



Making Lemonade: Lemon Yellow
By TC Blue

Part One

"I miss you," Evan said quietly, one hand resting on the bulge of recently turned earth as moisture from the ground made itself known as chilled patches under his knees, the small discomfort somehow fitting, somehow right. "I miss you, Bill. I think I always will."

Until the day he died himself, Evan was sure. But God, how could he not? Bill -- William Francis Latham -- had been larger than life. Had been so much more than Evan had ever dreamed, and he'd done plenty of dreaming in the early days. "Larger than life," Evan echoed his silent thought aloud. "God, Bill. I don't know if that's ironic or just plain prophetic. Maybe if I hadn't thought that all this time, you'd still be... Christ. *Here.*"

Even so, Evan had thought it. Believed it. Known, deep down inside, that Bill was so much more than he deserved. Then, and still. But even more so in the beginning when Evan had been all of twenty-five, with nothing much to offer. And Bill...

"God, honey. You were so amazing. Right from the start. I just didn't know then that you'd end up meaning so much to me. *Being* so much." He sighed softly, one hand scooping up a palm's worth of dirt. His eyes closed as it trickled through his fingers, drifted down to join the rest of the dark, fresh site.

He could hear the workmen shifting on the grass behind him and silently thanked them for waiting. For letting him say his final, or rather immediate, good-byes. The sun was almost down, of course, but bless them for not rushing him. It wouldn't be the same to touch sod rather than soil. Wouldn't be as... Evan didn't know what. Couldn't figure out how eight years of his life -- their life -- was suddenly over.

"We were supposed to have more time, Billy-boy," he whispered, unwilling to share the nickname that Bill had only barely tolerated from Evan with anyone else. "The cancer would have taken you eventually, but we were supposed to have another year or two, maybe more. God. I thought I was prepared, but I wasn't. I'm not. Not for this. Not for a heart attack and silence in our house and..."

God, he felt like a fool. Crying like it could change things. As though tears and an ache so deep inside him that Evan knew it was still just starting, could somehow make things better. His hands dug into the raw earth again and Evan squeezed, curled his fingers into fists until the only things holding them even slightly open were lumps of compressed dirt.

"I just don't know what I'm supposed to do now, Billy. I don't know how to live a life that's mine, not *ours*. It's... God, Bill, it's too hard. Four days without you and it's already too hard." Evan bowed his head, fresh tears making slow tracks down his sorrow and fatigue lined cheeks, dripping from his chin as a soft patter onto his earth-tinged hands. "I miss you. Love you. I..."

Evan forced himself to take a long, slow breath, forced his wet eyes to open. "I'll come back," he finally said, and his voice wasn't shaking nearly as much as he'd feared it would. "I have to, don't I? It's... God. It's your birthday next month. I have to show you your present. I... I think you would have liked it."

He climbed slowly to his feet, ignoring the relieved sighs from the two men waiting to cover the bare soil with rolls of live grass meant to... Evan didn't know what. They'd been more than patient with him, though, and they had their jobs to do. "Thank you," he said quietly, giving the men a sincere nod though he couldn't quite force himself to look at them, to let them see his pain.

Evan nodded again at their muttered sympathy and walked slowly away, hands deep in his pants pockets. He didn't look back; he just walked. *One foot in front of the other*, he told himself, and *it's just like riding a bike*. Except it felt like he'd never walked on his own before, all of a sudden, and bicycles sounded too risky.

He found his car, God knew how, and somehow managed to drive... not home, but to the house. Home wasn't there. Home was in a box under six feet of dirt. Home was being carefully covered in sod, like a slew of bandages over an open wound, by men who had no idea that it was more than Bill there. It was Bill, and it was Evan's heart. Evan's faith. Evan's world.

It wasn't until he stripped out of his clothes in the bedroom that had once been *theirs* and was so suddenly only *his* that Evan realized he'd brought the dirt with him. The clumps that had formed in his fists had made their way into his pockets and broken apart, become loose, dry grit that spilled onto the floor.

Bill wouldn't have understood, Evan told himself as he moved to the dresser. Wouldn't have comprehended the urge that took Evan to carefully -- so very, very carefully -- transfer Bill's cuff links and tie tacks from the carved ebony box beside Bill's wallet to the top drawer of the bureau. Wouldn't have realized how important it was when Evan settled naked and cross-legged on the floor to place every bit of that dirt he could scoop or scrape up inside that box. Would never have appreciated how hard it was for Evan to close the lid, to stand, to put the antique curio back in its usual spot.

It was appropriate, though, Evan thought. He'd found the box in that first year they'd been together. Bought it from the little shop, paying whatever he could each week for months on end. It had been his gift to Bill for their first Christmas together and Bill had loved it so much. Had immediately gotten rid of the much more expensive and modern silver and onyx container he'd used before. It was only right that the dirt stay there. As a reminder, Evan told himself as he finally made his way to the bathroom and the shower that felt far too large for just one man.

He doubted he would ever forget, even if he hadn't had a hundred pictures, but... Bill's eyes were blue, Evan remembered, and his hair a tawny gold. It was a bit lighter where Bill had started to go gray, but even at forty-nine, after three years of treatment and remissions and resurgences, Bill had been a fine figure of a man. And his, Evan reminded himself. *His*. He hadn't cared that

Bill was sixteen years older. Not when they'd met and not... God, not even right then, with Bill gone so much sooner than either of them had expected.

"Oh, Billy-boy," Evan sighed, the sound turning into a sob as water and steam surrounded him. "God, Bill. God. What do I do now?" As much as he wished for an answer, Evan didn't hear one. He never would again.

It wasn't a welcome thought, wasn't even one he could take with any sort of stoic grace. Then again, he hadn't been doing too well with the stoicism, or graceful anything. Not since the moment he'd answered the phone call that had changed his world. Ended his life, Evan qualified, because he might still be breathing, but his life was over. Gone.

It was possible, he told himself as he slid down the tiled wall and huddled in the shower, barely feeling the hot water pouring over him like a tropical storm, it was possible that he'd get used to it, to the gnawing emptiness that had taken up residence where his heart had once been. He might even learn to exist with it. But not yet. God, please, not yet. Let him hurt for a while. It was fitting that he should after loving so long and so well. So deeply and truly. Eight years. It was more than some had, and he knew it, but still not even close to enough.

"Please," he begged, barely a whisper, barely a small motion of lips. "Please let me hurt for long enough that when I turn numb, I don't miss it. Long enough that it's a relief when it's gone." Because it had to end sometime. Evan knew he wouldn't be able to bear it if it went on forever. So it would have to stop. But not yet. Not yet.

Well, shit.

Grayson Latham said it again, out loud this time, as he stared at the stone that had obviously just been recently set. The ground around the slab of pinkish-black marble was turned up, strips of farm-raised sod imperfectly tamped down. New grass would grow soon enough, he was sure, until the lines of dirt disappeared, but... "Well, shit. What the fuck did you have to go dyin' for, Will?"

Heart attack. He knew that much from the email he'd gotten just a week earlier, but he hadn't been able to leave the ranch. Not then. It was fucking ridiculous, anyway.

Uncle Will, dead before fifty. Just like Grayson's daddy. Daddy'd been gone close to ten years, though, and sure Gray hadn't really talked to Uncle Will more than twice since the funeral, but the guy had looked to be healthy and strong back then. Gray couldn't quite figure how Will's wife, or girlfriend, more like, because far as Gray knew, there hadn't been a wedding... but whatever. He didn't know how the woman who'd emailed him was managing.

She'd sounded fine in her letter, even if it was shorter than what would have passed for polite where Gray'd been raised. Of course, her man had just died, so he figured he could forgive her.

Eva Monroe. Sounded like an actress, maybe, and not one of the kind that starred in the sort of movies most of the guys back at the ranch watched.

Not that Uncle Will had been the kind to go running around with actresses, at least from what Gray remembered. No, Gray's uncle had picked up and left Montana just as soon as he could. Before Gray was even born, Will had gone off to college on a scholarship and studied business. He'd never really gone back. Not for more than a visit every few years, and even those had stopped after Gray's daddy died. Wound tight most times was how Gray recalled Will... and so self-contained. Maybe too much.

Gray figured it was a good sign that his uncle had at least loosened up enough to eventually find himself a woman. Even so, it hadn't stopped the man from working himself into a heart attack.

Gray stood there a few minutes longer, hat in hand, head bowed, and didn't know what on earth he could say. Uncle Will had left. Barely bothered to keep in touch even before Gray's daddy died. Then again, Harlan and William Latham hadn't been close. Not like Gray and his sister Sara. No, Harlan and Will had been content with the distance between them, though neither man had ever said why.

All Daddy had been willing to say about it, Gray remembered, was that he and his younger brother had a fundamental difference of opinion about right and wrong. Gray was pretty sure it had something to do with Uncle Will walking away from the Baptist Church, but Lord help Gray if he understood what difference that made.

Brothers were brothers, he'd always thought. And while Gray didn't have any of those himself, he for damned sure had a sister and fuck if there was anything on God's green earth that would ever turn him against her. Sara knew it, too. Hell, he'd proven it to her that summer when she'd turned seventeen and he'd helped her do what needed doing after the bastard she'd been seeing had... well. Over and done.

"Damn it, Will," Gray finally muttered, just to have something to say, "I'm sorry you're dead, man. Sorry I didn't get to know you better. Woulda been nice if we'd been closer after Daddy passed. Oh, and Sara woulda come, too, but someone's gotta handle the ranch. And she takes after you, kinda. Took business classes away at college." His brow furrowed. "Think I told you that before. Before you ended up here. But she got a degree and everything since then. Doin' a damned fine job, too. You'd likely be proud."

Gray pushed his free hand into the pocket of his jeans and sighed softly, rolling the softly gleaming nineteen-twenty-one silver dollar from finger to finger. "Know this is stupid, Unc, but Daddy always told me the story 'bout y'all's Granddaddy givin' these coins to you when you two were kids. Seems only right to... well. Wish I'd had a chance to know you better. Got my own problems with the church. Might coulda understood whatever it is you went through. Never was just like my Daddy, no matter how much he wanted me to be."

He placed the coin carefully atop the headstone, heads up, then nodded slightly and took a step back. "I'll just be goin' now, Will. Promised I'd stop in with your Eva. She might be a Yankee, but that woman of yours does seem to understand about hospitality."

Gray thought for a moment as he set his hat on his head again, pushing his long brownish-blond hair back behind his ears once it was settled in its usual tilt. "Might never have known you as well as I shoulda, Unc, but I guess it doesn't much matter. Still gonna miss knowin' you're out here in the world. The family just got that much smaller for losin' you."

There really wasn't anything left to say so Gray just touched the headstone lightly, feeling the slick, cool marble under his fingers, then pulled back and nodded his respect. "Rest in peace, man. Rest in peace."

Gray walked away slowly, leaving plot and stone behind without a backward glance. There was no point, he figured. He'd said what he'd gone there to say and Will was long gone. But Uncle Will's woman was still alive, and from what Eva had said in her emails, she and Will had been together eight years, wedded or not. As far as Gray was concerned, that made her family.

He got back to the rental his sister had arranged, snorting to himself at her sense of humor. The little red Miata convertible from the rent-a-clunker was exactly the last kind of car he'd have chosen for himself, but chances were Sara was trying to make him laugh. Which he'd done when he first saw the thing, and was doing again right then.

Someone on some TV show had once said Miatas were some sort of gay calling-card that announced the driver was a complete and total bottom who had a need to be dominated. Seemed Sara'd seen that show, too. And regardless of the fact that it wasn't true, she'd still... well, yeah.

"Guess that's what little sisters are for," Gray reminded himself as he opened the car door and forced his legs to bend enough that he could get behind the wheel. Christ. He really hoped she hadn't known just how tiny the damned cars were. If Gray hadn't been fairly flexible, he might have done himself a damage just getting in and out.

With his hat carefully placed on the floor on the passenger side and the directions Sara had printed from the internet in hand, Gray headed out. Headed in, more like, because the place Uncle Will was buried was just outside Hartford, Connecticut. Not even very far from Uncle and Eva's house because the directions soon had him pulling into the long, circular drive of what looked like a huge-ass mansion, and that couldn't be right. Will had done right well for himself, sure, but Gray didn't think he'd gone and made himself into another fucking Trump.

Then Gray saw the numbers, saw the individual driveways and noticed the different front doors, and okay. Row houses. Townhouses. Whatever they were calling them. Lord. Still impressive because there were only four doors on the whole building and it was all three storeys high, which made each one of those townhomes bigger than the main house at the ranch, for fuck's sake.

"Shit," Gray muttered to himself as he turned off the tiny car and groped for his hat. "Daddy woulda bust a gut if he'd known what Uncle Will was worth. Shit."

And, Gray reminded himself, Daddy would have done everything in his power to get his hands on it with Will dead. Wouldn't have felt more than a second's shame for putting Will's poor lady-friend out on her rear, either. Daddy had always been about the bottom line... and about resenting the hell out of his kid brother for whatever the fuck it was that Will had done when they'd been young.

"Lucky for your lady that Daddy's gone, Unc," Gray said, groaning as he unbent his six foot two inches of height from behind the steering wheel of the Miata, hat firmly in place to announce his pride. He might be a redneck, but he was a redneck cowboy, damn it. And even in the face of the big townhouse Will had owned, well... Gray and Sara had the ranch and the land around it, even with struggling a little to make ends meet, some months.

Gray unlocked the trunk of the car and levered his duffel from it by sheer force before closing the back. He stared at the enormous brick and stone building for a moment, then nodded sharply and headed for forty-six-eighteen.

It was time to meet Uncle Will's lady. Gray only hoped she wasn't put off by the fact that he didn't talk like he wrote.

Part Two

"I can do this," Evan told himself, his own voice providing a small bit of comfort in the otherwise silent house. "I can. It's Bill's nephew, and..." And God, even his own reflection looked strange. He had bags under his eyes from trying to sleep in the too-big, too-empty bed he'd shared with Billy-boy for seven and a half years, the hazel muddied from tears and pain. His hair was still all tangled, mussed from the lack of attention Evan had spared it. It had never been easily tamed, but after days of neglect, even dragging a brush through his messy brown curls hadn't done more than slightly smooth the surface.

God, he was a wreck. And Bill's nephew was going to be there any time. Because Evan had done exactly what he'd promised. What Bill had asked, back when they'd thought it was the cancer that would do him in. Evan had contacted what little family Bill had left, just to tell them Bill was... gone.

Maybe it had been a little impersonal to email rather than call, but Evan hadn't been able to force himself to dial the numbers. To hear voices and field whatever half-assed sympathies might have been expressed.

Bill's nephew and niece hadn't bothered with their uncle in the entire time Evan had known Bill. Evan knew he would have taken their false sorrow badly. It had been hard enough when the nephew had emailed back to say he was coming to Hartford. Worse still when Evan had done the right thing and said the boy could stay at the house overnight.

God, what had he been thinking?

"You were thinking that Bill would be horrified if you made this Gray stay at a hotel," Evan reminded his reflection. "You were trying to do what Bill would have wanted."

That didn't make it any easier, but it was true. For all that Bill had pretended to be like the people he'd worked with, the man had still been decent and kind, under it all.

The bell rang, a cheerful little tune Bill had found somewhere or other, and it pulled a small sob from Evan's lips. He swallowed the next one and turned away from the big gold-framed mirror, deliberately pushing the memories of Rome and the shop they'd bought it in from his mind. He wasn't ready to remember their last vacation yet. Some day. But not yet.

"I'm coming," he called out, and he sounded cross, even to himself. "I'm coming," he called again, modulating his tone. After all, he might resent the hell out of having anyone else -- even Bill's nephew -- in their home, but that was his own issue, not the kid's.

"You must be Gray," he said by way of greeting as he opened the door. He was afraid, Evan realized then. Afraid to look. Because if Bill's nephew looked like Bill, Evan thought he might... God. Suddenly turn into one of those gay men Hollywood liked to use as caricatures. He might topple over and shriek and start crying again, right there. Hell.

"Yeah," he heard and the voice sounded a little bit... puzzled, Evan decided. The guy had some nice boots, though. At least, Evan thought they were boots. A bit worn at the toes but not dusty, really. Not even old or ragged. Just brown leather with stitching across the tops in a dark gold color that went well, and jeans that looked new, judging by the sharp creases that covered the probably-boots down to the ankles and the dark shade of the denim. "Uh, I'm lookin' for Eva Monroe."

Evan blinked, surprise jerking his eyes from the man's feet and... oh, thank God. Nothing like Bill. Oh, the coloring was similar, but nothing that was enough to hurt much. Bigger, too. Taller. More... solid. A tiny likeness around the eyes and the same slightly higher left ear that Bill had hated having, but... "I. Sorry. Um, it's Evan. *Evan* Monroe. Not, um. Eva."

If he'd been any less separated from the world around him, Evan thought he might have been offended by the sudden realization in the eyes of Bill's nephew. As it was, he just sighed and shrugged, then stepped back, opening the door wider. "Come in, I guess. I... the guest room upstairs is ready. Have you eaten? I can throw something together if you're hungry. I... I'll have to see what we..." Evan closed his eyes for a brief moment at his own still-automatic *we*, then swallowed hard and opened them again. "Sorry. I'll see what's in the kitchen."

"Think I'm good for now," the man said, and Evan didn't know why he'd been expecting someone younger, but he had. Gray, because the man said he was Gray, and Evan couldn't think of any reason for him to lie about that, looked close to Evan's age, for God's sake. "Might could use a shower, if you don't mind, though."

Well, of course he could, Evan thought as he led the way up the stairs and down the left-hand hallway to the guest room. Traveling and so on. "The bathroom is right across the hall," he said simply. "I put fresh towels in there earlier. If you need anything, just let me know. I'll... yeah. I'll see about dinner."

He wasn't hungry, himself. Hadn't been since... just since. Even so, Bill would want him to be a proper host. And Evan would be. He would even try to act like he didn't mind having Bill's nephew there. It was just the polite thing to do.

Lord, Lord. Gray didn't quite have a handle on things just yet.

Oh, he got that Uncle Will's lady wasn't a lady at all. That much had come clear just as soon as Evan Monroe had answered the door. There was no way that tall, lean man with the dark, wavy bedroom hair and sad, sad hazel eyes was anything like a woman.

And, Gray reminded himself, if Evan Monroe and Uncle Will had been involved in the way Gray thought -- and there was little doubt of that -- he could understand how the man might not have been paying full attention in that first email. How Evan might have missed hitting the N and not noticed.

The two or three emails after, they'd not bothered with names. Just replies. So yeah. Gray was fine with that. What he wasn't fine with was the sudden knowledge that Uncle Will was -- had been, more like -- gay. And Gray's daddy had never bothered to mention that little fact.

Shoot, Gray realized as he opened his duffel and pulled out a fresh pair of socks, some jeans and a clean T-shirt that still smelled of the air freshener Delilah used for his and Sara's things, being gay was likely what the whole rift between his daddy and Uncle Will had been about. Gray had thought of all kinds of reasons, but that had never been one of them.

Uncle Will had never said or done anything that might suggest it, either, on the few occasions Gray had met the man. The *very* few occasions, Gray remembered, because Daddy had for damned sure never left the two of them alone.

Well, if Daddy had thought that would protect Gray from gay-vibes or whatever, he'd been wrong. Shoot, Gray knew at least four gay fellas by name, over in Carter, the closest thing to a city to the ranch. One of them had even gone to school with Gray for grades seven through twelve. That boy, Rolly, had kissed like a dream, too.

But that was neither here nor there, Gray told himself as he set his hat on the dresser, then crossed the hall and stepped into the bathroom. "Lord. This is bigger than my room back home." It was, just about. The commode, sink, huge-ass tub with what Gray thought were some kind of jets, separate shower enclosed in glass, with what looked like six different shower heads and some bookcase-looking thing packed with more bathing supplies than Gray could ever imagine anyone needing filled the room. There was a frosted-glass window with a padded bench under it, too, Lord knew why. It was a bathroom, for fuck's sake. Why would anyone want to sit in there, no matter how nice it was?

Gray frowned and toed off his boots, then set to stripping himself down to the skin. He glanced at the tub again, then frowned and shook his head. Thing looked big enough for three; maybe more. Lord alone knew how long it'd take to fill.

Maybe that explained the bench seat, he decided once he'd figured out the shower controls and was standing under -- or more like in the middle of -- streaming jets of water. It was somewhere more comfortable than the toilet lid to sit and wait for that huge-ass tub to fill on up.

He was avoiding thinking about his uncle and Evan Monroe. Gray knew that. He couldn't help it, though. The gay thing didn't bother him; not even a little bit. It couldn't, considering. But... Evan looked to be Gray's age, and while Uncle Will had only been nineteen or so when Gray was born, it was still a little strange.

"More than a little," he muttered to himself as he soaped his chest, then his underarms. He remembered Uncle Will pretty well, even with the decade since the last time they'd met. Will had been a good enough looking man, sure, but Lord, he should have been with someone his own age. Not some guy young enough to be his... *nephew*.

Still, Gray figured he couldn't really fault his uncle. Even with the obvious signs of grief that showed on Evan's face, the guy was attractive. And had clearly loved Uncle Will. Which would have had Gray's daddy that much more determined to buck whatever Uncle Will's will had said.

He almost laughed at that. "Uncle Will's will." Gray didn't, though. He couldn't when he remembered the obvious lack of sleep and the equally clear sorrow written on Evan Monroe, top to toe.

Gray pushed that aside and finished his shower, then stepped from the glass enclosure to towel himself dry.

He dressed, combed his hair back to lie flat and drip down his back, still wet even after rubbing it with the towel. He was used to it, though, and his T-shirt was dark enough that it wouldn't show the water much. Daddy'd never held with hair dryers for men. Too *girly*. Jesus, it'd likely chapped the old man's ass when he'd started to suspect about his only son. He'd never said anything, but Gray was pretty sure his daddy had been clinging to denial with both hands. Tightly.

Gray gathered his boots and the clothes he'd discarded, going back to the guest room barefooted as he decided... it didn't matter what his daddy would have done, and Gray had been ready to welcome Evan into the family when he'd thought the man was a woman named Eva.

"It's the twenty-first century, damn it," Gray reminded himself out loud. "And I'd be the biggest fuckin' hypocrite on the whole damn planet if I changed my mind about Unc's woman just because he's turned out to be a man." And yeah, that was nothing but the truth.

Gray smiled slightly as he pulled on socks and boots, then he headed out of the guest room. He'd barely had any breakfast, he realized when his stomach rumbled a little, and the so-called snack on the plane hadn't been enough to keep a bird fed. How one tiny little bag of pretzels was considered a snack, Gray couldn't figure out, but whatever. It was getting on to dinner time. And he wouldn't be letting Evan Monroe cook for him, either.

No, sir. The guy was going through enough. The least Gray could do was take him somewhere and buy him a meal. To thank Evan for being so hospitable, Gray told himself. After all, a hotel would have cost much more than dinner ever could.

Evan sighed, though he tried to do it softly enough that Gray wouldn't hear. He hadn't wanted to go out. Hadn't wanted to be around people, watching couples and families enjoying themselves while he was so wrecked, himself. So alone, even with Gray sitting right across the table.

Every smile he saw, every laugh, every single time he witnessed someone putting their hand over someone else's on a table top, it speared through him. Hot needles of resentment that they could sit there and be so damned happy while Evan's heart was bleeding, crying, lying shattered into a million jagged pieces in his chest, though it insisted upon beating on.

Even so, he hadn't been able to say no to Gray. Not when doing so meant Evan would have to admit that he hadn't left the house since the funeral. It was true, no matter how pathetic it might seem to Gray or anyone else, but Evan just wanted to be there. In his and Billy-boy's house. They'd been so damned happy there.

"I've never actually been here before," Evan said, responding to the question he'd barely noticed Gray asking. "It's only been open a couple years, and Bill wasn't that big on steak when the chemo started making him feel sick all the time." He laughed and the sound seemed bitter, even to him. "In the end, I guess it's a good thing. All that cholesterol might have made the..." Evan shook his head and swallowed the sob that wanted out. "I've heard they get their steaks from Omaha, so they're probably really good."

Gray was smiling. Evan could hear it in the man's voice though his own eyes were locked on the table and the fork Evan couldn't help fiddling with. His fingers ran slowly across the tines, feeling the four points over and over.

"Omaha's definitely known for beef," Gray agreed. "But you should pay a visit to the ranch sometime, Evan. We don't really run much cattle for slaughter, but we got a deal goin' with a place, other side of Carter. Better steaks than Omaha could ever even hope for."

Evan supposed he should be glad for the ease of Gray's acceptance. He'd heard all sorts of horrifying stories about people in the less cosmopolitan states being raging homophobes, so things could definitely have been worse. Especially considering what little Bill had said about his life before meeting Evan. Evan just couldn't work up the spare emotion that would let him care.

"I'll look you guys up next time I'm in Montana, then," he managed to answer, which would be never. Evan knew that much. "So tell me about your ranch." Anything, just... anything to get him through the rest of his ridiculous attempt to seem normal.

"Well, we got a hundred and some acres," Gray said, like Evan knew how big an acre was. Even so, he didn't ask; he didn't care. "My sister Sara deals with the business side, most often. She might be younger, but she's a smart cookie, as my daddy woulda said. She's only twenty-five, but that girl's got a head for business, y'know? We were barely breakin' even before she finished her degree and took over the finances. Cleared that up right fast, creative as she is, though I gotta say we still have the rare rough patch."

The waitress showed up with their drinks and Evan shrugged, letting Gray order for him. It wasn't like he was going to eat much, anyway. He didn't really care what he had. Then Gray went right back to talking about the ranch like they'd never been interrupted.

Cows and horses and Sara. Grazing rights and stud fees and Sara. Evan was starting to get the impression that Gray and his sister had a closer relationship than most people -- outside of some small mountain communities that hadn't interacted with society in decades -- would consider normal.

"So Uncle Will was the only family we had left," Gray said then and Evan couldn't help but wonder whether what he'd been thinking had shown on his face. "And he stayed away even more after Daddy died. I'm not sayin' I blame him, because I'm thinkin' Daddy had problems with Unc's bent, y'know? But..."

Gray looked a little bit sheepish all of a sudden and Evan found himself actually curious. "But?" he echoed, giving the waitress a slight nod when she set salads down on the table. He wrinkled his nose just a little at the ranch dressing, but it wasn't important enough to comment on. "But?" Evan said again once Gray had speared some greens, chewed and swallowed them.

"But Daddy's not around and Sara and me, we don't hold with his prejudices. I guess..." Gray's face twisted just a little, somehow looking annoyed, hopeful and hopeless, all at once. "I guess what I'm tryin' to say is, if you were Eva, like I thought before I met you, I'd be welcomin' you to the family, late as it is. Just because you're *Evan*, instead? Doesn't change that."

Evan swallowed hard, unable to even begin finding a reply to the man's words. Instead, he took a larger than necessary bite of his own salad, just to keep his mouth from trying.

Gray offered a small smile that Evan couldn't categorize. "You were with Uncle Will for eight years, man. Stuck with him through that chemo you mentioned and fuck knows what else." The man frowned suddenly. Deeply. "We didn't even know he was sick. And I'm not pushin' you, Evan. But when you can talk about it, I'd like it if you'd tell me what Unc went through and why he didn't think we'd want to know. But that's for whenever you're feelin' up to it, okay? For now..."

Gray's eyes closed for just a second and they were calm again when they opened. Sort of warm. "For now, I just want you to know that we -- me and Sara -- consider you family. If you ever need us, you just call. Uncle Will... well, we loved him. Even with never seein' him, we loved him. And we'll care for you, too. Because that's what family does, man."

Fuck. Fucking fuck. He was going to cry again. Evan knew it. Just the idea that Bill's nephew and niece could care more about him than his own blood-family ever had was... yeah.

Then again, Bill had loved him like that, even before they'd gotten serious. Loved him and loved him until Evan had needed to stop fighting it and give in. Give up on being an island.

He wasn't ready to do that again, though. Not even close. Not even with it being different, or maybe because it was.

Evan held back the tears that threatened to well in his eyes and nodded slowly. "I'll keep it in mind," he managed to say. "So what else goes on? On a ranch, I mean."

Gray laughed, though Evan thought he could see a bit of sorrow in the man's bluish-green eyes. "Lord, Lord. Better question might be what *doesn't* go on, y'know? There was this one time when Chester Roderick -- he's one of our hands -- was datin' a Miss Montana hopeful and she wanted to do some steer-ropin' on camera for the judges as her 'talent.' Well, Chester's a good one with

the horses, but he knows fuck-all about steers and he ain't the kind to ask. Seems he thought one of the really young 'uns would be more placid or somethin'..."

Evan listened, becoming more and more fascinated with the alien lifestyle Gray was describing. He didn't notice finishing his salad and barely marked it when the waitress replaced his empty plate with a larger one filled with medium rare prime rib, a baked potato and steamed carrots.

"So she ended up sittin' in a pile of cow dung," Gray finished as he started cutting into his own slab of beef, "and the rest of the guys were just standin' there laughin'. I swear, man, I never heard a beauty queen cuss like that in my life. Before or since." He laughed. "Then there was the time when Brat Bradford thought it'd be a good idea to put bells on the dogs. *All* of them. Now, he wasn't but ten at the time, but he'd earned his name already."

Okay, Evan told himself close to an hour later. He wasn't feeling better exactly, but he thought he might live. Which was about a thousand percent better than he'd been before.

Part Three

"This is nice," Gray said simply, turning away from the view of trees and grass he'd been staring at. "It's less... I don't know, refined than I was expectin', somehow." It was true, too, he told himself as he accepted the glass of what was supposed to be a Margarita from Evan. It didn't look like the Margaritas he'd seen people drinking at Rolly's bar in Carter, but maybe it was some sort of Connecticut version.

Evan nodded just a little and when he moved to the table off to the left on the deck, Gray followed him and took a seat, as well. "The homeowner's association keeps saying they're going to clean it up, get a landscaping company in to make it all manicured. Controlled. But now there's talk about putting more houses in, so who knows?" Evan sighed, but it sounded a little less strained than before. The tiny smile the man offered up was more than Gray had seen earlier.

It was maybe a good sign, Gray figured, enough for him to at least ask, to pry a little. "So what about you, man? I mean... what do you do? Business, like Uncle Will?"

Damn, it looked like Evan was blushing. Even in the near-dark, Gray thought that grief-pale skin had grown darker.

"Nothing that important," Evan muttered after taking a long swallow of his drink. "Bill was..." He swallowed hard enough that Gray would have heard it even if it had been pitch dark. "He was the smart one. I just... dabble in things. Photography. Painting. A little stained glass, sometimes. I've sold some work, here and there. Had a few shows."

Oh. An artist. Gray tried not to grin, but he could see it. Artistic types were more carefree, from what he understood. Evan had probably been just the right balance for Uncle Will's serious nature. Gray could barely recall his uncle ever even cracking a smile.

"Nothin' wrong with bein' creative," Gray said after trying his own drink and finding it tart, but pleasantly so, with a small bite underneath. He took a bigger sip. "Let me guess. You guys met at some hoity-toity gallery thing, right? Champagne and caviar and weird liver stuff on crackers?"

Evan laughed and it sounded closer to real than the few hollow barks Gray had heard at dinner. "No. That would make a good story, but it wasn't anything like that." The man's laughter faded and Gray was surprised to realize he missed it. "Not even a little bit."

"So..." Gray tried after a few quiet minutes broken only by the sound of Evan's slightly labored breathing and crickets out there in the trees and bushes and such. "It's fine, man. You don't have to tell me." He shrugged and drained the liquid left in his glass, ice cubes clinking against the sides as he set it down on the table. "You think you might be comin' out to the ranch sometime? We'd love to have you pay a visit, me and Sara." Yeah, Gray had said as much before, but he had a feeling that Evan hadn't believed him.

Oh, that shocked look was fucking priceless. Hell, Evan looked like he'd just swallowed a bug. And maybe he had, Gray decided, because the guy got up all fast-like and started lighting the candles that sat around the edges of the deck. Gray hadn't noticed them right at first, but the smell clued him in once they were flickering against the growing dark. That sharp citrus-and-chemical scent was unmistakable.

He frowned a little when Evan turned away from the last candle and went inside, but the man was back before Gray could follow, bearing a glass pitcher of the slightly cloudy, vaguely greenish mix.

"I'll think about it," Evan muttered after refilling Gray's glass, and yeah, the guy had manners. Then again, Uncle Will probably wouldn't have gone getting all involved with someone who didn't, Gray decided. Evan, with his messy, sexy hair, sad eyes, lean body and grasp of being hospitable would have been exactly Uncle Will's type. Even with as little as he'd known the man, Gray was sure of that much.

"You do that," Gray murmured, giving Evan a smile. "Think about it and when you decide you're ready for family, you let me know, man. Meantime... you got a studio or somethin'? For your art stuff, I mean. Wouldn't mind lookin' if you're up for some show and tell." He took a long drink of his freshened Margarita. "Later, I mean. Or in the mornin'. This is a damned fine drink, Evan. They don't make them like this in Carter."

Well, there was another blush, and it didn't look all uncomfortable like the one before. Nice.

"I. It's our... my friend Troy's recipe. He's good at entertaining." Evan frowned slightly. "Um, studio? Yeah. It's on the third floor, next to our... *my*. Next to my bedroom."

Oh, Gray remembered that. The not-so-subtle reminders that someone was gone. He'd gone through it with his daddy's death, after all. Hell, he still thought of the master bedroom back home as Daddy's. And it wasn't the same, losing a lover. He was sure of that much, even without personal experience of it. It couldn't be too far different, though. Loss was loss. It always hurt. It was the dealing with it that varied.

"Later, then," Gray answered, pretending he hadn't noticed the nearly silent hitched breath. "After we're done enjoyin' these fine drinks and the little bit of wild out here." He gestured toward the bit of nature beyond the deck and wasn't at all surprised when Evan looked relieved and nodded.

They sat a while, just drinking and not really talking much at all. Evan would get sidetracked more often than not, putting an end to Gray's attempts at conversation. Gray got that. He did. Had to be damned hard for Evan, after all, sitting there with someone he didn't really know, all the while surrounded by everything Uncle Will and Evan had known and loved. Every word Gray spoke seemed to bring back a memory, judging from the glazed look that came and went on Evan's face.

It was a good face, Gray found himself thinking. Not delicate, but not rough, either. Even with the slight pallor and bit of scruff along Evan's jaw, the man was... yeah. And grieving, Gray reminded himself harshly. Evan was grieving the death of his lover and likely would be for a long while. Checking the guy out and having inappropriate thoughts about the man was not a good idea.

He told himself that over and over again, right up until they'd finished their drinks and taken the glasses and the empty pitcher inside. He told himself so even more as they climbed the stairs to the third floor studio, Gray weaving just a bit from the stronger-than-they'd-tasted Margaritas.

He cocked his head slightly, looking at one of Evan's photographs. Some old building that had seen better days, but the way that Evan had captured the angle of the sun, setting the details in stark relief, was really good. Gray wasn't any sort of art critic, but yeah, he liked it.

A small stained glass piece -- an angel with one broken wing -- had him biting his lip at how much work it must have been. Looked like eight different shades of white, alone, and not a single bit of glass larger than Gray's thumbnail. Damn.

More photos. More glass pieces. Some sort of figure made up of tangled copper wires. And paintings. Probably twenty or so, stacked and leaning against one wall, plus the one on the easel that wasn't quite finished. Lord.

Right there in paint. Evan, grinning more than Gray thought was possible, looking happy as... well, as a pig in shit, Daddy would have said. And Uncle Will, looking thinner than Gray remembered, hair shot with silver here and there, but smiling. The both of them naked, but for the sheet that covered them, tangled around them, Will's arm around Evan's shoulders, Evan's hand on Will's chest, and the both of them looking so damned happy.

It wasn't a perfect painting. Gray could tell that much. But he could see the love in it. In the faces and in the way Evan had put the scene on canvas. Lord.

The sob from behind him should have been surprising, Gray thought, coming as it did, all sudden-like. It wasn't though. In fact, Gray thought he'd maybe been expecting it.

"Sorry, man," he said as he turned. "Sorry. I didn't know..." Didn't know the painting even existed, Gray thought. Didn't know how deep in it Evan and Uncle Will had been. Hell, he didn't know a lot of things. He knew how to step closer and open his arms, though. Knew how to offer comfort where it was needed, though the drinks made it easier, if he was being honest.

And he knew how to hold on while his dead uncle's lover cried and railed against an uncaring universe, too. So he did that. He held on and let Evan break down. Then he held on even tighter when Evan started to mumble.

"I know... I know, Ev," he answered, just rubbing the man's back and trying to ignore his own reaction to the closeness. To Evan. Inappropriate, he reminded himself yet again. Entirely.

"It was supposed to be for his birthday," Evan whispered, finally winding down, catching his breath. "I... I think he would have liked it."

Gray couldn't argue. Not even a little bit. "I think he would have *loved* it, Ev. Just like he musta loved you. So much."

The lips against his own came as a surprise. They sent a shock through Gray's body like nothing before. And God help him, Gray thought, but he was just buzzed enough to respond, even knowing how wrong it was. Jesus. Preying on Evan's grief. It was...

Good, damn it. It was fucking good. Soft lips, not quite warm, but not cold either, brushing, then pressing against Gray's, opening. Evan's tongue -- tasting of lime and tequila, triple sec and just a tiny bit of salt -- pushing into his mouth so slowly, so easily. It was more than good.

The slow slide of tongues and mouths ended almost as quickly as it had begun and Gray knew his eyes were wide when he finally opened them. His body was tight, yearning, but even so, it would be wrong to let things go any farther. Gray knew that. He felt it so deep, it might as well have been written in his bones. That and... Evan looked like he was slowly waking up from some sort of trance, his face going from soft to stunned to horrified in visible stages.

"Oh. Oh, God. I. Sorry. Shit! Sorry, Gray. I..."

Gray shook his head, though he loosened his hold enough for Evan's sudden struggles to be less than exciting. Thank God. Even so... "Calm down, man," he said simply, doing his best to sound like hot-as-sin in-laws kissed him all the time. "It's cool, okay? Just a kiss, man. It ain't like I never kissed a guy before, Ev."

Yeah, that had Evan shocked. Gray could tell by the way Evan froze and stared at him like Gray had just grown a spare arm from his forehead. "Y'know," he added, "I heard somewhere that people do all kindsa things when they've just had a loss. Like kissin'... and most times, more. Reaffirmin' that they're alive or somethin'."

Good, Evan wasn't freaking out anymore. Or wasn't looking like he thought Gray was getting ready to kill him, anyway. "It was just a kiss, Ev."

"I... yeah," Evan agreed after a long, silent moment. "Okay. Um. Maybe we should, um..."

"Get the hell out of your studio and find somethin' else to do for a while?" Gray smiled as he suggested it and let his arms release Evan carefully. "Yeah. Because I'm thinkin' I saw that big-ass TV downstairs. Might could be somethin' worth watchin'." He furrowed his brow then winked, hoping Evan wouldn't be offended. "Without Margaritas. I'm not much of a drinker and those things sneak up on a guy. Wouldn't say no to a beer, though."

Evan nodded quickly and moved to the door, leaving Gray to follow and pretend he didn't miss the way that lean body had felt against him, that he wasn't remembering how Evan had felt in his arms.

"Um, how is it that Bill never mentioned anything about his nephew kissing men?" Evan asked him once they were settled on the plush leather couch in the living room, both of them holding bottles of beer, though neither of them had seen fit to drink from them yet.

Gray shrugged just a little and arched a surprised brow when Evan handed him the TV remote. "I'm guessin' he didn't know." He hit the power button and flipped channels until he found one of the ESPNs. "I don't think even Daddy knew for sure before he passed, or at least he didn't want to know. Can't imagine him tellin' Uncle Will, either way."

And thank God Evan seemed to be satisfied with that. Gray really didn't want to talk about his daddy, after all.

God. What in the world had he been thinking?

Yes, being in his studio for the first time since Bill's... just *since*... had been hard, but kissing Gray? *Kissing Bill's nephew*? Good God.

Sure, Gray wasn't holding it against him, had even spouted some sort of psycho-babble that Evan hadn't expected to hear from a cowboy-type from Montana, but shit. Yes, Evan had heard that before, but the last thing he'd even considered was... God, Bill would have killed him.

Or laughed his ass off, Evan realized with a heavy sigh. Bill's sense of humor had never been what anyone else would call normal.

Gray honked the horn on the little red rental car and Evan blinked, then made himself smile. He offered a wave as Gray backed out of the drive and got one back before Gray headed off, and that was good.

It was good that Gray was gone. Nice to have met the man, but... yeah.

The strange thing, Evan told himself a few hours later, was how the house felt empty all over again when Gray had only been there a little more than a day. Stranger still that after Evan's initial resentment had passed, he hadn't minded having the man around when the idea of having his and Bill's friends over still seemed wrong.

Then again, their friends would want to talk about Bill. Or even worse, would want Evan to talk about his *feelings*. "And probably have long discussions between themselves about how to *help* me," he said out loud, his own voice startling in the quiet. "At least Gray didn't push." In fact, Gray had backed off every time Evan didn't want to talk about something, and maybe that was it.

Maybe he'd been comfortable with Gray because the man hadn't really known Bill or Evan, much less Bill-and-Evan. Gray hadn't actually known either of them before the cancer and then Bill's heart attack had changed everything. Their friends had, though. Hell, his and Bill's

friends... well, they'd kept calling and calling, right up until Evan turned the ringer off and let the voice mail handle things. He would have to go through the messages eventually. Evan knew that. But not yet. First...

Well, first he needed to check the cupboards again and make a shopping list. He hadn't been paying that much attention when he'd made breakfast that morning. He'd been glad enough to have eggs in the fridge and some frozen turkey bacon.

So, list first. Then Evan would see whether he felt up to going to the grocery store. He almost thought he might. It was strange to think that life went on, but maybe? Well, maybe it did.

Part Four

It took another three weeks for Troy to wear him down, and while they'd always been friends, just as Evan had mentioned to Gray on the back deck, Troy and he had never been the kind of close that some others of their circle were. They'd been friendly, yes, but not to the extent of sharing secrets.

Maybe that was why Evan hadn't minded having the man over, nearly a month after the funeral, then more and more frequently. He wasn't sure, really. In fact, all Evan was entirely certain of was that Troy was there, in the living room, and it felt good. Nice.

"Come on, Evvy," Troy called, his voice clear as a bell, even with the kitchen wall between them. "You're missing the best part! That woman with the really huge breasts is about to totally kick that big guy's ass!"

God only knew where Troy stumbled across some of the shows he liked, because Evan surely didn't. He couldn't deny that they were amusing, though. "I'll be right there," he called back, arranging a few crackers around the cheese on the silver platter he'd chosen. "Skip back or something, okay?"

Troy grumbled something, but Evan figured he'd have been louder if it were important. "You know," he added as he walked back into the living room, cheese platter in one hand and a matching bowl of the caramel and cashew popcorn Troy had brought in the other, "I still have no idea of what's going on in that thing. Too bad it doesn't have subtitles."

Troy laughed just a little and started the DVD again. "You mean you don't speak Vietnamese? Oh, Evvy. Your education is *sorely* lacking." Then Troy winked and Evan tried to smile.

Bill had always thought Evan should learn a second language. It had never been something they'd fought over, but God, it would have made Bill happy if Evan had just listened. He wished he had, just so there'd be one more smile to remember, one more shining moment.

"Sorry," Evan said, forcing a tiny laugh. "It's just..." He shook his head.

"Memories," Troy said softly. "I know. Not like you do, but... when Julian and I. When we ended. It seemed like everything I saw or did was a reminder of what I'd lost. And Julian's still alive and kicking. Just not with me. I'm guessing it's a lot harder for you."

Evan frowned. "Wait. You and Julian? Really? I mean... Wow."

Troy offered up a bright smile and reached into the bowl of sticky popcorn. "It was a long time ago and we didn't know you then. No reason you would have heard about it, I guess. Let's just say Julian and I were high school sweethearts who didn't get a happily ever after, and leave it at that, hmm?"

That was exactly the right thing for Troy to say. If he wanted Evan to prod and pry until he got the whole story, anyway. Which Troy somehow knew because he paused the DVD again and turned on the couch with an obviously false annoyed look in response to Evan's "But..."

"Oh, fine. Short version? High school, then we went off to college together. Junior year, I went to see my faculty advisor about... something or other. I can't remember right now. The why isn't important, anyway. What is..." Troy popped a few kernels and nuts into his mouth and crunched noisily, then took a sip of the Shiraz they'd been trying. "What's important is that when I walked into the office, Julian was there. On his knees, with Richard's dick in his mouth. Richard was my advisor's TA back then, of all things."

"Oh. My. God." Evan couldn't think of anything else to say, but Troy laughed.

"Yeah, tell me about it." Another sip of wine and a bit more sweet popcorn, then Troy shrugged. "That was, oh, nine years ago, now. And like I said, for months afterward, I saw Julian in everything. Wondered what he'd think of this or that. I managed not to run into him for the next year and a half, even on the same campus, but finally I was okay. Not that it doesn't still piss me off a little bit that he and Richard are still together, but I moved on. It stopped hurting so much, and now it's just a remembered pain. Regret. Whatever. A sort of wistful 'could have been if Julian hadn't been such a jerk' feeling that I almost never dwell on."

Evan wasn't so sure of that. There was something in Troy's eyes that... well, Evan wasn't about to call the man on it, no matter what he thought he saw in Troy's eyes. He opened his mouth to say he was sorry or maybe just to announce that Julian was an idiot, but somehow that wasn't what came out.

"I kissed Bill's nephew!" It burst from his lips like it had been lurking there, just waiting for the chance to break free. "I grabbed him and I kissed him and it felt good! God, what does that make me?"

Troy's eyes widened, the green standing out brightly for just a moment. "Um. Well, hopefully not a pedophile? I mean, his *nephew*? That's sort of..."

"No! Ew!" Evan shuddered, the idea alone killing the small bit of appetite he'd felt for the cheese on the coffee table. "I told you! Gray's like... my age, or close enough. God, how could you even think that? Now I'll have to bleach my brain. Twice."

"Oh." Troy frowned a little, then shook his head. "Okay. So what?"

Evan's expression must have answered well enough because Troy shook his head again, harder, pale blond hair swaying with the motion.

"You were upset, Evan. And yeah, maybe not the best idea ever, but things like that happen. It's not like Bill was in the hospital and you were out fucking some random guy." Troy smiled, looked a little sad. "It makes you a man who went from being part of a unit -- you and Bill -- to

being... not. You kissed a guy who wasn't Bill because you were hurting and this Gary was there."

"Gray," Evan muttered.

"Whatever! You were in pain, he was there, you kissed him and it doesn't sound like he beat you up, so I don't see the harm." Then Troy blinked. "Oh, you're worried about what Bill would have thought."

Evan nodded slowly. "I... he was hardly even gone a week, Troy. God."

"Over a week that you spent with no human contact, aside from the funeral," Troy pointed out. His hand rose, pressed over Evan's on the couch, still slightly sticky from the popcorn and nut concoction. "And then you crawled right back into your shell and ignored everyone. Not that I blame you. Jesus, you should have heard some of the ideas the guys had to cheer you up."

Troy's eyes rolled and Evan chuckled just a little. Even so... "Speaking of the guys..." Evan bit his lip. "Uh. Shit. What I just told you..."

"Goes no further," Troy said bluntly. "Most of them wouldn't get it, Evvy. Roger and Brandt would, I think, what with their last lovers dying before the two of them ever got together, but it's your story to tell, when and if you want to. Now, relax, okay? We've got a smackdown to watch."

Evan couldn't help smiling. "Right. Vietnamese Barbie versus German Goliath."

Troy started the disc playing again and they settled back to watch. And Troy was right, Evan decided. Roger and Brandt probably would understand. They'd lost their first real loves to AIDS years earlier. But Brandt's health had been a little bit shaky of late, his T-cells fluctuating all over the place. The last thing Evan wanted to do was remind either of them that they were possibly on borrowed time.

Besides, it didn't matter. It was one kiss and Gray was back in Montana. It was just bothering Evan because the man was Bill's nephew. Nobody even knew about it, aside from Troy, and for whatever reason, Evan trusted Troy to keep it to himself.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that Bill would have been disappointed in him. Or incredibly amused. Possibly both.

The horses were looking good, healthy, according to the vet. Gray knew it was unusual to have the riding beasts checked out as often as they did, but that was the arrangement Sara had worked out with the man. They boarded Doc Rafferty's two mares, cared for them, made sure they got enough exercise, and the Doc checked all the equines once a month, plus made himself available for emergencies with the herds. It was Gray's favorite kind of transaction, with no money changing hands and just their words for bond. He knew it wouldn't last forever, but it had been

damned handy in the two years since Doc's divorce had put the man in a small house closer to town with no room for Lilly and Sunshine.

"Oh, please. Are you getting all weird again?"

Gray turned, arching a brow at his sister before pushing away from the paddock gate. "I'm gettin' all irked with the way you keep sneakin' up on me," he answered with a grin that belied the words. "Thought you were goin' to Billings with Raina for the weekend."

Sara snorted, delicately, but still a snort. "I thought I was, too. Right up until that man she married decided today would be the perfect time to go visit his momma in Missoula."

Oh, Lord. "Kenny Richmond's visitin' his momma? On purpose? Lord, Sara. What'd you do to piss him off?" Because there was no other explanation. Kenny usually spent his Saturdays fishing with his buddies. Giving that up to go see the bitter old shrew that'd birthed him, instead, seemed a pretty damned clear message to Gray.

Sara offered him a slightly wicked little grin. "I *might* have suggested that he smells like a backed up sewer, even after bathing. But he does! I think Raina's just used to it. Can you say I'm lying?"

Well, no. Sadly, he couldn't. That didn't make it right to be poking fun at the man's misfortune, though. Wasn't Kenny's fault that the stench of the slaughterhouse seemed to cling to him.

"Lord, Lord," Gray muttered as he followed Sara into the house. "Good thing you didn't try goin' into politics, Sissy. Diplomacy ain't really your thing."

Supper came and went with Sara telling him about the financial breakdowns from the last quarter. Gray signed off on starting a new account with a different feed store than the one they'd been using. Higher quality and lower prices were never a bad thing. They watched something or other on TV for a little while, then Sara got up, said she was going to a movie in town.

Gray puttered about, went outside and made sure the dogs were fed. Checked on the stables, looked in on the hands in the bunkhouse, and had a beer.

Finally, he ended up in his office, staring at the wall and the one photo of his daddy and Uncle Will, back when they'd been younger. Daddy looked around eighteen or so, Uncle Will about twelve, Gray figured. Brothers, standing there grinning for the camera, the old barn that Gray had replaced after his daddy's death showing in the background, arms around each other's shoulders, clearly affectionate. It was hard to believe they'd ended up with so much distance between them, and not just physically.

Well, it was too late to make Daddy's mistakes up to Uncle Will, but damned if Gray was going to compound them by ignoring Will's man.

"Family," Gray reminded himself out loud. "And that kiss doesn't mean a thing. Evan is family." He kept reminding himself of that, even as he flipped through the old rolodex on the desk and found Will's number.

"Well, hey there, Evan Monroe," Gray said into the phone a few minutes later. "Gray, here. Just callin' to see how you're doin', man." Not because he couldn't get the guy out of his mind after weeks and weeks. Not at all. Just... family.

It was strange, talking to Gray. Mostly because it felt easy, comfortable.

On the rare occasion that Evan had considered even emailing the man again, he'd been sure it would seem awkward, but the phone calls didn't. It was nice to feel like he was a part of something: a family, even if it was Bill's, rather than Evan's own.

It was good to hear about how things were going on the ranch, too, nice that Gray called just to ramble on about nothing, once a week at first, but eventually, every few days.

It helped Evan to feel connected, really, because he'd been right. Aside from Troy, all Evan and Bill's friends wanted to talk about was Bill. How Evan felt about Bill. Did Evan resent him for dying, or feel like he'd somehow let Bill down, or feel like his own life was over.

Yes, and yes, and yes, but Evan refused to say as much, and Gray never asked those kinds of questions. Just whether Evan was eating, and suggestions for food that might tempt him. Because Gray said he remembered what it had been like when Harlan Latham had died and only certain things had appealed to him through the shock of it all.

Evan knew the people in Gray's life by name, after a month or so. Enough to ask after Chester, Billy, Jerry and Digger -- the regular full-time hands who lived at the ranch -- and Delilah, Gray and Sara's housekeeper and surrogate mother. He'd spoken to Sara once or twice, too, when she'd wrestled the phone away from Gray, and hearing the good-natured bickering over the line had cleared up any lingering questions as to the nature of their relationship. Evan had never had a sibling and he was surprised to find that he almost wished he did.

"You started paintin' again, Ev?" Gray's voice dragged Evan from his thoughts with a small start.

"I... no," he admitted slowly. "I took a few pictures the other night, but they're probably crappy. Troy kept bumping into me." He laughed a little. "It was funny, Gray. Every time he saw a guy he thought was hot, he started bouncing around like a puppy."

"Musta been to amuse you," Gray suggested, his chuckle echoing through the phone. "From what you've said, it doesn't seem likely he'd be gettin' all the dates he does if he's like that all the time."

A slight smile curved Evan's lips. "Seriously, if anyone had told me before... just *before*... that Troy would end up being such a good friend, I would have laughed. I mean, we're really different, you know? But he is. I think I'm closer to him than anyone else, these days." His smile grew just a bit. "But God, I wish he'd settle down. Just hearing about his social life is exhausting."

Gray laughed again, louder. "Maybe he's tryin' to make you jealous, Ev."

He snorted. "Please. I'm so not his type." Troy would never even think about hitting on him. Evan was sure of that much. The man respected Bill and Evan's relationship far too much for that. Even with Bill... gone.

"I mean tryin' to make you jealous of all the fun he's havin', honey. Not jealous the other way."

Okay, maybe that made sense. It was sort of working, if that was what Troy was doing. Evan had been going out for lunch and shopping and that sort of thing with Troy for weeks, though he for damned sure couldn't figure out how that had even started.

"Anyway, the pictures might suck, but I won't know until I download them. The little screen on the camera isn't enough for me to be sure." Evan shifted, then lay back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. "I... Bill could always tell, just from the tiny view." He sighed.

"Mood swings mean it's time to eat, y'know," Gray said then. "I read somewhere that grievin' takes just as much energy as workin' out at a gym. Maybe more, what with it bein' all emotional and shit."

Evan couldn't help shaking his head at that, though he was glad Gray couldn't see him. "I'm not hungry," he answered. "And you know something? For a self-proclaimed 'redneck cowboy', you seem to do an awful lot of reading. It's weird."

Gray was smiling. Evan could hear it in his voice. "I like to take a break from all the Zane Gray every now and again, honey. Now go eat somethin', okay? Or do you want me to put Delilah on a plane? I'm pretty sure she could fatten you up in no time."

God, Evan thought as he stood in front of the refrigerator a few minutes later. Gray was damned good with a threat. That didn't mean he had to pay attention, though. Gray was on the other side of the country and what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Besides, Evan really wasn't hungry. He hadn't been for ages. which was exactly why he closed the refrigerator door and made his way up to his bedroom.

He stripped and burrowed under the tangled sheets, drawing up the memory of Bill's scent, letting the occasional sigh slip from his lips into the otherwise still air.

Part Five

"Oh, you'll totally make someone a really good wife one day."

The words came from behind him and while Gray couldn't help but roll his eyes, he had to force a growl into his voice. "Thin ice, sister," he replied, one hand reaching for the open tin of coarse sea salt while he stirred the pan of chicken cutlets, tomatoes and black olives. "Just remember. Thin damned ice you're on, Sara."

His sister snorted and moved closer until she was leaning against the counter beside the stove. "What? If I could do more than boil water, you'd be *more* than ready to marry me off. Or at least trying to get me to think about it." She winked and Gray snorted.

"Yeah, well. I ain't a girl, am I?" Which wasn't to say that he minded playing at being the bottom from time to time, but he wasn't about to tell Sara that. "Why're you in here, anyway? Don't you got some kinda stuff to do? You're usually outside terrorizin' the hands about now."

Sara sighed and shook her head, long blonde ponytail swinging away. "Jim Keane called from the Broken Bend a little while ago. It seems *somebody's* favorite stud-bull busted down the south fence with an eye to... satisfying himself with the herd there. I sent the guys out to bring Smasher back in and fix the break. Thus, no terrorizing."

Gray stopped stirring, pinch of salt poised over the pan in front of him. "Would that be our south fence that separates our land from Jim's north pasture?" he asked softly, eyes narrowing when Sara nodded. "The same north pasture that Jim usually keeps horses in?" Another nod and Gray slowly -- carefully -- let the wooden spoon he was holding drop into the chicken mixture, then turned off the burner. "I'll just be coverin' this up for later, then. How we set for bail money?"

"Oh, get your head out of your ass, Gray." Sara's voice snapped, crackled like a live wire, the way it only did when she was annoyed. "I already had a word with Jim and we've worked out an arrangement. So leave that apron on and finish cooking. I'm hungry." She arched a brow at him and crossed her arms over her chest. "And if you go over there and end up in jail, you can damned well stay in a cell for the night." Sara nodded sharply. "Now, don't forget the parmesan. It's not the same without it," she added with a smile that was far sweeter than Sara herself ever was.

"Daddy was right when he said college was wasted on girls," he called after her retreating back. "Give you some learnin' and you go gettin' all uppity!" He was laughing when he said it, though, which possibly made it less of a dig, but that was fine. Sara bugged the crap out of him, most days, but he trusted her to handle things like Jim Keane's attempted thievery. Gray still wanted to thump the man one, though.

He finished cooking the chicken, dropped a few good handfuls of pasta into the water boiling on the back burner, then pulled a couple beers from the fridge and put them on the kitchen table above the knives and spoons. That was their deal. He cooked, Sara set the table and did the

dishes. It wasn't exactly traditional, but it worked for them. Gray just pitied whatever man Sara eventually married. Unless he could cook, the poor guy would likely starve to death.

Gray sat out on the back porch later that night, phone pressed to his ear, and laughed at Evan's confused question.

"No. Trust me, Ev. It's theft, pure and simple. Smasher... well, he's busted down that fence a good three times, the last year or so. Seems clear that Jim decided to take advantage of it by stickin' part of his herd in there. Shoot, Smasher's won prizes and shit, man. His seed goes for thirty, thirty-five bucks a straw."

"Um, seed? *Bull* seed? What the..." Evan sounded so baffled, Gray could hardly keep from laughing himself silly. Especially when he considered that after the three months since Gray's time in Hartford, they were actually talking about come, and it was Smasher's. Lord.

Even so, he tried to explain. He thought he lost Evan somewhere around one good orgasm for Smasher equaling round about three hundred straws, or maybe at the part of just how they got Smasher and the other stud-bulls to ejaculate in the first place.

Then Evan apparently did the math because he sounded stunned. "Wait, that's... for bull semen? Just one, um, you know." Evan made a sound that was between a spurt and a squelch, but he was laughing. Gray could hear it shivering the man's voice.

"Yeah," Gray agreed. "I know it sounds kinda weird, but it's big money for us. And Smasher's the exception. Most bulls don't pull in that kind of cash for their swimmers. He was big on the rodeo circuit a while back, but he got himself hurt. Sara managed to pick him up for a good price, though. Anyway. Enough about that, Ev. How you been since last week?"

Lord, Lord, he really cared, too. More than he'd planned on.

"I'm here," Evan announced, gasping just a bit as he pressed the phone to his ear. "Sorry, I was in the shower, but I'm here." And it was ten o'clock, which was when Gray usually called and Evan had nearly forgotten. "God, what a day. Hold on, okay? I'll be right back."

He didn't even wait to hear what Gray might say. He just dropped the phone on the bed and toweled off enough that he wasn't dripping all over the floor, then pulled Bill's robe on, the soft fabric wrapping him in warmth.

"Okay," he said a minute later, breath finally caught from his short but mad dash. "What's going on? How'd that thing with the bull turn out?" He settled on the edge of the bed, letting himself relax a bit.

Gray laughed and Evan could almost picture him shaking his head. "Gotta tell you, man. Sara's one sharp bargainer." Gray laughed again. "Got poor old Jim runnin' scared first, thinkin' we

were plannin' on pressin' charges. That's a big damn deal out here, Ev. A man's word, his honor? Well, let's just say folks in these parts got long-ass memories, y'know?"

Evan grunted, then found himself nodding when Gray went on about him and Sara sharing the offspring of the bull's orgy with their neighbor's cows, while said neighbor would be responsible for the upkeep of the babies until they were the right age to be useful. He wasn't entirely sure of how a calf could be of any use, but he figured Gray would get around to explaining it eventually.

"Well, it sounds fair, I guess," he said when Gray finally finished. "I mean, it seems like everyone wins, right?"

A chuckle answered him. "Could be worse. Now, tell me about this day of yours, Ev. What's got you rushin' around, this time of night?"

Evan smiled slightly. "Just Troy again. I didn't get home until half an hour ago." He smiled a bit more at Gray's enquiring grunt. "I told you we were having lunch, right? Well, he decided we should go to New Haven. Some place he'd heard of or whatever. And that was fine, only it's like an hour drive."

Gray mumbled something that sounded amused, but he wouldn't repeat it. He just told Evan to go on.

"Fine. So lunch was good, but then Troy's master plan kicked in. Turns out," Evan said, still just a little bit annoyed, "he wanted to go to New Haven because nobody at the clinic there knows him. It was time for his six month HIV test and he didn't want to do it in Hartford, or alone. So God knows why, but we both got tested."

Gray was silent for a moment. "Guess it couldn't hurt, honey," he said a few seconds later. "Meanin' if it helped your friend feel better about it, then why not? You got no cause to be worryin', right?"

Evan's smile faded and he sighed. "No. It's been years, but I wasn't... you know. Doing anything unsafe. There was only Bill for me." It felt strange, though, getting tested again after so long. Nerve wracking, though Evan knew he had no need to be concerned.

"Well, there you go." Gray sounded like he was smiling. "If it makes you feel any better, everyone on the ranch gets the whole blood work-up once a year for insurance. Even those of us who've been celibate for longer than we care to think on."

Oddly enough, it did make Evan feel better, a little bit. "So, anyway. We did that, then Troy wanted to shop. I swear, Gray, he has more energy than anyone else I know. God. I was worn out after the first hour." He chuckled just a little. "We drove back and he insisted on dinner, too."

"Did you eat?" God, Gray really needed to stop asking that. "Not just at dinner, Ev. Did you actually eat anythin' today?"

"Of course I did," he answered, rolling his eyes as he shifted on the bed, leaning back and pulling Bill's pillow to him. He'd had half of a salad at lunch and a whole shrimp cocktail later. "Then we saw that new movie. The one with what's-his-name. The big guy. With the car. And Troy tried to drag me out to a club, but... Well. Anyway. It's just been a long day."

"Sounds like you'll be gettin' some good sleep tonight, then," Gray said in his overly-reasonable voice. "You given any more thought to payin' a visit, man? It's right pretty out here, this time of year."

No, Evan thought, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. Not when he wasn't sure of why he was so reluctant. He should have been willing, considering how good of a friend Gray had become over the last months, but he wasn't.

"I think it's still too soon," he muttered, though Gray's little rumble told him the man had heard. "It's not that I don't appreciate the invitation. Really. I just... I'm not ready to be away from here yet." Away from the memories. He was getting there, though. "Maybe in a few more months. I do want to see the ranch some day. Even though I can picture it, just from what you've said."

Gray sighed softly, the sound barely making it through the phone line. "You're always welcome here, honey. So tell me about that movie with the car and the big, nameless fella."

And Evan did, glad for the change of subject.

"How's Evan doing?" Sara asked easily, shoving more scrambled eggs into her mouth than Gray thought should be possible for a woman so slender. Then again, she'd always had a wicked metabolism.

"Runnin' about with that Troy of his," Gray said with a shrug as he shook hot sauce onto his own eggs. "He said they went to some gallery the other night to look at pictures of naked men." Lord, Lord, Gray couldn't even imagine a show like that happening in his own neck of the woods.

Sara snorted and when Gray looked, she was rolling her eyes. "Thrilling. But I meant, how is he *doing*. You know. Emotionally."

That was the question, wasn't it? Gray wasn't sure he had the answer, though. Evan sounded okay, most times, but Gray sort of got the feeling the man was holding back with him. *And why wouldn't he?* Gray asked himself harshly. *The two of you might be friendly, but that doesn't mean he's achin' to share his innermost thoughts, does it?* Well, no. That didn't stop Gray from wishing Evan would, though.

"Seriously, Sissy, I think he's still a mess." The words surprised him, but there it was. He wasn't in the habit of lying, not even to his own sister. "Not as much as before, but he ain't likely to be doin' cartwheels in the street, either." He sighed and poked at the eggs and ham on his plate,

watching the tines of his fork sink in. "And hell, I guess I can't expect him to be. What he's goin' through... it's nothin' easy, y'know?"

Sara sighed softly. "I *don't* know, Gray. And neither do you. But it can't go on forever, right? Besides, if he managed to deal with one of you Latham men for eight years? He's got to be strong. Because you're just as much of a pain in the ass as Daddy was, and I can't imagine Uncle Will was any different."

Gray glared at her smirk. "Best be careful there, Sissy. Seems I'm hearin' that ice creakin' under you, more and more. Be a damned shame if it gave out and you fell right on through."

Still, her words had him feeling just a bit better about Evan. Not a lot, but every little bit helped.

Part Six

Over five months since Bill's death, Evan thought sadly. Five months, almost six. Sure, he was doing better, feeling better. Better-ish, anyway. Enough so that he'd been able to box Bill's things up, finally.

Most of the clothing and such had gone to charity. Bill had never been stingy about donating money and various items, though he hadn't had time to offer. Evan was determined to keep that up, even with Bill being gone.

He'd kept Bill's robe; he even slept wrapped in it every now and again, when the loneliness got too strong, too deep. None of Bill's charities would have wanted the ragged, fraying old thing anyway, Evan had justified, when he'd kept it from the boxes. The robe had been Bill's one less-than-stylish possession and while Evan had repeatedly suggested that they get rid of it before Bill's heart attack, he was glad that his late lover had never listened.

It didn't smell like Bill anymore, but it was warm and soft and it helped, damn it. A little bit, anyway.

Evan smiled slightly, feeling wistful as he looked around the living room.

It was more or less unchanged, really. All the furniture was the same and in the same locations, but the smaller items -- lamps, candle sticks, original paintings in hand carved frames and so on - were gone, packaged and catalogued nearly a week earlier for the auction that was being held that night, and Bill would have liked that. He would have liked knowing that the things that had been Bill's, rather than *theirs*, were going to benefit Bill's favorite charity of all. That the proceeds would be going to fund educational programs for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth who spent time at Hartford's many community centers.

Evan liked knowing it, too. All those items would make a more than respectable amount of money; he was sure of that, too. His and Bill's friends would all be there and every one of them had promised to bid to their limits.

Evan smiled again, just a bit more, then rolled his head, feeling his neck crack slightly. He really needed to get going, but he paused in the kitchen for a moment, gazing at himself in the reflective door of the refrigerator. His tux still fit, though it was just a tiny bit loose, not enough that anyone else would notice, but Evan did.

"I need to start working out again," he murmured, his reflection nodding its agreement when he did. He needed to listen to Gray and start taking better care of himself, Evan decided. Or he needed to listen more, not just when it was convenient. He'd almost gained back the weight he'd lost in the first few months. He needed to keep it up and get back the muscle he'd lost, as well.

Minutes later, after a swift drink of water and a determined stride to gather the cashmere coat Bill had bought for him almost a year earlier, Evan was protected from the late-October chill and driving Bill's car. It would be the final item offered that night... as well as being the final tie to

cut. Bill's old Edsel -- found rusted out and lovingly restored by highly-paid professionals -- was going to be the big ticket item, and hopefully provide even more than Evan expected for Bill's charity.

It was going to be a good night, he thought. He was almost looking forward to it. Only almost, though, because Evan was sure he would feel each winning bid deep in his gut. Even so, he knew Bill would approve.

Well, *Bill* would approve, Evan thought with a snarl as he stalked into the house over four hours later. Their friends, on the other hand...

"How could you get rid of *everything Bill loved*," Evan mimicked out loud, viciously yanking at one end of his bow tie. "Are you *trying to erase him*?" He growled, shrugging out of his coat and draping it over the back of the couch, suddenly glad that he'd held in his fury until after the cab dropped him off. He'd been a glowering and broody passenger, he was sure, but at least he hadn't poured his ire out all over the driver.

"I always knew you weren't good enough for him," Evan added, because that had been his personal favorite. And none of it was deserved, damn it. That was the part that had him shaking with anger and something that felt like... he didn't know what. Betrayal, maybe.

They were supposed to be his friends, too. They'd known about the auction, had even said it was a good idea and a fitting tribute. Then they'd turned on him.

Well, not all of them, Evan reminded himself, though it did nothing to decrease his anger. Troy, Roger and Brandt had stood by him. So had Bill's boss from the firm Bill had been a partner in, as well as the man's wife. Gerald and Robert hadn't called Evan a gold-digging whore, either. But the rest?

Evan growled again and made his way up the stairs, already unbuttoning the collar of his shirt and maneuvering the shirt-studs loose. He shrugged out of the stark white shirt as soon as he got to his bedroom, then collapsed on the mattress and kicked his shiny dress shoes off, even while digging his cell phone from the pocket of his tuxedo pants.

"Hey," he greeted when hitting Gray on his speed-dial had the call ringing through and answered. "Is that offer still good? To visit with you and Sara? I just... fuck, Gray, I need to get the hell out of here for a while."

"What the... of course you can come here, but what the fuckin' hell happened, honey?" God. Gray did worried-for-him really well. It was nice.

Evan snorted softly, a lump growing in his throat at even the thought of explaining. God, how could he tell Gray what his... what *Bill's* friends had said? How could he even begin to without sounding pitiful?

"Can we just call it a really bad night?" Evan found himself saying, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I don't want to talk about it, okay?" Because God help him, if he did, Evan knew he would end up crying. And after nearly three months of having his shit mostly together, he didn't want to cry, especially not when Gray would hear him.

Gray seemed to understand. At least, Evan thought so, because the man was very quiet for about twenty seconds, then started talking about the foal Sara's mare had dropped the previous week. In the two days since they'd last spoken, Gray said, Sara had decided on a name for the little guy.

"Well, I suppose it's lucky that horses don't speak English," Evan offered after a moment of blinking at the ceiling. "That poor little horse would need *years* of therapy if he knew what 'Momma's Prince' meant. God, that's even worse than *momma's boy* would be."

Gray laughed and told him the actual name-of-record for the poor thing, but Evan wasn't really listening. He was more caught up in wondering why it was that Gray could have him smiling, even after the night he'd had.

The ice under Sara was getting thinner and thinner. It really was, Gray told himself. Even though she was right about him being far more excited about Evan's visit than he had any reason to be.

Yeah, Ev was apparently cool with Gray calling him honey, and maybe a few of their conversations lately had been much more personal than talks between friends usually were, but damn it, that didn't mean Sara had to be so smug and sure about what was going on between him and Evan. The man was their uncle's widower... or something like it. Close enough, wedded or not. And likely not ready for what Gray was feeling; especially not so soon.

"Please," Sara had said the night before. "You talk about him like he's Jesus Christ himself. And every single time he calls you, you glow, Gray. *Glow!* And maybe he's sort-of-family since he was with Uncle Will for so long, but it's not like you two are actually related. I say you should go for it!" Then she'd run off to her room before Gray could get up from the couch. The bitch hadn't unlocked the door when he'd knocked -- pounded -- on it, either.

She'd already been up and out when he'd woken up, too, which Gray knew meant she was avoiding him. Most days, she slept in until Gray banged on her bedroom door hard enough to wake the dead and then he had to bang some more until Sara managed to grumble at him loud enough to hear through air and wood.

The note on the kitchen table had said nothing more than *Headed to the Broken Bend. Jim's got some worries on Smasher's calves. Doc's meeting us. Go pick up your guy. See you later.* An obvious attempt to avoid him, but even so, there Gray was. At the airstrip outside Carter, waiting for the small plane Evan had arranged to take from the airport in Billings.

Gray looked at his watch again, only to groan when he realized it had been less than five minutes since the last time he'd checked, but God. Just knowing Evan was on his way was incredible.

Maybe more than it should be, but Gray wasn't examining that idea too hard. Wasn't remembering the last time he'd seen Evan, or the desperate, hot, wet kiss they'd shared in the man's studio. He for damned sure wasn't.

"Shit, whoever you're waiting for's got you by the balls, huh?" The voice surprised him enough that Gray jumped just a little before he narrowed his eyes and turned to glare at... Lord, he couldn't remember the guy's name, but Gray knew he'd seen him before. At one of the two gay bars in Carter, in fact, which had him relaxing just a bit.

"It ain't like that," Gray answered cautiously, because even if the guy next to him shared Gray's bent, that didn't make them friends. "He's family. And he's never been here before, so I'm hopin' he didn't change his mind, is all." Not exactly a lie, but Gray hadn't gotten around to mentioning his own feelings to Evan. He'd be damned if he was going to talk about it with some airstrip jockey, no matter the man's leanings.

A snort answered him, then the man laughed. "Yeah, okay. It's none of my business. But just so's you know, it's just me and my guy here right now. Nobody who'd say anything or *do* anything if you and your... 'family'... got all affectionate. And the next plane coming in radioed a delayed takeoff from Billings, so it'll be another ten or so. Just saying."

Well, that was something, Gray told himself as the man walked away. Evan would be there soon and the plane hadn't gone down or any of the other bizarre scenarios that had been lurking in the back of Gray's mind. So, soon, unless Evan really had changed his mind, in which case...

"In which case, I'm gettin' on a fuckin' plane and goin' to fuckin' Connecticut," Gray decided, his words whipped away by the chill wind of autumn in Montana. He would. He knew that much. Huddled in his fleece-lined coat, hat pushed down over his ears, Gray knew he would go if he had to. In a heartbeat.

He stared into the distance for a while, until finally the sound of a propeller dragged him from his thoughts, and when the plane finally landed after circling the airstrip a few times, Gray was more than ready.

He watched the landing, hands clenched into fists, and breathed a sigh of relief when the plane stopped. His eyes were locked on the door, though, and it wasn't until it opened and he saw Evan in that round-edged rectangular opening that Gray's hands relaxed.

Then Evan was stepping down the unfolded stairs and someone still inside handed out a bag that had to belong to him and Gray barely kept himself from rushing the plane. He barely managed to hold himself still and steady when Evan looked around, saw him... and smiled more than Gray could have imagined or even hoped.

He didn't remember moving, didn't have any recollection of crossing asphalt, but Gray knew he must have done just that because he was closer to the plane and Evan was right in front of him.

Too thin, Gray thought, even as he reached for Evan's bag. Too thin and too pale, but still the best thing Gray had seen in... well, close-on six months, really.

"Hey there, honey," Gray heard himself murmuring, and Evan smiled again. *Really smiled*. It went all the way to Evan's eyes, lighting the hazel from within. Gray's breath caught, then resumed with a small shudder.

"Hi," Evan answered, so easy, so calm. "Oh, I'm sorry about Delilah. How's her daughter doing? I meant to ask before, but, well."

But whatever had happened in Hartford had distracted the man, Gray figured. "Patty's gonna be fine, but she needs her momma for a while. That baby went and did some damage comin' into the world. Means we'll have to clean up after ourselves, but I'm pretty sure we're grown enough to manage it." Gray nodded. "So. How 'bout we get you to the truck, Ev."

Oh, Lord. Lord, Lord. Evan's smile got bigger. Better.

"Thank God," Evan answered, falling into step beside him. "Not that I'm in any big hurry to be in yet another enclosed space, but the sooner we get to the ranch, the sooner I can just stretch myself out, right?"

"Y-yeah," Gray gasped. He *heard* himself gasp. He hated it, but there wasn't fuck-all he could do about it. Oh, it was wrong to be thinking about Evan's words like that. He knew exactly what Evan had meant, after all, and it wasn't anything like what Gray's twisted and horny brain was picturing. "I'm glad you made it," he managed to add, though he wasn't sure of that anymore. He'd expected to react to Evan's presence, yes, but not so deeply. So helplessly.

"Jesus," Evan answered, obviously looking around and seeing a big bunch of nothing, but still, he looked surprised. "I'm glad, too. Um, where are we? I mean, there's like, nothing here, aside from the... well, not *airport*, but you know." Then Evan grinned and Gray thought he might fall over just from the continued lack of overwhelming depression he saw there.

"It's maybe not an airport, but it gets the job done," Gray announced, bumping his shoulder against Evan's as they reached the truck. "I woulda gone to Billings, y'know. To spare you the tin-can-with-wings." Because fuck it, if Gray was being honest, even just with himself, he would have driven to Hartford to pick the man up if it meant having Evan at the ranch for even a day.

Evan seemed to know it, or seemed to know *something*, because the man's too-pale skin went pink in maybe three seconds. "That... that would have been bad, Gray," Evan said, but there was something in his tone that seemed encouraging and Gray couldn't help being suddenly more hopeful than he had any right to be.

"It woulda meant more drivin'," Gray allowed as he put Evan's bag in the bed of the truck, "but I'm good with that. Can't really see the bad, honey." Then Evan's hand was on his shoulder, pulling him around, and Gray nearly stopped breathing -- again -- at what he thought he saw in those bright hazel eyes. "Ev...?"

Evan was closer, suddenly, was right up against him, lean but strong arms holding him tight. Gray couldn't help letting his own arms wrap around Evan's lithe form. "Good to see you, too, Ev."

"I can't stop thinking about it," Evan whispered against his neck. "I pushed it aside, pretended it never happened, but I couldn't really and now I'm here, Gray, and *you're* here, and I can't stop thinking about it. That... the kiss. It was good."

Oh, fuck. Fuck. Gray shuddered just a bit. Evan was remembering it, too. One kiss, almost half a year earlier, and it seemed that neither of them could forget.

But Evan was still in mourning. Gray knew that. In fact, he'd read somewhere that getting over a serious relationship could take up to twice as long as that relationship had lasted, and Gray wasn't willing to wait sixteen years. He wasn't willing to wait sixteen minutes.

"It was more than just 'good,' honey," Gray murmured into Evan's ear. "It was amazin'. Unexpected, but fuckin' perfect. I, fuck, Ev. I want to kiss you again."

Evan went stock-still against him and Gray thought he'd maybe overstepped his bounds, but then, oh, then Evan pulled away just a little bit, pulled his face from the crook of Gray's neck. Those lips were right there, right there in front of him, being offered up, pretty as anything. Then Evan's tongue flicked out, moistened that wide pink mouth, and Gray couldn't do anything but lean in.

Their lips met, brushed, melded, and Gray was sure he'd never felt anything so right and true and necessary in his life. Then Evan's hands shifted, one finding its way to Gray's lower back, fingers brushing the top curve of his ass while Evan's other hand landed just below Gray's shoulder blades. Evan's mouth opened, Ev's hot, slick tongue sliding easily past Gray's teeth and...

He didn't know how long they stood like that, arms tight, mouths exploring, pulling out moans and groans that were muffled and swallowed. Gray didn't care, either, not when he could feel Evan so hard against him, an erection matching his own, right there.

Something... God, he couldn't think, but there was some reason that they shouldn't be...

A plane flew over, the buzz of the small aircraft pulling him from Evan's lips with the realization. They weren't even close to home yet. And they were in public, or as much in public as they could be at the airstrip.

"Uh, we should..." Gray mumbled, releasing Evan in order to get the keys to the truck. "God, Ev. I. You." He sighed and opened the passenger side door of the pickup truck. "You make me forget myself, honey. How about we get a move on, huh?"

Evan's smile looked less real then, Gray noticed, but they could clear that up later. He'd just have to make sure Evan understood that Gray hadn't stopped out of any lack of desire, but from necessity.

He closed the passenger door behind Evan and strode around the truck, then settled himself behind the wheel. "It's gonna be okay, Ev," Gray said as he started the truck and shifted gears. "We'll talk once we get you home."

They would, Gray promised himself. He and Evan would talk. Then they'd kiss some more. At some point, Gray would hold the cock he'd felt against him in his hand. He would feel Evan come from his touch. At least, he hoped so.

Evan hadn't planned it. He hadn't even considered that his damned traitorous mouth might open and start spilling words about that first kiss. It had, though, and God help him, but that had led to a second.

Lips and tongues and hands roaming and Evan had been so hard. Just as hard as Gray because Evan remembered feeling that. He remembered feeling Gray pressed up against him, too, Gray's heavy bulge hot even through jeans and coats, and Evan wanted more.

He should be horrified, furious with himself. God, not even six months and there he was, wanting someone who wasn't Bill. Wanting Gray, Bill's *nephew*. Christ. He should feel dirty, dirtier than he'd ever been.

The drive was relatively quiet right at first, Gray humming along to the alternative rock station that was playing quietly, and that alone was weird enough, even without Evan's unhappily overwhelming attraction: alt-rock, on low volume? God.

"Mighty quiet over there," Gray said just as Evan was starting to relax. "You want somethin' else on the radio, Ev?"

God. Like that was all Evan had to think about. Hell, he wished it were. "No. I'm fine."

He was given a slow nod, Gray's hands caressing the steering wheel. Five minutes of simple silence followed. "You want I should stop in town? We got a couple drive-thru places if you're hungry."

"I'm fine," Evan said again, staring out the passenger side window of Gray's truck: land, a couple of hills, a rabbit and a bush or three. Then, finally, there were a few buildings. They were closed down, wretched-looking buildings, but even so.

"There's a Mainstream Video," Gray offered next and Evan wanted to throttle the man. "We could stop in. Think they got new stuff in last week."

"Some other time." Like after he got to the ranch and called a cab or something to take him the hell away from Gray. Because even with as wrong as he knew it was, Evan was still hard, damn it. He still felt Gray's kisses, all the way down to his toes, and it scared the fuck out of him.

Gray sighed, long and soft. "Sorry," he said, so quietly Evan could barely hear him. "I won't do it again if you hated it so much."

Evan groaned softly and shook his head, the words pushing from him before he had a chance to filter them. "I didn't hate it! That's the problem. I liked it, damn it! I liked kissing you, okay?" *And I want to do it more, among other things, and that makes me wonder if Bill's friends were right and if I was really just using him and didn't love him at all!* He managed to keep that part to himself, thank God. Even knowing it wasn't true, Evan didn't ever want to say it out loud.

Another sigh came from Gray, but Evan couldn't quite manage to look at the man. He didn't want to know if Gray was disgusted or not. He was disgusted enough with himself.

"This was a mistake," Evan said carefully. "Coming here. Even talking to you, Gray. Being... whatever the hell it is that we are, because I thought we were friends but I don't run around just kissing my friends, and I shouldn't be here. It's... fuck, I don't know!"

Gray pulled over in front of something that could have been a gas station, though there was a sign in the window offering *Live Bait & Tamales*. The truck shuddered just a bit when Gray shifted it into what Evan assumed was neutral and set the brake.

"I get it," Gray said, sounding calm and easy. "I get it, honey. Uncle Will's only been gone a little while and you're likely thinkin' somethin' crazy like he'd want you to be a monk. Or whatever happened the other night's got you all scared, even if you won't tell me about it. But, Ev..."

Evan swallowed and shook his head, teeth in his own bottom lip when Gray's hand landed on his shoulder. "They... Bill would freak," he answered, still looking out at the tamale and worm shop. "Hell, *I'm* freaked. It's... this... God, Gray, it's just so *wrong*! I shouldn't be so happy whenever I talk to you, and I shouldn't want to kiss you again, okay? I shouldn't be thinking about what it would be like to *touch* you. And I wasn't until I got here, so I need to just go, Gray. I... I need to go back to my house and just pretend I don't want you!"

Gray's hand moved then. It slid along Evan's shoulder, and up the side of his neck. Those fingers were on his cheek, warm and callused, just resting there. Just... touching him... and Evan moaned.

"Might be you're lonely, Ev," Gray murmured, his hand pushing under Evan's chin and finding the other side of his face. "You lived and breathed Uncle Will for close-on a decade, honey. Makes sense you'd be all needin' contact, what with him bein' gone." Gray paused. "If it helps even a little, I can't deny wantin' you, too."

Those fingers pressed his cheek, and while Evan knew he could have resisted the gentle guidance, he didn't want to. Not when it seemed like Gray understood, at least a little. So he let

Gray's hand turn his head, met aqua eyes under long, dark blond hair and barely held back a sob at the pained understanding he saw there.

"How could that possibly help? Because it's not just the wanting you," Evan whispered a few moments later, the truth of it finally forming in his mind. "It's that I like you, Gray. I mean, I really like you. I... fuck. I talk to you more than just about anyone else these days, even Troy, and..." He shook his head, still holding his gaze on Gray's eyes. "If I stay here, we'll end up in bed. Like, together. And eventually I'll go back to Connecticut and our whole friendship will be screwed up and I can't... I'm scared to take that chance, okay? I just can't."

"Can't what?" Gray answered, his voice just as soft as Evan's had been. "Lose me? Evan. Honey. Whatever does or doesn't happen between us, I'm not gonna ditch you, man. Hell, we don't even have to do anythin'. Not even kiss, if..."

"Fuck off, Gray!" Evan nearly shouted the words, his sudden volume shocking even himself. "You were at the house for less than a day before I kissed you, and we made it a whole five minutes after I landed out here in the middle of nowhere! Which part of that makes you think either one of us will be able to resist more kissing? Plus everything that comes after!"

Gray blinked and Evan knew the man finally got it, finally saw. Except Gray started to smile.

It was just a little twitch at the corners of his mouth at first, but it didn't take more than a few seconds before Gray was grinning widely. It took even less before Evan wanted to dive into the man's mouth again.

"You're right," Gray said, sounding happy about it. Easy, for God's sake. "We're gonna want, honey. Doesn't mean we're gonna have. If that happens, though, I hold by what I said before. Uncle Will was a smart man. A good man, right?"

Evan nodded, trying not to lean into the hand that had shifted to cup his cheek, no matter how much he wanted to. "The best," he agreed quietly. And yes, it was the truth. Bill had been more than Evan could ever say. Everything.

Gray nodded and smiled a bit wider. "And you told me 'bout his charities and stuff, so I know he wasn't selfish. He wouldn't want you bein' lonely, Ev. Wouldn't want you hidin' away in that big old house and... Momma woulda called it 'languishin' in splendor.' So if we end up doin' what fellas who're so inclined usually do, I think he'd be glad for you, Ev. And with him bein' gone, well, it doesn't mean you love him any less. Just that you need to be connected. Might could be you need the comfort. Can't say I'd mind bein' the one to give it, either. I, well, I got even more to offer you than comfort, man. Know what I want, and trust me, Ev. It's more than just a fuck. I care for you. More all the time. This ain't never been just a friendship, and you know it."

With that, Gray nodded again and pulled his hand away. He did something with the stick shift and released the brake and Evan watched those strong, tanned hands on the steering wheel again, missing the heat of one of them, at least, against his skin.

God, Gray's words. More than friends, it seemed. It was a scary thought, but also just not, Evan realized, biting his lip as the truck moved deeper into the town, Gray pointing out the occasional place of interest.

And he was still hard, damn it.

Part Seven

Lord, Lord, Evan did look fine, just leaning up against the wood slats of the paddock, finer than anything Gray had seen in quite a while, in fact. That last kiss, from the airstrip, played through Gray's mind again, all lips and tongues and heat. Lord knew how, but Evan was resisting the urge to do it again. Gray could see it, every time their eyes met. Damned good thing Gray was a patient man. He reminded himself of that every few minutes, but especially when he was looking at Evan.

"Hey, Ev!" he called from the back porch. "Might want to think about washin' up for supper, y'hear?"

Evan waved but didn't look at him, and Gray was fine with that. It'd been a strange few days since he'd brought Evan to the ranch. Gray was fairly sure Evan still hadn't decided what to make of the simmering heat and tension between them.

Gray knew, though, and it wasn't just some sort of need for comfort, or even that whole life-affirming thing Gray himself had mentioned, way back when.

It'd be different if Uncle Will were still around, Gray knew that much. Just like he knew that it wasn't just want burning between him and Ev. Evan might not be ready to admit it yet, but it was more. Problem was, if Gray let the man head back to Connecticut without taking at least a step or two in the right direction, he had a feeling he'd never hear from Evan again.

"Jesus Christ." Sara rolled her eyes as she strolled into the kitchen and grabbed the napkins with one hand, opening the silverware drawer with the other. "You've got it bad, don't you? All brooding. It's sad. Funny, but sad." She smirked when he growled. "So, what's for dinner? It smells like... oh, no. Gray, are you making barbequed brisket? For Evan?"

Well, it wasn't like he could deny it. Even if the smell hadn't announced it, Sara was going to be there for dinner, anyway. So Gray nodded and gave the green beans in the sauté pan on the stove a toss, coating them lightly with oil, garlic, salt and pepper. "They don't have it in Hartford," he tried to explain, but he could feel Sara staring at him.

"Okay." Sara sounded stunned. "Okay, then."

She was setting the table when Gray looked over his shoulder, and while he wasn't exactly thrilled that she knew she'd been right -- that Gray really was brooding, after all -- at least she wasn't rubbing it in.

"We should have wine with dinner," Sara announced a few minutes later, out of the blue. "Something nice. Red. Not too dry, but not sweet, either. I'll give Jim a call." She darted from the kitchen so fast that Gray didn't have a chance to ask her when -- or why, for that matter -- she'd started being so damned friendly with Jim Keane over at the Broken Bend that she would just call him about wine, of all things.

Then Evan came into the kitchen through the back porch door and Gray stopped thinking about Sara or wine or anything other than the man who wasn't his.

"The horses are something," Evan said, sounding smooth and easy and like he was just fine. He looked fine, too, aside from the way his eyes were darting to and from everything in the kitchen except Gray.

"You say that every day, Ev," Gray answered, his own eyes unable to see anything but Evan in the jeans and cowboy boots they'd gotten in Carter the day before. Evan's hair was still messy and brown, his eyes still hazel and sort of sad, but only sort of, Gray noticed yet again. Not as destroyed as when they'd first met. Not even close.

Evan shrugged and slipped out of the coat he'd been wearing. Black and city-style, that coat was the softest thing Gray had ever touched, aside from Evan's hair.

"I guess because it's still true," Evan said softly. "Hey, do I have time for a shower? I'm sort of, um. Cold."

Well, Gray decided, dinner could wait. "Try not to be too long," he answered, swallowing hard when he pushed the pan of green beans to the back of the stove and turned fully, only then noticing the not so subtle bulge in Evan's jeans. "Half an hour, okay, Ev?"

Then Evan was nodding and beating a hasty exit, leaving Gray to close his eyes and swallow back a moan that would have upset the cattle if they'd heard it, which they likely would have.

Lord, Lord, he was so near to losing his mind, and Evan didn't seem to have a clue, damn it.

God help him, but Evan was actually starting to enjoy the weird tension between him and Gray. Hell, he was even starting to get used to being hard all the time.

Well, maybe not *all* the time, but whenever he saw Gray, or even heard the man's voice. It was strange, but kind of...

Not cool. Not cool at all, damn it. Because Gray was... *smart, funny, sexy*... Gray was... Gray. Evan acknowledged that Gray was all those things. Smart, regardless of sounding like a hick. Funny, and seemed to get Evan's sense of humor. And yes. Sexy, damn it, though that wasn't a word Evan could say out loud without feeling like a sixteen-year old girl.

And where was the harm, anyway?

Evan pondered that question as he stripped in the guest bathroom attached to the bedroom Sara had offered when Evan first arrived at the ranch.

As much as Evan still hated it, the fact was, Billy-boy was dead. It still hurt, yes, but a small part of Evan had been growing more and more convinced that Bill would have been glad to go the way he had: quickly. Relatively painlessly, especially compared with what the cancer would have done to the man over the next year or more as it ate away at Bill's body and finally left him unable to care for himself.

Evan bit his lip, erection fading as he left his dirty clothes in a small pile beside the sink. He started the shower, waiting for the hot water to steam before adjusting it with a careful twist of the cold water knob, then stepped inside.

"God, Billy-boy," he whispered, barely able to hear himself under the thundering deluge that rained down over his bowed head. "What am I doing? Gray's related to you and I want him and you're not even in the ground a year."

And Gray's right, Evan admitted silently. You wouldn't want me to be lost and alone forever, but I'm not sure it's been long enough, and... God, Bill, I'm not sure I can do casual. You broke me of that, you bastard, just by loving me and keeping me so damned happy.

It was true, too. Bill had destroyed Evan's determined refusal to even consider relationships, just by being so persistent. By caring and being so blunt about it all. It had been shocking, and so strange that Evan hadn't even noticed that he was falling in love with Bill until it was far too late.

"You always did get what you wanted," Evan said out loud, slowly soaping himself with the plain, unscented white bar Sara had offered when Evan's hasty packing had proven to be minus a few things. Like the spiced sandalwood body wash Evan still bought out of habit. "I can't help wondering what you'd make of all this, Billy-boy."

That was the problem, Evan knew. Even while he washed himself, spread lather over stomach and cock, sac and thighs, he knew that was what was bothering him. He was sure Bill would want him to move on, but Evan didn't have a single clue about what Bill would think of that moving on involving Gray. It sort of already did, though. Wrong or not, there it was.

Evan sighed and rinsed under the warm spray of water, then stepped out of the shower to dry off. One swipe at the steam-shrouded mirror later, Evan was staring into his own troubled eyes. *I need to make a decision and stick with it*, he told himself sternly. *Wondering what Bill would think isn't helping.* And yet, the words that had been said at the auction still lingered in the back of Evan's mind. He didn't give them much credence, but they were there none the less.

It wasn't until Evan was in the guest room, hair combed and still damp, wearing the soft black slacks he'd brought and a blue cashmere sweater, that it hit him. The concept turned over in his mind more than once while Evan slipped his bare feet into the casual loafers he'd worn on the plane, but no matter which angle he approached it from, the realization didn't change. It was right. It felt true, deep inside.

"I feel guilty," Evan said later, after discovering his appetite had returned and applying it to copious amounts of barbequed beef brisket and crisp green beans along with some sort of warm, red potato salad with bacon and scallions.

They were standing on the back porch by then, he and Gray, both of them wearing coats against the cold that grew deeper as the moon rose. Coffee mug in hand, Evan leaned against the railing, Gray just a few inches away.

"I feel guilty," Evan said again. "I mean, I still miss him, Gray. I still love him. Bill was... God, he was an amazing man. So much better than I could ever be. But I'm the one who's still alive. Who still wants things. I still have a whole life ahead of me. I have choices and options, and Bill *doesn't*, and I wouldn't have *anything* if he hadn't seen something in me that made him care. He changed me, Gray. Just by loving me the way he did, and I don't know if I ever really deserved him. I hope I did, but I suppose I'll never really be sure."

Gray shifted a little. Evan saw it from the corner of his eye even before he felt the man's arm against his own.

"Think they call that survivor's guilt or somethin'," Gray murmured, pushing just a bit closer. "But Ev. Honey. It's just luck of the draw, y'know? Wasn't you that gave him cancer. Wasn't you that made his heart give out, either. And yeah, maybe you'd be a different man otherwise, and you wouldn't have that fine house in Connecticut if he'd never loved you. But he did, honey."

Evan smiled slightly and leaned against Gray's arm. "I know," he replied with a small nod. "And I'm starting to think that's all that matters. Not what anyone else thinks of me. Just what Bill thought. What we felt for each other. I..." Evan shook his head. "I'll always love Bill, and God knows I respected the hell out of him. And I think... I know this isn't what you want to hear, Gray. I know it. But it's too soon for me to start something up with anyone else if I want to have a real relationship, and I do. I want that. So, when it's time..."

Gray heaved a shuddering sigh, so deep and strong that Evan could feel it in the man's arm, even through their coats. "I guess that means I won't be gettin' laid any time soon, huh?" Gray asked, but he was smiling when Evan looked at him straight-on, smiling and teasing.

"Probably not," Evan agreed, feeling oddly hopeful. He was still just as damned horny as he'd been since getting off that little plane four days earlier, but hopeful none the less. "I... you might be getting kissed, though." Evan frowned for a second, then chuckled quietly. "Except that might be too much, I think. I'm not sure."

Gray's hand was heavy on Evan's sleeve, then chilled against his fingers as Gray's tangled with Evan's own. "Y'know, honey," Gray murmured, his eyes shining in the pale moonlight, "That's exactly your problem. You think too damned much."

When Gray's hold tugged Evan even closer and those lips were against his, Gray's mouth warm even in the chill surrounding them, Evan couldn't do anything but agree. Silently, as his mouth was busy, but he definitely agreed. No more thinking. For a while, anyway.

God, he was sore. Evan couldn't believe it, but he was. Everything hurt, from his neck down to the soles of his feet. Of course, that was what he got for trying to ride a horse.

Four times he'd ended up on the ground, falling from the too-damned-tall behemoth of a demon that Gray insisted was the most placid mare on the whole ranch. It was sad, really. Pathetic that Evan still couldn't figure out what had happened, and Gray telling him to grip with his knees hadn't helped. At all.

Oh, Evan had been fine when it was just walking. It was the trotting that had done him in. That, and the way Gray and the hands watching had kept calling to him to move his body in time with the motion.

"Grip tight with my knees, lift my ass up and down," Evan grumbled to himself as he carefully dragged the T-shirt over his head. "God. And that horse." Bitsy, her name was, though there wasn't anything small about her.

"How you doin', honey?" Gray's voice came from the open doorway of the guest room, sounding just a bit strained.

Evan groaned, turned around, shirt balled up in his hands. "Honestly? I feel like I just got used as a tackling dummy." He sighed. "I think the whole riding thing is a lost cause." Unless it didn't involve horses. That idea flitted through Evan's mind quickly, but not so fast that it didn't have his body trying to react to Gray's presence, as well as the bulge Evan could clearly see in the man's jeans.

Gray's eyes closed for just a second, but Evan saw it. "Wouldn't write it off just yet, Ev. Some things, you just gotta keep at 'til you get it. That whole cliché 'bout fallin' off the horse and gettin' back on? Might be there's a reason for it."

"Oh, I'll try again," Evan admitted with a sigh. "Just as soon as I stop feeling like a bruised melon. God, I didn't even fall that far."

"Far enough," Gray said, disagreeing. "And you were usin' all sorts of muscles you probably didn't even know you had. It'd be a wonder if you *weren't* hurtin', honey. So come on out to the kitchen and I'll give you a rubdown. Got some of that hot-and-cold, should do you up right." Gray's nose wrinkled. "Won't smell so appetizin', but it'll feel damn good."

Oh, man. That sounded like either the best idea ever, or the worst. Evan couldn't decide. That didn't stop him from toeing off his boots and following Gray, though. It didn't even slow him down. Then he was straddling one of the kitchen chairs, leaning his chest against the ladder-back, and Gray was behind him, sitting normally in another.

Gray's hands felt good, strong and callused and slick from the ointment that really did feel fiery, then icy on Evan's skin, then hot again. Gray used long, smooth strokes, thumbs pressing, pushing at every place Evan had strained, and a few he hadn't. His skin felt like it was vibrating, underneath where it didn't show, and Gray seemed to know it somehow because those hands -- those hands Evan couldn't help imagining touching him in other places -- slowed. They slowed and went from helpful to tormenting, in the best possible way.

"Evan?" Oh, Gray sounded tense. Like he was easily as hard in his jeans as Evan was in his own. "I think maybe... Lord, you feel good, honey, but..."

"We should stop," Evan murmured. "I. Yeah. I really like how you're touching me, but stopping would be good. Smart." And he had to be smart. Had to. He even wanted to, mostly. "Um. I'll just... I need to clean up."

Evan let loose one soft sigh of relief when Gray's hands left him. He was glad to see Gray looking just as relieved when he stood. It would be so easy to lose control, so easy to let go and do what Evan knew they both wanted to do, but it was still too soon. Too much.

"I'll go ahead and put some sandwiches together," Gray said, nodding sharply, though he made no effort to cover the unusually tight front of his jeans. "Figure we can see what's on TV when we're both done... washin'. Try not to be too long in the shower, okay?"

Evan nodded slowly, deliberately not looking at Gray's groin. His own was in a similar state, after all, and Gray was being courteous enough not to stare. "I don't really think that's going to be a problem," Evan admitted, heat rising in his cheeks. "Um. Okay. See you later."

With that, he beat a hasty retreat, already thinking of hot water and slippery suds and hoping he'd be able to swallow his shout when he came.

Part Eight

Letting Evan go back to Hartford after near-on two weeks of the man's company had been almost more than Gray could stand. Even with nothing beyond long, slow, deep kisses and a few memorable nights when necking on the couch had led to rubbing against each other until both he and Evan messed their pants like a pair of horny, humping teenagers.

Gray wanted the man back, damn it. Tormenting as it had been, it was even worse not seeing Evan.

"Oh, you're just pitiful," Sara said with a wide grin, letting a huge gust of cold air in with her through the back porch door. "I swear, Gray. It's just sad, the way you've been moping around here for the last month. Even Jim's noticed, and he doesn't see you but maybe once a week."

Lord. With as much as Sara mentioned Jim Keane, Gray was starting to think there was something going on there, but there couldn't be, really. Keane was pushing forty. Not to mention, Gray was pretty sure the man wasn't even looking. Hadn't done, as far as Gray could tell, since Elizabeth Keane ran off with one of the Broken Bend ranch hands five years earlier.

"Jim needs to start mindin' his own damn business and stop mindin' mine," Gray grunted, shoving still more stuffing up inside the twenty-five pound turkey, then binding its legs. "A man might start thinkin' there's somethin' wrong over the Broken Bend for Jim Keane to be so concerned with other folk."

Sara laughed, damn her. "Well, a *woman* might think you're pining away for a certain dark-haired lovely who can't sit a horse to save his life. Then again, I guess it isn't his *horse* riding skills that have you acting all pathetic."

Oh, that was more than enough. "Look, Sissy. I know you think you're bein' funny, but you're not. Do I miss Evan? 'Course I do. But you remindin' me of it every damn minute ain't helpin', got it? So just... leave me be. I'm dealin' with it. Maybe not well, but that's my business, not yours." Gray frowned and covered the turkey with plastic wrap, then opened the fridge and shoved it, pan and all, onto the shelf he'd emptied for just that purpose.

He was washing his hands at the kitchen sink when Sara hugged him from behind. "Sorry," she said softly. "Sorry, Gray. I just... I guess I keep hoping you guys will work things out. You were so happy when he was here and now you're not and I hate seeing you like this."

Gray sighed, then dried his hands with the dishtowel on the counter before turning around to return the hug. "There's nothin' to work out, Sara," he answered a minute or so later. "Or more like, it's already worked out as much as it's gonna be. Evan ain't ready to jump in just yet, and I'm not willin' to settle for less than I deserve. So we're waitin'. We talk." All while the truth lurked under their words, simmered there, but that wasn't Sara's business, either.

"It's gonna be okay," Gray told her next, and even though he couldn't explain how he knew, he really did. He knew it, all through him. Brain and bones. Everywhere.

Hours later, Gray sat on his bed, feet up, back braced against the headboard. "So you're sure you forgive them?" he said into the phone, trying not to frown. Evan had finally told him what had spurred the man's visit, and even though Gray had calmed down over the whole thing in the last few weeks, he still wasn't sure Evan should even be talking to the bastards who'd hurt his feelings so badly. So deeply.

Of course, if they hadn't, Evan never would have been to the ranch, and that left Gray caught between hating Evan's people in Hartford and owing them, damn it.

"I'm sure they thought they were trying to help me," Evan answered, his voice soft enough that Gray heard music in the background. And people. "It was Julian's idea. He thought I was disappearing into myself, and he's..." Evan laughed, still quietly. "Julian's the type who would have just let fly at the auction if anyone said those things to him. I think he figured I would, too, and then they could all take it back once I went ballistic. He's a big fan of explosion-therapy. God knows how he talked the others into it, though." He paused, but was clearly joking when he went on. "Maybe blowjobs."

Gray covered the phone for a moment to groan, then pressed it to his ear again. "Lord, honey. So. I hear a party goin' on. You havin' a good time? What're you doin' for Thanksgiving? Because I know you're not really goin' with that 'order in some Chinese food' plan of yours. That'd be... un-American." And thank the Lord that Evan took the change of subject because Gray didn't ever want to hear Evan say blowjob again unless it was because he was offering.

They didn't talk too long after that, which was just as well, really. Gray's body was having its usual reaction to Evan's voice, after all, and he needed to take himself in hand.

Wasn't the first time, Gray thought blearily as the last of his spunk drained away with the water from the shower. It wasn't the first and for damned sure wouldn't be the last. He could only hope that Evan felt something similarly desperate and deep, all the way on the other side of the country. Gray thought the man did, but he figured only time would tell.

It had been a close thing, keeping himself from flying out to Montana for Christmas, especially since Bill had loved the holiday so much.

Their house had always been decorated in green swaths that smelled of pine and holly, and gold and white bows tied around cinnamon sticks. There had been a tree every year, covered in the numerous odd little items they'd accumulated on their trips to Italy and Barbados, Japan and France, as well as more traditional Christmas ornaments.

Evan had actually considered going through the motions, but he honestly hadn't seen the point. He was one man in a house that was far too big, and while Evan knew his friends would have come by to visit, it was just easier to go to them, to celebrate the holidays in their cozy homes and avoid all the effort of Christmas. He'd never really been big on holidays before Bill anyway.

The strange thing to Evan was that he hadn't been nearly as depressed as he'd expected. It hadn't been all "tidings of comfort and joy," as the song went, but it hadn't been horrible, either. He'd gone to a party on Christmas Eve over at Troy's place, then headed back to the house around one a.m. and Gray had called maybe half an hour later, as Evan was relaxing in the huge tub, sipping slowly at a glass of Syrah.

Their conversation had turned into something hotter, more explicit than ever before, which Evan had freaked out about on Christmas morning, but he'd been fine by New Year's Eve. In fact, he'd wished Gray was there when the big crystal ball dropped because Evan missed Gray's kisses. He missed them fiercely.

His art was going well, though. After as long as he'd ignored it, he'd finally started to feel like he had something to express other than heartache and emptiness. Because while he did still miss Bill -- and probably always would, to some degree -- Evan had finally, truly realized that *his* life wasn't over, not even close. That being so, he'd been able to start again with his art. In fact, Evan had just finished a stained glass piece the day before. It was good, too, possibly his best ever.

He took a step back, polishing rag in hand, and smiled as the weak February sun lit on the thirty or so shades of black, brown, cream and white he'd used. "I think he'll like it," Evan said out loud, looking from the glass piece to the framed photo of Bill that sat nearby. "I think Gray's really going to like it, Billy-boy."

Evan knew he was imagining it, but Bill's picture seemed to wink at him, agreeing.

Of course, he had to get the thing to Montana without having it break into a million pieces, which Evan suspected would be easier said than done. He'd never done stained glass that size before, but he would figure something out. He had to. He sort of thought he needed to see Gray, anyway. It had been months, after all, and talking on the phone just wasn't the same.

"I'm a little bit freaked," Evan told Troy later that night, nearly whispering the words as they sat in Troy's living room drinking beer from bottles and nibbling at gourmet pizza with pesto, goat cheese, sun dried tomatoes and Tasso ham. "I mean, it feels right, but..."

"But it's been less than a year?" Troy suggested and Evan nodded, biting his lip. "Evvy," Troy went on, "I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but do you have any idea of how lucky you are? I'd give my right nut... well, maybe not that, but I'd give my right *something* to fall in love even once with someone who actually gave a shit about me. You had Bill, and he was a great guy, but he's gone. And now you've found someone else and you're getting all caught up in the timing. Don't be a moron. Loving this Gray person doesn't mean you love Bill any less. It just means you're possibly the luckiest son of a bitch on the planet. Because he sounds like a prince."

"He kind of is," Evan mumbled, admitted almost reluctantly. "I mean, it's good, you know? And we get along really well. The chemistry." He blushed. "We definitely have that part down. He's just a really decent guy, Troy. But I still feel... I don't know."

"Evvy. I swear to God, if you don't stop being an ass, I'm going to have to beat you. You loved Bill, and Bill loved you. You know that. And you know he'd be pissed off if you missed a chance to be happy, now that he's gone. So stop worrying about what other people might think and do what your heart tells you is right, okay?" Troy sounded so irritated that Evan almost laughed. "Man does not live by phone sex alone."

Well, maybe Troy had a point. "Okay," Evan said after another swallow of micro-brew and a few more tiny bites of pizza. "You're right. I know you're right. I just need a little more time, okay? Now, moving on. How was your date the other night? Sparks? Anything?"

Troy snorted softly, green eyes sharpening under white-blond hair. "If by 'sparks' you mean did I want to set him on fire before we even finished our drinks, then yes. Lots and lots of *sparks*. I swear, just because I'm not all muscle-bound and butcher-than-butch, it doesn't mean I want to be someone's little house-bitch, you know? And ughh! I am *never* going to be the type to play at being a naughty schoolboy, twenty-four seven! I mean, the word 'Headmaster'? Doesn't really roll off my tongue."

Evan nearly spit beer across Troy's coffee table. "Oh, shit. You're kidding, right? It was a first date!"

"I know," Troy agreed with an obviously annoyed roll of his eyes. "But his accent was delicious! So after the sex, I did what *my* heart said was right. I got dressed and got my happy butt out of there. I swear, that's the last time I go out with someone I meet at a sex shop." Troy paused, frowned, shook his head. "In the *clothing* section, anyway."

Luckily, even Troy realized how funny that was because he joined Evan's laughter a few seconds in. Eventually they fell to talking about other things, but in the back of Evan's mind, Troy's earlier words echoed, and yeah, Evan really was a lucky man.

He finally knew it. He just needed to figure out what to do about it.

Valentine's Day dawned with a dim, watery sort of light that told Gray it was cloudy outside, or at least overcast. Chances were it would clear, once the sun had a chance to warm up the haze, but it didn't much matter.

Valentine's. A day for lovers. And Gray's... well, not lover in the technical sense, but exactly that as far as his heart was concerned, was on the other side of the country.

Gray grunted to himself, rolled over in his bed, then pulled the covers up over his head. He almost never slept in, but fuck it, he was the boss and if he wanted to hide for a little while, that was his right, damn it.

He slipped into a light doze, hearing the muted sounds of the ranch waking up, dogs snuffling, hooves slapping dirt, all of it muffled by the snow that had started falling the night before.

He heard the sound of an engine, probably Sara's pickup truck, moving slowly over gravel, and she was likely sneaking back from Jim Keane's place, trying to be subtle about it. Gray still didn't get that whole relationship, but Jim had come by to share Christmas dinner with Gray, Sara, and the hands, and Gray couldn't say that Sara and Jim were entirely unsuited. It was a reasonable match, in any case, assuming it went that far.

He wrapped himself more fully in the pile of blankets and drifted deeper, only fuzzily aware of anything around him, most of his sleepy attention wrapped up in imagining Evan lying, all sleep-warm and mussed, in the big bed Gray had only seen the once.

He dreamed, in his three-quarters-under state, that he was there in Hartford, that he'd spent the night holding his man, touching him. He pictured Evan slipping into that bed after visiting the bathroom. The bed dipping, covers lifting to let in cool air before closing around them both... Evan's hands reaching for him, pulling Gray close.

Gray mumbled happily, enjoying the illusion, just loving the sensation of Evan's skin, so hot and smooth against his back, Evan's cock naked and hard, touching him just as much as the soft lips that pressed against his shoulder.

Lord, it was a beautiful dream. Perfect and lazy and not even slightly rushed.

Evan's hands moved on him, one rubbing small circles on Gray's chest, the other sliding down, cupping his hardening cock, his balls. Small, sucking kisses were placed along his neck while Evan tasted his skin. That prick slid slow and easy along his spine, painting Gray's skin with small streaks of wetness, and Evan's voice was right there in his ear, warm breath gusting softly, stirring Gray's hair.

"Happy Valentine's Day, baby," Evan murmured and Gray shivered. Lord. Baby. Yeah. He could handle that from Evan. "You planning to sleep all day?"

Lord, Lord. "Yeah," Gray whispered, pushing back into the warmth of Evan, then forward into Evan's touch, Evan's hands. "Don't want to wake up, honey. Keep you right here. Likin' this dream just fine..."

There was a chuckle, so quiet and pleased that Gray wished it were real. "So it would be okay if this wasn't a dream, then. Good." Teeth nipped hard at his ear lobe, so sudden and unexpected that Gray yelped, his eyes opening wide.

Evan was still there. Lord, Evan truly was, pressed along Gray's back, holding him. Evan was hard against Gray's skin, hands just like Gray had imagined, and "You... you're here. You're really here."

It wasn't a question, but Gray didn't have a single problem with the way Evan answered. He couldn't even begin to complain about being pulled onto his back or the way Evan moved over him, the man's weight just right.

"I'm here," Evan said with a little smile that seemed slightly shaky. "I... I should have told you I was coming, but I guess I was scared. I really just couldn't stay away any more, Gray. I had to come."

That scared part didn't make a single damned bit of sense, but Gray wasn't willing to ask about it, not then. Instead, he slid his hands up Evan's sides, then down the man's long, lean back and pulled him down more firmly.

"You ain't come yet, honey," Gray whispered, "but I'm thinkin' we can take care of that right soon." And oh, Evan's mouth. He'd had whole dreams just about that mouth. This time, though, Gray knew he was awake.

Hell, he might just never sleep again.

God, it was good. So good to be inside Gray. To feel that gel-slick hole tight around him and look down into the man's aqua eyes; to see them nearly black with want. "So right," Evan whispered, body already shaking, wanting nothing more than to spill hard and deep.

"Fuck." Gray's voice was strained, like he was just as close and just as reluctant to let things end. "Ev. Honey. Just... Lord. That's..."

Yes. God, Evan understood exactly what Gray meant. He was right there with Gray, somehow. "Y-yeah," he agreed, pulling back as slowly as he could stand before pressing deep again, letting his own weight push him to flush once more. God, it had been years.

It had been years since the last time Evan was inside anyone, because between the cancer and the chemo and the feeling sick, Bill hadn't wanted, for the most part. The times when Bill had, he'd needed to top, and Evan hadn't had any problem with that. Hell, he'd loved having Bill inside him, loved letting his man take control of that much when the rest of Bill's world -- even Bill's own body -- had been so uncontrollable.

What he was doing with Gray wasn't about that, though. It was about need and want and, God, yes, love, though neither of them had said so. Evan figured they didn't have to, not yet. It was there, though. It had started that first day they'd met, somehow, and grown stronger with every call, every kiss.

"Ev," Gray moaned, body shifting beneath him, rocking up, Gray's legs bent high, knees clutching Evan's ribs. "Come on, honey. Need... with me, Evan. Lord, with me!"

He'd barely been holding on by a thread, barely been managing to keep the orgasm coiled tight in his gut. But those words... oh, they robbed Evan of even that tenuous bit of restraint.

"Yes," Evan breathed, the word emerging on a shuddering sigh. "Yes," he said again as he pulled back once more, eyes locked with Gray's. "Now, baby."

Gray's cry was muffled against his shoulder, though Evan heard his own filling the room. It burst from his lips as his hips shot forward, balls slapping Gray's skin as they pulsed, Evan spending himself roughly, deep within Gray's tight heat.

A second passed, maybe, and the slickness Evan had spilled was matched by Gray's seed, wet and hot between them, and Evan felt the sob building in his chest. He felt it and couldn't hold it.

It flew from him, and Gray seemed to be expecting it because that mouth, so soft and full, was there to swallow it, to take it in and transform it into a deep moan. Gray's hands were on him still, holding, stroking, touching Evan just right.

"It's okay, honey," Gray murmured against his lips and Evan swallowed hard. He nodded and pulled back to meet wide, wondering eyes. "It's okay, Ev."

Evan smiled, eyes damp as he pulled himself slowly from Gray's body, a small trickle of fluid emerging along with his prick. "I know," he answered, just as quietly. "I know, Gray. And it is. Will be, I think." He laughed softly, but no less sincerely for the low volume. "I think we're going to be fine."

They'd have to talk, Evan knew, figure out how to work things with the house in Hartford and the ranch and Evan's studio... and at some point they would need to get the stained glass window out of the rental truck Evan had driven from Connecticut, but that was just details.

They would work it out. They had to. Because Troy was right, Evan was one lucky son of a bitch. Gray was right, too. Bill would be happy for him, so Evan for damned sure needed to be happy for himself.

It might be difficult, right at first. Evan knew that. There was still a part of him that thought it was all too fast, too soon, but lying there in the pale light with Gray in his arms, both of them sated, Evan wanted to believe they would be fine.

"I still miss you, Billy-boy," Evan murmured, one hand stroking the grass that was green again, even in the early morning light. "I think a part of me always will. But I'm happy, Bill. I... God, it feels strange to be saying this to you. It's only been a year, but... I'm happy. I love him. Gray. Your nephew." Evan laughed quietly. "Maybe I just have a thing for you Latham men, huh?"

Evan's eyes closed and he listened, hearing nothing but the soft susurrrus of the surprisingly gentle breeze on grass and the leaves of the nearby tree. "I'm not selling the house. I know everyone thinks I'm going to, but I can't. It's still ours, deep down inside. And... Gray understands. He gets how I can love him but still love you, too. So I guess that's it, Billy-boy. I'll

still come to see you when we're in town, but it might not be as often. I really do love you, but I have to go on, right? And you'll always be a part of me."

He sat there a while longer, a sense of peace settling over him, his small, wistful smile growing slowly. "I'm going to go now, Bill. I... I hope you're as happy wherever you are as I am, here."

The drive back to the house felt both long and short, but that was fine. He was finally settled, on the inside. He knew where he needed to be.

Evan parked in the driveway and made his way inside, then up to the guest room. It hadn't felt right to sleep with Gray in the room that had once been his own and Bill's, not when they'd arrived the night before, not without making his peace with Bill first.

He undressed without any real haste, then slipped under the covers and reached for Gray, and Gray rolled to him without any hesitation, pressing against Evan's body with a quiet murmur that sounded happy. Content.

They had their whole lives ahead of them, Evan knew, and for whatever reason, he felt like Bill approved.

He and Gray would do their best to balance things between them, with the ranch and Evan's art. They'd talked about it, after all, and Evan was pretty sure they would manage and would be happy, no matter how hard they had to work at it. They wanted the same things, really: a life together, love, companionship and passion. Evan was almost entirely certain that they would be fine.

Then Gray shifted, one whisker-rough jaw brushing Evan's shoulder. The light from outside the window grew brighter, becoming a strong lemon yellow as the sun rose more fully, and Evan was sure of it. They really would be fine. No question.

Making Lemonade: Lemon Yellow

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