sex before he went to sleep but that was obviously not going to happen. "Can I call you tomorrow?"

"You can do anything you want, obviously, and I just have to *go with the flow.*"

"Goodnight, Brac," Jessup said before hanging up. He knew he should cut the man some slack. After all, Brac had been cooped up inside the cabin for days. Maybe giving Priest the go-ahead to take Brac fishing would help.

He turned off the light and pulled the covers up under his arms. A thought began to creep into the forefront of his mind. What if arguing was part of being in a relationship?

* * * *

Brac thumped his head against the blanket under him. Even fishing wasn't enough to get the argument with Jessup off his mind. He'd finally given up, reeled in his line and was currently staring up through the trees.

"Yeah, I can see why you enjoy this so much. It's just a big ole party," Priest said from the water's edge.

"Shut up," Brac grumbled. It seemed that every time he was in a bad mood Priest's spirits rose. What the hell was up with that?

Priest set his pole on the ground before walking back to the blanket. Staring down at Brac, he shook his head. "You still want to go into all the reasons why Jessup's loveable?"

"Do you mind? Your big head's blocking my view of the leaves."

Priest dropped down onto the blanket and pushed Brac until there was enough room for both of them to lie on their backs. "Don't be too hard on him."

Brac rolled his head to the side. "Why're you defending him all of the sudden?"

"Because he was just as grouchy as you when I talked to him earlier."

"So?" Brac tried to tell himself he didn't give a shit what Jessup's mood was.

"It's not like him to let someone affect his mood like that. The fact that you have the ability speaks volumes for how much you mean to him. I seriously doubt he even realises just how much he likes you. As a matter of fact, it could even be the big L word that men like us only whisper about."

"Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"You always refer to the two of you as 'men like us'. What exactly does that mean? I've seen Jessup's cock, so the only thing I can come up with is men with super big dicks. Is that what it is?"

"No, but I can beat Jessup in that department. Let me show you," Priest said, hands going to his zipper.

"Keep it in your jeans, Sasquatch."

"Ouch. Do you have any idea how much it hurts my feelings when you call me that?" Priest clutched his chest as though wounded.

Brac rolled his eyes, not buying the act for a second. "Stop it," he said, slamming the back of his hand against Priest's stomach. "Just tell me the truth."

Priest held up his arm, drawing Brac's attention to the tattoo that he'd shown Ryan the first day. "Jessup has one of these, too."

"Yeah. I've seen it." *Duh*. "What's it mean?"

"It's the Mark of the Damned. It's a reminder." Priest outlined the Angel of Death with the tip of his finger, seemingly lost in thought.

"A reminder of what?"

"No friends, no family, no one to miss us when we fail to return from a mission. As far as the government and other agencies who hire us are concerned, we don't exist as real people."

Brac rolled to his side and tucked his hands under his cheek. He'd thought a lot about Jessup's early beginnings, but he hadn't realised Jessup had no other family. "Jessup doesn't have anyone? Who took care of him when he was a boy?"

"I don't know. He won't talk about it. Knowing what I know of his birth, I'd say foster care same as me."

Brac wanted to ask Priest about his parents but by Priest's expression, Brac could tell it wasn't open for discussion. "Okay, so even if Jessup had to live that way while he worked for whoever it was, why's he still holding onto it? I mean, I'm here, trying desperately to get close to him. Doesn't he want that?"

"You haven't been listening." Priest adjusted the gun holster under his arm before resting his head on his clasped hands.

"Of course I have," Brac argued.

"The Mark of the Damned isn't something people get for kicks. It's the symbol of how we feel about ourselves. I don't know when Jessup got his, but the day I got mine was the day after I tried to kill myself. You see, in the end, I decided I might as well make a load of money and let others try to kill me since I'd done such a shitty job of trying to kill myself."

The news that Priest had once tried to kill himself hit Brac like a ton of bricks. For the first time since they'd met, Brac brushed a caring hand across Priest's stomach. "I'm glad you didn't succeed in killing yourself."

"You and most of the gay dudes I've met since then," Priest quipped.

Leave it to Priest to make a joke out of a serious situation. "And you think Jessup felt that way when he got his?"

"I can't speak for why he did it, but it takes a seriously fucked up mind to do what we do, or as in his case, did."

Brac thought of his parents. What would he have become if he hadn't had their support in the early years of his life and career? Jessup had confided in Brac that he didn't know how to date or be a boyfriend, and Brac had repaid that confidence by yelling at Jessup every time he screwed up. "Would you take me to the hospital?"

"Sure I will. Right after I catch that bass you promised me."

* * * *

Staring down at the green and brown goop on his plate was enough to drive away Jessup's hunger. He pushed the tray aside just as the door opened. "You can take..." He stopped mid-sentence and smiled. "What're you doing here? I didn't figure you'd show up after the argument we had."

"You call that an argument?" Brac grinned. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

Brac dug into the messenger bag slung over his shoulder and pulled out a white takeout box. "I'm sure they're cold, but I brought you some tacos from O'Brien's."

"You went to O'Brien's?" Jessup couldn't believe Priest would be so careless.

"Me? No. Priest went into town for me." Brac moved the uneaten tray of food out of the way before setting the tacos in front of him.

"I can only imagine the attention Priest received in town."

"Yeah, sounds like he caused quite a stir." Brac started to reach for Jessup but quickly pulled his hand back. "He's downstairs, by the way. You want me to get him?"

"No." Craving the man's touch, Jessup lifted Brac's hand from the mattress and pressed it to his mouth. He took his time kissing Brac's palm before clutching the hand to his chest. "I wasn't lying when I told you I missed you."

Brac leant over and sealed his lips over Jessup's.

With a hungry groan, Jessup reached up and buried his fingers in Brac's soft curls. He forced his way into Brac's mouth and proceeded to plunder the warm orifice with his tongue.

The way his cock reacted to the kiss, Jessup had no doubt of his staying power when it came to Brac. However, even though his dick was up to the challenge, the rest of his body wasn't. He was forced to break the kiss long before he wanted to. Jessup tried to draw in a few good breaths. "Sorry. I get winded for some reason."

"Don't apologise. That kiss would've taken anyone's breath away." Brac ruffled Jessup's short hair. "I'm sorry about last night."

"No. I know I've been sending mixed signals."

"You have, but I haven't been very patient with you either."

Still holding Brac's hand, Jessup moved them down his body to press against his erection. "Hopefully that's not a mixed signal."

Brac grinned. "Nope. I understand that one perfectly." Brac released Jessup's hand and lifted the sheet far enough to reach underneath.

Jessup felt his idiotic hospital gown being lifted seconds before a warm hand wrapped around his cock. Thank God he'd got them to remove the catheter the evening before. With his hand free, Jessup reached for the front of Brac's cargo shorts. "Seems you're suffering from the same condition."

"That I am." Brac glanced over his shoulder towards the closed door. "Hang on." He released Jessup's cock and carried the chair to the door. With a devilish grin, Brac wedged

the chair under the handle. "That should do it." Returning to Jessup's side, Brac unzipped his shorts and let them fall to his ankles before flipping the sheet back to expose Jessup's cock.

Instead of paying attention to Jessup's dripping erection, Brac's gaze fell to the bandaged area on his torso. "I'm so sorry," he whispered.

Jessup felt the cock in his hand start to go soft as Brac continued to stare at the wound left from the gunshot and subsequent kidney removal. Jessup applied pressure to the cock in his hand. "I'm fine, honest."

"It's still hard for me to believe someone could hate me enough to kill me. Especially because I've never done anything mean to anyone, so I can only assume my sexuality's the reason."

"Have you ever received fan mail that made you uncomfortable?" Jessup asked.

Brac continued to slowly pump Jessup's cock. "Not really. When I first came out, I had some whack jobs email me and stuff, but for the most part my fans have been incredibly supportive." Brac slowed his hand as his expression changed. "I did get one disturbing email about a year ago. It was from a Private First Class that I corresponded with several times. He was stationed in Iraq and miserable from the sound of it."

"He was gay?" Jessup couldn't imagine being forced to hide his sexuality from the very people he had to trust enough to fight beside.

"Yeah, although he was completely in the closet, even at home. I guess he just needed someone to talk to, so we began emailing a couple times a week. Then one day I received a handwritten letter from him instead of an email. It was the first letter I'd received so I don't know if his handwriting was usually as sloppy, but it was hard to read."

"What did the letter say?" An uneasy feeling began to creep its way up Jessup's spine.

"That I'd ruined everything and he hated me. Of course I'm paraphrasing, but it all boiled down to that." Brac's eyebrows drew together. "That's the last time I heard from him. I wondered about him for a while, but then Kit moved next door, and I had other things to do besides dwell on a guy who believed I'd done something to ruin his life."

"Do you remember anything about him? His name? Where he was from? Anything?"

"Sure do. It's the reason his email caught my attention in the first place, S. Hostetler, but instead of Simon, the S stood for Steven."

Jessup nodded, remembering Brac's given name was Simon Hostetler. "Any idea where he was from?"

"Lincoln, Nebraska. We talked a couple of times about how different life was growing up in the Midwest."

Jessup rubbed the head of Brac's cock with his thumb. "Would you mind if I try to get in touch with him?"

"He couldn't have been the shooter," Brac started to argue. "He was confused, but he was a good guy."

"War has a way of changing people and not always for the better," Jessup said.

A loud knock sounded, making Brac jump. He quickly pulled up his shorts and threw the sheet back over Jessup's lap.

"Who is it?" Jessup yelled, pissed that someone would interrupt his handjob.

"It's time for your pain medicine. Why's this door locked?"

Jessup rolled his eyes. "It's Nancy. She's my least favourite nurse." He pulled Brac in for another quick kiss. "Do me a favour and go find Priest while I make this woman happy."

"Not too happy, I hope."

The mental image made Jessup shiver from head to toe. "Don't even go there. The woman makes Mussolini look like a happy puppy."

The knock came again, with more force. "Mr Jessup. Open this door or I'll have to call security."

"She's serious," Jessup mumbled.

"I'll unlock the door and slip out before she has a chance to string me up then." Brac brushed another kiss across Jessup's lips. "Be back in a few."

Brac unlocked the door and jumped back as Nancy pushed her way inside. Her face was so red Jessup expected her to keel over any second. She stopped in front of Brac and narrowed her eyes. "You're that actor."

"Yes, ma'am. I didn't want to take the chance of a photographer following me in here so I locked the door. I hope I haven't caused a problem."

Right before Jessup's eyes a miracle occurred. Nancy's face transformed from the dour bitch who'd begun to haunt his every waking moment, to a...fan girl?

"Oh, that's okay, Mr Riesling. I completely understand. I didn't know that you knew Mr Jessup," Nancy fawned.

Brac glanced over and met Jessup's gaze, his dazzling smile on full display. "We're very close. I would really appreciate it if you would take extra good care of him while he's here."

"Oh, of course. I would be honoured."

Jessup rolled his eyes. He couldn't believe how fake people could be around someone just because they were on TV. He glanced at the uneaten tacos on his tray. No doubt Nancy would scold him and try to take them away as soon as she pulled her head out of Brac's ass. "Brac brought me some tacos. Isn't that nice, Nancy?"

The nurse's lips thinned momentarily before pulling back in yet another fake smile. "That was very kind of you, although I don't believe Mr Jessup is supposed to have anything not on his approved diet."

Brac put his hands together and looked pleadingly at Nancy. "Please just this once. I wanted to do something special for him and couldn't think of anything but giving him tacos from his favourite place in the world."

Nancy shook her finger at Brac. "You know just how to get to me. Okay, the tacos can stay, but just this once."

Brac leant forward and kissed the nurse on the cheek. "You're the best nurse ever!"

It was official, Brac had totally lost his mind. Before Mr Crazy could leave and Nancy had a chance to renege on her deal, Jessup pulled the tray back over and started devouring the cold, soggy tacos. Even in their present state they tasted better than anything he'd been given at the hospital.

"Well, I'd better go, but I'll be back in a bit," Brac called, easing his way out into the hall.

Jessup finished his first taco in three bites before starting on the next. He pulled the tray closer to his chest when Nancy started his way.

"You're lucky I like him," she muttered, handing Jessup a small paper cup with his pills.

"Yes, I guess I am," he answered before taking another bite.

* * * *

Priest helped ease Jessup onto the soft leather seats of the Range Rover. "You good?"

It had been almost six days since the shooting, and Jessup felt worse than he had the day he'd woken up in the hospital. The doctor had explained that the muscle he'd cut through to remove the damaged kidney would take a while to heal, but damn.

Priest pressed a button on the side of the seat and thankfully his bed for the next hour smoothly reclined. "I may never leave this vehicle."

"I doubt the rental company will be happy about that once you start stinking." Priest chuckled at his own joke before shutting the passenger door.

Jessup waited to speak until Priest got behind the wheel and pulled out of the parking lot. "What's different about you?"

Priest lifted his hand off the steering wheel and pretended to study it. "Nope, still black." He leaned over and glanced at his reflection in the rear view mirror. "And still good looking. I can't imagine what you could be referring to."

"This? The happy-go-lucky bullshit. Please don't tell me Brac has worked his magic on you, too." For the remainder of his stay in the hospital, Nancy had made it a point to take special care of him, each time inquiring as to when Brac would be back to visit.

"He's a good guy. It's been a while since I've been subjected to one of those. Maybe it's rubbing off," Priest explained.

"Gee, thanks," Jessup mumbled. He started to close his eyes but suddenly thought of something. "Your mood doesn't have anything to do with you getting laid, does it?"

"I've kept your boy's cherry intact if that's what you're asking."

"I seriously doubt Brac's had his cherry for some time now."

Priest shook his finger from side to side. "Aahhh, but until I've fucked them, they're still officially a virgin."

Jessup let his eyes drift shut. "Keep tellin' yourself that, stud." He didn't know what Brac had done to cheer up his usually ornery friend, but he had to admit the new Priest was a hell of a lot more fun to be around. "How did Brac take the news of Steve's suicide?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"Hard. I think he's blaming himself. He tried to call the boy's family, but the listed number's been disconnected."

"I wonder why?" The whole situation didn't feel right. "Have you dug up anything on the family?"

"Basic search stuff. His mom, Beth, died of a heart attack shortly before Steve hung himself. His dad, Curtis, sold the family home and moved to parts unknown."

Jessup's eyes sprang open. "That's a lot for one man to handle in such a short time. You thinking what I'm thinking?"

“Already a step ahead of you, as usual. I called home on the way here and asked Alice to put a trace on Curtis’ social security number. If he’s moved, she’ll find him.”

As far as Jessup knew, Priest was the only operative to call headquarters home. He assumed it was because Alice was the closest thing to a mother Priest had ever had. Jessup closed his eyes again as the pain medicine began to kick in. “Wake me when we get there.”

Chapter Seven

Brac spread his favourite blanket and lay down before tucking the ridiculous handgun between his legs. He hadn't bothered to bring the fishing pole, wanting nothing more than to feel the afternoon sun on his face for a while.

"I've been watching you," a gruff voice said.

Brac sat straight up and turned to find an older man step out of the brush. After Priest had filled him in on Steve's suicide, he knew exactly who the man was. Although having a rifle pointed at him was enough to scare the shit out of him, it was the red laser sight on top that Brac knew cemented his fate. "Mr Hostetler?"

"Don't you say my name, boy," Curtis spat. "I came to make things right. I've waited for this chance for days, and I finally saw that big fella leave, so I'm taking it."

Brac held up his hands to draw Curtis' attention away from the gun hidden between his legs. He'd known he was taking a chance coming out to the pond after Priest had left, so he'd found one of Jessup's guns and had brought it with him. Damn, was he glad of his moment of paranoia.

"Please, sir. I'm sorry about Steve. I truly am, but I was just trying to be a friend to him when it seemed he needed one."

"Yeah, well that friendship cost him everything. You filled his head with all kinds of queer bullshit. Had him believing he was one of you."

"He was," Brac whispered. "He was just afraid to tell you."

Curtis shook his head. "You're lying. Steven told me he reached out to you because you were a famous guy and you used that to send him vile emails. Surely you can't be stupid enough to think the government doesn't monitor what goes in and out to their troops."

Confused, Brac tried to remember the content of the messages. "I'm sorry, sir, but that's not true. I only encouraged Steve to reach out to the people he loved and trusted. Never would I send anything sexual in nature to a fan."

"Liar!" Curtis screamed.

"Maybe the emails he received were from someone else. Perhaps someone he met online? I know there are a lot of sites out there that offer that sort of thing to men in the military."

Curtis began shaking his head again, mumbling to himself. Brac used the opportunity to ease his hands down between his legs. He managed to get the safety off the gun, before Curtis came back to himself.

"My Steven wasn't like that. He was devastated when the Army sent him home."

"I'm sorry. I remember how highly Steve spoke of the Army and his part in the war effort." Brac needed to keep Curtis talking. Having a gun in his hand was one thing, but he honestly didn't think he had it in him to shoot someone. Priest had been gone at least an hour and a half. If he could keep Curtis talking for another thirty minutes or so...

"Turn around," Curtis ordered.

Brac squeezed the butt of the gun. *Please don't make me shoot you.* "Do you think Steve would really want you to kill me? I'm sure he'd tell you the truth if he could. I promise you I didn't send him the emails that got him discharged."

"I said turn around!" Curtis yelled, waving the rifle.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Time's up, he told himself. He jerked his head in the direction of the house. "Did you hear that? I think Priest's back. You'd better go if you want to live."

"Live?" Curtis began to cackle. "I've been half dead since my wife and boy died. The only thing keeping me going was putting things to rights with you. When I saw that report on the news about you being in this cesspool of a town, I used the last of my money to get here. You really think I care anything about living after I do to you what you did to my son?"

"I didn't kill your son, Mr Hostetler. If you're looking for someone to blame, blame yourself. Maybe if you'd been open enough for Steve to come to you to discuss his homosexuality he wouldn't have had to seek strangers out online."

Curtis' face went pale. It seemed it wasn't the first time he had heard it. "Did Steve tell you that before he killed himself, Mr Hostetler? Did he blame you in some way? Is that the reason you've gone looking for someone else to blame?"

Of course Brac knew the only one ultimately at fault for Steve's death was Steve himself, but at the moment he'd try anything to get that fucking rifle pointed away from him.

"No! It's you. You started all of this. If he hadn't been discharged he'd still be alive."

"And he'd still be gay," Brac reminded the older man. "As I see it, I'm the one person in his life who tried to help him work through his feelings. And this is the way to repay me for trying to be a true friend to Steve? Do you really think I deserve to die for doing what you couldn't bring yourself to do? I accepted Steve. Why couldn't you?"

With a roar, Curtis lifted the rifle to his shoulder. Brac lifted the handgun and tried to turn around to get a clean shot, but by the time he took aim, Curtis was already falling to the ground, face first with a hole between his eyes.

Priest stepped out of the trees, a silencer-equipped handgun still smoking at his side. "We're back," he announced in a casual tone.

* * * *

"Are they gone?" Brac asked Priest.

"Yeah. Finally." Priest fell to the couch and closed his eyes. "That's exactly the reason I don't usually stick around after a hit. I never understood it. The guy was bad, he needed to be stopped, end of story. Why the hell do cops think everything has to be investigated?"

"Ummm, I'm guessing it's because it's their job."

"Bullshit. Their job is to make sure the bad guys don't get out of control in the first place."

Brac got to his feet and stretched his arms over his head. "I would usually take great joy in disagreeing with you, but being as you're my hero today, I'm gonna give you this one. Thanks for saving my life."

"Hell, it wasn't like I had much choice in the matter. You've kinda started to grow on me."

Brac grinned. "I do believe that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Well, I'm in a good mood. Don't let it go to your head."

Brac laughed and bumped Priest's knee with his leg. "I'm going up to bed. See you in the morning."

"Yeah, see ya, Mr Hollywood."

One step at a time, Brac managed to make it up the stairs without falling. He couldn't remember a time when he'd felt so exhausted. He opened his bedroom door and just stood there. Sound asleep with the light on, Jessup looked like every dream Brac had ever had.

Although they hadn't had a chance to talk much since the shooting, when it came time for Jessup to give up the fight and lay down he'd asked Brac if he could do it in his bed. Of course Brac had wanted to jump for joy and follow Jessup upstairs immediately, but he'd been forced to endure several more hours of routine police procedure.

Brac stepped out of his shorts on the way to the bathroom. If Priest was skulking around he'd just have to get an eyeful because Brac was too damn tired to care about modesty.

He turned on the water and looked at his reflection while the water heated. Although he'd only been away from Malibu for three weeks, his California tan was fading fast. It was more than that though. The man Brac saw in the mirror was nothing like the man he'd been before he'd met Jessup.

Brac turned around and climbed under the warm spray of the shower. The thought of going back to his old life held absolutely no appeal for him. Days trapped on studio lots and evenings spent at parties had been fun for the first couple of years, but even the parties had become a hated part of his job.

Soaping up, he began to wonder whether or not he could really make a home in Cattle Valley, more importantly, a home with Jessup. They still had so many things to work out between them. Jessup's aversion to being touched was the biggest obstacle still in their path.

Brac did a quick rinse before turning off the water. He grabbed the closest towel and dried off before dropping it in the hamper on his way out of the bathroom.

After shutting the bedroom door securely, Brac lifted the sheet and slid in beside Jessup. Even lying next to the man felt right.

"You okay?" Jessup asked.

Brac carefully thought the question through before answering. "I don't know. I hope so." He rolled to his side. "I keep wondering whether or not I would've had the balls to pull the trigger."

"No use thinking about it. The moment's passed so your answer wouldn't be accurate anyway. All that matters is what you choose at the moment. Before that or after that is all just speculation." Jessup stretched out his arm and tapped Brac's shoulder. "Scoot closer."

Inch by inch, Brac eased his way towards Jessup. "Tell me when."

"All the way," Jessup said, hauling Brac against him. He turned on his good side to face Brac. "I nearly dropped to my knees when I found out how close I'd come to losing you." He

rested his palm against the side of Brac's face, tracing the shell of Brac's ear with his ring finger. "I don't know if what I feel is love, but I know I'd give my life ten times over to save yours."

"Maybe I'm just being selfish, but I choose to believe that's exactly what it is." Brac moved close enough for his cock to line up with Jessup's. "Did Priest tell you he made me list the reasons why I love you?"

"No." Jessup thrust his hips forward. "I won't make you list the reasons since I probably wouldn't believe them anyway, but you could tell me again that you love me."

"I love you, Al Jessup," Brac whispered. "And I'm going to say it every day until you start to believe it."

"Priest told you about my mother, didn't he?"

"Yeah. But what I don't understand is how you could've let the actions of one woman convince you that you were unlovable."

"It wasn't one." Jessup slid his hand down Brac's neck to his hip. "I didn't even know about my birth mother until my first foster mother told me."

"Why would she do that?" Brac couldn't imagine a woman being so cruel as to tell a child something like that.

Jessup leant forward and buried his face against Brac's neck. "Mrs Gibbs was the first foster mother I remember having. I'm not sure if she took me in right away or not. I always knew she wasn't my mother, she made that fact very clear on a number of occasions."

"Bitch," Brac grumbled.

"Yeah, she was, but she was the only thing I had. She had this collection of pretty glass ballerinas. Each one of them was just different enough to make them interesting. I used to sit for hours and look at them through the display case she kept them in."

Brac had a sinking feeling he knew where the story was going. He held his breath and hoped he was wrong.

"I knew I wasn't supposed to touch them, but one day I just couldn't resist. The other kids had gone to the pool but I had an ear infection so Mrs Gibbs wouldn't let me go. I remember being mad. I don't think that's why I disobeyed, but it was a long time ago, so maybe I'm not remembering it right."

"How old were you?" Brac asked.

"Five." Jessup pulled back and stared into Brac's eyes. "I broke one of the ballerinas when I tried to pick it up. It fell over and her little crown broke off. I was so scared I took her out of the case and ran up to the bedroom I shared with two other boys. Later that evening Mrs Gibbs discovered the missing ballerina and knew immediately who'd taken it."

Jessup stopped to clear his throat. "She found me up in my room hiding under the bed still holding the figurine. I remember her pulling me out by my hair and screaming at me as she tied me to the timeout chair in the closet. She told me what my mother had done and that if I weren't so damn big she'd do the same thing to me for daring to break something that didn't belong to me." Jessup shrugged. "I was sent to a different home the next day."

"And by then the damage had been done," Brac surmised. The pieces of Jessup's personality clicked into place. "Whether she deserved it or not, you probably loved her. And not only did she restrain you, but she didn't show you an ounce of loyalty in return for your trust and love."

"Like I said, it was a long time ago. I must've gone through ten homes after that, some okay, some bad."

"I wish I knew how to take away your pain, but I don't. All I can do is fight like hell to replace those bad memories with good ones."

Jessup moved his hand to cup one of Brac's ass cheeks. "How're you gonna manage that?"

Brac rolled away from Jessup and opened the bedside drawer. He removed a condom and bottle of lube before holding them out to the man he loved. "By asking you to fuck me by whatever means you feel comfortable."

Jessup took the supplies and set them between them. "We've been through a lot since that day by the pond. I'd like to try again, if you're willing."

Brac smiled. "I'm a big believer in practice makes perfect, but I shouldn't have asked. I got caught up in the moment, but the minute you're feeling better, I'm gonna be all over you."

Jessup held up the bottle of lube. "Then why don't you do me?"

Floored by the request, Brac didn't know what to say. He knew how much courage it had taken Jessup to offer. "You really do trust me."

"Yeah, it seems I do."

Brac tried to figure out how he could make love to Jessup without putting his weight on him. He finally came to the conclusion that there was simply no way without risking possible injury to Jessup's healing body. "Would you settle for a blowjob?"

"I would never consider a blowjob from you settling." Jessup brushed Brac's hair out of his face. "Are you not used to topping?"

Brac couldn't help but laugh. "I've probably topped twice as much as I've bottomed, so that's not the problem."

"Then what is?"

Leaning in, Brac gave Jessup a deep kiss. It was long enough to get them both worked up without overexerting Jessup. Pulling back, he rubbed his nose against Jessup's. "I want our first time to be full throttle, I guess. It's been less than a week since you were shot."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? If anyone should be sorry it should be me. I'm the one Curtis was after. Besides, maybe if I hold out on you, you'll decide to keep me around longer."

"And what about your career? Surely you can't put Hal off indefinitely."

"Maybe not indefinitely, but right now this is where I want to be." Brac moaned when he felt Jessup wrap a hand around both of their cocks.

"Any idea how long you'll be staying?" Jessup asked as he stroked their cocks.

"Mmmm, that depends. Do you know of any houses for sale in Cattle Valley?"

"Never really looked for a house, but I'm sure you could find something. Are you sure you want to move that far away from Hollywood though?"

"Right now I have absolutely no plans to do another series. I'd like to find a movie I can get behind and feel passionate about, but regardless, I've had my fill of living life in the fast lane."

When Jessup's rhythm picked up, Brac couldn't help himself. He reached between them and gathered some of their combined pre-cum on the tips of his fingers. He pressed his middle finger against the centre of Jessup's lips and watched as it was immediately sucked inside. "Taste good?"

Jessup nodded, lapping at Brac's ring finger. "I don't think I've ever taken the time to play like this in bed."

"I hope you can trust me enough to try all kinds of things you've never done before." Brac could think of several things he'd like to try with Jessup. "You know you're not the only

one who's had to watch himself. It was different with Randal because I believed in him. But with every single lay after that I woke up the next morning wondering whether my performance would be rated on a scale of one to ten on page one of the gossip rags."

"At least you don't have to worry about that anymore. I never kiss and tell." Jessup pressed his thumb against the slit on Brac's crown. "You close? Because my arm's wearing out."

"Then stop talking and let me enjoy the moment."

Jessup opened his mouth but quickly snapped it shut.

Damn, although it had taken Brac a while to get Jessup to talk to him, it was amazing how fast the man became a chatterbox. It was obvious the day's events had taken their toll on both of them. Normally the touch of Jessup's hand would set Brac off like a rocket, but he just couldn't get there. Throwing back the covers, Brac sat up. "Save your arm, I'll take over from here. I think that big cock of yours needs some extra attention."

Jessup released Brac's cock. "Swing your ass around here so I can take care of you, too."

Never one to turn down a blowjob, Brac removed the pillow from under Jessup's head and straddled the man's gorgeous face. Before leaning over him, Brac brushed Jessup's forehead with his cock. "You sure this won't bother you? I don't plan to lay on you, so that might help."

Jessup gave Brac's ass a playful swat. "I'm game. What's the worst that can happen?"

Although Jessup said it in a teasing manner, Brac knew they both were a bit worried. "Just don't bite my dick off."

"That, I can promise you."

Brac braced his hands beside Jessup's hips and slowly lowered himself over the man he loved. He took several moments to visually study the perfect cock lying hard against Jessup's stomach. Darker than the rest of him, Jessup's cock truly was a masterpiece of creation. Brac had always been a vein man. There was just something about those long plump lines travelling up the length of a cock that fuelled his fire, and Jessup had more than the average man. But, of course, Jessup was far from average. With a firm grip on the root, he used the tip of his tongue to follow the biggest vein from the base of Jessup's cock to the crown.

Jessup stroked Brac's cock several times, spreading the pre-cum down his length. Brac expected to feel the warmth of Jessup's mouth on his cock so was quite surprised when Jessup separated Brac's butt cheeks and licked a path to Brac's hole.

"Ahhh, fuck!" Jessup had found Brac's sweet spot. Brac glanced over his shoulder. "Don't hurt yourself. The last thing I want is you back in the hospital."

"Stop nagging and start enjoying," Jessup ordered.

"Well, in that case I only have one word to say to you. More," he begged.

After a soft chuckle, Jessup's tongue began paying particular attention to the puckered skin surrounding Brac's hole.

Not wanting to be outdone, Brac sucked the crown of Jessup's cock into his mouth. He teased the slit with the tip of his tongue, encouraging the constant flow of pre-cum as he reached down to massage Jessup's balls.

"Where'd that lube go?" Jessup asked, searching the bed beside Brac's hand.

Brac reached over to aid in the search, finally coming up with it. He handed it back without ever taking his mouth off Jessup's cock. Working Jessup's dick further down his throat, he hummed at the breach of Jessup's lubed finger into his ass.

"I want in here," Jessup growled, burying his finger as deep as it could go.

Brac released Jessup's cock. "I may be mistaken, but I think you're in," he said before engulfing Jessup's cock again.

Jessup bit Brac's cheek. "Stop sucking so I can fuck you."

Brac stilled. "I thought we agreed you weren't physically up to making love."

"Yeah, well, my cock disagrees." Jessup added another finger.

It had been a while since Brac had been fucked, but his body opened for Jessup as if by magic. Hell, even his ass knew he was meant to be with Jessup. Like he'd done earlier, Brac ran through the possible positions that could give them both what they wanted while still protecting Jessup's healing wound.

After a quick search, he came up with the condom and tore open the wrapper. Jessup's third finger felt so good, Brac took his time rolling the condom down Jessup's length. "Pass me the lube."

The bottle tapped against his arm, and Brac reached around to grab it. A few drops was all he needed to prepare Jessup's sheathed cock. With his ass more than ready, Brac carefully climbed off Jessup. "I think I've figured out a way, but I need you to be honest with me. If you start to feel panicky, tell me."

"All I'm feeling right now is horny."

"Good, keep that thought going." Facing Jessup's feet, Brac insinuated his calves under Jessup's thighs. "Okay with this?"

"Yes, just do it and stop worrying about me."

Brac glanced over his shoulder. He'd have rather faced Jessup, but there was plenty of time for that once his man healed. "I'll always worry about you."

Jessup smiled and held his cock by the base, giving Brac what he needed. "I believe you," Jessup whispered.

Brac backed himself up until he felt the touch of Jessup's cockhead against his stretched hole. There was something so open and honest in Jessup's expression that Brac had no doubt the man had meant what he'd said. Relaxing his body, Brac lowered himself onto Jessup's length. The width of Jessup's cock was more than he was used to, but once again, his body seemed to understand and make accommodations for Jessup's girth.

He slowly rocked back and forth until he sat on Jessup's groin. Jessup tapped Brac's hip, telling him without words that he needed Brac to move. Perhaps Jessup felt a niggle of panic or the heat of desire. Either way, Brac was more than willing to comply.

With one hand braced on his thigh and the other wrapped around his cock, Brac began to move. Each slide of Jessup's cock in and out of his ass prompted a moan. As good as it felt, he had no doubt a full-out fucking would send him straight to the stars.

"Feels so good," Jessup moaned. "Better than ever."

Brac couldn't agree more. He reached under his swinging balls and felt his hole wrapped around Jessup's cock. The skin seemed to be stretched beyond reason, making Brac even hornier. "Bear with me a sec," he told Jessup.

In a quick change of position, Brac squatted over Jessup with his feet planted on either side of Jessup's hips. He impaled himself once again and used the strength in his legs to bounce up and down on Jessup's dick.

"Yeah, that's it," Jessup encouraged.

"Oh, that's more than it," Brac fired back, his balls drawing up. "Gonna come."

"Hell yeah." Jessup gripped Brac's hips and began thrusting upwards.

With no time to worry about his lover's wound, Brac came in a rush, spraying Jessup's leg with the first strand of seed.

Jessup grunted and slammed deep into Brac's ass.

Brac released his cock and braced his hands on the mattress. His legs were beginning to shake, but he held on long enough for Jessup to finish. When he felt Jessup's body relax under him, Brac fell to the side, dislodging Jessup's cock.

He barely managed to turn himself around and lay at Jessup's side before collapsing again. "Fuck," he sighed.

A car engine starting outside the window brought Brac upright. "What's that?"

Jessup groaned and reached down to remove the soiled condom. "Priest's leaving," he mumbled, tossing the tied condom to the floor.

"What?" Brac jumped out of bed and ran to the window just in time to see the last of a set of taillights before they disappeared into the trees. "Where's he going? He didn't even say goodbye."

"Priest never says goodbye." Jessup ran his hand through his hair. "Come back to bed."

"In a minute." With a heavy heart, Brac went to the bathroom to clean up. As he ran warm water over a wash cloth, he thought of the man who'd saved his life only hours earlier. After cleaning up, Brac carried the warm cloth to the bedroom. "You think he'll be back?"

"Someday."

Brac cleaned Jessup's cock before throwing the cloth on the floor. "Doesn't it piss you off that he just left like that?"

Jessup drew Brac against his side and kissed him. "He runs away when he starts to feel something. It's always been that way with him. I watched him earlier, right after the shooting. Normally he kills on command without a backwards glance, but when he walked into the house with you tucked under his arm, I could tell the shooting had taken its toll."

"Do you think he blames me for it?" He prayed the episode hadn't destroyed the friendship he'd built with Priest.

"No. I think he realised just how much you meant to him, and it scared him." Jessup kissed Brac again. "Don't worry. It's good for Priest to remember he still has a heart every now and then."

Epilogue

"Never ask me to do that again," Jessup said before taking a sip of his beer.

Brac bumped Jessup with his shoulder. "Don't worry, I won't. Furniture shopping's supposed to be fun, not an excuse to whine."

"I wasn't whining. I just don't understand the point of it when you have an entire house full of the stuff back in California."

Brac looked at Jessup like he had two heads. "You can't put Malibu beach furniture in a log cabin. Are you nuts?"

"Evidently," Jessup drawled. "Gotta use the restroom. If Moby comes by order me another beer, please."

"Will do."

Jessup stood and made his way out of the bar. It was Friday night and the place was hopping with a charity pool tournament. Stepping up to the urinal, Jessup unzipped his jeans and pulled out his cock. As the stream started to flow, he noticed Luke Hatcher, an EMT at the fire station, staring at him. "Problem?"

Luke was wearing a thin white muscle shirt and his tattoos were on full display, drawing Jessup's attention away from his face. "You heard from Priest?" the medic finally asked.

Jessup shook off and stuffed his cock back into his jeans. "How do you know Priest?"

"Met him the night of the dance. We were in the middle of an award-winning fuck when you called," Luke added. By the wicked grin, Luke knew exactly how much he'd thrown Jessup with the announcement. "Anyway, he said he'd call, but I haven't heard from him."

"Don't hold your breath. Priest lives life by his own watch, and he doesn't usually do repeat performances." Jessup hated to be the one to tell Luke, but the guy had a right to know that Priest wasn't the sort of man to be counted on.

"No biggie. I'm not into candy and flowers. Just thought it'd be nice to feel that meat of his again." Luke walked out of the restroom without another word.

Jessup washed his hands before rejoining Brac at the table. "I think I know how Priest knew your name."

"How?"

Jessup nodded towards the pool area. "Luke said Priest was in town the night of the shooting. He must've been watching us."

"Why would he do that?"

"No idea, but if that's the case, why'd it take him two days to get to the hospital?" Jessup pulled out his cell phone and called the familiar number. "Hi, Alice. Bob Goldsmith again. Would you please call me at your earliest convenience?" He hung up the phone and set it on the table next to his beer.

"Is all that cloak and dagger stuff really necessary?" Brac asked.

"Yeah."

"So how does this Alice woman know you want Priest to call and not her?"

"Because if I wanted to talk to Alice I'd leave my name as Jim Paul."

"That is so twisted," Brac said, taking the plate of food from Moby. "Thanks."

Moby placed Jessup's steak in front of him. "Let me know if you need anything."

"Will do." Jessup took another drink of his beer. Despite what Brac said, Jessup knew the man loved the cloak and dagger stuff. Jessup had caught Brac reading a lot of mystery/suspense scripts lately and wouldn't be surprised if his boyfriend started auditioning for movie roles.

Although Jessup hated the thought of Brac leaving to shoot a movie, it went hand in hand with loving an actor. At least Brac had given up his California lifestyle to concentrate on the home they were having built. It wasn't officially within the Cattle Valley city limits, but Brac had managed to use his wealth and charm to buy a hundred acres from a neighbouring land owner. Why they'd had to spend the entire afternoon in Sheridan picking out furniture when the damn house was still months away from completion floored him.

"I'd like to find a few antique pieces to sprinkle around the house," Brac said out of the blue.

"Sprinkle? Did you seriously just say that?" Jessup chuckled.

"Fuck you," Brac replied around a mouthful of food.

* * * *

Off duty, Jessup drove towards home after his shift. It had been a long three weeks since Brac had left for Toronto to film a movie, but his partner was finally due home any minute.

Jessup had just rolled to a stop at the intersection outside of town when a bright red Crossfire going at least seventy sped by right in front of him. With a shake of his head, Jessup dug the magnetic cherry top out from under the seat and stuck it to the roof of his truck.

Pulling away from the stop sign, Jessup floored it in an effort to catch up to the speeding vehicle. With the red beacon flashing, he'd had to travel close to a hundred miles an hour before pulling up behind the sports car. Jessup honked his horn and waited for the car to slow down and move to the side of the road.

The driver's hand went up as he slowed the vehicle to within the speed limit. Jessup honked his horn again, signalling for the driver to pull over.

Instead the driver pointed in front of him and continued on his way down the road. The car made a right-hand turn into a long driveway and drove for another mile before slowing to a stop. Jessup turned off the flashing light and stepped out of the truck. Before approaching the car, he removed his weapon belt and set it on the seat of the truck.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Jessup asked, coming up on the driver's side door.

Brac held up his hands in a sign of surrender. "I'm sorry, deputy. I'm just returning from a long absence, and I have this new lube I'm dying to try." Brac lowered one of his hands and lifted a small pharmacy sack. "See?"

"I'm gonna have to ask you to get out of the car." Jessup stepped back and waited for Brac to climb out of the low-slung vehicle. Although the game was one of Brac's favourites to play, Jessup needed to teach his man something about the dangers of speeding.

Instead of facing Jessup, Brac turned and put his hands on the hood of the car, legs spread. "You're not going to frisk me, are you?"

Jessup gave Brac's ass a heavy-handed smack before he pressed himself against the man he loved. "We both know that road isn't meant for speed. You could've killed yourself." He finished the sentence with a bite to Brac's neck.

Brac pressed his ass against the erection trapped behind Jessup's jeans. "I didn't speed the entire way. I saw your truck pulling up to that stop sign and decided to have some fun."

Jessup moved his hands to run down the front of Brac's body, taking the time to appreciate the body sculpting Brac had worked hard on for his role. "There are safer ways to have fun."

Although there wasn't much heat in his voice, Jessup was damn serious. He'd seen first-hand what could happen when people got careless behind the wheel. Jessup pulled the front of Brac's T-shirt up, needing to feel the warmth of skin. While one of Jessup's hands roamed Brac's chest, the other went to the thick package hidden beneath his jeans. "You're not trying to hide drugs in here, are you?" he asked, getting back to the game.

"You're not planning to get rough with me are you, deputy?"

"That depends on how cooperative you are." Jessup lowered Brac's zipper and pushed his jeans down as far as he could reach without breaking body contact. "You know good boys wear underwear," he commented when Brac's cock sprang free.

"Lucky for you, no one's ever accused me of being a good boy." Brac pushed back against Jessup.

Jessup gave Brac's cock a couple of strokes before spitting in his hand. He lowered his fingers to the sweet ass he'd missed so much and found the bullseye that made all his fantasies come true. "You know some men think they can hide contraband by stuffing it up inside themselves."

"Really? Well, you're free to check, but I'm not about to confess."

Jessup reached into the car and retrieved the sack Brac had held up earlier. "Stay right where you are," he ordered. He unzipped his jeans and pushed them down far enough to release his cock. Unlike Brac, Jessup liked the support underwear gave him, especially while on duty.

Brac shuffled his feet backwards and moved to brace his hands on the door, thrusting his ass out further.

Jessup groaned at the ass on display. "Feels like it's been a while for you," he said, pushing a finger inside Brac's hole.

"Three weeks and two days," Brac answered.

Jessup quickly worked his way up to two fingers. It had been too long and he knew he wouldn't last much longer. With his fingers still buried inside Brac's ass, Jessup dripped the warming lube onto his cock.

"Oh, damn," he groaned, replacing his fingers with the head of his cock. "I don't know if you're smuggling anything in here, but I plan to do a very thorough cavity search."

Brac's head dropped down. "Fuck, I've missed you," he said, breaking character.

"Me too, you'll never know how much." Jessup held Brac's hips as he began fucking the man he loved. As his thrusts grew more forceful, his grip on Brac's hips increased. The last thing Jessup wanted was to ram Brac's pretty face against the car.

Brac bent his knees slightly, changing the angle of Jessup's thrusts. "Yeah. Oh, fuckin' A, right there."

Jessup slammed in again and again until he heard Brac's breath hitch, signalling his lover's climax. It didn't take long for the squeeze of Brac's ass to set Jessup off. He unloaded three weeks' worth of sexual frustration deep inside Brac. It wasn't that he begrudged Brac his career, but phone sex wasn't nearly as good as the real thing.

"Three weeks is too long," Jessup mumbled against Brac's back. He eventually pulled out and took a step back, allowing Brac room to pull up his jeans.

Brac settled his jeans low on his hips but didn't bother to zip them. He pulled Jessup into his arms and gave the deputy the first kiss he'd received in three weeks. Jessup dove into the kiss with gusto, going as far as to lift Brac off the ground.

With a contented sigh, Brac wrapped his legs around Jessup's waist and hung on. It had taken a little doing, but Jessup had got over most of his issues with being held. Although being tied up, even in the course of play, would never happen, he and Brac had a fulfilling sex life.

What surprised Jessup even more was how much he'd come to enjoy spending time with Brac outside of the bedroom. Until he'd settled into their new house, Jessup had never really known what a home was supposed to feel like. Even the outrageously expensive antiques Brac had *sprinkled* around the house had helped the new construction feel like it had always been there.

Breaking the kiss, Brac stared into Jessup's eyes. "Feels good to be home."

Jessup shook his head and brushed his nose against Brac's. Even though the house was still physically the same with Brac gone, it didn't feel as much like a home without his partner being there. "Yes it does," he whispered.

With Brac still in his arms, Jessup walked to the front porch of their sprawling Hollywood version of a log cabin. He was glad he'd taken the next few days off and laid in enough supplies to welcome his man home properly.

Carol Lynne

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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by Carol Lynne

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Good-time Boys: Garron's Gift
Good-time Boys: Rawley's Redemption
Good-time Boys: Twin Temptations
Cattle Valley: All Play & No Work
Cattle Valley: Cattle Valley Mistletoe
Cattle Valley: Sweet Topping
Cattle Valley: Rough Ride
Cattle Valley: Physical Therapy
Cattle Valley: Out of the Shadow
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Cattle Valley: The Sound of White
Cattle Valley: Gone Surfin'
Cattle Valley: The Last Bouquet
Cattle Valley: Eye of the Beholder
Cattle Valley: Cattle Valley Days
Cattle Valley: Bent-Not Broken
Cattle Valley: Arm Candy
Cattle Valley: Recipe for Love
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