



Loose Id

I'LL
BE
HOME
FOR
CHRISTMAS

ADRIANNA DANE

I'll Be Home for Christmas

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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Multicultural Contemporary Western

Destrie Two Rivers and Benedict Webster—an orphaned half-breed and a wealthy rancher's son. Men who were boyhood best friends, turned secret lovers when they were eighteen. And then one nightmarish night they are discovered and Destrie almost dies as a result.

Now, eight years later, just before Christmas, Destrie, an Army sniper, returns to Wyoming on leave to attend the funeral of his foster father. Both men have changed and the distance between them seems wider than the Continental Divide with no way to breach the chasm. Just as the creek where they first made love runs powerful and constant, Destrie and Benedict's passion for each other still burns undeniably deep and everlasting. Re-igniting their unquenchable desire could prove fatal. Until the heavy guilt and shocking secrets of the past are revealed, will either of these men ever find their way home?

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices.*

Chapter One

An ice-cold wind blasted through the open doorway as a man entered the bar. Benedict's heart seemed to stop beating for a split second and then sped up as a burst of adrenaline shot through him when he recognized the tall, lean figure standing near the doorway. He almost blacked out and as an afterthought remembered to breathe. He drew in oxygen and then slowly released it in an attempt to steady his nerves. And then another. Benedict's vision cleared. He looked again at the stranger who had entered the bar. He wasn't mistaken.

Destrie was back.

Benedict surmised it wasn't exactly the best sort of homecoming a man fighting for his country should expect. Not that Destrie had ever really thought of Coyote Forks as home. He'd returned for his foster dad's funeral, not for any sort of holiday celebration. And as prepared as Benedict thought he was to see his ex-lover after all these years, this wasn't what he'd imagined. He wasn't prepared. Not by a long shot.

Nobody in this town was gonna say, *Welcome home, Destrie*. Not a one of them would offer a handshake or buy him a drink. By the ice-cold expression on Destrie's face, he sure as hell didn't expect a warm homecoming from this crowd. His expression said, *Fuck you all. Just try to run me out this time*.

The decibel of noise in the bar of Friday-night cowboy rowdiness diminished significantly, coming more in line with a dead man's wake than a soldier's homecoming, when Destrie Two Rivers walked through the door. The echo of laughter was strangled by the deafening, shocked silence of a morgue. He was a ghost from the past, and not one this crowd wanted rising from the dead.

Benedict swallowed a long gulp of cold draft from his glass and then leaned back against the roughened beam in a corner on the other side of the room. His gaze raked over Destrie. From

beneath the broad brim of the hat shading his expression, Benedict studied the man, the room, the ugly mob forming adjacent to him on the other side of the crowded, smoke-filled room.

The surly group hovered close together, like a bunch of cows huddled under a tree braced for a storm, with Benedict's brother, Jake, being the tree at its nucleus. They represented the worst, the rowdiest, of Coyote Forks. And tonight they were Friday-night drunk. Destrie's arrival would only stoke the already-simmering blaze that, at full blast, was likely to erupt into an all-out bloody barroom brawl.

Benedict was no longer the eighteen-year-old cub he'd been when Destrie left town. He'd learned a lot in eight years. The wolf inside him unfurled, readying to attack at the least spark of full-out trouble. He was no longer naive to the brutality that lurked beneath the surface of his hometown. And this time, he might go down, but he'd be taking a few of Jake's cronies with him. He turned his attention from Jake's mongrel pack to look at Destrie. There was controlled challenge in those coal black eyes.

But then, there had been no fear there when Jake and his buddies descended on them like a pack of ravenous coyotes eight years ago. Benedict narrowed his gaze. From this distance he couldn't spot the scar on Destrie's face. Had it faded?

He heard the whispered mumblings crest over the room like the distant rumble of thunder presaging a storm.

But the desire building inside Benedict was even stronger. He still felt that familiar surge of lust when Destrie walked into a room. It was something he hadn't experienced in a long time. And he was still just as tongue-tied as the first time they'd fucked. The high cheekbones were just as strongly pronounced as Benedict remembered. Destrie had filled out some, and the striped black-and-white shirt he wore stretched across shoulders broader than Benedict recalled. Benedict's gaze drifted downward, to the polished silver and turquoise belt buckle that winked back at him. He remembered the buckle. Destrie had won it at the first rodeo they'd ever ridden in. That bronc was one neither of them would ever forget. He closed his eyes, afraid to face the memory that struggled for freedom inside his head.

It was riding that high, feeling that energy, that had them down by the river with a six-pack of Bud after the rodeo. Shucking clothes at midnight in the sweltering Wyoming late-summer heat.

It was the water that had made it so easy. Destrie's cock had slid inside Benedict's hole so smooth. Made it feel so damn good. His big hand with those long fingers wrapped around Benedict's dick as Destrie fucked him. The only sounds that night had been the ripple of waves against the sandy bank, the bullfrogs croaking, the chirp of crickets, the lone cry of a coyote in the distance. And the groans of pleasure that had erupted from his throat as Destrie had ridden him.

With a few deep breaths to calm himself, he opened his eyes and looked at Destrie across the crowded bar. Destrie's thick black hair no longer flowed wildly past his shoulders, trailing down his back, a defiant badge of his lost Native American heritage. It was now buzzed to U. S. Army-regulation length, and his stance was controlled at ease, hands clasped behind his back as he studied the room. The brown leather jacket only added to the breadth of the half-breed. There was a lethal alertness to the mature man, one Benedict didn't think even Jake and his friends would want to take on. Not here in front of so many witnesses, at any rate.

No, Jake and his friends liked to do their damage under cover of darkness, when no one was around to witness the havoc they wreaked. But everyone in Coyote Forks knew what had happened eight years ago; it was just no one talked about it. No one dared.

Benedict slapped his glass down on the table, swung around, and headed toward the back door. He shoved at the cold metal bar and stepped out into the frigid, subzero December night. He didn't feel the freezing air slice across his face. It helped to cool the hungry, blazing fire that whipped at his body as memory surged through him like a bloated river in flood season. The icy slap across his cheeks yanked him back to the present. When Destrie had left, it had ripped a piece of his heart right out.

He didn't want to remember. He'd put that part of his life behind him. He'd had to in order to survive. The Webster Ranch was the biggest around, his heritage—well, his and Jake's. It was all Benedict knew.

He gripped the railing of the back porch and sucked in the frigid night air, letting it freeze his lungs. But his raging erection refused to abate.

He was a damned fool. He had to have known this would happen. Especially once he knew that Laine Carson had contacted her foster son. Maybe he'd expected Destrie would ignore it or

that the letter wouldn't find its way into the hands of Benedict's ex-lover in time for him to return home.

Too many memories surged inside his head, going round and round like a Cat 4 cyclone still picking up speed. He fought to rein in his emotions. But the passionate memories were like that ornery black rogue stallion he and Destrie had tried to break—unyielding, obstinate...and proud to the end. They had both been too young to know better back then. Some wild things were born to run free.

He heard the creak of the door opening behind him. He braced himself for the confrontation he knew he couldn't avoid.

Destrie had known Benedict was in the room when he entered the bar. He hadn't needed to see him to be aware of his presence.

He recognized other faces as well. Benedict's brother, Jake, was there, along with the other delinquents the rough redneck hung around with.

Years of military sniper training had honed a fine edge to Destrie's primal survival instincts. He could smell danger; he was one of the best at reconnaissance, tracking prey. And he could sight his target with the precision of a hawk's eye.

It was the rules of the engagement that sometimes turned murky, especially in the last year or so. Identify the enemy, determine hostile intent, and take them out.

Days ago he'd been in the hot, sweltering climate of Iraq, on edge, alert, and an M14 glued to his side.

He flexed his fingers.

Stand down, soldier. This wasn't Iraq, but he still felt the hostility, focused mainly from the small group on the other side of the bar. Clearly identifiable.

They were all there in that smoky, crowded room that stank of stale beer, cigar smoke, and cowboy sweat. He remembered every last one of them. And he knew the exact location of the man at the back of the bar, standing in the shadows, watching Destrie.

His gut said Jake and his ilk wouldn't challenge him. No, this group was made up of cowards who only went after those weaker than themselves. No coup in that.

Oh, the intent was there, but something held them back. It was a long ten minutes before the tension eased and the noise level slowly surged once again. Only then did Destrie walk to the bar and order a draft.

Destrie had put off returning to Coyote Forks, knowing he'd be facing things from his past he wasn't ready to deal with. His foster father's death had changed everything. It had left him with no choice but to return.

Destrie nursed the beer. He spoke with no one. He felt the hostility. Eyes on the mirror behind the bar, he was aware of all movement around him. Sideways glances that turned toward him and then slid away. If he'd been wearing his knife, he knew the sharp edge could have cut through the fabric of the hate and intolerance surrounding him in this room. Their antagonism was twofold—he was Indian, and he was gay. And he was to blame for corrupting one of their own. And that would never change.

And it showed how little they understood one of their own. And by the very fact that Benedict stayed here, how little Benedict understood himself.

Destrie finished off the beer and set the glass back down on the polished, scarred wood of the bar. He knew exactly when Benedict had walked out the back door. He had marked it, and now he felt it was time. The music was loud, a Toby Keith song. He remembered seeing the performer when he was on tour overseas. Some damn good music. The smoke thickened; the noise crescendoed. His attention was elsewhere as he slowly wended his way through the crowd to the back door and walked out into the cold December night.

His honed sense of self-preservation had him instinctively scoping out the area for vulnerabilities the moment he stepped outside. A thin veneer of pristine white covered the porch landing. Exits from both sides. The wood was old, easily broken. The porch floor firm enough but still decaying in spots. The weathered, spaced boards creaked as he walked to the railing, maintaining a distance between himself and the cowboy already standing there.

Then Benedict turned his head to look at Destrie. His expression was veiled beneath the brim of his hat.

“Still like 'em big and broad I see,” Destrie remarked.

He saw the tension ripple across the man's shoulder and when Benedict's jaw tightened.

Destrie nodded toward Benedict's hat. "I was talking about your hat, cowboy, not your—" His gaze shifted downward to the obvious bulge in the man's jeans.

Benedict swung away, his big hands wrapped around the snow-covered handrail. Destrie saw the knuckles whiten with the stranglehold grip.

"Why'd you come out here, Destrie? There'll be talk. It'll all start up again." His voice had deepened since Destrie last saw him. Right now it seemed tinged with tension, tight and raspy.

"Been a long time, Benedict. Glad to see you too."

He saw Benedict's shoulders fold inward as he leaned heavily against the rail.

"That's not what I mean, and you know it. This town has a long memory. It never forgets. Do you want them coming after you again? Especially now?"

"I can take care of myself. They're nothing compared to what I've seen." *What I've done*, he almost added but didn't. There were things a man didn't talk about. Sure as hell not to civilians.

The silence stretched between them. Long and thick and tense.

"I'm sorry about Ray," Benedict said, his words soft, barely above a whisper. If Destrie hadn't been tuned intently to the man standing next to him, he might have missed them.

"Thanks. Laine's taken it hard. They just moved into town last year. They were only getting settled when the heart attack took him."

"Yeah. He went to the doctor last week. New guy, just came to town."

"I know. I heard Doc Logan passed last year. Laine wrote me; she thought I'd want to know."

Destrie was afraid the old wooden rail would snap beneath Benedict's grip. It was Doc Logan who had patched up Benedict and Destrie after the incident eight years ago. It was Benedict who had hauled Destrie on foot, slung over his shoulder, limping heavily after the beating, the long two miles to Doc's house.

Destrie rubbed at the raw memento on the side of his face. He'd never forget the tight, demonic smile on Jake's face as he cut into Destrie's flesh as three of Jake's *friends* held him down. Now a jagged, shiny pink line of scar tissue that arced from the corner of his eye down to

his chin kept the occasion fresh. He remembered when it had flowed freely with his blood, covering both him and Benedict. He remembered the smell—the pain.

It had turned into his lucky charm over the years, reminding him to keep his edge, never let his guard down. It kept his rage fresh and new. In his profession, that reminder had paid off more than a time or two.

He also remembered the late-night visit from Benedict's father while he was healing at Doc's place. It was that visit that had sent him out of Coyote Forks eight years earlier. He'd escaped all of them by joining the Army. He appeased the raging spirit inside him by joining his battalion's sniper unit. For a lot of years it had worked—until recently. Until now. Because he knew this time he had no excuse for not returning to Coyote Forks. And he knew it would mean trouble.

All the angry memories, all the pent-up yearning, came flooding back. He turned to look at Benedict, and suddenly, unable to help himself, he surged forward. Control be damned. He peeled Benedict's fingers from the rail, spun him around, and fastened his mouth to his ex-lover's hard lips.

All the heat was still there, every bit as fierce and deep as it had once been. Destrie fastened his hands around Benedict's thickly muscled forearms and shoved the cowboy backward. Benedict stumbled down the two steps, almost falling, and his hat fell onto the ground, landing upside down in the snow. The two men practically danced a two-step backward through the snow-covered alley.

Destrie shoved him beneath an eave flat up against the hewn-log walls of the bar. The alley was winter silent. Hot, fast breaths clouded the air, frosty and vivid. He released Benedict's arms and shoved one hand down the front of Benedict's denim jeans, past the plain belt buckle, and inside the stiff fabric of his jeans, curling around the rigid erection imprisoned inside. He tasted Benedict's groan.

Destrie remembered it all, every moment of those combustible months when they were eighteen. When they were invincible and passionate and so, so needy for the touch of each other in every way there was to be taken. That same summer heat branded his palm as he gripped Benedict's dick.

He brushed a broad thumb over the flared head, sliding through the wetness of precum leaking from the slit.

“Benedict,” he whispered against the man's lips just before he covered them with his own mouth once again.

Benedict shot forward, grabbed onto Destrie's arms, and whirled him around. He forced Destrie back against the building and looked into his eyes.

An impression of pain creased Benedict's brow as he reached for Destrie's hand and carefully removed it from inside his pants.

“We can't do this. Not again. It doesn't matter how much we want it. It doesn't fucking matter. Jake and his crew will kill you if they find out.”

“But you still want me. You haven't changed.”

Benedict shut his eyes and leaned his forehead against Destrie's.

“You have no idea, man. No idea what it's been like. But I've learned to live with it. I can't do it again. I can't go back. You left, remember? I've learned to live with that. And I don't plan to let Jake finish the job he started. I can't have your death on my conscience. I won't let this happen.”

Destrie knew the cowboy was right. Benedict's home was here in Coyote Forks. Destrie would never make this bigoted hellhole his home. He was here for one reason and one reason only.

He dropped his hands and straightened. This was why he'd never dared return to Wyoming. Destrie had known the minute he set eyes on Benedict exactly what would happen. The situation was too damned combustible.

“You're right. I'll only be in town for a few days, until right after Christmas. Then I'm out of here.”

Benedict's expression tight, he nodded.

“Then we understand each other. No point in starting something neither of us intends to finish.” His hands dropped away from Destrie, and Destrie felt Benedict's withdrawal keenly. Suddenly the cold night air sliced through him. So different from the dry desert heat of the Middle East, where he had been just days ago.

He watched as Benedict turned, walked several paces, and then slowly bent forward to pick up his hat. He brushed it off and replaced it on his head.

“You've been visiting my mother. Why, Benedict?”

He saw the man stiffen, but Benedict didn't turn to acknowledge Destrie's question. He straightened his shoulders and with long strides veered around the porch and disappeared down the darkened alley.

Suddenly the scar on Destrie's face began to throb, mirroring the intensity of his hard, pulsing prick. He reached up and rubbed at it. This time back in Coyote Forks was going to ride him a lot harder than he'd expected. Than he'd hoped. He turned away and walked down the alley in the opposite direction.

The sooner he was out of this damned town, the better. For both of them.

Chapter Two

Benedict picked up his hat and brushed at a speck of dirt on the brim. He turned it slowly, eyeing it for cleanliness. Then he looked up and met his gaze in the mirror.

“This probably isn't a good idea,” he said to his reflection.

He eyed the brown suede jacket that he hadn't worn in probably two years. The pristine white-and-black-pinstriped shirt and black bolo necktie. His gaze swooped down to the brown leather belt and a glimpse of the brand-new blue jeans.

Yeah, he looked presentable. Slipping the hat on, he turned and headed for the door of his bedroom. Now was the real test—when he faced Jake at the kitchen table and told him he was taking the morning off to go to Ray Carson's funeral.

Benedict had thought long and hard about whether or not he should make an appearance at the funeral and stir up all the old memories, but in good conscience, he just couldn't stay away. It wasn't right.

It was late by ranch standards—just past nine. Most everyone would be out either checking for stray cows, mending fences, or dealing with the various other chores demanded of a thriving ranch. If he were lucky, he wouldn't even run into Jake.

He'd already been out dealing with work, up at five, out the door at six. Back to the house at eight. The days went fast out here. And then again, sometimes not so fast.

His boots echoed when they struck the polished oak steps as he made his way downstairs. He came to a halt in the doorway of the kitchen when he saw Jake standing near the coffeepot, pouring coffee into a thermos. He looked at Benedict, and his gaze narrowed.

“Where the hell do you think you're off to dressed like that? We've got work to do.”

“I dealt with the horses and handed out orders to the men this morning before you hardly rolled out of bed. Now I have business in town.”

His brother studied him for long moments. Something flickered in Jake's eyes, but Benedict couldn't quite put a name to it. He had never quite noticed before how rough his brother's appearance had become. Maybe it was because of the way the harsh winter daylight flooded the kitchen. Or maybe it was because Jake wasn't wearing his hat. Benedict watched him replace the cap on the thermos with shaking hands. He almost dropped the cap but quickly recovered.

He looked at Benedict with a narrowed, mean focus.

"You gave the men orders? Who the fuck do you think you are? I'm the one who gives orders around here. I need you here, not gallivanting into town. Them's *my* orders."

Benedict saw trouble brewing. He'd come to learn the signs with Jake—just as he'd learned to recognize the signs with his father. He'd not crossed his father, but Jake was another matter entirely. And he knew there was no way to avoid it. Jake was right—he was the boss when it came to giving orders to the crew; Benedict carried no weight on the Webster Ranch as far as his brother was concerned. Little did he realize how often the men came to Benedict behind Jake's back. Especially when Jake was falling-down drunk. The two brothers might own equal shares, but Jake was the eldest brother and Benedict for the most part deferred to him—at least in public. He didn't want trouble.

Today that was going to change.

"I'll only be gone for a couple of hours." He met Jake's angry gaze with his own determined look, his voice even. "But I am going."

Carefully Jake set the thermos on the counter, then turned to face Benedict squarely. His hands were tightly clenched into fists at his sides, stance wide.

"If you think you're going to take up with that Indian again, I'd be real careful if I were you. You aren't a stupid teenager. And you remember what happened the last time. A lot of land out here, lots of places for a body to disappear." His tone was low and threatening, and Benedict knew to steer clear unless he wanted a fight before he left.

For the first time in a long time, Benedict was not going to back down from Jake. For the first time in a long time, there was something to stand his ground about.

It was a rare occasion that Benedict outwardly challenged his brother. Nothing had ever seemed worth the fight. He straightened away from the door frame and glared back at Jake.

"I'm going to town." He took a step toward Jake. "You're right; I'm not eighteen. And you're right on the mark about the land—there are a lot of canyons out here a man might get lost and never get found. I'd remember that if I were you. Stay away from Destrie Two Rivers." Again Benedict saw something flicker in Jake's eyes, his expression belligerent—guilty—and then his gaze slid from Benedict's as he stepped back. That was a first.

It was maybe the first time he'd really thought about the differences between him and Jake. Jake was a head shorter than Benedict, stockier...meatier than Benedict. He was also slower. He tended not to use the brain God gave him before he used his fists.

Jake's mother had been Jacob Sr.'s first wife. She'd apparently died giving birth to Jake. Hence the old man's marriage to his second wife—Benedict's mother. A marriage that, in its own way, hadn't fared any better than the first. Benedict had often wondered whether it had been the hardness of the man or the number of mistresses that had passed through his life that had his mother leaving when Benedict was four.

Jake was cut straight from their father in looks and temperament; Benedict was more like his mother's side of the family, yet with a keen sense for business. A level of confidence shot through Benedict that he hadn't been aware of before. He hated to admit it, but his brother was just a damned bully. With both of them raised by the same man, how they'd come out so differently, he had no idea. But the truth of the matter was that they were very different. Benedict veered around his brother and headed to the back door.

"I'll talk to you later, Jake." He swung open the screen door and stepped outside.

"You remember what I said, damn you. You don't want to be responsible for what will happen if you don't do what I tell you. Two Rivers don't belong here."

Benedict ignored his brother's rants. He walked over to the Chevy truck, got in, and tore away from the ranch house.

It was a good thing Destrie wasn't going to be in town for more than a few days. Even with that length of time things could get ugly. He needed this one last glimpse of Destrie. Just one more time. He'd watch Destrie's back, make sure nothing happened to him while he was here. Benedict knew he couldn't trust his brother farther than he could spit. And he wasn't going to chance a repeat of the performance eight years before. This time he'd be ready. And he'd meant

every last word he'd said to Jake. He'd do whatever he had to in order to protect the man he couldn't have.

* * * * *

Laine's thin, frail arm was hooked through Destrie's as they sat through the services for Ray. Destrie had always respected the couple who took him in after the accident that had killed his mother. But he'd never really thought of them as "Mom and Dad." He'd thought of them as just Laine and Ray.

They had remained childless. Both of them had always treated Destrie as their own—whether it came to praise or discipline. And he knew he hadn't made it all that easy for them.

But Ray had always kept his head, had always been patient with him. An even-tempered man, sort of laid-back. Whether it was teaching Destrie how to lasso or teaching him how to drive the truck out in the backfield.

Destrie found himself smiling as he remembered the time he'd almost tipped the truck over with a particularly sharp turn that landed the wheel in a prairie-dog hole. Ray had ended up with a bloody nose when his head had snapped back against the window of the truck. A string of blue invectives uttered from his mouth such as Destrie had never heard from him before.

Sadness welled through Destrie. He would miss Ray. There were some good memories of this place, even if he had forgotten them. He placed a hand over Laine's fingers that were curled into the fabric of his jacket. He felt her fragility. She had been devoted to Ray, and something told Destrie she might not last much longer without her man. Some people were like that.

Suddenly he felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Someone had him in his or her sights. Over the years he'd become vigilantly attuned to the burning sensation.

He tried to home in on this one. It wasn't hate that burned his neck. That was a scorch he'd felt more than once. No, this was different. It was molten; it was intense. He'd felt it before. Even without looking, he recognized the sensation. He didn't dare turn around to confirm his suspicions.

Benedict Webster. After the other night at the bar, Destrie hadn't figured he'd show up for the funeral. The emotions that night had taken Destrie unexpectedly. He hadn't anticipated after all these years to still feel the intensity of desire that had hit him upon his return to the town.

“Go with God, Ray Carson. You will be missed.” Destrie realized that Pastor Lark was ending the memorial service.

Destrie blinked, his mind returning to the minister at the small, nondenominational church his foster parents always attended.

Laine looked up at Destrie as people started to get up and leave the church. Her grip tightened on his arm.

“You’ll take care of him the way he wanted, Destrie.”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“He loved going fishing there. He said he used to go there as a boy with his pa.”

Coyote Forks Creek. It formed a border along the Webster spread. The town had been named after it. It was also where Ray had taken both Destrie and Benedict fishing.

And where Destrie and Benedict had first...

“I’ll do right by him, Laine. Don’t worry.”

She smiled at him. “He always knew you’d do well. He was so proud of you.”

Destrie had to wonder. They’d never spoken of what sent him out of town so quickly. They’d never come right out to ask about the bruises or the wound on his face that Doc Logan had stitched up. He had a feeling they knew, and it made him respect his foster parents all the more because they hadn’t judged him. And they had known why he up and joined the Army.

If only the rest of the town had bothered to have a wit of caring in their bones, there might actually be some hope for the town. But none of them had.

There was no more time for conversation as people began to file by, offering their condolences. Laine remained seated, but Destrie stood and shook hands with the folks who the Carsons had considered friends.

Two people down, he saw Benedict. Destrie had been right. A rush of feeling washing over him as he saw the tall man, a good head above the couple in front of him. Respectfully waiting his turn. His gaze moved from Laine and turned to Destrie.

So much emotion reflected in his eyes. Sadness, remembrance, empathy. And something more. God, if only things had been different. If only this town hadn’t been so unforgiving.

As Destrie watched, Benedict leaned down to brush a kiss against Laine’s cheek.

"Gonna miss him, Laine. I'm sorry. You need anything, you just call me, you hear?"

She smiled and reached up to pat his cheek. "You're a good boy, Benedict Webster." She turned to look at Destrie. "He always comes by to make sure we're okay. Once that arthritis set in with Ray, Benedict has been stopping by at least once a week to help out around the place. He's been a godsend."

Benedict straightened and turned to Destrie. His face was ruddy, either from being bent over or from embarrassment. Destrie wasn't quite certain which.

He seemed hesitant but then held out his hand, and Destrie took it. The grip was warm and strong. Destrie felt the hard calluses of a working cowboy in the grip. Rope and rawhide. He remembered the rodeo. He remembered the first ride—both the bronc...and later, Benedict.

This wasn't the place or the time to be remembering. But he saw in Benedict's look a bit of those same memories.

"Thanks for taking care of them."

"No problem. They've been good friends."

So much unspoken. So much they dared not express.

Benedict released Destrie's hand and stepped back. Hat in hand, Destrie saw Benedict twist the wide brim in his grip, a subtle yet sure sign of his agitation. His eyes on Destrie burned, brimming with feeling. A tense moment locked them together. Destrie could almost feel Benedict's arms wrapped around him, gathering him close, man to man.

Destrie wanted to rage at the futility of it. What he wanted would never happen. Not with this man; not in this town.

Suddenly Benedict whirled away and Destrie watched him stalk down the aisle. He stopped and shoved his hat on his head, set his shoulders, and strode from the church.

Destrie felt an ache spread through him. Damn the man. Destrie knew Benedict still felt something for him. Damned hardheaded cowboy. But the pull of this town, of generations of Websters, was a hell of a lot stronger hold than what Destrie could ever have.

Destrie shoved away the longing for something he should know better than to want. It was never gonna happen, no matter how much he might want it to.

“Destrie?” Laine reached for his hand. “This is Mary McBlaine. You remember Mary, don't you?”

Destrie tried to refocus his attention. He pasted a polite smile on his face. “Yes, ma'am, I remember. We were in high school together. You've grown up real pretty, Mary.” Mary's father owned the McBlaine spread, not quite as large as the Webster place, but still a fair size. It bordered the other side of Coyote Forks Creek. Laine and Ray had found work there shortly after Destrie left town. Laine had written him how much she and Ray liked the McBlaines. It had eased Destrie's mind to know they were with good people. It gave him some flicker of hope for the town knowing that.

Benedict was a man Destrie couldn't have, and here was a woman who looked at him as though she'd have no problem offering him exactly what he wanted. Or what she thought he wanted.

Unfortunately there was only one person in this town who Destrie wanted in that way. And he was never going to have him.

Thank goodness only a few more days and he would be out of here. If it weren't for Laine, he'd never come back. But at least he could get some respite before facing this place again.

Just one last duty to perform and he could leave.

For now.

Chapter Three

It was bitter cold. Another ice storm brewing. Benedict pulled the collar of his shearling jacket up around his neck. He should go back to the ranch. He'd been out here for hours; there were no more strays out this way as far as he could see. Besides, it was almost five o'clock and getting dark. Time to head back to the house.

He should have headed in earlier. Jake had a big party planned. Christmas Eve bash. Rowdy friends, sexy women, and free-flowing champagne and beer. What a combination. But it had always been a Webster tradition. Half the town showed up at this shindig. It would probably be well into January before Benedict saw even a glimpse of soberness in his brother. He'd tried to talk Jake into getting help more than once, with no success. The man was going to drink himself into an early grave.

Benedict nudged his horse up to the top of the ridge overlooking the ice-encrusted creek.

It was the curl of smoke rising into the cold air that caught his eye. The tent itself, dark against a snowy land, almost disappeared into the landscape. He spotted the battered black Jeep Cherokee that he belonged to the Carsons, and he knew exactly who was down there.

Benedict forgot the heifer he was searching for. He forgot everything he should have remembered as he turned his horse down the rise toward where the tent had been erected next to the river, which was, for now, mostly frozen over.

The windchill was bitter as he pulled on the reins and Rogan came to a halt. He could hear the sound of the flute coming from inside the tent. The sound of it fueled more memories. He recalled the beautiful music that Destrie had often played in the past with the flute he'd made himself. He wondered if it was the same flute made from a hollowed-out cedar branch that he'd fashioned so long ago when they'd been on a camping trip together. Benedict remembered that weekend vividly. The tune Destrie now played wasn't a melody he recognized.

Benedict knew he shouldn't have come down here. But it was Christmas Eve, and the thought of going back to the ranch house knowing his brother and his rowdy friends would make a mockery of the holiday—He couldn't bring himself to return there.

Here out on the Wyoming landscape where the night was silent and still—this was why he stayed. The open range called to his heart and soul in ways even his brother would never understand. It wasn't the ranch house; it wasn't the property. It wasn't the money, and it wasn't Jake or family that kept him here. He'd thought it would be enough. It at least gave him some solace when things became too tough. He thought he'd come to terms with his decisions, both good and bad. But with Destrie's return, he found himself questioning everything all over again.

If he stayed, if he went inside that tent, what was he saying? Could he just let Destrie disappear again? All the old feelings surged once more—the ones he'd thought he'd managed to resolve. The ones that made him love the man inside the tent despite everything and kept the memories alive inside his head.

He tied Rogan to a tree, protected from the wind, loosened the saddle, and then turned toward the dark, funnel-shaped tent. Taking a deep breath, he pulled off a glove and then lifted back the thick flap. A blast of heat struck him from inside the tent. He could smell the scent of burning cedar and sage as he stepped inside.

Considering the subzero weather outside, the temperature inside the tent seemed decidedly sweltering. The small flame flickered as a gust of wind followed him inside. Quickly he closed the flap to keep out the frigid air.

As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw the man sitting on the other side of the fire. Flute lying across naked thighs. His bare skin slick and shiny.

Benedict slipped off his hat and ran a hand through his short blond hair.

“Come in,” Destrie said in a low tone. “You might want to shed some of those clothes if you're going to stay.”

Benedict wasn't quite certain what to say or to do. The man was a chameleon. So different now from the trained predator at the bar the other night, or the stoic hovering protector standing next to Laine at the funeral service.

This man sitting before him was more spirit and bronzed fire, fashioned from the elements of nature. Dark, taut flesh held an undeniable aura of appeal that Benedict found very hard to

resist. The scent from the fire wafted into the air, fragrant and welcoming. Making a decision, Benedict tossed his hat into the corner. He pulled off his gloves and dropped them next to the discarded hat. As he unbuttoned his heavy jacket, he studied the man on the other side of the fire-bright, glowing orange coals. Destrie stared back.

His body was more toned, more mature, since the last time Benedict had seen him naked. Tight muscles defined every inch of him. He sat still as a statue, legs crossed, in front of the fire, cock hard and tempting.

Benedict was slightly shocked to see the shaved, bare skin. Not a speck of the curly black hair he remembered. The look intrigued him. Benedict just managed to keep his thoughts in check. His own cock was hard as rock at the direction his thoughts were taking him.

Benedict dropped his coat next to his hat, on top of the gloves. He cleared his throat.

"I didn't expect to find you here."

Destrie emitted a snort. "No, sir, don't expect you did." He picked up a small beige clay pot sitting next to him. "Ray wanted his ashes dispersed over the river." He swept an arm out. "The ritual is for me, I guess. I wanted to do it right. His memory deserves to be honored."

Benedict sat down and removed his boots and then his socks. There was something about the way everything was set out in the tent, the blankets, the fire, and the sparsity of the small area.

Destrie's nakedness. The flute lying across his ropy, muscled thighs. The shadows from the fire that flickered over him, light and dark texture.

He tossed his boots and socks to the side.

"It's Christmas Eve," Benedict said. "I'm surprised you're doing this now. That you're not home with Laine tonight."

"She's spending the evening over at the McBlaine place. Mary stopped by to pick her up. We'll have tomorrow together. Before I leave."

Benedict was surprised. "I thought you'd be here until New Year's at any rate."

Destrie shook his head. "No. I'm needed...overseas. I can't stay more than a few days. I'm lucky they let me remain here this long."

Benedict started to rise to his feet. Destrie's dark eyes followed his movements. Benedict's body felt tight and hot, and it wasn't strictly from the hot bed of coals separating them.

"The rest, Ben. I may not be able to touch you, but let me see you. At least this once. Something to remember."

He knew he shouldn't do it, but again, he couldn't help it and found himself unbuttoning his shirt. Destrie lifted the flute to his lips and watched Benedict remove the rest of his clothing. The music wafted over Benedict, quieting something deep inside, as it always had done. As always, it threaded through him, warming him all the way to his core. It was insubstantial and almost ethereal as the sound lifted into the air. He hadn't realized until now how much he had missed Destrie's music. It was like the touch of an animal whisperer reaching the spirit deep inside. Some sort of earthy magic that carried peace and quiet joy.

He remembered when Destrie had tried to teach him how to play the flute. But it was Destrie who had the magic fingers and the talent for creating beautiful things. Not Benedict.

Benedict's hands were made for branding, for lassoing, for holding on tight in order to break a horse. And he had a nose for sifting out lost cows.

But for him, right now, this tent and what it contained were all that mattered. Time, people, and places beyond this moment ceased to exist.

Clothes stripped off, he stepped closer to the bed of glowing coals and dropped down cross-legged onto the blue blanket that was spread there. It was almost as if Destrie had expected him. Or had expected someone. Destrie stopped playing and lowered the instrument to rest across his thighs.

"I knew something was missing," he said quietly. "I prepared, but I didn't know why or how. Or who. Now I know what it was." He hesitated for a minute before continuing. "We should remember Ray; he liked you a lot, Benedict."

A lump formed in Benedict's throat. He nodded. "Ray was a good man. He always treated me like a son."

Destrie smiled. "Remember that time he caught us with the truck out in the backfield? After he'd told us not to take it out?"

Benedict chuckled. "I thought we were going to die for sure."

Benedict saw the twinkle in Destrie's eyes. "It was that night when we were fifteen that I remember calling out to the spirits to protect us." His look darkened if that was at all possible. "To protect you, Benedict."

Benedict shuddered at the intensity of that look. He remembered that night as though it had occurred just last week. "Yeah, well, it was your idea to build the ramp and see if we could make it across the creek. You always were the hell-raiser."

Destrie smiled, just a small one. And his eyes lit up with a spark of humor. "Ray sure treated you like a son that night."

"I thought he was going to tear a strip off both our hides." Benedict laughed softly. He remembered how scared they'd both been when Ray had brought his own truck to a skidding halt, tearing up swirls of dust and pebbles. Even before the truck had come to a stop, the door had shot open and Ray had jumped out. He had stalked toward the two cowering adolescents like an avenging angel.

The battered old field truck had landed on its side on the other side of the creek. Luckily they'd been wearing seat belts, so neither of them had been hurt. Ray had set the two of them to mending barbed-wire fence for the next month over that little adventure.

"I'll miss him," Benedict said softly.

He looked up and realized Destrie was staring at him intently. He felt his own nakedness as he looked at the man seated across from him, still as a statue. He yearned to reach across the distance that separated them and to wrap his arms around him. The desire to do just that after the service for Ray had sent him flying out the door before he'd followed through and ending up causing them both a whole world of hurt. He seemed so distant, so much more controlled than he had been when he was eighteen.

"The military's changed you."

Destrie released a sigh, and his shoulders dropped. "Yeah, well, time does that too."

"Why'd you go and leave like that?" Benedict couldn't help asking. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Destrie shrugged. "Would it have changed anything? You couldn't leave; I couldn't stay. There was nothing that was going to alter that fact."

"But there might have been another way."

Destrie shook his head. “Not in this town.”

Benedict had to admit the truth. There was no easy answer for them. There was no answer, period. Destrie threw more fuel onto the fire, and Benedict stared into the burning embers.

Destrie had thought he was looking at an apparition brought on by his deep meditation when Benedict appeared at the opening of the tent. And then when he'd realized his cowboy was really here, he knew it was right that he share this night with the man he loved more than any other on earth. How many times had he lain awake in another tent thinking about the man now seated across from him? Too many. He couldn't help thanking the spirits for sending Benedict to him on this night of all nights.

“I've at least found some peace,” Destrie finally answered. “I accept who I am.” He reached up to stroke the beaded necklace around his neck. He saw Benedict's eyes follow his movement. Brief flashes of memory were about all that he had left of his real mother.

“You found out who he was—your real father?”

The necklace was all he had left linking him to his heritage. It was the only thing he had to go on. His mother had been Mexican. He was told the car had skidded into a guardrail on the interstate outside of Coyote Forks. His mother had been mortally injured. Her blood still tinged the necklace. He didn't remember how he'd gotten out of the seat—he'd only been five at the time and probably traumatized, but apparently he'd scrambled across to the front in order to reach her. The rescuers found him curled up next to the body of his mother, both of them covered in blood. He remembered the sight and smell of the blood. That was something that had been burned into his memory as well. One flash of memory was his mother, with shaky hands removing the necklace from around her neck and placing it around his.

“This was your father's, Destrie,” she had whispered. “It's all we have left of him. You'll be a good boy, whatever happens. Forgive me. I didn't mean to... I had to find a way to take care of you after your papa died. Promise me you'll remember us. Remember that we loved you.”

Tears had clogged his throat as he had made her the promise. And then she had died just as Destrie had heard the cry of the police siren—too late to save her.

In the next flash of memory he had been sitting in a cold, hard yellow chair at the hospital, hand gripping the necklace, feeling more alone than he could imagine. That was where he was

when the Carsons had come to take him home. He remembered Ray's strong arms as he'd picked Destrie up and hugged him close.

Yes, Ray had been a good man—a good surrogate father. But Destrie had always known there was more—some journey he had to make to discover who he really was.

He saw Benedict lean forward, his eyes dark, the shadow of firelight pouring over him as he studied the necklace around Destrie's neck. Then he looked at Destrie.

“Is that what this is all about?” He swept his arm in an arc, indicating the tent.

Destrie's hand dropped away from the black and red beaded necklace. “I met a man on my first tour overseas who knew the symbols on the necklace. It's Arapaho.”

Something flashed in Benedict's eyes. “Were you lovers?”

“It wasn't like that. He taught me many things. His grandfather lives on the reservation, and I went with him on leave a couple of times. I learned the things I've wanted to understand about myself.” Destrie looked at Benedict. “I had a vision, and I followed a man who became two and then merged into one.” He swept a hand across his eyes, and then he looked at Destrie. “I have a path to travel, and I know it's not going to lead me back here, to Coyote Forks. I've been a lot of places you don't ever want to be. Done things you can't ever imagine. I can't return.”

“You mean we can't go back.”

“Benedict, if I thought there was even the slightest chance that you and I could make it—be it here in this town or elsewhere, I would stay. But I don't think you have come to terms with the man you are. You're too busy trying to fit into the mold of the man your brother, and this town, wants you to be.”

There was a long, tense silence that broadened the chasm between them. Destrie knew they would never be able to reach common ground, and it was too painful for him to keep coming back to this place. Memories swamped him, both good and bad.

“You have no idea who I am,” Benedict said.

Destrie sighed. Finally he picked up the flute. Playing the music of his ancestors was sometimes the only thing that soothed him. He could fall into the music so easily.

It was a long time later that he set the flute aside. He threw more cedar onto the fire, and the fragrant, cleansing scent wafted into the air. It was time.

He picked up the pot of paint resting next to him. He began to apply the red to his face. It was true, he'd taken some of the traditions of his father's people and twisted them a bit to suit his own purposes. Ray wasn't Indian, but maybe Destrie was mourning both his fathers and not just one. And now it was time to put the past behind him, to stop mourning, for Ray, for his own mother, for the father he'd never known. It was time to step into the sun.

He had just finished one side of his face when a large, calloused hand rested over his, and he looked up in surprise to find Benedict sitting next to him.

"Let me," he whispered as he looked deeply into Destrie's eyes.

Destrie nodded. This would probably be the last time he would ever be with his first lover. It was Christmas Eve, and if there was one gift that Destrie would have ever asked for, he was sitting next to him right now. One last night to be with the lover he would never forget.

As Benedict moved closer and lifted a hand to Destrie's face, Destrie reached into the pot for more paint and stroked a hand down the side of Benedict's face. He left a long streak of red, vivid against his cheek. Benedict drew closer. Mouths crashed together in a burning kiss that spoke of long years of yearning for the unreachable.

Destrie fell back upon the blanket, the paint forgotten as Benedict spread himself over Destrie's body. His cock had come to full attention the moment Benedict had stepped into the tent, and now his stiff rod rubbed against Benedict's thick, hard presence.

So much time had passed, and the need went so deep. He could feel it in himself; he could feel it in Benedict. This was coming home. This moment, this time, and most of all, this man. He rolled, and Benedict was beneath him. He lifted up and looked down at the man spread so temptingly across the blanket.

Taut, mature, and rugged. Cowboy to his Indian. Yet they were one tribe, and no matter the distance, no matter the years, they would always be one. He thrust his hips and then felt Benedict's hard legs wrap around his waist as he thrust back.

Destrie dipped down and pressed another hot kiss to Benedict's mouth, this time thrusting his tongue deep inside, tasting the man, thirsting for this cowboy. He bucked and thrust against him.

Benedict groaned. With a heave he had Destrie beneath him once again. This time it was Destrie who wound his legs around Benedict, driving upward with his hips, rubbing against the

hot passion. Chest to chest. He grabbed at Benedict's ass, cupped his cheeks, lifted up for Benedict's kiss.

Benedict reeled back and pulled up to rest on his knees. Destrie followed as though drawn upward by the yank of a short rope that bound the two men together, and he pressed against Benedict; his hands still cupped the man's muscular cheeks, kneading and separating.

And then he felt Benedict's hands on his own ass. He'd almost forgotten how good it could feel. Benedict lifted a finger to Destrie's mouth. Destrie knew what he wanted and sucked at the finger, making it slick and wet with his saliva. He lifted one of his hands to Benedict's mouth, and Benedict did the same to his finger.

They rose up onto their knees, cock to cock, slick fingers sliding into tight, puckered passages, mouths locked together claiming and swallowing the cries that erupted as they both climaxed.

It was a long time later that they collapsed back onto the blanket, arms still wrapped around each other. For Destrie, he was afraid to let go. Afraid of when the sun moved high into the sky once again and this dream—this vision—would disappear. And once again he would be alone. He gripped Benedict tighter, felt the sticky, slick heat of their spent passion. They should clean up, but he found he couldn't move. He didn't want to. He wanted to stay like this forever. But he also knew that time was running out.

Chapter Four

It was sunrise, and both men were once again dressed, wrapped in warm coats, passion locked away. Destrie stood side by side with Benedict on the creek bank, the container with Ray's ashes clutched in one hand. He tipped the container, and Ray's remains dispersed. Most landed in the water, but some were caught and carried away by the wind.

"It's done." He replaced the cover on the urn. He couldn't bring himself to look at Benedict. The night just spent in his arms, with memories surrounding them, was like a displaced piece of heaven. And now they were back in the real world once again. The cold reality rushed at him, cutting into him like splinters of ice.

"How's Laine holding up?" Benedict asked.

"It's not easy for her, but I think she'll be okay. They were married for fifty years, and she always said Ray was her best friend. You'll look in on her?"

"Of course." Benedict's voice sounded rough. The white peaks in the water surged; Ray's ashes had disappeared.

Destrie looked down and noted Benedict's hands as his fingers curled around the brim of his hat. Destrie could feel his tension, saw it as he flexed his fingers, rubbing over the rim.

A working man's hands, rough and calloused. Reddened by the winter, his hands were littered with tiny cuts. Destrie dropped the urn and spun to Benedict. He cupped Benedict's roughened jaw, leaned forward, and kissed him.

Benedict's hands clutched at Destrie's leather jacket, dragging him forward. Destrie tasted the bitterness of farewell, and he couldn't let go. He couldn't be the one to walk away—not this time.

Tongues clashed, mouths hungered as they held on to each other, knowing this could very well be the last time they would ever see each other.

Benedict yanked free and stumbled back. Just as he'd done in the alley, he bent over to pick up his hat. And soon it would only be the memory that remained.

Suddenly, Destrie reached out and grabbed a shank of Benedict's pale blond hair. He yanked up. Benedict yelled as he was brought up swift and hard by Destrie's grip. Destrie saw his gaze widen. Throwing his body against Benedict's, he shoved him back against the immovable, wide, ancient tree.

He held his lover there, hand wound tightly into his thick hair. Benedict stared into his eyes. Destrie saw the range of emotions as they crashed through him, the color of Benedict's eyes changing so rapidly. Sky blue deepening to storm gray. Pinpoints of black that dilated as he began to yield to the savageness that overtook Destrie. Finally understanding. He knew what Destrie wanted without his saying a word.

Destrie yanked back, practically pinning Benedict against the rough bark, shoving his coat down over his shoulders. Benedict's thick coat dropped to the ground. His hands reached for his belt, and he quickly unbuckled and unzipped his jeans, then shoved them and his underwear down over his hips. Legs spread, balancing himself in the slippery snow; the lowered clothing hung just below his ass.

Destrie released his hair and spun him around. He kicked Benedict's legs as wide as they would go. Reaching down, he grabbed a handful of snow and held it in his warm palm until droplets trickled between his fingers.

He couldn't wait. He and Benedict were almost the same height. He used the snow to lubricate Benedict's hole. He heard Benedict gasp when the icy water was pressed into the passage of his hot anus. He shoved back when Destrie's fingers speared inward, then quickly out. More snow and Benedict's ass colored from pale ivory to ruddy rose.

Suddenly Benedict whirled around. He shoved Destrie back full force. Destrie stumbled and landed in the snow. He didn't feel it; his full attention was the man towering over him, a look of steely determination on his face.

"Did you think I was going to make it easy for you?" Benedict said.

He dragged Destrie up by the lapels of his jacket. Spinning around, he slammed him back against the tree and possessed his mouth, thrusting his tongue deeply between Destrie's lips.

Destrie was so taken aback by the dominant act, at first he didn't respond. Benedict's hands were at his waist, ripping the tails of his shirt from inside his pants, reaching for the opening, unzipping them, and then he shoved them down. His mouth ravaged across Destrie's lips, over his lean, darkened jaw, back to his mouth, down to his throat. He sucked his way downward to the opened collar.

Anger and frustration warred with passion and lust right there next to the creek bank. The cold, frigid winter was no match for the hungry, blazing furnace of their need.

Benedict lifted his head and looked into Destrie's black eyes. "Now, you have me."

Destrie didn't wait to even catch a breath. With little effort, he shoved Benedict back against the tree. He was hard, so fucking hard. He positioned the head of his cock at Benedict's opening.

"You'll feel this, lover. You'll feel it, and you'll never forget it." He surged forward, burying his thick prick inside Benedict's rectum. Benedict grunted as Destrie's cock tunneled deep inside him.

Destrie hardly waited a second before he began thrusting inside the hot, tight heat. Friction surged around him. He pumped, driving Benedict against the hard bark again and again. He felt the fury, the lust building. The pain of impending separation roared through him. He rammed forward and pulled out; then he buried himself deep as his orgasm burst over him, pulse after pulse of hot cum spurting into Benedict.

When he was finished, he dropped against Benedict's back. His hands clenched in the soft fabric of Benedict's flannel shirt as he pulled his softening prick from inside Benedict's hole.

Neither of them said a word as they separated and righted their clothing. Breaths fast and deep clouded the frigid air. Destrie watched Benedict closely as he pulled on his coat. Then, as he did at the bar, he reached for his hat and put it on. Once he straightened, he turned to look at Destrie.

Suddenly there was a yawning canyon of distance that separated them, both physically and emotionally, as Benedict appeared to slam down the door on his feelings and distanced himself from his lover.

Benedict cleared his throat. His eyes filmed. He blinked, and they cleared. He nodded to Destrie. "You take care of yourself over there. Laine wouldn't take kindly to you coming back to her in a box."

They didn't shake hands; they didn't hug. It was past that now. The enchantment was gone, and the midnight tolling had rung.

"You watch yourself in this town. Don't let it eat you alive."

But Destrie knew it would. It already had him locked in its jaws like a ravenous wolf and wasn't about to let go. And if Destrie tried to fight it, it would likely end up killing Benedict or at least tearing out his soul. And that wasn't what Destrie wanted or ever meant to do.

Benedict nodded. Destrie saw his mouth tighten almost into a grimace of pain.

"Hoss, you don't really understand this town any more than you understand me. We've both changed, and you just can't—won't—see it."

Just as Destrie would have closed the distance between them, Benedict whirled away and stalked over to his horse. He tightened the girth, adjusted, and then mounted. He nudged his horse and rode away, first moving into a trot and then a canter as he headed up over the ridge.

Destrie watched him go. A lump formed in his throat, his eyes stung, and he blinked rapidly.

Benedict stopped at the top of the ridge for just one moment. He was silhouetted against the wide gray Wyoming sky. He was alone, a solitary figure. A stark image that Destrie knew would stay with him until the day he died. That was how he would remember the strong man that he loved. In his own way hard as the earth, willing to sacrifice for his people and for the ranch he loved. Proud and so damned beautiful, it hurt to look at him.

And then he was gone, and Destrie stared at the empty gray landscape, feeling as though all the warmth had been sucked from inside him.

He took his time tearing down the tent and packing the Cherokee back up. He was careful not to leave any mark upon the land. And then he got into his truck and left without looking back.

Just as Benedict had done not an hour before.

* * * * *

For Benedict, the days of winter passed slowly. He didn't see Destrie again before he left town. He didn't dare. The emptiness he felt inside was bad enough before, but now it was even more painful. His feelings of loneliness and isolation and abandonment cut even deeper.

He did his chores, he gave the men orders, he moved around the ranch just as he had done before Destrie's return. He sidestepped his brother as best he could. But it wasn't the same. It was like someone else walked in his boots. He felt no passion. Except in his dreams.

He stood on the porch, staring over the land—the buildings. Everything was just as it had been, but for some reason he was seeing it differently. There was a stark, frozen aspect to it he hadn't noticed before. It cut through to his bones. It just wasn't the same. Not without his lover. Destrie was the one who made it all come alive for Benedict. He painted the world in living color for Benedict.

When he'd seen Destrie in the bar, it was like something had woken up inside him. He had come to life in a way he hadn't realized was missing before. It was as if the vivid winter colors of a Wyoming sunset that blazed across the sky had come to life. And now it was dulled. He wasn't certain what to do about it.

He pulled his truck keys out of his pocket and headed to his Chevy. He'd promised Laine to patch a portion of her fence that needed mending.

"You'll look in on her." Destrie's concern for his foster mother cut into Benedict.

Laine was all Benedict had left, his only connection to Destrie. And his feelings toward her were not just based on a sense of duty. He'd long since lost all respect for his own brother. But he was locked into the ranch, chained there by his deep-rooted respect for tradition and responsibility to family. People depended on him. They depended on the strength of the Webster Ranch. And a man didn't turn his back on blood. You buckled down, and you did what needed doing. No matter the personal cost.

If he left the ranch in Jake's hands, it was a foregone conclusion that it would be bankrupted within a year and a lot of men and women would lose their livelihood. And there would be nothing left for—well, there just wouldn't be anything left. It was Benedict who held the purse strings, and he had a feeling that was one thing that Jake resented more than any other. At first he hadn't understood why his father had done it that way, but as the years passed, it had become obvious. Jake wasn't up to the task. And there was nothing Benedict could do about it.

Maybe it was part of the problem between him and his brother. Benedict was the younger son; Jake had always felt he should have been the one in control. And if Benedict hadn't kept it quiet and allowed Jake to keep up appearances, so to speak, it would have probably been a lot tougher life than it was.

Benedict started the truck and pulled away from the ranch house. Spring would be here soon, and maybe things would look up then. Maybe his mood would lighten. He sure hoped so.

Laine's house was a small white wood-frame structure at the edge of town. Probably built in the 1940s, it had withstood its share of unforgiving weather over the years. But like Laine, many of the people who lived in Coyote Forks were hardy and ready to withstand the sometimes-heartbreaking demands of a fierce land.

Benedict pulled up in front of the house, parked the truck, and got out. As he opened the gate on the white fence that surrounded the small property, he spotted the frail figure of Laine standing at the door with a smile on her weathered face.

"Benedict, come in. I just got a postcard from Destrie. He was asking after you."

Benedict's heart jumped inside his chest. He hoped he managed not to let it show on his face. Just the mention of the man's name had his cock pushing hard against his jeans. Damn. This was not the time or place. He was glad the jacket he wore was longer than most and ended just at his upper thighs. Jeez, this was one time he was almost thankful for the frigid bite of winter.

Laine held open the screen door and stepped back to allow him to enter. He stamped his boots on the mat before entering, took his hat off, ducked his head, and then stepped inside.

"Miz Laine, you shouldn't be standing out in this cold weather. You don't want to get sick. I don't think Destrie would take kindly if something happened to you."

She smiled; the corners of her faded blue eyes crinkled. "You go on into the kitchen. I just made a batch of that gingerbread you like so much. It's still warm."

That had Benedict's mouth watering. Laine Carson made the best gingerbread in the county. It had won prizes at the state fair.

"Sit down, boy. I appreciate you coming by to check on me. If it weren't for you, this place would be falling down around my shins."

"It's no bother, Laine." He slid onto the wood chair and watched her as she moved around the small, homey kitchen.

She'd aged drastically in the months since Ray's death. Her hands shook as she poured him out a cup of coffee. Her skin looked paper thin, blue veins prominent, her frame small and fragile.

She turned to the table, carrying a plate of a thick slice of whipped cream-slathered gingerbread and a mug of hot black coffee, and set them down in front of him. "There you go." She handed him a fork and a white paper napkin before she took the seat across from him.

The aroma of the gingerbread was too much, and he dug in. He closed his eyes as he savored the taste of the warm gingerbread and fresh homemade cream. "I think I've done died and gone to heaven."

Laine chuckled. "Not yet, Benedict." She reached across the table to the napkin holder and pulled out the picture postcard that had been resting there. She waved it at Benedict. "Got this in the mail today. It's from Germany this time. I'll be adding it to my collection." She shook her head. "Both of you, always good boys. Don't know what came over those young delinquents that they did those terrible things."

She looked at him, and the sympathy he saw in her eyes that had him setting down his fork, too choked up to swallow another mouthful of the delicious gingerbread.

"It's just the way folks are—can't change 'em." He didn't know what else to say. He was embarrassed that the leader of those "delinquents" was his own brother. And he had no excuse for him.

"Wish I could see my boy again, before I join Ray, but I don't think I'm going to do that."

Benedict's heart rate quickened, and he looked at Laine with alarm. "Don't be saying that. You're going to be around a long time yet."

A smile spread across her lips, but it was one that didn't reach her eyes. "No, not this time. Don't let him pine too badly for us, Benedict. You're the only one who can help take the hurt away."

"No, ma'am, I'm not the one." But how he wished that he could be. "This place isn't good for Destrie. I think we both know that."

"Well, boy, he don't always see things quite so clearly. He's a bit bullheaded, if you know what I mean. But I think time'll come when he'll come around and realize what needs to be done. He might need a push. Just don't let it be too long. You deserve better."

"My blood's here, Laine. I can't just walk away. It's home."

Laine made an unflattering noise. "Home's people, not places." She leaned forward and placed a hand over his. "Life's too short. Don't let *some* people in this town take away your chance of being happy. You'll only regret it. Ray was my home, and you boys too. Without that, without love, without that human warmth, it's just an empty shell." She straightened up and looked at him. "Sometimes one has to stand up for what they love, or nothin' will ever change."

He looked into her eyes for a long time and then gently pulled his hands from beneath hers. He cleared his throat. She made him want to believe in things it was probably best he not think about. "I better be getting to that fence repair. Which part of the fence was it?"

She shook her head and then pushed away from the table. "All right, have it your way. Finish that gingerbread.; you'll need your strength. It's out back. Those dogs from next door keep getting through it and making it bigger. I got an account down to Gordon's, so whatever you need, just put it on my bill."

He smiled and then nodded. "Sure thing, Laine. It shouldn't take long, and then we'll have it all fixed up for you." It was sort of a running joke between them. He never put anything on her tab. He needed to do this not just for her, but for Destrie. For himself.

He finished off the gingerbread and the coffee and then stood up. He couldn't think about losing Laine. He didn't think he could handle it.

"I should come out there with you. But these old bones don't take to that cold as well as they used to."

"No, ma'am," he said firmly. "You stay right in here where it's warm. No need for you to be getting sick."

Please. Not now. He just couldn't lose her too.

And yet, when the leaves began to turn once again, that's exactly what he did. Less than a year passed before Laine joined Ray. And Benedict was left desolate and alone—more alone than he'd ever been in his life.

Until Destrie returned once more.

Chapter Five

For what seemed liked the thousandth time, the doorbell rang. Destrie set the mirror down on Laine's dresser and went downstairs to answer the door. Most of the people who stopped by to offer their condolences on Laine's passing were courteous. The kitchen was now filled with more food than he could eat in a year. And he didn't plan to stay in Coyote Forks for more than the time it would take him to finish packing all the personal belongings. Some he would keep and put in storage for the time being, until things were settled; others he would pass on to some needy charity. There wasn't much in Coyote Forks, so he'd probably just load the stuff into his truck and take it back to Cheyenne with him.

This time when he opened the door, it was to find Mary McBlaine standing on the porch, holding a casserole dish between her gloved hands.

"Hello, Destrie. I just wanted to stop by." She moved forward an inch, and good manners dictated that Destrie step aside and allow her to come in.

She breezed past him and headed straight for the kitchen. But she pulled up short at the doorway.

"Wow, guess I wasn't the only one. Where would you like me to put this?"

Destrie stepped past her and took the pan from her hands, then turned back to the kitchen table. "I have no idea what I'm going to do with all this food. I won't be here that long." After setting the dish on the table, he turned back to face her.

"Well, I have an idea, if you really mean it."

"Please. Anything would be better than letting all this food go to waste."

She stepped farther into the small room. "We have a youth center in town, and there'll be a holiday party soon. For Thanksgiving. You might want to donate the food for the kids."

"A youth center? Since when?" There had never been one when he lived in Coyote Forks. It was great that someone had finally gotten one up and running.

"I'm surprised Laine didn't write to you about it. Benedict Webster fought the town council pretty hard over it. They finally agreed after he spearheaded a fund-raiser and was able to raise most of the money necessary to get it up and going. Got us a grant too."

"Benedict did that?" He wasn't certain what he felt about that. Laine had known how much he disliked the town after what had happened, and usually hadn't written too much about what occurred when it came to town politics. He knew it was his own fault, but considering the conditions under which he left, she hadn't wanted to push him, he guessed.

"Yeah, a couple of years ago. It's been very successful, and he works hard to make sure things go right for the kids. Anyway, they could use the extra food. Times are hard. Some of the kids don't get holiday celebrations at home. Usually Benedict and some of us chip in to do it up right at the center, so they have something."

"Well, sure. That would be great."

Mary nodded. "I'll contact the director and have someone come by to pick it up and get it into the freezer at the center. Then you don't need to be worrying about it."

"Appreciate it, Mary. And I appreciate you stopping by. I know Laine thought a lot of you. Oh, damn, can I get you a cup of coffee or something? I'm forgetting my manners here. Laine would kill me."

She smiled and shook her head. "Nope. Can't stay. But I just wanted to stop by to see how you were doing. I'll miss Laine; she was a good friend, almost like a second mother to me."

"Yeah, Laine was like that. The mothering sort."

"But you were always her son. She and Ray thought the world of you, Destrie."

An uneasy silence fell into the room. Destrie didn't know why he could never bring himself to call Laine "Mom" or Ray "Dad." It just always felt like he was betraying his real parents to even think it. But there had been moments when it had felt right, and then, within a breath of that, he felt the guilt swamp through him.

Sometimes it was like he punished himself by not calling them "Mom" or "Dad." That in some way it meant desecrating the memory of his real mother and father. His Native American connection would be lost somehow. He realized now that a lot of stuff got jumbled around inside his head. A sudden moment of insight and sorrow suddenly gripped him: he'd never thought to gift his foster parents with something so simple.

He turned away. "I'll package this stuff up and have it ready." He needed a moment to get himself under control.

"Laine once showed me a picture of your mother," Mary said softly behind him. "She was a beautiful woman. I can see how... Well, you brought a lot of joy into their lives, Destrie. They never regretted taking you in when Old Man Webster asked them to. It was the least he could do, I would imagine."

Destrie whirled around and looked at her, shock surging through his body with the unanticipated force of a typhoon. "What did you say? Webster asked them? I thought it was a social worker who arranged it."

Too many emotions flitted across Mary's face. And some of them had guilt and secrecy attached to them. "I-I... Well, maybe I misunderstood her. At any rate, Laine and Ray never looked back once they saw you." She fiddled with her gloves for a moment. "I best be going." She gave a weak attempt at a smile. Destrie felt he'd missed something in the exchange. Something important, but he couldn't quite be certain what it was. Suddenly things seemed to be off just a beat. Why would Webster get involved in dealing with an orphaned half-breed boy? He wasn't the type. Something didn't make sense.

Mary turned and headed back to the front room and was gone before he could form the questions that were just starting to shake loose from the shock. What did Mary know? What had he missed?

He rushed to the door and then yanked it open, but Mary was already in her truck and driving away. Another of Laine's neighbors turned the corner and strode up the walk toward the house, carrying a cake keeper. Destrie sighed. He'd have to sort out what Mary had said later. Right now it appeared neighbors were intent on fattening him up.

Two hours later Destrie straightened from packing up the last box from the main bedroom. The last of Ray and Laine's earthly possessions. There was nothing in the paperwork from the desk or in Laine's personal belongings that revealed anything about Webster's part in bringing Destrie together with the Carsons. Destrie had to wonder if he'd ever find out the truth of what had happened when his mother died.

He turned away from the bed and gazed around the now-sterile room. He'd settled the house with a Realtor, and this was the last of what needed to be taken care of.

He thrust a hand through his hair. It was longer now since he'd left the service. It had only been a month since he'd been back in the States, but it felt like much longer.

Destrie happened to look out the window and was arrested when he saw the Chevy pickup sitting in the driveway. He knew whom it belonged to. He just hadn't expected to see it sitting in his foster parents' driveway. He picked the box up and set it on the floor. As long as he kept coming back to this godforsaken town, he'd never be able to forget Benedict and put the relationship behind him.

Slowly he made his way down the stairs and out the front door. A breeze lifted some leaves from the ground, swirling them around his feet. Another few weeks and winter would have its usual stranglehold on the land. He needed to move on.

He walked toward the truck parked in the driveway. He saw the man hunched over the steering wheel. He walked over to the window, and that's when he spotted the half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's resting on the seat next to Benedict.

"Hey, man, how are you?" he said as he pulled open the door. He could tell Benedict was way beyond any point of driving. He'd witnessed Jake in this condition many a time, but never Benedict.

Benedict staggered out of the truck and would have fallen if Destrie hadn't caught him.

"Whoa, cowboy. I think you better come inside the house and sit for a spell."

"Gone," Benedict muttered. "All gone." His hat flew off as another gust of wind caught them just before they made it to the porch.

Destrie managed to get him into the house, and Benedict toppled onto the couch. Destrie leaned down to pull off his boots and tossed them across the room. Then he ran outside to grab Benedict's hat before it disappeared.

He looked at his ex-lover as he tromped back inside. The couch wasn't long enough for the big cowboy. Destrie walked toward him, shaking his head. Benedict was a mess. One arm was slung over his eyes; the other trailed down to the floor. He looked like Gulliver attempting to fit on a Lilliputian sofa. He couldn't help chuckling at the image that made.

But Benedict was out. The least Destrie could do was try to make him more comfortable so he could sleep it off. He leaned over to unbuckle his belt and undo the button on his pants so he

could breathe easier. Suddenly Benedict's fingers curled into the front of Destrie's cotton shirt and yanked him on top of the sprawled-out cowboy.

Benedict cupped the back of Destrie's head and pulled him down until their lips were fastened together, and Destrie tasted the whiskey on his breath. But damn if he still didn't taste good. Destrie couldn't make himself rise from the couch.

He lay there on top of Benedict, enjoying the feel of the man. He had a hard, lean body that still fit him pretty fine. If only there had been a way. But there wasn't. And there never would be, as long as Benedict refused to leave Coyote Forks.

Benedict was the one to pull away, leaning his head back against the armrest, eyes closed.

"You're gone too," he murmured. "All gone. Wish I had the guts to leave. Laine says I should." He slitted his eyes to look up at Destrie. They were as bloodshot as Destrie had ever seen them. Worse than when they smoked that stolen pipe back when they were twelve and Benedict'd had that coughing fit that he couldn't shake, eyes streaming. It should have taught them a lesson, but it didn't. It was the first of many half-cocked misadventures that they'd gotten themselves into.

God, but he didn't want to love this man. Benedict's eyes closed, and his head lolled back. Destrie finally got up. Damn, the truck keys. He better grab them and put them in a safe place where Benedict couldn't get them until he'd slept off some of his drunk.

Destrie checked both of Benedict's pockets, but the keys weren't there. Probably still in the truck. He walked back outside, and sure enough they were still in the ignition. He pulled them out and tucked them into the pocket of his jeans. At least he wouldn't have to worry about the man going off half-cocked.

He leaned over and grabbed the bottle of JD. He dumped out the contents and then tossed the empty bottle into the trash barrel at the back of the house. He'd never forgive himself if anything happened to Benedict because he hadn't helped him.

He walked back into the house and found Benedict snoring, out like a light. Turning toward the kitchen, he figured a pot of strong black coffee wouldn't be amiss right now. He really needed to pack up the rest of the food. And keeping himself busy would help to take his mind off the man in the sitting room.

But trying to keep himself busy only lasted for just so long. Time passed, but not enough. Eventually he found himself sitting at the table, a mug of hot coffee gripped between his cupped hands.

The sun was starting to go down, and suddenly Destrie's mind wandered back to the time long ago when Benedict had held Destrie in his arms on the banks of the creek. It'd been after Jake and his friends had finished with Destrie, and he hadn't even been able to see because both his eyes had been swollen shut, and the pain in his cracked ribs had made it so hard to breathe. He'd had boot prints on his chest for a long time before they healed and finally went away.

"Don't worry, Destrie, I'll get you to Doc. Jesus, why did he do this? You ain't hurt no one."

"Just you," Destrie had managed to gasp out between cracked and swollen lips. *"He thinks I hurt you."*

"Goddamn him." Destrie couldn't see Benedict, but he heard the tightness of suppressed tears in his voice. *"I'm sorry, Destrie. I'm so sorry."*

"Destrie?"

Coffee spilled over the edges of Destrie's mug when he turned to the doorway and saw Benedict leaning against the doorjamb. He pushed the memories away, and then he stood up.

"Well, so you're up." He turned away, toward the coffeemaker sitting on the counter. "How 'bout some coffee?"

"Coffee'd be good. How long was I out?"

Destrie shrugged. "Couple hours. No more. Why, Benedict? You're not a drinking man. At least not like that."

What could Benedict say? The pain was too much to bear? The loss too final? He just wanted it all to go away?

He squared his shoulders as he looked at Destrie.

"You have no idea what I am. You left. Remember? Not once, but twice, damn you."

He saw something flicker in Destrie's eyes.

"You know why I left. Don't try to turn this on me."

Benedict's head was splitting. He couldn't do this right now. How the hell he'd ended up in Laine's driveway, he had no idea.

Destrie pulled out a chair. "Sit before you fall down. Drink the damned coffee."

Benedict pulled away from the doorjamb. "Just give me my damn keys, and I'll be out of your hair."

"Not until I'm sure you're sober enough to drive. And right now, you can't even stand up. So forget it. You're not leaving this house until I think you've got it together."

"Fuck you, Two Rivers." He whirled around and stalked toward the door. He was not staying in the same room as the man, even if he had to walk back to the ranch. As a matter of fact, it might actually help to clear his head if he walked.

As he reached for the door, hard hands landed on his shoulders and whirled him around. Destrie stood barely a breath away, his eyes glittering. The scents of coffee and clean male assaulted Benedict.

Suddenly the dam burst on all the emotions that Benedict had kept tightly reined in. His arm shot out; the blow caught Destrie unaware on the jaw, and his head snapped back.

Benedict rushed forward, and he and Destrie hit the floor. Destrie bucked beneath Benedict and threw a punch that just barely missed him. They rolled, and the coffee table struck the couch. The table toppled onto its side. Benedict threw another punch but missed this time, and the men rolled in the opposite direction.

They hit the recliner; this time Destrie was on top. He rose up, legs straddling Benedict. Benedict tried to gain an upper hand and attempted to buck Destrie off. He curled his fingers into a fist and shot it upward toward Destrie's face. Destrie grabbed his wrist in a jaw-tightening clench.

He looked Benedict in the eyes, and suddenly everything stilled and the world stuttered to a stop. For one second and then Benedict was up and at Destrie. He heaved up and threw Destrie off. Destrie landed with a *crack*, stunned for just a moment.

Benedict surged up over him. He locked Destrie's arms to the floor. "I may not be military," he said breathlessly, "but I've learned how to take down an adversary when it's called for."

Destrie looked up at Benedict, the glitter in his eyes bright and deadly, and then his expression changed. He was no longer fighting Benedict; he lay there, seemingly submissive to the man on top of him.

“Is that what I am to you, Benedict? The enemy?”

Benedict was at a loss for words. Awareness of his surroundings had him realizing what he was doing, where he was, and the man who lay beneath him. And suddenly it wasn't anger he felt; it was something so much more. He leaned forward and claimed Destrie's mouth, his tongue surging between Destrie's lips.

He released Destrie's wrists and ripped Destrie's shirt open as Destrie did the same to his shirt. There was no thought for tomorrow or the day after.

There was only Destrie. The man he had to have. A fire raged through him. And there was only one man who could put it out.

Benedict sat back and shoved his jeans and underwear down his legs.

And then they were on the floor again, rubbing body to body, cock to cock, mouths locked together as they rolled on the floor locked in each other's arms—but this time it wasn't in an effort to be free. Benedict's hands gripped Destrie's ass, kneading the fine, hard flesh. He dipped a finger toward Destrie's anus and penetrated. Destrie groaned.

The entrance was tight and dry. He shoved deeper, and Destrie pushed back against the painful invasion.

“Yes,” was the only word Destrie uttered.

They clutched at each other as though it would be the last time they ever fucked. And Benedict figured it probably would be, and he planned to make it the best damn fuck either of them ever had.

He removed his finger from Destrie's hole and shoved him back against the recliner. Then he dropped forward and sucked Destrie's cock into his mouth.

He'd never done it before. Not in the times when they were younger, not when they were in the tent near the creek. But now Benedict wanted it all; he wanted to touch and taste every inch of the man.

He sucked harder, and Destrie groaned. He swirled his tongue over the head, dipping into the slit. Releasing Destrie's cock, he rose to his knees. He yanked Destrie upward, then shoved him farther back into the chair. He spread Destrie's legs wider, leaned forward again, and sucked Destrie's balls into his mouth. Destrie cried out and jerked his hips.

Destrie gripped his cock, levering his hand up and down his own prick as Benedict sucked his balls into his mouth. Within a breath, he spurted his cum onto his belly and dropped back into the chair.

He and Benedict looked at each other, and then suddenly Destrie surged forward and, bracing his hands against Benedict's chest, shoved him back onto the floor.

And then it was Destrie's mouth on Benedict's cock, driving him crazy with need. He thrust his hips, driving his cock deeper into Destrie's mouth. Back and forth, the sucking action was amazing. Then Destrie's finger was jabbing inside Benedict's hole. And Benedict was spurting his seed into Destrie's mouth, and Destrie swallowing every bit, licking the softening prick clean before releasing him.

Benedict tried to catch his breath. He didn't want to think about how or why. He just wanted more. He lifted up to his knees and found Destrie was kneeling in front of him, just watching him.

Benedict leaned forward and claimed his mouth, pressing his body to Destrie's. He couldn't let him go. Not yet. He knew he would have to eventually, but not now.

Chapter Six

Morning broke sunny and bright, but neither man had slept the night before. Destrie wouldn't have thought he could get hard again. But here he was, warm water lubricating his cock as he thrust into Benedict's ass. He just couldn't seem to get enough of the man. His cock rode slick and hard inside Benedict's channel. One of his hands gripped Benedict's slim waist, fingers digging against hip bone.

He watched Benedict's muscles flex, the tanned skin shiny and wet. Benedict's arms were braced against the wet tile wall. Destrie traced the bulge of muscle and pressed a hand between his shoulder blades then slid it downward. He swept around to draw it upward, snapping up a rock-hard nipple between two fingers. He heard the echo of Benedict's groan, and he twisted, while at the same time thrusting forward, burying his rigid prick inside Benedict.

He pulled back and then thrust once more, feeling the power of his orgasm shoot through him. Benedict collapsed against the wall, and Destrie's wet flesh was pressed close behind. Neither of them spoke as, moments later Destrie slipped his softening prick from inside Benedict. It was sometime later that he finally turned the shower off and stepped out to grab a towel.

He heard Benedict behind him and tossed him another towel from the stack on the shelf. So many thoughts slammed against each other inside his head as he toweled himself dry. Too many.

"I have to get back to the ranch," Benedict said. Destrie stilled.

"Yeah, I guess you do."

He felt a hand on his wet hair. "Your hair's longer than last time."

"I pulled out. I'm not going back."

"What? You just up and quit?" Benedict grabbed his arm and whirled Destrie around. Destrie shook him off and turned away to get dressed. He wasn't certain he was ready to answer

questions about the Army. The separation was too new. The nightmares too fresh. He was still trying to come to terms with his reasons for joining in the first place and his reasons for leaving. Anger had gotten him in and kept him going until he'd run out of emotion. Until he'd become numb. Returning to Coyote Forks that first time had somehow made things clear, opened him up. He didn't want to be reminded about killing and death. He didn't want to be numb anymore. And he wanted the nightmares to stop. But the reasons were still all jumbled up inside his head. That's why he was going to Cheyenne for a while. Maybe get some help in sorting things out.

Destrie wasn't certain how to explain his decision to Benedict. They were able to come together on a basic sexual level, but there was a root difference between them. It was no wonder Benedict looked at him with such shock in those gorgeous eyes. Neither of them knew each other—understood the men they had become.

"I cared for them, you know. They took me in when it's doubtful anyone else would have. And I was a hell of a handful." He straightened after pulling his boot on. He looked at Benedict. "Not like you and your family. Your roots are dug deep here."

"What are you trying to say?"

Destrie reached up to stroke the necklace, the only link he had with his parentage. "You've got roots here, Benedict. Strong ones. If I tried to force you to cut them—even if I could—you'd like to die away from this place."

"Wait a minute—"

Destrie shook his head. "No, I've always known it. Me, on the other hand—I've really got no roots to this place. Got no roots anywhere really. Maybe I thought the Army could do it for me. It didn't. What tenuous connections I had here are dead now. I'm still looking for where I belong on this earth."

"You say your roots are dead here, but what about us? Home's people, not places. It's the living, not the dead," Benedict said.

"You don't want me here. I make it too hard for you." Destrie cupped Benedict's face with both his hands. "I can't give you the acceptance you need from this town—to be one of the regular guys here. You shouldn't have to fight this place all your life. If I stay, you'll only get hurt, and that's something I don't want. My destiny's not here—yours is. You wouldn't be happy anywhere else."

As hard as it was, he released Benedict and stepped away. He dug into his pocket and pulled out Benedict's truck keys. "Here. I think you'd better go."

Benedict looked at him as his fingers curled around the keys. For one moment they just stared at each other. Destrie could have relented, could have said he'd stay. And then the keys were gone from his grasp and the warmth of Benedict's body heat disintegrated as he turned and walked to the truck. The door opened with a squeak.

Before climbing in, Benedict turned to look at Destrie; his expression was hard and unreadable. "You need to think about what home really is, Two Rivers. You fought for this country, and yet you don't think it's worth fighting for a place to call home." His expression burned into Destrie. "You might have asked if I wanted to go with you. Back then I might have left. Can't do it now. This is home. I'd make a place for you here. I'd stand right next to you and fight. But you gotta want it bad enough. You gotta want us bad enough."

He climbed into the truck and shut the door. Destrie refused to let the flicker of hope burn. But something made him stride toward the truck just as Benedict started the engine. He'd begun to back out as Destrie reached the driver's door. The truck skidded to a halt. Benedict stared out the window without looking at Destrie.

"I'll be in Cheyenne for a time," Destrie said abruptly. "I don't know for how long. There's some people there—" He stepped away from the truck. "Ask for me at a place called True Heart. I'll be staying with a friend from the Army who volunteers there. That is, if you ever feel you can walk away from this place."

When Benedict finally did look at him, the fierce burn in that look took Destrie's breath away. There was such a war going on behind that expression.

"Ben—"

The truck jerked, tires spun up grit and dirt, and then Benedict was flying down the road and there was no time to say more. Destrie stood there for a long time as the dust settled and the truck disappeared from view.

There'd been some tough choices to make before. Life-and-death choices. But nothing seemed as hard to take as letting Benedict drive away. Especially after the night they'd just spent together.

He couldn't hold out hope that Benedict would track him down in Cheyenne. He couldn't live his life on broken dreams. That was something that had destroyed many a man. He didn't dare keep that flame alive.

"Let him go, Two Rivers. Just leave town. You never should have come back. I thought Pa made that clear nine years ago," Jake said.

Destrie didn't move a muscle. He stood still as a statue, remembering every speck of his training. Oh yeah, he felt the hostile intent. And then Destrie heard the gun cock. He judged distance from the sound of Jake's voice; the man wasn't standing more than a couple of feet behind him. His muscles bunched; his attention narrowed. He readied himself to combat the threat. Slowly he turned to face Benedict's brother.

"What do you want, Jake? How long have you been here?"

"Joey's the one told me Benedict's truck was in your driveway. You fucked him up once—he's never been the same. It's your fault. He'd have been just fine if it wasn't for you. Pa never would have made me... Maybe I should just shoot you now. Finish it. Nobody'd say me wrong for it. The Webster name means a hell of a lot more than some queer half-breed living or dying."

Sudden bright images flashed through Destrie's mind. Memories, or maybe the better word was "nightmares," of what had taken place nine years before.

Neither he nor Benedict had been ready when the angry mob of seven had descended on them at the creek's edge. He remembered having counted them. Having looked at their faces, memorizing each one. Three of them had gone straight for Benedict, dragging him to the other side near a tree. The other four, including Jake, had converged on Destrie.

He remembered Benedict's angry yell, and then the fists had come flying at him from all directions. Three of the men had held him down. He remembered the feel of the warm dirt and stones scraping against his naked back.

He'd felt a rib give beneath a particularly brutal kick. Knuckles crashed against the side of his face, one after the other. He remembered everything. It had seemed to go on forever, until finally he had lost consciousness.

When he finally came around, he'd found himself staring up at Jake through half-closed lids. He could hear Benedict screaming, his voice hoarse. But all Destrie had seen was Jake

towering above him. There was a strong whiff of alcohol clinging to the man hovering above him. And the reek of Destrie's own blood and sweat.

"You leave my brother alone, queer boy," Jake had snarled at Destrie. *"If you know what's good for you, you'll hightail it out of town. We don't take to your kind here. We don't want you here."*

Then Jake had kicked him viciously, and Destrie remembered feeling another rib give just before he'd lost consciousness a second time. There was little else that came clearly to mind from that night. Nothing except pain and the determination to focus on taking one breath after another.

He looked at Jake with all these memories crashing through his mind. Since that time, he'd learned to defend himself and do it quite expeditiously. He'd become a predator that the likes of these bullies didn't want to tangle with, but Jake wouldn't know that.

Suddenly it felt as though Destrie had moved outside of his own skin. Was watching dispassionately as Jake took careful aim.

"Not today, Jake."

Destrie spun fast, leaped high, and the gun went spinning out of Jake's hands. Destrie had him down on the ground eating dirt before Jake knew what hit him, an arm wrenched high up behind his back, a grimace of pain on his face.

"Don't ever pull a gun on a man unless you're ready to use it," Destrie said. He released him, stood up, and walked over to the gun. Carefully he lifted it, removed the bullets, and then tossed the gun back to Jake. "You're a fool, Jake Webster—you always were. Your brother loves this place too damn much to ever leave it. Even if I asked. Too bad you never did know him well enough to realize the ranch and the land would win with him every time."

Jake scrambled to his feet, the surly look on his face telling Destrie exactly what he already knew. Even if Destrie had been willing to give up everything and stay here with Benedict, Jake and his cronies would make sure Destrie didn't survive long—one way or the other.

"This ain't the end of it, Two Rivers. You remember what I said. Stay away from my brother. 'Cause next time, I'll be ready for you. Make no mistake. You don't belong in this town." He nodded toward the house. "Your kin's dead. No reason for you to come back here. Not if you want to keep breathing." Then he spun away.

Destrie watched Jake stagger down the deserted street. He must have left his truck parked at one of his friend's houses so Destrie wouldn't see him coming.

There was a stillness to the avenue that told Destrie people had been watching. Hiding and watching as it had all played out. Had they hoped Jake would finally kill Destrie and at last lance the pimple on the face of Coyote Forks once and for all? No one had come out to help. No sirens to indicate anyone had even called the sheriff. Destrie wasn't surprised. It was just as it had always been.

But then he remembered all the food on the table in the house. The people who had stopped by to offer their condolences and reminisce about Laine and Ray.

And then, to his shock, he heard a siren in the distance. Apparently someone had called the sheriff's office. More conflicted emotions surged through him. He looked back at the house. For a moment it was an effort to remember he didn't think of Coyote Forks as home.

There would always be men like Jake. If he even tried to make a life here, he'd always have to watch his back. Never certain where the bullet might come from. Benedict had blinded himself to the true nature of his brother. He'd probably needed to in order to survive.

But Destrie couldn't live like that.

"You want your Ray to keep his job on my ranch?" That's what Old Man Webster had said to him two days after the attack. *"You want him to work anywhere in this county again? You do as I say and get out, boy."*

And that's exactly what he'd done. He'd really had no choice. Webster had too much power, and Destrie was just a half-breed kid with no way to fight that power. He'd never told Benedict about that visit. It wouldn't have done any good. As soon as he'd been able, he'd quietly left town and tried to turn his back on everything that happened in Coyote Forks—both good and bad. And that meant loving Benedict as well.

Just as he'd be doing now. There were just some battles one wasn't meant to win. He had no doubt he could best Jake and his crew, and it would feel fine doing it. But if he destroyed Benedict in the process, what would he accomplish? He would end up destroying the very thing he loved—anything that might be considered good about this town. No, it was better that he just walk away. Again.

He turned and strode back into the house, wanting to just finish it once and for all. There was nothing for him in this town—not any longer. And this time he wouldn't be back.

Chapter Seven

Benedict relived that last night with Destrie over and over in his mind. He couldn't forget it. Every night he dreamed about his lover, his body aching, burning, until he had to stroke his cock to completion in order to get even a few hours of sleep.

He remembered the tight feel of Destrie's passage. Pumping into him and wanting it never to end. His cock surged once again at the burning memory of Destrie's hard dick inside his ass. Of him coming and the growl of completion. He remembered Destrie's arms wrapped around him, his hard lips against Benedict's mouth. Tongues tangling, hot and demanding.

"Don't forget the party tomorrow night, bro. That Perkins gal is gonna be there. She's got her eye on you. Trust your big brother to fix you up right."

Benedict's arousal was doused quickly at the sound of Jake's voice. He controlled his temper and focused on tightening the cinch on Rogan's saddle before straightening and turning to look at his brother. Why was it he hadn't realized how dissipated and hard Jake had become over the years, and how bad he was for the ranch? Suddenly Benedict felt like he was suffocating and needed fresh air.

Christmas was right around the corner, once again. And all Benedict could think about was how much he just wanted the holidays to be over with. Ever since Destrie had left town, Jake had been trying to fix Benedict up with one woman or another. Last week it was that new bank clerk. Now it was their neighbor Perkins's daughter. He couldn't take much more of this.

He grabbed the reins and walked his horse outside, ignoring his brother. The late-afternoon sky felt crisp and still. The air seemed heavy. He looked up at the sky.

"Feels like snow coming," he said as he swung up onto his bay gelding. "Need to go check for those strays once more. Don't know if I'll be back in time for dinner. You go on into town without me." He reined his horse away from Jake.

"Wait. Ben, I've made plans. We're supposed to go into town together."

"Not tonight, Jake." Benedict was tired—so tired of fighting, like salmon swimming upriver against the current. He was marking time in limbo, and he needed to make a decision.

Long hours later and nary a stray in sight, but at least the fence line was mended at any rate, he settled on the rise above the creek. He was a survivor, but this time it felt like something inside him was as frozen as the river he looked at right now. And yet beneath that icy surface, the water still surged strong and steady, never abating. Kind of like the love he felt for Destrie. Over the years he'd managed to keep his feelings to himself, never letting on how much he yearned to have Destrie back.

He'd known better at the time, but he'd still made one of the biggest mistakes of his life in order to try to please his father. And he knew some of it was because of the ache of loneliness. He'd tried so hard to make things work. Until they didn't.

And that's when things started to turn around for him, because he'd finally came to a decision. The only way things were going to change in this town was if someone cared enough to make a difference. It was people who changed perceptions, not causes. And the Webster name still carried some weight. He'd thrown everything into helping build the youth center. And he'd succeeded. And where this town had succeeded once, it could be done again. Bit by bit. Nothing worth having came easy—be it freedom on a grander scale, or home, or...love.

If only he could convince Destrie of that fact. He wished there was a way to get through to him. If only there were more time, but Destrie never stayed around long enough to try to forge something together. He wanted everything on his terms. Well, sometimes one had to bend, to take the long way around to get to the goal.

He remembered last Christmas Eve, when Destrie had been here. Being with Destrie made everything seem different. It felt right, but Benedict didn't quite know how to get to that place again. And he should know how to do it. No, that wasn't right. He shouldn't be afraid of doing what he knew he was supposed to do.

The sun had set long ago. He stared up at the stars twinkling in the sky. It was a gorgeous, clear night, no snow yet. He'd been wrong. But it wasn't the first time.

For a moment he felt like he'd been traveling the wrong path for so long. He was lost, and he wasn't quite certain how to get back to the right road.

He raised his face to the night sky, focusing on the North Star. Bright and beautiful.

“What do I do?” He felt stupid talking to no one, but he couldn't help himself. “Do I turn my back on the ranch and just let it and Jake go to pieces? Give up everything I've fought for up till now? My heart's split two ways, and, I lose half of me either way I turn. If I turn my back on the ranch, will it follow me for the rest of my life?” An ache of melancholy hit him. He'd never known his mother—she'd died when he was four. New York City was a far cry from Coyote Forks. After she left the ranch his visits to her had been few. He remembered her smell and the comfort of her arms—only an echoing memory now. Laine had been the only woman in his life whom he'd felt comfortable with in that role. And now she was gone too.

She and Ray had been the parents he'd probably have wished for himself. They'd always been there for him. Just at this moment, he'd never felt so utterly alone.

“Damn, Laine. I sure do miss you.” He felt the sadness grab onto his throat, and he tried to force the emotion away.

“Benedict Webster, you're taking on more responsibility than you should. You always have. You've got to listen to your heart, boy.”

He twisted around, and his eyes widened. Now he knew he'd lost it for sure. “Who are you?” It sure couldn't be who he thought it was.

“You know who I am, young man. You wanted me here, and here I am. Talk to me, boy.”

The pale, ethereal image of Laine Carson floated toward him. But she looked more like the young woman he'd known when he was a boy than the frail widow who'd pined for her dead husband.

Slowly, afraid she would disappear, he dismounted from his horse.

“You aren't real,” he said, trying to convince himself of that fact. He'd never believed in ghosts. This shouldn't be happening.

“I'm as real as you need me to be, Benedict.”

He didn't dare reach out to try to touch her. He knew she would disappear for sure if he did. And right now she was right. He needed her here. He was at a crossroads, and he needed to make a decision.

“What is it you want?” she asked him softly. *“I mean, really—in your heart. What catches at your gut and tells you that you can't go another step, take another breath, without having it?”*

He was afraid to voice it out loud. He just shook his head.

"Say it, Benedict. Admit what you've been afraid to say out loud for so long."

"I-I can't. My father put this place in my hands. He made me responsible for its survival. I can't let him down."

"You're a fighter, boy. A quiet fighter, but still a fighter. But now's the time you need to make yourself heard. You know why your pa did that. You've known all along. He used the ranch to keep you away from what you wanted. Just before he died, you were all set to leave. Do you remember when we talked about it?"

He remembered all too well. But they'd come long past that point. When he'd finally gotten up the nerve to tell his father he was leaving the ranch, the old man'd had a heart attack. It was while he was in the hospital that he informed Benedict that he was making Benedict administrator of his estate—not Jake.

And that's when he'd begun to feel the chains tightening around him. And then he'd even compounded that error in judgment. In the end, he knew he couldn't leave without destroying everything his father and his grandfather had worked so hard to build. And it was shortly after that pa had introduced him to Leann. He wished he could have given her what she needed; he'd forced himself to try. But it just hadn't worked.

"If I leave, Jake will run it all into the ground. And there'll be nothing for Mark. I can't turn my back on him."

"Don't things need to be allowed to run their course? Isn't it time? Jake's always resented you for holding the reins to the ranch. You said it yourself."

"But he doesn't want me to leave either."

Laine drifted closer. *"Is that what it's all about? The ranch? Or does he just not want you to be happy? Is this just a way for him to control you, the way he can't control the ranch? To make you suffer because of what your father did?"*

Benedict stilled. He hadn't thought of that before. He'd never been able to see beyond the guilt that he carried for causing his father to have a heart attack and eventually die.

"Oh God," he said as he began to realize why he had stayed and what Jake's real motives were. It was all about the guilt. Or at least most of it was.

He looked up to where Laine had been standing a moment ago, but she was gone. Had she ever really been there? Or had Benedict used her memory to try to sort out his own troubles?

He got back on his horse and turned toward home. He was leaving, and this time no one was going to stop him. He had to find Destrie. Somehow they had to work things out.

Once back at the barn, he couldn't get his horse put up fast enough. In his mind, he planned. It wasn't going to be easy to disengage himself from this place even for a short time, but by God, that was exactly what he was going to do.

He didn't need to do it all tonight, and he could get most of it handled by phone and e-mail from Cheyenne. But he was going to take all the time he needed, and do whatever it took to convince Destrie to come back with him. Or find a way they could be together one way or the other. Maybe there was a way to have it all. It was just going to take work to find it.

And then something else made him pause. What if Destrie was involved with someone else? What if he'd already washed his hands of Benedict?

"Take a chance, Benedict." He could hear Laine's voice inside his head. *"Follow your heart."*

He never had been much of a gambler, but this time he was going to do it. If things didn't work out, he'd worry about it then. But he had to try.

He took the stairs to his room two at a time. He dragged out a duffel bag and began stuffing clothes inside. No way he was waiting for tomorrow. His gut said he had to leave tonight. No more waiting. He'd done enough of that for the last nine years.

His brother confronted him on the staircase. He eyed the duffel bag.

"Where are you going?"

"To Cheyenne. For a few days, maybe more."

"But it's almost Christmas. What about the plans for the party?"

Benedict took a deep breath. He looked his brother straight in the eyes. "I think you know where I'm going and why."

"You can't leave. What about the ranch? Who's going to take care of the bills? Arrange for the payroll?"

"I can handle everything from Cheyenne. I packed my laptop, and I can do it all online. You've got my cell number. Any problems, just call me."

Jake took another step up. His expression hardened. "You're going after that fucking queer." He grabbed for the duffel. Benedict yanked it back.

"You're not stopping me, Jake. Not you, not the old man, not this ranch."

"You can't leave me alone here. This place is yours too."

"I don't want it anymore. Not without Destrie. I've tried it your way and Pa's way. No more."

"What about what Pa wanted?"

"I know exactly what Pa wanted. I know what you want. And now I'm going after what I want."

He tried to brush past Jake. Jake grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him against the banister.

Benedict dropped the duffel bag, saw it bounce down the steps to land at the bottom. He grabbed Jake's upper arms and shoved back. Jake careened into the wall, pictures falling, glass breaking.

"I'm not staying, Jake. There's nothing you can say to stop me from going. I'm finished."

He dropped his hands and turned away.

"She was the old man's whore!"

Benedict turned back to look at Jake questioningly. "Who was?"

"Two Rivers' mother. I found a letter she wrote Pa in some of his papers."

Benedict stilled. It couldn't be true. "I don't understand."

Jake straightened from the wall. "After her man had died in a construction accident, her car broke down in Coyote Forks. Apparently she was heading back to her folks' place down south. Pa saw her at the diner and offered her a job to keep her close. He wanted her. You know Pa: he wants something; he gets it—whatever it takes. She needed her job to feed her brat. She'd had enough apparently and was leaving him when she had the...accident." Something in Jake's eyes shifted, but Benedict couldn't quite put his finger on what it meant. "It was Pa who gave the brat

to the Carsons to raise. He never thought—never expected the two of you would end up as fuck buddies.”

“Is that why you went after him?”

“It was Pa who put us up to it. Said it had to be done. Had to get you loose of him.”

Benedict reeled back. He looked at Jake. “Did everyone know who she was? Even Laine and Ray?”

Jake shrugged. “She was Pa's business and so was her brat. No one wanted to get involved. No one was about to cross a Webster.”

“When? I don't remember her, nor Destrie. Not before.” Not before Destrie began to live with the Carsons.

“It was that last summer that Ma whined to have you go visit her. Pa finally relented. Remember? Two Rivers' ma was here that summer.”

Benedict thought he was going to be sick. He stumbled down the steps and picked up his bag.

“You can't go after him,” Jake yelled. “How do you know it isn't just revenge?”

Benedict didn't stop. He had to figure this out, but the ranch wasn't the place to do it. Had Destrie known all this? Was it all just about revenge? Did he know what happened and blame Benedict's father for everything, and had he used Benedict to get back at the Webster family for wrongs done to his kin? Is that why he'd left the first time, because he'd discovered the truth?

There was only one man who could give him the answers he needed. And as afraid as he was to find out the truth, Benedict had to go to Cheyenne. He could rent a hotel room, sort through some of his jumbled thoughts, and when he was calmer, he would find Destrie and get some answers. He couldn't move forward without knowing. Not anymore. Doubts and fear careened inside Benedict's head.

He raced out the door, threw the bag in the back of the truck, and clambered inside. He hardly noticed that it had begun to snow. He didn't care—he had to get away from this place; he couldn't stand looking at any of them. But could Destrie stand looking at him?

Destrie's mother had been his father's mistress. He tried to wrap his mind around that fact. His father'd had more than a few women in his life before he died. Most transitory, more than a

few one-night stands. Never anything lasting or permanent. Who would have noticed one more woman among the many? Except this one had died and left a boy orphaned.

What Benedict couldn't grasp was his father's taking responsibility for finding the boy a home with the Carsons. It seemed out of character. Something wasn't quite right, but Benedict couldn't exactly put his finger on what it was.

An hour later he was heading along the slick road of the interstate when the car in front of him swerved. It crashed into another car, sending it careening across the lane. There was no way for him to avoid what happened next. But maybe if his mind hadn't been otherwise occupied, his reflexes would have been quicker, his mind sharper. He veered right, but the car in the outside lane, red brake lights flickering, barricaded his escape. He slammed on the brakes; the truck fishtailed and skidded out of control.

For one brief moment, he wondered if this was what had happened to Destrie's mother. And then the image of Destrie appeared in front of him. The sharp edge of regret slashed through him just before he crashed into the guardrail and the world went black.

Chapter Eight

Destrie tried to remain calm. His gait was measured; he held himself in control as he approached the emergency room. The smell of antiseptic and disinfectant poured over him. People rushing, the murmur of voices. His own ears were attuned to one particular voice; his eyes searched for one particular man. If he hadn't had a friend who worked in the emergency department, he never would have known that Benedict was in Cheyenne, nor that he'd been in a car accident.

"Can I help you?" a nurse asked.

He turned to look at her.

"Benedict Webster. He was in a car accident. I was told he was brought here."

The woman behind the desk looked at her computer terminal and scanned the list.

"Are you a family member?" she asked.

"As close as it gets," he said, not even thinking about the implications of his response.

He'd almost lost it when he'd gotten the call from Charlie, a man he knew from the center. How he'd managed to track down Destrie was a miracle in itself. But he had, and now nothing was going to keep him from getting to Benedict.

"Look, this is really important. He means a lot to me. I just need to be certain he's all right."

He saw the sympathy in her eyes as she again turned to the screen.

"Looks like he's being treated for some cuts and bruises, maybe a couple of broken ribs." She looked up and pointed just over his shoulder. "If you'll head toward that door, I'll buzz you through. Someone will direct you from there."

"He's conscious? He's going to be okay?"

She waved her hand. "Just go on through, and someone will be able to answer your questions."

No more time to waste. He heard the buzzer and stepped through. More questions and then finally he found himself in front of the door to the examination room. He looked through the glass and saw Benedict sitting on a table.

From this angle, the expression on Benedict's face wouldn't have told anyone a thing about the amount of pain he was in as the physician wrapped his ribs. But Destrie saw the tic at the corner of Benedict's right eye, the tightened jaw, the fisted hand.

Slowly Destrie opened the door, and Benedict turned to look at him. Destrie tried not to show his concern when he saw the left side of Benedict's face. The eye was swollen and almost totally closed; his cheek was already bruising.

"Okay. All done, Mr. Webster. I'll leave a prescription for some pain medication."

"Not necessary, Doc. I'll be fine." He didn't take his attention off Destrie.

"He'll take that prescription, Doc. I'll see to it that he takes them if it gets bad enough. He always was a stubborn cuss," Destrie said.

The doctor looked first at Benedict and then at Destrie. A tense silence hung thick in the sterile room.

"He shouldn't be driving if he takes these. They'll probably make him sleepy."

"He won't," Destrie said. "He's coming home with me. I'll make sure."

Destrie felt like he was outside his own skin watching from a distance. What was Benedict doing in Cheyenne He'd given him the number to the center in order to leave a message for him, but what did it all mean? He didn't want to read too much into things.

"Here you go." The doctor held out the prescription. Destrie was the one who grabbed for it.

"I'll take care of that."

"Great." The doctor turned back to Benedict. "You'll be sore for a few days. Luckily nothing was broken, but there's a bit of bruising. Take it easy. Don't try to overdo it. Let us know if you experience any other problems." He nodded to Destrie, and then he left.

Suddenly a woman burst through the doorway, clasping the hand of a small towheaded boy. She immediately moved to the bed, sweeping past Destrie as though he weren't even there.

"Benedict. What happened? Why are you in Cheyenne? Annemarie told me you called, that you were here and that you needed to be picked up."

Benedict looked at Destrie and then turned to look at the young boy who stood next to the bed, his eyes wide and scared.

"Are you okay, Daddy?"

Daddy.

Destrie's eyes shot to the woman, to the boy, and back to Benedict. As realization struck, it was as though someone had punched him in the stomach.

"Your wife?" His tone was low and hoarse. Forming the question was probably one of the most difficult things he'd ever done in his life.

Benedict's expression turned shuttered.

"Ex-wife. We're divorced." It was the woman who turned to him and answered. Her gaze going dark and interested, as she surveyed him. "And you are?"

"He's my friend. Destrie Two Rivers. Destrie, this is Leann." Benedict looked down at the boy, and a soft smile curled his lips as he gingerly reached out to ruffle the boy's hair. "And this is Mark." He looked at Destrie. There was so much in his expression. "My son."

"Yeah, I gathered that." What more was there to say?

"Leann, lift that boy up here."

She did so and settled Mark carefully on the side of the bed. "You can't have him for the holidays. We already discussed that."

"I know. I didn't come to Cheyenne to intrude on you. I came for other reasons. If I'd had another option I wouldn't have bothered you." His gaze again turned to Destrie, who felt like a fifth wheel as he started at the trio.

"Well, I guess you have someone to see to you. I'll be leaving."

"Oh no," Leann said. "Mark and I are headed to my parents' place in the mountains. Since you're the person he came to see, maybe you can take care of him now."

"Thanks for the concern, babe," Benedict said.

She turned to look at him, the usual dollar signs flashing in her expression. "Well, sure, I'd care. Mark would be devastated if something happened to you."

She looked at Destrie again, a dark brow arched. "Seems I've heard your name before. From Jake, maybe?" And then Destrie saw a glimmer of understanding. "Oh yeah, now I remember." She turned back to Benedict. "I think he's the one you want...taking care of you anyway. Kiss Daddy good-bye, Mark. We have to go."

Mark put his small arms around Benedict's neck and kissed him on the cheek. "Merry Christmas, Daddy. I'll miss you. I'm glad you're okay."

"Me too, but we'll make up for it."

Then he released him, and Mark slid to the floor. Leann grabbed his hand.

"Sorry about your accident, Benedict. I'll be in touch when we get back to Cheyenne."

"Sure thing, Leann. Thanks for making the trip down here."

And then as quickly as she had arrived, she left, leaving a hint of her expensive perfume in her wake.

There'd been too many revelations in the last few days. Too much unexplained.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Destrie asked, breaking the tense atmosphere.

"You didn't stay around long enough to discuss anything, much less my getting married and divorced. And having a son. This isn't the way I'd have wanted to tell you, but I can't undo it now."

He looked at Benedict for a long time. Lines of pain etched his face.

Nor was this the time for more revelations. The man was hurting, and all Destrie wanted to do was get him home. That's what he focused on—not the hurt, the sense of betrayal, even though he knew it was misplaced.

"Ready to go?"

Benedict carefully slid from the table. He wavered a bit but then straightened. He was pale as a ghost, his eyes dark and shadowed as he looked at Destrie.

"Guess so."

Destrie started to move toward him, to give him some support, but Benedict waved him off.

“No, I can do it. Just show me where to go.”

Destrie nodded, then turned to hold the door open. Slowly Benedict passed through. Stubborn cowboy, always had to do things for himself. Never would accept help from anyone.

Destrie wanted to touch him, to hold him. He'd had a scare. He was still finding it difficult to believe Benedict was real and he was going to be okay.

They stopped at the front desk, and Benedict signed himself out. Destrie stood back and waited while Benedict did what he needed to do.

He always thought of Benedict as indestructible. It never occurred to Destrie that there would be a time in his life when Benedict was not there. He knew, having been in the eye of war, that it was so easy for a life to be snuffed out. He'd just never applied it to Benedict. This was definitely a wake-up call he could have done without. Or maybe it was one he needed.

“Wait here, and I'll bring my Jeep around. No need for you to walk out to the parking lot with me.”

Benedict set his jaw. “I can walk. Let's just go. I want to get out of here. I've had more than enough of hospitals for now.”

“Dammit, Benedict Webster. You never did listen.”

Suddenly Destrie remembered the night Benedict had carried him on his back to Doc Logan's. There'd been a couple of times when Destrie hadn't thought they would make it.

“Put me down, Benedict. You can't carry me all the way to Doc's place. You'll never make it.”

“Just shut up, Destrie.” Once more he was on his feet, dragging step by step. Long hours later he'd set Destrie's broken and bruised body on the front step and then knocked on Doc's door.

Benedict was a man with rigid determination and focus. But Destrie just wished he'd show that same determination about his relationship with Destrie. Instead he'd been doggedly determined to stay in Coyote Forks, even knowing that they could never accept him for who he was. And it was going to kill him one day.

Benedict carefully got into the Jeep, and Destrie got behind the wheel. He watched as Benedict carefully buckled his seat belt. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the headrest.

"You left, Destrie. You vanished without a word. I was tore up with you gone—I hurt, and I needed... It happened, all right. It was a mistake. But Mark came out of it, and I don't regret that. I love that boy more'n my own life. I'm not going to apologize for need'n someone. It just wasn't the right someone, and that didn't take long to figure out." He turned his head to the window.

Destrie started the truck. There was nothing left to say, at least right now, so he concentrated on getting them home. He was careful of the potholes in the road, trying not to jiggle Benedict too much. He stopped off at a drugstore to fill the prescription before heading to his apartment.

Benedict was ragged by the time they reached Destrie's place. His mouth was pressed into a thin line when they entered the apartment.

"Sit down and I'll make you something to eat. You shouldn't take these pills on an empty stomach."

Benedict ran a hand over his eyes. "Just show me where I can sleep. I only need to lie down."

"Right. You can take the bed. I'll stay on the couch—and I don't want an argument over it."

Benedict shook his head. "Not tonight. Simply show me where to bed down."

If there were a way for him to take Benedict's pain away, he would have done it without a murmur. No questions asked. Unfortunately, the only thing he could do right now was give him a soft place to lay his head.

"In here. It's not much, but it's better than the floor. Better than some of the places I've slept."

"Yeah, I'll bet it is."

Benedict's voice was filled with exhaustion. Destrie watched him slowly ease onto the bed. Destrie moved around to the other side and pulled back the covers. At least he'd just changed the bedding this morning after getting the week's laundry done. He guessed that was something anyway.

"Can't get my boots," Benedict mumbled.

Shit, he should have thought of that. Strapped up the way Benedict was, no way he could get his boots off.

Destrie knelt down in front of Benedict. First one boot, then the other, finally came off. Next Destrie eased off his socks. He knelt there and looked up into Benedict's face. Neither of them said a word.

"You have no idea what I'd like you to do for me right now if I wasn't hurting like hell. Damn, Destrie. You have no idea."

"Oh, I think I do."

Benedict removed his shirt. All that stark white bandage against lean, tanned skin played havoc with Destrie's willpower. He fought his own desire with a vengeance.

He got up and carefully eased Destrie back onto the bed. Damn good thing he had ironclad self-control, because the erection shoving against his zipper was steel hard, and tonight he was just going to have to ignore the need as best he could.

He reached over and undid Benedict's jeans.

"Can you lift your hips?" He tried not to let any emotion leak into either his expression or his words. "We've got to get these off you."

"Not a good idea," Benedict mumbled. "Just leave 'em."

"Can't. There's dried blood all over them. Come on. We need to do this."

Moments later Benedict was stripped down to his shorts and T-shirt. Destrie scooped up the dirty clothes.

"If you need anything, holler," Destrie said as he turned toward the door, trying to rid himself of the temptation of the man in his bed. He turned back to look over his shoulder, but Benedict's eyes were closed, and it looked like he was already out.

Destrie quietly closed the door when he left. He dropped onto the couch. It was going to be tough having the man here. He'd wanted to get into bed with him, to hold him close, to protect him from all the ills of the world. From death itself.

Overseas, he had managed to stay cool, to focus on the mission, and to blot out anything that might screw up his objective. But back here in the States, it was all too close, too emotional.

It wasn't the same edge of putting one foot in front of the other just to survive. Here, it was messy and passionate and almost too real.

He was still having problems adapting to civilian life. The counseling sessions were helping. Volunteering time at the True Heart Center helped as well. He knew it was going to take a while. He hadn't factored in that he was going to need to deal with his past baggage. He'd thought he knew what he was going to do, what the next step would be, how to move forward.

How to control his life just like he'd done when he joined the Army. But right now it seemed like nothing was in his control, not in any respect. The presence of the man in the next room had changed all that.

Destrie pulled off his shirt and then stretched out on the couch, Benedict's jeans clutched to his bare chest. He eased open his pants and released his stiff cock. He let out a long breath, then began to stroke the steely prick up and down.

There was an edge to his touch as he thought of the man in the next room. What exactly he would like to do to him. He remembered the night they'd share back in Coyote Forks. Within seconds he came, cum spurting onto his flat abdomen.

It helped to ease his tension somewhat, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly. He cleaned himself up, zipped up his pants, then grabbed the blanket from the back of the couch. He turned into the couch, knowing it was going to be a long night. Doubting he'd get any sleep. He could smell Benedict on the pants he still held.

Why had Benedict come to Cheyenne? How long was he planning to stay? Destrie wasn't certain he could just let him walk away this time. He'd left him once nine years ago, then both times after his foster parents' funerals. He wasn't certain he could do it again.

Maybe the spirits were trying to tell him something. And maybe this time he needed to listen.

But he had to wonder where Jake stood in all this? Did he know Benedict was in Cheyenne? With Destrie? Destrie had to wonder how fierce a dust storm that was going to stir up.

"Destrie?"

Destrie's head shot up, and he squinted in the darkness. The soft glow of the streetlamp was the only illumination in the room. He sat up.

“What do you need?” He rose to his feet.

Benedict leaned against the wall—it was the only thing holding him up, by the looks of it.

“I can't sleep knowing you're out here. I want you to come to bed.”

Destrie's heart seemed to stop for a minute and then began to hammer hard.

“You—are you sure about this?”

“Yes. Even if you can't forgive me for marrying Leann and not telling you. I know there's a lot for us to settle—you were gone a long time. But not tonight. Tonight I just need you lying next to me. I need to feel your arms around me.”

In that moment, in the darkness, nothing else seemed to matter. Just Benedict. Just the man he loved. He walked across the room. He cupped Benedict's jaw and kissed him. His tongue pushed deep into Benedict's mouth. The kiss deepened with all the want and fear and longing of nine years. All the guilt and desire twisted around. If he hadn't left Coyote Forks, not once, but three times—could things have been different? In the darkness of night, it seemed all things were possible.

Tonight there was no need for words.

He helped Benedict back to bed, helped him to lie down. And then he leaned forward and pulled off Benedict's boxers. He didn't want to cause Benedict further pain after what he'd been through, but he couldn't help himself. Benedict's taut skin gleamed in the moonlight. He stroked a hand down Benedict's body, over the tight bandages, across the skin warm and supple beneath his touch. He curled his fingers around the stiff erection. Carefully he climbed onto the bed.

“Don't move,” he whispered.

“Like I could. 'Fraid you're going to have to do all the work. Wish the damned thing would realize I ain't up to this.”

“You're up all right, boy. Hard as hell, from what I can see. Those bruised ribs and pains pill don't seem to have slowed your stride one bit.” He didn't wait for a response, and he leaned forward to engulf Benedict's prick with his mouth. He heard Benedict groan.

He swirled his tongue beneath the hood and then up and down the stiff rod. He released Benedict's cock and dipped down to his balls, sucking them inside his mouth. He felt Benedict quiver beneath him.

“Oh yeah.” Destrie heard the whisper of Benedict's pleasure surround him in the darkness.

Destrie allowed Benedict's balls to pop free of his mouth, and he used his tongue to glide up Benedict's length, pass over distended veins, and swirl beneath the mushroomed head. Then he sucked him deep inside once again.

He tasted Benedict's climax, felt him buck beneath him. Heard the groan that was part pain and part pleasure as he swallowed Benedict's cum.

When it was over, he moved up the side of the bed to stretch out beside his lover.

“You need to get some rest,” Destrie said. “We'll talk later.”

“Yeah,” Benedict mumbled. “I guess there's a lot to say, but I'm not up to it all right now.”

Too much that needed to be said. Benedict had a son; he'd been married and apparently was now divorced. And he wanted to ask Benedict if he had known Destrie's mother worked at the Webster Ranch. If he remembered her.

He lifted up onto an elbow and looked down at the wounded man. His eyes were closed and his breathing rhythmic. They had known each other so well when they were younger, but now it seemed they were worlds apart. And there were secrets between them.

And there was the ranch and Coyote Forks. Was there any way they were going to be able to breach the wide chasm that seemed to exist between their worlds? Could they find some common ground other than sex?

Destrie dropped back against the pillows and stared up at the ceiling. He wanted to think there might be away. If they both wanted it bad enough.

Chapter Nine

A week later Benedict sat across the room in Destrie's apartment, feeling as out of place as it was possible to feel. There was a gathering of gay men, mostly Native American, all of whom seemed to be a part of an organization called True Heart. All the men had something in common with Destrie. All of them supported the rights of gay Native Americans and were trying to find a common ground for acceptance in their community.

He knew Destrie had always felt an outsider in Coyote Forks. But now Benedict guessed maybe he knew how Destrie felt. Benedict had ties to the community that Destrie had never had, never seemed to want to have. But here, he seemed at ease. Or maybe the better word was he had found some measure of equality that he'd hadn't been able to experience in Coyote Forks.

He studied Destrie as his lover led the discussion about the plans for the upcoming solstice celebration that all the men expected to take part in.

"I think Dan Martin's place is an ideal location to hold the dance," one of the men said.

Destrie nodded his head. "Seems right. We've been out to take a look, and it appears to be just what we want. Who's printing up the notices? Do we have someone in charge of getting them out?"

And so the discussion went on, with one of the men named Charlie taking down notes and making the odd comment. Benedict had learned that Charlie was the man who worked at the hospital and had informed Destrie that Benedict had been admitted. It was something to know that Destrie had mentioned his name to someone. That he hadn't totally forgotten about Benedict.

An hour later the meeting dispersed, with everyone seemingly in good spirits. After Destrie closed the door on the last man, he turned to look at Benedict. The silence between the two men ever since Benedict had arrived was unsettling. Each was tiptoeing around the other.

When Benedict had finally gotten up the morning after his first night in Destrie's apartment, Destrie had already left. When he'd returned to the apartment, he was carrying

Benedict's duffel bag, which he'd picked up from the police station. But it was as though he were a different man, closing himself off. He'd not joined Benedict that night but instead had slept on the couch, and Benedict didn't approach him again. He tried not to think about how good it had been.

After the third night, Benedict had adamantly refused to continue sleeping in Destrie's bed. They'd gotten into an argument over it, but in the end Benedict had said he would leave and go to a hotel. So Destrie had finally agreed. But they still didn't discuss what was on either of their minds. It seemed to Benedict they were both afraid of opening up that discussion, afraid of what it would mean. Since the blowup, it had been like two stallions pawing at the ground, neither one willing to make the first move.

Destrie let out a sigh. "You've hardly said a word all night. Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

Benedict shrugged. How could he tell him? It was something he needed to sort out for himself. Destrie was involving himself in this community. Was there really a place for Benedict in his life?

He'd left the ranch, and he hadn't a clue what he was going to do with his life—whether he should stay here or return to the ranch. He was broke, his truck was totaled, he had absolutely nothing. Not even a place to live. Well, not one that he could call his own. He was beholden to Destrie for all of it.

He stretched out his legs and crossed them. Leaning back, he stared up at the stark white ceiling.

He heard Destrie rustling around the room, and then the faint squeak of springs as he dropped onto the sofa.

"How are the ribs?" Destrie finally said.

Benedict looked at him. It seemed there was some great chasm between the two men now, and Benedict didn't know how to breach it. Or if he should even try. He knew it was his own fault.

"Fine. Hardly a pinch now."

"Good." Destrie paused for a long moment as he studied Benedict. "I expect you'll want to be heading back to the ranch soon."

So that was it. He was eager to be rid of Benedict. After all, Destrie had a new life all set for him. Why would he want to be reminded of his past? And that's all Benedict really was, wasn't it? Just a reminder of something Destrie would rather forget.

Suddenly Benedict rose up from the chair. He stalked across the room and grabbed his coat; then he turned toward the door.

"You going out? Now?"

"Yeah. And don't worry. I can probably grab a bus back to Coyote Forks in the next couple of days. You don't need to worry about having me underfoot much longer."

"Benedict, that isn't what I meant."

But Benedict wasn't waiting around to hear more. He had to get out. He had to clear his head.

Benedict grabbed the next city bus and rode for a long time, just staring out at the passing street. His mind refused to focus; it flitted from one thing to another. But always, Destrie was at the core of every thought. He was at the center of every emotion that went through Benedict. So why couldn't he talk to him? Why couldn't he ask him about his mother and Benedict's father? Was he afraid of learning everything they'd shared was a total sham? All lies just to get back at Benedict's father?

Because he darned well knew that if that was the case, he didn't really want to know the truth. He couldn't blame Destrie if that was why he came on to Benedict. But it also made Benedict feel like a fool for not realizing that he was nothing but a pawn in the whole game. For his father. For his brother. For Destrie.

At the moment it seemed as though there were no place that Benedict could call safe; nowhere to call home.

"Last stop, folks," the bus driver called out.

Benedict looked out the window and saw an all-night diner across the street. It had started to snow, and white flakes began to stick to the pavement. Right now a cup of strong, old-fashioned joe sounded real good.

Benedict stepped through the door, and the blast of heat from inside almost took his breath away. A man with long black hair turned to look at him. Benedict realized the man was just as surprised to see Benedict as Benedict was to see him.

"Hey, Benedict. What you doing here? Where's Destrie?"

Benedict shrugged out of his coat, realizing he couldn't just turn around and leave. Charlie was sure to think it odd. So he walked over and took the red stool next to Charlie's.

"I was getting antsy, so I decided to go out to clear my head. Not quite sure how I ended up here. What about you?"

"My sister has the late shift. Don't like her walking out alone, so I usually stop by to give her a hand." He turned to the waitress behind the counter. "Hey, Leslie. How about a cup of coffee and a piece of that apple pie for my friend here?"

The girl resembled Charlie a bit around the eyes and mouth. A pretty girl, probably in her late twenties, her long black hair braided. She smiled at Benedict.

"One second. Be right with you."

After she delivered the coffee and pie with a side of vanilla ice cream, she left them alone. Charlie turned to study Benedict.

"What ails you, Webster?"

"What makes you think something's bothering me?"

"Awful quiet tonight at the meeting. Seemed to me like something was weighing on your mind. You know, Destrie doesn't talk much about his past. But he's mentioned you a time or two."

Benedict took a sip from his mug. "Yeah, well, we spent a lot of time together when we were kids."

"Yeah, kind of figured. Sort of high school sweethearts."

"I guess. That sort of thing never lasts."

Charlie looked at Benedict. "You think things have cooled off?"

"He's got a lot going for him here. He's moved on."

"You think he's left you behind?"

Benedict shrugged. "We all have to change, don't we? Not sure I really belong here." Nor in Destrie's life. Too much had changed.

Charlie swiveled around on the stool. “Have you talked to him since you came to town? Seems to me he's had stuff weighing him down since you got here. Won't talk much, but you might want to talk things out, whatever's bothering you.”

Benedict finished his coffee, reached into his pocket, and placed some money on the table.

“I better get going; it's getting late.”

“Destrie's a good man. Not too many like him. Army gave him a lot of baggage to carry too. Hope you get things sorted out.”

“Thanks, Charlie.”

Benedict left the diner. Snow was coming down thicker than before. It took him a good hour to get back to the apartment. He was just about to turn the key when he heard shouting from the other side of the door. Someone else was inside the apartment. And then, as he swung open the door, he was shocked when he saw who was there.

Chapter Ten

Destrie watched Benedict slam out of the apartment. This was one time he felt totally impotent about what to do, what to say. He had no idea how to make things right with Benedict.

Several hours later and he began to worry. It was close to midnight. A loud banging sounded at the door.

“Two Rivers, open this damned door and let me in. I wanna see my brother.”

Jake Webster was not a man he wanted to see right now. But obviously the man was drunk. Destrie couldn't just leave him in the hallway, waking up the rest of the tenants in the building.

He opened the door, and Jake burst into the room. He staggered and then halted at the center. He whirled around on Destrie.

He tried to straighten his shoulders and face Destrie and almost tripped over his own feet.

“I'm here to take my brother home.”

“If he'd wanted to go back there, he could have left at any time, Jake.”

“You think he wants to be here with you?” Jake shook his head. “You've sure run him a merry chase. No hoss better broke to the saddle. He knows what you are, half-breed.”

It was too late to get into this with a surly, drunk cowboy, and Destrie was too tired. He didn't want to be doing this.

He wanted Benedict. Here. In his bed. Fucking all night long. With Jake's arrival, it was unlikely he and Benedict would be able to sort things out.

“Why don't you sit down before you fall down, Jake? Let me make you some coffee. You can't drive in your condition.” He started to head toward the kitchen.

“Bastard of a whore. That's all you are, and Benedict knows the truth.”

Destrie stopped in his tracks and spun around toward Jake. “What did you say?” The lowered tone of his voice should have warned Jake, but Destrie figured he was probably too damned drunk to realize he was taunting a dangerous animal with his words.

“I said you're just the bastard of one of my father's whores.”

Something sparked in the back of Destrie's mind. An image of a big man arguing with his mother just before she picked him up and put him in the car. Then things went dark again. It was just a blurry impression.

“Benedict knows you just went after him to get back at our pa. Nothing more than revenge.”

He tried to calm himself, refusing to rise to Jake's bait. He couldn't let the man win that easily. But maybe Destrie would find out the truth.

“What exactly are you trying to say?”

“Before Pa died, he told me exactly what she'd been to him. Housekeeper.” Jake snorted.

“And Benedict knows?”

Is that why he'd been so distant since he'd been here? So many things seemed to fall into place. It was as though someone had yanked back a curtain, and he saw things more clearly than he ever had before. His mother had been Webster's mistress. She'd been running away from him when the accident had occurred. That had to be what had happened. And Benedict thought Destrie had become his lover in order to get back at Webster? Destrie hadn't even known about the relationship. Not until just now.

And then he heard the slide of the key in the lock, and he knew a confrontation was inevitable.

“What's going on here?” Benedict asked as he strode into the apartment. “What are you doing here, Jake?”

“I'm here to take you home. You can't just walk away from the ranch like this. Everything's a mess. Do you really want to drive it into the ground?”

Finally Jake collapsed onto the sofa. “You can't leave me,” he whined. “We done too much to keep you there.”

Destrie felt his insides tighten up. “Everything you've done? Exactly what was done?”

Jake's gaze shifted away from Destrie's. Benedict leaned over and curled his fingers into Jake's shirt, yanking him to his feet. "What'd you do, bro?"

Jake tried to break free, but Benedict snapped him back to attention. "What'd you do?"

"It weren't me, Ben. It was Pa. He was the one done it—the one who gave the orders. Nobody crosses Pa; you know that."

Benedict looked at Destrie. Destrie felt the connection with his lover as Benedict turned back to Jake. "What did he order, Jake?"

Jake folded back onto the couch, dropping his head into his hands, rocking back and forth. "I heard them that night." He glanced up at Benedict, eyes bloodshot.

"Tell me," Benedict ordered. "Tell me what you heard."

"You remember Couzins?"

Benedict nodded. "Vaguely. He was one of the crew for a while, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, for about six months. He'd just got out of jail, I think, and Pa gave him a job. Oh yeah, he gave him a job, all right. Pa knew Maria was going to leave, and no woman walked out on Pa. He set Couzins to watching her. That night she had the accident, Couzins was following her. I heard him tell Pa. He tried to get her to pull over—to turn around. But something happened, and she lost control of the car. Couzins didn't wait around; he hightailed it back to the ranch."

Destrie felt like he'd been punched in the chest. His mother's death hadn't been an accident. She'd been run off the road intentionally.

"Is that why Couzins left so suddenly?"

Jake nodded. "Pa gave him some money and sent him packing before the sheriff could come around asking questions. He must have felt guilty, don't you think? He wouldn't have found the boy a home with Ray and Laine—he wouldn't have done that if he didn't feel something, right?"

Destrie couldn't even begin to understand the workings of Webster's mind after what he'd done.

“But he sure as hell didn't expect you to be taking up with him like you did.” He jerked his head in Destrie's direction. “That's when he called me into his office.” Jake hunched forward once again. “That's when he told me what I had to do.”

“When you came after us?”

Jake nodded. Tears now rolled down his face. He looked up at Benedict, bleary-eyed. “I didn't want to, Ben. I didn't. I knew you'd be mad as hell. But I had to do it. Pa wanted him run off. I didn't have no choice.”

“You had a choice, damn you,” Benedict said, his voice hoarse with suppressed rage. “We all have choices. You could have said no.”

Jake shook his head. “It wasn't right what you done with him, Ben. I told the boys just to rough him up a bit. I didn't want his death on my conscience, but we had to make Pa's point. He had to know we meant business.” He ran his hands across his wet face. “I had too much to drink. Things got out of hand. That's all.”

Benedict dropped into the chair on the other side of the room. He looked as shocked as Destrie felt.

Destrie looked at Benedict. Something told him they weren't going to get their chance. He saw it in the look in Benedict's eyes.

“I'll get him out of here. You won't have to put up with us any longer,” Benedict said to Destrie.

“Put up with you? Is that what you think I've been doing? Just putting up with you?”

Benedict shrugged. “I don't even know why I came here. You left; you wanted it over with. I should have just left well enough alone. And after this I don't blame you. God, everything was against us from the start, wasn't it?”

“Benedict—”

Benedict held up a hand to halt him. “Don't say any more. My family's wronged yours, and I can't ever make that right. I never knew, Destrie. I swear to God, I never knew any of this. I wouldn't blame you for wanting revenge.”

“And you think that's why... You think it was all about revenge? *You think I knew?*”

Benedict ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know anymore, Destrie. I don't know anything."

"You can't trust your own judgment? Do you really think I would do that to you?"

"You know, I haven't known my own mind for some time. I think I need some space to figure it out."

"So you're leaving."

Benedict walked over to his brother and lifted him to his feet. "Where are your car keys, Jake?"

Jake reached into his pocket and pulled them out. Benedict took them and then looked at Destrie.

"It was never meant to be, Des. Life just doesn't always work out the way we expect it to. You know?"

"It was never revenge, Ben. I never knew about my mother and your father. Not until tonight."

Benedict dragged Jake, who was half-unconscious, toward the door and released him, watching as his brother stumbled out into the hallway. Benedict turned back to Destrie. "Don't much matter now, I guess."

"I don't want you to leave like this."

He saw a determination in Benedict's expression that told Destrie he wasn't going to change his mind. It was one of the things he'd loved about his childhood friend—his loyalty. And sometimes something he hated.

"He won't let you live your life, Ben. Not the way you should."

"We all make choices. I can't turn my back on them. People depend on the ranch—on the jobs, on the crops. And the cows. I don't know what I thought I was doing coming here. I've always known I couldn't leave the ranch. I've always known you couldn't stay there. It's just the way it is. But I had to try, you know?"

Before, Destrie would have said he understood what Ben was saying. But the pain and the sorrow that ramped through Destrie right now were almost too much to bear.

"Don't go." He forced the words out, his chest hurting with this new loss, but he also knew what Benedict's answer was going to be.

"I have to. I've got responsibilities, and I can't turn my back on them. You know, in the end, home's a place you've got to fight for; it ain't just handed to you. I thought I could walk away, but I can't." He dropped the apartment key on the coffee table and then looked at Destrie. "I don't know how to make this right for you. Hell, I don't know how to make it right for me. I love you, Destrie. I always have. Jake and his buddies aren't all that Coyote Forks is about. I wish you could see that. I wish I could make you want to come back home with me. But maybe now's not the right time; maybe it won't be never. But you got to make that choice, Destrie. Right now I got to go home and take care of business." He looked at Destrie, and Destrie thought his heart would break with the pain and conflict he saw in Benedict's eyes. He didn't know what to say.

"Don't go, Ben. We don't have to stay here; we can get out of Wyoming. Find someplace fresh. Just the two of us, with none of the baggage."

Benedict took two steps forward, cupped his face, and kissed him. His lips and tongue ravaged, aroused, and said good-bye all before Destrie could even respond. And then Benedict stepped back. There was such a look of regret in his expression, it almost tore out Destrie's soul. He didn't say a thing. Quietly his lover turned and walked out the door, closing it softly behind him.

Suddenly the apartment seemed all too quiet. Destrie wanted to race after them, to stop Benedict from leaving. But in the end he stayed rooted where he was.

It felt like he was at a crossroads once again. He remembered the pain, the hostile stares. But he also remembered his foster parents, and he remembered loving Benedict. He remembered Mary McBlaine and Pastor Lark. He couldn't go back there. He couldn't make that place his home. He'd never thought of it as home. Had he ever thought of any one place as home?

He remembered the tent by the creek. And he recalled the feeling of joy when he was with Ben. The feeling of displacement without him. The loneliness that encompassed him right now, within a city bustling with people.

This apartment should feel like home. But right now it just felt like a place to lay his head when he needed sleep. He looked around. It was stark and empty of anything personal. Just like when he'd been in the Army. It wasn't home.

He had no memory of his father and only fleeting glimpses of his mother. Laine and Ray had tried to raise him right. Why was it that he fought so hard about caring for people? And that's exactly what he'd done. Was it the guilt because he'd promised his mother that he'd never forget? Had that promise destroyed any chance of happiness with the man he loved?

Why did Destrie have to make it so hard for people to love him? Why was he always pulling away? The world wasn't black-and-white. There was compromise. That was something he hadn't been willing to do all these years. To give a little in order to receive. To find a balance. And in the end to forgive. Even himself. Wasn't that some of what the counselor had tried to get him to understand?

He dropped onto the couch, unsure of what he was going to do next. Would he just let that hole in his heart remain empty and not even attempt to fill it? Would he try to live his life without the love he yearned for?

Benedict had come here and tried to meet him halfway. Deep roots kept Benedict tied to the ranch and yet he'd been willing to attempt to make a go of things—a fish out of water. Because he loved Destrie. Whereas Destrie had learned to adapt to city or country—a rootless tumbleweed, afraid to commit himself to a man he said he loved.

Home wasn't a place. It was people. It was love. And right now, for him, it wasn't here in Cheyenne. There had to be another way. He just wished he could get his mind to wrap around what that should be.

What was his definition of home? Who was his definition of home? Could he compromise enough to be with the man he'd always known was the other part of who he was? Did he dare try to breach that damned town to be with Ben?

He looked out the window at the twinkling lights. Snow falling heavily. He hoped they'd make it home safely. The solstice was almost upon them. That time of year when life called for new beginnings. Was he ready to make a fresh start? Was it possible to do so? Could he find a way to live in Coyote Forks to be with the man he loved?

It was a huge gamble. And then there was the question of whether Benedict really wanted Destrie to be there.

But first there were things that Destrie had to attend to before he could even begin to think about his future.

Chapter Eleven

Benedict rode up the ridge and looked down at the creek. One thing about the land was that it didn't change. He could always count on its being there. There was some comfort in the unchanging vista that met his eyes.

He could almost feel the steady, ice-cold rush of power beneath the ice. He could hear it. For him it was a soothing sound. Maybe that's why he'd gotten it into his head to build the cabin and had chosen this part of the ranch to build on. It suited him.

He studied the land. Looking for something—something in particular. If he really was coming, Benedict would see him here. Benedict reached inside his coat and pulled out the postcard he'd received last week. Five words written in a black scrawl that had Benedict's heart pumping in his chest all week.

I'll be home for Christmas.

Cryptic. What did it mean? Benedict didn't want to think about what he wanted it to mean. He didn't dare try to interpret a meaning to the words.

He knew the FOR SALE sign had come down in front of the Carson place about a month after Benedict had returned to Coyote Forks. No one had moved in, and Benedict had wondered what it meant.

Almost a year had gone by with no word from Destrie. A lot had changed in that time. Mostly for the good, but still it had changed. He'd come to terms with not having Destrie in his life. He'd enjoyed time with his son—Leann had mellowed a bit since she'd found a new man in her life. And Jake—Jake was different too.

All that poison bottled up inside him was finally cleansed, and that stint in a rehab clinic had helped. He was close to celebrating a year clean and sober. He'd even found a pretty gal who seemed to be good for him. It was one of the reasons Benedict had decided to build the cabin—to

give Jake some room. And himself. Jake had always been fond of the big house. He was the eldest, so it should have gone to him, was Benedict's thinking.

He liked the cabin. In some ways it reminded him of Destrie. And all he had to do was look out the window at the winding creek below, and every moment they'd been together came rushing through him. Sometimes it was almost more than a man could bear loving a man like Destrie and not being able to be with him. But sometimes—well, a lot of times—life wasn't always fair. And a man, well, he just bore up to what needed to be done and kept putting one foot in front of the other. No other way to do it.

The world wore at a man, just like the water in the creek riding the land hard and steady, never ending. But the world just kept on doing its living.

He rubbed the slick finish of the postcard, treating it almost like a talisman. It was getting dark when he saw something in the distance. A black splotch against the luminous white snow moving across the land. He pocketed the postcard. His stomach was tied in knots as he watched the black shadow shape into a defined image. The breath caught in his chest when he thought he recognized the ebony-colored stallion with the white blaze across its nose. It couldn't be. They'd freed that stallion more than ten years ago.

He watched as Destrie leaned forward and urged the stallion up the ridge to join him.

"I didn't know if you'd come. Or even if you got my postcard," Destrie said breathlessly as he came to a halt. The sight of frigid breath accompanied his words. "I left it up to destiny as to whether I'd find you here or not."

Benedict shrugged. "Guess I'm kind of like this land, part of the fixture. Whenever you get the itch to come home, I expect I'll be here waiting." He felt that came out bad. Had he meant for it to sound so censoring?

Destrie ducked his head, the broad-brimmed hat shading his expression. "Suppose I deserved that."

"All depends, I guess, on why you're back." He looked at Destrie, at the horse. Something was different. Destrie's expression, the whole way he held himself was different. And he'd lost weight. His high cheekbones were more prominent, his eyes more shadowed.

Benedict pointed to the horse. "Where'd he come from? That can't possibly be the same one."

Destrie patted the stallion on the neck with a gloved hand. “Yep, same one. It's time. Believe it or not, he wandered into Coyote Forks, into the damn backyard. I took it as a sign.” He looked at Benedict, and there were things in his eyes Benedict was afraid to interpret. Just as he'd been afraid to interpret the words on the postcard. “I'm thinking maybe it's time for both of us. Is there someplace we can go? I wanted to meet up with you alone first. Here, by the creek. I thought if you came here, then maybe there was—” He left the rest unsaid.

Benedict was afraid to hope. To even think about what this all might mean. Sure, it was the Christmas season, but miracles just didn't happen.

And then he remembered that incident just before last Christmas when he'd thought Laine's spirit had visited him. Right here on this spot. It sent a shiver down his spine. The night seemed unusually warm, almost balmy. He looked at the sky, so clear and bright.

“Come with me,” he said as he turned his horse in the opposite direction that Destrie had ridden in from.

“Where we going?”

“Lot's happened this last year. Built me a cabin. We'll go there. Then we can talk.”

And Benedict figured there was a lot for them to talk about. He'd prepared the cabin just in case. He'd even put up a small tree. They rode the short distance back to the cabin in silence. Apparently Destrie had as much on his mind as Benedict did.

Chapter Twelve

As Destrie dismounted and walked alongside Benedict toward the barn, he tried to figure out how he was even going to begin the conversation he needed to have with this man. Benedict had changed. He was even more cautious now than he had been before. And Destrie felt it was probably his fault.

So many times he'd walked away and turned his back on Benedict. So many times he'd hurt him because of his own fears and guilt. Why should Benedict trust him after everything that had happened?

Once the horses were put up, Benedict led him to the cabin. Benedict went immediately to the fireplace. He picked up the matchbox from the mantel and struck a match. Immediately the fire blazed to life. Destrie pulled off his gloves and shrugged out of his coat. He hung it and his hat on the coatrack near the door. He sat on the wooden bench and pulled off his wet, ice-covered boots.

"Want a beer? Or coffee?" Benedict asked.

"Whatever's easy," Destrie said as he padded toward a chair near the fireplace. He ran a hand through his hair. Benedict handed him a beer, then crossed the room to drop onto the couch.

"Okay, so tell me why you're here." Benedict's eyes were coolly assessing, little expression to his face. "Why were you in Texas? I saw the postmark on the card you sent."

Again Destrie couldn't fault him for being wary. He sucked in a breath and released it slowly, trying to steady himself. He looked at Benedict. The Internet had made his search easy, but things still hadn't gone as quickly as he would have liked.

"I found Couzins in a prison in Texas. Well, I found out that's where he'd gone."

That got Benedict's attention. Surprise registered in his eyes as he leaned forward, elbows on jean-clad knees. "You found Couzins?"

"Sort of. He died two weeks before I finally tracked him down. Cancer."

“So you didn't get to talk to him?”

“Guess it wasn't in the plan. But at least I know he's dead. He won't be hurting anyone else.”

“What was he in for?” Benedict asked and then took a swig of beer from the bottle.

Destrie couldn't help noticing the wetness of his lips and how much he wanted to lick those last droplets to taste the beer mingled with the essence of the man. It had been so long. Every night his dreams had been filled with fantasies that involved Benedict. And now here he was in the same room with the object of his desire. It was almost more than he could bear. His cock poked against the front of his jeans.

“Manslaughter. Apparently he got drunk and ended up killing a man in a bar.”

“So that took you a year to do?”

Destrie shook his head. “I found my mother's family down across the border in Mexico. I saw—well, it's hard to say. It appears I have an uncle and three cousins. Two of my cousins moved to California.”

“So you looked them up too?”

“Yeah, I did. Nice folks. I'd like you to meet them sometime.”

“You've got a strange look on your face, what's that about? I'm getting the feeling it wasn't what you expected. What about your dad's people? Did you find them too?”

“No. There's nobody left. I found the res he grew up on and people who knew him. But no blood relations left there, apparently.”

“Sounds like you covered all your bases. Did you figure out where home was, Destrie?”

This was the moment. He looked at Benedict. Firelight flickering over his face, casting light and shadow. “You are. In the end it didn't matter where I went or what I did or who I met. They weren't you.” He dipped his head forward and stared down at the hardwood floor, focusing on the grain of satiny wood. He tried to gather courage to say what needed saying.

“What is it you want, hoss?”

Destrie leaned back in the chair. “I've taken a job out at the McBlaine place. That's where I rode over from. I want to volunteer time helping at the youth center you helped put together.” He lifted to his feet, his attention locking onto Benedict. “I want to be wherever you are. I know it

won't be easy." The words rushed out of his mouth like rocks caught up and tumbled by the surge of spring thaw in the creek. "You've got your brother; you've got a son to worry about. But I want to try. Every place I went, everything I did, I couldn't stay. I've been around the world, but it's here, with you, that's the only place I want to be. Now if I've run my course and come too late, just say the word and I'll leave. I won't bother you again. But if there's a chance, if you still care just a little bit—"

He didn't get to finish the sentence, because Benedict shot up from the couch and was across the room in two strides, his mouth fastened to Destrie's.

He thrust his tongue deep inside Destrie's mouth, and Destrie clung to the man as though he were the lifeboat that would keep him from drowning.

He lost himself in Benedict, hands sliding up over broad shoulders. He felt the heat of the flames in the fireplace as Benedict ripped open his shirt and shoved it down his arms, binding him. He spun him and shoved him onto the couch, where Destrie dropped, Benedict splayed over him, their hard cocks brushing against each other, searching for release.

Benedict looked down at Destrie. "If I want you? Damn, hoss, are you serious? I've wanted nothing but you, I think, since the first moment we met. You're the one who's always walking away. You keep leaving me."

Destrie's hands were at the front of Benedict's shirt, ripping it opening, his fingers testing flesh, finding a nipple, and twisting it between his thumb and forefinger. Benedict drew a ragged breath.

"There were several times you walked away from me, Ben, as I recall. At the bar." He tugged on the nipple, and Benedict groaned. "At the creek." He lifted his other hand, found the other nipple, and tugged. "You left me in Cheyenne." He leaned up and bit into Benedict's skin. And Benedict groaned again. He rolled onto the floor, Destrie right with him. He saw several droplets of blood seep from the wound on his chest. He leaned forward and licked at the wound, tasting his lover's blood.

"I didn't trust, Destrie. I couldn't. The cost was too high. You had to want this as much as me. You had to want this life, 'cause I am what I am. I'm tied to this place—to this land—and I need it as much as it needs me. I need you too, but you have to need me back."

Destrie leaned forward and kissed Benedict, tasting the man, the beer, the land. He tasted home and commitment and love in a way he never had before. In a way he'd been afraid to understand and accept.

He undid Benedict's jeans, then shoved the pants and Benedict's underwear down over his hips. His cock sprang free. Benedict lifted, and the clothing came off with slight effort.

Destrie stood over him as he removed the rest of his own clothing. "Don't suppose you've got lubricant."

"Nope. Got oil, though. Expect that'll do her up just fine."

Destrie smiled. "I expect it will." He padded into the kitchen, retrieved the oil, and then went back into the living room and dropped to his knees. He leaned forward and claimed Benedict's mouth, forcing him back to the floor. Twisting the cap from the bottle, he dribbled the oil down Benedict's chest, stopping just shy of his short curls.

He broke the kiss. Then, using both hands, he smeared the oil over Benedict chest, circling his tight nipples and sliding his slippery hands down Benedict's body until he reached the thick erection rising from the thatch of pale, curly hair.

Benedict lifted onto his knees and grabbed the bottle of oil. He poured some into his hands, then smeared it across Destrie's chest. He gripped Destrie's hard prick and slid his oil-covered hands up and down the rising shaft, circling over the mushroomed head and back down to his testicles. He cupped them, weighed them, stroked them. Just as Destrie did to him.

Breaths mingled, hot and heavy; mouths clashed and bodies rubbed together. Slick hands cupped muscled buttocks, slid around to the crease, and delved into the small hot hole that waited to be penetrated.

Twin groans erupted into the heavy, blazing atmosphere. Bodies undulated, illuminated in the firelight. Destrie pushed Benedict back onto the floor, spread his legs, then grabbed for the oil. He dribbled it over his cock. Using both hands, he lifted the man beneath him, spreading him wider.

Two fingers soaked with oil penetrated Benedict's hole, widening, preparing him to take Destrie.

"You ready for me?" he rasped into the steamy atmosphere.

"Fuck yes. Now, baby, now."

Destrie positioned the head at his entrance and pushed forward. Benedict's flesh split and captured him. The burn of penetration drove him deeper, harder, faster.

Benedict gripped his own cock, his hand moving up and down, an echo of Destrie's movements.

Destrie felt his climax peaking, churning from deep inside him. And then he shattered, crying out as he came.

Benedict's strong arms came up to surround him, drawing him down onto his chest. Breaths coming fast and deep, skin wet and still slippery with oil, the musky smell of spent passion clung to the warm air.

Destrie clung to Benedict, his half-hard cock still buried inside Benedict's hole.

Benedict's hand stroked down Destrie's back; the snap and spurt of the fire's sparks seemed loud in the pleasant aftermath of their passion.

"You're home, Destrie. Finally home."

Destrie felt the tears begin to rise, and he crushed closer to his lover, wrapping his arms around Benedict's strong shoulders. Strong, silent, and grounded. So much that Destrie was not. But no longer.

At last, Destrie had come home.

 THE END 

Loose Id(R) Titles by Adrianna Dane

Body Parts
Lonely Hearts
The Messenger

Adrianna Dane

The first defining love story Adrianna read back in junior high school was *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, and that set her on the road to her long standing love affair with the romance genre. Her inspiration in writing often can be found by listening to song lyrics and reading poetry by such poets as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edgar Allen Poe, and Ranier Maria Rilke. But finding inspiration for her stories truly has no boundaries for Adrianna.

She freely admits she is a romantic by nature and adding sensual heat to romance with a dusting of suspense is her motto. *Esmerelda's Secret*, released by Amber Quill Press in June of 2004, was Adrianna's first book, and with that story and her subsequent books has firmly established herself as a voice within the sensual/erotic romance genre.