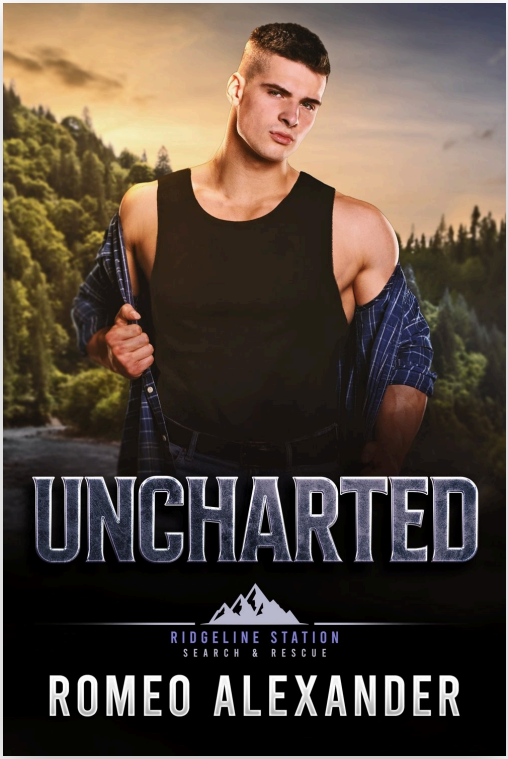
BONUS SCENE · RIDGELINE STATION

Uncharted



Romeo Alexander

Best read after you've finished the book.

BEFORE YOU START

Author's Notes

Howdy,

Time for another bonus scene from our Search and Rescue boys, and this time it's Reno and Jake's turn.

These two spent a whole book sharing a bed and insisting they were straight, so I wanted to see how they'd handle the next big test: Christmas with Jake's family. Spoiler: Reno is a nervous wreck about it.

It's sweet, it's a little chaotic, and yes, it gets steamy before the night is over.

Like always, this one is best read after you've finished Uncharted, so if you haven't yet, go read the book and then come back.

Thank you for being a subscriber. Scenes like this are my little way of saying thanks.

Until next time,

Romeo Alexander ;)

THE SCENE

Reno & Jake

"I told you we should have brought chains just in case," I said to Jake as I watched the snow drift down.

"Reno, the truck's made for worse weather than this," Jake reminded me.

"You're the one who said snowy-weather preparation down here is dubious at best."

"That's not what I said."

"No, you said they 'can't figure out their heads from their asses,' which is basically the same thing."

"Also told ya it ain't gonna be that bad."

I huffed and pressed my face to the passenger-side window, as if that would somehow make the trees any less dense or the night any less dark. I regretted it immediately when we hit something in the road and the truck bounced, smacking my forehead into the glass.

Jake didn't even try not to laugh at me.

"I knew I should have brought my boots," I said. "And a thicker coat."

"Reno, this could be gone by tomorrow."

He would know better than anyone, since he'd grown up here, but the sight of snow coming down when the South was supposed to be so damned warm still made me nervous. There were a dozen things we probably should have grabbed before making the long-

ass trek all the way down to Georgia. Didn't help that I'd been stuck in this truck with Jake for three days.

"We should've just flown," I muttered.

"Drivin' was your idea."

"Well…still…"

"Ya know, ya could just say you're nervous about seein' my family, and we could talk about that instead of ya obsessin' over every little thing that ain't gonna change," he suggested lightly, but his hand stole onto my knee and gave it a squeeze.

"I'm not nervous. I've met them before."

"As my friend. And at the outpost. Not as my boyfriend."

The title sent alternating waves of pleasure and something squirming and unpleasant through my gut, and I fiddled with a loose string on my jacket. Yes, all of that was true, but… "It would be kind of stupid to worry about it. They like me. They don't care that we're dating. And it's just…Christmas, right?"

"It don't have to be *just* Christmas," he said, steering the truck through a set of curves. "It's a big deal, or it can be."

"Nah," I said, even though it *was* a big deal. I'd only celebrated Christmas with a girlfriend's family once, and it had been a nerve-racking experience. Christmas had always been one of those holidays I wanted to love but could never fully get into. Didn't help that growing up, the only way I knew it was Christmastime was that everyone else decorated for it. My mom only decorated

on the rare occasions when she was in a good mood while blackout drunk.

Nothing said "holiday cheer" like being woken up at two in the morning by your mother's slurred rendition of "Jingle Bells" while she strung half-dead lights she'd dug out of someone's trash or hung tinsel she'd stolen off a porch.

"Do you wanna call Mika?" Jake asked, and that was when I realized I needed to calm down. If I was acting so nervous that Jake thought Mika needed to be brought in, I probably looked about two steps away from a meltdown.

"I'm sorry," I told him, putting my hand over his and squeezing. "I know this is a big deal for you. You really want this, and I do too!"

He chuckled at my hasty addition. "I do. We could always just get a room and stay there for the next week. I know you're still gettin' used to…ya know, us."

"No," I said quickly. "I mean…yes, it's still…a thing. I…"

I wished I could say my grand speech after being shot at had slammed the lid on my nerves about the two of us dating, but that wouldn't be true. There had been a few times when the annoying-ass hesitation that had caused us problems before reared its head, even though I was supposed to be over that. Sometimes it was just plain *weird* to openly acknowledge I was with another guy.

"They don't care," I told him resolutely. "So I'm not going to either."

"They love it," he said, chuckling. When I rolled my eyes, he must have sensed it, because of course he did. "No, seriously. They've been talkin' for ages about me settlin' down and actually findin' someone that works for me. They weren't exactly expectin' it to be a guy, but I don't even know if it threw 'em off all that bad at first. That it's you is just an extra heap of sugar on top as far as they're concerned."

Which should have made me feel better, but it only made the jittery feeling in my stomach worse as I sat there squeezing his hand and watching the road open up. Suddenly we were facing a wide stretch of land with a house in the middle of it, completely adorned with lights. Even the trees around the house were lit up, and I wondered how long that had taken them.

"Okay, I'm nervous," I blurted, realizing we were only minutes away.

"We can still get a room."

"No!" I snapped, then took a breath. "Seriously. No. I want to do this. I'm terrified, and I'm going to fuck something up, but I need to do this, okay?"

"Okay," he said calmly, and I wondered just how much it bothered him that I was…well, the way I was.

Jake was Jake, and he took damn near everything in stride. It honestly felt like the most out-of-pocket, crazy thing could happen and he'd just stand there, one thumb hooked in a pocket, give that easy grin of his,

and accept whatever it was. That included the fact that we were two men who had firmly believed we were straight, only to find out there was apparently a little flexibility to our heterosexuality. The irony was that, unlike me, he'd never so much as kissed another guy, and he was still handling it better than I was.

And now I was going to spend Christmas with his family.

"Shit," I muttered as we rolled up to the house and around to the side to park beside a beat-up pickup and a small, twenty-year-old Ford. "Okay."

"Reno," he said as he put the truck in park and turned off the engine. "I'm serious. We can take a minute."

"And we both know that if we take a minute, I'll start thinking even harder than I already am. Then I might start talking myself out of it. Then you'll see me doing that and try to talk me out of it too, because you'd rather I hide and be comfortable than be uncomfortable and face this thing that shouldn't be a big deal," I rattled off, staring at him. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"I…can see that happenin', yeah," he said, reaching over to stroke my face. "You tell me what we need to do, and I'll do it, all right?"

"Get naked?"

"Really?"

"No, but your body does make me feel better."

"Well, ya can see it later."

"What? No!"

"Huh?"

"I am not sleeping with you at your parents' house!"

"Lord have mercy," he muttered, and before I could insist that he was absolutely not going to try anything later, he leaned in and kissed me. It was a sweet, gentle thing, but I felt his tongue slide along my bottom lip. If he'd meant to shut me up, he'd done a fine job of it, because I was speechless when he pulled back. "We can do this."

"You mean me."

"We. You and me. We're a whole thing now, remember?"

"Right, yeah…sure."

We got out, Jake reminding me it would be easier to bring our things in after we got through the whole meet-and-greet. Which, of course, reminded me how thoroughly we were about to be dogpiled once we walked through the door. My heart sped up, but I followed him onto the porch, and instead of going in the front, we looped around to the back. Despite all the noise coming from inside, I trailed him into the comforting heat of the house.

It was like a fucking bomb went off.

There were kids *everywhere*, all of them apparently competing to see who was most excited to see Jake. There were adults too, but I didn't recognize most of the faces around us. So all I could do was stand there

nervously while Jake was mobbed, twiddling my thumbs and waving awkwardly at the unfamiliar adults.

Jake eventually realized I was surrounded by strangers and started pointing people out—all cousins of some sort, I assumed, since he didn't exactly give titles. After about the sixth introduction, I finally had to own up. "Just so you know, I'm probably going to forget everyone's names."

"Well, duh," one of the cousins said, grinning as he held up a beer. "I can't remember half of 'em most of the time anyway."

"Look who's here!" a voice boomed, rolling over the entire group and drowning out most of the noise. I looked up to see that Jake's father had come into the kitchen, grinning wide. Sometimes it was weird as hell to see the man, because it was like looking into Jake's future. "Get your asses over here!"

When his father was dead set on something, he was just like Jake. I was helpless to do anything but let Jake drag me along until we reached his father and found ourselves on the receiving end of a bear hug. Well, it was a bear hug for me, since I came up to their chins and was about half their size. For the two of them, it was just mutual squeezing.

His mom appeared then, and I tried to keep the smile plastered on my face. We'd been here ten minutes and I was already dizzy and lost, from both the sheer energy in the room and the heat that was practically

choking me. I gave her the hug she wanted, and admittedly deserved.

"Take your coat off," she told me. "And come on in here, where it's a little cooler."

The living room was cooler, especially once someone I barely glimpsed had whisked my coat away. It also had more people for me to meet—Jake's aunts and uncles this time. Once again I warned them that there was no way I'd remember everyone's names, especially since the kids had decided to jump in and announce their names too.

His sister appeared, and I relaxed a little as I hugged her, because she, at least, was a known quantity and could be counted on for some measure of calm. She wrapped me up in her arms. "You don't have to worry. We're not going to bite. Well, Earl might."

"Who's Earl?" I asked, looking around.

That was the cue for a blond boy of maybe one or two to swivel his head around and grin at us…with unnervingly sharp-looking teeth.

Right.

Then Darren appeared, as serious and somber as ever and so unlike the rest of his family. He shook his brother's hand and then mine, his eyes lingering on me for a moment before he turned to talk to someone who'd called to him from the kitchen.

"C'mon," Jake muttered in my ear, appearing out of nowhere behind me and putting his hand on my lower back. It was a gesture he wouldn't have made before we

started dating. Not that he'd ever been afraid to touch me when we were just friends, but back then he would have pushed on my upper back or grabbed my arm. This was intimate, and it felt obvious to anyone who saw it. At least, it seemed that way to me.

"Thanks," I said when he led me down a hallway and into a far quieter room. It looked like a playroom of some sort, with a couch smeared with paint and what appeared to be dried Play-Doh in the seams. "Jesus."

Jake chuckled, turning when two more people followed us in. I tensed for a moment before I saw that one of them was Lauren, though some of the wariness returned when I saw the other was Darren. The last time I'd seen Jake's brother, he'd been intent on making me understand how much I needed to do better by Jake.

"Hey," I said to both of them as I sagged onto the couch, pulling out my phone now that I had a chance to text Mika and let him know we'd made it in one piece. That was when I discovered all that chaos had lasted over an hour. "God, it's already been that long? Felt like five minutes."

"The look on your face said it felt more like three days," Lauren said with a smirk.

"We are a lot," Darren said, eyeing me.

"Oh boy," Lauren said, glancing between us. "Hey, Jake, come help me wrangle my kids."

"For what?"

"The dinner that's about to be served?"

“Oh,” Jake said, glancing over and frowning at his brother.

“Dear God, go without me,” I said, as if I were the problem. “I’ll take a few minutes to breathe.”

“Perfect,” Lauren said, and seeing the dubious look on Jake’s face, she grabbed hold of him and dragged her much larger sibling away like a child.

“At least you waited until I got through the door before jumping me,” I told Darren once the door closed, my nerves still hopping all over the place. “Unlike your brother.”

It was out of my mouth before I could think, and I saw the moment it hit Darren. His eyes widened, then narrowed as he wrinkled his nose. “Really?”

“Sorry,” I said immediately, wincing. “I’m overwhelmed and nervous, and when I get like that, my mouth can run ahead of my brain.”

“A terminal disease that’s afflicted most of my family,” he said with a snort, glancing around the room and choosing a chair that seemed to be on its last legs. “You handled yourself…differently than I thought you would.”

“What, the part where I didn’t bolt at the twentieth introduction?” I asked with a weak smile.

“I guess I thought you’d handle it better, since you’ve dealt with Jake plenty and you’ve met us.”

“Dealing with Jake is not the same as dealing with thirty Jakes. Thirty Jakes I don’t actually know that well,

who are now officially slated to maybe become in-laws…is cousin-in-law a thing?"

"Technically? Yes. Would I advise using it? No. Just stick with cousin," Darren said, his brow arching slowly. "You're talking about marriage already?"

"No!" I said, then realized how fast it had come out. "Look, we're, uh…still adjusting to the whole relationship thing. You know, our first…gay relationship and all."

"You are?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"Well…I am," I admitted uncomfortably.

"Really?"

"Look, it's just…I like Jake, I love Jake, and…yes, I'm attracted to Jake. It's just…weird to adjust to. You've been something your whole life, something you never believed was all that important, because shit, your twin brother's gay and it's never been a big deal to you. So why would sexuality matter? Except then you find out you aren't as straight as you thought, and all of a sudden one kiss has you thinking about your best friend naked and doing things with you.

"And you realize that holy shit, sexuality isn't a big deal when it's other people, but obviously it's a big deal for you. Because now you want all those gay things with that one specific guy, but otherwise you're still weirded out by it because you're straight. So you keep doing those things, and it gets less and less weird. But then you start to freak out that it might be with you

forever, and *that*'s no good, because fuck me, your best friend—now boyfriend—deserves better than all that.

"And you're thinking about that, and then you're meeting his family. Not for the first time, but like…as the boyfriend. And you realize you have a hard enough time being comfortable in a relationship around your coworkers, who are more like family, so what the fuck are you going to do around his actual family? His family loves him and wants the best for him, just like you do, but they're not going to be thrilled if you act like you're not with him and in love with him—which you *are*—but what if you just can't bring yourself to act like it, like… ever?"

I took a deep breath and grimaced. "So the problem is me."

"Dear God," Darren muttered after several seconds. "You were not exaggerating about your motor mouth."

"I'm nervous!"

"Clearly."

"Fuck you."

"Please don't. If you tried to work your way through this family, you'd be fifty by the time you finished," he said, smirking when I made a choking noise of horror. "For whatever it matters to you, I never once thought there was an issue."

"Huh? Well, yeah, makes sense. We've only been here an hour."

"No, I mean the whole time you've been here, you've been clinging to Jake. Your hands were locked together

almost the entire time. You never let him get too far, and he stuck to your back…you weren't dissociating so hard you didn't notice, were you?"

I clearly was, since I couldn't remember anything like that.

"Perhaps the problem lies in how much you're overthinking things," he began, and when he saw me roll my eyes, he snorted. "I mean in general. You're overthinking your overthinking. Instead of focusing on how much you think you're going to screw something up, focus on what feels good in the moment. Does it feel good to hold his hand? Then do it. Does it feel good to let him hug you from behind? Then do it."

"I also get uncomfortable when he does that around other people," I pointed out.

"Yes, but give more weight to the parts that feel good. Judge it by how good you feel overall. If the discomfort outweighs the good, then don't do it. Otherwise, learn to live with the discomfort. Perfect is the enemy of good," he said, shaking his head. "And here I was about to tell you I was wrong to chide you."

"Feeling like I need to be Protective Brother'd a little more now?" I asked weakly.

"Anyone willing to go through all this while having an internal meltdown over how badly they think they're handling it is someone who's both good for my brother and worthy of him," Darren said. "Now, on that note, I'm going to get up and quietly walk to the door. I'm going to open it, and my brother is going to be there, trying

to overhear and failing because it's too loud. It's also why he doesn't know I'm doing this."

I looked, and sure enough, there was a shadow under the door. Darren reached it, rested his fingers lightly on the handle, then twisted it and yanked the door open. To his ever-growing credit, he stepped back and plastered himself to the wall as he did, which was good, because Jake came stumbling into the room. He might have kept his feet, but an errant sparkly princess shoe turned his ankle, and down he went.

"Ow."

"And with that," Darren said, giving a slight bow, "I leave you two to it."

The door closed, taking the noise with it, and I stared down at Jake, who hadn't moved. He was fine—although if, by some bizarre, screwed-up piece of luck, he had broken his arm all over again, he wouldn't have told me anyway. I didn't think he had, though. He was just lying there because…well, he was Jake.

"So…how's dinner coming along?" I asked lightly, not even bothering to keep the laughter out of my voice.

"Not even gonna ask?"

"If you're okay? Nah. Figure eavesdroppers never hear anything good about themselves, or end up in a good place. Like the floor."

"I could be hurt."

"Maybe your pride."

He rolled onto his side, his bright eyes finding mine, and he smiled. "You're a dick."

"And you love me," I told him with a snicker.

"I do," he said, sitting up and scooting closer. It was a little odd being the taller one for once, but even with me on the couch and him on the floor, I didn't feel all that much taller.

Jake leaned forward, wrapping his arms around my waist and burying his face in my stomach. "You okay?"

I ran my hands through his hair and down his back. I'd always appreciated his size. He was a big guy, and even from a straight perspective, you had to admire the sheer effort of it…if not the bulk itself. Though, thinking back, I'd always loved his size, always liked it when he picked me up and manhandled me like I was nothing. I'd found it almost…safe. Comforting.

The only difference between now and last year was that now I knew it turned me on.

"I feel that," he mumbled.

"Shush," I told him, tapping the back of his head, but I knew he could hear my smile. "I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"We can eat in here if you want."

"Oh, Jake, I do want to be around your family. I know I've done a really bad job of showing it, but—"

"Stop," he grunted. The boyishness was gone from his face as he frowned up at me. It wasn't quite the face of the man I'd seen in the woods, the one who had stared down mortal danger and decided he was going to be the real danger. I could still remember his

expression when he'd snapped a man's neck, and the way he'd looked at me when I'd pulled the trigger and—

"Reno," he began, reaching up to me.

"Sorry," I breathed, closing my eyes. "I just… remembered the woods for a second there, was all. Not very festive of me."

"The fear, the almost-loss, or killing him?" he asked, because it was Jake, and even if Jake knew how to be subtle, he usually chose not to be.

It was something I loved about him.

"The killing," I said, opening my eyes to meet his and smile. "I don't want to talk about it. Not right now. Not on our vacation."

He searched my face, and whatever he found there made him nod. "You sure you wanna go out there?"

"I can do this," I said, taking his hand in mine. "So long as you're with me."

"Always," he said, getting to his feet.

It turned out I could do it. Didn't hurt that Darren, of all people, snuck me a heavy-handed shot of whiskey, and when my holiday punch was set in front of me, I smelled more of it in there. Then again, it was hard for anyone to focus much on conversation, or even on me, with food galore on the table. Especially since full stomachs made for mellower moods, and plenty of people forgot about me entirely as they talked among themselves.

Even as people began to file out, talking about coming back for Christmas dinner tomorrow, the

conversation flowed as freely as the drinks. There were stories of Lauren punching a kid's lights out for making Sean cry, and then their mother sighed heavily over her youngest not being here because he'd wanted to stay at the outpost this year. Jake consoled her with a squeeze and the story of the time Darren had fallen into what he thought was an old mine shaft but turned out to be a random hole full of shit.

"It was mud," Darren muttered into his drink.

"Didn't smell like it," Lauren said with a grin.

"Ya smelled like an outhouse," their father agreed, chuckling at his oldest's scowl.

A cousin told a story about a fire they'd accidentally set in the woods, one that apparently hadn't been told before, judging by the way Jake edged away from his mother's stern look. An aunt reminded his mother of the time they'd gotten drunk on wine they found in the cellar and snuck out to party with some boys in a cornfield. It was Jake, not Darren or Lauren, who was horrified to learn that not one of those boys had been their father.

"She might not've been an angel, but she was always mine," their father said, clearly seeing his wife's fluster at Jake's bumbling attempts not to look openly shocked.

She shot him a look that would have rotted anyone's teeth, and my hand stole to Jake's and squeezed. I even held on the whole time I found myself telling them about the Christmas Mika and I woke up to actual presents under the tree. It wasn't an entirely

comfortable story, since it meant mentioning that our mother had been too fucked up to think of anything but her next fix. But it was a good story, because a neighbor had agreed to help my brother get me something for Christmas, and he never suspected she already had something in mind for him too.

"Oh. Bless," Jake's mother said, reaching out to run a hand down my arm. "I'm sorry it had to be that way, honey. But the Lord bless that woman for her charity and the love in her heart."

"I still have that CD," I said, chuckling.

Jake looked at me. "Wait, that one on your bookshelf?"

"Yeah." I grinned. "The Open Door. Mika called it depressing, I called it cathartic."

Lauren glanced at Darren. "Sounds like you."

I gasped. "Do I have a lover of 2000s gothic alt-rock in my midst?"

"At full volume," his father muttered, and Darren raised his glass in salute.

That gave me one person to talk to rather than the whole group as more people began to peter out of the house. It wasn't until the absence of noise caught my attention that I realized only Jake and his immediate family were left.

"All of ya can stay up as long as ya like," their mother said. "But we did get ya set up in the…guest house."

"Guest house?" I asked.

"Uh," she said, looking at Jake.

It was Darren who whispered, “It’s usually for the married couples in the family. Newlyweds, mostly.”

“Oh,” I said, and then felt awful, because that meant Jake and Darren weren’t the only ones who knew about my…difficulties with being open. “Well, that’s fine.”

“It don’t mean nothin’,” their father assured me, and I sighed.

“We’ve been acting like a married couple for ages,” I said with a shrug. “We’re not there yet! Wait, that was…”

Jake chuckled, and before I realized he was crossing the room, he bent down and kissed me. It was chaste as hell, barely a press of his lips against mine, but God above, I didn’t feel that horror at being on display. All I felt was the way he smiled into the kiss, the happy hum his mother made, and the way his fingers wrapped around mine and held on as he pulled away.

“Fine, I know when to shut up,” I muttered.

“It’s been a long one, so we’re just gonna go,” he said.

I was sure he was tired, since he’d done most of the driving today, but I suspected there was more to it as we said our goodbyes. After all, he had to know I was at the end of my rope and desperately needed some time away. I hadn’t realized it would be a cabin on the property rather than a room in the house, but that was even better.

It wasn’t until we made it to the cabin that I learned his other reason for wanting me alone. Turned out I wasn’t as steadfast about my no-getting-naked-here

rule as I'd thought, because he had us both stripped down in minutes flat.

He was hurried but patient, firm but slow. I loved the times I got to fuck him, because it felt good and I loved hearing the plaintive way he groaned and gasped. But I adored it when he fucked me—his larger bulk over mine, holding me down by sheer virtue of physics, and the feel of him inside me.

Ah God, the feel of him inside me.

His wasn't a dick made for a beginner like me, but I wouldn't have chosen anyone else to be the one to fuck me. Just as his body surrounded me in every way possible, his cock filled me completely. After the long day I'd had, knowing he had me, that he was in control, that I was connected to him in every way possible, was exactly what I needed.

And when I came, it was with my face pressed into his broad chest, crying out his name.

"Cheater," I told him happily as I lay facing him. My ass was reminding me that we needed to clean up so we could actually get some sleep, but I was in no rush.

There was just him beside me, staring at me like I was the only thing in the world. And, well, he was the only thing for me right then.

Darren had been right: this was what I needed to focus on.

"You *are* okay," he said—not a question, but an understanding.

I took his hand in mine. "I am. Better than."

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Because of me?”

“Because of us.”

“Reno?”

“Yeah?”

“I like that. I’m better than okay ’cause of us too.”

I chuckled. “Good.”

“Reno?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“Merry Christmas.”

I looked at the clock and realized it was, in fact, Christmas. Our first as a couple, our first in love. And hell, after today and tonight, I thought I might just be ready for everything tomorrow would bring.

“Merry Christmas,” I told him, and if it sounded a lot like “I love you,” then that was perfectly fine.

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed Uncharted, a quick review on Amazon helps other readers find it.

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