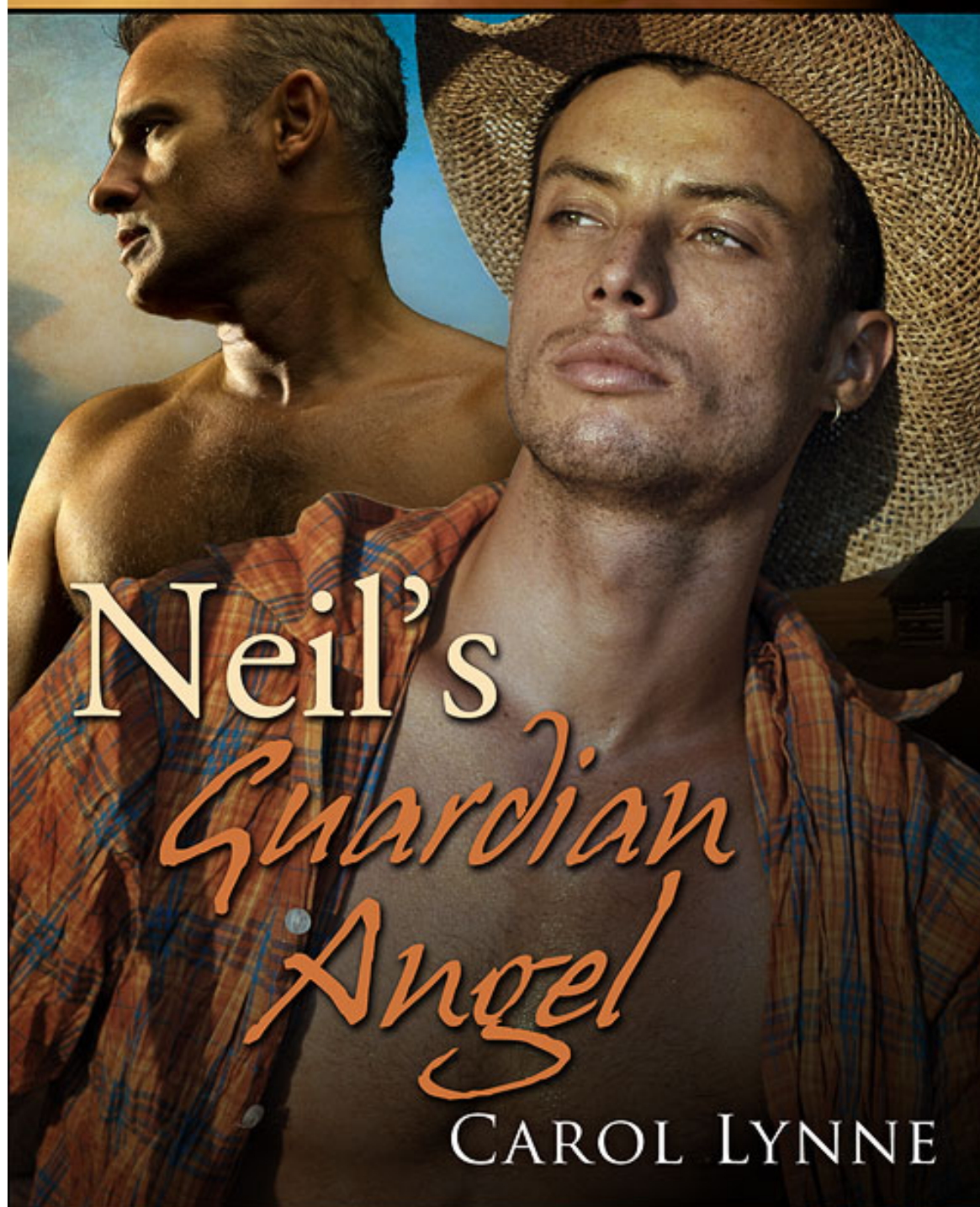




CATTLE
VALLEY



Neil's
*Guardian
Angel*

CAROL LYNNE

A Total-E-Bound Publication



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Neil's Guardian Angel

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-sizzling*.

Cattle Valley

NEIL'S GUARDIAN ANGEL

Carol Lynne

Dedication

For Diane and Andrea. Thanks for keeping the sharks at bay.

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Chapter One

Ben Waters finished the rest of his cardboard flavoured sandwich and sipped at yet another cup of coffee. The hospital cafeteria had become almost like a second home to him. It had been ten days since he'd received the late night phone call from Leo Burkowski informing him that his ward, Neil Peters, had been seriously injured in a fall from his horse. Serious, as it turned out, had been an understatement.

For days, Neil slipped in and out of consciousness. Now that he was finally awake, Neil was experiencing a good deal of amnesia. He seemed to remember his friend Leo and Leo's partner Sammy, as well as the other folks from Cattle Valley that came to see him, but he didn't remember Ben or his life before he moved to the small Wyoming town.

Worse, Neil's physical mobility had been compromised by the severe blow to the head. The doctors hoped, with therapy, Neil would regain the use of his hands and his left leg, but so far the young man Ben had always known was practically helpless.

A hand landed on his shoulder, startling him out of his thoughts. He glanced up and smiled at Leo. "You scared me."

"Sorry about that." Leo set a fresh cup of coffee in front of Ben and took the chair across from him.

"I stopped into the room, but Neil's napping. I figured I'd find you down here," Leo said.

Ben nodded. "Thought I might as well grab something to eat while he slept."

Leo traced the design on the outside of his cup with his finger. "Any change?"

"No."

"And I suppose you still haven't told him who you really are."

"He knows I'm his legal guardian, but he still doesn't remember me," Ben admitted.

"Don't you think you should tell him the rest?"

"The rest? What, like how I kicked him out of my life after he told me he loved me?"

Ben shook his head. "If there's a reason he doesn't remember me, I figure that's it."

"You should tell him you love him."

Ben finished off his original cup of coffee before pouring two packets of sugar into the one Leo had given him. "What good would that do? Maybe it's better he doesn't remember. I know how much I hurt him by pushing him away."

"Why did you?" Leo asked. "I mean, you don't have to tell me, but I know why Neil thinks you did it."

Ben shook his head. "I know what Neil thought, but the age issue was only a small part of it."

"Was it because you were his guardian?"

"Partly. I had my reasons. Things I won't discuss."

Leo nodded. "From what little he's told me, I gather things were pretty damn bad at home."

"You can't even imagine what that boy went through. In the beginning, it seemed I called the cops at least once a week. They never seemed to do much." Ben cleared his throat. "Did Neil tell you his mom was a dispatcher for the police department?"

Leo shook his head. "He never mentioned it."

"Well, she had everyone fooled, including the Department of Social Services. It got to the point she threatened to move away. In my heart, I knew that I couldn't let that happen. At least with Neil living next door, I was able to protect him as much as possible."

"Sounds like you did all you could."

"Not all. I found out after his mother's death, beating him wasn't all the woman's boyfriends enjoyed doing to Neil." Ben swallowed around the bile rising in his throat. "I knew Neil seemed to be unnaturally interested in learning about gay sex. I mistakenly chalked it up to him being curious about my open homosexuality. He never gave any indication he'd been violated, but I should've seen it. I should've known."

"Bullshit. Now you're being too hard on yourself."

"I'll never be as hard on myself as I deserve. Pushing Neil away seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Part of me was afraid I'd fallen in love with him for the wrong reasons as well. It wasn't until after he left, and I didn't hear from him, that I realised I loved him more than I'd ever loved anyone."

Ben sighed and stood. "I need to get back up there. Neil may not remember me, but he's gotten used to having me around. Once again, I'm like an old, ratty security blanket to him."

Leo stood and clapped Ben on the back. "I have a pretty good idea that in his heart, he remembers exactly who you are. It just might take his mind a little more time to catch up."

* * * *

Neil opened his eyes and tried to give Leo the best smile he could muster. "Hey."

Leo leant over the bed and smiled back. "How're you feeling, cowboy?"

"Like I got thrown from a horse and smashed my head against a stone fence post. How about you?" Neil spotted Ben sitting quietly in the corner of the room. It wasn't that he minded the guy always hanging out in his room, but he needed to talk to Leo alone.

"Ben?"

Ben jumped out of his chair and was immediately at Neil's side. "Yeah?"

"Would you do me a favour and ask one of the nurses if I can have some chicken broth?"

"Sure." Ben's smile fell a bit as he turned to leave the room.

As soon as he was gone, Neil returned his attention to Leo. "That guy makes me sad."

"Ben?"

"Yeah. I know he doesn't mean to, but I always catch him looking at me like it hurts him that I don't remember him."

Leo nodded. "It does, but he understands. Maybe someday soon your memories will come back and you'll remember what he truly means to you."

"Were we dating?" Neil asked. Although he'd spoken to his doctor about Gavin and his subsequent death, Neil couldn't recall having another boyfriend, especially not one as hot as Ben.

"No."

Ben knocked lightly before coming back into the room, a small paper cup of broth in his hand. "I didn't know if you'd prefer a spoon or a straw, so I got both."

"Thanks. I'll use the straw." His hands still wouldn't cooperate, and for whatever reason, Neil couldn't bear it when Ben tried to feed him.

Ben smiled patiently. "I'll just set it on your tray table."

Ben positioned the straw, getting the correct angle on the bend, before scooting the table close enough for Neil to take a sip if he wanted. It was those little things Ben did for Neil that bothered him most. *Why can't I remember someone like you?*

"So how much longer are you in here for?" Leo asked, breaking the tension in the room.

"Four or five days, I guess," Neil mumbled.

"I'm going to take him back home with me. He'll be able to start physical therapy in Rapid City," Ben said, resuming his place in the corner.

Neil gazed pleadingly at Leo. "I'd rather stay in Cattle Valley, but Dr. Flatts said a dirty bunkhouse was no place for me right now."

"Kade and Lark just finished their new house, so Ben Zook's place is up for rent again. It's already set up..." Leo stopped. "It would probably work out well for you."

Neil had been by Ben's old place out in the country. He'd seen the wheelchair ramps and paved sidewalk out towards the small barn. The thought of trying to live his life in a wheelchair was unacceptable. "I'll be up and walking before long."

"Sure, but it might take a few weeks or months for you to get to that point," Leo added. He laid a hand on Neil's shoulder. "As long as relocating is okay with Ben, it's a way for you to stay in Cattle Valley."

Neil glanced at Ben, sitting quietly in the corner. "Do you think he will?" he whispered.

"Ask him." Leo squeezed Neil's shoulder. "I'm going to take off, but I'll be back Thursday once I get off shift."

Neil swallowed. "What day is it today?"

"Monday," Leo answered.

"And you won't be back until Thursday?" Neil knew his attachment to Leo was unnatural. It wasn't sexual, although the man was fucking hot. No, it was more a sense of normal. The memories he still had were precious, even the ones that hurt.

"Carol had the baby. A little girl they named Lucy. So I told George I'd work some of his shifts this week," Leo explained.

"Tell them congratulations. I bet Trick is beside himself with a little girl to spoil."

Leo nodded. "You're right, but you should see Nate. That man has to be thrown out of the house to get him away from that baby."

Neil tried to smile, but the fucked up nerves on the lower right side of his face must have turned the action into more of a grimace.

"Something wrong?" Ben asked, standing.

"No," Neil replied. He looked back up at Leo. "Do you think Trick would bring the baby over to see me once I get out of here?"

"I'm sure of it." Leo gifted Neil with a reassuring smile. He turned to Ben. "Take care of him. I'll call you later to check on how things are going."

Ben nodded, and Leo left the room.

Alone with Ben, Neil's gaze went to the third-story window. It looked like a perfect day to be out on Footloose, checking fences.

"Your broth has probably gone cold," Ben said, standing. "Would you like me to go heat it up or get you another cup?"

"No," Neil answered without turning his eyes away from the blue sky. "I'm fine."

He heard the soft sigh from Ben before the room was once again quiet. What would he do if he wasn't able to ride again? Fucking beer. Leo had warned him not to drink too much the day of the chilli cook-off, but Neil hadn't listened for shit. By the time he rode back to the EZ Does It with Brent, another one of the cowboys, he'd been beyond feeling good.

He'd ridden drunk before and had never lost his seat. It was just his luck to get tossed so close to a fucking fence post. Out of nowhere, a tear escaped and ran down the side of his face. Without thinking he started to reach up to wipe it away. His arm, more specifically, his hand refused to cooperate.

"God dammit!"

Ben was at his side in a heartbeat. "What do you need?"

Neil turned his watery focus to the handsome man at his side. He still didn't understand why Ben sat with him day and night. It definitely wasn't the stimulating conversation.

Although he was getting used to Ben being around, he still didn't feel like he knew him any better than he knew the nurses that came in constantly to check on him. "Nothing."

Once again, Ben sighed. The back of Ben's hand brushed the side of Neil's face, drying the tears. "I can't help you if you don't let me."

"I don't know you well enough to ask for it," Neil replied honestly.

Ben moved away. Neil thought he'd hurt the man's feelings until he realised Ben was merely moving his chair closer to the bed to sit at Neil's side. "There was a time when you came to me for help. I guess a part of me wants a little of that back."

"Who are you, exactly? I mean, I know you used to be my legal guardian, but why?" Neil asked.

Ben was so quiet, Neil didn't think he would answer. "I was your neighbour while you were growing up. After your mom died, it was only natural that I take you into my home."

They had told him before that his mother was dead. At the time, Neil hadn't questioned it any further since he didn't remember her anyway, but now he began to wonder. "How did my mom die? Didn't I have a dad?"

Neil watched as Ben's jaws clenched. The handsome man shook his head. "I think your dad left your mom when you were just a baby. He was never part of your life."

But I was. Seemed to be the unspoken emotion in Ben's dark grey eyes.

"And my mom?" Neil prodded.

"She worked for the Rapid City Police Department. There was a shooting...she died." Ben rubbed at his eyes before blinking several times.

"You hate me for not remembering you, don't you?"

Ben shook his head as moisture once again filled his eyes. "I could never hate you. Ever."

"I wanna stay in Cattle Valley. I don't remember Rapid City, so I don't want to go back there. All my friends are here."

Ben nodded. "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

* * * *

Because Leo was on duty at the firehouse, Sammy showed Ben around the small house in the country for rent. "It's nice."

Sammy nodded, and opened a door at the end of the hall. Like most of the doorways in the house, this one was wide enough for a wheelchair to easily pass through. "This would be a perfect room for Neil since it's a straight shot down the hall and won't require any fancy turns."

"Yeah," Ben agreed. "I'm still not sure how he's going to handle the electric wheelchair. I mean, he cringes when you even mention a regular chair. I'm worried that it'll make him feel even more helpless to have the electric one."

"He doesn't have much choice right now. Until he can regain the mobility in his hands and forearms anyway."

Ben walked behind Sammy out the back door to the expansive deck. Besides a small barn and garden shed, the yard was a huge expanse of carefully maintained flower beds. With the gorgeous mountains in the background, Ben couldn't have asked for a more peaceful setting. "It sure is pretty out here."

"You're right about that," Sammy agreed, making his way down the wheelchair ramp towards the sidewalk. "Wanna see the barn?"

Ben shrugged. "Can't say that I've ever been in one. I was born and raised in New York City."

Sammy glanced over his shoulder and grinned. "So how'd a city boy wind up in Rapid City, South Dakota?"

"I was stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base for a while. Some nasty shit went down later in my career, and I guess I just missed the quiet of South Dakota." Ben grinned.

He was bound by law to keep his mouth shut about the covert missions he'd been on for the government, so he didn't expand. "Of course by the second year of living in Rapid City, I was sick of the slow pace, but by then I had Neil to keep an eye on."

Sammy nodded. "I hope you don't mind, but Leo told me about Neil's life when he was younger."

Ben followed Sammy into the barn and stopped dead in his tracks until his eyes became accustomed to the dark interior. "Smells funny."

Sammy laughed. "Horses. Mr. Zook had them and passed them on to Kade and Lark who took the gorgeous animals with them to their new place down the road."

Ben braced his hand on one of the two stalls. Yeah, he knew what they were called. Just because he'd never actually been in a barn didn't mean he was completely stupid. Hell, cowboy westerns had been a big part of his life growing up in the city.

"I heard Neil talking to Ezra about his horse, Footloose. Do you think Ezra would let me bring him here?" Ben asked.

"Sure, but do you think that's a good idea? I mean, Neil can't ride yet."

"I understand what you're saying, but maybe it would help give Neil a sense of home, ya know? Hell, I know he won't talk to me, maybe he'll be able to come out here and talk to his horse."

"I'd ask Ezra or Wyn if I were you. They both know Neil pretty well. They should be able to tell you just how close Neil and his horse are."

"I'll do that." Hell, he had to go by the EZ Does It anyway to get the rest of Neil's things.

* * * *

As soon as Ben parked his SUV, Ezra came out of the barn and started towards him. "Glad you found the place okay."

"No trouble at all," Ben answered, shaking hands with Neil's boss. "Quite a place you have out here."

Ezra seemed to stand a little taller at the compliment. "We're pretty proud of it."

As they talked, Ezra led Ben towards the bunkhouse. A large truck pulled into the ranch yard.

"Shit," Ezra said with a shake to his head. "Sorry. That'll be my lumber order. I'm building Wyn a big gazebo for our anniversary. Do you mind starting without me?"

"Not at all," Ben answered.

"Neil's room is the second door on the left once you start down the hall."

"I'll find it. Thanks." Ben walked into the bunkhouse and glanced around. It was a damn nice place compared to the ones he'd seen on his favourite westerns. He went down the indicated hall and opened Neil's door.

"Neat as a pin," Ben said with a chuckle. He remembered the house cleaning boot camp he'd put Neil through several weeks after he'd moved in. The young fifteen year old had excelled in everything except putting the cap back on the toothpaste and...Ben glanced at Neil's bed. Making a military bed with hospital corners had been something Ben had been forced to remind Neil of daily. From the look of the bed in the bunkhouse, it seemed Neil had gone back to his old ways.

Ben was happy to see someone had left several boxes on the floor in the middle of the room. He picked one up and carried it over to the small door-less closet and began taking jeans from the top shelf and placing them in the box.

A small stack of spiral-bound notebooks fell to the floor when he grabbed a sweatshirt from the shelf. "Shit."

Ben stuffed the shirt into the box and bent over to pick up the books. Leafing through the first one, he was shocked to see pages and pages of Neil's tiny scrawl. It took him several moments to realise it was a journal of sorts.

As tempted as he was, Ben closed the notebook and held it against his chest for a few moments before placing it in another box. Gathering the other fallen books, it was obvious Neil had been journaling since he was a boy. How much pain was written into each and every one of them?

"How's it coming?" a deep voice asked from behind him.

Caught with the books in his hands, Ben decided to be honest with Ezra. He turned and held them up. "I didn't even know he did this."

Ezra grinned. "I've noticed him clutching one before. Neil usually stuffs one in his saddlebag if he's going to his thinkin' rock."

"Thinking rock?" Ben questioned.

Ezra nodded and sat on the edge of the small twin size bed. "A spot up on the bluff that overlooks the ranch. After Gavin was killed, he started spending even more time up there."

Ben placed the notebooks into the box. "Did he love Gavin?"

Ezra sighed and leaned his forearms on his thighs. "I think he wanted to, but I don't think he did. Still, Gavin's death in the collapse last year really hit Neil hard."

Ben nodded his understanding. "It's good to see he has friends here. I don't think he's had them before."

"Well he does now. Neil may have his quirks, and we try to respect them, but he's a great guy to be around." Ezra chuckled. "And a hell of a cowboy to boot."

"Quirks?" Ben questioned.

"You know, the no touching thing. We respect his boundaries."

Ben glanced around the room, unable to maintain eye contact with Ezra. He'd never known Neil to be that way. If anything, Neil had always been incredibly needy when it came to physical comfort. He wondered if something could've happened to the young eighteen year old after Ben had tossed him out.

"When did Neil move here?" he asked.

"Oh, geez, I guess it was right around the first of June almost four years ago. He wandered onto the ranch with nothing but will in his heart and a suitcase in his hand."

Ezra rubbed the back of his neck. "There was something so lost about him. I hired him on the spot and assigned another of my hands, Jax, to teach him how to ride. It was one of the smartest moves I ever made."

Neil had to have shown up to the EZ Does It soon after he left Rapid City. He looked at the box of journals. The answers were right in front of him but his conscience wouldn't let him invade Neil's privacy.

Ben stood and turned back to the closet. As he pulled out the rest of the clothes, he glanced over his shoulder. "We're renting Dr. Zook's place while Neil recovers."

"Yep. I heard." Ezra started packing the few odds and ends beside Neil's bed.

"I was wondering if you'd let me take Neil's horse over there. He won't be able to ride, of course, but I think it'll bring him some comfort."

Ezra grinned. "One step ahead of you. I had Jax take Footloose over early this morning."

"Thanks. I'll be staying at the house tonight to get it ready for tomorrow. If you'll show me how to care for a horse, I'd appreciate it."

"I'll have to teach you more than that. Footloose needs to be ridden. That'll be up to you until Neil can get back in the saddle."

Ben closed up the box full of clothes. "Are you sure that's a good idea? The last thing I want is to make Neil feel worse. Seeing me on his horse might drag him even further down."

"Or give him the incentive to get back on his feet sooner than anyone expects," Ezra countered.

Ben nodded. "I hope you're right."

Chapter Two

"Fuck!" Neil yelled, running his stupid wheelchair into the leg of a side table. He watched helplessly as the table teetered for several seconds before toppling to the floor.

"What happened?" Ben asked, rushing into the room.

Neil turned his head to the side. "I feel like a bull in a china shop."

Ben righted the table and started picking up the broken candy dish. "Don't worry about it. It'll take you a while to get used to manoeuvring around."

Neil gazed at his hands. One was lying limply in his lap while the other was harnessed to the joystick on the arm of the electric wheelchair. "I'm twenty-two." He lifted his chin and stared at Ben. "I shouldn't be in this chair. It's not fair."

Ben set the pieces of broken glass on the table and took a seat on the couch. "You're right, it isn't fair. You've been through a lot of things in your life that haven't been fair."

"So you're saying I should be used to it?" Neil stared at Ben. It was so strange to be around a man who obviously knew him so well.

"No. I'm saying you've survived a lot worse. You're the strongest man I've ever met. So give yourself a fucking break. Regardless of whether you're walking in a month or six, you'll survive."

"Were you always such a fucking cheerleader, or is this something new?" Neil quipped.

Neil expected Ben to give him a smartass comment in return, but instead, Ben leant forward and narrowed his eyes. "I've always been your fucking cheerleader. Why should I stop now just because you don't even fucking know who I am!"

Ben bounded off the couch and out the back door, leaving Neil in his wake. Neil was shocked for only a moment before he broke out into a wide grin. It was nice to know Mr. Feelgood could get pissed off.

Instead of going after Ben, Neil managed to turn around and head back to his new bedroom. The journals on the dresser continued to mock him. The answers to his past were all there in neatly scrawled lines of text, but he still hadn't been able to convince himself to open them.

He glanced out the window and saw the big barn door open. After several moments of staring, Ben rode out atop Footloose. Neil's stomach dropped as his breath caught in his chest. "Oh no, you're not!"

Red faced, Neil spun the chair around and made his way out of his bedroom, only banging into the wall once as he manoeuvred out the back door and started down the ramp. Who the hell did the fucker think he was, shoving the fact that Neil couldn't ride in his face?

He neared the pasture gate, screaming. "Get off him!"

Ben walked Footloose over to the gate and stared down at Neil. "Ezra said your horse needed to be ridden."

"Not by you! I'll have someone else do it," Neil spat.

Ben slid off the saddle and walked over to Neil. "I'm here, dammit! You're not getting rid of me so you'd better get used to it." He turned and mounted Footloose once again. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a horse to exercise before I have to make dinner."

Neil watched as his best friend carried off the traitor. "Fucker," he mumbled under his breath.

* * * *

Ben finished up the dishes and walked into the living room to find Neil in his usual position in front of the television. For three days they'd barely spoken. The incident with Footloose felt like a wedge between them.

He hadn't said anything to Neil, but since that day he hadn't ridden Footloose once. Instead, he'd spent hours walking the damn horse around the pasture on a lead. Leaning against the doorframe, Ben's chest tightened. Although Neil was in front of the TV, Ben could tell he wasn't watching it. Like they seemed to be most of the time, Neil's thoughts were somewhere else.

"I thought I'd help you with a shower."

Neil blinked several times before turning his head to look at Ben. "No thanks."

"Sorry, but you're starting to smell pretty ripe." Ben tried to put himself in Neil's position. "I know you're uncomfortable with me bathing you, but it needs to be done."

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. "I'll get it."

"Ya think?" Neil fired back in the smartass tone Ben was coming to loathe.

Ben shook his head and strode towards the front door. A smiling threesome with a fat, dark-haired baby girl stood on the front porch. "Hi."

"I hope we didn't come at a bad time. I'm ashamed to say I didn't know your number to call beforehand," Trick Allen said.

Ben shook his head and stepped back. It was still hard for him to wrap his mind around the fact that Neil was good friends with the famous country singer. "Not at all. Come in."

George, Carol, little Lucy and Trick poured into the house.

"How's he doing?" Trick asked.

For no reason, Ben felt his throat begin to knot up. He longed to pour out his troubles to these people but he barely knew them. "Better, I think. Well, physically anyway. He's been working on holding a spoon in his physical therapy sessions."

"Do you think Neil's up for a visit?" Carol asked. "We can always come back."

"No." Ben shook his head. "I mean, no, don't leave. It'll be good for him."

Ben shut the door and ushered the group into the living room. "Look who's come to see you."

Neil's face lit up as they walked into the room. Ben turned away, afraid the hurt would show on his face. "I'll make some coffee."

Before he even got the water poured into the coffeemaker, he heard Neil's laughter. Ben braced his hands on the counter and struggled to keep the threatening tears at bay.

"Can I help?" Carol asked, coming into the kitchen.

Ben quickly stood up straight and tried to nonchalantly wipe his eyes. "That's okay, I've got it."

Carol walked over and bumped her side against Ben several times before he got the hint and stepped back from the coffeemaker.

"It seems to me you should accept help when it's offered," she said, fitting a filter into the basket.

"It's not always easy," Ben answered.

"Yeah, I know. I would imagine Neil feels the same way."

Ben watched as she carefully measured out the coffee grounds. "Yeah, but he doesn't have much choice. I do."

"Exactly," Carol said. She turned on the coffeemaker and turned to lean against the counter, arms crossed in front of her chest. "It's not easy doing what you're doing. I just want

you to know there are people around who are more than willing to give you a break when you need it."

Ben sighed. It was the first true act of kindness he'd received in almost two weeks. "He hates me."

"No he doesn't. He hates the situation." Carol cocked her head to the side. "He may even hate himself." She smiled. "But he doesn't hate you. It just feels like that because you're the only one around to hear his frustration."

"He's losing weight that he can't afford to lose, all because he doesn't like me to feed him. I've tried to tell him it doesn't make him any less a man in my eyes, but he won't listen."

Another round of laughter came from the living room. Ben gestured towards the sound. "I haven't heard him laugh since he was a senior in high school."

Once again his eyes began to burn, but he'd be damned if he'd cry in front of anyone. He quickly blinked away the tears and cleared his throat. "He needs a shower, but he won't even let me help him with that."

Carol stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Ben. "Would you do me a favour?"

The embrace felt so good, how could he say no? "Sure."

"Let George take you out for a drink while Trick and I make sure Neil gets that shower."

Ben closed his eyes. He was incredibly tempted by the offer, but he knew it wasn't a solution to his problem. "What happens a couple days from now when he needs another one?"

Carol pulled back far enough to stare into Ben's eyes. "Then you meet that challenge when you come to it. For now, take an evening off."

The thought of getting out of the house to somewhere other than the clinic or the grocery store did have its appeal. Ben nodded. "I'd appreciate it."

* * * *

"Now don't get your head full of lustful thoughts when I pop wood. I promise it won't be because of you," Neil warned Trick.

"Gee, thanks. Good to know I'm so inspiring."

Neil chuckled as Trick turned on the water. "It's been a while, is all. I just wanted you to know it was nothing personal. I mean, I'm not a perv or anything."

Trick knelt in front of Neil's wheelchair and started pulling down his sweats. "Is that the reason you didn't want Ben helping you?"

Neil averted his gaze and nodded. "Partially. Ben confuses me."

"How so?" Trick tossed the sweats into the laundry hamper. He turned to switch the shower over to the spray nozzle. "Okay, up you go."

Trick helped Neil slide onto the shower stool set inside the bathtub. "I see him looking at me sometimes." Neil shrugged. "He was just my guardian, right?"

"What exactly are you asking me?" Trick stood and ran the warm water down Neil's head and back.

"I think he has feelings for me that have nothing to do with being a father-figure. Does that make sense?"

"Sure."

"So?" Neil prompted. "Did we have sex or something?"

Trick set the handheld nozzle back in its cradle and reached for the shampoo. "You should ask him."

"I can't."

"Because you're embarrassed?" Trick asked.

The fingers massaging his head felt so good, Neil's cock went erect in no time. He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping Trick wouldn't say anything. "I don't think it's embarrassment as much as fear."

Neil took a deep breath. He still wasn't sure why being around Ben made him uneasy, but he was sure there was a good reason for it. "If we were lovers, there's a reason we weren't together before my accident."

Trick finished rinsing Neil's hair and reached for a washcloth. As he began to scrub Neil's chest and underarms, he bit his bottom lip. Neil knew that expression. "Tell me."

"I know you loved him, and I know he sent you away."

"Why? Didn't he love me back?"

Trick tackled the scrubbing of Neil's lower half with renewed enthusiasm. "I haven't talked to him about it, but, yeah, I get the feeling he did love you back."

"So...why?" The soft soapy cloth rubbing his most sensitive areas was almost more than he could stand. A gasp came out of nowhere when Trick reached under the specially made stool to wash his backside.

Neil's eyes shot to Trick's. "Sorry."

Trick gave him an understanding smile. "Will you be okay here by yourself for a few minutes? There's something I need to do."

Neil knew Trick was trying to give him a chance to calm his raging erection. "Sure."

Trick dried his hands and left the bathroom.

Neil hadn't realised how cold the room was until he was left alone. He manoeuvred his arm across his lap to hide his condition. Several times he'd tried to rub himself off using the mattress or his forearm, but it hadn't been enough. He figured it served him right for preferring a strong hand on his cock.

Trick came back into the room and once again picked up the washcloth. "We're friends, right?"

Confused by the question, Neil nodded. "I hope so."

"Close your eyes."

Neil did as instructed.

"Now just relax and don't say a goddamn word."

Neil almost jumped off the stool when he felt Trick's hand close around his erection. "Trick?"

"Not a word," Trick growled. "I only hope someone would do the same for me if I'm ever in the same position."

Neil kept his eyes closed as the hand continued to jack him off. It didn't take long before he felt his balls draw up and the first rope of cum shoot from his cock. God, how long had it been since he'd felt another man's hand on him?

Neil was so far into a blissful zone he was actually surprised when he opened his eyes and stared into Trick's eyes instead of Ben's. The realisation that he'd hoped it was Ben touching him shocked him even further.

"Thanks," he croaked.

"Don't mention it." Trick narrowed his eyes the slightest bit. "Ever."

Trick began scrubbing away the cum from Neil's stomach.

"I hope it won't get you into trouble," Neil mumbled.

"It won't. I asked Carol about it. I'm sure we'll tell George...eventually."

With Trick's help, Neil slid back to his wheelchair and sat still while Trick dried him off.

"You never answered my question."

"Which one was that?" Trick grabbed a pair of clean sweats and started to dress Neil.

"Whether or not Ben loved me back, and if he did, why he sent me away." Neil could find the answers himself if he just had the nerve to read his own journals, but he couldn't even open the damn things himself.

"I'm not sure. Maybe he thought he was doing the right thing. The man was your guardian, after all." Trick stood and opened the medicine cabinet. "One of these razors yours?"

"The black one."

"What about deodorant?" Trick asked.

"The blue one. The Old Spice is Ben's." Neil lifted his arm as far as he could before waiting for Trick to help him. His strength was slowly returning, but his hands still weren't cooperating, acting like dead weights at the end of his arms.

Trick swiped the deodorant several times across each of Neil's armpits before grabbing the shaving cream out of the medicine chest. "Sorry I'm not being much help as far as Ben's concerned, but I really think it's something you need to talk to him about."

Neil rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'll get right on that."

* * * *

Chuckling, Ben set another pitcher of beer on the table. "I just got my ass squeezed. Do you have any idea how long it's been since anyone's had the balls to try something like that with me?"

"Too long evidently," George laughed and refilled their mugs.

"You're right about that, but Cattle Valley is a long way from Rapid City." Ben chanced a subtle glance over his shoulder at the handsome man still smiling at him. "You know him?"

George grinned. "Sure and so do you."

Ben shook his head and took a sip of his beer. "I've met a lot of nice people, but I don't believe he was one of them. Believe me, I would've remembered a guy like that."

"Picture him in a skin tight ski suit, perhaps an American flag emblazoned on the front and back."

Ben's head snapped back around to the handsome stranger. *No fucking way!* "That's Guy Hoisington? What's he doing here?"

"He recently retired from the pro circuit and moved here full-time. Owns this hotel as a matter-of-fact. And he's coming this way," George chuckled.

Ben suddenly felt like a seventeen-year old virgin being stalked by the star quarterback. "Like this way as in to our table?"

George didn't answer but stood and extended his hand. "Hey, Guy, you settling in okay?"

"Perfectly," Guy answered. He took another step and gazed down at Ben. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Guy Hoisington."

Ben quickly wiped his palm on the leg of his jeans before clasping the hand of one of the greatest skiers ever to represent the United States in three consecutive Olympic Games. Standing, he introduced himself. "Ben Waters. Nice to meet you."

The shake lingered but it was purely on Guy's directive. Oddly enough, Ben didn't feel the sexual charge one would expect at being in the presence of one of the sexiest men to ever grace the cover of Sports Illustrated.

"Dance?" Guy asked, still gripping Ben's hand.

Ben smiled and shook his head. "Sorry. I haven't danced in going on twenty years."

Guy appeared taken back by the answer. "Well then it's about time. Come on, I won't take no for an answer."

With a backward glance at George, Ben pulled his hand from Guy, but followed the man to the small dance floor. As soon as they reached the parquet floor, the song changed to a slow ballad. *Great.*

Guy pulled him into his arms and started moving to the music. Ben couldn't help but prickle at the way Guy was trying to lead. Who the hell did the man think he was? Ben tried to take over the dance, but Guy subtly fought him on it.

"There a problem?" Guy finally asked.

Ben stopped dancing and stared at the handsome man. "I guess there is. I'm too old to give up control to someone else."

"What're you saying?"

Ben reached out and squeezed Guy's shoulder. "Thanks for the dance, but I'd better get home."

Ben left Guy standing on the dance floor with a confused expression on his face. He returned to the table and drained his mug of beer.

"That was quick," George remarked.

Ben refilled his glass, refusing to sit down. "He wanted to lead."

George chuckled. "So? It was a dance."

Shrugging, Ben quickly gulped a second mug of beer. "Doesn't matter what it is. No one tries to lead me."

George's chuckle morphed into a full-blown belly laugh. "I take it you've never been in love? You'll..." George cut himself off. "Damn. That's why you sent Neil away, wasn't it?"

"He was too young. He deserved a life." Ben set his glass on the table. "You ready?"

George stood and tossed several bills on the table. On the way out of The Grizzly Bar, George slapped Ben on the back. "You can tell yourself you did it for Neil's sake all you want, but it won't make it true."

* * * *

Walking in the back door, Ben was out of sorts. He'd refused to acknowledge George's earlier statement, and the two of them had ridden home in silence. He wasn't mad at the guy and had told him so before he got out of the big SUV. It had been a strange evening, one he hoped not to repeat.

"George said he'd wait for the three of you in the Denali."

With the baby sound asleep in his arms, Trick stood and turned to face Ben. "How was it?"

"Beer was good and cold." He spotted Neil dozing in the recliner. Ben's breath hitched in his chest at the sleeping man. All clean and freshly shaved, Neil was a wet dream. Ben yearned to hold the younger man until none of his problems mattered anymore.

Trick got Lucy in her carrier and passed the diaper bag to Carol. He gestured to the still sleeping man in the chair. "He didn't want to go to bed. I think he was waiting up for you."

If only that were true. "He's always fought bedtime."

Carol yawned before kissing Ben on the cheek. "Come to dinner on Sunday."

Ben smiled. "Maybe. That fancy place you have up on the mountain wheelchair accessible?"

"There are a few steps, but with three strong men, I'm sure we can make it work." Carol patted Ben's arm before walking to the door. "Coming?"

Trick nodded. "In a sec. You go on."

After Carol left, Trick took another look at Neil before turning back to Ben. "He'll kill me if he finds out I told you this, but he had a little problem in the shower." Trick cleared his throat and leant closer. "The reason he doesn't want you to help him bathe is because he gets hard. It embarrasses him."

The thought of Trick witnessing Neil's erection didn't sit well with Ben. "I'll take care of him from now on."

Trick grinned. "Will you?"

Ben didn't quite know how to take the question. He nodded sharply. "Yes."

With a satisfied smile, Trick hoisted the carrier and took the blanket from Ben. "Call if you need anything."

"I will. Thanks." Ben saw Trick out and locked the back door.

He shut off the kitchen light and made sure the front door was secure before returning to Neil's side. Standing over the sleeping man, Ben took a deep breath. He should probably wake Neil and get him into his chair, but more than anything, Ben wanted to hold him.

Decision made, Ben scooped Neil from the chair and hoisted him against his chest. The idea of carrying Neil to his bedroom was short lived. As thin as Neil had become, he was still too long and heavy for Ben to carry far.

He barely managed to make it to the first bedroom. His arms gave out just as he reached his bed, dumping Neil like a sack of potatoes onto the mattress.

The abrupt movement woke Neil. He blinked several times. "What's going on?"

No way would Ben confess his desire to hold the man. "Just thought I'd help you to bed. Sorry, looks like we'll be switching spots tonight."

Neil looked around the room. "I need to use the bathroom."

"I'll grab your urinal." Ben turned to leave the room.

"Just get my chair. I...um...need to use the toilet," Neil mumbled.

The flush running up Neil's neck and cheeks clued Ben in. "Oh. Okay."

Although Neil's muscle control was better than it had been when he'd left the hospital, the younger man still needed help wiping himself. Ben knew it was embarrassing for Neil, and he couldn't imagine being in the same position. Unfortunately, it was one of the tasks that had to be done on a daily basis, no matter how much Neil hated it.

Walking back into the living room, Ben sat in the wheelchair and drove it towards the bedroom. He had a hard time getting it to turn the sharp corner and eventually just got out of the damn thing and left it parked in the hall.

Returning to Neil's side, Ben gave the man an understanding smile. "I can't get it in here. I'll have to carry you."

Neil shook his head and sat up. He used his forearm to shove his leg off the mattress to hang over the side. "Just help me."

Ben moved to stand on Neil's left, the side with the bad foot, and wrapped both arms around Neil's waist, helping him stand. "Okay?"

Neil nodded. After a couple of steps, Neil turned his head to stare at Ben. "You smell like cologne."

Ben nodded. He'd put some on earlier in the evening.

"Not yours. I take it you had a good time tonight."

Was Ben imagining things, or did Neil sound jealous. "I danced with Guy Hoisington."

After another few steps, Neil stopped again. "You like him?"

Ben shook his head. "He's a nice enough man, but that's as far as it'll go."

"Why?" Neil asked.

"Just not interested in what he has to offer." Ben tried to prod Neil into moving again, but the younger man didn't budge.

"But you're gay."

Ben chuckled. "I am."

"I've seen Guy Hoisington. Hell, the entire world has seen him. I would imagine there are plenty of straight guys out there that would swoon at his feet, why not you?"

Because he's not you. "Who knows? Maybe we're too much alike. He just doesn't do it for me."

Neil started moving again. Once he was seated in the chair, he glanced up at Ben. "You must be a damn hard man to please."

Ben looked away and moved to stand outside the bathroom. "Maybe."

Chapter Three

"You can do it. Just apply a little more pressure," Matt Jeffries said.

Neil wiped the sweat from his brow with his left forearm as he struggled to squeeze the blue ball in his right hand. The fact that he could close his fingers around the ball in the first place should've been a big enough accomplishment for the session, but Matt seemed to enjoy pushing him.

The ball popped out of his hand and bounced across the floor. "Fuck!"

Without missing a beat, Matt retrieved the ball and set it back onto the table. "Try again."

"It hurts," Neil complained, reaching for the stupid fucking ball.

"That's good. I'm glad it hurts."

"Masochist," Neil grumbled.

Matt laughed. "I've been called worse, believe me. Have you been sleeping with your braces on?"

Neil shook his head. "I can't get comfortable with them on. I feel weighted down."

Matt's head tilted to the side. "They're important. See how your hands are starting to clench into fists?"

Neil nodded.

"You have to keep the tendons and muscles from shrinking. I'll talk with Ben. Maybe a hand massage several times a day would help."

Neil groaned. "Please don't do that. He's got enough to do around the house. I'm a big enough pain in his ass as it is. Taking time out of his day to hold my hand isn't necessary."

"I think it is, and I imagine Ben would agree with me." Matt nodded to the ball still on the table. "You're not leaving here until you squeeze that, so you might as well stop stalling."

"Might help if it was a smaller ball," Neil continued to complain.

"A smaller one wouldn't help strengthen your fingers as much. Just do it. I'm the one with the degree on the wall."

"You sure that's a real degree, cuz I have a feeling you flunked Compassion 101."

Matt grabbed his chest. "You wound me."

"Whatever."

Matt sighed and rested his forearms on the table. "I know I seem like the mean guy in all this, but I can guarantee it takes a hard ass to get a lazy ass working again."

Neil bristled at the comment. "I've never been called lazy in my life."

"Maybe not before your accident, but I sure as hell don't see you putting much effort into your rehabilitation."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Neil swung his arm and knocked the ball across the room.

"Are you? I mean, physically you're sitting in the chair, but I have no idea where your mind or your heart are, because they sure as shit aren't in here with you. If you want to regain the use of your hands and foot, it's going to take work. Not just here, but at home. Every spare minute of your day should be spent trying to accomplish a new task, no matter how small."

Why did he suddenly feel like a disappointment to Matt, and why the heck did he even care? "Get me the damn ball."

* * * *

While Neil was in therapy, Ben decided to run a few errands. He stopped at the grocery store and stocked up on supplies, putting the refrigerated foods into a cooler in the back of his small SUV. He gazed down Main Street towards the bakery. "Why not?"

He'd yet to visit Brynn's Bakery. Although it was out of character for him, Ben had enjoyed making desserts from scratch lately. However, the thought of someone else doing the work for him held a certain appeal.

He walked into the small shop and took a deep breath. Fantastic.

"Can I help you?" a young man behind the counter asked.

"I've heard a lot about this place from Leo, so I thought it was time I indulged my sweet tooth."

The man broke into a wide smile. "I'm Kyle. You must be Ben. Leo told me I might see you in here before long."

"Nice to meet you." Ben walked up to the counter and perused the wide selection of treats. "What would you suggest?"

"Depends on what you're after. You hungry for breakfast?"

Ben shook his head. "I'm grilling hamburgers for dinner. Need something for dessert."

Kyle tapped his bottom lip with the tip of his finger. "You like strawberries?"

"Who doesn't," Ben chuckled.

"Wait here." Kyle disappeared through the swinging doors, leaving Ben to stare at the mouth-watering desserts.

He noticed the wheelchair in the corner behind the counter. Leo had told him Kyle used to be wheelchair bound, but looking at the man now, Ben would've never guessed.

Kyle strode back into the shop, a mile-high strawberry pie in hand. "What about this?"

"Perfect," Ben answered.

While Kyle folded a box for the pie, Ben's gaze kept straying to the chair.

"I still need it sometimes at the end of a long day," Kyle answered without Ben even asking the question.

Ben rubbed the short hairs on the back of his head. "Sorry."

"Don't be. Every step I take is a gift. I know that." Kyle closed the box and grinned. "You in a hurry?"

Ben glanced at his watch. "Nope. Neil has another thirty-five minutes of therapy."

After filling two cups of coffee, Kyle handed them to Ben. "Grab one of those tables, will ya?"

Ben did as instructed and took a seat in front of the big window.

Kyle carried over a plate with a very large cinnamon roll and two forks. "You'll have to share this with me."

As Ben stared at the roll, a large drop of white frosting dripped over the edge of the plate onto the table below. "Wow."

"I don't usually sell them this big, but I make a pan of 'em every day for a few of my regular addicts."

Ben picked up a fork and cut off a large piece. The combination of cinnamon and other spices exploded in his mouth. Before he had even swallowed, he was cutting off another piece. "I see what you mean about getting addicted. I'll never be satisfied with rolls from a can again."

The smile on Kyle's face lit up the room. "These rolls are what keep me in business. I do okay on the other stuff, but I've been getting orders for my cinnamon rolls from all over the country."

"I can see why," Ben said around another bite.

Kyle sipped at his coffee as Ben continued to devour the majority of the roll. "How's he doing?"

"Pardon?" Ben glanced up to meet Kyle's gaze.

"Neil. How's he doing with his therapy?" Kyle asked, setting down his cup.

"It's slow," Ben answered with a shrug.

"Mind if I offer a piece of advice?"

"Not at all." Ben figured if anyone knew what Neil was going through it would be Kyle.

"Push him, but do it gently."

Ben nodded. "It's hard, ya know? If I'm too easy on him, he calls me a cheerleader, but if I try the other tactic, he seems to resent me even more."

Kyle grinned. "Yep. That sounds about right. I know Gill went through hell with me in the beginning. For me, there was a combination of shame and anger present whenever Gill tried to do something for me. It was even worse when he made me do it on my own. I'm ashamed to say I gave that wonderful man more than his share of insults."

"I keep telling myself it's the position he's in that makes him lash out, but there are days I want to get in the truck and drive back to Rapid City."

"And that's completely understandable. It's those times when you need to reach out to the other people in town who love Neil. If you're at the end of your rope, you won't do either of you any good."

Ben took a sip of his coffee. "Did you know Gavin?"

"Yeah. He was a good man. His death, along with the others, hit this town hard."

"I can tell. There was a big article in the paper on the upcoming events for Cattle Valley Days. It mentioned a special dedication ceremony at the new arena." Ben began tapping his fork on the edge of the plate.

"Asa Montgomery had a beautiful memorial made that will sit at the entrance to the rodeo grounds."

"When I mentioned the ceremony to Neil, he got pissed. Told me he wasn't going and not to mention it again."

"I can understand that," Kyle said.

"Can you? Because I can't. Maybe it's because I wasn't here, but I don't understand not wanting to pay your respects to someone you loved," Ben explained.

"Neil didn't love Gavin. As a matter-of-fact, it was the lack of love that drove the guilt down deep inside Neil. But I don't think his unwillingness to attend the ceremony has anything at all to do with Gavin."

"You don't?" Ben questioned.

Kyle shook his head. "He doesn't want to be seen in public riding around in a chair. It's natural, believe me."

"It sounds self-centred if you ask me," Ben grumbled.

"Said the man walking on two good legs." Kyle reached across the table and laid his hand on Ben's wrist. "I know you mean well, but Neil's entire life's been turned upside down. Give him a break. Invite people over. Get him used to being around his friends again. He'll eventually see the chair doesn't matter to them."

"According to Matt, Neil shouldn't even be in the chair much longer. Once we get Neil's hands working again, he should be able to use a walker or crutches to get himself around until he regains control of his foot."

"If anyone can help him accomplish it, it's Matt. He's the god that finally got me up and walking again. But just in case, Neil needs to know he's accepted by his friends regardless of the chair."

Ben glanced at his watch. "I'd better get. Neil's usually madder than a wet hen after his sessions."

Kyle laughed. "Ahhh, the good ole days. I remember them well."

* * * *

Sitting in his chair on the deck, Neil watched Ben push a load of straw and shit out of the barn. The sweat covering Ben's bare chest glistened in the afternoon sunlight. After dumping the wheelbarrow, Ben pulled a red bandana out of his back jean pocket and wiped his face and neck.

Neil's mouth watered as he watched Ben's muscles flex at the simple movement. Damn, the man was gorgeous. Neil's cock hardened, making him wish he'd put on underwear that morning. He'd finally learned to pull on his own cut-off sweats, but underwear was still beyond his skill level.

Over the past week, Ben had massaged Neil's hands several times a day, and although Neil was loath to admit it to Matt, it was definitely helping. He'd read once about spots on your feet that directly affect other parts of your body. Neil wondered if the same went for hands. There wasn't a massage session that went by without Neil springing wood. So far, Ben had been polite enough not to comment, but Neil knew the man had to have noticed.

Ben glanced towards the house and caught Neil staring straight at him. The older man smiled, stuffed the bandana back into his pocket and yelled towards Neil. "Why don't you grab an apple off the table? I think your horse is missing ya."

Neil nodded and rode into the house. Ben wasn't fooling him. They both knew Footloose preferred carrots, but for some reason, apples were harder for Neil to get his hand around.

Neil's gaze swung from the bowl of fruit on the kitchen table to the new bag sitting on the counter. Feeling defiant, Neil powered over to the counter and used his forearm to push the bag into his lap.

Shit! Neil bit his bottom lip as the heavy bag dropped onto his balls. Served him right, he supposed. He readjusted the apples and slowly made his way back out of the house and down the boardwalk towards the barn.

By the time he arrived, Ben had already spread fresh straw and sawdust in Footloose's stall. The smell of the dimly-lit barn brought back memories. "Would you mind taking me over to the EZ Does It some evening?"

"Not at all. We can go later today if you want." Ben spotted the plastic bag in Neil's lap and raised an eyebrow. "You cheated."

"No I didn't. You said to bring an apple. I just brought more than one."

"Okay, smart guy. Now let's see you open the bag." Ben crossed his sun-bronzed arms over his lightly furred chest and leaned against a pole.

Neil winced. He hadn't thought of that. "If you'll get it started, I can finish it."

Ben pushed off the pole and walked over.

The simple act of Ben reaching towards Neil's lap had Neil's cock hard in no time. Neil squeezed his eyes closed and prayed Ben wouldn't notice the bulge propping up the apples.

After several moments, Neil opened his eyes to find Ben staring straight at him. "Did you get it?"

Ben exhaled, his breath fanning across Neil's face. "Can I ask you something?"

Neil swallowed around the lump in his throat and nodded.

"Is that for me or the horse?" Ben asked, his voice deep and raspy.

Neil glanced down at the prominent cloth-covered erection poking up between the apples. "What happens if I say the horse?" he asked, trying to play the situation off.

"Then you have serious issues we need to see someone about."

Neil swallowed again. "And if I say you?"

The corner of Ben's mouth lifted in a devilish grin. "Then that's something I can help you with."

Before Neil had a chance to speak again, Ben's mouth was on him. After the initial swipe of his tongue against the seam of Neil's mouth, Ben waited. Neil opened and Ben delved inside, swirling his tongue around the interior of Neil's mouth.

Neil automatically tried to lift his arms to grab onto the back of Ben's neck to draw him even closer. He managed to bring his hands to Ben's shoulders but that was as far as he got. "Closer," he moaned into the kiss.

Ben pulled back and glanced around the small interior of the barn. "Hang on."

Neil watched with swollen lips as Ben broke apart a bale of straw. He next retrieved a dusty wool blanket from one of the small cabinets and carried it outside to shake it. Once the straw was covered, he moved back to Neil's side.

"Come here."

Neil scooted to the edge of his chair and wrapped his arms around Ben's waist. Embarrassment over his inability to walk on his own had morphed to almost nothing. Ben helped him lie down before joining him on the scratchy blanket.

Cupping his jaw, Ben leant over and whispered against Neil's lips. "Now, where were we?"

Neil's eyes slid closed as his mouth opened, accepting Ben's kiss with enthusiasm. While he was enjoying each swipe of Ben's tongue his mind began to wander.

Gavin's kisses never turned his insides out like this. *God*. He had to ask Ben why he sent him away, but he refused to do or say anything that would break the spell of their shared passion.

"Touch me," Neil begged, breaking their kiss.

Ben sat up and straddled Neil's hips. He pulled up the front of Neil's white tank until it was tucked under his armpits. Gazing down at Neil's bare chest, Ben licked his lips and ran

his finger around one tiny brown nipple. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to touch you like this."

Neil bit the inside of his cheek to keep from asking the obvious question. There would be plenty of time to bring up the past. "Touch me all you want," he said instead.

Ben bent over and captured Neil's nipple with his mouth, applying pressure to the small nub with his teeth.

Neil's breathing hitched as his cock strained against the front of his sweat shorts. He managed to place his hands on the back of Ben's head to hold him in place. The short, salt and pepper hair felt good against the tips of his fingers.

Ben's legs eased out from under him to stretch backwards until he was lying on top of Neil. "Too heavy?"

Neil remembered being in the same position with Gavin. Although Gavin was much smaller than Ben, Neil had often panicked, feeling like he'd suffocate until he forced Gavin off of him. But it was different this time. He didn't feel anything but comforted by Ben's weight.

Neil shook his head and moved his hips. With something as solid as Ben's cock to rub against, Neil knew he wouldn't last long. He wondered if it was due to his dry spell or the man moving on top of him. "I'm gonna come."

"Glad I'm not the only one." Ben quickly reached between them and unfastened his own jeans before pushing Neil's shorts down far enough to expose his shaft.

The slide of skin on skin as Ben ground against him had Neil's balls drawing up in no time. The faster Ben moved, the more pre-cum leaked from Neil's cock. Each thrust of Ben's hips felt like heaven against his throbbing erection. Without even realising it, Neil sunk his teeth into Ben's shoulder and came. Thoughts of Ben's cock buried deep in his ass came to mind, surprising him further.

Neil's body jerked as spurt after spurt of seed shot between them. It was on the tip of his tongue to beg Ben to fuck him when Ben groaned as he, too, rode the wave of his climax.

Neil released the skin between his teeth and flinched at the deep mark he'd left behind. "Sorry. I think you're gonna have a bruise there."

Ben didn't even lift his head from its position beside Neil's. "'s okay."

Lying on the floor of the barn, Neil suddenly felt exposed. "We should get dressed in case someone comes."

Ben grunted and rolled over onto his back. "I was hoping we could take a short nap." Ben grinned and opened his eyes enough to peek sideways at Neil. "You can bring me apples anytime."

Neil smiled back. "I'll remember that."

* * * *

Travelling up the drive towards the EZ Does It, Neil's nerves started to get the better of him. He glanced at Ben, wishing he could unburden himself on the older man, but kept his mouth shut.

Since their shared passion in the barn earlier in the day, Ben had gone quiet, too quiet. It was a silence that niggled at the back of Neil's brain. He still didn't know what happened three years earlier to make Ben kick him out of his house, but Neil was suddenly afraid history was about to repeat itself.

At the welcoming sight of Ezra, Jax and Logan on the front porch of the main house, Neil exhaled.

"Looks like a party," Ben drawled.

"No, just an average night on the ranch," Neil said with confidence.

Ben pulled the SUV to a stop and turned off the engine. "Is that how you used to spend your evenings?"

"Sometimes, but usually I went for a ride." Neil unfastened his seatbelt just as Jax opened his door.

"Hey there, stranger." Jax leant into the vehicle and slapped Neil on the shoulder.

Without thought, Neil reached out and pulled Jax into a quick hug. "I've missed you guys."

When he pulled back the shocked expression on Jax's face startled him. "I'm sorry. Did I do something wrong?" Neil quickly turned to Logan. "I'm not trying to steal him. I promise. Guess I just got carried away."

Jax shook his head and grinned. "It's not that. You've just never voluntarily touched me before."

Neil didn't understand. He thought back to all the things Jax had done for him since he'd come to the EZ a complete greenhorn in every fashion of the word. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't remember ever touching Jax more than was needed to do a job.

Neil's attention swung to the back of the SUV when he heard Ben open the hatch and pull out his travel chair. He would have preferred to bring the electric wheelchair, but it was simply too heavy and bulky to transport. In the end, Neil decided seeing his friends and being on the EZ again outweighed the embarrassment of being pushed around.

Ezra's massive frame filled the doorway. "Let me help you."

Before Neil had a chance to protest, his boss plucked him up from the seat and quickly deposited him in the chair. "Thanks."

"Care to have a beer with us on the porch?" Ezra asked.

Neil glanced towards the barn and bunkhouse. Other than the barn, there were no places on the ranch he could go without help. "Sure. But I didn't think you were supposed to be drinking."

Ezra took control of the wheelchair. Even with the huge man's superior strength, getting Neil's chair across the gravelled drive wasn't easy. "Shhh, Wyn's inside working on the books. What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

"Hell, you'd better not do anything to get you on the big boss's bad side," Neil chuckled.

"What's the best way to do this?" Ezra asked, reaching the porch steps.

"Turn him around. I can lift one end if you can get the other," Ben said.

Once Ezra had him turned around, Neil looked at Ben. There was an expression on Ben's face he couldn't read. "You okay?" he whispered.

Ben nodded once in a sharp and efficient manner. "I'm fine."

You're lying. Neil's chest ached. Was Ben regretting what had happened between them?

Neil was positioned next to the grouping of weathered chairs, locked in place and handed a beer. "It's been a while since I've had a beer."

"Good," Jax said. "Before your fall, you were drinking too damn much of the stuff."

Neil noticed Logan didn't sit with the rest of them. "Do you have somewhere to go?" he asked.

Logan shuffled his feet. "Well, actually, I was hoping to steal Ben for a few minutes. I have something I want to show him."

"Oh." Ben stood up. "Do you mind?" Ben asked, looking down at Neil.

"Not at all," Neil answered.

He watched Ben and Logan travel back down the steps and head towards the barn.

"What's going on?"

Jax took a drink of his beer. "Logan's been working on a gift for you, but he wants Ben's opinion before he presents it to you."

Neil picked at the label on his bottle. "You said something earlier about me never touching you before. Do you know why I was like that?"

Jax shook his head. "Don't you remember?"

"No." Once again, Neil knew the answers were probably in the journals he'd yet to read. Papers that held the answers he needed but were afraid to rediscover. "Do you think it had something to do with Ben?"

Ezra leant forward in his chair. "If you're asking if we think Ben hurt you, the answer is no."

"How can you be so sure? There has to be a reason I've blanked out all memories of him." Neil sighed and took a sip of his beer.

"The impression I get from Ben is that, for whatever reason, he's afraid to touch you. Those aren't the actions of a man that's physically abused you in the past."

The screen door opened and Wyn stepped out on the porch. "Hi."

"Hey," Neil greeted.

Wyn started to say something else but stopped and put his hands on his lean hips when he spotted the beer Ezra was doing his best to hide. "What the hell is that?"

Ezra lowered his head slightly. "Just a beer. I thought I could sneak one while you were busy."

Wyn puffed his chest out. "You're six-foot-eleven. There's absolutely no way you can sneak anything and expect to get away with it." Wyn held out his hand. "We'll ask Doc Brown if it's okay for you to have a beer occasionally the next time we go into town, but until then, hand it over."

Ezra grinned at his partner and handed him the near-empty bottle. "Spoilsport."

"Well excuse me for wanting you around."

Neil laughed. Although the two men had only been together going on two years, they seemed like an old married couple.

Ezra stood and gestured to the barn. "I think they're ready for us."

Neil glanced towards the barn to see Ben waving his arms in the air. "You'd better tell him we get the message or he's going to take off like a helicopter."

As Ezra and Jax lowered him down the steps, Neil knew he had a lot to think about. The time for burying his head in the sand was over. He could question Ben's motives all day, or he could read the damn journals.

Chapter Four

Ben leaned against the corral fence and watched as Neil rode a horse for the first time since his accident. The gift Logan had made for Neil turned out to be an altered set of horse reins with wide leather Velcro cuffs that fit around Neil's wrists.

"Looks good, doesn't he?" Logan asked from beside Ben.

Ben nodded, momentarily unable to speak. The cuffs surrounding Neil's lightly-tanned wrists made him harder than he'd been in years. *No. Not with Neil. Ever.*

Swallowing, Ben scrambled to find his voice. "He's breathtaking," he admitted to Logan.

Chuckling, Logan bumped his shoulder against Ben's. "Having dirty thoughts, are you?"

Neil chose that moment to look straight at Ben, his eyes boring into Ben's soul. *Don't*, Ben silently begged the younger man. *You don't know what you're asking for.*

He was thrust back in time to the adoring gaze of his collared mother as she doted on his father. As a boy, Ben had always prayed someday he'd have someone look at him like that. Ben shook his head. *But not Neil!*

Neil had been through far too much in his young life. It was one thing to be mastered out of love, but Neil had only known cruelty at the hands of those who were supposed to take care of him. Ben had pushed away the one person in the entire world he wanted in order to do right by Neil. How could he have allowed himself to fall back into his old desires?

"Would you help me down?" Neil asked Ben.

It took several moments for the request to register. "Sure."

Ben climbed over the fence as Logan went to retrieve Neil's chair. Standing beside the large horse, Ben gazed up at Neil. "Enjoy yourself?"

Neil nodded and held his wrists out. "Very much."

Unable to help himself, Ben reached up and ran his fingertips over the wide leather cuffs. When Logan first showed him the leatherwork he'd done, Ben was impressed with the craftsmanship, but he'd had no idea what the bands of leather would do to his body once they were strapped to Neil's wrists.

Neil cleared his throat, and Ben once again stared up into the hazel eyes of the man he loved. "Sorry," Ben apologised and removed the cuffs.

Logan appeared with the chair far enough away so as not to spook the horse. "Is this close enough?"

Ben nodded and wrapped his hands around Neil's slim waist. "Ready?"

He noticed the flush that crept up Neil's neck at the contact.

"Don't let me embarrass myself," Neil whispered, glancing down at the erection trapped behind the fly of his jeans.

"Don't worry." Ben gently pulled Neil off the horse. When he had him on the ground, pressed against his body, he leant in and spoke quietly in Neil's ear. "I'm having the same problem."

"Just carry me over. It'll hide us both."

"Or make it worse," Ben chuckled.

* * * *

On the ride home, Neil couldn't keep his eyes off Ben's profile. What was it about the man that made him feel like he was truly cherished for the first time in his life? Other than the earlier episode in the barn and the obvious erection Ben was presently trying to hide, there had been no mention of feelings.

Neil bit his lip. *No*. Although Ben hadn't told Neil how he felt, he'd shown it in everything he'd done for him in the last two months.

Taking a chance, Neil lifted his arm and placed his slightly-curved hand on Ben's thigh. "Do I need to read the journals to figure out why you sent me away or will you tell me?"

Ben's hands tightened on the steering wheel. His strong jaw clenched and unclenched several times before he eventually answered. "Your journal won't have the reason, because I never really gave you one. I can only imagine how much you hated me by the time you wrote it down."

Ben didn't say more, and refused to even look at Neil. Neil waited for several moments before withdrawing his hand. "Sorry I brought it up. I didn't mean to piss you off."

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Pulling into the drive, Ben stopped and shut off the engine. He unfastened his seatbelt and turned to face Neil. "For the record, you didn't piss me off."

"Then what?" Neil prompted.

"It's just...not the right time." Ben reached out and rested his hand on the back of Neil's neck. "All I can tell you is that I'm feeling the same way now that I did then. And it scares the shit out of me."

The admission stung more than Neil wanted to admit. Would he be sent away once again?

Ben drew Neil's head forward and kissed his cheek. He released his hold and opened the SUV's door. "Never doubt that I care deeply for you. There are circumstances..." Ben shook his head and got out of the vehicle without finishing his sentence.

Sitting in the passenger seat while Ben went into the house to get his electric wheelchair, Neil knew the time had come to read the journal. Although Ben had told him he wouldn't find the answers as to why he was sent away, Neil hoped to find something that would help him understand his past relationship with the older man.

* * * *

Neil went immediately to his bedroom without saying another word to Ben. Now, staring at the stack of journals, he needed to figure out which to read first. Did he start at the beginning, or at the end? He already remembered most of what had happened since moving to Cattle Valley, although there were still spots here and there, the not touching thing, for example. After Jax mentioned it, Neil did remember flinching whenever someone reached towards him, but he couldn't remember why he did it.

He finally selected the oldest journal in the stack, spilling half of the books onto the floor in the process. Glancing over his shoulder towards the door, he hoped he hadn't drawn Ben's attention. When the door remained closed, he returned his attention to the journal in his lap.

The control over his hands was slowly getting better, but he still didn't have the muscle control to turn the pages. He used the side of his hand to open the front cover, smiling at the childish scrawl that greeted him.

My Thoughts by Neil Peters

August 17, 1999

My new friend Mr. Waters gave me this book to write stuff about myself. I saw Mr. Waters writing in something like it after I told him about Momma's newest boyfriend, Charlie, hitting me.

Mr. Waters went to his desk and pulled this out of the drawer and gave it to me. I still can't believe it. It didn't even have scribbles in it. I think it may be the nicest thing anyone has ever given me. I decided I owed it to him to use it like he wanted me to.

So, where do I begin? I don't think I want to talk about Charlie or Momma. They made me sad again so they don't deserve to be in my book yet.

I'm hungry. I thought about asking Mr. Waters for something to eat but I saw him leave. He was all dressed up in black leather. Charlie has leather clothes. Momma says that is what bikers wear, but Mr. Waters doesn't act like Charlie so I don't know if he is a biker or not.

Neil stopped reading and tried to imagine Ben in tight black leather. Yeah, he could definitely imagine Ben's toned body encased in soft hide. His cock started to fill and press against the journal still resting in his lap.

He remembered the way Ben touched the leather cuffs of the reins earlier that evening. Did Ben still wear leather? Neil hadn't seen Ben in anything remotely bikerish, other than the black belt he often wore.

Neil returned his attention to the journal and tried to turn the page with the side of his hand. Although he couldn't turn a single page, he did manage to turn a segment, skipping him forward by several months.

November 9, 1999

I had a bad day. The guys in gym class made fun of the bruises on my butt. They all laughed cuz it was easy to see I had been spanked real hard. By the time I got home, I was really sad and just wanted to talk to Mr. Waters. There was a car in his driveway I didn't know.

I stood on his porch for a while trying to decide what to do. I finally knocked on the door. I don't know how long it took but Mr. Waters opened the door. He didn't have a shirt on. It was the first time I'd seen him like that. It made me feel kind of funny.

At first Mr. Waters looked mad but then when he saw I had been crying, he invited me inside. He asked me what happened, so I started to tell him.

Then some man I had never seen came into the room. I don't know why the man was naked, but Mr. Waters yelled at him and told him to get out of his house. When the man turned around I saw that he must have been in trouble with his mom, too, because his bottom had been good and spanked.

I hope Mr. Waters isn't mad at me for making his friend go away. Maybe Mr. Waters was being nice to him like he is always nice to me after I get a whipping.

Mr. Waters gave me a bowl of ice cream and sat with me on the porch swing. I shouldn't have been looking but his chest had a lot of big muscles. I hope my chest looks like his someday.

Once again Neil stopped reading. Leather? A friend who was naked and had been spanked? He tried to picture the man in the other room spanking someone. Is that the kind of thing Ben was into?

Neil's mind jumped from past to present and back again. Did Ben ever try to spank him? Was that the reason he was afraid of being touched when he came to Cattle Valley? Did Ben hurt him then send him away?

No. Neil refused to believe the man who had cared for him so completely for the previous two months could do something like that. Still, the journal seemed incomplete. Maybe he'd just been too young to understand what was going on.

He set the journal back on the pile of strewn books and found a more recent one. Although a different colour, the journals were all the same kind. He wondered if Ben had bought all of them for him.

February 14, 2006

It's Valentine's Day and Ben has that little twerp, Trent over again. Man, I hate that asshole. What's even worse is that I don't think Ben likes the guy much better than I do.

Although he's never done anything in front of me, I've heard Ben's deep voice through the heating vent ordering Trent around. And the smug look Trent gives me every time he sits on the floor beside Ben's chair when we're trying to watch a damn basketball game gets on my fucking nerves.

I think I'll go out so I don't have to be around them tonight. If I'm lucky the twerp will be gone by the time I get home. God, why can't he see how much I love him?

Neil slammed the journal shut and knocked it onto the floor. "Fuck."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm as he tried to get his breathing under control. The entry had not only made him sick to his stomach but hard and throbbing. How could he feel all those things at once?

Neil closed his eyes and dissected the passage bit by bit. He suddenly realised it was the mention of Trent's name that made him feel ill. The other parts, and the realisation of what the other stuff meant, made him hard.

Is that the kind of relationship Ben would like to have with me? Neil found the possibility...appealing.

With all the impetuousness of a twenty-one year old, Neil steered his chair towards the door. It took some fumbling and a few dents in the wall, but he eventually got the door open and glided into the living room. He was surprised to find the room empty. "Ben?"

"Out here," Ben answered, his voice carrying through the screen door that led to the deck.

Ben had replaced the bottom portion of the door with a piece of plywood, so all Neil had to do was nudge it open with his chair.

He found Ben sitting in the corner rocking chair, lights off. The full moon overhead cast his profile in a silvery shadow. A glint of glass let Neil know Ben was drinking a beer. "That looks good."

"Want one?" Ben asked, opening the small cooler beside his chair.

"Sure." Neil rode over and stopped an arms-length away.

"Do you have my cup out here?" Neil had become used to drinking out of a heavy plastic cup with an oversized handle that he could slip his hand through to lift it to his mouth.

"Nope. You want it, you learn to hold it," Ben said simply, twisting the top of the bottle and holding it out.

"Bastard," Neil grumbled.

"Yes I am," Ben agreed.

Neil opened his hand and Ben pressed the cold brown bottle against his palm and helped him curl his fingers around its circumference. "You got it?"

Neil nodded. "For now. Don't be surprised if it spills all over me though."

"You can do it. Just concentrate."

It was the way of things lately. Ben always seemed to think up new challenges for Neil to tackle. Neil wondered if Ben had been given a list by Matt Jeffries of ways to torture him.

Ben leant back in his chair and once again looked out over the moonlit pasture.

They sat in silence for several moments before Neil gathered the nerve to speak. "You still wear leather pants?"

Ben coughed and wiped a drop of spilled beer from his chin. "Excuse me?"

"I was in my room reading some of my journals. I made mention of you in black leather. Just wondered whether or not you were still into that," Neil explained.

"Not much anymore. My ass is too old for leather."

"Bullshit. Your ass would look good in anything," Neil remarked, carefully lifting the bottle to his lips.

Neil savoured the mouthful of beer on his tongue for several moments before swallowing it. "If I ask you a question, would you tell me the truth?"

"Maybe. Depends what it is."

Neil took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Did you ever hit me?"

Ben's head snapped towards Neil. "No! Why would you ask me that?"

Neil shrugged, almost dislodging the bottle from his grasp. "Just wondered. You're into that stuff though, right?"

"What? Hitting? No."

"But you and that guy Trent..."

"That's enough," Ben barked, cutting Neil off. "It wasn't like that."

Neil took another sip of his beer. "Then what was it like?"

"I don't want to talk about this," Ben grumbled.

"After what happened in the barn, don't you think I have a right to know how to please you?" Neil asked.

Ben threw his beer bottle into the yard and stood. "I've had enough for the night. I'm going to bed. You need help with anything?"

Neil gazed up at Ben, feeling more vulnerable than he could ever remember. "Yeah. I need to know how to get close to you."

Ben braced his hands on Neil's shoulders and bent over. With his lips brushing Neil's, Ben spoke so softly Neil barely heard him. "Be yourself. That's all it's ever taken for me to fall in love with you."

Neil closed his eyes as Ben bestowed a whisper soft kiss on his lips. Neil opened his mouth and accepted Ben's tongue.

Eventually Ben pulled out of the kiss and stood. "Come on. Let's get you into bed."

* * * *

As Ben slowly removed Neil's clothing, he tried to concentrate on the soft skin, and not the earlier questions Neil had raised. He knew he'd eventually have to answer Neil's questions, but not yet.

He helped Neil into bed and pulled the sheet and light blanket back over him. Neil hadn't said a word since their exchange on the deck, and Ben started to worry that he'd ruined everything.

"Mind?" he asked, gesturing to the side of the mattress.

Neil shook his head. "I'd mind even less if you'd get in with me." Neil's expression was hopeful. "Even for a little while?"

Ben felt like he stood on the edge of a cliff. The choice to jump or retreat rode squarely on his shoulders. "Let me get the place closed up first."

"Do you have stuff?" Neil asked as Ben started from the room.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah, but we won't need it tonight."

"Would you bring it just in case I can change your mind?" Neil's grin reminded Ben too much of the young man he used to know.

He continued to the living room without answering. After locking the doors, Ben decided to turn on the air conditioner. The nights had been hot lately, and it would be even worse snuggled against a warm body.

He took the time to undress in his own bedroom, slipping a robe on over his naked body. On his way out of the room, he stopped and tapped his fingers on the top of the small bedside table. Did he dare?

Sliding the drawer open, Ben removed the tube of lube he'd purchased in town for his own use. He didn't have condoms, but for the first time in his life it didn't bother him. Neil had undergone every test imaginable while in the hospital, and Ben knew he was clean. Not only had he never fucked a man without a rubber, but he'd never been the type to suck a guy off either. That was a job for his plaything, not him.

The thought stopped Ben in his tracks. He sat heavily on the side of the bed and took a deep breath. *What the hell am I doing?*

The fact that he wanted Neil was undeniable, but Neil deserved to be more than his plaything. Ben wasn't sure if he could have a loving relationship without living the lifestyle he'd grown up with. His parent's marriage had been perfect, still was. Even at the age of sixty-nine and seventy, Camille and Jonathon Waters still followed a Dominant/submissive lifestyle.

Ben wondered what his mom and dad would think of Neil, more importantly, what would Neil think of them? Would Neil be sickened by their relationship, or would he see the pure beauty in their unwavering love for each other?

Ben shoved the bottle of lube into the pocket of his robe and turned off his bedroom light. He stopped by the bathroom for a quick wash-up before returning to Neil's bedroom.

Resting on his side, Neil had his eyes closed when Ben walked into the room. He turned off the overhead light and moved to the far side of the bed, dropping his robe to the floor. "You asleep?" he whispered.

"No. Just resting my eyes," Neil chuckled.

Ben pulled back the covers and slid between the sheets. He wasted no time moulding himself against the younger, smaller man, slipping his arm under Neil's pillow. He prayed they were done with questions for a while. All he wanted was to feel the man he'd dreamt of for years sleeping in his arms.

Neil leant back further against Ben's chest. "Ben?"

"Yes," Ben answered, kissing the top of Neil's shoulder.

"I think I still love you."

Ben squeezed his eyes closed. It was several heartbeats before he could pull himself together enough to speak. "You can't love what you don't remember." It was one of the hardest things he'd ever had to say, but he knew it was the truth.

Neil began to squirm and shift until he was able to turn over to face Ben. "Do you really think that's true?"

"I do." Ben ran a hand over Neil's bristled cheek. "In the past, I think you loved me more as a protector. Perhaps now you can learn to love me as a man."

"Were you my protector?" Neil whispered into the darkness.

"As much as I could be." Ben wrapped his arm around Neil's waist and brought their bodies closer together. "I didn't do a very good job of it, but I tried."

Ben's eyes stung with emotion as he remembered all the times he'd let his young neighbour down. He'd always tried to be there to patch Neil up but he was powerless to stop the beatings before they happened. If he had to do it over again, he wondered if he'd have taken the law into his own hands if he'd known Charlie Hill and the other men in Neil's mother's life had sexually abused the young teenager.

"I was abused, wasn't I?" Neil asked.

"Yes. You remember?"

"No. I read stuff in my journal."

Neil went quiet and Ben began to rub Neil's back in a comforting manner.

"Did my mom abuse me or just her boyfriend?"

"As far as I know, your mother never struck you, but that doesn't mean she didn't abuse you. Every time she stood by and let one of her boyfriends touch you, I'd call that abuse."

"I'm glad I don't remember her."

"Me, too, honey." Ben kissed Neil's forehead. Pressed as close as he was against Neil, Ben knew the talk of abuse had driven away the younger man's lust. There was no doubt in Ben's mind he could rejuvenate Neil's erection, but in the end he decided they should spend their first night together just as they were.

He continued to pet and soothe Neil as the man fell asleep. Resting his head next to Neil's, Ben hoped he wasn't making a mistake by opening Neil's past to him.

Chapter Five

A noise woke Ben from a restful sleep early the following morning. It took him several moments to realise the whimpers were coming from Neil, who at some point during the night had rolled himself into a foetal position.

Ben slid across the bed to wrap himself around the younger man. He ran a hand down Neil's side, trying to gently wake him. "Neil?"

Before he could block it, Neil's arm swung towards Ben, clipping him on the jaw. "Neil! Wake up, honey."

Neil's body went still. "Ben?"

"Yeah. I'm here." Once again, Ben wrapped Neil in a protective embrace. "Bad dream?"

Neil nodded and curled himself against Ben's chest, tucking his face in the crook of Ben's neck. "There was a man with red hair. He was...touching me."

Ben knew exactly who the monster in Neil's dream was. Robert Curtland, with the fiery red curls, was the man who'd murdered Neil's mother. According to Neil's recounting of what had happened leading up to the shooting, Robert also had a history of sexually abusing Neil.

"Shhh, it's okay. He's gone now," Ben soothed.

Neil lifted his head and gazed up at Ben. "You know him?"

Ben nodded. "I think your memory is starting to come back."

Neil shook his head vehemently. "No. I don't want them. Make them go away again."

The doctor told Ben it was possible Neil's memories would return. It was a day Ben hoped would never happen. He'd been so deep in denial, he hadn't even sought out a psychiatrist like Dr. Flatts had suggested.

"I'm here," Ben said with a kiss to Neil's forehead.

"It's because of those stupid journals. I should've never tried to read them." Neil's breath hitched. "Burn 'em."

"I'll take care of them." Ben refused to burn years of Neil's thoughts, but he would definitely put them away. Ben's own journals were stored in a series of file boxes at his house in Rapid City, save for the one hidden under his mattress down the hall.

Neil's soft lips began kissing Ben's throat. "Make me forget."

Ben ran his hand down Neil's back, stopping at the base of his spine. He wanted nothing more than to make Neil forget the atrocities he'd lived through, but in his heart he knew that wasn't the answer. Protecting, shielding the person you loved was his duty, one he took very seriously. But if Neil's memories were returning, the younger man would need help Ben wasn't qualified to give.

Neil's lips worked their way up Ben's face to his mouth. "Kiss me."

That, Ben could do. He took Neil's mouth in a passionate kiss, delving deep as if he could remove all the tainted memories with a swipe of his tongue. Neil's erection prodded against Ben's stomach.

Neil broke the kiss and used his forearms to tug at the back of Ben's neck. "Lay on top of me."

As much as Ben wanted to, he shook his head. "I can't. There are things...things you haven't remembered. I..." Ben sighed. "I don't think making love would be the best thing for you right now."

Neil nipped at Ben's bottom lip hard enough to sting. "I know what happened to me. It could've simply been a nightmare, but you confirmed it when you knew who I was remembering."

"I'm not just talking about what happened to you. I'm talking about me, too. The way I am. I'll be too rough. I can try not to be, but I've had almost thirty years of fucking a certain way. I'm not sure I know how to be the man you need."

"You wanna spank me? Spank me. Do whatever you want to me, just do something," Neil groaned, grinding his cock against Ben.

Ben pulled back enough to break the connection with Neil's cock. He leaned up on his elbow and looked down at the gorgeous man. "It's not about spanking. Sure, that can be part of it, but there's more."

Something suddenly occurred to Ben. He narrowed his eyes in thought. "How do you know about the spanking?"

Neil appeared embarrassed. He tilted his chin down and stared at Gray's chest. "My journal. I read about a time I came over to find a naked man at your house who'd obviously been spanked. At the time I thought he was like me, that his folks had done it. But then I read

about Trent and hearing the two of you through the heating vents and how he used to sit on the floor at your feet."

Ben sighed. *Shit*. He tilted Neil's chin up. "Trent was never my partner. Hell, he wasn't even my boyfriend. He was just learning the lifestyle. He's the one who chose to sit at my feet. It wasn't something I demanded of him."

He didn't want to get into the mechanics of a D/s lifestyle with Neil. There would be plenty of time to discuss what they were both comfortable with once they'd addressed Neil's returning memories.

Neil managed to sit up. The sheet slid down his lean torso to pool at his groin in an erotic temptation Ben was finding hard to resist. "Reading about something, even remembering it, isn't the same as feeling it. Do you know what I mean?"

Ben couldn't keep his hands to himself. He reached out and ran his palm over Neil's exposed chest, stopping several times to pluck at the small brown nipples. "The whimpers I heard a few moments ago weren't without feeling."

Neil leaned in to Ben's touch. "Were you ever hurt when you were in the service?"

"Sure."

"You remember the pain, right?"

"Yeah." Ben thought he knew where Neil was headed.

"But you don't feel the pain now, right? So if you don't actually feel it, how can it still hurt?"

Ben's hand wandered down to the short patch of hair at Neil's groin. "Physical pain isn't the same as emotional pain. That's what I'm trying to make you understand."

"But I want this. I want you. If I'm okay with it, why shouldn't it be the right thing to do?"

Ben pulled the covers down to further expose Neil's erection to his hand and eyes. "You haven't had a lover since you moved to Cattle Valley, have you?"

Neil shook his head. "I've dated, but fucking wasn't something I was interested in."

"Exactly. There was a reason for that. My guess is it's because you never really dealt with what had been done to you."

Neil lay back down and spread his legs. "Or maybe you were always the only man for me. I wanted you at seventeen. Don't you think if I was going to have hang-ups about sex, I would've had them then?"

"I was your protector, your friend. I think you've always confused those things with your desire for me." As they talked, Ben slowly ran his fingers over Neil's young, firm sac.

Neil was quiet for several moments. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm screwed up, but I still want those things. If I'm going to spend the rest of my life looking for a lover who is everything you already are to me, why can't it just be you?"

Ben's chest tightened. "Because I want you to love me," he admitted.

"Who says I can't, or that I don't? I obviously still loved you after coming to Cattle Valley. Hell, evidently I talked to Leo about you to the point he knew who to call when I had my accident."

Everything he'd ever wanted was laid out right in front of him. He made a spur of the moment decision. Neil's ass felt so good, he knew he could no longer resist. He climbed off the bed and retrieved the lube from the pocket of his robe. Kneeling beside Neil's head, he casually slicked his fingers. "Wrap your hand around my cock and squeeze it."

Neil looked up at him with his heavy lidded eyes and shook his head. "I can't..."

"I don't want to hear that word from you. Just do it." Ben stretched to reach between Neil's spread legs. He ran his lubed hand up and down Neil's crevice before slowly circling the tight puckered flesh. "I'm waiting."

The muscles surrounding Neil's hole slowly relaxed enough for Ben to penetrate. He wanted to go slow, scaring or hurting the man he loved wasn't an option. With the tip of his middle finger breaching the pucker, he stared down at Neil.

Neil's struggle was obvious. Not only did he have to hold his arm up off the mattress, but concentrate enough to wrap his stiff and uncooperative hand around Ben's length. Ben smiled. "You're doing good. Just a little tighter."

"I ca..." Neil snapped his mouth shut.

Ben applied more pressure to Neil's hole, moving his finger into the first knuckle.

Neil moaned and wiggled his hips. "More."

"You first," Ben said, rotating his finger.

There was a subtle change in the grip on his cock. It wasn't enough by a long shot, but Ben could tell Neil was doing his best. "Good, baby. Hold it right there."

Ben's finger sunk further into Neil's body. "Tell me if it starts to hurt."

Neil snorted. "My hand hurts, not my ass."

Once Ben could easily move in and out of Neil's hole, he pressed his ring finger slowly inside to join the first digit. Neil's back arched slightly as he hissed at the invasion. "Too much?" Ben asked.

Neil shook his head but didn't answer. When Neil's arm started to shake where it was still trying to cling to Ben's cock, Ben grinned. "You can put your arm down. I'll take over from here. Good workout though."

Neil chuckled and let his arm drop to his stomach. "I'll have to remember that when I see Matt later today."

A possessive rage took over Ben's normally calm demeanour. He removed his fingers from Neil's body and swung his leg over to trap Neil under him. With his hands gripping Neil's wrists, Ben leant down until they were nose to nose. "Don't ever. Ever! Cheat on me. Do I make myself clear?"

Neil's prominent Adam's apple moved several times before he answered. "I'm sorry. It was just a joke."

"Not to me," Ben growled. "Not that. Never that."

Neil nodded. "I promise."

Ben suddenly realised what he was doing and quickly released Neil's wrists. "Sorry if I scared you. I..." Ben shook his head and sat back out of Neil's face. "I've never been a possessive lover. Guess I didn't know I had it in me."

Neil surprised Ben with a big grin. "That's because you've never been *my* lover."

Ben chuckled. "Maybe so."

"Ben?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Before, when you got mad at me?"

"Yeah, I already told you I was sorry." For a brief moment, Ben feared he'd blown his chance with Neil.

"You were *hot*." Neil glanced down at his erection, a pool of pre-cum on his stomach.

Overcome by Neil's reaction, Ben moved down to lap at Neil's stomach. The sweet taste coating his tongue surprised him. He suddenly realised it was his first time tasting another man's pre-cum. Maybe he'd been too strict in his rules. He moved further down and took the glistening head of Neil's cock into his mouth.

Neil let out a long moan as Ben used his tongue to map the head and length of Neil's erection. *What the hell am I doing?* Ben released Neil's cock and spread his lover's legs further apart.

He needed to get his head back to wear it belonged. He'd never pleased a lover in such a manner, and wasn't sure it was a direction he wanted to take in his budding relationship with Neil. So why, for the first time ever, did he feel selfish in his choice?

Gazing at Neil, he knew everything he'd ever wanted was within reach. He decided to give some of the control he fought so hard to keep. "What do you need?"

"Fuck me like you want to. Show me what you're so afraid of."

Ben positioned himself between Neil's spread thighs. He grabbed the bottle of lube and slicked his hand and cock. This time he started with two fingers and quickly worked his way to three.

"Still okay?" Ben asked the squirming man.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good."

Ben removed his fingers and replaced them with the head of his cock. "Guess we need to discuss this. I'm clean and I know you are, so have you got a problem with not using condoms?"

Neil shook his head.

Ben nodded and began to ease his way inside, surprised at his restraint. They'd just started and already things felt different. With every inch, Ben paused and waited for Neil's body to stretch, afraid even a pinch of pain would bring back memories neither of them were prepared to deal with.

Movement caught his attention and Ben's gaze swung to one of Neil's hands. In his passionate haze, Neil's fingers were moving independently, something he'd been working hard at relearning. "Baby, look at what you're doing."

Neil appeared confused and looked down his body at the point where he was joined with Ben. "What am I doing wrong?"

Ben couldn't help but grin. "Not a damn thing. I was talking about your hands."

Neil's head swung back up and turned towards one of his hands. When he looked back up at Ben, the joy evident in the younger man's face at the small accomplishment melted Ben's heart.

The euphoric smile spoke to Ben's baser instincts, prompting him to surge in to the hilt.

Neil's eyes rounded. "Oh!"

"Too much?" Ben asked.

Neil shook his head. "Kiss me."

Ben leant forward, bracing his weight on his arms and thrust his tongue deep into Neil's mouth as he started a slow rhythm in and out of his lover's ass. Neil tasted of youth and hope. Ben prayed he could live up to the man's faith in him.

"More," Neil pleaded, breaking their kiss.

"More of what?"

Neil opened his mouth to speak, closed it, before finally whispering, "Everything."

Still buried to the hilt, Ben sat back enough to lift Neil's legs, one at a time, to rest over his shoulders. He looked at Neil to make sure the new position wasn't uncomfortable.

Neil gave him a reassuring smile before issuing Ben a challenge. "Show me that you mean it."

Ben had never meant anything more and set about proving it. He slammed his hips against Neil's ass over and over, delighting in the expression on Neil's face. Although Ben still didn't know if their lifestyles would be compatible outside the bedroom, things were beginning to look promising.

He changed angles and slid his cock against Neil's sensitive gland, delighting in the long moan that issued from Neil's gorgeous mouth. "Touch yourself."

"Don't need it," Neil gasped, shooting his seed onto his chest.

Before he could stop himself, Ben reached down and drew his fingers through the warm cum. "So sexy."

He lifted his fingers to his mouth, his cock still thrusting, still fucking the man he loved. He held Neil's gaze as he licked each digit clean.

"Ahh, hell, you're gonna make me come again," Neil groaned.

Ben felt the familiar tightening as his balls readied to empty. "Too late, babe," he said, his stroke stuttering as he came deep inside Neil. With each stream of cum that left his body, Ben felt...changed.

He eased Neil's legs to the bed before covering the thinner man with his body. He didn't feel like himself and it scared him.

Neil began kissing the side of Ben's face, but Ben couldn't bring himself to meet Neil's gaze. It was like his world had been turned upside down. For a man who prided himself on being in control, he felt anything but.

Ben's cock slipped free of Neil's hole, freeing him. He rose off the bed and walked to the bathroom. After quickly cleaning himself, he carried a warm washcloth back to Neil. Sitting on the mattress, he carefully cleaned his new lover.

"Everything okay?" Neil asked.

Ben nodded. "I'm gonna go out and feed Footloose and make us a big breakfast. Why don't you rest for a while?"

"I could help," Neil offered.

Ben cupped Neil's cheek and bent to give him a deep, but short, kiss. "That's okay. I've got it."

* * * *

Ben went through his morning chores as if on automatic pilot. Standing in front of the refrigerator, he continued to stare without really seeing a damn thing. With a resigned sigh, he picked up the phone and walked out to the deck.

"Hello?" his father answered.

"Hey, Dad." Ben wiped the seat of one of the chairs with his hand before sitting.

"Benny, how're you doing?"

"Okay. I'm still in Cattle Valley with Neil." Ben realised he'd only called his parents once since Neil's accident. He braced himself for the reprimand that was sure to come.

"Okay isn't good. What's going on?"

Why he was surprised by his father's intuition, he had no idea. Now that he had the wisest man he'd ever known on the phone, though, he wasn't sure what to say. How could he admit his inner turmoil?

"I'm in love, and I think I'm in trouble," Ben admitted.

"With the boy?" Jonathon Waters asked.

"Yeah. Although he's not a boy anymore," Ben clarified.

"So what's the problem?"

Ben stared out at the rising sun. His dad had always been easy to speak to, but disappointing the older man gave Ben pause. "I've always had certain ideas of how things would go once I was finally with the person I was meant for, but that's not happening."

"Hang on, back up. Guess you should tell me what those certain ideas were before you go on."

Ben shifted in his chair. "You know, I thought I'd have the kind of relationship you and Mom have. You two have always seemed like the perfect match."

"We are, but we've had to work damn hard at it. What does our relationship have to do with you and Neil?"

How did he tell his dad that he could never see himself demanding Neil follow a strict set of rules? Sure he'd love to see a pretty chain around Neil's neck that reminded his lover who he belonged to, but Neil was a cowboy at heart. Ben simply couldn't see Neil staying home to take care of him.

When Ben didn't answer right away, his dad's intuition once again kicked in. "He's not submissive. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I mean, he definitely seems to like parts of the lifestyle, but I don't even know if I have what it takes to try and dominate him the way I should."

"The way you should?" Jonathan sighed. "Son, there are no rules except the ones the two of you agree on. Your job as the dominant is to protect your family and anticipate your partner's needs and address them before they can be voiced. It's basically like an old-fashioned marriage. Your mom and I feel it's important to have one person making the majority of the decisions. I take care of her, and she does the same for me. Like I said, there are no set rules to follow. The two of you just need to sit down and discuss what you both are willing to live with. The important thing is making sure neither of you break the trust of the other. Without trust and honesty, you're just playing a game."

Ben leant back in his chair and ran his free hand through his short salt and pepper hair. "Are you saying not to worry about living up to anyone else's idea of what a relationship should be? What about you? Will you think less of me if Neil doesn't do the same things for me that mom does for you?"

"Your relationship is just that, yours. My marriage to your mother should have nothing to do with it. Your mom likes doing the things she does. Hell, most of them were her idea.

She feels safe and loved when I set down rules, but no one's saying Neil has to be the same way."

Ben had a lot to think about. What he'd always imagined a relationship should be suddenly didn't seem as important. Still, there were some things he wasn't sure he could live without.

"Thanks. So, how's Mom doing?" he asked, changing the subject.

"She's good. I'd let you talk to her, but she's meditating."

"Of course. I should've remembered it was her time of morning. May I call her later?" Ben asked.

"I'll make sure she's available at two if you would like to call," Jonathan answered.

"Thanks. I miss you."

"Miss you, too, son. You'll have to bring that boy of yours up for a visit."

Ben started to correct his dad, but thought better of it. "Maybe someday soon once his physical therapy slows down."

"He going to be okay?"

"Yeah. He's showing improvement. It's been slow going, but we'll get there." Ben heard the low whine of Neil's wheelchair heading in his direction. "I'm going to have to go, but please give my love to Mom and tell her I'll call her later."

"Love you," his father said before hanging up.

Ben rolled his eyes. His dad always did that. Jonathan was quick to say the words but uneasy about hearing them from someone else. He hung up the phone just as Neil made his way outside.

"Hey," Ben greeted, leaning towards Neil for a kiss. "Sorry, I haven't cooked breakfast yet."

Neil gestured to the phone with a nod of his head. "Who're you talking to?"

"My dad. Remind me to call my mom at two."

"Why two?" Neil asked.

"Because that's the time Dad said I could call." Ben shrugged. "She's meditating right now or he probably would've let me talk to her when I called."

Neil chuckled. "Meditating? Is she like a hippie or something?"

Ben grinned and shook his head. He realised it would be a good time to bring up some of his parents lifestyle schedule. "Every morning since they've been married, Mom makes

breakfast. Before Dad eats, he takes Mom by the hand and leads her to a small mat in the sunroom. There she sits quietly while Dad reads the paper and gets ready for his day. He's been retired for going on three years but the two of them like the comfort of routines."

"So she just sits there?"

Ben nodded. "I remember asking her about it once. As a kid, I thought it looked like Dad was putting her into a corner or something. You know, like she was being punished."

"And what did she say?" Neil asked.

"That the quiet time was for her, not him. It's like a gift of thirty, uninterrupted, minutes of peace every day. It gives her a chance to think about what needs doing. She always prided herself on getting the housework and errands finished at least two hours before my father got home from work. She would spend the rest of her time preparing herself and dinner for Dad's arrival."

"So she was the kind of mom who had cookies and milk waiting for you when you got home from school?"

"Yeah."

"Cool." Neil moved his chair closer and put his hand in Ben's lap. "What else did they do?"

"My folks?" Ben asked. He unzipped his jeans and pulled out his cock before moulding Neil's hand around its half-hard length. "Exercise while we talk."

Neil chuckled and applied a light pressure. "Is this for my benefit or yours?"

"Can't it be both?"

"Guess so," Neil said around a grin.

After a few moments of concentrating on his hand-job, Neil tilted his head to the side. "Does your mom sit on the floor at your dad's feet?"

"Sometimes. It depends on the situation."

"So what's the big difference between the way they live and everyone else? Or is it more of a sexual difference?" Neil asked.

Ben's face twisted in disgust. "Please. I don't even want to think about their bedroom activities."

"Prude," Neil teased.

"Maybe," Ben agreed. "But I guess the real difference is the way Mom defers to Dad in decisions. Dad's the head of the family, no doubt about it. I think it's the main reason things

have always been fairly even-keeled with them. They've never really argued that I know of." Ben shrugged.

"So you want to make decisions for me?" Neil asked, releasing his hold on Ben's cock.

Did he? "I want to be the one responsible for taking care of you in all aspects of our life."

Neil pulled his hand back to rest in his lap. "I'm not sure if I'm ready for something like that."

"I know." Ben stood and zipped his jeans. "I'll go get breakfast ready."

He started to walk into the house but stopped when Neil called him. "Ben?"

Ben glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"Is it a deal breaker for you?"

Ben took a deep breath. His problem was that he knew it wasn't, and that's where his real issues came into play. Could he have a strong relationship without the discipline he'd seen growing up?

"No," he mumbled before continuing into the house.

* * * *

"Damn, you've really been doing your exercises," Matt remarked the following week.

Neil shrugged. He wasn't sure how Matt would take the news that he'd been holding Ben's cock whenever Ben had downtime during the day. Their sex life had grown in the last several days to the point where he didn't even need to be reminded of what Ben liked, but their communication seemed to be off.

Although Ben never mentioned his desire for a solid commitment, Neil knew Ben was the kind of man who needed it.

"I'm remembering," Neil finally confessed to Matt.

"Yeah? That's great."

Neil winced as Matt manipulated his foot. "Not really. I mean, some things are good, like remembering my feelings for Ben and what prompted them in the first place, but there's a lot of crap that goes along with my past."

Matt released Neil's foot. "You're ready to start walking on this."

Neil glanced down. "Really? I think it might be better to hold off until my hands get back to normal."

Matt's eyebrows rose. "I thought you'd be excited."

When Neil didn't answer, Matt's eyes narrowed. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing. I'd just rather not push it and end up falling on my face." It wasn't the truth, but Neil wasn't prepared to tell Matt the real reason.

"Your brace came in. I think you should at least wear it, get the feel for it. I'm not sure what's really going on, but you're only going to walk again if you really want it."

A month ago he would've been up on his feet giving it all he had, but walking didn't hold the appeal it once did. "Put the brace on. We'll see about the rest."

Chapter Six

Ben tucked a thermos of coffee against Neil's hip. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Neil nodded. "Riding with Leo used to be something we did at least once a week. I guess I miss it."

"You're not taking Footloose though. Do you think you'll be comfortable enough on someone else's horse?"

Ben's constant state of worry since Neil had announced his morning ride with his old friend warmed his heart. "I'll be fine. I'm taking the reins Logan made for me."

Ben's fingers ran through Neil's hair in a loving gesture. Neil rested his forehead against Ben's bare torso and began to push down the pyjama bottoms Ben favoured in the morning.

It was another of their unspoken moments. Ben moaned when Neil wrapped his lips around the head of the quickly filling cock.

"You're good to me," Ben whispered, holding the back of Neil's head.

Neil knew it was one of the few things he could actually do for Ben that brought them both a great amount of joy. His lover never seemed to tire of Neil's mouth, and Neil was becoming more skilled with every encounter.

Teasing the slit on the bulbous head with his tongue, Neil lifted his hand and cradled Ben's balls in a firm grip.

"That feels good, babe."

Pleased that he could bring Ben pleasure, Neil opened his throat and took Ben's length as far as he could. It was their secret signal and soon Ben began fucking Neil's mouth. Tires crunching over the gravel drive caught Neil's attention, but he refused to leave a job half finished.

Ben's speed increased, as did the tight grip on Neil's hair. "Almost," Ben warned.

The sound of a car door slamming seemed to prompt Ben's release. Neil opened wide and accepted every precious drop of Ben's cum. He managed to give Ben's cock a quick bath before Leo made it to the back door.

"Wow. That was a record," Ben chuckled.

Neil smiled up at the gorgeous man. "Kiss me and promise that you'll miss me."

Ben bent and thrust his tongue deep into Neil's mouth. "I know I'll have to get used to you being gone during the day, but I hate that it's happening so soon."

"Come on in, Leo. Neil will be ready in a second," Ben called towards the living room.

"Just a few hours then you'll have me all to yourself for the rest of the day," Neil promised.

Ben stepped back and checked the front of his sweats before leading Neil into the living room. Neil watched as Ben and Leo shook hands.

"Make sure he's careful," Ben told Leo.

"Don't worry. Sammy's already given me the lecture." Leo turned to Neil. "Ready?"

"Yep. Ben even packed us some coffee."

Leo glanced outside. "We'll have to drink it on the way. It's going to be a scorcher out there today."

* * * *

Neil felt like an idiot with the brace connected to his shoe. It just didn't feel right to ride a horse without his usual cowboy boots. When they finally reached the top of the bluff, Neil gestured to his favourite spot. "Mind if we sit awhile?"

Leo shook his head. "Can you get Lickety-split close enough to climb onto the rock?"

"Don't need to. If you can give me a shoulder to lean on, I can make it."

Leo stopped his horse and stared at Neil. "When did that start?"

"What?"

"You being able to walk, idiot. What do you think I'm talking about?" Leo climbed down from his horse and tied the older mare to a tree limb.

Neil shrugged. "Couple of days ago, I guess. Ben doesn't know though, so don't say anything."

Leo walked over to Neil and looked up at him. "And may I ask why you haven't told Ben about this?"

"No you may not. Just help me down."

Leo put his hands on Neil's waist and helped him from the horse. "Thanks," Neil said once he was on the ground.

"Hang on." Leo walked Lickety-split over to a shaded area and tied him as well.

"Okay. Just hold out your arm," Neil instructed.

Leo did as told and Neil used his healing hand to steady himself as they slowly walked to the rock. "I can get it from here."

"You sure? Because I could lift you up there."

Neil rolled his eyes. "I'm sure.

It was easier said than done. By the time Neil made it, he was sweating profusely and out of breath. Leo was perched on the rock, his arms crossed and a smug grin on his face.

"Shut up," Neil growled at his friend.

Leo glanced over, still grinning. "So...spill."

"No."

Leo sobered and shook his head. "You're a grown-ass man, so it's not like I can make you talk to me, but let me just say this. I get a strong feeling you're keeping shit from that man of yours, and I'm here to tell you, you don't want to go down that road."

"You don't understand." Maybe it was stupid, but things with Ben had been so good, the last thing he wanted was to rock the boat. "Ben's not like you."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Leo asked, looking completely affronted.

It took Neil several moments to work up the nerve to tell Leo a little about his relationship dynamic. "Ben likes to feel like he's taking care of me. He wants other things, but he doesn't push because he knows I'm not comfortable. But this, being in the chair, it's something I can give him."

Leo sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. "Do you want me to just kick your ass now or later?"

"When did you become such an ass," Neil mumbled and scooted towards the edge of the rock.

Leo grabbed his arm and kept him in place. When Neil turned around, Leo was right there in his face. "When did you start acting your age? You've always impressed me. Now? Not so much. Hell, I don't know what's going on between you and Ben, but you'd better get your head on straight or you'll throw away any hope you have of making things work."

Leo released Neil and sat back. "You love him?"

"Yeah," Neil said in a clipped tone.

"Is he pressuring you into doing something you don't want to do?"

"No. I already told you that." Neil suddenly felt defeated. He lay back on the rock and stared up at the sky. Although it was shaded, the warmth of the day had already seeped into the stone, heating Neil's skin on contact. "There are things he wants that I know I can give him, but there are others that I don't want to."

"Have you told him that?" Leo asked, ruffling Neil's hair.

"Not really."

"So, instead of telling him how you really feel, you're pretending to need a wheelchair?"

"He's all I've ever wanted. I thought he was the most perfect man I'd ever known. But now..."

Leo grunted. "He's shown himself to be human?"

Neil felt his eyes fill with tears. *I will not cry, dammit.* "Yeah. Maybe that's it. Stupid, huh?"

Leo moved and pulled Neil into his arms. "Not stupid." Leo kissed the top of Neil's head. "Being in love isn't always the fairytale we want it to be, but guess what? Fairytales aren't real. Love is, or it can be, if you meet its challenges head on. And being less than honest with someone you love is the worst possible thing you can do."

Neil wiped his face on the sleeve of Leo's shirt. "Sorry I yelled at you."

"Don't be. I think I've managed to wring more honesty out of you today than I have in a long time. And for the record, I respect you for keeping some things private. As long as you're not being hurt or pressured, how you and Ben decide to live your lives is no one's business but your own."

Neil glanced up to meet Leo's gaze. It was evident in the way Leo looked at him that he understood more than he was admitting. With so much honesty and understanding right in front of him, Neil decided to take a chance. "Do you think it's possible to be submissive at home, but still remain who you are everywhere else?"

"Like I said, what you do at home is no one's business."

"Yeah, but I'm not talking about what other people might say or think. I'm asking if you think it's possible for a man to live that way?"

Leo shook his head. "Sorry, buddy, but that's a question I can't answer for you. It might help if you opened up to Ben and talked to him about your fears."

Neil looked down at his hands. "You won't tell him that I walked, will you?"

"It's not for me to tell. But I won't be happy if I see you in town riding around in that wheelchair."

Neil nodded. "I get it. I'll figure it out."

* * * *

Ben put the last of the dinner dishes in the dishwasher and dried his hands before going out to the deck. It was that perfect time of the day when the sky was painted with deep pinks and purples as the sun dipped closer to the horizon. "It's gorgeous out here."

He walked over to the cushioned lounge chair and waited. Neil smiled up at him and scooted forward, giving Ben enough room to squeeze in behind him. It had become their evening ritual. One Ben loved more each day.

They hadn't talked much about Neil's ride earlier in the day, but he was curious. "How'd things go with Leo?"

"It was hot but worth it." Neil rested his head on Ben's chest and tilted his head up to meet Ben's gaze. "Leo's a good friend."

Ben ran his fingertips across Neil's lean washboard abdomen. "You were kind of quiet when you got home."

Neil directed Ben's hands, one to his nipples and one to his shorts. "I miss my job."

Ben plucked at the tiny brown disks as he pushed his way under the waistband of Neil's jersey shorts. They hadn't talked about what would happen once Neil was well enough to return to work. Although Ben still owned a house in Rapid City, he wasn't opposed to moving if he felt it was the right thing to do.

"Once we get you back on your feet, you think that's something you want to return to?" Ben asked, manipulating Neil's sac.

Neil didn't say anything for several moments. "Would that make you mad?"

"Mad? No. Scared? Kinda."

Neil's hand stilled Ben's hand on his groin. "What scares you about me going back to work?"

It was a question Ben had been asking himself a lot lately. "Honestly? I'm not sure. It might be the fear of you growing away from me. I mean, I'd hope you'd like me to stay around here once you're up on your feet again, but we haven't discussed it."

"Of course I want you here, but would that be something you'd be willing to do?" Neil asked.

"For you? Absolutely. I just don't know what I'd do with myself all day while you're out there working."

"So find something to keep yourself busy," Neil offered. "What was your speciality in the Air Force?"

"I was a Combat Controller, usually assigned to work with covert Special Force units from other branches of the military." Ben brushed the back of his hand over Neil's jaw. "See? There's not much use for an old man who knows how to coordinate air strikes from the ground."

"You can shoot, right?"

Ben chuckled. "Yeah. Top of my class."

"You could try to get a job with the Sheriff's Department," Neil said.

"No. Do you have any idea how many times I butted heads with the cops in Rapid City over you?" Ben shook his head. "No."

Neil sat up and turned around as much as the confined space would allow. "You can't blame the police for what happened to me. I'm as much to blame as they were. Mom would tell them stuff then they would ask me, and I..." Neil's Adam's apple bobbed several times before he was able to continue. "Despite everything, I loved my mom."

Ben cupped Neil's cheek. It was obvious Neil's memories had returned. When, Ben didn't know, but the pain evident in Neil's eyes told Ben the younger man was definitely remembering what he'd gone through. "I know you did, but that still doesn't excuse how the cops reacted. They should've been looking out for you."

"So maybe you should become a cop and help kids in my situation."

Ben shook his head. "I just can't."

Neil lifted his arm and placed his hand over Ben's. It was a relatively simple gesture but one that spoke volumes in terms of Neil's rehabilitation. "Grab me a shirt and let's go for a drive. There's something I want to show you."

* * * *

Ben followed Neil's directions into town. "Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Not yet. Flip a U-turn when you get to The Canoe and park across the street."

Ben continued down Main Street until he reached the fanciest restaurant in town. He looked both ways and made a U-turn. "This better not get me a ticket."

"Don't worry, it won't."

Ben parked across the street from The Canoe and shut off the engine. "Okay, now what?"

Neil pointed towards the building in front of them. "See that new addition?"

"Yeah."

"That's going to be the new Cattle Valley Youth Centre. The town's been raising money to help get it off the ground. As far as I know they have enough money to get it finished, but what they really need is volunteers to help run the place."

Ben had a feeling he knew where the conversation was going. "What does this have to do with me?"

"I think you know." Neil turned sideways in the seat to face Ben. "You may not have kept me from a shit-tastic home life, but you made me the man I am today. You can do the same thing with other kids. I'm not saying they're going through the same things I did, but maybe one of them is. Even if they aren't, you can still help them believe in themselves."

Ben admitted to himself that the idea did hold a certain appeal. He'd never been around a group of kids before, but it might be something to look into. "I'll think about it."

"Good. Now take me down to O'Brien's and buy me a beer."

Ben started the SUV and pulled out of the parking spot, but kept his mind on the possibilities of the youth centre. "Who's in charge of it?"

"What?" Neil asked, pointing towards an open spot in front of O'Brien's Pub.

"Who's in charge of getting volunteers for the centre?" Ben asked, pulling in.

"Oh. I don't know. You could ask Nate, but I'd guess Hearn Sutherland, the Parks and Rec guy would be in charge."

Ben got out of the SUV and went to open the back hatch.

"I'd rather you just help me walk inside. It's not that far," Neil said from the front seat.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Neil answered.

Ben shut the back door and walked around to open Neil's door. He wondered if Neil was too embarrassed to be seen in his wheelchair. It was the first time since his accident that he'd asked to go anywhere but the EZ Does It or the medical clinic for his therapy.

Neil used Ben's forearm to help himself out of the SUV. Before moving, he wrapped his arms around Ben's waist and stared up at him. "I'm walking pretty good now. You'll see."

Ben stared into those gorgeous hazel eyes, wondering if he'd heard Neil correctly. "What?"

"Hey, stranger!" a deep voice shouted from the sidewalk.

Neil glanced over and grinned, but Ben kept his eyes on the man in his arms.

"Hey, Shep," Neil said, trying to pull himself out of Ben's arms. "Come on over and meet Ben."

"We need to talk," Ben growled in his ear.

Neil nodded. "We will."

Instead of making a scene, Ben stepped back far enough to shut Neil's door and help steady him towards the sidewalk.

A handsome older man held out his hand. "I'm Shepard Black. You must be Ben Waters."

Ben nodded and shook the man's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Shep used to ride the rodeo. He owns the Back Breaker Ranch now. Where's Jeremy?" Neil asked.

"He'd better be inside. I got caught up in a meeting so he was supposed to ride in with a couple of the wranglers."

Although Neil had a good grip on Ben's arm, he seemed to walk without problems to the door of O'Brien's. Ben's gut twisted as he realised Neil had been keeping secrets from him. He wanted nothing more than to throw the man over his shoulder and take him home where he could get to the bottom of what was really going on.

"Come on over and join us for a beer." Shep went on ahead to greet a young man sitting by himself in a booth, mug of beer in hand.

"That's Jeremy, Shep's partner. He's my age," Neil explained as they made their way slowly towards the kissing couple.

Ben leant in and growled in Neil's ear. "Why the hell didn't you tell me you were walking?"

Neil glanced up. "Because I was afraid of your reaction." Neil's eyes narrowed. "Guess I wasn't far off, huh?"

Ben moved to step in front of Neil, stopping his progress through the room. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Neil placed both hands on Ben's chest. "Do me a favour and ask yourself one question. Are you mad because I didn't tell you or because I can walk?"

Ben opened his mouth to deny it had anything to do with the second part of Neil's question, but Neil stopped him with a quick kiss on the lips. "I know we need to talk about this, but I really, really want you to think about what I said first."

Ben could feel the vein in his neck begin to pulse in time with his rapid heartbeat. "One beer."

* * * *

"I guess you can get into the house on your own," Ben grumbled. He opened the driver door and walked up the ramp without looking back.

Neil closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the seat. He'd barely managed to finish his beer at O'Brien's before Ben was on his feet ready to go.

"What have I done?" he whispered in the quiet interior of the SUV.

Since his memories had returned, Neil had spent the majority of every day remembering how much Ben had done for him. How could he have not fallen in love with a man who would provide cold compresses and pancakes in the middle of the night?

Not once had Ben asked for something in return. He'd simply welcomed Neil into his home and done what he could to get Neil through another day.

It was incredibly stupid on his part to believe he was doing the right thing by letting Ben think he was still needed. Not only was it the role Ben had always played in their relationship, but it seemed to be something the older man needed to be happy.

Neil glanced towards the house. With a heavy sigh, he opened the door and carefully climbed down from the seat. He only had to walk on his own for fifteen yards or so before he could grab the ramp railing. *Piece of cake.*

The first several steps were slow but okay. When Neil put his weight on his bad foot for the fifth time, his leg seemed to collapse under him. He teetered for several seconds before

going down, hard. The cheekbone on the left side of his face caught the railroad tie that bordered the flower garden as he landed.

Sprawled on the ground, Neil shook his head several times to clear it before pushing himself to a seated position. He lifted his hand to rub the sore spot on his face and was met by warmth. "Oh shit."

Neil couldn't have cared less that he would be facing yet another scar, but he knew what the stupid cut would do to Ben. He started to slide his way across the paved sidewalk towards the ramp and wished to hell he'd put on a pair of jeans before leaving the house earlier that evening.

With the rough cement scraping away his flesh, he finally decided to swallow his pride and call for help. "Ben?"

While he waited, Neil changed positions to get the recent road rash on his hip and thigh off the ground. He used the bottom of his T-shirt to wipe the blood from his cheek. He prayed Ben would forgive him enough to come outside to see why he was being called. Once again he was asking for Ben's help. It seemed to be a long-standing pattern with him.

He heard the screen door open. "Wha...Fuck!"

Ben raced down the ramp to Neil's side. His hands hovered over Neil like he didn't know where to touch him. "What've I done?"

Neil shook his head. "Not your fault. Just, please, help me up."

Ben wrapped an arm around his back and one under his knees and lifted him off the ground. Instead of carrying him towards the house, Ben headed for the SUV.

"What're you doing? I'm okay," Neil tried to argue.

"That cut's going to need stitches." Ben set Neil on his feet long enough to get the passenger door open before lifting him into the seat.

"Sit tight," Ben said before starting towards the house.

"Ben, wait! I don't want more stitches. Just slap a butterfly on me and call it good."

Ben stopped and turned around. His expression was one of confusion and pain as he walked back to stand at Neil's side. He turned on the overhead light and examined Neil's cheek for the first time. "I'm so sorry, baby."

For the first time in their history together, Neil watched as moisture pooled in Ben's beautiful eyes. Neil reached out and tried to wipe away the tears as they began to trickle down Ben's face. "Please, don't. I need you to be the strong one."

Despite the throbbing pain in his cheek, Neil pulled Ben closer. "I love you, and I'm sorry I fucked everything up. I thought..." Ben's mouth covered Neil's, cutting him off.

Neil opened for Ben's tongue. The kiss was savage, but surprisingly gentle at the same time. Neil would never tire of the sweet slide of Ben's tongue against his.

Ben eventually broke the kiss. "Let's get you cleaned up, and then I think we have a lot to talk about."

"Get my chair out of the back. I'm too tall for you to be carrying around."

Surprisingly, Ben didn't argue, but retrieved the wheelchair instead. He lifted Neil out of the seat and into the chair with apparent ease. "Promise me you'll go to the hospital if the cut turns out to be worse than it looks."

"I promise," Neil said as Ben pushed him up the ramp.

Ben didn't stop until they were in the bathroom. He grabbed a washcloth and ran it under warm water before closing the lid on the toilet and positioning himself between Neil's legs.

Ben's face looked like it had been carved in stone as he carefully washed away the blood. His gaze zeroed in on the cut as he gently prodded the split skin with the pads of his fingers. "It'll probably scar."

"I don't care, if you don't," Neil said.

Ben drew his attention away from the cut. "You think a scar would ever matter to me?"

"No, but if every time you look at it you try and blame yourself, I'll get it sewn up." Neil put his hands on Ben's handsome face. "I know you too well. This isn't your fault. It was an accident."

Ben tossed the washcloth into the sink before reaching for the first aid kit. As he dabbed the cut area with Neosporin, he bit his bottom lip. "I was angry with you, but I should've never left you to make it inside on your own."

Neil winced when Ben closed the cut with two butterfly bandages. "I reckon you had a right to be pissed."

Ben sat back and dropped his hands to his lap. "What do you say we have this discussion over a couple of roast sandwiches?"

Neil grinned. "I'd rather you made me some of your special pancakes."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "Aren't you a little old for Mickey Mouse pancakes?"

Neil shook his head. "I'll never be too old for something that makes me feel so loved."

Chapter Seven

Ben poured the batter onto the griddle in the familiar three-circled Mickey Mouse shape. He still found it hard to believe Neil remembered the silly pancakes he used to make the scared little boy during rough times.

"I like it when you take care of me," Neil said from his seat at the table.

Ben closed his eyes and gripped the spatula. "That's all I've ever wanted to do," he finally admitted, opening his eyes again.

"Why?" Neil asked. "Is it that you've always just felt sorry for me, or is there something else?"

Ben carefully flipped the pancake over. How many times had he asked himself the same question in the last four years? He knew he'd held no inappropriate feelings for Neil when he was younger, so what changed and when exactly?

Once the pancake was ready, he added it to the stack and turned off the griddle. He set the plate on the table and retrieved the small pitcher of syrup from the microwave before taking his seat.

Neil made no effort to fill his plate. Instead he looked at Ben, obviously hoping for an answer to his question.

"I'm not going to lie and say I didn't feel sorry for you. No kid deserved the kind of childhood you had." Ben rested his elbows on the table and scrubbed at his tired eyes.

"I remember the summer before you turned eighteen very well, a specific day, actually. It was hot, and I asked you if you wanted to go to the pool. You jumped at the chance, of course and ran in to your room to change into your swim trunks. I cleaned up the lunch dishes and went to your room to see what was taking you so long."

"And you caught me jacking off," Neil finished for him.

"Yeah."

"It was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life," Neil remembered.

Ben shrugged. "It shouldn't have been. It was my fault for not knocking first. Hell, you were seventeen. It's perfectly natural for a boy that age."

Neil nodded. "Yeah, except the reason I had to jack off in the first place was because I got hard thinking about seeing you in a suit for the first time. I was already madly in love with you and the thought of you all wet and slippery..." Neil snorted. "Even the embarrassment of you catching me didn't keep my dick down that day. I remember I stayed in the water the entire time we were there because I didn't want you or anyone else to see me like that."

Ben reached across the table and squeezed Neil's hand. "It was the day I recognised you as the man you'd become. I didn't have any trouble keeping my cock soft because the shame and embarrassment over what I wanted to do to you were enough to put me off sex for quite a while."

Neil nodded his head slowly. "That's about the same time Jeremy stopped coming around."

"Yep. I'm not sure if it was my lack of interest in him or the fear that he'd see you like I did that prompted his dismissal. All I knew was I couldn't take the chance that he'd come onto you."

"Did you already know I was gay?" Neil asked.

"In my heart, I did, but I tried to convince myself it was your unnatural introduction into the world of sex that prompted your questions." He pushed the platter of pancakes towards Neil. "Eat up before they're cold."

Neil loaded several of the fun-shaped pancakes onto his plate. "There's something that's been bothering me."

"I figured as much." Ben stabbed one of the leftover pancakes and added butter.

"You sent me away because you thought I was confused about my feelings for you. I was young and relied on you for everything, but you seemed to think I needed to experience life without you as a crutch. Am I right?"

"Yeah, for the most part."

Neil picked up the pitcher and poured a generous amount of syrup onto his pancakes. "Okay, so I moved here and learned to stand on my own two feet. It didn't make me stop loving you. But now that I've finally been given the chance to be with you, you want me to act like that eighteen-year old that you kicked out in the first place."

"I never said that," Ben argued, putting his fork down.

Neil slowly chewed the bite he'd taken, obviously choosing his words carefully. "You want to make decisions for me, but I've lived on my own long enough not to need you for that. I didn't let you know that I was walking because you seem to have this need to take care of me."

Ben started to argue, but rose and crossed to the refrigerator instead. He pulled out a gallon of milk and crossed to the cupboard to retrieve two glasses. Neil was right, and Ben knew it. It wasn't that he wished Neil was the naive eighteen-year old again, but he did want to be the one to always make sure his needs, in all aspects of his life, were met. It's what his dad had always done for his mother.

"I was angry that you lied to me about the walking. Trust means everything to me." Ben set a glass of milk in front of Neil, then bent and placed a kiss on top of Neil's head. "And I want to take care of you because I love you. I don't think of it as trying to control you."

"And I like it when you take care of me, but I want to take care of you, too," Neil mumbled.

Ben sat in his chair. "There's nothing wrong with you taking care of me. That's what I meant when I told you part of the lifestyle was anticipating each other's needs."

"I don't want to live a predetermined lifestyle. I just want to love you and be loved. I want us to find our own way, not your parents' way."

"How can we be sure it'll work out between us if we don't have some kind of guideline to follow?"

Neil's head tilted to the side. "I guess you'll just have to learn to have faith in me, in us. I can't promise that I'm always going to agree with you, or that we'll never fight, but taking away what makes me...me, isn't going to get us any closer to forever than just having faith in each other will."

Ben leant back in his chair and crossed his arms. He knew it for the defensive position it was, but he felt his whole belief system was crumbling around him. Neil's points were incredibly valid, and Ben was man enough to admit it.

Standing, Ben held out his hand. "Let's go to bed."

* * * *

Neil lay on his side with his scraped hip and thigh towards the ceiling and watched Ben undress. As sculpted as Ben's body was, Neil couldn't imagine what he'd looked like in his twenties. It was still hard to believe someone so handsome wasn't already taken. "Have you ever had a serious relationship with someone?"

"Huh?" Ben paused in the process of taking off his socks.

"You told me things with Jeremy weren't serious. I was just wondering if there'd ever been a 'serious' in your life."

Ben lifted the sheet and slid in beside Neil. He placed a soft kiss on Neil's bandage before answering. "If you're asking if I've ever felt for someone else what I feel for you, the answer is no, not even close."

"Why? It can't be that you weren't given the opportunity, you're fucking gorgeous." Neil scooted closer and began kissing Ben's neck.

Ben rolled to his back, bringing Neil with him. "I was in the military for so long, I guess I just didn't allow myself to get attached to the men I fucked."

Ben put a hand to the top of Neil's head and gently prodded him down until Neil was eye level with Ben's fat cock. As Neil licked the head of Ben's hardening shaft, he couldn't help but grin. This kind of dominance he didn't mind at all. He would happily hand Ben the reins in the bedroom if that was enough to keep his man satisfied.

With Ben's hands on his head, Neil was guided down to the heavy balls. Neil rubbed his face against the lightly-furred sac before taking as much of the sensitive flesh as he could into his mouth.

He was rewarded with a deep, chest-vibrating moan from Ben. "That's it, baby, suck on my nuts."

Neil tilted his head to make eye contact with Ben as he reached to wrap his hand around his own hard and leaking cock.

Ben batted Neil's arm. "No touching yourself until I tell you to."

Neil released the ball in his mouth and licked his way up Ben's shaft. After licking the pre-cum from Ben's cock he tore his mouth away. "Fuck me. Please?" he begged.

Ben reached over to the bedside drawer and withdrew the bottle of lube. "Turn around so I can reach that sweet ass of yours."

Neil did as instructed, being careful of his sore hip and thigh. He went back to worshipping the cock that would soon be buried inside of him as Ben dribbled lube down the crack of his ass.

Neil moaned as Ben's finger invaded his hole. It wouldn't take long, Neil already knew that much. They had been fucking at least three times a day lately. He moaned again when Ben quickly worked his way up to three fingers.

"That feel good?" Ben asked, brushing Neil's prostate.

"Fucking awesome," Neil answered.

"You want to ride this big cock?" Ben asked, reaching down to slap his cock against Neil's mouth.

Neil stuck his tongue out, catching the sweet drops of pre-cum as they sprinkled his face at the movement. Ben pulled his fingers out and smacked Neil playfully on the ass. Neil knew that was his signal. He sat up and turned himself around to straddle Ben's lap. Without his brace on, his foot wasn't yet strong enough to hold his weight, but Neil knew Ben was aware of that.

Neil reached behind him and spread himself open as Ben guided him down onto his cock. Neil's body opened for the invasion with little pain as he slowly impaled himself. "So fucking good."

"Your ass was made for my cock." Ben's voice had gone deep and growly, something Neil knew meant Ben was already close to coming.

With his hands cradling Neil's ass, Ben lifted him enough to thrust in and out. "Will you still suck my cock whenever I need you to?" Ben asked.

The question took Neil by surprise. He gazed down at Ben. He still wasn't sure what impact their earlier talk would have on their relationship, but Ben needed to know their sex life definitely wouldn't be affected. "My mouth and ass will always belong to you."

The answer seemed to fuel Ben's lust. His speed increased as he slammed his cock hard into Neil's hole over and over.

Neil decided to give Ben more of what he seemed to enjoy. "Once I'm strong enough, I want you to fuck me at every available opportunity. I'll even promise to blow you every morning while you read the morning paper. Now isn't that better than sending me off for thirty minutes of meditation?"

Neil knew he was pushing his luck with the last question, but it was too late to take it back. Ben reacted predictably and aimed several, well-placed, swats at his ass. "Don't make fun of my folks."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't. Just offering an alternative that would hopefully work for both of us," Neil admitted.

"You really want to suck me from under the kitchen table?" Ben asked. "Or are you just saying that to please me?"

Neil grinned and licked his lips. "You know how much I love the taste of your cock."

Ben grinned back, his pace never slowing as he continued his assault on Neil's ass. "Yes, I believe I do."

Ben's teeth clenched as his face took on a pained expression. "Go ahead and touch yourself, baby. I'm about to explode."

Neil wasted no time reaching down to wrap his hand around his cock. The pressure felt so good in combination with Ben filling his ass. Before he had time to warn Ben, he came in thick ropes of seed, painting the bronzed chest of his lover.

As much as he wanted to fall into Ben's arms, he maintained his upright position until Ben pulled him down into a kiss. Ben's grunts as he thrust his tongue deep into Neil's mouth signalled his release.

Neil sighed into Ben's mouth at the warmth and security Ben's arms provided. They might have some work to do on their relationship out of bed, but as far as Neil was concerned they were a perfect match between the sheets.

* * * *

Ben insisted on going inside with Neil on his next physical therapy appointment. He shook hands with Matt before gesturing to Neil. "Did you know he could walk?"

Matt glanced at Neil before nodding. "He'd be able to do even more if he'd use the damn canes I told him to buy."

Ben gave Neil's shoulder a reprimanding squeeze. "That true?"

Neil nodded, refusing to look up from the floor.

Ben returned his attention to Matt. "Any special kind?"

Matt walked over to the reception counter and scribbled something on a sheet of paper. "Here's the length he needs. Make sure you get something with a sturdy handle."

Ben tilted Neil's chin up and gave him a quick kiss. "I'll run down the street to the drugstore and see what they've got."

Neil's bottom lip stuck out just enough to let Ben know he wasn't happy with the idea. "I don't want to look like an old man."

From off to the side, Matt began to laugh. "Yeah, because a wheelchair makes you look so much younger than a cane would."

Neil narrowed his eyes at the therapist before finally chuckling. "Guess you're right."

Ben gave Neil's ass a playful pat. "Be right back."

He turned and left the clinic, waving to Doctor Singer in the process. The walk to the drugstore wasn't bad except he had to pass the bakery on the way. "Damn."

Veering off his intended course, Ben stepped into the bakery and took a deep breath. "Something smells good."

Kyle stopped kissing the huge man leaning over the counter. "Hey." He looked up at his partner, Gill, and smiled. "You've met Ben haven't you?"

Gill turned and held out his hand. "Yep. We met last month when he came in for an oil change. How's Neil doing?"

"Good. He's ready to move up to a set of canes. I was on my way to the drugstore to see if they had any."

Kyle made a face. "They do, but they're not very stylish." He held up a hand. "Wait here." He pushed through the swinging doors to the back and disappeared.

"So, the big dedication is coming up. Have you talked Neil into going yet?" Gill asked.

Ben shook his head. "I haven't really pushed him on it. He's been going through enough lately as it is."

Gill nodded. "I can understand that, but I think he should be there. It's a pretty big moment for all of us. We tend to do better as a community when everyone sticks together. The ceremony is only open to residents and their guests, so he won't need to worry about the media circus that happened at the memorial last year."

Although Ben remembered seeing the news stories on television and in the paper, he hadn't even known Neil was living in Cattle Valley at the time. "Did Neil go to the memorial service?"

"Yes, physically he was there."

Ben suddenly felt guilty that he hadn't even talked much about Gavin Lively's death with Neil. "I'll talk to him about it."

"Good. That's all anyone can ask," Gill said.

Kyle came back into the room and Gill strode behind the counter to give his partner a kiss. "I'll see you at supper."

"I'll be there." Kyle watched Gill leave with a dreamy expression on his face. Ben wondered if Neil ever looked like that when Ben left the room.

"Here. Neil can use these," Kyle said, holding up two elegantly carved wooden canes.

Ben took the canes and ran his fingers over the incredible workmanship. "These are gorgeous, but I think they're too short for my little bean pole."

"Gill had Deacon McConnell make these up for me. He owns that little shop next to O'Brien's. I'm sure Deac could hook you up with something special."

Deacon McConnell? "You wouldn't happen to know if he was a Green Beret, would you?"

"Deac?" Kyle shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think he's ever mentioned being in the military, but come to think of it, he doesn't say much at all." Kyle leaned closer and grinned. "He's kind of surly, but I figure it has something to do with his leg being all messed up."

That description didn't sound like the happy man Ben had known, but it was worth checking out. "I'll go check it out, thanks."

Ben left the bakery and crossed the street. Down several doors was a small shop with a sign that read *Falling Limb Creations*. Ben pushed open the door and stepped inside. He was met by an incredible array of furniture, lighting and knick-knacks but no shop owner. "Hello?"

A noise sounded from the back, and if Ben wasn't mistaken, a low curse. He continued to glance around the shop, looking for a selection of canes like the ones Kyle had.

"How can I help you?" a gravelled voice asked from behind Ben.

Ben turned and the slightly younger man automatically straightened and lifted his arm as if to salute.

Halfway to his forehead, Deacon McConnell realised what he was doing, scowled and dropped his arm back to his side. "Sorry. Bad habit."

Ben held out his hand. Although he hadn't seen Deac in years, he still had the same dark green eyes trimmed in long black lashes. The worry lines were new, as well as the pronounced limp, but it was the same handsome face he'd served with in a number of covert operations.

After several heartbeats, Deac returned the gesture and shook Ben's hand. "How are you, sir?"

"Ben," he corrected.

"You live here?" Deac asked.

"Yeah, but I'm new. I came to take care of my partner after his accident. Which is one of the reasons I came by actually." Ben pulled out the slip of paper Matt had given him. "Neil needs two canes that length. Kyle from the bakery told me you might be able to help me."

Deac rubbed his heavy shadowed jaw with his fingers. "I might have a couple over there." Deacon headed towards the back corner of the shop. Sure enough there was an old brass umbrella stand with several canes inside. "I don't have two the right length that match, but I can make you up a set if you'd like."

"They don't need to match." Ben ran his hand over the velvety-soft wood. "These are fantastic. I didn't know you had this kind of artistic talent in you."

Deac met Ben's gaze. "Evidently that's not the only thing we didn't know about each other."

"Touché," Ben said, tipping one of the canes in acknowledgement.

Epilogue

Neil stretched his arms over his head as he woke from a short nap. Ben reached down to his lap and pet Neil's hair away from his face. "Good nap?"

Neil grinned. "I wasn't sleeping. Just resting my eyes."

"Really? So I was imagining the loud snores coming from that sweet mouth of yours?"

Moving the back of his head against the fly of Ben's jeans, Neil chuckled. "Must've been."

Ben ran his fingers through Neil's hair. "You gonna get this cut before you start work Monday?"

Neil reached up and began to unbutton Ben's shirt. "You don't like the skater boy look?"

Ben groaned when Neil's fingers found their way to his nipple. What do you think?"

Neil pinched Ben's nipple enough to send a zing of electricity straight to Ben's cock. "Why don't you cut it for me then?"

"Me?"

"Sure. You cut your own, no reason you can't cut mine. I trust you. I know you wouldn't want to walk around the dedication with a guy with fucked up hair."

Ben leaned down and kissed Neil slow and deep. "I'd be proud to have you on my arm no matter what."

Neil pushed himself to a sitting position and straddled Ben's lap. "Speaking of work, did you go see Hearn about working at the youth centre?"

"I did. He said they can always use another volunteer."

"So..." Neil prompted.

"So, I'm going to go in several days a week while you're at work." He didn't tell Neil there was a possibility he could soon take over running the centre as a paid employee. His meeting with Hearn and Nate had gone well. Nate pointed out Ben's years of coordinating military manoeuvres and how that could be a big advantage when dealing with a building full of kids and volunteers. He wasn't going to get his hopes up, though. The important thing was building his relationship with Neil.

"We gonna do this thing or what?" Neil asked, breaking into Ben's thoughts.

Ben put his hands on Neil's lean hips and ground his cock against Neil's cute little cowboy butt. "I'm up for it."

Neil laughed riding the hard ridge trapped behind Ben's jeans. "I was talking about the haircut but this works for me."

Ben glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantel. "I don't know that we have time to do both. Unless you want to ride me while I cut your hair?"

Neil's eyes rounded. "Uh...I'd rather not. Guess you'll have to decide which you want more, a clean-cut boyfriend or an empty sac."

Ben threw Neil down on the couch and jumped on top of him. "We might be a little late for the dedication, skater boy."

* * * *

With a cane in one hand and Ben's arm in the other, Neil joined the line of people walking under the stone arch of the new rodeo grounds, appropriately renamed Cattle Valley Memorial Arena.

Neil's eyes stung as he rounded the corner and got his first good look at the new grandstand. "Cement," he whispered.

"Did you say something, baby?" Ben asked.

Neil swallowed around the lump in his throat. In place of the twisted metal and screaming victims was a solidly built grandstand made of concrete with professional stadium seating. Neil eventually nodded and gestured to the grandstand. "It's nice."

Ben wrapped an arm around Neil's waist and kissed his temple. "Yeah, it is. You want to stay down here for a while?"

Neil leaned against Ben, absorbing his lover's strength. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all. I'm here for *you*. Whatever you need." Ben led Neil over to one side out of the way.

Turning to tuck his face against Ben's chest, Neil tried to block out the memories. The moments following the collapse had been complete chaos. "We fought that day. I wasn't even sitting with him."

Ben rubbed Neil's back. "Gavin?"

"Yeah. He wanted things I wasn't ready for. I miss him, but I'm glad..." Neil stopped, suddenly realising what he was about to admit.

Ben pulled away enough to tilt Neil's chin up. "What?"

Trust. Neil remembered what happened the last time he wasn't completely honest with Ben. "I'm glad we fought. I'm glad I wasn't sitting with him. I'm happy I made it through with only a couple of scratches. I hurt Gavin by telling him I may never be able to give him the serious relationship he wanted, and then afterwards I was relieved that I'd said it."

Neil's eyes stung as tears filled his vision. "It wasn't supposed to happen here, not in Cattle Valley. We moved here to be safe, then everything changed. One moment we were cheering and the next..." Neil shook his head. "I thought I'd never feel safe again."

"Shhh," Ben soothed, peppering Neil's face with kisses. "You're alive and you're safe."

Neil nodded and wiped at his eyes. "I know." Neil gestured towards the grandstand. "So are they. Can you see the guilt in their eyes?"

Ben studied the growing crowd for several moments. "Actually, I see sorrow more than guilt with a few happy-to-be-alives sprinkled in."

Neil tried to see what Ben saw. So many familiar faces that he knew had been at the rodeo that day.

"It's good to see you here," Ezra said, pulling Neil away from Ben and into his arms.

Neil looked to make sure Ben wasn't upset by the gesture. Ben smiled, and Neil hugged Ezra back. They'd almost lost Ezra that day as well. Although he still carried guilt for his own survival, he was happy Ezra stood over him, alive.

Ezra pulled back and ruffled Neil's hair. "You staying down here or going up?"

Despite the solid look of the new grandstand, Neil couldn't bring himself to sit up there. "I think I'll stay here outta the way."

Ezra gave Neil's shoulder an understanding squeeze. "We both know you wouldn't be in the way, but you do what you need to do. The important thing is you're here."

Wyn stepped up and gave Neil a quick hug before heading up the steps to find a seat.

"You okay?" Ben asked, wrapping an arm around Neil's waist.

"You don't mind if we stay down here, do you?" Right or wrong, he couldn't bring himself to join his friends. He caught several people he knew watching him. Did they worry he'd break down, like he had that day?

"Not at all."

Neil pointed towards an area even further removed from the traffic flow. "Let's stand over there."

On the opposite side of the grandstand was a niche, tailor made for Neil. Using Ben and his cane for support, he walked over, out of eyesight of the majority of the quickly growing crowd.

Ben kissed Neil's forehead. "Will you be okay here by yourself for a minute?"

Neil nodded, figuring Ben had to use the restroom. "I'm okay now."

It wasn't until Ben walked off that Neil noticed the large cloth-draped scoreboard on the opposite side of the arena. It probably had the names of the four who had died, a constant reminder of the tragedy.

He heard the crowd applaud and noticed a small group of men file onto the makeshift stage in the centre of the arena.

"Here, baby," Ben said, unfolding a metal chair.

Neil shook his head. "You first. I'll sit in your lap."

Ben nodded and settled on the chair, pulling Neil into his lap. Neil rested against Ben's chest and watched as Nate stepped up to the microphone.

"For those of you who don't know me, I'm Nate Gills, proud mayor of Cattle Valley. I think it is appropriate that we start the day with a prayer. Please stand and give your attention to Reverend Casey Sharp."

Neil stood, along with the crowd. He felt Ben's comforting hand on the small of his back.

Nate stepped back and Reverend Sharp took his place at the podium. "Let us all bow our heads."

Neil had never been particularly religious, but he bowed his head as Casey began.

"Our dear Heavenly Father, help us..."

That was as far as Neil got before his mind began to wander. Before the collapse he'd naively thought the worst moments of his life had already occurred. The childhood abuse, the murder of his mother, and the most devastating of all, the day Ben pushed him out the door and out of his life. But the events a year earlier made him realise just how little control he had. His life wasn't in his hands at all. Sure he could move on from the abuse, the murder and the loss of the one person who meant everything to him, but he had no say in whether he lived or died.

A moment, any moment could change everything. Why had Gavin's side of the grandstand collapsed and not his? Why was Gavin dead, but the woman sitting next to him barely bruised?

Neil knew they were questions that could never be answered. Why? Because despite what everyone thought, they were not in control. Neil chanced a glance over his shoulder at Ben. His lover thrived on being in control. Neil wondered how Ben would have reacted if they'd been sitting together in the stands a year earlier. Would Ben's control have suffered?

Ben's hand moved to wrap around his waist, pulling him more securely against Ben's broad chest.

Neil sighed. *No*. Ben would've fought even harder to prove he was worthy of leading. It was the kind of man he was.

Neil knew the kind of lifestyle Ben hung his hopes on was an illusion. It took as much strength to follow as it did to lead, both demanded absolute trust. The label Ben had given the lifestyle his parents had raised him in was simplistic. It didn't speak of the people involved as individuals, but lumped them into two categories. Neil wasn't a category. The experiences he'd lived through had made him who he was, a man who was often scared of the unknown but seldom depressed over it.

His relationship with Ben grew stronger each day. They continued to disagree on certain things, but Neil had learned over time to pick his battles. Whether or not to keep a stick of butter on the table or in the fridge wasn't something he had the conviction to fight about.

He didn't blame Ben for his ideals. Hell, some of them he even agreed with. Sex with Ben was fantastic no matter what label was put on it. Neil did what felt right and worshipping his lover in every way imaginable made them both happy.

Ben had made the decision to sell his home in Rapid City without consulting Neil first. Although some people might get angry at the exclusion, Neil didn't let it bother him. The important thing was to be with Ben in Cattle Valley. Whatever Ben felt he needed to do to make that happen was fine with Neil. Why discuss something when it was known they were both after the same result. Neil trusted Ben. If he didn't, he wouldn't be standing in his arms.

"Amen." The crowd answered to the prayer, bringing Neil back to the activity onstage.

Ben kissed Neil's shoulder. "You okay?"

Neil nodded. He looked up, scanning the crowd. There were couples jostling wiggling children, men and women wiping tears and those, like him, who still felt the guilt of survival. Yes, it had been a year since their lives had been forever changed, but Neil had a strong feeling the rebuilding would take more than a new arena, something, oddly enough, echoed by Nate as he began to speak.

"Cattle Valley lost more than Jim Becker, Gavin Lively, Rick Buchanon and Earl Graves a year ago. We lost our innocence as a community and as individuals. There isn't a single person in this arena that hasn't been changed in one way or another due to the tragedy. For some of us it has been a year of rebuilding, for others, a year of reflection, but for all of us, it has been a year of getting up each day and figuring out a way to go on. We owe it to the men who lost their lives to make the most out of the gift we have been given."

With his voice thick with emotion, Nate stopped and wiped his eyes with the handkerchief in his hand. "We have a state-of-the-art arena thanks to some very generous sponsors and the giving folks of our community, but we must never forget who we were before the collapse and who we are today. With that in mind..." Nate gestured to the scoreboard as the covering was pulled down. "I thought it fitting to preserve some of the innocence of the way we were."

Neil's tears flowed freely as he stared at the same scoreboard that had always been there. Absolutely nothing had changed on the aging piece of equipment. Maybe in a few years, the scoreboard would get a fresh coat of paint. But for now, Neil embraced every chip, and every burnt out light bulb.

In that moment, he realised Cattle Valley didn't need Gavin's name gracing the arena in two foot high letters. His name, as well as the man he was, would forever be remembered in the hearts of those who called Cattle Valley home.

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

Email: carol@carol-lynne.net

Carol loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

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Cattle Valley: Bent-Not Broken
Cattle Valley: Arm Candy
Cattle Valley: Recipe for Love
Cattle Valley: Firehouse Heat
Karaoke at the Tumbleweed
Legend Anthology: Healing Doctor Ryan

Joey's First Time
Between Two Lovers
Corporate Passion
Poker Night: Texas Hold Em
Poker Night: Slow-Play
Poker Night: Different Suits
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