



Love can be found among the pieces of a broken heart.

The night his brother, Simon, was killed in an accident, Dylan took on a double load of guilt. Guilt for walking away unscathed...and for secretly loving Simon's partner, Wade. Unable to bear the pain, Dylan left the Lazy G ranch to rebuild his life elsewhere.

A year later he reluctantly responds to his sister's plea to come home, where he finds the Lazy G falling apart. And so is Wade. Wade has stopped caring about the ranch, about everything that should matter most to him.

Though there's more ranch work than one man can possibly handle, Dylan throws himself into the task. Wondering how he's going to find the strength to pull Wade out of the fog of grief when his own is still as raw as a fresh wound. Wondering when Wade will finally see that his second chance for happiness is standing right in front of him.

Warning: Contains explicit, emotionally charged m/m sex. Extra box of tissues required. You could use your sleeve, of course, but we don't recommend it.

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Seeing You

Dakota Flint

Dedication

For anyone who has lost a loved one and managed to find happiness again.

Prologue

“It’s time for you to come home, Dylan.” The strain in my sister’s voice came across loud and clear over the connection, a palpable feeling despite being almost three thousand miles away.

“Why, Erin? What’s wrong?”

“You’ve been gone too long. Wade... I’m worried about him.” She didn’t continue.

“Why’s that?” I closed my eyes, trying to block out the image of the last time I’d seen Wade, standing silent by Simon’s graveside, his face a hardened mask, no emotion showing through except the emptiness in his eyes.

“Every time I call to say the girls and I are going to come out for a visit, he makes some excuse. The few times I’ve just driven out there, he wasn’t around. And the ranch... well, it looks like it’s falling apart.”

“What?” I couldn’t keep the surprise out of my voice. The only thing Wade had loved more than that ranch was Simon.

“Yeah, I couldn’t get over how many repairs need to be made and how much needs to be done, and I couldn’t find Wade or Mack. You...you just need to come home now, Dylan. It’s time to stop running.” The last part was said hesitantly.

“I’m not running.” I bit off the words that tried to force their way out after that. Did I even believe that anymore?

“The girls miss their uncle,” Erin said. I didn’t think the pain would be so acute, not after all this time, but thinking of eight-year-old Amelia and six-year-old Molly crying for their Uncle Simon made my stomach clench.

I gripped the phone tight and tried unsuccessfully to swallow. I said, “We all miss him, Erin.”

I heard her heave a tired sigh. “No, you idiot, their Uncle *Dylan*. They miss *you*.” Another sigh. “Just come home, Linnie. We need you.”

At the use of that silly childhood nickname, my throat closed up and I couldn’t speak. I thought for sure I was going to lose it right there on 23rd Street, surrounded by a blur of navy blue suits swarming into the State Department buildings and an army of tourists clicking away on their cameras. Continuing my walk, I stared out at the Potomac and wondered what a dumb cowboy like me was doing busing tables in a city like this. I ignored the voice that whispered something about running. It sounded suspiciously like my brother Simon.

I stood staring at the water for a long time, watching it turn blood red as the horizon swallowed the sun. I shuddered. Erin was right.

It was time to go home.

Chapter One

Turning onto the private road that would lead me to the ranch buildings, I took a deep breath. It had been two weeks since that phone call from Erin. I didn't exactly drag my feet, but I probably could have made it back last week.

The dread ate at me on the drive back to Montana, through big cities offering nothing but traffic and problems, through the small abandoned towns that offered a skeleton of the past, through mountains and rolling hills and flat plains. Over the river and through the woods, to Wade's house I go.

My smile faded as I pulled my beat-up blue Chevy to the front of the bunkhouse. I hopped out of the truck and stood still as I tried to figure out why this place felt so...off. Not even the day after Simon's funeral had felt like this.

I walked around a pick-up truck, its mouth gaping open and the intestines abandoned on a blanket on the ground, and made my way over to the corral, hooking my boot on the bottom rung of the fence. And then it hit me.

Where was all the life?

I did a three-sixty, scouring the meadow and the foothills, the ranch house, the bunkhouse, the pond, the road winding out of sight leading back to civilization, the stables and the barn, the clumps of trees lining Sweet Grass creek, the trails leading into the mountains. Nothing.

Where the hell was everyone? The hands? Mack? Wade? More puzzling, where the hell were the animals?

A breeze brushed past my neck and rustled the leaves on the aspen trees, which until that moment had stood silently at attention around the outbuildings. I stood still and listened, but I didn't hear anything other than the occasional songbird and the gurgle of creek water.

Shaking my head, I made my way over to the stables. Opening the sagging door, I walked inside and couldn't help wrinkling my nose. The stalls needed to be mucked out, despite most of them standing empty.

I walked down the aisle and then paused when I realized Simon's horse, Donner, wasn't there. I stood looking at the empty stall for a moment, but forced myself to keep looking for the other horses. I didn't see Rudy, Wade's horse, either, but my heart clenched when I spotted my Blitzen. Man, it had been hard leaving my girl behind when I left the Lazy G.

"Hey, girl. How's my pretty lady been?" I rubbed her nose, fiercely glad all of sudden that I had come home. It had been too long since I'd been on a horse. The unconditional love didn't hurt either.

I gave in to the little boy inside of me and hugged Blitzen's neck tight until she nudged my head and I let go, laughing. "All right. I was getting sappy, huh? Missed you, though." She lipped my pocket and looked at me with what I would have assumed was a desperate eye if I didn't know any better. Had anybody been bringing my baby any treats?

"I'll see if I can scare up an apple or two later, but first I need to find out where everyone is. And where the rest of the horses are." Blitzen whickered softly, and I gave her one good rub before heading out of the barn and over to the bunkhouse. I stepped onto the sagging front step and knocked on the door before walking in.

"Hello? Anybody here?" It was the middle of the day, so I didn't really expect anyone to answer.

"Yeah? Who's that?" The voice bellowing from the belly of the house had to be Mack, the foreman of the Lazy G since before I started working here back in high school.

"It's Dylan," I said, walking down the hallway. I met up with Mack as he came out of his bedroom wearing sweatpants and an old T-shirt. His hair was rumpled as if he had been asleep, and his bushy gray eyebrows climbed in surprise toward what used to be his hairline.

"Dylan! I didn't know you were coming back. Wade didn't mention it. Sure am glad to see you." Mack pulled me into a bruising, back-slapping hug, and I was ashamed to feel my eyes burning. I had a good excuse for it a second later, though, when Mack pulled back and smacked me on the side of my head.

"Ow, what was that for?" Guess they weren't going to slaughter the fatted calf for me.

"Boy, we're gonna talk 'bout this whole keepin' in touch thing. Twice in fourteen months don't count, and I oughta take you outside and teach you a lesson that will have you checkin' in at least monthly next time you leave."

Rubbing the side of my head, I said, "Sorry, Mack. I meant to call more, but... I just needed time."

I didn't need to say any more; we both knew why. Mack looked at me, ran his hand through what was left of his gray hair, and it struck me that Mack might have been napping. In the middle of the afternoon. That was odd. I couldn't remember Mack taking a nap in the seventeen years I'd known him.

I caught a flash of an unmade bed and bedside table sporting an array of pill bottles before Mack shut the bedroom door and turned toward the kitchen. Accepting the cold beer he offered me, I joined him at the kitchen table and tried to tell myself there was no reason to be nervous.

"So, why'd you come back? You talk to Wade?"

"No, not yet. I wasn't sure exactly when I'd get in so I thought I'd...surprise him." I smiled, but Mack leveled a look at me and I knew he wasn't fooled. "Actually, I talked to Erin and she thought I should come home. Now that I'm here, I can see why. Where is everyone? The horses? Wade? The hands?"

Mack fiddled with the label on the bottle, not looking at me anymore. "You talk to Wade at all since...well, since you left?"

"Not exactly." I forced myself to keep my expression blank.

Mack looked up at me and sighed, and I realized that somewhere along the way, the man who had always seemed larger than life to me had gotten old. Old and tired. How did that happen?

I was afraid I knew.

“What does ‘not exactly’ mean?”

“It means...well, no.”

“Shit. *Shit*. What the hell is wrong with you, Dylan?”

“I just needed time.” Damn, that sounded lame. “And Wade didn’t call me either.” Oh, that was better. Damn.

“Christ.” Mack just shook his head. “*Shit*.”

“I’m sure He did. Funny, gives new meaning to the term ‘holy shit’.” I knew as soon as the words left my mouth that this was not the time for jokes. Mack looked at me like he had the time he found Simon and me drunk behind a couple bales of hay in the barn when we were sixteen, and I was supposed to be mucking stalls. I’d tried to brazen it out, asking Mack to join us, and he stared at me with a mix of anger and disappointment. Then he hauled me up and tossed me in the freezing cold pond not five minutes later. It had been...sobering. “Sorry, Mack. Will you tell me what’s going on?”

Mack sighed and said, “Wade ain’t been around much since... Well, I rarely see him, so he don’t talk to me. I try to hunt him down to remind him to pay stuff, but he... Shit, I don’t know where he goes. Just out riding with Rudy, I think.”

“Pay stuff? Why would you need to remind him? And where are all the horses?”

“Yeah, Wade ain’t been very timely with the bills lately. The feed store needs a payment before they’ll fill the next order. Had to sell most of the stock.”

“What? Why? What’s everybody riding? How’re you moving cattle? Riding fence?” Why did it feel like pulling teeth trying to get answers out of Mack?

“There ain’t no ‘everybody’,’ boy. Just two hands left ‘sides myself. Can’t take care of an outfit the size of the Lazy G with just three people. Had to do somethin’. And if Wade don’t pay the two hands we got left this Friday, Billy and Joe aren’t goin’ to stick around any longer either.”

“What the hell is Wade thinking?” I tried to swallow down my disbelief, but it was a funny taste.

“Don’t think he is.”

“He drinking?” He hadn’t been, not when I’d left, but I couldn’t say as I’d be surprised if he was taking some comfort from staring at the bottom of a fifth of JD every now and again.

“Not that I can tell,” Mack said, sounding certain. I forced my fingers to unclench from around my sweating bottle.

“Well then, what the fuck is he doing?”

“Grieving. Hiding. S’m guess, anyways.” Mack’s faded hazel eyes looked just about as sad as I felt.

“You talk to him?” That wouldn’t have been easy for Mack, forcing Wade to talk about his grief, but Mack had been there for Wade since his father died, and whatever needed doing, Mack always stepped right up to the plate.

“Won’t stand still to listen to me. That is, if I can smoke him out to begin with.”

“Shit.” I sat back in the chair, ignoring the creaking sound, and thought about this. I should have come home months ago. “Why didn’t you call me? I would have come home.”

“Figured if you needed the reminder, be best if no one forced you back before you were ready to quit your wanderin’. I wasn’t goin’ to call you ’til things got desperate.” Funny, Mack didn’t look like he was kidding. I barked out a laugh anyways.

“When did this start? He seemed to be taking care of everything the first month after Simon died.” Fact was, the ranch had looked like all Wade had to hold onto then, throwing himself into running it every minute of the day.

“Oh, ’bout the time you left.” Mack just looked at me for a moment, and I dropped my eyes, afraid of what he might see. “You left, and what little life he seemed to have just drained right out, far as I could tell.”

And just like that, I could feel the guilt pressing down on my shoulders. I mumbled some excuse to Mack and bolted outside, gulping fresh air as fast as my lungs could take it.

Instead of coming home months ago, I never should have left in the first place.

Chapter Two

Walking into the ranch house, I was struck by the smell. Not the fresh apple pie smell of yesteryear, but something a little more rank. Garbage. Ugh.

Not surprising, since the kitchen sink was full of dishes, and the smell got decidedly more funky as I walked closer to the spot where the garbage was kept. Realizing my mouth was hanging open, I shut it quick. Where there was garbage like that, there were sure to be flies.

The muscles in my stomach wound tight as I surveyed the mess. Wade had never been a neat freak by any means, but he'd always cleaned up after himself. Simon had been the slob. My stomach started cramping.

The door to Wade's office stood ajar, so I didn't bother knocking. Holy crap. His desk looked like a twister had blown through. The one place Wade freaked out about mess was in his office.

Starting to feel like I'd walked into the wrong house, I called out, "Wade?" No answer.

Climbing the stairs, careful not to touch the two inches of dust on the banister, I made my way down to Wade and Si—Wade's room. I knocked softly and then louder when there was no answer. Deciding Wade wasn't in there, unless he was asleep—and hey, maybe in this weird alternate Lazy G world everyone napped at three o'clock in the afternoon—I turned the door handle.

No Wade in sight, just a bed that looked like it hadn't been made after a wrestling match and a previously wooden floor that was now sporting a new rug I'd call "dirty laundry." I lifted my foot to step inside and halted it mid-air as my gaze swept over the coffee-colored wall and spotted a rectangle of wall that was darker than the surrounding area.

I swallowed hard and knew that if I walked into the room there would be another two naked rectangles to match the first. Wondering where Wade had put the paintings, I listened to this weird whooshing sound for a minute before I realized it was the sound of my own breathing.

I turned around and didn't stop moving until I had Blitzen saddled and was urging her faster and faster toward the mountains, heedless of the danger, of when I must have lost my hat, and of the wetness blurring my vision.

When I returned to the stables a few hours later, my steps faltered as I noticed Rudy was back in his stall. I took my time brushing Blitzen, telling myself it was because she liked it and not because I was putting off this first meeting.

Finally, I took a deep breath and walked to the house in search of Wade. I found him sitting at the kitchen table, bent over what must have been a microwave dinner. He didn't look up, and I wondered how he could have missed the slamming of the screen door when I walked in.

"Hello, Wade."

His head shot up, and he stared at me for moment like he didn't recognize me. Then his eyes focused, and he continued to stare at me, saying nothing.

"Sorry I didn't call to tell you when I'd be showin' up, but I wasn't really sure." Still, he didn't say anything. I slid into the chair across from him. "How are you, Wade?" I clenched my hands under the table and willed him to stop looking at me like that and just say something.

It felt like an eternity while he just stared at me and breathed, and then finally he said, "Okay, I guess."

Right.

"So, uh, how come... Is Mary not coming out any more to drop off dinners and clean up?" It was obvious that the woman who used to come out to the ranch to cook and a clean a few days a week hadn't been around for a while.

"No, she said she... No, she's not. Sorry, I should probably clean up a little better."

Ya think? Jeeze. All I said, though, was, "Yeah."

Talk about uncomfortable. I stared at him, noting his russet hair needed some serious trimming and his cheekbones were more prominent than I remembered, although they went well with the shadows beneath his eyes and the general gauntness of his frame. He stared at me, seeing God knew what. An awkward silence like this never would have developed if Simon were—I cut off the thought.

Finally, I couldn't take one more minute of this, and said, "What happened to this place? To you?" I could have kicked my own ass. What a stupid thing to say. I could tell by the look on Wade's face that he thought so, too. "Have you tried talking to someone?" Great, I was handling this beautifully.

His whole body tensed. "About what?"

I wasn't sure if I should go on. "About your...grief. About Simon. About trying to..." I stopped, because as much as I loved the sound of my own voice echoing around the now empty kitchen, I would have preferred it far more if Wade had stayed and listened instead of getting up without a word and walking off.

Chapter Three

Living in different cities for over a year had made me soft.

I had blisters aplenty after a morning spent mucking out stalls, and I had all sorts of muscles screaming at me for riding for so long yesterday. Some things you just had to ease back into.

Which was why I was here in Wade's kitchen, scrubbing dishes instead of being out checking grazing conditions with Billy and Joe. Wade wasn't around, and Mack had disappeared earlier, mumbling something about working on his truck. I suspected he was actually resting, since there was a minute there in the barn this morning that I swear he almost fell over for no reason. Well, there was a reason all right, but I doubt if he'd tell me about it. I was going to have to force it out of him eventually, and in the meantime, I ignored the tendrils of worry worming into my brain.

I was just wishing I had turned on the radio or something instead of spending so much time alone with my thoughts when the phone on the wall rang.

"Lo?"

"Dylan?"

"Hey, Erin. How are you?"

"Good. Thanks for calling me when you got into town."

"Sorry. I just got in last night. Was about to call you actually." Small fib, but it would have occurred to me soon, I was sure. Great big brother I was.

"Yeah, right. I believe that like I believed you the time you gave me a Barbie for my birthday with a shaved head and claimed it came like that, and the only reason it wasn't in the box was because you didn't want me to have to go through all the hard work of taking it out." I could hear the smile in her voice.

"You never did believe me that it was GI Jane." I smiled to myself, but it faded at Erin's next question.

"So you've seen Wade? Talked to him?" She sounded anxious.

"Well, I've seen him. Talked to him, well that's kind of a liberal description." I rubbed my forehead. "Christ, Erin, why the hell didn't you tell me the shape this place was in? Why didn't you call me home sooner?"

"Hey, last I checked you were a grown man. Didn't think I should have to tell you that 'your family needed you, not after Simon... Not after what we've been through.'" She paused and then said grudgingly,

“And every time I said I was calling you to come home, Mike said I should leave you to do it in your own time.”

I smiled, thinking of Erin meekly following what her big, burly husband told her to do. “And you, of course, listened to his advice without question.”

She snorted. “What do you think? So, are you staying in the house with Wade?”

“Hell, no. Even the bunkhouse, smelling of sweat and beer, is better than this. Couldn’t you have done some cleaning when you were out here?” I grinned.

Erin didn’t disappoint me. “Oh, because when the little ol’ female comes to visit, we should just keep her busy cookin’ and cleanin’, is that right? Whatever. Seriously, though, the house has gotten a lot worse in the last couple months.”

Well, shit, I hoped so. How long could a man live with filth like this?

“Yeah, about that. Why isn’t Mary coming out here still? Wade wouldn’t say.”

Erin sighed and confirmed my suspicions by saying, “I don’t really know. I asked her when I saw her in the grocery store the other day, and she didn’t really give an answer. All she said was she felt bad, but she has a family.”

“So he probably wasn’t paying her either.”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Damn. I wonder if he’s even looked at the books lately.”

“It’s really that bad? Oh God. I knew things were getting thin, but I never thought... He’ll never survive it if he loses the ranch too. Never.”

“He’s not going to lose it. I won’t let that happen.” My voice came out sounding sure and strong, and I was glad.

“I’m glad you’re home, Dylan. Real glad. Now come over here for dinner tonight. Mike’s coming home from work early, and he’s anxious to hear how you got along with all the snobs on the East coast. See if you can drag Wade with you, but come without him if you can’t.” Her tone of voice said she had little hope I would actually be able to convince Wade to go.

“All right. Sounds good. Tell the girls they better be prepared to help me fill my bear hug quota. I have fourteen months to make up for.” More than she knew.

We said our goodbyes, and I stood there staring at the wall and thinking.

Returning to the ranch later that night after dinner at Erin’s, I turned off the engine of my truck and just sat there staring out into the darkness. I could hear Billy and Joe talking and laughing on the front porch of the bunkhouse, and I tried to identify the feeling that was running through me.

It felt foreign, and I tried to pinpoint it. I thought back to dinner and the worry in Erin’s eyes when she asked about Wade and the ranch, to the disappointed looks on the girls’ faces when they realized Uncle

Wade wasn't with me, to all the work I did today and the endless list for the next day, and the next, and the next.

I felt the feeling move through me, pumping my blood, quickening my breathing, tightening my hands into fists, and I recognized it from the days after Simon's death. Anger.

It had been a while since I felt anger at anyone else besides myself, and I took a moment to savor it. It actually felt good.

The next minute I was out of my truck and racing into the house, calling Wade's name. I wasn't surprised when he didn't answer, and I went tearing up the stairs, searching all the rooms until I found what I was looking for.

Fifteen minutes later, I stood back and admired the way Simon's three paintings looked on the wall in Wade's bedroom. Looking at the one of Wade seated atop Rudy out near the pond, it was obvious why other people had been willing to pay Simon to teach them how to paint. What was also obvious, and what couldn't be taught, was the emotion that rolled off that painting. So much love.

I knew exactly how Simon had felt.

Chapter Four

I was sitting at Wade's desk the next morning, digging through the mess of paperwork to try to figure out where the Lazy G stood financially, when the man himself stomped in and slammed both hands down on the desk. He towered over me, probably trying to intimidate me. It might have worked if I hadn't seen this bluff play out over the many disagreements he and Simon had over the seven years they lived together.

I decided a little preemptive strike was necessary here and said, "Do you even know if the Lazy G is in the black these days?" Wade looked briefly taken aback, and before he could answer, I waved my hand at the mess of papers on his desk, and said, "Of course you don't."

Wade ignored that. "Were you the one who put the paintings back up?" Oh, yeah, Wade was angry. Growling. Despite feeling happy at the evidence that Wade wasn't a completely empty shell, I used the residual anger I was still feeling from yesterday to hand it right back to him.

"You're damn right I did."

Admitting that seemed to take the wind out of Wade's sails. He looked away for a moment then turned back to me and practically whispered, "Who gave you the right?"

I shot right back, "No one. But I'll be damned if I sit by and let you pretend my brother didn't exist. Who gave you *that* right?"

For a moment I thought he would haul off and hit me, actually wished that he would, but he just stood there breathing hard. He started to say something, stopped, looked at me like I was dirt beneath his boot, curled his lip and stomped back out again.

I leaned back in Wade's chair, forced myself to relax, and couldn't help but think that had been waiting for fifteen months.

Three hours later I rubbed my eyes and tried to decide what would be better for my headache, dinner or bed. Probably dinner first.

I got up, leaving the rest of the paperwork for tomorrow. I had at least managed to establish that the Lazy G was operating in the black. Barely. And if things didn't turn around soon, the promise I made to Erin would come back to bite me on the ass. Hard.

Mack was just serving up Sloppy Joes when I got back to the bunkhouse, and I grabbed a beer and sat down. It wasn't until I had shoved the sandwich into my mouth in three bites that I looked up to find Mack, Billy, and Joe all staring at me.

Mack was the first to speak. "You talk to Wade?"

Deciding not to quibble over semantics I said, "Sure."

Mack snorted. "Well?"

"Wade agreed to see a grief counselor, helped me clean the house top to bottom, paid all the bills, and he's ready to help move cattle tomorrow." I took a swig of my beer and almost spit it out laughing when I saw the identical expressions of shock on their faces.

Seeing my laughter, Mack looked like he wanted to strangle me, Billy looked exasperated, and Joe just looked confused. "Honestly, Mack, what were you looking for me to do? I landed a lot of different gigs while I was gone, but magician was never one of them."

Mack sighed. "I dunno, boy. I just thought... Shit. Well have you at least looked at the books?"

"Yeah. Y'all will get paid, don't worry," I said, and the other three began to eat with enthusiasm.

I was leaning back and contemplating how much it would suck to fall asleep in the kitchen chair when I noticed Billy looking at me like he wanted to say something, but was hesitating. "You got something to say, Billy?"

Billy turned red to match his hair, the curse of having fair skin and freckles, and said, "Yeah, I uh—" He cleared his throat. "Remember when Simon first moved in with Wade? Before Wade laid down the law and told Simon he could work in any room in the house except the office?"

I had forgotten that Billy had been here at the Lazy G almost as long as I had, and I smiled as I thought back. "Shit, yeah. I don't think I ever looked at Wade swimming in the pond without busting a gut after that." We all started chuckling.

Noticing Joe looking confused, I explained, "Old Wade's not real big on words most of the time, but he sure does have a temper. He didn't want to scare his temperamental little artist off while they adjusted to living together those first few months, so when Simon irritated him, he'd go jump in the pond to cool off rather than yell at Simon. Wasn't long before Wade was dunking himself two, three, four times a day." I stopped to laugh, but sobered a little as I recalled the first time I had seen Wade coming out of the pond in cut-offs plastered to his legs, water streaming down the ridges of his chest. I had gotten completely hard before it dawned on me I was looking at a *man* like that.

Seeing I wasn't going to continue the story, Mack picked it up while we followed him outside to sit on the porch, probably to give us a visual. "Well, one day, we're all sittin' on this porch after dinner, having a beer, when we see Wade come slammin' outta the house and Simon's sittin' right here and says, 'I doodled on some papers on his desk. Bet ya twenty bucks he goes in fully clothed this time.' Sure enough, Wade got to the pond and kept right on walkin', boots and all, until all we could see was his gray hat floating in the water where his head had been a second before that." Mack paused as we all hooted with laughter. "We 'bout pissed ourselves laughin', and wasn't long before Wade musta decided the water wasn't gonna help that time, 'cause he was up and outta that pond before we could blink. Came up, face all

red, grabbed Simon's hand and dragged him up to the house without a word. Didn't see those two for days."

Joe was laughing, but never having met Simon, he obviously needed clarification. "So, Simon was doing stuff to annoy Wade on purpose?"

"No, not really. Little shit was testin' Wade," Mack said with a fond smile, and I had one of my own as I wondered if that was the first time since the accident that Mack referred to Simon as a little shit. Hard to call the dead names, even ones you'd been calling them for years.

"Testing?" Joe looked even more confused at this.

"Oh, yeah. Wanted to see how far he could push 'im, wanted to force Wade to talk stuff out if they needed to so it wouldn't build up like that. And based on the look in Simon's eyes when it was obvious Wade had been in the pond, the little shit was havin' fun, too. Kinda twisted sense of humor on him," Mack said.

I snorted at the last bit. Truer words. Simon and I'd had so much fun over the years, though.

We were all quiet for a moment, smiling, remembering, and it felt good. Just deep down good in my bones, thinking of Simon looking up at me with his laughing brown eyes and his paint-flecked brown hair, so unlike my own blond strands. Much better than the last time I had seen him, his eyes filled with pain and his hair matted with blood.

My smile faded, and I glanced over at the house when I noticed movement. I saw Wade sitting on the wooden swing in the deepening shadows of the front porch, and it felt like he was looking straight at me, but I couldn't be sure.

Mack spoke again, this time the sadness coming through in his gruff voice. "Yep, Simon sure was good for our boy over there. Just what Wade always needed."

Chapter Five

The rain pounded on the roof, the wind screamed through the trees, the crack and boom of thunder kept an even drumbeat, and I watched it all from my bedroom window in the bunkhouse, marveling at nature's symphony and the inconsiderate rehearsal time.

Well, to be fair, it wasn't the storm that woke me up. It was the nightmare.

The nightmare was always the same. The last few minutes with Simon, looking up at me and covered in blood, saying, "Love you...brother." Then me screaming for help on the deserted highway, clutching Simon's limp body, too mindless to pull my cell phone out of my pocket and make the call.

Then there was Wade standing over us, seeming eight feet tall, fury on his face as he said, "Why Simon? Why not you?"

I shuddered, thinking back to that night in May when I lost the man who was a brother to me in every way that really counted. Most of the nightmare was so tragically real, a flashback of those heartbreaking moments, but Wade wasn't there.

No, that was just in my mind.

I hadn't dreamed about the accident in weeks, hadn't woken up sweating and crying and wondering "why me?" in months. I had recently, in fact, started dreaming of our childhood together, of Simon and Erin and our parents, Annie and Fred. I dreamed of the day I came to live with them when I was six, bewildered by the disappearance of my mother and this concept called death, when this Simon boy sat and held my hand all night when I was too scared to sleep. I dreamed of the time a pair of nine-year-old boys thought they could hitchhike to California instead of doing their chores, but wound up waiting at Miss Flossie's house for our parents to pick us up while the town librarian fed us stale cookies and Lactaid. I dreamed of the time twelve-year-old Simon tried to convince Erin she was adopted and was really born at a house located at 666 Damnation Drive, of the moment when she looked at Simon and said, "If you're trying to make me cry, it won't work. Dylan was adopted by Mom and Dad and look how lucky we all are."

Much better dreams than nightmares of blood and death and grief.

My attention was caught by the light flashing on in the kitchen of the ranch house, and I wondered what Wade dreamed about at night. A moment later it looked like the front door had opened, and I squinted, trying to see in the darkness if Wade was outside. Then the moonlight caught him as he stood at the top of the porch steps, his face tilted up to the rain.

I watched as he made his way down the steps, over the mud and grass, to the corral fence. Puzzled, I stared. This wasn't a drizzle. It was a storm, and even if it were almost summer, a drenching would sap body heat pretty quickly. "Christ, what the hell is he doing? Doesn't he care if he gets pneumonia?"

Abruptly I realized, no, he *didn't* care. That was the point. And just like that, once again I felt the burn of anger infusing my limbs, powering through me as I dragged my Levi's and boots on, bubbling under the surface as I stomped down the hall and out the door. I didn't stop until I reached Wade where he was leaning against the fence, and I grabbed his shoulder and whirled him around to face me.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" I barely recognized my own voice.

He blinked water out of his eyes and stared dumbly at me before saying, "What?"

"I said, what the *fuck* are you doing out here? I know it might seem like a nice night for a walk to you, but I thought I might inform you that it's fucking pouring outside."

Wade looked away, as if he was too tired to even look me in the face, and said, "Go back to bed, Dylan." Then he turned back around to lean on the fence, dismissing me, and my anger turned to rage.

It felt like someone else moving after that. Someone else's hand grabbing Wade's shoulder to turn him around again, someone else's arm that cocked back and let fly straight into Wade's granite jaw, someone else that watched as Wade's head snapped back from the force and he stumbled against the fence. Because surely it couldn't have been me that touched Wade in anger.

But it was definitely me that went down, without a fence to catch me, when Wade's fist connected to my own jaw. I was sure that would hurt later, but at the moment I couldn't feel anything except anger and relief that Wade was still fighting.

I scrambled back up out of the mud, and then it was happening so fast, the adrenaline moving through my veins as we both grunted and swore and swung our limbs, that I wasn't sure who was landing punches where. We were like one beast, ugly and flailing. I hadn't brawled like this since Johnny Baron, one of the linebackers in high school, had called Simon a faggot when we were juniors.

The rain and mud were making things slippery, and then we were on the ground wrestling like a couple kids in the mud, both of us obviously no longer going for blood. Wade managed to roll me onto my back and straddle me, and I felt mud oozing around my head. I could barely see with the rain falling into my eyes.

It felt like the mud was seeping into my ears, which was just fucking nasty, and I stopped struggling for control and reached out, grabbed a handful of mud and aimed it for Wade's face.

It landed around his left temple and I smashed it into his hair and ear as best I could. I started laughing when Wade stopped moving and just sat back, looking down at me as if I had suddenly turned into a purple dinosaur.

I laughed and laughed until I was scared I would never stop laughing, and all the while Wade looked down at me with his mouth hanging open in shock. Which just made me bellow more as he was catching mouthfuls of rainwater like that.

Just as Wade was starting to look really concerned, the laughter just dried up, and I became aware that we were out in a thunderstorm and it was pouring, and I hadn't bothered with a shirt. I wouldn't be surprised if my nipples were little blue pebbles, and I grinned at the weird thought.

That must have been the final straw, because Wade grabbed my chin and forced me to meet his gaze. "Are you fucking crazy?"

I considered this. "Probably. But if I'm crazy for lying here in the mud and laughing in the rain, aren't you crazy for watching me do it?"

Wade grinned and said, "Probably." The grin caught me off guard. It had been so long since I had seen it, making him look unexpectedly boyish despite the years carved into his face. I looked at that grin and the momentarily happy look in his eyes, and I couldn't breathe.

As if he was deflating, the look faded from his face and he said, "Why did you hit me?"

"Because I couldn't stand it one more minute. Not one more fucking second."

"Stand what?"

"Watching you give up."

"I have not." But he said it quietly, and I knew he didn't even believe himself.

"You *have*. What do you think Simon would say?" I winced as I said this, hating myself for it, and Wade looked like I had punched him again.

"I—"

"Simon died. Not you. I want you to stop acting like it was you that died on that highway."

"How do you know it wasn't?"

That physically hurt. "Because that's bullshit. I watched my brother die in my arms, okay? I watched and for a while, I wish I had, too. You're not the only one who lost something that day, and I'm sick of watching you wish you could join him when the rest of us are doing the best we can to pick up the pieces."

Wade snarled back at me, "Why do you care now? You just left. Just packed your bags and left like I was nothing to you. Like this place was nothing to you."

That left me momentarily speechless. "I... Wade." I wasn't sure what to say. I tried again. "I just... I was trying to adjust to a world without my brother in it, and every time I looked at you I kept waiting for you to get angry that I walked away from the crash and Simon didn't. I just couldn't stay for that." I told myself that the burning in my eyes was from the mud and rain.

Wade looked shocked. "You thought that? I... Never." He scrubbed his hands over his face, not that it did any good. "Christ, I thought a million times that it shouldn't have been Simon. But I never once thought it should have been you instead."

I hoped Wade would think it was only rain leaking around my eyes. “I... Thank you. Didn’t want to think of you hating me.”

“No.” Wade was looking down at me, and I was about to ask him to get off me because I could feel my teeth getting ready to chatter, when he let out this weird choking sound. Then he said, “What do you want from me, Dylan?”

I didn’t even have to think about the answer, even if this was the oddest time and place to have this out. “I want you to look around. I want you to start thinking about what you had with Simon instead of just what you lost. I want you to see that you’re about to lose this place if you don’t fight for it. I want you to see that old man in the bunkhouse who loves you as much as your father did, who is sick and worried about you, about keeping this ranch going. I want you to see that Erin and Mike love you and miss you, and she has two girls who cried for Uncle Wade the other night when I showed up at dinner alone. They feel like they lost all of us at one time. I want you to see that Simon would hate to see you living like this.” I paused for breath, hesitating, knowing he deserved my apology. “I want you to see me, see that I’m sorry I left and I’m back to stay. I’ll help you hold onto this place, I swear, but I can’t do it alone and neither can Mack.”

“I—” Another weird choking sound, and then Wade was sobbing, broken choking sounds. I pulled him down and held him, uncaring about the surreal quality of doing this here and now, with mud oozing into my ears. He cried as if his soul was purging itself of all the pain, and I made shushing sounds, thinking it felt different to be the strong one giving comfort this time.

When his body had stopped shaking so violently, I helped pick us both up off the ground.

I led him into the house, straight into the bathroom, and turned the water on in the shower. “Can you get undressed and get in? You need to warm up, get clean.”

He nodded, looking drained and tired of talking.

“Okay, I’m going to go try and clean up.” I turned and jumped a little, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Man, I looked like I had the Halloween Simon and I had gone as Swamp Things, covered in mud and grass sticking to my skin and hair. Looking at Wade, I realized he looked just as bad.

Wishing I had a camera handy, I smiled until I walked back into the hallway and saw the trail of mud. Well, at least I hadn’t gotten beyond cleaning the kitchen yesterday and I could take care of this tomorrow.

I mopped up the worst of the mess with towels and tossed them in the washer, shivering and starting to feel sore from the pounding of Wade’s fists. A hot shower would feel great, but I decided to check on Wade before heading back to the bunkhouse.

Pushing the bathroom door open a little, I saw him still standing there at the sink, looking dazed and not a little lost. I wondered if this was the first time he had given voice to his grief. I never saw him cry after Simon died, not the night of the accident, not at the funeral, not in the month before I left. Wade was always more stoic about things than Simon and I, more prone to giving in to his temper than any other emotion, and I figured he’d let it out in his own way.

Realizing he needed someone to direct him and put him to bed, I stepped back into the bathroom, the steam swirling as if reaching out to touch me. The warmth felt good. “Wade? You should get in the shower, get clean so you can go to bed. We have work to do tomorrow and you can’t lie in bed all day.” No smile, no reaction to that.

I started to unbutton what looked like it might have been a green shirt, but was now splotchy brown with grass accents. Kneeling, I helped him pull off his boots, and heard the wet suction sound they made. Probably beyond redemption now. Standing back up, I undid his belt buckle and felt his gaze on me. I ignored it and continued undressing him until he stood there naked and dirty and shivering.

I gently pushed him into the shower, watched him stand there under the spray without reaching for the soap, and made a decision I didn’t want to look at too closely.

Chapter Six

Hopping on one foot, I yanked off first one boot and then the other, and shucked off my jeans. I climbed into the tub next to Wade. Guiding Wade until he stood directly underneath the spray, I murmured, “Close your eyes.”

Letting the water wash the worst of the mud and grass off of his body, I reached for the shampoo. Only an inch shorter than Wade, I didn’t have to stretch like Simon would have to gently work the shampoo into Wade’s hair. Thinking of Simon, my hands stuttered, but I continued when Wade made a questioning sound. By this point, my hands were practically massaging Wade’s scalp, and I made myself stop and turn him to rinse the shampoo out.

His jaw was starting to discolor blue and purple, and I lifted my hand to trace a finger over the bruising I’d caused when he opened his eyes and looked at me. He had an odd look in his hazel eyes, and I realized that we were both standing in the shower together, naked.

I mean, I knew that we were naked, obviously, since I undressed us both, but I didn’t *know* we were naked until this moment when Wade looked at me, the knowledge dawning on him as well. And since I’m a guy and I hadn’t had sex in months and this was *Wade*, it was going to be painfully obvious to Wade any second that my body was beginning to *know* we were naked too.

Feeling myself start to harden, I turned around, ashamed. Wade caught my arm. “Don’t go,” he said.

I looked back at him, my gaze dropping for only a second down the miles of wet flesh, but long enough to know his body already *knew* we were naked too. “This is a bad idea.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t bother denying it as he pulled me back in front of him.

So there we were, both naked, hard, wet, still pretty dirty—actually I was still a lot dirty—and I didn’t really know what to say. This had moved past awkward and hurtled straight into weird. Wade didn’t move, just stood there not speaking, not looking away from me. Finally, I just grabbed the washcloth and lathered it up, motioning him to come closer.

“Did you wash behind your ears like a good boy? I seem to recall some hooligan shoving mud into one of them.” The smile that followed my lame teasing was fleeting at best, and then Wade just went back to looking at me, serious, intent.

Not knowing what else to say, I started to run the washcloth over Wade’s skin from the ear I had caked with mud, to his neck where I could see the pulse pounding a quick beat, to his chest where I could

feel his heart thumping as quick as mine was, to his ribs where I could count each one since he'd lost so much weight.

When I reached his waistline I stopped, took a deep breath, and motioned for him to turn around. I massaged the soapy washcloth into the muscles of his back, from the top of his neck to the base of the spine. I stopped there, unsure if I should continue or not, and unwilling to break the silence that had descended. Wade turned around again. I met his eyes, seeing something there I didn't expect to see despite the hard length of his cock brushing mine.

Heat.

Then Wade took the washcloth out of my hands and repeated what I had done to him, shampooing my hair, cleaning the mud out of my ears, tracing the bruising he'd caused, lathering up the muscles of my chest and back. Only he didn't stop at my waist.

He knelt in front of me, moving the washcloth over the quivering muscles in my calves, my thighs, and he paused a moment before gently washing my prick, my balls, between my legs, and I bit back a groan.

He looked up at me, his eyes bright with so many emotions, and it was almost as if he was waiting for something, but I didn't know what. I returned his stare, and he turned me around, washing the backs of my legs, my ass, and then between my cheeks. This time I didn't bother biting back the groan that rumbled up my throat.

Still not speaking, not breaking this odd spell, we moved as if by some unspoken agreement, switching places. I knelt at Wade's feet and mirrored his previous actions, cleansing the most private parts of his body, his gaze burning into the top of my head as I hesitated a moment, looking at his prick. It was hard, I could see it throbbing, and yet there was no urgency in this moment, whatever it was. I resisted the urge to lean forward and swipe my tongue across the head of his cock, shiny and leaking pre-come, resisted the urge to finally find out after all these years of wondering what he would taste like.

Feeling the familiar guilt start to press in on me, I struggled to my feet, meeting Wade's gaze when I felt him wrap his hands around my biceps and pull me against his body, our erections trapped between us.

"This is not a good idea." I couldn't be sure who I was trying to convince, myself or Wade.

"Probably not." Wade didn't sound like he really cared.

When Wade began thrusting against me, his cock rubbing against mine, the pleasure was so intense I stopped talking. When he reached a hand down to stroke both of our cocks together, I had to fight to keep my eyes open. I wanted to see what he looked like when he came.

Wade leaned in to kiss me, and I'm not sure why, but I turned my head, his kiss landing on my cheek. I felt his lips brush my neck next, and then he was sucking on the skin there. I bit my bottom lip before foolish words poured out of my mouth.

I could feel the pleasure building, my balls beginning to tighten up, and I could tell Wade was close, too, because his hand kept losing the steady rhythm. I came before he did, my gaze locked on his, an anchor while all that feeling shot right out of me. When he came, he closed his eyes and I watched his come swirl down the drain.

Listening to the harshness of our breathing, my legs feeling like jelly, my brain like mush, I had one thought: this had been a bad idea.

“Don’t go.” Surprised, I glanced back up to see him looking at me again, a lock of his wet, reddish brown hair curling into his half-shut left eye. I couldn’t think of anything else to say except for what I had been thinking about bad ideas, and he must have read that in my face because he spoke again. “Please.” His throat worked. “Stay with me tonight?”

Something in my chest cracked open at the simple request and what it must have taken for Wade to ask something like that. I nodded and we got out of the shower, toweled off, and made our way to his bedroom. He got in the king-sized bed first, and I climbed in after him, wrapping my arms around him from behind.

“Dylan—”

“Shhh. Just go to sleep.” When his breathing evened out and his chest was rising in the steady pattern of sleep, I leaned my head down, kissed his shoulder, and closed my eyes.

Waking up the next morning, dawn’s fingers reaching through the window, it took a moment to realize where I was and who was wrapped around me. Sometime in the night, Wade and I must have traded spots because he was spooned up behind me, his morning erection prodding my ass and mine ready to wave his hello.

I stayed there a moment, thinking, looking at the portrait of the mountains Simon had painted that I’d hung up the other day. Looking around the rest of the room, ignoring the fact that my right eye was practically swollen shut, my gaze snagged on something bright pink and gauzy hanging in the closet.

Hoping it wasn’t what I thought it was, I extricated myself from Wade’s hold, careful not to wake him up, and swung my legs over the side of the bed. I paused when my foot landed on something and looked down to see the corner of a notebook poking out from underneath the bed.

I reached down and picked it up, realizing it was a sketchbook, not a notebook. Opening it with a pang of guilt, I saw that it wasn’t Simon’s sketchbook as I expected. It was Wade’s.

I flipped through the beginning pages, mostly of Simon, the ranch, the hands, a few good ones of Mack, a really appealing one of Rudy. Working mostly in charcoal, Wade never believed Simon and me when we told him how good his sketches were, not that he had any reason to believe me. I wasn’t the expert.

But Simon was. And I'd heard him telling Wade that he should do something with his work since after that very first art lesson Simon had taught in Big Timber, the art lesson I'd convinced Wade to go to—the start of it all. Wade had always replied that their relationship had enough “artist” in it without him adding to the load, and Simon had always sniffed and told Wade he better be happy for that “load.”

Flipping to the back of the sketchbook, I discovered the last pages were blank, so I turned pages until I got to the last sketch Wade had done and just sat there looking.

It was a drawing of me and Simon out by the corral, Mack at the edge of the page laughing. I was glaring at Simon, and Simon was wearing my hat and holding his hand out. We had played poker that lazy Sunday afternoon, and when I ran out of money and didn't want to fold, Simon suggested he'd let me stay in if I bet my favorite hat.

He had squinted at me, his poker face firmly in place, and said, “Cash or hat.” I thought I had a sure hand and was shocked when Simon snatched his winnings right off my head. The little shit taunted me, wearing that hat around the ranch where I could see him, laughing, before giving it back to me three days later. Mack was right. Twisted sense of humor.

That was a week before Simon was killed.

I put the sketchbook back in the same place I found it and checked to make sure Wade was still sleeping before getting up and walking over to the closet. Opening the door wider, I sighed. There it was, in all its hot pink glory, the long sleeve fishnet shirt—or close enough to be called a shirt in some circles I guess—that I had given Simon as a gag gift on his last birthday. It was surrounded by all the rest of Simon's clothes.

A thought occurred to me, and I walked over to the oak dresser and picked up Simon's watch sitting in the change tray. Holding the watch our dad had given Simon on his eighteenth birthday, I closed my eyes.

After a few moments resting my head on the edge of the dresser and clutching that watch, I set it back down and looked over at Wade. Still sleeping. As quietly as I could, I walked out, shutting the door softly, and went downstairs.

Looking at my stiff and muddy Levi's with distaste, I snagged a pair of Wade's from the laundry and stuffed my feet into my boots with a wince. I made sure not to slam the front door on my way back to the bunkhouse.

I slipped inside, grateful nobody else was up yet—though they be would any minute—and made my way to the shower, hoping to clear my mind. And if that didn't work, there was always mindless labor, like mucking stalls.

That was actually where Wade found me almost two hours later.

Well, I assumed it was Wade standing in the entrance to the stall I was working in, but I didn't turn around to visually confirm. Billy or Joe would have said something, probably called my name to get my attention. Mack was working on his truck but wouldn't have just stood there watching me work either, so that just left Wade. I was a regular Sherlock.

Not wanting to examine why, I decided to wait Wade out, keeping my back to him to see how long he would stand there without saying something. It wasn't because I didn't want to see the look on his face or anything.

"What do we do now?"

I finally turned around, looking somewhere over his left shoulder, and said, "Well, I'm going to finish these stalls. You can help if you want. Then I have some fence to fix, cattle to move, a house to scrub, a trip to town to make. And no hope of a fairy godmother to send me to the ball tonight."

"Dylan. No jokes." At the tone of his voice, I focused on his eyes, wincing when I saw that his left eye matched my right and the left side of his jaw was a deep navy blue.

"Okay. No jokes." I felt naked, more naked than I had last night washing each other. I considered his question. "I was serious, though, about the work. There's a lot to do if you want to hang onto this place. Take your pick."

"No, I meant about...us." He looked like saying that was as foreign as it sounded to me.

"Wade. There is no us." I made myself hold his gaze as I said that.

"But what about last night?" Now it was Wade who wouldn't meet my eyes as he fiddled with the buttons on his blue checked shirt.

"Last night was—" I paused to gather my thoughts so I could say this right. "Was good. Nice. For you, for me. I think we both needed...something. But I don't want to be your solution to lonely nights. I'd much rather you stick with random fucks for that." I saw him stiffen, and I tried to remember that honesty was what this situation called for.

"I see." Wade was clenching his jaw even though it must have hurt like hell, and his hands had dropped to his sides and curled into fists.

"No, I don't think you do. I don't think you do at all." I hated doing this to him, but I wasn't willing to be anybody's crutch, not even Wade's. I hesitated, wishing I could leave it at that, but he needed to hear it and I needed to say it. "I'm not Simon. And I'm not a substitute for him. I need you to see that."

Wade was silent for a while, twirling his black hat between his hands. "So, what do we do now?"

I leaned on the pitchfork and forced my lips to quirk. "Well, I have to finish cleaning these stalls. And then there's some fence to fix. One step at a time, Wade. Not gonna be easy, but we'll do it."

"Well, then, I better go find Mack." Something about the way he said it, almost as if he was forcing a light tone, made me curious.

"Why?" I asked, suspicious and fighting down a real smile.

“To see if he’ll be your fairy godmother. Gotta get you ready for the ball tonight.”

I heard him chuckling on his way outside, and I laughed, feeling warm inside for the first time in a long time.

Chapter Seven

A week later, I woke up feeling optimistic. The ranch wasn't so far gone that it couldn't be saved with hard work, sweat, and love.

The same could probably be said of Wade.

A week of hard work was already doing him good, giving him color, removing the dark shadows from under his eyes. A few more weeks of good eating and ranch work, and Wade would be looking much better.

Wade's body might start looking better, but his smiles still didn't quite shine through to his eyes the way they used to. The night we fought in the rain had done Wade some good, but I had a feeling he might still need to talk. Being the stubborn cuss that Wade was, I figured he also wouldn't do it voluntarily, or at least initiate it, so I saddled Rudy and Blitz and went to go kidnap Wade for a ride.

I finally tracked him down in his office, and I stood leaning against the door jamb, one hand hooked in my front pocket, and stared at him. He was a good-looking man. Tall, strong, with lines carved into his face that said he had lived a hard life. But the lines at his eyes also suggested that Wade might be used to laughing. Or had been, anyways.

I cleared my throat and he glanced up. "Hey. Didn't hear you come in."

"Well, I thought about bringing the trumpeter with me, but he was busy with his one o'clock." I walked toward the desk to see what he was working on. "How the books lookin'?"

Wade winced. "Lean. Very lean."

I nodded. I had thought as much from the work I had done in here, but I hadn't been absolutely sure. Math was never my strong point. "Fixable?"

"Yeah. Sure. Barring any major catastrophes, and as long as we all keep working hard, things should turn around. Be ready to start expanding the stock again in a few months and we might even be able to hire a couple more hands soon. We need the help."

Wade kept saying "we" and I had to admit it sounded nice.

"Speaking of help, I convinced Mack to see his doctor again. He's been suffering from dizzy spells, shortness of breath, and I'm wondering if maybe they can tweak his current medication. I'm taking him in for the appointment next week."

"I should have noticed. I'm sorry." Wade looked ashamed, and I hated the way his shoulders sagged.

"None of that now. Come on. Put that on hold for a couple hours, we're goin' for a ride."

“Now? I should really finish this.” But he had perked up, as if he was already mentally out on the trails.

I said, “Come on. We’ve been working hard. We can spare a couple hours. I’ve already saddled Rudy for you.”

“Sure of yourself.” Wade didn’t sound like he minded.

“Always. Until I’m not.” I winked and walked out, confident Wade would follow.

At first we didn’t talk, just content to ride side by side toward the mountain peaks looming in front of us, the immediate world blanketed in green and dotted with wildflowers, mostly yellow and red blanket flowers. I hadn’t realized how far from relaxed Wade had been until I saw him sitting atop Rudy and breathing in the fresh mountain air. No wonder he had found solace in hours spent riding beneath the endless blue sky.

I wasn’t sure how to get the ball rolling, how to get Wade talking if he needed to. A few teasing lines came to mind, but I didn’t think that was the best way to get Wade to open up. In the end it was Wade who opened the starting gate.

“So, where’d you go?” Wade didn’t look at me, instead studied the mountain peaks.

I was tempted to ask when he was talking about, but I didn’t. “Made my way east. Worked odd jobs until they ran out and then I moved on. Stayed at motels mostly.”

“Did it work?”

Again I was tempted to play dumb. The hard part about forcing someone else to talk was that you’d have to talk too, in the process. But I wanted to help Wade, so I tried not to squirm in the saddle. “Yeah, some. At first it was just nice and mindless, looking around and seeing only strangers made it so I didn’t freak out when I didn’t see Simon. The work was usually hard, for little pay, and I was glad. Anything that left me exhausted enough to sleep was a bonus.” I didn’t tell him about the nightmares. I looked over and could see him gripping tight to the reins. Yeah, he probably already knew about dreaming. “Mostly, it’s just time, Wade. It mutes it. Won’t ever go away, but time helps. Important to remember the good times too, and not just the end.”

We came to a clearing next to the creek, rife with thimbleberry and the pungent scent of sagebrush in the air. Dismounting to water the horses, Wade and I both walked to the edge of the stream, watching as our reflections rippled and swayed on the surface.

Finally Wade turned to me and said, “How do you move on and still remember? How do you keep from forgetting?” I barely caught the last part, almost lost amongst the trickles and gurgles of the water as it moved over and around rocks, fallen branches or any other obstacles in its way.

I pulled my hat off my head and thrust a hand through my hair as I searched my mind for the right answer. “Wade, moving on with your life doesn’t mean you’ll automatically forget all the good times. You lived with Simon for seven years. That’s seven birthdays, seven Christmases, seven years worth of nights

going to bed next to him, and seven years worth of mornings waking up with him. Do you really think there is anything you can do to forget that?"

Wade seemed to think about this, his head bowed and his eyes hidden by the brim of his hat. So I continued. "The important part is to face forward. You can glance back all you want. In fact, it's important to hold onto the times that you laughed with him, that you smiled with him, that you loved him. At least it's been important for me. But you've got to face forward." I felt like a fraud preaching advice I wasn't even sure I could take myself. But I wanted to believe. "What do you want, Wade?"

"Huh?" Wade glanced at me, looking confused.

"What do you want? You must want something out of life."

He seemed to think about that, and I kept quiet, content to wait for as long as he needed. "I... I want to smile. Want to laugh again and really mean it." He paused, turned toward me until he was looking straight into my eyes. "Not sure how, but I want to be happy again."

So simple. Two years ago this conversation would have been laughable. Now it was just life. It was so unfair. "We'll figure it out. One day at a time. Simon loved you. He would want the same thing."

Feeling drained all of a sudden, I turned and swung up onto Blitzen's back. I only knew that Wade followed when he spoke again. "So, why'd you stay away?"

Surprised, I looked back at him. "I told you that the other night."

"Did you?"

"Yes." Didn't I? I went over what I remembered of the conversation we had while rolling around in the mud.

"No, I don't think you did, actually. You told me why you left. Not why you stayed gone so long."

"Oh." And this was the tough part, trying to answer truthfully without revealing how I felt about him. "Well, it's partly the same reason." I knew he deserved more than that. "But it was also... Simon wasn't here, but neither were you. Not really. I lost my brother that night. I was scared to come home and find my best friend still gone, too."

That was all true, as much as I didn't like talking about it. It was almost the whole truth even. In the way that winning a silver medal is almost like winning a gold, I guess.

The silence seemed to stretch between us, screaming, and I wondered if Wade heard the things I didn't say. I could say it, just admit out loud that in addition to all the pain and heartbreak, I left because of guilt too. Guilt that after all the years I'd spent loving a man who wasn't mine to love, loving a man that was my *brother's*, I walked away from that crash and Simon hadn't. I wasn't sure of the logic, but I guess somewhere in there was the thought that it should have been me instead. Penance for my sin.

But I couldn't say that to Wade and add another burden to the ones he already carried. I told Wade to look forward, to remember the love and take that with him into the future. Maybe it's time I tried that too.

Finally, Wade said, "I'm glad you're home now, though."

I nodded. “Yeah, me too.”

After that, we didn’t talk the whole way back to the ranch house, and I let Blitzen’s plodding pace and the warmth of the late spring breeze moving against my skin lull me.

Chapter Eight

“Hey, I got that new action thug movie with Kevin Bacon. You haven’t seen it, have you?” I juggled the pizza, beer and movies I’d brought back from my trek into town. Wade was bent over peering into the fridge when I walked into the kitchen. I tried not to stare.

Wade helped me set things down, saving the pizza box from a near miss. “Nope. Sounds good. Let me warm up the pizza and put the beer in the freezer and I’ll meet you in the family room if you want to shower.” In that respect, living almost forty miles from town sucked. Pizza was never warm by the time you got home. I ran back to the bunkhouse to shower, oddly unwilling to use the one in Wade’s house.

We eventually got settled on the couch, pizza hot and beer cold just as God intended. The movie was pretty good, although not enough to distract me from Wade, sitting only a couple feet away. I could smell him, a hint of the pine-scented soap he used in the shower and something that was pure Wade.

Over the last three months, we had settled into a pattern of sorts. Working hard sunup to sundown had paid off, the ranch gaining enough ground back to support hiring two new hands and to start expanding the stock again. It was slow going, but it was steady.

Wade worked tirelessly beside me, and he smiled and laughed, and somewhere in the last month or so the look deep in his hazel eyes started to change. So very different from when I first got back to the Lazy G.

He still didn’t go to town much, only to run errands occasionally, and never for fun. So he and I stayed here on the weekends when the hands went to tear up the town. I usually rented a movie, or we watched TV, or we went for rides. It was nice. Peaceful.

And it was always the same at the end. We’d sit here in this moment of expectation, and I would wonder how he would look at me, if it would be with warmth as he usually did, or with the heat I was starting to see in his eyes more and more. There were times that I would sit next to him, scared to move, scared not move, not wanting to screw anything up, not wanting to miss out. And there were times when I was scared that we’d be stuck like this forever, poised on the brink of action.

I blinked and noticed the credits were already rolling. The silence seemed pronounced and I realized I missed something Wade had said. “Sorry, what?”

“I said, why don’t you move into the house, Dylan?”

Whoa. And what exactly did he mean by that? “Why? I always lived in the bunkhouse, even when Simon tried to cajole me into moving in here.” But it hadn’t felt right, not with the way I felt about Wade,

so I always said no. And maybe Simon had known why, because he stopped pushing it after the first couple times.

“Well, with Simon gone...it just feels lonely here. There’s plenty of space, and you spend a lot of time here in the evenings,” Wade said.

I didn’t know how to answer that. I was tempted. Very tempted. But that didn’t mean I thought it was a good idea. I said, “I...well, that’s probably not a good idea, Wade. The guys might think...” I trailed off, oddly reluctant to verbalize what Mack and the hands might think. I wasn’t even sure if they knew I was gay, though they obviously never had a problem with Simon or Wade.

“Oh. Right. Yeah, they might...” Wade stopped and uttered what sounded like an uncomfortable laugh. Hesitating, he continued, “I was thinking I’d pack up Simon’s clothes this week. Maybe drop ’em off in town at the Goodwill. Thinkin’ about donating his art supplies to the high school.” Wade paused and met my eyes.

Surprised, I waited to see how much this would hurt. Even more surprised, I realized that instead of the sharp pang I was used to, missing Simon had turned into more of a dull throb. “Sounds like a good idea.”

“I think so.” Wade cleared his throat. “I wondered if you’d help me.” He looked away, staring at the TV, which was replaying the DVD menu loop over and over.

I thought about it, about what it would mean. Waited for the dread to rush over me at the idea of getting rid of Simon’s things, more tangible proof that he was gone. But it wasn’t a tidal wave, not now, more like a gentle lapping against the shore. I looked at Wade still studiously avoiding my gaze and wondered what it felt like for him. Wondered why he asked me. I said, “Yeah, okay. I’ll help.”

Wade looked at me again, and I couldn’t miss the relief on his face. “Thanks. I’m not sure how... easy it will be. But it’s kinda nice, the idea of making somebody happy with stuff that was just sittin’ around.”

“Simon would have liked that idea.” He really would have, his heart had been so big.

Wade nodded and then was quiet. I debated getting up and heading back to the bunkhouse, but it was calm and restful sitting here so I decided to enjoy it before it turned into one of those awkward moments of expectation.

“Dylan, how come you’ve never gotten serious about anyone, never brought anyone to meet your family, never really dated the whole time I’ve known you?”

From calm and restful to panicking and hyperventilating in five seconds. I didn’t want to answer this question, couldn’t answer it. I’d been afraid for years that everyone would see, that Wade would see. I tried to stop, tried to tell myself it was wrong, he was my brother’s partner. But no matter how hard I tried, I never could stop loving Wade. And the only reason he hadn’t seen it, most likely, was because when Simon was alive, he was all Wade could see. As it should have been.

I tried to calm my breathing without being obvious, and I looked at Wade. Stared straight into his steady gaze and I realized he already knew why. He *knew*. I couldn't identify the emotion in his eyes, but it wasn't anger or disgust. It looked kinder than that.

Wade laid a hand on my knee, and I glanced down at it, trying to figure out what to say. "I—" That was all I could get out. I couldn't really think beyond the fact that Wade knew, and I shouldn't have felt that way, not when Simon was alive, and somehow it made it worse that I still felt that way now.

"It's all right, Dylan. He probably knew. You didn't do anything wrong." Wade's voice was gentle, as if he were talking to a spooked horse.

"I shouldn't have..." Shouldn't have loved Wade. Shouldn't have walked away from that crash when Simon didn't.

"It's all right. He loved you." At this gentle comfort from Wade, of all people, something released inside of me. I could feel it, like a great big gust of air or the rush of water over the banks of the creek in spring.

I had carried this around with me for so long, and it was finally demanding to be let out.

I was the one who cried this time, Wade holding me close and telling me it would be okay.

Chapter Nine

I was tempted to avoid Wade after crying in his arms like that, but on Sunday he showed up at the bunkhouse looking pale and nervous as he asked me if I was ready to go through Simon's things. He didn't mention the conversation from Friday night, or my tears.

I didn't say it, but there are some things in life you're just never ready for.

But I followed him over to the ranch house, feeling all the dread I hadn't felt a couple nights ago when Wade first asked for my help. Why had I agreed to this? We were going to give my brother's things to strangers.

Wade didn't speak as we made our way through the house and up the stairs, and the sound of our boot heels hitting the hardwood floor was like a steady pounding drum. It echoed through me, and I forced myself to take deep breaths past the dread that was like a vise around my throat. I was scared I'd start choking any minute.

I didn't know how Wade could be so calm about this, so collected.

We stepped into his bedroom and I noticed the bed was made, the brown striped quilt smoothed neatly into place. There were a couple boxes by the open closet door, sitting at the ready, waiting for us to pack up a life. We'd put Simon's things into them and we'd haul them to town and some stranger would look at it all like it was just stuff.

Even if it was just stuff.

Still, Wade didn't speak, and I looked over at him. He had his hands shoved in the pockets of his Levi's and he stood there looking around the room like he'd never seen it before.

No, he wasn't calm and collected. He looked lost.

And then it wasn't so hard to control myself. Every breath wasn't a fight, and I didn't have to lock my knees to keep from bolting out of the room. It didn't take two guys to put some clothes into boxes. Wade had asked me because he couldn't do it alone.

"Well, I guess we'll start with the clothes. Is there anything you'd like to keep?" I asked.

"Um. Yeah. I think so." Wade sounded so uncertain, and I watched as he walked over to the closet. He ran a finger along the clothes hanging there, pausing every once in a while, but he moved on until he got to his side of the closet. Then he stood there unmoving in front of the clothes for another minute before finally uttering a pained little laugh, shaking his head a bit, and turning to look at me. "No... I guess not. His hat's downstairs. I'll keep that, but...this is just stuff."

“Yeah, clothes don’t maketh the man.” I briefly closed my eyes, wondering why I always do that. Expecting to see a scowl on Wade’s face, I opened my eyes and instead caught his small smile.

“No, they definitely don’t. Especially not when Simon had such...interesting taste.” Wade fingered the pink fishnet shirt I’d given Simon.

I couldn’t hold back a smile at that either. “But Simon didn’t pick that out. I did. As a joke.”

“Yeah, but Simon liked it, I think. If he could have gotten away with it without getting his ass kicked, I think he would have worn it. It was the artist in him. Different time, different place and I think he would have shocked us all.” Wade grinned.

“Yeah, Simon always was...colorful.” I had a grin of my own, thinking back.

Wade snorted. “Yeah. I always told him that’s why I preferred to work with charcoal. He used up all the color in our lives before I could get to it.”

I chuckled, recalling a time or two when I’d heard Wade say that. Simon had always sniffed, careful not to let Wade see his smile. I opened my mouth to speak, but Wade’s sigh cut me off.

“Some days I wonder if I’ll ever get that color back.” And just like that, the smiles were gone. He walked over to the window before continuing. “But then some days I wake up, and the world looks like it’s about to burst, there’s so much there.”

I nodded. I knew exactly what he meant. Good moments and bad. A different reality to adjust to, and the underlying feeling that you’d never quite reach adjustment. I didn’t know what to say, but then maybe Wade didn’t really need me to say anything. Maybe he just needed someone to listen to him.

His back looked stiff, his muscles tense, as he stood looking out into the bright afternoon sun. Quiet for long enough to make me think he’d forgotten I was even standing there, he said, “Do you know what the worst time is?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “Sometimes I have dreams about Simon. Almost like memories. He’s happy and so...alive. And then I wake up. I wake up and I remember. But it’s that transition from one second to the next, one where he’s still here to one where he’s not. It’s like losing him all over again and—” His voice broke and he went silent.

I knew exactly what he meant. I also knew... “But it’s also like having him all over again. The dreams, they’re the best times too.”

The muscles in Wade’s back relaxed, and he glanced over his shoulder at me. “I—yeah. The best times too.” He looked grateful, though I couldn’t figure out why. For listening to him? I hoped he knew what it meant to me too. I almost told him so, but my throat still felt too tight.

“All right. Let’s do this. You ready?” I didn’t have any trouble getting that out.

I could see Wade take a deep breath. He said, “Yeah. I’m ready.”

We worked side by side after that, folding up Simon’s clothes and putting them into the boxes, clearing half the closet and emptying drawers. At one point Wade turned to me, looking straight into my eyes, and echoed what he said a few months ago. “I’m glad you’re here, Dylan.”

He didn't look as lost as he had when we first walked into the room. He didn't look as pale either, his tanned face holding more of its natural color than it had all day.

For the first time in a long time, I was glad I was here too.

Barely a week later, I stepped out of the bunkhouse on my way to my truck. I was running into town to pick up pizza and a movie for Wade's and my usual Friday night festivities.

It had been a good week. After we finished packing up Simon's things, I drove with Wade into town the next day to donate it. It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. It really was just stuff. We were keeping all the best things left of Simon.

The weather was getting cooler, the breeze carrying a distinct chill as we settled into fall. I spent the last few days helping the boys move cattle. I didn't see much of Wade, since he spent the time cleaning up his office. I felt glad about that. Even if he had been keeping up the books, the last few months his desk had been covered in papers and his filing system seemed to have taken a vacation. It was good that he was picking up old habits again.

It felt familiar, which was nice.

Wade never mentioned the conversation we had last Friday night. More to the point, he never mentioned the way I felt about him, the way I had always felt about him. He acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary, and I was grateful. If I thought about it all, my stomach would start cramping.

But it looked like things were back to normal, or as normal as they ever would be.

I was just opening the door to hop in my truck when I happened to glance over toward the pond. Just beyond it and to the left a little, a lone figure stood in the shade of the big cottonwood tree on the grassy knoll where Wade's ancestors were buried. Where Simon was buried.

I paused with one foot resting on the runner of my truck and wondered why my stomach flipped. I knew that Wade must visit Simon's grave. Yeah, I must have known that.

So there was really no reason for me to feel like I just took a punch to the gut. Just because I was too chicken shit to face where we buried my brother didn't mean Wade was.

I had managed to avoid the spot since I came back to the Lazy G, telling myself it didn't matter. Why did I think Wade avoided it too?

Maybe it was just a simple case of needing to see it with my own eyes.

Shaking my head, I got in my truck before Wade could turn around and head back toward the house. I didn't know what I would say to him just then.

I was still thinking about it, though, when I returned to the ranch. I thought about it during the drive into town and the drive back. Then I thought about it watching the movie. I couldn't have said what we even watched. I ignored the puzzled looks Wade kept sending my way.

I thought about it as I got ready for bed, thought about it as I lay there and prayed for a dreamless sleep.

I was still thinking about it the next morning as I walked slowly over to my brother's final resting place.

I stopped in front of Simon's grave, a quick glance showing that the headstone was less weathered than those of Wade's deceased family members. Looking up at the tree branches overhead, the leaves quietly rustling in the breeze, I tried to force my gaze back to the spot where my brother was buried, but I couldn't.

This was much harder than I thought it would be.

The tree seemed as if it were whispering to me, though the language was foreign, and I stared until I had a slight crick in my neck. Still, I couldn't look down.

Wiping my forehead with the back of my hand, I concentrated on taking deep, even breaths.

"I'm sorry." My heart stuttered and I stopped breathing for a moment before I realized that I had said those words out loud. I thought that through, surprised at what I meant. A million reasons to be sorry, but only one that really mattered now.

Feeling awkward speaking out loud, but needing to get this out, I said, "I'm sorry I ran away. I was trying to outrun the pain, not your memory." I felt something shift inside of me, settling. Standing there, I looked over at the mountains in the distance, picturing Simon smiling at me. "I miss you, brother."

A bird sang softly nearby and I finally looked down at Simon's headstone. The words "He was loved" were engraved below his name.

I cleared my throat, ignoring the burning in my eyes, and said, "Yes, Simon. You were."

Chapter Ten

Later that night I hesitated at the door of the bunkhouse. I had just returned from dinner at Erin's house in town. When I had asked Wade to go, he claimed he still had to finish organizing his office. Which sounded like what it was: an excuse.

A couple of Wade's lights were still on, and I made a quick decision, thinking about the disappointed look on Erin's face.

I didn't bother knocking, just walked in and headed for Wade's office. Not surprised when I didn't find him—or at how immaculate his desk looked—I headed for the family room. Wade was there, sitting in a pair of thin black sweatpants and watching what looked like, from a quick glance at the Duke, *The Alamo*.

"Hey," I said. Wade looked over at me, surprised.

"Hey, Dylan. How was dinner?" He straightened up from his slouch and I tried to ignore the expanse of bare, tanned skin.

"Oh, you know. The usual." I walked over and sat at the other end of the couch. "A regular circus."

"I bet." Looking puzzled, Wade was quiet for a moment, then asked, "How's Erin?"

"Oh, you know. The usual. A talented ringleader, our Erin is."

Wade smiled briefly at that. "Yeah, she is."

When Wade didn't speak again, I said, "Why didn't you come to dinner?"

"I told you, I wanted to finish up the office. Get things done."

"Wade. Come on. I just looked in there; it doesn't get more organized than that, and I'm betting it was like that this morning when Erin called to invite us to dinner." Wade started to interrupt, but I kept talking. "Why won't you go into town for anything but errands?"

"I...I'm not ready. That sounds dumb, I know, but it's the truth." I could see the flush lining Wade's cheekbones.

"No, I don't think that's dumb. But Erin and Mike are family. They miss you."

"I, well, it feels safe here. Which sounds even dumber than saying I'm not ready, I know." Wade's voice had gone all soft and quiet, like when he was uncomfortable about something, and he was staring at his lap.

I wasn't sure what to say that wouldn't embarrass him more. I understood what he meant. The ranch was a comfort zone for him. Familiar. Someday he'd wouldn't need that—maybe that would be how I'd know he was ready to start living again—but until then, I wouldn't push it.

Much.

Trying to put him at ease, I said, “Well, I’m not sure how safe you’ll feel when I tell you that I invited Erin and Mike and the girls over for dinner here next Saturday. When Erin’s around, I don’t think anyone is safe.”

He looked up at me, but didn’t smile as I expected. “Dylan—”

I cut across his words. “Ya know, when it comes right down to it, she’s your sister, too. You can’t keep avoiding her. And don’t you miss your nieces?”

The look in Wade’s eyes softened. “Yeah, I do. It just...well, yeah you’re right. I do miss them, and I’m surprised Erin hasn’t come barging in here demanding to know why I haven’t been out to see her.”

“She’s shown admirable restraint.” I smiled at Wade, letting my gaze drop to his chest for only a moment. One weak moment. He looked really good sitting there—and completely oblivious to my roving gaze. “Seriously, though, she’s been giving you the space she thinks you need, but I don’t think it’s been easy for her. She misses you a lot, and she worries because you rarely leave the ranch.”

“I will. Just...not yet. You’re right, though. I’m glad you invited them.” Realizing I was staring at his mouth as he talked, wanting to move over until I was close enough to trace his lips with my tongue, I decided it was time to go.

“Good.” I stood and tossed over my shoulder on my way out of the room, “And look at it this way, Wade. The circus is coming to the ranch and we’ll have front row seats.”

His soft chuckle followed me into the chilly night air.

I pulled the roast out of the oven just as the screen door slammed at the front of the house.

“Honey, I’m home!” Wade sounded chipper, even if his words made me roll my eyes. Okay, so a tiny part of me thought they sounded kind of nice, despite the fact that I somehow got slotted as June in this episode.

“Oh, Ward, please remember to take off your boots, or I may have to skimp on your ‘hunka’ dessert.” My ‘50s housewife impression left a lot to be desired, although I could try to warble with the best of them.

Wade was chuckling as he walked into the kitchen. “Aw, June, have you been slaving away at the stove all day?”

I liked that Wade got my sense of humor, and I liked even more how genuine the sparkle in his eyes was.

He seemed...happier this last week, like maybe packing up Simon’s things had done him some good, deep down inside. His eyes looked warmer, if that was possible, and the jokes came more readily. Wade just seemed...easier in his skin.

I was glad.

And if I was a little frustrated that sometimes Wade would level a look at me—intense, possessive, full of heat—before turning and walking away, well, I wasn't thinking about that. Much.

I just wish I knew what to expect from Wade, whether I was coming or going with him these days.

Well, I knew I wasn't coming, that was for sure. But it would be nice to know whether I was going to get the buddy-buddy-Wade or the I-want-to-fuck-you-but-I-still-need-time-Wade. Considering they both came with a dream ranch, no batteries required, and matching horsies, I should probably be happy playing with either edition.

"Yeah, Erin and Mike and the girls will be here any minute. And so will the 'special' guest." Erin had invited one of her employees, a kid named Scott who was home for the summer before he finished up his final year at MSU-Billings. She had said on the phone the other night that she felt bad for him, his parents didn't seem thrilled with his existence—according to him anyways, but that could be leftover teenage angst—and he didn't appear to have many friends. I was used to Erin bringing home strays over the years, so I told her to bring him along to dinner.

Only now it felt just a little bit more formal than it would have been with just family. Thus my meager attempts in the kitchen. I wasn't a great cook, but I was a damn sight better than Wade, so I'd been giving it my best shot for the last two hours. Not too shabby, actually, if I did say so myself. The roasted carrots and potatoes looked really good.

There was a knock on the front door, and I turned to Wade and said, "They didn't barge in, so I'm assuming that's Scott. Erin gave him directions so he didn't have to ride with the girls. You should go wash up unless you want to impress him with your eau de stables."

As I went to move past him, Wade hooked his arm around my neck and pulled my face up against his neck. "You sayin' I stink?"

Yeah, he had a bit of the stables about him, but he also smelled like sweat and man. I resisted the urge to rub my nose against him as I took a deep breath to savor the scent of Wade, resisted the urge to dip my tongue in the tanned hollow of his throat. I shoved away from him before my body started to tell him how very appealing I found this headlock. "Definitely no dessert for you now." He left to go get ready.

Answering the door, I was surprised. I had been expecting some awkward, pimply-faced kid, not blond-blue-eyed-All-American-Joe-next-door. "Hi, you must be Scott. I'm Dylan." The kid met my eyes confidently, returned a strong handshake. This was the kid that nobody liked?

I didn't have time to pursue that thought because Erin and family arrived then, and there was much shrieking and giggling that took place as I squeezed the breath out of Amelia and tossed Molly into the air, straining a bit. She must have been getting too old for that, because the other option was that *I* was getting too old, and wasn't that a scary thought?

“Hey, you,” I said as I pulled my sister into a bear hug. I lowered my voice and said against her ear, “So, why did you really invite that kid?” She didn’t answer, the sneak, and I had been her brother long enough to know that something was up.

The greetings finally over, even after repeating them a second time when Wade came down the stairs fresh from his shower, I ushered everyone into the dining room to eat so the food wouldn’t get cold.

We sat down, Wade at the head of the table, Scott on his right and Erin on his left, said grace, and I left everyone else to make small talk amidst the sound of clanging silverware and closed-mouthed chewing. Well, looking at Molly, maybe not closed-mouth chewing for everyone. I contemplated Scott.

“So, tell me, what are you studying, Scott?” This was probably Wade’s best attempt at dinner table conversation.

“I’m an English Literature major.”

Scott looked earnest and I didn’t think I should chime in with something along the lines of, “What the hell are you gonna do with that?”

“Ah. That’s interesting. Seems like Erin’s coffee shop is a good place to work,” Wade said. I barely refrained from rolling my eyes. Was Wade even trying? And was this how the whole evening was going to go?

I glanced around the table, taking in Mike, who was studiously applying himself to his second helping of roast, the two little girls who were conducting a whispered conversation, and finally Erin, who was looking at the exchange between Wade and Scott with interest. I looked back to see Scott blushing slightly and smiling shyly at Wade. Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner. This time I didn’t bother to refrain from rolling my eyes.

“Erin, could I have your help in the kitchen?” She shook her head no, an evil grin on her face. Little sisters were still the pits no matter how old you were. “Please?”

“Dylan, you know I’ve never been a hit in the kitchen.” Erin was truly evil. If I had said that about her, I wouldn’t have turned my back on her for weeks. I opened my mouth to agree with her, damn the consequences.

And cue Mike, ever the diplomat. “But you do bake a fine chocolate cake. Doesn’t she, girls?” The girls must have known which side their cookies were frosted on, because they stopped whispering long enough to agree with their father. As for Mike, he just smiled at his wife, and I cringed, thinking there was something unnatural about seeing a man look at one’s baby sister like that, even if they had been married for nine years now.

But back to the matter at hand. “Oh, you know me, I’m just hopeless with desserts. I try and I try and still, it eludes me. How *do* you get your chocolate cake so chocolate? I think that’s where that whole mystique problem came from. Betty’s cake was just never chocolate enough.” Erin rolled her eyes, but finally followed me into the kitchen, probably eager to tell me to shut up before I scared off young Scott.

I grabbed the store-bought chocolate cake out of the fridge and pulled out a plate to put it on, trying to keep my voice quiet as I said, “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I *was* eating dinner until you rudely demanded my help.” I’d seen that butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-my-mouth look too many times over the years to be fooled.

“No. Scott. He doesn’t look like the misfit type to me.”

“He is, actually. Small town, most of his high school friends moved away. His parents are pretty hateful, though they pay his tuition.” She started to say something else, but then bit her lip.

“So you thought you’d bring him out here for dinner, throw him in front of Wade, and sit back while the magic happened?” I turned around and braced my hands on the edge of the counter, consciously relaxing the muscles in my shoulders and back so Erin wouldn’t know how much the idea bothered me.

“No, you dolt. Actually, I brought him out here thinking magic might happen with *you*.” Her voice rose on the last bit, and I glared at her over my shoulder.

“Keep your voice down.”

“Oh, like they really think I’m helping you with your cake.” Her voice sounded annoyed.

“Whatever.”

“Dylan.” She sounded hesitant. “How long are you going to stay out here, playing house, waiting for Wade to look at you and realize he’s ready to move on?”

It didn’t surprise me that Erin knew how I felt about Wade. “Is that what you think I’m doing out here? Just waiting for my chance?” I’d poured blood, sweat, and even a few unmanly tears into this place over the years, and I’d worked damn hard these last few months to save that. Besides, Wade was my good friend, had been before he and Simon ever got together.

I felt her come up behind me, lay her hand between my shoulder blades, a gentle reminiscence of our mother, and say, “Not at first, no. And maybe not even completely now either. I’m not blind. I see the work this place needs. But... I’m not blind. Wade’s not broken anymore, you know?” She paused, and I closed my eyes, both unwilling and desperate at the same time to hear what she had to say. “He’s going to wake up someday soon and realize he deserves to be happy again, and he’s going to go looking, and I’m just scared he might not go looking for you. I love you, Linnie, and I just don’t want you hurt.”

I bowed my head and tried not to think about how much the idea hurt. Erin hugged my back, probably feeling bad, and I turned around to return the hug properly. For all the teasing, Erin was a gentle little thing, and she’d always hated to see anybody hurt, but most especially her brothers. “Don’t worry about me, Erin. I’ll be fine.” I sure hoped so, anyways.

She pulled back, patted my shoulder, again so reminiscent of our mother. “We should go back in before my girls think we’re eating the cake without them and come looking.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. We’ll just tell them we had to make it just chocolate enough for them.” I picked up the plate. “How’d you know Scott was gay, anyways? He tell you?” Kid didn’t seem like the type to just go blurting that out.

Erin blushed, her pale cheeks a fiery red. “Um.”

Now this looked like it might be interesting. The brother in me decided I couldn’t just let it go, even if the occupants of the dining room mutinied. I set the cake down. “Spill. Make it quick, though, before we’re discovered.”

She gave a nervous laugh. “Well, the other day I saw him reading in the back room while on break.”

I waited, but she looked like that was all she’d offer up. “Well, hot damn, Erin. Book the tickets for Washington. Somebody better tell those folks at the Department of Ed that it’s *reading* that makes you queer.” She glared at me. “So, what was he reading? The Gay Kama Sutra?”

She sighed and said, “No, nothing like that. The title, *The Good Thief*, didn’t shriek it and the cover wasn’t that obvious either, although it did have two guys on it. I probably wouldn’t have given it another thought, but he blushed and stammered and raced back to the front. So I took a look.”

“And?”

“And it was...well, basically a romance. But between two guys. With, ya know, sex and everything.” Now she was beet red again.

“Sex and everything?” An odd thought struck me. “You read it.”

“Um.” She looked reluctant to answer, but then she smiled. “Okay. Yeah. I read it. When I realized what it was, I was really curious. I asked Scott if I could borrow it and when I started reading it, holy cow, I couldn’t put it down. It was hot and awesome, and I can’t wait for the author’s next release.” With that, she grabbed the cake off the counter and walked back toward the dining room, leaving me to ponder the fact that my sister was reading gay romance.

Deciding that thought needed reexamining later, I went back to the dining room to find Wade talking about the ranch, Scott hanging on his every word, and Erin and Mike trying to settle the fight between the girls over the cake.

I sat down, figuring I might as well see how chocolate the chocolate cake was after all that. I was just digging in when Molly stopped antagonizing her sister and said, “Uncle Dylan?”

“Yeah, Molly Dolly?” How cute, she had cake on her cheek.

“You and Uncle Wade are married now, right?” She waited expectantly for an answer.

Why was it that kids always zeroed in on exactly the wrong thing to say at the worst time? The table was dead silent, and I could feel everyone looking at me, feel Wade looking at me. I didn’t know how to answer, and shot a pleading look at Erin, but she was just watching me. I couldn’t believe she was seriously going to make me field this one.

“No, Molly, we’re not.” I was saved by having to say anything else when Dwayne, one of the new ranch hands, appeared in the doorway.

“I’m real sorry to interrupt, but can I talk to you a minute, Wade?” I was curious what this might be about, but with Mack visiting his daughter in Michigan ’til Wednesday it could be any number of things.

“Sure thing, Dwayne. We were just finishing up, and then I was going to give Scott here a tour of the ranch, but I’m sure Dylan can start it off and I’ll catch up. Let’s go to my office.”

As Wade stood to leave, Erin said, “Well, we should be going. I have to open up the shop tomorrow morning. Don’t feel like you have to go yet, though, Scott. I’m sure Dylan will be more than glad to give the tour one-on-one.” She smiled at me, the glint back in her eyes.

We all said our good-byes, the girls hugging me sweetly, and Erin taking an extra long time to hug Wade and whisper something in his ear. Whatever it was made him look at me, the oddest look on his face, then swing his gaze to Scott standing near the door, waiting to start his exciting tour of ranch life.

Finishing up the tour in the stables, I introduced Scott to Blitz. He wasn’t really the cowboy type, but, to give him credit, he had listened and looked interested as I showed him around and he had a nice, gentle rub for Blitz, who hung her head over the stall door.

“So, what do you think? Ready to quit school and join the rodeo?” I wondered where Wade was and why he didn’t catch up with us.

Scott laughed. “Um, no, not exactly. It’s really pretty out here, but the only thing I’d really want to get my hands on would be the cowboys.” He blushed, as if he hadn’t meant to say that. It was cute, I decided. He was cute. Cute and young, that was for sure.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

He turned toward me, propping his arm on the stall door, mirroring my position. Barely a foot separated us. “So. You come into town much?”

I’d kind of been expecting something like this. All the furtive looks at my ass out of the corner of his eye and the subsequent blushing as we walked around. I tried to think of the best way to let him down gently. Honesty was probably the best idea. “Nope, not really. Just for errands. No time or interest for anything else.” There. That was plain as day, and I could see Scott heard what I was saying by the disappointed look on his face.

“Hey, you done with the tour?” I turned to look at Wade, who was looking from me to Scott and back to me again.

“Yep. Showed Scott how glamorous ranching is, and I’m trying to talk him out of giving up school to become a ranch hand.” I wasn’t sure why I felt like I just got caught with my hand in the cookie jar, but I didn’t like it. “Everything okay with Dwayne?”

“Yeah. Fine.” Wade just continued to look at us. I could feel my muscles starting to tense.

“Um, this was really nice, but I should be going. Thanks for dinner and the tour. I had a very nice time.” Scott kept shooting uncertain looks between Wade and myself, probably picking up on the weird tension.

Seeing as Wade still wasn’t going to say anything, I glared at him and said to Scott, “You’re welcome. It was nice having you.”

We walked Scott to his car and it was only when Scott’s car was a tiny red dot on the road leading away from the ranch that Wade turned to me and said something. “Nice kid, huh?” He looked at me expectantly.

“Yeah, nice kid.” I wasn’t sure what he wanted from me. Erin’s words from earlier ran through my mind again, but I determinedly pushed them away.

“You gonna see him again?”

Huh. So that’s what this was about. Had Wade wanted to see this kid again? “Probably not. You?”

Wade’s eyebrows lifted. “I wasn’t the one looking all cozy with him a minute ago.”

I snorted my disbelief. “Cozy? Seriously?”

“Yeah, that’s what it looked like to me.”

“Well, then, I think you might need to have your eyesight checked.” Suddenly I felt weary of trying to figure everything out. I just wanted to sink into sleep for a week and forget Wade, and family dinners, and cute kids from town. “It doesn’t matter. You’ll see whatever you want to see, I bet.”

I turned and walked off toward the bunkhouse, not bothering to say good night, even when I heard Wade say behind me, “Yeah, I think I’m starting to. Night.”

Chapter Eleven

The first sketch was left on the dresser in my bedroom a week after the dinner with Erin and the family, rolled up with a rubber band around it. Just back from checking on cattle in the south meadow, I didn't know what it was at first. I only realized it was from Wade when I uncurled it.

It was a charcoal sketch of Mack, left leg resting on the first step of the bunkhouse porch. He had a beer bottle dangling in one hand by his side, and his hat was off. Mack was laughing, looking much better than when I first returned to the ranch.

It was a good sketch, captured the feeling of camaraderie we felt sitting out on the porch in the cool summer evenings, showed that larger than life quality I'd always associated with Mack.

Feeling a bit puzzled, I wondered why Wade gave it to me, furtively left in my room like it was a secret gift. But I was glad he was sketching again.

I decided I'd go thank Wade in person, see if he'd give me a clue as to why he gave the drawing to me.

I found him eating a sandwich at the kitchen table in the main house, and I took a seat when he invited me to join him. Wade smiled at me. "You go down to the south meadow?"

"Yep, just got back. Should get ready to move cattle."

"S what I figured." Wade nodded his head and continued to eat.

I set the sketch down on the table, and his eyes flicked down to it then back up to meet mine. He didn't say anything.

"Thank you, Wade. It's nice. Mack probably would have liked it more than me." I let the last word lilt up as if I had asked a question.

"Welcome. Yeah, he probably would have." And that was it. He didn't add anything else, just went back to his turkey on wheat.

"All right, then. Back to work. See you at dinner." I got up to leave, and I caught the small smile playing around Wade's mouth. It looked secretive.

Hmmm.

The second sketch was left in the same place, the same way, a week later. I was curious to see what this one would be, and I felt a thrill of excitement as I unrolled it.

Surprised, I studied it. It was a drawing of Erin and Mike and the girls, sitting around the dining room table at their house, probably drawn the other night after Wade and I went for dinner. Wade had managed to capture the animation in their faces, like a snapshot in time, a sweet remembrance of a family moment.

I was still puzzled and felt as though I was missing some vital piece of information, but I pushed the thought aside. It was a nice drawing of my family.

I wondered what Wade would say, so once again I sought him out to say thank you. I found him sitting out by the pond, shirtless, sweat streaming down the curve of his spine despite the brisk air, and my step faltered.

He must have heard me, though, because he turned his head and looked at me over his shoulder.

“Hey, Wade,” I said as I joined him on the grass by the edge of the pond.

“Hey, Dylan.” He tossed a pebble into the pond, disturbing the smooth surface of the green-brown water.

“I got the drawing you left today. It’s...special. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Did you give one to Erin?”

“Nope.” Another pebble was tossed. I waited.

Nothing. So, that was it. I sighed, oddly reluctant to push for more.

“Mack and the hands are heading into Big Timber tonight to blow their paychecks in their usual Friday night free-for-all. I was thinking about joining them. You wanna go?” I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, absently plucking grass by his right knee. I could smell him, sweat and man and Wade with that hint of pine-scented soap, and I wondered what he’d do when we all went to town and he stayed behind.

He looked at me for a moment and then said, “Yeah. Sure.”

I tried not to look as surprised by this as I felt. Wade hadn’t gone out for a night of fun since I’d been back on the Lazy G. Something relaxed inside of me.

“All right. They’re leavin’ in about an hour or so. Time to go find my dancin’ shoes.” Wade snorted at this. I got up, brushed off my jeans and said in falsetto, Southern twang added in for good measure, “I suggest you try and find a shower. You’re sweaty and that is *so* icky.”

Wade laughed and said, “Sorry, darlin’. Didn’t mean to offend your delicate sensibilities.”

I didn’t dignify that with a response, but I did put an exaggerated swing in my hips as I walked back to the bunkhouse, smiling as Wade laughed again.

I found myself whistling as I heated up the leftover chicken from last night instead of waiting for Billy to cook dinner. His hamburgers were always dry and overdone. I tried to tell myself to stop, but I whistled through my shower too. I whistled while pulling on a clean pair of Levi’s and a blue shirt Erin had

bought me a couple weeks ago to match my eyes. Why I would want to color coordinate with my body parts I had no idea, but Erin had acted like that was a really good thing.

I was still whistling as I pulled on my boots, just a regular whistlin' fool.

But it felt good.

When everyone was ready to go, three piled into Wade's truck, and four into Billy's. I was squeezed between Wade and Mack on the bench seat. Wade had indeed showered, because I smelled mint and pine and clean just rolling off the body pressed tightly against my side.

We were quiet on the way to town, except for the sound of Wade humming. I fought the urge to whistle and occasionally joined Wade's humming with my own when I couldn't help it. Hearing me join in, Wade grinned over at me, and Mack snorted and said something about young fools being "so damn weird these days."

We went into Ginny's Saloon, not a gay bar by any means, but friendly enough that Wade and I probably wouldn't get our asses kicked. Wade and I went to go grab beer from the bar while Mack and the hands snagged a pool table.

While we waited for the beers, I said, "Shame we picked Ginny's."

Wade didn't look at me but I could see the grin fighting through. He said, "Why's that?"

"I wouldn't mind a whirl around the dance floor with you, cowboy. Don't think we'd get away with that here." I looked around at the mixture of weathered cowboys and young kids looking for trouble. Yeah, we might not get our asses kicked for admitting to being gay, but if we started twirling around together, somebody might have a problem with it.

"Yeah. I think you're right. Shame." Wade's hazel eyes looked more green than anything tonight, shining bright with...something. Something good, something I wanted to see every time Wade looked at me.

"Yep. " S what I said." We just stood there smiling at each other like the fools Mack had called us earlier. I didn't know what this was exactly, or how things had changed from last week, I just knew it was warm and good, and it was running back and forth between us, bringing smiles and laughter and teasing. And the promises of more.

I never wanted it to end.

The moment was interrupted by the bartender coming back over with the pitchers. We paid and headed over to play some pool.

Two hours later, I was riding a nice buzz and starting to feel downright good. Excited. Which might have had something to do with staring at Wade's ass for the majority of that time while he was bent over taking his pool shots. Man had a damn fine ass, filled out his denim just right, that was for sure. I realized I was getting myself in trouble that would soon be very obvious if I kept composing odes to Wade's ass in my head, despite my slouch against the wall in the darkened corner.

Wade and Mack were playing for some serious money, competitive bastards. Billy was kicking Tom's butt over at the other pool table, Joe had left an hour ago with a blond woman who looked at least ten years older than he was, and Dwayne was currently trying his luck with a redhead at the bar. I decided to get some air.

I was leaning against the corner of the building in the shadows, inhaling the scent of early fall nights in Big Sky country, and thinking about the last few months and how glad I was that I came home when Wade joined me.

"Thought you were winnin' big in there."

"Nah. Old man cleaned me out." Wade didn't seem too bothered about it.

"Better not let him hear you call him old man. Unless you're not partial to your front teeth."

"Too late. And it's wasn't pretty." He paused. "So, why'd you leave? Didn't want to stick around and see me get my ass kicked?"

"Wade, I got ideas for your ass, and they've got nothin' to do with kickin'." Shit, did I say that? I'd definitely had one too many. I leaned farther back into the shadows, not wanting Wade to be able to see my face.

"Oh, really? Maybe you should tell me more about them, then." Wade didn't even look like he moved, and yet all of a sudden there he was, right in front of me, all I could see. The look in his eyes was intense, and the shadow was creeping over his face as he moved closer.

"I'm not sure..." I smelled the yeast on his breath, felt my hat tip up off my head and tumble down to the ground as his knocked into it, felt the heat of his body, felt him breathing. Then I was breathing him *in*, getting ready for the taste of Wade, finally, when the door to Ginny's slammed shut.

"Wade? You out here?" Mack. I groaned and leaned my head against the side of the building. Wade stepped back into the light.

"Yep. You ready to go?" Wade looked completely at ease, as if nothing had been about to happen here in the shadows.

I stepped into the light too, and Mack just squinted at me for a moment. Then he looked at Wade, snorted, and said, "Yeah. I'm about ready to head home. Stayin' out 'til the wee hours is for the young fools."

I studied Mack's face, tried to figure out if it was more than that. Relieved, it really did look like he was just tired.

"All right, old man, let's go home." I might have had the brass to say it, but I still put a hop in my step on my way to the truck, trying not to laugh at Mack's outraged mutterings that followed close behind.

I found the third sketch the next morning, rolled up, on my unmade bed after I came back from a morning dip in the pond. Probably the last of the season, 'cause the water had been *cold*. I stood there dripping on the wooden floor, shivering, and I contemplated it. I had a feeling...

Yeah, this one was of me. It wasn't a very graceful pose. I was half bent over, hauling up a wooden slat, my hands covered in work gloves and my hat shading my face from view. I sat down on the bed and looked at that drawing, and I finally got a clue.

"I want you to see me, see that I'm sorry I left and I'm back to stay. I'll help you hold onto this place, I swear..."

I studied the sketch another minute, and then I set it on the dresser until I could frame it and hang it up next to the other two on my wall.

I didn't hunt down Wade to say thank you this time. I realized he was telling me something, but I still didn't know how much he was saying.

I spent a week avoiding Wade. I was unsure of what he wanted, where he was going with this, so I did what I do best. I ran.

Every time I saw him coming, I went the other way, or tried to look busy, and if that didn't work, I hid. Not behavior to be proud of, really, but sometimes not knowing and hoping was better than finding out and being disappointed.

What a coward I was. I wondered if I'd find the yellow brick road somewhere on the ranch.

I didn't know if I was coming or going, and I was learning that running was still tiring even if it was partly figurative.

After an evening spent watching TV with Mack and Dwayne, ignoring Mack's mutterings—even when he called me Debbie D. for my "long face"—I said good night, my mind on what Wade was doing up at the house as I made my way to my bedroom.

Was he getting ready for bed? Or already in it? Was he running a hand down the smooth skin of his stomach, into the hair at his groin? Was he stroking the length of his prick, enjoying the feel of it slowly filling until he was hard and throbbing? Was he picturing someone as he pumped himself, the intense feelings curling through his body? Did he cry someone's name as his back arched and he shot his pleasure into his hand?

Realizing I was leaning against my bedroom door and rubbing myself through my jeans, I huffed a laugh and started stripping. I was naked and about to climb into bed when I noticed the drawing left next to my pillow. I wondered when he had managed to leave this one since it hadn't been here when I came back earlier, and I had been in the bunkhouse since dinner.

I picked it up, unfurled it, ignoring the clenching of my stomach muscles, and gaped. The sketch was of me coming out of the pond, running a hand through my hair as I tilted my face up to the sun. I was

decently covered in cut-offs, and there was nothing indecent about what I was wearing or doing. But I wouldn't show this to Mack or Erin, and definitely not to any kids.

I looked...sexual. The lines of my body, the look on my face, I don't know, but something about the way Wade had sketched me was unmistakably erotic.

Was this how Wade saw me? Was he answering my questions? Asking his own? Was he waiting for me to make my own move? I felt more confused than ever, and abruptly I was sick of the game. Tomorrow I was going to ask Wade what he wanted from me.

It was no surprise that I dreamed about his hands on me.

The next morning I stumbled out of bed late after a night spent dreaming. I blinked sleep from my eyes and when my right foot slipped on something, I looked down blankly for a moment. I rubbed my eyes, not thinking it could be what I thought it was, but it was still there when I opened them again, so I leaned down and picked it up.

There was nothing subtle about this sketch. I was lying on a bed, back arched, head thrown back, eyes shut, as I pumped my cock. I looked at this drawing of me and I blushed. This wasn't memory, it was imagination.

I stood there, my morning wood becoming actual interest as I thought of Wade spending time fantasizing about me, thinking of me spread out on his bed putting on a show just for him. I dragged on my clothes from yesterday and was on my way out the door within a few minutes. At the last second, I turned around, rummaged through the drawer in my bedside table and stuck the lube and a condom in my back pocket.

Then I went to find Wade.

Chapter Twelve

I found Wade mucking stalls, not surprised that most of the meaningful conversations in my life have taken place around horse shit.

"Where is everybody, Wade?" He obviously hadn't heard me come in because he jumped before turning to look at me.

"Mack and Dwayne ran to town. Billy, Joe and Tom are out working cattle." Wade put down the pitchfork he'd been using and stepped out of the stall toward me.

"Good. Got something this morning." No sense beating around the bush.

"That right?" Wade's smile spread slowly across his face. He looked like he had a naughty secret.

"Oh, yeah. Think maybe you'd like it." I walked up close to Wade until our chests brushed.

"Think so?" Wade slid his right hand up my arm to my neck in one smooth caress that made me shiver.

"Oh, *yeah*. I should pass it on." Then we were kissing, tongues thrusting and hands flying as we both tried to touch as much of the other's body as possible. It was desperate and needy and a little awkward at first as we learned the way our mouths fit together.

I heard myself moan as I finally learned the taste of Wade. He tasted like coffee, a little bitter, and something else. Something that I would bet was just all Wade, rich and dark and so very good.

Good in the way that climbing Mount Everest is good, or winning the Nobel Peace Prize good. There were no words for the feeling as he stroked my tongue with his and moved his hands down to cup my ass, bringing my hips up to rub our cocks together through denim. "So good."

"Yeah," he took the time to mutter as he sucked on my neck, and we attacked buttons and belt buckles.

"This isn't going to last." I thought I should warn him of that, and then he got his hand around my cock. Yeah, no way was this going to last longer than a few more strokes.

"Last long enough to be in me?" Probably not, but for that I'd damn sure try.

"Maybe. God, that feels so good." He continued to pump my dick. "But not going to last long enough to fuck you if you keep doing that." I wrapped my hand around his cock, loving the heft in my hand as it pulsed with life.

"Shit, we don't have anything." Wade groaned and kissed me again. "We should go up to the house."

“Hell, no. We got everything we need.” I dug the condom and lube out of my pocket. “Turn around, hands against the wall.” I wondered what he’d think of that command.

He didn’t say anything, just turned around, put his hands on the wall until he was almost bent over, and looked over his shoulder at me and grinned. “You gonna show me how I like it now?”

“Sure am. Hope you want it rough and fast because anything else will have to wait ’til later.” I pushed his jeans all the way down to his ankles to help him widen his stance a little. Talk about down and dirty in the stables.

“Yeah, don’t hold back. Been too long.” And with that we both froze as we thought about why. Then he turned his head to look at me again, serious this time, and said, “Dylan. Now.”

I paused for just another moment, thinking that at some point you just had to make a conscious decision to leave the past behind, and then I finished rolling the condom down my cock.

I slid a lubed finger into Wade, listened to his breathing catch as I got him ready. When he began pushing back onto my fingers and mumbling things like “please” and “now” over and over, I lined up against his entrance and pushed in.

The feeling was so intense, the tight welcome of his body around mine, and we just stayed there a moment, my body plastered against his from where my hands covered his against the wall to the place where his body swallowed mine.

We just breathed. In. Out. In. Out. And I never knew until this moment that I’d sell my soul for the pleasure of breathing.

Then Wade groaned, and said, “Now. Please. Just move.”

So I did. In. Out. In. Out. Like breathing, only this was ten times better. A million.

I set up a pounding rhythm, pumping in and out, fast, hard, and I buried my face in the back of Wade’s neck, sucking on the skin there. Salt, sweat, man, Wade. I knew I’d never want another taste as long as I lived.

Adjusting the angle, I knew when I hit the right spot because Wade tipped his head back to rest against my shoulder and whimpered. Yes, whimpered. I’d never want to hear another sound during sex as long as I lived.

Wade was so sexy, and this felt so good, and I knew I was close when it occurred to me he might like a helping hand. Duh. I reached around and wrapped my hand around his cock, letting Wade fuck himself between my hand and my cock. I tightened my grip, put a little twist in, added a little rough, and then Wade was coming, his body tightening around me as he shot, and that was it. I was done. Or completely undone.

My climax left me gasping for breath and blinking my eyes to remove the spots dancing in front of me; my legs felt like the merest wind would knock me right over. I leaned on Wade, letting him support me. “Are you okay?”

Wade snorted. "As soon as I can talk, I'll tell you. Have you seen my brain? I think I lost it somewhere." Those were a lot of words. I laughed and then Wade joined in, and I thought from now on I would always order hot, desperate sex in the stables with a side order of laughter for after.

When the laughter died, I turned his head and captured his mouth in a soft, wet kiss, lazily stroking his tongue with mine. We both moaned, as if adding this connection again was too much. I felt Wade stiffen.

"Did you hear that?"

"What?" The galloping of my heartbeat drowned out everything else. I listened and heard what sounded like a car door slam. "Shit."

"Yeah." And then we were scrambling to clean up as best we could and yank our clothing back on. I looked around for a place to put the condom, and finally just shrugged and stuffed it in my pocket.

We looked reasonably presentable by the time we made our way out of the stables and saw Mack and Dwayne unloading feed from the truck. Mack glanced at us and gave me a knowing look that made me drop my gaze and scuff my boot in the grass.

Wade turned to me, "I need to make a couple calls, and I'd like to talk to you if you have a moment, Dylan. Will you come up to the house?" By the look in his eyes, I didn't think we'd be doing any talking.

"Sure, I'll help unload and then I'll be up."

Wade nodded and walked toward the house, the slight hitch in his gait making me flush.

Dwayne paused next to me on his way to the barn, his face earnest and his eyes on Wade's retreating back. "Is Wade okay? He looked flushed and he's walking like he spent too much time in the saddle without a break."

"Yeah. He's fine." My voice sounded strangled to my own ears.

When Dwayne was out of earshot, Mack came around the truck, clapped me on my back as he hooted with laughter. "Boy, I don't even want to know what you both been up to. Just glad."

"Glad?" I wasn't sure what he meant.

"Yeah. You both been alone, and it's nice to see my boys happy together." Mack smiled, clapped me on the back one more time, and then ambled toward the bunkhouse. I helped Dwayne finish unloading, grabbed a quick shower, and then made my way to the main house, whistling.

Happy. Yeah.

Chapter Thirteen

An hour later I had my mouth wrapped around Wade's cock, finally learning the taste of him as I gave teasing licks from base to tip, swiping my tongue over the head, which was steadily leaking pre-come.

"Please." Wade was gripping the sheets in both hands, his head thrashing from side to side. I gave him what he wanted and sucked first on the head of his cock and then sank my mouth down his length until I felt him nudge the back of my throat.

I threw everything I had into it after that, just getting off on the taste of Wade, on the feel of him sliding through my lips and over my tongue. I wanted him to enjoy this as much as I was. From the groaning and whimpering and the way his hands moved from clutching the sheets to clutching my head, I think he was.

I swallowed when he came, and that was it for me. I came without even touching my own cock. After I stopped trembling, I licked his dick clean, gentling my tongue strokes so it wouldn't be too much for sensitized flesh.

His voice was husky as he said, "Dylan that was... Just give me a minute and I'll take care of you."

I laughed and nuzzled the crease between hip and thigh as he ran his hand through my hair. "No need. I, uh, took care of it." He quirked a brow at me. "I took care of it by taking care of you." I blushed, not sure why I was embarrassed by that.

"Oh. Wow." He seemed to think about this for a minute then pulled me up for a kiss. He moaned into my mouth. "Do you have any idea how hot that is? That you got off just from getting me off? And that I can taste myself in your mouth?"

I propped my elbows on his chest and rested my head on my hands as I looked down at him. I let a smile curve my mouth. "I think I have an idea. But maybe we should try it again later to make sure I *really* get it. I think I might be a slow learner."

Wade smiled. "Hmm. If we have to. But only if you cook me dinner first. I don't work for free, ya know."

I was just jonesin' on the carefree and happy look on Wade's face, but I was going to do it. Even as I told myself to wait, later would be fine, I was going to get serious.

"Why the drawings?" Wade's smile faded at my words, and I rushed back into speech. "Not that I didn't love them. I did. I do. I think they're great. And I think I even get what you were trying to tell me, but why didn't you say anything after that night at Ginny's? After the first drawing of me?"

“Ah, because you gave me so many opportunities to, you mean?” He didn’t sound annoyed, but I still felt bad that I had avoided him like that. He continued. “You asked for something months ago. And maybe you weren’t asking for...for this, but I was just trying to let you know.”

Not sure why I needed to hear him say it, I asked, “Let me know what?”

“What I see when I look at you.” He rolled me over onto my back and leaned over me, rubbing a hand over the muscles in my chest and kissing me slowly. Gently. Telling me so many things I’d always wanted to hear, lip to lip. Leaning back, he said, “I see a friend, a desirable man, a lover.”

I kissed him, giving him back the unspoken words.

“Can I show you what else I see?” Wade seemed slightly unsure now, not meeting my gaze anymore.

“Sure.” I was curious as he rolled off of me and stood then walked over to his dresser. He held out his hand for me, and I joined him as he took a rolled sketch from his top drawer.

“Open it. See what I see.” As I unrolled it, he slid his arms around my waist from behind and set his chin on my shoulder. I felt my throat constrict and reminded myself to breathe.

“You see us.” Wade had drawn me on horseback. He was right next to me, and we were looking at each other and smiling.

“Yeah, I do.” He tightened his arms around my waist. “Never tried to draw myself before, but it was easy once I knew how I wanted to look.”

“Oh, yeah?” I still couldn’t think of anything to say. No jokes, no flippancy, no wisecracks this time.

“Yeah. Happy was really easy to draw. Looks good on both of us.” Wade kissed my neck and continued to hold me as we stared down at the drawing. More than I ever thought I’d see, right there in front of me. Right there holding me. I tipped my head back against Wade’s shoulder, closed my eyes and absorbed the feel of Wade here in the silence. It felt so right.

Of course, it would have felt wrong eventually if I continued without *something* to say. That just wasn’t me. “Well, let’s hope you keep your good eyesight into old age, then, eat your carrots and everything. Because I love your vision.”

Wade snorted against the side of my neck and then sobered. “Love. Yeah.”

Love. Oh, yeah.

About the Author

Dakota Flint currently lives in ~~northern Siberia~~ Michigan and is working on her law degree. An average day for her consists of reading about things like negligence or homicide, punctuated by thinking up interesting ways for two men to meet and fall in love. Given a choice between getting some writing time in and time for things like laundry or cooking dinner...well, let's just say the pile of laundry is blocking out sunlight and there's a very real chance that all the salad for dinner is turning Dakota into a rabbit...

To learn more about Dakota Flint, please visit www.dakotaflint.com. Send an email to her at Dakota@dakotaflint.com or check out her Livejournal at dakotaflint.livejournal.com.

Two men on trajectory for an explosive collision.

Star Flyer

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Still mourning the loss of his lover to invading forces, Marr Hingo operates his farm under a dictatorship while keeping his mind—and feet—planted firmly on the ground. Spring arrives right on schedule, bringing with it something completely unexpected—an unconscious pilot from a downed star jet. Unable to bring himself to give up the handsome aviator to searching troops, Marr hides him in the barn's cellar.

The last thing Davan Siedel remembers before ejecting is getting in a couple of good blasts against a Galactic Forces F150. He wakes to find his vague memory of being carried by an angel wasn't far off the mark. A tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed farmer has brought him to safety and is tending his injured leg.

The attraction between solid, earthy Marr and clever, quicksilver Davan catches them off guard—and their sexual union is as sweet as it is powerful. Yet the longer Davan lingers, the tighter the enemy's web grows, threatening their love, their freedom...and their lives.

Warning: Contains hot male/male loving, sweet sexual healing, a down-to-earth farmer who knows how to wield a...plow, a smart-mouthed pilot with fast...jets.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Star Flyer:

Marr descended the narrow steps, tripped and caught himself with a stumbling leap to the ground. He cursed his clumsiness as he held up the glow stick and peered into the darkness. The rumpled pile of sacking was empty. His guest was nowhere in sight. "Are you all right?"

"Still here." Davan's voice floated quietly through the still air. He crawled out from behind one of the wooden vegetable bins, dragging his injured leg. He had a mag-blaster in his hand and a quizzical expression on his face. "I heard a lot of activity up there. What happened?"

"Tandus soldiers searching the area. I sent them into the forest in the opposite direction from where you came down. Had to wait for them to leave before I could come back."

Davan holstered his weapon and blew a long breath. "Thought I was going to have to shoot my way out." His frown returned as he cursed in Antian. "Ob-coms! They've probably got the place bugged."

"I checked and didn't find any."

"I've got a scanner in my flight suit if you want to sweep the area." Davan reached into the bin behind him and pulled out the folded suit. He handed Marr a small device and showed him how to turn on the beam.

For a moment their hands touched and Marr was shocked by the effect the brief touch had on him. His cock grew rigid as if it imagined what the other man's hand would feel like touching it. Marr had stripped

Davan practically naked and wrapped his leg from thigh to heel without feeling a jolt of lust like this. He pushed the feeling away and turned to climb back up the stairs.

“I’ll be back with some dinner,” he promised.

After sweeping the barn from rafters to floor and finding it clean, he hurried to the house and did the same. The sun had set by the time he emerged from the house and crossed the yard.

He moved awkwardly down the steps to the cellar with his arms full of the box of supplies. The glow stick illuminated the cellar, the empty vegetable bins, the dirt floor and Davan. The pilot’s skin was so white he practically glowed, creating illumination of his own. Marr wondered if he was pale from trauma or if it was his natural color.

“I’ve brought more medication for you if you’re in pain.” He set down the box and unpacked it, tossing the water bottle to Davan, who caught it in one hand. “I have clothes, blankets, pillows and a camp bed. I didn’t have time to make dinner, but there’s leftover stew. If you don’t like the stew, I can make something else.”

Marr realized he hadn’t strung that many words together in weeks. Solitude had become such a part of his life without Sasch that he remained quiet even when he was with people. But now it was as if a dam had burst. He wanted to talk. He wanted to find out everything about the young pilot and to tell him things about himself.

Davan accepted the T-shirt he offered and slipped it over his head. It was big for him and the long-sleeved shirt he added on top of it was even bigger. Marr thought it was a shame to cover such a beautiful body. The man’s muscles were taut and toned, making him look like a white marble statue. He imagined sliding his hands over that smooth, perfect skin, warm and alive—not like marble or glass at all. But the young flier also looked really good in Marr’s old clothes. There was something erotic about having a shirt he’d worn against his own body so many times now intimately touching Davan’s.

“I can help you into the pants,” Marr offered, then remembered the splint on Davan’s leg. “Or maybe just cover you with blankets for now.”

“That would be good. I’m a little cold.” From the way his jaw clenched to keep his teeth from chattering, he was more than a little cold. Perhaps he was in shock from the trauma of his injury.

Marr quickly inflated the insta-mattress with a flick of the switch, glad he hadn’t gotten rid of it along with the rest of Sasch’s stuff. He’d never expected to go camping again and certainly didn’t want to be reminded of the times they’d used it together, but instead of giving it to charity he’d left it up in the attic.

After spreading a blanket over it, he helped Davan to lie on top, gently positioning his hurt leg. The younger man suppressed a groan.

“Sorry.”

“No problem. I owe you my life. All I can do is keep thanking you for taking such a risk.” He placed his mag-gun close at hand on the floor beside the mattress.

Marr covered him with one of the blankets and propped a pillow behind his head. He added a quick-dissolving pain tablet to his water bottle and handed it back. Davan took a long drink while Marr pulled the container of leftover stew from the box and apologized for not having warmed it.

“I don’t care. I’ll eat the stew and the container, too. I’m starving.”

It was a pleasure to watch him enjoy the food Marr had made, reminding him of how many solitary meals he’d had in the past two years. His appetite had dulled after Sasch left and he’d lost weight. Neighbors and friends kept inviting him over for dinner as if he might not eat if they didn’t feed him. Maybe he wouldn’t have.

Davan didn’t speak until the bowl was empty then he belched, sighed and handed Marr the empty bowl. “Best stew I ever tasted. You’re a good cook.”

“Or you’re really hungry. It’s nothing special.”

Davan raised an eyebrow. “Not used to compliments, are you? You’re supposed to say, ‘thanks’.” His gaze traveled around the cellar then back to Marr. “Do you live here alone or is there someone else I’m putting in danger?”

“Just me. No family or anything.” He paused, but felt compelled to explain. “There was someone, my partner, Sasch, but he’s gone now.”

Sky blue turned to silver as Davan turned his head and the light reflected from a different facet of his diamond eyes. “Gone where?”

Marr hesitated again. He hadn’t spoken about Sasch to anyone and didn’t know why he felt compelled to tell this stranger. “When Theon was invaded, Sasch went to fight the Tandus. I didn’t want him to go, but he felt he had to. And I stayed behind.”

He shrugged, unable to express the guilt he felt for not going with his lover and trying to keep him safe. But he was no freedom fighter. He was a farmer and someone needed to grow the crops and feed the people no matter what else was going on in the world. He couldn’t persuade Sasch to stay and Sasch would never have asked him to go.

“The resistance was crushed in a few months. He was killed.” The words fell like pebbles from his mouth and Marr realized it was the first time he’d ever said them aloud.

“I’m sorry.” Davan’s silver eyes shifted back to a soft blue. Marr couldn’t take his sympathy and didn’t want to talk about Sasch anymore. He began unpacking the last of the items from his box.

“You’ll need this.” He handed Davan the empty jar he’d brought for him to piss in and set a palm reader on the ground. “Do you like Gindre adventures?”

“I don’t need to read ’em. I live ’em.” Davan winked and a cocky grin twisted his lips. But the shadows under his eyes and sheen of sweat on his brow belied his teasing manner. He looked like he was in pain.

Marr leaned forward and rested a hand on his forehead, a little hot, but not too feverish. He stroked Davan's hair back from his face. It was an absurd gesture of comfort to offer a man he barely knew, but he couldn't resist touching that shiny, white-blond hair. It slid like silk between his fingers and the color shifted from white to burnished gold to a kind of toffee-brown depending on how the light reflected from the fine strands.

Davan didn't pull away. Instead, he closed his eyes and his grin softened to a faint smile.

A quirky holiday romance about Faith, Hope, and...er...glow-in-the-dark condoms!

The Dickens with Love

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Three years ago, a scandal cost antiquarian “book hunter” James Winter everything that mattered to him: his job, his lover and his self-respect. But now the rich and unscrupulous Mr. Stephanopoulos has a proposition. A previously unpublished Christmas book by Charles Dickens has turned up in the hands of an English chemistry professor by the name of Sedgwick Crisparkle. Mr. S. wants that book at any price, and he needs James to get it for him. There’s just one catch. James can’t tell the nutty professor who the buyer is.

Actually, two catches. The nutty Professor Crisparkle turns out to be totally gorgeous—and on the prowl. Faster than you can say, “Old Saint Nick,” James is mixing business with pleasure...and in real danger of forgetting that this is just a holiday romance.

Just as they’re well on the way to having their peppermint sticks and eating them too, Sedgwick discovers the truth. James has been a very bad boy. And any chance Santa will bring him what he wants most is disappearing quicker than the Jolly Old Elf’s sleigh.

Warning: This book contains an ocelot, songs by America, Stardust martinis, tinsel, long-lost manuscripts, Faith, Hope and...Love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Dickens with Love:

I dreamed that an ocelot was chewing on a first edition of *A Christmas Carol*. When I tried to snatch the book away, it sank its fangs into my hand.

Head throbbing, I opened my eyes to watery green daylight. I was in a hotel room. A very comfortable hotel room that smelled of orange furniture polish and sex. The fluffy duvet and long draperies were in matching old-fashioned pink and gray cabbage rose print. Rain trickled down the windowpanes of a pair of French doors and sent sperm-shaped shadows twitching and jerking across the sage green walls.

My head hurt. That was because I’d had too much to drink. My hand hurt. That was because a strange man was lying on it.

I wriggled my hand out from under my naked companion and studied him. Sedgwick Crisparkle looked less angelic and more rakishly debauched that morning. He had quite a heavy beard and the longest eyelashes I’d ever seen on a guy. He did not snore, but he made a gentle puffing sound. He looked deeply asleep and unreasonably content.

I flexed my fingers a couple of times, then sat up carefully, wincing, and looked around for my clothes. They were on the floor near the door where I’d apparently dropped them. I inched over, trying not to wake my host, and got slowly, cautiously, out of bed.

I had to stop halfway to the door to give my spinning head a rest. How the hell much had I had to drink the night before? Not that much really, but I hadn't eaten. Those shooting stars, or whatever they were called, packed an unexpected wallop. I tried to make out the numbers on my watch. They seemed very tiny. I peered harder.

Six thirty. Plenty of time. I didn't need to be at work until four. I could go home, sleep more, shower, and...call Mr. S.

"Not feeling well?"

I jumped, whimpered and clutched my head. "Must you shout?"

"Sorry." Part of what he said was lost in a gigantic yawn. "Didn't mean to startle you."

I heard the rustle of bedclothes being thrown back and the pad of bare feet on carpet. The drapes were jerked shut and the room returned to a soothing darkness. I heard him pad past me on his way back to bed, so when a warm hand was laid on my naked shoulder I did another of those starts and yelps.

"You have a very nervous disposition," Sedgwick said disapprovingly. "You ought to consider supplementing your diet with bee pollen."

I gazed up at him, opened my mouth. Closed it. Closed my eyes. Why not? I was clearly still dreaming. *Bee pollen?*

"I think you should come back to bed." I opened my eyes at that particular note in his voice. Sedgwick was smiling a funny sort of shy half-smile. "I think you'd feel much better in bed."

He put his arm around me and I permitted myself to be led back to bed.

When I woke the next time the sun was shining and a busboy was carefully lowering a large tray with covered dishes to the table in front of the fireplace.

"Lovely," Sedgwick was saying as he signed the busboy's chit.

I raised my head, peering owlishly over the edge of the duvet, and the busboy grinned at me before taking his bill book and departing.

When the door had safely closed, I climbed out of bed, pulled on my jeans—to Sedgwick's evident disappointment—and investigated the breakfast tray. A white teapot, two gold-rimmed china cups, a jar of honey, a small basket of muffins and nut breads, a bowl of fresh berries. One plate offered eggs Benedict with shaved honey ham and what appeared to be an herbed Hollandaise sauce. Another plate had thick round Belgian waffles, richly, sweetly scented of vanilla, cinnamon and topped with whipped cream, fresh strawberries and pecans.

"I wasn't sure what you liked," Sedgwick said at whatever he read in my expression. "We can share or I can order you something completely different." He was wearing the kind of gorgeous silk dressing gown people only wear in old movies and the horn-rimmed glasses, but even behind those severe glasses his face looked much younger and softer that morning.

I dropped down on the fat comfortable chair cattycorner to the table. “No. This is...amazing. Any of this is fine.” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a breakfast like this.

He looked smug. “We’ll split everything down the middle.”

“We will if we eat all this.”

He laughed. “I admit I don’t usually eat like this, although I do like my breakfasts. I’m on holiday, though, so...when in Rome.”

“I’m very glad you’re not in Rome this morning.” I heard myself say that and cringed. Talk about sappy. I added quickly, “I’d be eating a bowl of Cheerios right now.”

“I’m glad I’m not in Rome too.” He smiled right into my eyes.

After that I couldn’t think of anything to say, and I devoted myself to eating that fantastic breakfast.

As vocal as Sedgwick had been in bed, he was not terribly chatty over breakfast. It seemed to be a replete and satisfied silence, though. He appeared content, and each time our eyes met, he offered that disarming smile.

In fact, it felt so natural and comfortable between us, I was encouraged to ask, “Will you let me have another look at *The Christmas Cake*?”

Sedgwick’s gaze dropped to the egg-topped muffin he was neatly cutting through. “No.”

“No?” I felt bewildered, not least by the brusqueness of this. “Why?”

He sighed. “After last night I’d hoped you’d let this go.”

What the hell did last night have to do with it? “I was hired to appraise the book. I’m being paid to do that. If I ‘let this go’ I also have to let go of that commission. Which I need.”

He said quietly, “James, I think we’re both realists.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“If you don’t stop now, you’re liable to spoil this, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. Spoil this? How is asking to see the book spoiling anything?” And now I was starting to get annoyed.

Behind the severe glasses, Sedgwick raised his green-gold eyes, gave me a long, direct stare.

“I don’t know what that look is supposed to mean.”

“It means we’re having a very nice time together. Let’s not ruin it by bringing up...unpleasant memories.”

It took me a beat or two to work out what he was referring to. The rush of anger and hurt left me feeling winded. Lack of oxygen made my voice come out flat and compressed. “I thought you didn’t believe the rumors about me.”

He said with all the dispassionate exactitude one could ask of a science teacher, “What I said was, no one accused you of being directly involved in murder or forgery. That is *all* I said.”

I'm sure my disbelief showed on my face. Hopefully nothing else showed. The laugh that escaped me took us both by surprise. "You're right. My mistake."

I got up, my knee knocking the edge of my plate and tipping it over. The waffle landed in a sticky plop face down on the plush carpet. I didn't give a fuck about that. I didn't give a fuck about anything at that point. It was all very clear, diamond-edged and razor-bright. He didn't trust me. He thought I had possibly been involved in murder and forgery, but he liked having sex with me—or possibly with anyone and I happened to be willing—and he didn't want me to spoil that by bringing up something as awkward as business.

Sedgwick rose too. "James."

I ignored him, finding my shirt and buttoning it up quickly. I got one of the buttonholes misaligned, so it hung crookedly—appropriately, it seemed—but I didn't care. Was not going to stay in that room one instant longer than I had to.

"James—?"

I was hunting with fierce attention for my other shoe. I found it under his side of the bed.

"Apparently I've offended you. I...didn't intend to."

Now that was almost funny. I slipped the shoe on. I was missing my socks, but that really seemed a small price to pay for getting out of there without committing murder for real.

"I'm not sure what I—oft times I put things more bluntly than I intend," Sedgwick was saying. He sounded a fraction impatient. "Don't you think you're overreacting?"

I found my jacket and headed for the door. He was right behind me.

"James, I really don't *see*—" He put a hand on my shoulder, and I spun around and shoved him back. The arm of the sofa caught him behind his thighs, and he half fell back over it, glasses crooked, blinking up in astonishment at me.

I said, "Enjoy the rest of your stay in L.A., asshole."

I managed not to slam the door on my way out.



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