

FINAL ENCORE

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CHAPTER 1

BILLY EAGAN left New Orleans for Nashville with a dream and a few thousand dollars in his pocket. He was born and raised in the Big Easy and was the first in his family to leave the city and his loved ones behind. New Orleans is a town rich in history and tradition; she forces you to love her, and most never leave her embrace, but Billy had bigger-than-average dreams and he wasn't about to stay put and live the simple life, no matter how he loved his family and his home.

His middle-class upbringing had taught him to work for everything he wanted, but his parents had taught him to dream, dream big and never give up on those dreams. He understood and was saddened because he felt sure their encouragement was the result of the dreams they had given up on to raise their family.

Billy's father worked long hours and wasn't around much in the early years, and because of that, they'd never really bonded like most fathers and sons do. As Billy reached his teens, his father's work schedule lessened, and wanting to find something that he and Billy could do together, he picked up a hobby of raising quarter horses. They soon discovered a mutual love of horses which became the

catalyst for what would become a very close relationship. Up until the time Billy seriously began pursuing his music career, they spent every afternoon riding and practicing, and together they competed on weekends at the surrounding area rodeos.

His mother, on the other hand, was a stay-at-home mom with a great love of music who chose a career of looking after her family over her own ambitions. From very early on, Billy's musical abilities were encouraged and nurtured by days of "helping" his mother with chores set to music. In the years after his older sister started school and before his younger sister was born, he had his mother all to himself from eight in the morning until three in the afternoon. They never watched daytime television but spent their days listening to such musical greats as Dinah Washington, Etta James, Percy Sledge, BJ Thomas, Timi Yuro, Tammy Wynette, Brenda Lee, and George Jones. Eventually it was his turn to start school, which was a disaster for the first few weeks. He went each day, kicking and screaming, but really longed for the days of riding on the back of a canister vacuum cleaner while he and his mother sang "When a Man Loves a Woman." Those days bonded his love of music to his soul.

In his adolescent years, Billy had always felt somehow different and of course didn't understand why. When he hit puberty and discovered his attraction to men, the pieces of the puzzle started to come together. At first he didn't understand it, but he instinctively felt it was wrong. So he fought to keep the feelings hidden and hoped that if he ignored them long enough, they'd go away. But they didn't, and although his family was very close and always around him, he felt mostly alone.

In the eighth grade he'd tried out for a singing part in the

school's rendition of *Beach Blanket Bingo* and, much to his surprise, got the lead. From that point forward, the quiet and shy little kid became an outgoing and funny young adult. He auditioned for every musical at all the local playhouses and, because of his great singing voice, got the male lead virtually every time. In his heart, he was sure that singing and performing was what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

In his senior year of high school, he taught himself to play guitar and formed a small band. In the beginning, his band played mostly school functions, but after graduation, they started playing local clubs and weddings and began to build up quite a reputation. It was at one of their wedding gigs that he met the first woman he would seriously date. She was fun and attractive and came from a fairly prominent New Orleans family. Still repressing his feelings and attempting to satisfy a desire to be normal and fit in with society, he married her.

Unfortunately, she didn't share his love of music. Soon after they married, she decided that she didn't want him in clubs night after night chasing a pipe dream and God only knows what else and demanded that he give up the music business. So in the end, he did what his parents had always taught him never to do and put his dreams aside for the sake of his marriage.

Six long months of Billy trying to change the person he was to become what she wanted him to be took its toll on both of them and ultimately the marriage. They both realized that although they loved each other, they'd never really been in love, and they called it quits. One year later, the divorce was final, and Billy was free to give his dreams another shot. Being very naïve and still in denial, he attributed the divorce to youth and failed expectations, but deep down, he

knew it was much more.

As he matured and became more comfortable in his skin, he faced what he'd known most of his life, dealt with those feelings, and embraced his homosexuality. He eventually told his family, and much to his surprise, they were not as shocked as he had expected them to be. Their only sadness was because they knew he would have to learn firsthand about hatred and persecution. With time everyone adjusted except his father. Although Billy's father never stopped loving him, Billy felt a new emptiness in their relationship that affected him greatly, mostly because he'd never really felt he had earned his father's respect, and above all, he wanted and needed it.

Now that he'd faced his demons and was rebuilding his life, Billy was again focusing on his dreams. He'd slowly made his way back into the local music scene as a solo act. After several years of playing the Crescent City, nothing was really happening for him, so he made the decision to move to Nashville and give it all he had.

On the morning he left, his family was there to send him off. He started his car and rolled down the window for a final goodbye. His mother kissed him, and his father shook his hand and said, "I'm proud of you, son. You're leaving everything you know behind and making a new life for yourself, and that takes real guts." Billy thought back to the many things he had done to hear his father say those words, but he'd never realized that actually leaving his family behind to chase his dreams would be the thing that made his father the most proud. He left with a sense of comfort that warmed him to the core.

CHAPTER 2

BILLY'S drive from New Orleans to Nashville was long and uneventful. The uninterrupted hours of interstate, with country radio stations fading in and out, gave him a great deal of time to plan a strategy, at least a short-term strategy. The first day he arrived he would find a hotel, look for a day job to help with expenses, and then look for a more suitable place to live.

As the first few days passed, he missed his family terribly but was nonetheless energized with the infinite possibilities of the unknown. Nashville was his new home, and for as long as it would have him, he was happy to be there. The first week, as planned, he searched the want ads for a position that would sustain him financially. He answered several ads and, within a few days, had a great lead. The position was for a foreman at a large horse farm in Mount Juliet, just outside of Nashville, called the Lazy H Ranch. He set up an appointment to meet the owner at ten o'clock the next morning. It wasn't his dream job, of course, but it would pay the bills until he found something in the music business.

When Billy turned in under the large iron arch etched with "The

Lazy H Ranch,” he looked down at his watch to confirm he was right on time, nine forty-five. Billy drove down the dust-covered road, and after a half mile or so, he saw two large barns on either side of the drive with what looked like an old farm house that he assumed was used for command central. When he got out of his truck, he was looked over, more than greeted, by a rough and unfriendly looking sort. The man was short and stocky, carrying about thirty extra pounds on his frame. His skin was scarred from years of acne, and his teeth were stained from what appeared to be chewing tobacco, as indicated by the Styrofoam cup he spit into. Hoping this wasn’t the owner, Billy introduced himself and learned the man was a ranch hand named Buck Stevens. Buck directed him to wait near the east barn and someone would be with him shortly.

Billy waited around for about forty-five minutes, and no one approached him. He was about to go back and remind Buck that he was still waiting when he saw a tall, ruggedly handsome man walking in his direction. The man, who reminded him of an older version of the Marlboro Man from the old cigarette commercials, walked up and offered his hand.

“Hi, I’m Jules James. I’m the owner of the ranch. Are you William Eagan, by any chance?”

“Yes, sir, but I go by Billy.”

The two shook hands and looked each other over for a few seconds before Jules broke the silence. “I had just about given up on you, son. I thought your interview was at ten o’clock.”

“It was, sir,” Billy replied. “I arrived at nine forty-five, and Buck told me to wait at the east barn and someone would be with me in a minute. I was just about to go back and see Buck when I saw

you walking over.”

“That’s funny,” Jules said. “I told Buck to have you meet me at the west barn. I have a mare about to foal and I want to be there in case there are any problems.”

“I’m sorry about the confusion, sir,” Billy said. “Would you like me to come back?”

“No problem,” Jules answered. “Why don’t you walk with me to the west barn and we can have a chat along the way.”

“Yes, sir,” Billy said, and the two men headed to the stables.

On the short walk, Billy filled Jules in on his experience with horses and why he was in Nashville. Jules, of course, had heard the same story many times before but listened intently and offered words of encouragement.

They soon reached the stall housing the expectant mother. The mare was lying on her side, and as they watched her tense up every few minutes, it was apparent she still had some time before she’d deliver. Billy thought she looked a bit distressed but held his tongue and tried to get a better gauge on the situation. As they examined the mare more closely, Jules continued to tell Billy about the ranch operations and the job he had available. After the examination, Billy was sure something was wrong. More convinced now, he mentioned it to Jules.

“Good call,” the ranch owner said. “I was just about to tell you I’m certain the foal is breached.”

Billy spent the next several hours helping Jules try to get the foal in the right position for a natural birth. Eventually they succeeded, and

by late afternoon the little filly was born healthy.

Once the danger had passed, the two men, impressed with each other's abilities, cleaned up and headed back to the tack room to put the supplies away. As they entered the tack room, Buck was filling up the feed barrels and looked up and eyed Billy.

"Well, Billy," Jules said, "I'm pretty impressed with your knowledge and skill. As far as I'm concerned, I've seen as much as I need to see. If you want the job, it's yours."

Before Billy could speak, Buck turned around with a disgruntled look on his face and stormed out of the tack room, brushing Billy's shoulder in the process.

"Wow," Billy said. "What was that all about?"

"Oh, don't pay him any mind," Jules replied. "He interviewed for the job, but I just don't think he has the skills to be a foreman. He's a little hotheaded for my taste."

"If I take the job, is he going to be a problem for me?" Billy asked.

"Don't you worry, I'll deal with him," Jules said. "Does this mean you'll take the job?"

"Yes, sir," Billy replied, and the two men shook hands.

On the way back to the office, Jules said, "My wife and I own a little club on Broadway, and I'm headed there for a couple of beers, then right back here to check on our little one. You want to join me?"

Billy said, "Sure," and within ten minutes they were on their

way downtown.

When Jules's truck pulled up to Jean's Magnolia Saloon, they got out and headed inside.

As Jules opened the door to the lounge, Billy's eyes struggled to adjust to the dark lighting as he glanced around. It was much larger than it looked from the street, he guessed about the size of a small supermarket. On one side, a large mahogany bar ran the full length of the room. Opposite the bar was a raised stage with a colorful set of drums, an electric keyboard, and various musical instruments on stands. In the center of the room was an expansive oblong dance floor surrounded by split-rail fencing with openings at each end and what looked and smelled like fresh sawdust scattered about. Overstuffed chairs in numerous groupings, along with high cocktail tables and barstools, provided ample and comfortable seating.

Jules immediately led Billy up to the bar and introduced him to a beautifully matured, very well-dressed woman behind the counter pouring beer from a tap. His first thought was that she must be Jules's wife Jean, and his second thought was that she didn't look like she belonged behind a bar. She was tall and slender, about five foot nine and around a hundred and twenty-five pounds, give or take. Her smile was beaming. With her dark brown hair and deep brown eyes; she appeared to be the epitome of joy, strength, and sincerity. Billy had heard the term "ageless" before but had never really understood it. It had nothing to do with how young a person looked, although this woman looked very youthful. It was really about natural style and confidence.

"Hey, hon," Jules said, "this is Billy Eagan. He just joined the Lazy H as our new foreman, but he really wants to be a country

singer. Billy, this is my wife, Jean.”

Jean stuck out her hand, and Billy said, “Pleased to meet you, Mrs. James.”

“Nice to meet you, Billy, and please call me Jean. Welcome to Jean’s Magnolia Saloon. By the way, you any good?”

“Well, ma’am, I’ve been told I am by more than just my family and friends,” Billy replied, “and I sure hope no one’s been pulling my leg.”

Jean smiled. “Monday nights once a month, we have open mic and you’re surely welcome to join us. Many celebrities got their start here. We have a regular crowd of talent scouts that hang around on open mic night just to see if they might just catch the next best thing.”

“When’s the next one?” Billy asked.

“Tomorrow night, but you better show up early because every newcomer dreaming of stardom will be here and ready to go. And the best thing is, the winner gets to be the opening act for the headliner for the month until the next open mic night. We open the mic at ten, but you better get here by eight to sign up. We only have time for ten acts before the regular house band starts. I hope to see you tomorrow,” Jean added as someone down the bar called her name.

“I’ll be here,” Billy said as Jean walked away. “And thanks.”

Jules and Billy sat at the bar enjoying small talk for an hour or so, getting to know one another at a leisurely pace. Jean came and went as business dictated but always came right back and joined the conversation. Finally, after another bartender showed up to relieve

Jean, she landed on the barstool next to Billy.

“So what’s the hot topic you two seem to be so involved in?” Jean asked.

“Oh, we were talking about the ranch,” said Billy. “Jules was telling me you guys live in Lebanon but that he sometimes stays at the ranch when he needs to pull a double, or when they’re expecting a foal, things like that. So how long have you two been married?”

“Forty-nine years now and still going strong,” Jules said as he reached behind Billy and gave Jean a squeeze. “What about you, do you have a girlfriend, son?”

“Uh, no, sir,” he replied.

Jean chimed in, “I don’t mean to assume anything, but do you have a boyfriend?”

“Uh, not at the moment, ma’am,” Billy said with a grin.

Both Jules and Jean smiled, and Billy’s eyes got as big as quarters, and they all broke into laughter. When they were finally able to control themselves, Billy asked, “So how did you know about me? I mean, I try not to spit sequins when I talk.”

As they all chuckled again, Jean said, “Our son is gay, and we’ve been around you sweet boys for over twenty years now. One’s gaydar becomes pretty accurate after so many years.”

“I guess it does,” replied Billy. “So, Jules, how will the boys back at the ranch react when they find out?”

“Oh, no need to worry about those lugs, they’re all harmless. You may take a little ribbing every now and again, but if you pull your

weight they'll respect you and it won't matter none. But I would keep my eye on Buck. As I mentioned, he's somewhat hotheaded, and he already has a chip on his shoulder since he thinks you stole his job."

Billy said, "I can take care of myself, but when Buck's around, I'll sleep with one eye open and a baseball bat under my bed."

The three of them enjoyed the rest of the evening and around midnight began to say their goodbyes. Jules asked Billy if he wouldn't mind taking the pickup back to the ranch and checking on the little filly so he could go home with Jean. She would drop him off in the morning on her way into town.

Billy agreed and drove back at a leisurely pace, taking a mental recap of all that had happened to him since he'd left New Orleans. He eventually made it back to the ranch and, after checking on the mare and filly, hopped back into his truck and headed back to his motel room for the last time. When he got there, he stripped down to his shorts, brushed his teeth, and climbed into his bed. For a long while he lay there and anticipated the next day and night.

THE next morning, Billy drove out to the ranch, and after completing the necessary paperwork required for new employees, he was given a slip of paper that assigned him to the "Palomino" bunkhouse, with a highlighted map directing him to his new home. Fortunately, his new job came with lodging at the ranch, which really helped with expenses. He followed the directions and found his new home, a large, rustic log cabin. He pushed open the screen door and entered.

The open room was lined with three sets of bunk beds on each

side, numbered one through twelve. Between each bunk were double locker-like closets and two small foot lockers, all with corresponding numbers. At the other end of the room were a small kitchen area and a set of doors that he assumed were the entrances to the bathrooms and showers. Seated at the small table in the kitchen were several men Billy assumed were other ranch hands. Also seated at the table was Buck Stevens. Billy introduced himself and nodded in Buck's direction. After chatting with the men, he found out that many of the other ranch hands were also looking for their big break. Some of these guys had been trying to break into the business for many years, and some, like him, had just started their journey. Buck said he wasn't a singer, but his girlfriend was and she was a major up-and-coming star. Most of the guys rolled their eyes and smiled.

Billy also quickly noticed that the more experienced guys seemed worn-down and weary, while the newcomers had the same gleam in their eyes as he did. He was both encouraged and disheartened, but he knew Nashville was full of talented aspiring entertainers and only the best of the best would make it. He found his bunk and unpacked what little he had brought with him.

Reporting to the west barn, he found Jules already visiting with the newest addition to the ranch. They exchanged hellos, and Jules began to give him the ins and outs of his new position. Billy would be in charge of the hands who hosted the trail rides for Nashville tourists. Each day, tour guides led six groups of twelve riders on a breathtaking five-hour tour of Mount Juliet, which is known as the city between the lakes. Midway through the ride, each guide would set up a picnic lunch and then return with his group by three o'clock in the afternoon. Because Billy had six groups to supervise each day, in the beginning, he would take turns accompanying different groups

to familiarize himself with the terrain and to get to know the other guides and their capabilities. Jules went on to explain that each morning there were seventy-two horses to saddle and prepare. He and his staff arrived at seven o'clock, and his day was done no later than five thirty.

Billy was overjoyed to know that this new schedule would give him plenty of time for a quick nap, a shower, and some dinner before he hit the town in search of a gig. On his first day, he stayed around long after everyone had left the barns just to familiarize himself with the tack and the horses in order to get a jump on the next day. When he finally retired, it was nine o'clock in the evening, and he was exhausted. He had grabbed a late sandwich from the mess hall and made his way back to his bunkhouse, showered, and turned in.

When the first light peeked through the windows, Billy could hardly stand the wait. He was up and ready to go before any of the other hands were even stirring. Billy found his way around the small kitchen and made the first pot of coffee. When the pot was brewed, he poured himself a cup and made his way to the west barn.

He was immediately greeted by Jules. "Morning," Jules said. "Sleep okay?"

Billy smiled. "Hardly slept at all, guess I'm too excited about today and... tonight. I'll be just fine, though. Where do you want me to start?"

"This morning, you can start in the tack room," Jules replied. "Every bridle, saddle, and blanket is personalized with the horse's name on it and should be sorted that way. The other hands won't get here for another hour or so, but you can get everything ready to get used to the process. We have only eight riders in each group today,

so it should be a fairly light day.” For a second time, Jules was impressed by Billy’s capabilities and thought, *If he’s as good onstage as he is with the horses, Jean might just have another star on her hands.*

Because it was Billy’s first day, Jules led one of the tours to get him familiar with the trails and showed him where and how to present the lunch. When the rides were over, Billy helped the guides remove the saddles and blankets, replace the bridles with halters, and take the horses, one by one, to the walker for a cool-down period. When they were adequately cooled, the ranch hands released them in the pasture for grazing until it was time to put them in their stalls, feed them, and secure them for the evening. The day went by very fast and without a hitch. By five o’clock, Billy was headed to the bunkhouse to get ready for his big night.

When he arrived at the bunkhouse, some of the other ranch hands, already off duty, were sitting around the large table on the porch having a beer and waiting for dinner. They invited Billy to join in, and he obliged. The first and most important question asked, to the guys at least, was if Billy could cook. One night a week, the mess hall was closed and the hands shared cooking responsibilities in rotation, and they were wondering what kind of grub they could expect when it rolled around to Billy’s turn. Billy assured them that he knew his way around a kitchen, and they seemed relieved.

In a short time, Billy felt pretty comfortable around them. Much to his surprise, someone brought up Buck’s name, and they all had a little to say about the guy. It was general consensus that he was not really liked. The other hands thought he was rough around the edges and pushed his girlfriend very hard and treated her as his meal ticket,

although they didn't think she was that good. After about an hour, Billy excused himself and explained that he was headed to Jean's for open mic night. They all wished him well and said to give Jean their best. A couple of the guys even said they would be there to lend some support. He thought they were more curious than anything, but he knew a familiar face would make him feel a little more at ease.

Billy showered quickly, dried his body, towel-dried his thick black hair, and then wrapped the towel around his waist and headed back to his bunk to dress. He put on his best pair of black Wranglers, an emerald-green silk shirt, his favorite black boots, and his lucky black belt with a large oval-shaped silver buckle he had won at a rodeo back in New Orleans. When he finished dressing, he reached up to the top of his locker and pulled down a box containing his black Stetson with his favorite onyx and rhinestone hat band. He stuck it on his head and stepped back and opened the locker door. Looking at himself in the mirror, he thought he looked his best.

CHAPTER 3

AFTER picking up a burger and a coke at a drive-through and eating it on the way, he pulled into the parking lot at Jean's at exactly seven forty-five. He checked his teeth in the rearview mirror for burger residue, got out of his truck, and nervously started for the entrance.

He was surprised to see the place was already very busy. Scanning the club, he saw Jules was sitting at the far end of the bar talking to Jean. "Evening, folks."

Jules smiled genuinely and said, "Hey, son."

Jean said, "Hey, honey," and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"You ready for tonight?" Jules asked.

"Oh yeah, I'm ready. Chomping at the bit, so to speak."

Jean handed him a clipboard containing a sign-up sheet and a list of cover songs made popular by other artists.

"You better sign up and pick out your song choices so I can pass them along to the house band. You'll need to pick two, because if you're chosen by the crowd as one of the top three performers,

you'll do a second song."

Before he chose his songs, Billy took a quick scan of the bar to see who his audience was. To his surprise he saw Buck Stevens sitting with his arm around a fairly attractive older woman with auburn hair and a really big hairdo. *That must be his meal ticket, but who wears their hair like that anymore?* he thought. Turning his attention back to the audience, Billy saw that it consisted mostly of women, so he thought he should choose tender songs to try and establish an immediate connection with the ladies. He signed his name on the clipboard and reviewed the song list. After much thought, for his first song he chose "Moments" by Emerson Drive and for his second song, if he needed it, he chose "Love Me If You Can" by Toby Keith.

With that done, he decided to have a beer while he waited for the show to start. Just as the bartender brought his drink, Jules came over and sat on the empty barstool next to him.

"Are you nervous, son?"

"Not a chance, sir. I was born to do this."

They sat at the bar talking, and promptly at ten o'clock, the lights dimmed and the house band took the stage.

Jean walked up on stage and welcomed everyone to open mic night. Shortly after she introduced the first act, Billy started to get butterflies. Not because he didn't think he was good enough to compete, but because he hadn't sung with this band before, and singing with a band for the first time could be a challenge. For that reason, he decided he would stick with the original artist's version of the song and not do any runs or ad-libbing. He also wondered how

many of the other performers had already sung with the band at previous open mic nights, as that could give them a slight edge and really make a difference. Billy forced himself to calm down and focus on the performers to size up his competition.

Before he knew it, Jean was introducing him, and he was about to take the stage at Jean's Magnolia Saloon. Jean said, "Ladies and gentlemen, for the first time at Jean's, please welcome Billy Eagan."

Billy walked onto the stage, placed a barstool from the back corner at center stage, took a seat, and adjusted the microphone stand. He nodded to the band as a signal that he was ready when they were. As the band played the intro, he waited and then began to sing.

The song was about a down-and-out man attempting suicide by jumping off a bridge and being rescued by a homeless person. He knew the song would touch some hearts. It had great range, a good story, and more importantly, something people could identify with. He figured at one time or another most people, even if it was just a fleeting thought, fantasized about ending it all. He knew it wasn't an upbeat song, but it showed off his vocal range, and besides, all of the performers before him had done songs like Garth Brooks's "Friends in Low Places" and George Strait's "They Call Me the Fireman" as if it were karaoke night at the local bowling alley. This was his chance to stand out. It was a make-it-or-break-it song. As he reached the first chorus, he looked around the room, and he knew in his heart that he had captured everyone with the song. From that point he didn't second-guess his song choice; he just sang.

When he finished, the audience jumped to their feet and went wild. Billy was blown away and didn't quite know what to do. As he

looked over at the bar, he saw Jules and Jean, eyes wide with amazement and clapping like there was no tomorrow. As Billy exited the stage and made room for the next performer, the crowd called for more, but he just removed his hat, bowed, smiled, and walked offstage, knowing in his heart that he would have another chance to sing for them.

When he exited the stage, Billy nervously headed over to join Jules and Jean at the bar to watch the rest of the performances. When he reached them, he received a big hug from Jean as she said, “No one was pulling your leg, honey, great job!” He got a warm handshake and accolades from Jules as well as a few people standing at the bar.

He ordered a beer, took a seat, and watched the rest of the acts, sizing up the competition. When just about everyone had sung, he went over all the acts in his head. In his opinion, there were only a couple as good or better than he was.

The first of the two was an attractive dark-haired lady named Melanie Dodge. Melanie had a Gretchen Wilson look and a similar sound as well. He thought she would be tough to beat. The other contender was a short redheaded guy named Greg Ryan, whom he dubbed Opie, because he reminded Billy of Opie Taylor, the little boy Ron Howard played on *The Andy Griffith Show*. His size and looks were deceiving, because when he opened his mouth to sing, out came a deep, sweet, soulful sound that was as good as Billy’s, if not better. As he continued to size up his competition, the sound of applause snapped him out of his concentration.

Jules leaned over and said, “Just one more act to go, son, and if she’s any good, it’s going to be a close call.” The last performer was

Buck's girlfriend, who looked to be in her late forties with auburn hair, hazel eyes, and a pretty good body for her age. *However old she is*, he thought, *she's in great shape*. Jean walked onstage and stood in front of the microphone. "One more entertainer to go," she said. "I'm sure you all recognize this little lady. Please welcome back to the stage Ms. Tina Roth."

As the intro to her song began, Billy knew immediately that she was singing Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man." He looked around as if everyone could read his mind, blushed a little, and secretly thought, *Man, I hope she can't sing*. He was immediately relieved as Tina, somewhere between a twang and a howl, began, "Sometimes it's hard to be a wo-man."

He and Jules looked at each other with sly smiles, and Billy took a deep breath. He felt fairly certain he was in the top three. When Tina finished, everyone politely clapped, and a few of the guys whistled while she took her bow. All that was left now was to determine, by a round of applause, who were the top three.

As Jean took the stage again, she asked all the performers to join her. One by one, they walked up and fell in line. She called their names, and each one stepped forward. By audience applause, she would determine who would be the winners of round one, get to do a second song, and ultimately win the competition.

Just as Billy had previously thought, when it was Melanie's and Greg's turn, they received thunderous rounds of applause. There were only four of them left. The next two performers received polite but minimal applause, and then Billy heard his name. He stepped forward and received the same thunderous applause as the other two, plus the extra bonus of a few ladies jumping up and down in the front

row. Needless to say, he was happy with the outcome. Only one more to go, and it was Buck's girlfriend, so he thought he had a pretty good chance. Just as he thought, she received the same polite applause as the two acts before him. He was in round two, and he couldn't be happier. As Tina walked off the stage, he saw Buck grab her by the arm and lead her to the restroom area. He could hear Buck's raised voice from the stage.

Billy ordered another beer and bought a round for Jules and Jean while the house band played a set before the final three performers did their last songs. The two other newcomers were very good, and as he sipped on his beer, he thought it could go either way. He chatted with Jules and Jean about the competition, and then the band finished their set, the dance floor cleared, and the house lights came up. Again, Jean took the stage. As she was about to speak, Buck rushed by with his meal ticket in tow and again, deliberately and more closely this time, brushed Billy's shoulder and glared at him as he passed by. Billy shook it off but thought, that guy might be trouble.

Jean again thanked everyone for coming and promised them three more great performances. She welcomed all three finalists back to the stage and greeted each one with a hug while the crowd went wild.

After the three took additional bows, they were lined up onstage. Jean held out her hand, already made into a fist with three even straws protruding from the top and the bottom of the straws concealed. She explained that each finalist would choose a straw and the shortest straw would take the stage first, the next longest second, and finally the longest straw would go on last.

As each performer took a straw from Jean's hand, they

determined that Greg was up first, Billy next, and then Melanie. Billy was a little disappointed, as he really wanted the last spot, but was thankful he wasn't up first.

Billy and Melanie left the stage while Greg chatted with the band and Jean prepared to introduce his second song. Jean tapped the mic with her finger to make sure it was live and said, "Singing Garth Brooks's 'If Tomorrow Never Comes', let's hear it for Mr. Greg Ryan."

As Greg started singing, Billy thought it was going to be tough to beat him. Although his voice was very good, Billy saw that he wasn't connecting with the crowd as well as he had in the first song, and he hoped that would go in Billy's favor. When Greg was done, the crowd sprang to their feet for a standing ovation that lasted at least thirty seconds.

Billy was up next, and his heart was pounding so hard, he thought it would beat right out of his chest. It took him a minute to calm down, but he told himself this song was no different than any other song he had ever sung, although he knew it was.

Jean took the stage and thanked Greg for a great performance and began to introduce Billy. Billy again willed himself to calm down and to connect with the audience and do what he did best: perform.

The last thing he remembered was Jean saying, "Put your hands together for Billy Eagan." The next thing he knew, he was seated in a soft spotlight with a microphone in his hand and the band playing his intro. He looked at the audience, took a deep breath, and as the band reached the bridge, he started to sing. As he relaxed, he became one with the song and felt more in the moment than ever before. When he hit the chorus, the crowd went absolutely wild. At

that moment, he thought he knew how a drug addict must feel. The energy he was receiving from the audience was like a drug, and he wanted it, he needed it, he bathed in it. In a flash, the song was over, and Jean was back onstage. The crowd stayed on their feet for over three minutes; even Jean couldn't calm them down. She was finally able to get the crowd to settle down as she introduced the last performer.

Billy knew firsthand how hard it was to follow an act that affected the crowd in such a way. He had done it many times and didn't envy Melanie, not because he was so good, but because the crowd would not accept anything less than perfection. Jean had told him earlier that Melanie had chosen "Take Me as I Am" by Faith Hill, so he knew she had to nail it to have a shot at winning. Jean again took the stage and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the boards our last performer, Melanie Dodge."

As Melanie took the stage, she was noticeably shaken. When the band finished her intro and she began to sing, "Baby, don't turn out the light," her voice cracked and broke. Melanie stopped and asked the band to start again. She made it through the song, but just barely. The crowd reacted as such, and she left the stage in tears. Billy felt terrible for her, but at the same time he was also relieved to have a little less competition.

The time had come for the winner to be announced. Jean called Billy, Greg, and Melanie to the stage, and they all shook hands, hugged, wished each other luck, and stood at Jean's left. As Jean called out Greg's name, he stepped forward, and the crowd erupted into a thunderous round of applause. When the crowd settled back down, Jean called Melanie's name, and as expected she received

limited but respectful applause. When she called Billy's name and he stepped forward, he thought the roof was going to rise right off the place. Men and women alike were on their feet, waving hats and screaming Billy's name: "*Bil-ly! Bil-ly! Bil-ly!*"

At that moment, Jean, Melanie, Billy, and Greg knew who the winner was. Greg and Melanie again shook Billy's hand and congratulated him one last time as they exited the stage. Jean gave Billy the biggest hug and said with a tear in her eye, "I knew you could do it, honey, congratulations." All Billy could do was smile and bow. When he finally left the stage, Jules was there, this time with a bear-hug and more congratulations as he and Jean walked Billy over to the bar with their arms over his shoulders like proud parents. At that moment Billy was overtaken with emotion, and a tear slid down his cheek, not because he had won, but because he knew his parents would be so proud of him. And he knew they would be happy that he had these wonderful people in his life.

For Billy, the rest of the evening was heaven. He had a few more beers and relived the entire performance over and over again in his head until he finally allowed himself to accept that he was really on the way to living his dream at last. He mentioned to Jean and Jules what had happened with Buck, and they were not surprised. Jean told Billy that Buck's girlfriend was at every open mic night with Buck at her side. "She never wins and most times looks embarrassed, but nonetheless, she's always here. I don't like that Buck Stevens one bit," Jean added to Jules, "and I wish you would fire him at the ranch."

"That wouldn't make him stop pushing Tina to sing here every month," Jules replied.

“Well, maybe he would leave town in search of a new job and leave that poor girl alone,” Jean said.

“Billy, you keep your eyes and ears open and let me know if anything out of the ordinary happens,” Jules asked, and Billy agreed.

The next few afternoons, when Billy got back from the trail rides, Jules helped take care of the horses so Billy could meet with the band at Jean’s, choose a list of songs to sing with them for the next month, and get some rehearsal time in before the bar opened. Billy knew he had to work hard if he was going to make it. A month was a long time, and he hoped like hell that it was enough time to be discovered.

CHAPTER 4

IAN DILLON was just finishing dinner at Millie's Pub, which had become a favorite of his, and was headed to a late recording session to complete a demo for a new artist he'd recently discovered, when his cell phone rang. He flipped open the phone. "This is Ian."

"Ian, hi, honey, it's Jean."

"Hey, what's up, doll?"

"Listen, when you get a chance, it would probably be worth it for you to stop in and check out this new kid that won the open mic contest this week. His name is Billy Eagan, and he's something else. The kid's got it all—looks, charisma, and most of all, talent. I think you two would hit it off. The response from the ladies has been overwhelming, and the guys even seem to like him. You know guys, they especially like anyone who can get their ladies turned on," Jean said with the hint of a chuckle.

Ian laughed. "Yeah, I imagine so. I'm leaving Millie's, and I've got about an hour or so to kill, so I'll see you in a few."

Billy was settling into his new gig very well. This was his third night opening for Capitol Nashville recording artists Jed Strong & the Renegades, and although Jed hadn't said anything, Billy could tell that he wasn't very happy with the response Billy was getting from the crowds. He imagined it was getting harder to follow his act, but there was nothing he could do about it but be sensitive to it and try not to rub it in.

He stepped up to the bar to get a bottle of water to take on stage with him and saw Jean at the other end of the bar on the telephone. He waved at her, and she returned the gesture while continuing her conversation. The house band was just starting their warm-up set, so he had about forty-five minutes to go before he took the stage.

He was just about to go backstage to wait until showtime when he saw a couple of the guys from the ranch walk in. He made his way through the crowd, being stopped a time or two, shaking hands and smiling, as if he was running for office. He didn't quite understand people's sudden interest in him, but he thought that it would probably fade by the end of his month-long gig.

When he reached the guys, they all exchanged greetings, ordered beers, and shot the bull for thirty minutes or so. It was almost showtime, so Billy said his farewells and headed backstage to freshen up. He turned away from the bar and noticed Jean hugging a gorgeous blond-haired man who had just walked in the door. He felt a twinge of jealousy, not sure if it was because Jean got to hug this gorgeous man or because she seemed to be quite fond of him. He kept walking but made a mental note to ask her who the man was.

Ian had arrived just minutes before Jean saw him. She was

about to make a beeline in his direction, but he saw someone he knew and stopped to chat. As she watched him carrying on his conversation, her memories turned back to the first time Ian had walked through those very doors some eight years ago.

Ian had walked into the bar looking very lonely and broken. He'd just arrived in town and knew no one, so Jean had reached out to him, and they'd talked for several hours while she'd tended bar. After much conversation, she'd realized that he was a nice young man who'd had some really bad breaks, and she'd taken a liking to him. A bartender had quit that very day, leaving Jean in desperate need of help, and Ian was in desperate need of a job, so it worked out perfectly. Jean had offered Ian the studio apartment over the bar as lodgings, which he'd gratefully accepted.

The very next day, Ian had moved in and started working. It hadn't taken him long, Jean remembered, to get comfortable with the rhythm of the bar business. He'd begun bartending in the late afternoons when the saloon was just opening, which helped him get familiar with the layout and learn to mix the drinks and run the register. He'd also done some bouncing on Friday and Saturday nights, but he'd told her that the part of the job he liked most was working with the performers, getting them set up and ready for rehearsals and doing sound and lighting checks.

Jean quickly noticed that Ian had a knack for knowing who would be a hit and who wouldn't, and it wasn't long before she'd had him involved with the previewing, hiring, and scheduling of new talent. Everything worked out perfectly, and with each day, she'd seen a little of the weight he'd been carrying melt away.

Every night, she'd taken special care to introduce him to all of

her friends, regulars, and business contacts. And in no time at all, Ian had made quite a name for himself as her right hand. One night, she'd introduced him to Josh Randal, a talent scout for Capitol Records, Nashville.

The two men had hit it off right away and had talked for over an hour. Jean had listened as Ian described to Josh all the solo artists and groups he had auditioned over the last couple of months. With painstaking detail, he'd described to Josh who he thought was going to make it and who wasn't and, in his opinion, why. Later, in private, Josh had told Jean that he'd just been promoted and Capitol was looking for a replacement scout. He'd been impressed by Ian's insights, and even though he wasn't in the music business, Josh thought that gave him a fresh approach to new talent. It would be a hard sell to the record label, but Josh had thought it was worth the fight. She remembered how excited Ian had been when she'd told him what she and Josh had discussed.

After many long conversations with Ian and several meetings with the label, Josh had formally offered Ian the job. He'd accepted the position with a great deal of excitement, and Jean was so happy for him, but at the same time, she'd had a heavy heart at the realization that he would no longer be working for her. She'd known that she and Ian would always be friends, but things would never be the same as they were when he'd lived there at the saloon and worked for her. They'd become very close, and she was, in a way, his surrogate mother. She'd been thrilled when Ian had asked if he could continue living in the studio until he found another place to live, as this living arrangement would guarantee that they would see each other often.

Jean was snapped out of her thoughts as Ian walked up and greeted her with a big hug and a kiss. "Sure is good to see you, honey. How've you been?" she asked.

Ian shrugged. "Pretty good, doll, no complaints. You look younger every time I see you."

"Oh, Ian, you're only saying that 'cause it's true," Jean replied with a smile. "Are you making time for any fun, Ian?"

Of course she knew the answer was no, but she kept encouraging Ian to put himself out there.

"No, ma'am," Ian responded. "No time, too much work to do."

"Now, Ian," Jean said as she walked him over to her private table and gestured over her shoulder to the bartender to get him whatever he wanted to drink on the house. "I've got a call on hold in the office, but when I get off the phone, we're going to talk about this some more." Ian smiled and nodded, because he knew when Jean had something to say, there was no way out of it.

He took a seat and ordered a beer from the waitress and then sat back and waited for the show to start. Jean's table was on the back wall on the highest level and was the perfect spot to watch the audience and the stage.

As Ian sat there waiting for the newcomer to take the stage, he thought, as he always did when he visited Jean, how much things had changed since he'd first wandered into Jean's Magnolia Saloon all those years ago.

He'd just turned twenty-one and was running as far away from

South Carolina as he could get. He remembered watching Greenville disappear in his rearview mirror through teary green eyes as he made his way out of town. So many emotions were overwhelming him: anger, love, resentment, but mostly betrayal. Those were the emotions he knew he would forever associate with being in love. He'd silently vowed never to expose himself to the possibility of such pain again.

He'd looked for the closest route out of town, and when he'd seen the entrance ramp to Interstate 26, he'd taken it and headed north. He needed to be as far away from his repulsive parents and the memories of South Carolina as his truck would carry him. But mostly, he needed to be away from Todd Slocum, the love of his life, the man who had broken him so badly, he would never be fixed again. He'd had no idea how he was going to deal with the blinding pain he'd felt at the hand of the man who had vowed to care for and love him forever.

He'd driven most of the night. Thirsty and in need of a bathroom break, he'd searched for an exit. As he was approaching the next off ramp, a sign read "Interstate 40 West, Knoxville, Two Miles." Shortly after he merged onto I-40, he saw a billboard that said, "Visit the Grand Ole Opry," and he knew he was going to Nashville.

When he'd reached the Nashville skyline, he'd gotten a room at a cheap, dirty motel and left in search of a quiet place to eat and hopefully to decide what his next move would be. He'd found a greasy diner and picked the first thing on the menu. When his food had come, he'd eaten more out of necessity than desire and paid the check and left.

He remembered climbing into his truck and being overtaken by emotion. Folding his arms on the steering wheel, he'd laid his head down on his arms; the memories of recent events had seemed to rush at him with more force than ever. It had taken everything he had to push his thoughts away as more tears slid out of his closed eyes and ran down his cheeks. At that moment, his mind and heart had been so full he couldn't have begun to make any long-term plans. He'd lifted his head, opened his eyes, and wiped the tears from his cheeks. Through tear-stained eyes, the neon lights of Broadway seemed to have an eerie glow that had held his gaze. At that moment he'd decided he would stay in Nashville for a day or two, and when his mind was clearer and he felt more rested, he would come up with a game plan.

Out of the corner of his eye, he'd noticed a flashing neon sign in the next block with a large shape that seemed to be a flower of some sort. Straining his eyes, he'd barely made out the writing: Jean's Magnolia Saloon. He'd pulled his truck onto 2nd Avenue, turned left, and pulled into the parking lot. When he'd opened the door to the lounge, he was immediately hit with the scent of alcohol, sawdust, smoke, and the sound of Tim McGraw singing "Live Like You Were Dying."

Jean laid a hand on his arm and whispered his name.

Startled, Ian said, "Yeah?"

"You seemed to be a million miles away, honey. Are you okay?"

"I was just thinking about the first time I walked through these doors. You and Jules were my first real friends in Nashville, and I

owe you so much. You gave me a roof over my head and a job—not just a job, but in the end, a career that I love. A great many wonderful things have happened to me since that first night, and every time I walk through your front doors, I’m reminded of how lucky I am to have you both in my life. It seemed, at the time, that I had lost everything, but in reality, I’d found everything.”

“You are a good, honest man, a hard worker, and a hell of a son,” Jean said.

Although Jean and Jules had always treated him like a son, they had never really referred to him that way. Ian suddenly filled up with emotion, took Jean by the hand, and squeezed it tight. “I love you.”

Jean squeezed back and said, “I love you too, Ian. Now, enough trips down memory lane. I’ve got a man for you to turn into a star.”

“So tell me about this kid’s first three nights.”

“I haven’t seen the entire package in a long time, honey. In my humble opinion, this type of talent doesn’t come along very often.”

“I’ve never known your opinion to ever be humble,” Ian said with a chuckle.

“It’s so different now,” Jean replied. “The music business is not about the talent anymore, it’s mostly about the marketability. The labels want to make money and make it fast. With all the studio capabilities these days, you can make a pig sound like Patsy Cline. I feel terrible for the young people who sound great in the studio and on records but sound terrible in a live concert. Just for kickers, when was the last time you heard an entertainer sound great at the CMAs? It just breaks my heart. But I digress. Back to Billy.”

“I know what you mean about the talent,” Ian said, “but we’re here to change that. So when do I get to see this guy?”

Ian and Jean were so into their conversation that they didn’t notice the place had filled to capacity and the crowd seemed electrified. The dance floor was packed, and it was standing room only. So Jean stood and said, “Let’s get this show on the road.” Ian watched as Jean stuck her head behind the stage to make sure that Billy and the band were ready. At a nod from Jean, the house lights went down, the spotlight hit Jean, and she began, “Welcome to Jean’s Magnolia Saloon. Tonight we have a very special night for you. In addition to Jed Strong and the Renegades—” The crowd went wild, and Jean waited for them to quiet before she continued, “we have a newcomer. For those of you who weren’t here for open mic night this week, you’ll be blown away by this Cajun boy right out of New Orleans. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mr. Billy Eagan.”

Ian wasn’t sure what he expected, but his heart skipped a beat when he saw Billy take the stage. Billy was tall, inches taller than Ian’s own five-foot-ten-inch frame, and his close-cut coal-black hair, accented by the stage lights, shone like velvet. Ian took note of the long black eyelashes that shaded his deep-set crystal-blue eyes. Below his baby blues was a nose that looked like it was perfectly designed for his masculine face. His lips were full, his jaw was firm and slightly squared, and he was sporting just a hint of a five o’clock shadow. He was carrying a black felt Stetson hat with a rhinestone and black onyx band, wearing a hip-length black leather jacket, revealing a shiny silk shirt tucked into place by a tasteful sterling silver belt buckle big enough to bring attention to his slim yet muscular

frame. Black Wranglers and beautifully polished black Justin Ropers completed the outfit.

When Billy slipped the black Stetson onto his head, Ian could feel the man's charisma as clearly as he could see his strikingly handsome face beneath the hat. His sharp features and tall muscular frame worked perfectly onstage and, as Ian allowed himself to imagine for a minute, offstage as well. *It's been so long since I've felt even a flutter of an attraction to someone. Why now?* Was he just looking at Billy as a potential new artist for Capitol, or was it something else?

Ian hadn't been a saint, of course. In his early years in Nashville, when the pain of Todd had receded a little, and at Jean's encouragement, he'd tried to get back out there. He'd had a one-night stand or two but never even as much as a quick or casual relationship and nothing at all in the last few years. Fear of the slightest connection to anyone left him cold and closed off emotionally. He'd adjusted to the fact that his head would never allow it, or was it his heart? He no longer knew, and he'd given up trying to figure it out a long time ago.

Billy opened with "Find Out Who Your Friends Are" by Tracy Lawrence. As Ian watched Billy and the crowd's reaction, he instantly noticed that in addition to Billy's physical appearance, he had that star quality very seldom seen in today's entertainers. He was able to connect with the audience with an ease that Ian seldom felt from the stage.

Ian was stunned. Billy's voice was strong and easy, his transition from upper to lower registers was as smooth as velvet, and Ian could hear just a hint of R&B in his rich tone. He sang effortlessly,

and the lyrics flowed like a slow, lazy river.

Billy ended his set with the entire house, including Ian, on its feet. The crowd was screaming for more. Billy looked off to the wings and saw Jed nod, so he knew it was okay to do an encore. Billy hadn't rehearsed the song he had in mind with the band, so he wasn't sure if the time was right to do an original song. It was a risk, but he went for it. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for the warm reception. I would really love to end my set with the first song I ever wrote. It's called 'The Love of a Man'. It was inspired by my mother, who always said she wouldn't have had a life without my father's love." Billy reached for his guitar, took the stool at center stage, and the spotlight found him as he hit the first note.

The song was a ballad, and the dance floor soon filled up with couples doing a very slow two-step. Before long, the dancing stopped and the crowd stood there quietly watching, couples holding their dance partners and rocking back and forth with looks of approval and understanding.

Billy hit every note every time and sang the song with an ease that Ian had rarely seen. When the song was over, the crowd again went wild. He had really struck a chord with the ladies, and there wasn't a dry eye in the house. Ian thought about his parents, and a tear slid down his face as well, but for much different reasons. Ian had seen crowds react similarly to various singers, but never at Jean's and never for a guy who had just arrived in Nashville. The room was electric, but besides that, Ian suspected he would never forget that night for far more reasons than he was willing to admit, even to himself.

It was Billy's turn to introduce Jed. "Folks, I've taken up

enough of your time. Let's bring out the guy you really came here to see. Please put your hands together for Capitol Records recording artists Jed Strong and the Renegades." With that, Billy headed offstage and met Jed midway. They shook hands, and Billy continued to exit the stage as Jed thanked Billy and began his set.

When Billy reached the wings, he couldn't believe what had just happened. He felt like he was floating on air. After four nights, they still liked him! Jean was heading his way, and he sure hoped she was equally happy with his performance. In reality, he had no reasons for concern; she was thrilled and told him so. She also said she had someone she wanted him to meet.

"Now Billy, I didn't want to make you nervous, but I invited a very good friend of mine who just happens to be a talent scout for a Nashville record label, and he wants to meet you."

"What? No way!" Billy couldn't believe his ears. "Are you serious? Where is he?"

"He's sitting over in the corner at my table, and he's waiting for you. Take a minute, calm down, and don't be too anxious. He's a great guy, and I think you two will hit it off perfectly. I'll be over shortly."

Billy went to the men's room, freshened up a bit, took a deep breath, and headed into the crowd. He was stopped at least ten times by well wishers with words of encouragement. When he finally made it to Jean's table, he instantly recognized the guy Jean had been hugging at the door earlier.

Ian stood and said, "You're a pretty popular guy right about now."

“Oh, man, I can’t believe it,” Billy replied with a smile.

Ian stuck out his hand and said, “Ian Dillon.”

Billy returned the handshake and said, “Billy Eagan. Nice to meet you.” They looked into each other’s eyes, and all at once Billy saw nothing else. The place was empty except for Ian.

Billy couldn’t let go of Ian’s hand, and Ian didn’t seem to want to let go either. For a brief moment, Billy felt like time stood still. He couldn’t believe the warmth he felt simply by shaking this man’s hand, something he had never experienced with a simple handshake before. Suddenly Billy was aware of Jean speaking.

“I see you two boys have met. Can I get you something to drink?”

Ian said, “No, ma’am, thanks. I’ve already had two beers and I’m driving, so I’ll pass.”

Billy said, “Nothing for me, Jean, I’m still high from the crowd.”

“Then I’ll let you chat and I’ll see you in a little while.”

“I’ll walk you back to the bar. Will you please excuse me for a minute, Ian?” Billy asked as he took Jean’s hand.

Just as they were leaving, Ian kissed Jean’s cheek and said, “I’ll see you in a bit.”

As Billy walked Jean back to the bar, he was grinning from ear to ear.

“What’s with this guy? I shook his hand and all of a sudden I’m seeing stars.”

“Honey, he’s the one seeing a star, and you’re it!” Jean said.

“Is he really a talent scout? How did you meet him? What label is he with? Does he like boys?”

Jean laughed and said, “Yes, he likes boys, but the rest of your questions will have to wait; you better get back over there and charm him before someone else moves in on him.”

“I’m on my way, but I want answers to my questions and soon!” Billy said as he headed back to the table.

Ian watched Billy walk away with Jean and couldn’t believe what had just happened. The guy seemed to be as genuine as he was good-looking and talented, and that was a hard combination to find. He took another glance in Billy’s direction. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had this type of reaction to anyone and was stunned by his admission. *Stop it*, he told himself. *This is a business meeting*. Jean hadn’t really told him anything about Billy except how talented she thought he was. Could he be gay? Surely not, but then he remembered Jean saying that she thought the two of them would hit it off nicely. *What did she mean by that?* Ian told himself it didn’t matter. He was long past the point of ever thinking he could be happy in a relationship. His time for that had passed, and he was happy being alone.

Just as Ian was contemplating how he should handle the situation, Billy walked back and took a seat. “Sorry about that. I’ve only known Jean for a short while, but I feel so damn protective of her, I hate to see her walk across the bar unescorted.”

“Chivalry is not dead,” Ian said with a chuckle.

“Not while I’m still alive,” Billy responded.

“Jean is very lucky to have someone like you looking out for her.”

“Are you kidding? She and Jules are the only real friends I have in Nashville, and I’d do anything for them.”

“I’m thrilled to hear that, Billy. How about adding one more to your short list of friends?”

“I’m sure I can squeeze in one more,” Billy said with a smile. “Who do you have in mind?”

“That’d be me,” Ian said with a grin.

“Jean and Jules have spoken very highly of you, and any friend of theirs is a friend of mine.”

Billy and Ian talked well into the night. Jean came and went, just to make sure her boys were getting along okay. Each time she stopped by their table, they turned all their attention to her, and she loved it.

“Now what have I done in this world to have two such handsome men swooning over me?” she said.

“Just lucky, I guess,” Ian and Billy said simultaneously, as they looked at each other and then at Jean. They all had hearty laughs.

Ian told Billy about his responsibilities at Capitol Records, and how he and Jean had met some eight years ago. Of course Ian didn’t go into any real detail but hit the highlights, and in return Billy shared about his responsibilities at the ranch. Billy talked about his family back in New Orleans a bit. But when it came time for Ian to do the same, he quickly brought the subject back to Billy.

“So, Jean tells me that for the next month, you’ll be opening for Jed. How do you feel about that?”

“Excited and scared at the same time, if that’s possible,” Billy said.

“Of course it is,” Ian replied, “but you’ll get used to it. You’re a natural.”

“Thanks.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll try to get a few of my colleagues out to take a look at your show, and we’ll see where that leads us.”

Billy about slipped out of his chair. “Of course it’s all right, you kidding me?”

“No promises, but I’ll do the best I can.”

“I don’t know how I can ever thank you,” Billy said.

“We’ll come up with something.”

BILLY and Ian continued to talk about the ranch and the music business and everything in between until Jean came over one last time.

“It’s closing time, boys.”

Both of them looked at their watches in amazement, and neither could believe it was so late.

“Where did the time go?” Ian said, shaking his head.

“Not sure, man, but it sure flew by.”

Both men stood up and offered to help Jean close the bar, and as usual, she refused. She positioned herself between them and walked them to the door with a hand on each of their arms.

“I’ll walk Ian to his car and be right back,” Billy said.

“Okay, honey, see you in a minute.”

Billy walked Ian to his SUV and thanked him for taking the time to stop and catch his show.

“Now this is some ride,” Billy said as he admired Ian’s black Cadillac Escalade.

“This old thing?” Ian smiled.

“It’s a thousand times nicer than my old pickup.”

Ian was just about to say how much he’d enjoyed the night when he remembered. “Damn, I was due at a recording session five hours ago, and I totally forgot about it.”

“Oh man, I am so sorry.”

“What are you sorry about? You didn’t hold me hostage. I enjoyed every minute of your show and our time together. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have forgotten about the session. No worries,” Ian said. “I’m sure they tried to reach me, but it was so loud in there, I couldn’t have heard my phone ring. I’ll check my voice mail on the way home. Either way, it won’t be a problem when I tell them I’ve found their next big star.”

“Wow, I like the sound of that,” Billy said.

“I’ll bet you do,” Ian chuckled. “So where were we?”

“Well, let’s see, you were telling me how much you enjoyed the show and were about to ask for my telephone number.”

“Now was I?” Ian said.

“Yep, I remember distinctly.”

“You know, you’re right; I remember now. Besides, I may need to get in touch with you to set up a Capitol meeting or something.”

“A Capitol meeting, huh,” Billy laughed.

“Or something,” Ian said while he was reaching into his truck to grab a note pad from his attaché case.

Ian handed the note pad to Billy, who wrote down his number and handed it back to Ian. He gave Billy a card in return. “In case you need me for anything.”

Billy stuck out his hand, and Ian took it. They held each other’s gaze for what seemed like eternity, neither one wanting to let go. Reluctantly, they released their hold, and Billy said, “Drive safely, and hopefully I’ll see you again very soon.” Ian drove home feeling giddy and lighthearted for the first time in he didn’t know how long.

CHAPTER 5

BILLY watched Ian drive away and headed back inside to get the scoop on Ian from Jean and Jules and see if they'd had anything to do with the events of the evening. When he walked in the front door, the place was empty and the band was gone, the bartenders were busy restocking the bar, and he heard Kitty Wells on the jukebox singing "I Can't Help Wondering." He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned toward the dance floor, spotting Jean and Jules, arms wrapped around each other, dancing the last dance of the night. He turned around so as to not interrupt the tender moment, but Jean saw him and motioned him over to the bar and pointed to a stool. When the song was over, Jules and Jean walked over and sat next to Billy.

"Quite a night," Jules said.

"Okay, spill the beans, you two," Billy insisted.

"What beans?" Jean said with a guilty look.

"You know what beans. Ian Dillon, Capitol Records. How much did you guys have to do with what took place tonight?"

“Well,” Jean said, “I simply called a friend of mine and asked him to stop by and see a new performer, who’s also a friend. That’s what he does for a living, for God’s sake.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to make you nervous and I wasn’t sure tonight was the night. It all just worked out.”

“All I can say is thank you,” Billy said, and he gave them both hugs. “So now that we have that out of the way, tell me about Ian.”

“What do you want to know?” Jules asked.

“Everything.”

Jean looked at Jules and said, “Let me see.”

She told Billy about the night Ian had come into the saloon and how she’d given him a job as a bartender and bouncer, and how he had shown an interest and had a knack for knowing which performers had real potential; how he had worked his way up to selecting and hiring new talent, and finally, how she’d introduced him to Josh Randal and ultimately how he’d gotten the job at Capitol.

“Do you guys ever stop doing good deeds?” Billy asked.

“Oh, Billy,” Jean said, “we just put one and one together and we usually get two.”

Jules finally got a word in edgewise. “So what else do you want to know?”

“For starters,” Billy said, “does he have a boyfriend?”

“Oh my,” Jean said. “You know I don’t tell tales out of church,

but just between us, no.” Billy couldn’t help smiling.

“It’s a good thing, because he just might turn me into a home wrecker.” Jules shook his head, and they all laughed.

“You’ve done so much for me, what can I do for you?” Billy asked.

“For starters,” Jules said, “you can get things started at the ranch tomorrow. I’m taking my little lady home and we’re sleeping in.”

“My pleasure,” said Billy, “but if I’m going to open up shop tomorrow, I’d better get going. I have a full day tomorrow myself.” They exchanged hugs, and Billy headed for the door.

When Billy reached his truck, he noticed a note on his windshield. He grabbed the paper and got in his truck. The note said, “My business card only has my work number on it, so here’s my cell and home, if you need me for anything,” signed with a big “I.” Billy folded the note and put it in his wallet. As he pulled out of the parking lot, he didn’t see the look of disgust on the face of the man lurking in the shadows.

Billy smiled all the way home as he relived the entire night. It was almost four a.m., and he knew he wouldn’t get any sleep, but he couldn’t wait to get to his bunk so he could lie there and think about Ian. When he reached the bunkhouse, all was quiet. The first shift usually woke about five o’clock and it was four twenty-five, so he thought he would start the coffee for the guys before he lay down for an hour or so. Then he took a quick shower before he crawled into his bunk and waited for sunrise.

As the sun crept up over the horizon, Billy watched the daylight

seep into the bunkhouse. He'd pretended to be asleep when the first shift crew had started moving around, as he wasn't ready to talk to anyone. He'd spent the hour and a half thinking about the possibilities in both his professional and his personal life and wasn't ready to let go of the fantasy just yet. When the other men finally headed out, Billy got up and prepared for his day. By the time he reached the stables, the hands were already preparing the horses for the day's ride. After making sure all the horses were ready, he took the golf cart over to the mess hall to pick up the box lunches for the tours. When he returned, the guides took the box lunches they would need and placed them in the saddle bags and then took a break while they waited for the riders to arrive.

The day flew by, and before Billy knew it all the horses had returned and were unsaddled and put out to pasture for an hour or so. While the horses were enjoying a well-deserved break and snack, Billy helped put the tack away and then hopped up on the fence to watch the horses. Glancing at his watch and noticing it was four o'clock, he reached for his wallet and took out the note from Ian, dialing the first number.

After two rings Billy heard, "Ian Dillon."

IAN'S day had passed in a blur. When he'd pulled into his garage the night before, his heart had still been as light as a feather, and he'd realized that since he'd left the saloon, he had been humming "The Love of a Man." After a fast shower, he'd lain in bed, telling himself that Billy had just taken him by surprise and he would get this under

control, all the while wondering if Billy was home yet and tucked into bed thinking about him.

Work started with a breakfast meeting with his boss to tell him about Billy that lasted until almost noon. He had just enough time for a quick bite before heading to the rescheduled recording session he'd missed the night before. By four o'clock he was in his SUV and heading home when his cell phone rang. He looked at his caller ID and smiled. It was Billy. He opened the phone and said, "Ian Dillon."

"Ian, it's Billy Eagan."

"Hey, Billy, how are you?"

"Fine, thanks. How was your night?"

"What was left of it by the time I got home was okay. I slept like a rock. How about you?"

"No sleep for me," Billy said. "By the time I got back to the ranch, I was afraid to go to sleep, figured I might not wake up on time, so I just stayed up. Ian, I know this is a long shot, but do you have plans for tomorrow?"

"I don't think so. I'm driving, but hang on a minute while I pull over and check my schedule," Ian said. He crossed two lanes of traffic and pulled over to a stop in the emergency lane. He brought up his schedule on his iPhone and took a look. "All I have is a breakfast meeting that should be done by nine thirty or so. What do you have in mind?"

"I have the next couple of days off, and I was hoping to see you."

Caution, Ian thought. Don't do it. Before he could stop

himself, he said, "I think that can be arranged." *Damn it, why did I say that?*

"Do you ride?" Billy asked.

"Now, Mr. Eagan, just because I scout for country music's best talent doesn't mean I'm a cowboy."

"Oh, it doesn't matter, we can do anything. I don't care what we do."

"I was just kidding," said Ian. "I do okay in a saddle."

"One of the ranch hands said there are some really great trails up at Bells Bend on the Cumberland River. You feel up for a day ride?"

"Sure," Ian said. "What can I bring?"

"Just you. I'll pack a couple of lunches and we'll be all set."

"Sounds great," said Ian. "Where do you want to meet?"

"Can you meet me at the Lazy H, say around ten o'clock?"

"Sure."

"Perfect, see you then," said Billy.

"I'll look forward to it," Ian replied, while his brain was telling him, "*No. No. No.*"

CHAPTER 6

BILLY was off on Mondays and Tuesdays but always rose early out of habit. He started the coffee, as he often did, and inhaled the rich smell with the anticipation of his first cup. When the coffeemaker beeped, he poured his coffee, took the blanket off his bed, and went out to the front porch. The air was crisp and cool, and wrapped tight in his blanket, he sipped his coffee with the excitement of endless possibilities for the day.

He loved the fall season, and as the sun came up over the horizon, he thanked the heavens for what he thought was going to be a beautiful day. The turning leaves were well on their way to showing off bright colors of gold, red, and orange. As he took in the beautiful scenery, he thought this was the perfect day for the first date he'd had in over two years. He could hardly wait for ten o'clock.

After several cups of coffee, he decided to shower and get dressed so he could get to the stables in plenty of time to be ready. As Billy stood with the hot water running over his body, he thought about what he should wear. He wanted to look his best but not like he'd put forth any effort. After drying off and wrapping the towel

around his waist, he headed for his locker. He settled on a pair of black 501s, a royal blue shirt, his black boots, and his old black Stetson. As he was about to close his locker door, he paused when he caught a glimpse of himself and thought, *It'll have to do.*

He headed down to the stables and chose two of his favorite horses for the day's adventure. For Ian, he chose a chestnut mare named Firefly; she had just the right amount of spunk, but she was very even-tempered as well, since he didn't know how experienced Ian was on horseback. For himself, he chose his favorite; a beautiful buck-skin Arabian named Duke, a horse he had adopted for his own shortly after he'd arrived at the ranch.

After the saddles and tack were loaded into the horse trailer, he took the golf cart up to the mess hall, a trip he could do in his sleep, and fixed two special box lunches. He began with a little cheese and crackers for starters, turkey and cheddar sandwiches with chips as the main course, chocolate chip cookies for dessert, and a couple bottles of water. As he was leaving he grabbed two apples for the horses. On the way back to the stables, he swung by the bunkhouse and picked up a bottle of red wine he had been saving for a special occasion. He couldn't imagine an occasion more special than today.

IT WAS eight fifteen, and Ian discreetly looked down at his watch. He was so ready for this meeting to be over. Mentally, he had checked out thirty minutes earlier, when his presentation was complete and he had gathered all the information he needed. As the clock inched its way to nine thirty, Ian grew more impatient. Finally

the meeting concluded, and because today he couldn't afford to be stopped by anyone, he made a mad dash for the door. Once he reached the parking lot, he knew he was home free.

He got in his SUV, put on his seatbelt, and slid the key into the ignition. As he turned the key, he imagined the car not starting, or even worse, a dead battery. But right on cue, the engine turned over and started to hum. He sighed, put the SUV in drive, and headed to the ranch. He couldn't believe how excited and nervous he was at the same time. He made a quick stop at the liquor store to pick up a six-pack of beer, and within twenty minutes he was approaching the entrance to the Lazy H Ranch.

He had passed under this arch many times with Jean and Jules, but it felt somehow different this time, new, like the first time. The thought hit him hard. He knew it had everything to do with Billy Eagan.

BILLY had finished all the preparation and was just about to load the horses into the trailer when he saw Ian driving down the dirt road toward the stables. His heart immediately fluttered, and butterflies began to dance in his stomach. He calmed himself, rested against the stable wall, crossed his arms over his chest, and waited for the SUV to approach.

When the vehicle came to a stop, Billy stood up straight, took a deep breath, and walked over to meet him. Ian got out of his SUV with the brightest smile Billy had ever seen. As Billy walked his way, he thought how great Ian looked. He was dressed in worn blue jeans,

a western cut white shirt with the first two snaps open, which showed off just enough of what Billy knew was a well-defined chest, and soft brown lace-up Ropers. Just as Ian was about to close the door, he reached in and pulled out a brown suede Stetson. When Ian tipped his hat in Billy's direction, Billy thought he would melt right then and there.

As Ian closed the car door, Billy was there with his hand stuck out.

"Hey, Ian, it's good to see you."

"Hello, Mr. Eagan, you look great."

Billy smiled and said, "You can call me Billy." They both laughed and shook hands with a tight grip.

"We're almost ready. I just need to load the horses into the trailer and we can be on our way."

"Sounds good to me," Ian said as they walked toward the horses. "Which one of these great creatures is mine?"

"That would be Firefly, the chestnut. She's a really sweet girl, and I told her all about you."

Billy was untying Firefly and heading to the trailer when he heard Ian say, "Hey, stud."

He spun around and was just about to say "Yes, sir" when he saw Ian patting Duke on the neck. Billy smiled and turned around quickly in hopes that Ian hadn't seen him.

"Who's this guy?" Ian asked, referring to Billy's horse.

"That would be Duke. He's my favorite, and besides, he's a

little sweet on Firefly, so I thought we would double date.”

“Date? Is this a date?”

Billy immediately felt his heart stop and was about to apologize when he saw the grin on Ian’s face. Being quick on his feet, Billy said, “Oh, it’s a date all right.”

“Good, ’cause I was sort of hoping it was,” Ian said.

“Now that we have that settled,” Billy said, “let’s get these horses loaded and be on our way.”

THEIR route to Bells Bend was incredibly beautiful. It took them up Interstate 40 toward the ridges of the Western Highland Rim and Ashland City. Once they hit the Bells Bend Park Trailhead, they had been on the road for about an hour. During the drive, there was never a lull in conversation. They discussed politics, recent events, and the music business, but as they approached the foothills, all topics took a backseat to the scenery and the breathtaking colors of fall.

After they parked, Billy unloaded the horses and began to saddle and bridle Duke. Ian, with a familiar ease, followed suit and did the same with Firefly. It was very clear to Billy that Ian had spent some time around horses, and he immediately felt more relaxed. They finished preparing the horses almost simultaneously, and Billy reached into the truck and grabbed the two saddle bags he had packed the lunches in earlier that morning. He secured one on the back of each horse, and Ian shoved three beers in each saddle bag as his contribution, and they were about ready to go.

While Billy secured his truck and horse trailer, Ian mounted Firefly. When Billy turned and headed toward Duke, he had to stop a second to admire the beautiful man on horseback. With the last of the morning sun on Ian's back and the fall colors all around him, Billy thought this was a picture he would remember for many years to come. He sensed the strength and ease with which Ian mounted Firefly and realized that his earlier admission of "I do okay in a saddle" was a major understatement. *Could this man be real?*

Ian and Billy rode side by side, talking about the scenery, Nashville, the horses. As the morning passed, they became more comfortable, and the topics transitioned effortlessly from one to another, but it seemed that they both felt too vulnerable to get any more personal.

The trail narrowed as it approached the first crossing of the Cumberland River. At the crossing point, the river was only about two feet deep, and both horses seemed adjusted to the terrain, so Billy took the lead and they crossed without incident. Once over the river, they followed the narrow trail as it climbed to the ridge and widened again as they looked out over the hills of Davidson County. They rode a bit further, admiring the vistas, and came across an overlook with a pavilion surrounded by a split-rail fence. Attached to the roofline of the pavilion was a gutter system that spilled into a half-barrel, supplying ample water for the many horses using the trail.

"Looks like a great place to stop for lunch," Billy said. "What do you think?"

"Sure, I could use a bite," Ian replied, and they both dismounted.

Billy and Ian walked over to the split-rail fence and tied up the

horses so they could drink and cool down after the uphill climb. After they'd had their fill of water and looked pretty content, Billy removed his saddle bag and pulled out the two apples he'd packed earlier that morning. He dug in his pocket for his pocket knife and cut one of the apples in half, handing both halves to Ian. "Firefly's been waiting for this."

He did the same with the other apple and fed each half to Duke, watching as Ian followed his lead. With the horses taken care of, it was their turn. Billy removed a blanket he had rolled and tied to the back of his saddle and turned to Ian. "Follow me." Saddle bag in hand, instead of heading for the pavilion, Billy led Ian to a small clearing slightly off the path that he had spotted when they'd ridden up.

Ian noticed that the cozy clearing Billy had chosen had a slightly different view that overlooked the majesty of the Great Smoky Mountains as well as the foothills to the east. He studied Billy, amazed at the fluidity with which he moved as he spread out the blanket and began to set up a picnic lunch. The man had thought of everything. Ian could see how hard Billy was working to make this day a special one, but little did Billy know, Ian thought, just being here with Billy was special enough.

Ian watched as Billy moved with a purpose, a man who seemed to know exactly what he wanted in life and was very confident that he was going to get it.

"Hey, stud," Ian said with a smile.

Billy didn't turn this time, thinking he wouldn't be caught again. When Ian repeated, "Hey, stud," Billy turned slowly and saw Ian

smiling at him.

"I thought you were talking to Duke," he said.

"Yeah, well, I *was* talking to Duke this morning when *you* turned around, but this time I was really talking to you."

Billy felt his face turning blood-red. He smiled, swallowed hard, and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes you do," Ian said.

"Okay, so you saw me. I really hoped that you hadn't."

"Oh yeah, I saw you, and it took everything I had not to laugh out loud. But I thought it would probably come in handy later in the day, so I kept it to myself." Ian walked up to Billy and gently kissed his cheek. "I thought it was very cute," Ian said. "Let's eat."

Billy and Ian finished setting up the picnic lunch and rested on the blanket side by side. Propped up on one elbow, facing Billy and the amazing view, Ian popped the top on a beer and offered one to Billy. He accepted and in return said, "I also brought along a bottle of wine, if you're interested."

"Let's save the wine for later," Ian replied.

With lunch spread out between them, Ian and Billy sipped their beer as they enjoyed their meal. It was Monday, and Billy hadn't seen any other trucks or horse trailers parked in the lot, so he felt reasonably certain they were up there alone. After they were finished eating, Billy packed what was left of lunch and put it in his saddle bag. With the food between them now gone, Billy slid closer to Ian and impulsively kissed him on the lips, pulled back, smiled, and kissed him again.

Just then Billy heard a noise, like twigs breaking under a shoe or boot.

“What was that?” he said as he turned his head in the direction of the sound.

“What was what?” Ian asked. “I didn’t hear anything.

They were both quiet for thirty seconds or so, but they heard nothing.

Billy broke the silence. “It was probably just the horses.”

He turned to Ian and said, “Now, where were we?”

This time, Ian was the one who leaned in for a sweet, gentle kiss. With his free hand, he reached up and removed Billy’s hat. Ian ran his fingers through Billy’s hair and rested them at the base of Billy’s neck. He pulled Billy closer, dropped his elbow, and rolled over on his back, pulling Billy down with him.

Billy broke the kiss for just enough time to stare into Ian’s eyes with warmth and a need he hadn’t experienced in a very long time. Holding Ian’s stare, Billy went in for a deeper, longer kiss, closing his eyes as his tongue parted Ian’s lips. Ian’s warm welcoming mouth accepted Billy’s tongue, and they began teasing and tormenting each other while they lay stretched out on a blanket in the late October sunshine.

When they came up for air, Ian said, “You sure do know how to kiss a man, cowboy.”

“Much obliged, sir,” Billy replied.

They both laughed, and Billy gave Ian another peck on the lips

and glanced at his watch.

“Wow, it’s three o’clock already. Ian, you need to know I could stay like this forever, man. In fact, I wish I’d packed a pup tent and supplies for a stay-over, but since my stupidity prevailed, we probably need to start thinking about heading back. It’ll take us a couple of hours to get down to the parking lot and another hour or so, with rush-hour traffic, to drive back to the ranch. That will get us back around six o’clock or six thirty.”

Ian made a sour face. “All right, all right, let’s go.” He gave Billy another kiss and shot to his feet. “Come on, time’s a-wasting, cowboy.”

They made good time on their way down the trail. When they reached the river, Billy took the lead again. Just as he was reaching the other side, he turned to make sure Ian was behind him. Ian and Firefly started to cross the river, but midway through, Firefly reared up as something hit her on the rump, and an unprepared Ian flew off her back. Like a cat, Ian tried to right himself in mid-air to land on his feet. But unfortunately, he was unsuccessful and landed with all of his weight on his right foot, atop an uneven rock just beneath the water’s surface, then fell on his butt in two feet of water. Oh God, please don’t let him be hurt, Billy prayed.

Like a flash, he was off Duke’s back and splashing through the water to get to Ian. Firefly ran to the other side of the river where Duke was waiting, stopped and looked back as if to say “Oops, my bad.” Ian was already trying to stand when Billy reached him, laughing at Firefly’s expression. Billy was not quite ready to laugh. He had to know if Ian was all right. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. A little stunned, but I think I’m okay,” Ian

answered. He tried to stand and felt a sharp pain in his right leg. "Wow," he said, "I think I messed up my ankle."

"Okay," Billy said, "keep your weight off it and hold on to me." With one sweeping motion, Billy had Ian in his arms and was carrying him across the river. When they reached the other side, Billy lifted Ian even higher onto Firefly's back. "Can you ride?"

"Yeah," Ian replied.

Billy simply said, "Hold on and I'll get you home."

Stunned at what had just happened, Ian couldn't speak; he simply stared at Billy, trusting that he was going to do exactly that. Billy mounted Duke, walked over to Firefly, lifted the reins, and led Ian and Firefly back in the direction of the parking lot, both men soaked to the bone. Neither one of them noticed the figure of a man hiding in the brush and watching the events unfold.

When they reached the parking lot, the sun was starting to sink behind the mountain and the air was significantly cooler.

"Don't move," Billy said. "Let me get the truck started and the heat going, and once I get you settled, I'll get the horses unsaddled and loaded."

"No way," Ian replied. "We'll do this together. After all, I'm the reason we're wet."

"We don't even know how bad your ankle is hurt. You should keep your weight off it," Billy insisted.

"I can manage," Ian said. "Let me at least help."

Billy saw the need in Ian's eyes to help and said, "Okay, but

promise me you'll take it easy. No weight on that foot."

"Deal," said Ian with a look of relief.

Ian held both horses while Billy unsaddled them. Billy made sure they were cool enough to be transported, secured their blankets over their backs, and loaded them into the trailer. When the trailer was secure, he helped Ian into the truck, closed the door, and ran around and climbed in the driver's side. The cab was warm and welcoming.

As Billy pulled out of the parking lot, he opened his cell phone and pressed the speed dial button for Jules. When Jules answered, Billy explained what had happened and asked him to have someone meet them at Nashville General to pick up the horses and get them back to the ranch.

Hearing this, Ian protested, "I'm not going to the hospital."

"Jules, let me call you right back, I have a stubborn patient here. Ian," Billy said after closing the phone, "we need to get that ankle checked out."

"I'm sure it's just a sprain," Ian said. "A little ice and it'll be fine."

"I would feel much better if we had it looked at."

"I understand how you feel, Billy, and I appreciate it dearly, but I'll be fine, I promise."

"Since you're in a promising mood, then," Billy said, "promise me that tomorrow you'll go to your regular doctor to have it looked at."

“Deal,” Ian said.

Billy called Jules back and told him not to worry about meeting them at the hospital; they would be back at the ranch in about an hour. Jules assured Billy that a couple of ranch hands would meet them and take care of the horses so he could get Ian home.

When they reached the ranch, two men Billy recognized were waiting for them. One of the hands unloaded the horses and took them back to the stables while the other unhooked the trailer from Billy’s truck and removed the saddles and tack. Billy helped Ian out of the truck and to his Escalade, putting Ian in the backseat on the driver’s side with his legs spread across the seat. He started the car and pressed every button on the computerized dashboard until he found the heat.

“Ian, will you be all right for a few minutes?”

“I’ll be fine,” Ian replied.

“I’ll be right back,” Billy said, and he closed the back door.

He quickly took the golf cart to the bunkhouse and grabbed a change of dry clothes, a pair of sneakers, and a bag of ice. When he got back, he took the blanket they’d used for lunch from the horse trailer along with his saddle bag. He opened the front door and tossed the saddle bag to the passenger side floorboard. “Still okay?” he asked Ian.

“Still okay,” Ian responded.

Billy ran around and opened the back passenger door, gently lifted Ian’s right leg, and placed the rolled up blanket under his ankle. He unlaced the top few rows of Ian’s boot and then pulled as tight as

he could and retied the knot, hoping to keep the swelling to a minimum. He laid the bag of ice over the boot and said, "I don't want to take your boot off until we get you home, but this should help until we get there."

Hopping into the driver's seat, Billy said, "Let's get you home, handsome."

Ian smiled and said, "Okay, cowboy." And with that one statement, Billy's heart melted.

Billy drove down the dirt road toward the ranch gates. It was a pretty bumpy ride, but he did his best to avoid any potholes and unnecessary bouncing.

"How's my patient doing?"

"Good," Ian replied. "But I can feel it swelling."

"Are you sure you won't let me take you to the hospital?"

"Positive," Ian replied. "But do you know where you're going?"

"Come to think of it, no," Billy said. "Where do you live?"

"In Westhaven, about an hour south of Nashville. Take I-40 east to I-65 south and I'll direct you from there."

They drove in silence for a few minutes. "Billy?" Ian said.

"Yes, sir," Billy replied.

"I'm sorry about this. Some first date, huh?"

"Nonsense," Billy said. "I'm feeling very gallant, almost knight-like, and I like it."

“Yeah, but you’re still soaked through to your boots and you’re being such a gentleman.”

“I’m not being a gentleman, I *am* a gentleman. I’m really enjoying taking care of you.”

“As strange as it sounds, I’m enjoying being taken care of. Is that crazy?” Ian asked.

“No way, pilgrim,” Billy said in his best John Wayne voice.

IAN continued to give Billy directions to his home, and in just under an hour they pulled into Ian’s garage. Ian lived in a beautiful three-story Colonial rowhouse at the end of a cul-de-sac. Billy got out of the SUV and opened the door behind him to get Ian out. Because the garage was under the rowhouse on the lower level, Billy again scooped Ian into his arms and carried him up the flight of stairs to the main floor of the house. While still in Billy’s arms, Ian opened the door, and they pushed their way inside. Billy’s eyes widened as he entered Ian’s house. The door leading up from the garage opened directly into a great room the size of Billy’s bunkhouse at the ranch. To the right was the living area with a large stone fireplace on the far wall. Built-in bookcases framed both sides of the fireplace, and a large flat panel television hung above the stone mantel. The room was painted a light golden tan and furnished with a large brown leather U-shaped sectional in the center surrounding a beveled glass cocktail table with a mahogany pedestal base. Everything sat on top of a large cowhide rug that made the space seem cozy and intimate. To the left was a very spacious kitchen with wraparound granite countertops

and stainless steel industrial appliances. The breakfast bar faced the great room with four leather upholstered barstools with copper-studded nailheads.

Billy immediately headed for the couch and gently lowered Ian onto it. As he began to stand, he was stopped by a pair of hands tugging on his shirt. He stopped long enough to get his balance and felt Ian's lips against his. In a flash, Billy was kissing him back, and when they finally broke apart, Billy grabbed one last kiss and stood.

"Where's your bedroom?"

"Bedroom? Now you hold on one minute, cowboy," Ian said.

Billy laughed and said, "Don't flatter yourself, I just want to get you some dry clothes."

Ian laughed. "Oh, is that all? I was so trying to play hard to get."

Ian told Billy he could find his bedroom upstairs, second door to the left, and explained where he could find some underwear, socks, a T-shirt, and gym shorts. On the way to the mahogany-railed staircase, Billy passed a half bathroom on the right and continued on to what he assumed was Ian's home office. The room was handsomely decorated with a large leather-topped Chippendale oak desk and matching leather desk chair.

As Billy quickly scanned the room, he noticed a console behind the desk that housed Ian's computer and CD player, and in front of the desk stood two leather side chairs. The room had very high ceilings and was surrounded by floor-to-ceiling oak bookcases. Attached to the bookcases, three quarters of the way up, was a round brass rail that followed the bookcases around the room.

Attached to the brass rails was an oak ladder on rollers that Billy knew was designed to reach the top shelves. The shelves were filled with what seemed like an endless supply of books, awards, and accessories.

Billy hurried up the stairs and quickly found the open door to Ian's bedroom. He entered a very large two-level room. Along the right wall was a king-sized four poster bed with large marble-topped bedside tables. To the far left was a nook that held a massive armoire, and immediately to the right of the door was a matching dresser and gold-gilded mirror. Directly across from the bed was a second level to the room, one step up, with two overstuffed upholstered wingback chairs that sat in front of a fireplace. He made his way to the door he assumed was the closet and entered a room at least sixteen by sixteen feet with wall-to-wall clothes racks and an island in the center that held drawer units on all four sides. Billy felt a little like a voyeur rummaging through Ian's closet; after all, he hardly knew him. He immediately stopped looking around and got to the task at hand. He found the underwear and socks exactly where Ian had said they would be, and as promised, the next drawer down had the T-shirts, and in the drawer to the right were the gym shorts.

When Billy got back downstairs, he found that Ian had already removed his wet shirt, belt, and wallet and was about to remove his left boot. Billy stopped for just a minute to observe the tanned, topless Ian. Ian's chest was exactly how he had imagined it, smooth, hairless, and very cut. His pumped-up arms were very well defined, and Billy made a mental note that he needed to go back to the gym. When Ian saw Billy, he stopped unlacing his boot and looked up. His right foot, still in his boot, was propped up on one of the leather ottomans.

“Let me help with that,” Billy said.

“That was quick,” said Ian.

“Your instructions were dead-on.”

“Thanks,” Ian replied.

Billy quickly finished unlacing Ian’s left boot and attempted to pull it off. His boot and sock were still very wet, so the boot didn’t give way easily but eventually came off. When Billy removed the sock, Ian’s foot and toes were shriveled like prunes.

“We’ll get you dry and warmed up as soon as I get the other boot off,” Billy said with a little bit of sadness on his face. “It will probably hurt a bit.”

As Billy was bending down to remove Ian’s boot, he thought back to his Eagle Scout days and remembered that as soon as the boot came off, the foot would begin to swell very quickly.

“Wait a second,” Billy said, and he headed to the kitchen. “Do you have any plastic bags?”

“Yep, third drawer down on the left,” Ian said.

Billy found the bags and turned to the freezer, filling a bag with ice and sealing it before heading back to Ian. He slowly unlaced Ian’s boot, thankful he had worn laced-up Ropers instead of a traditional boot.

Ian had winced only once or twice by the time Billy was finished unlacing.

“Okay, this is it,” Billy said.

“Go for it,” Ian replied, and Billy started to pull the boot off.

Billy’s heart was breaking as he saw the pain on Ian’s face, but Ian didn’t say a word. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips together and held on to the arms of the couch.

Ian’s right boot didn’t give way any more easily than the left. When the boot finally skidded off, Ian and Billy both took deep breaths, and Ian finally relaxed his grip on the couch and tried to smile.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Ian said as a single tear slipped out of his left eye.

Billy reached up and wiped the tear away with his thumb.

“I’m really sorry, Ian.”

“No need to be sorry,” Ian said. “It was my decision not to go to the hospital, remember?”

Billy just shook his head. “One more step,” he said, and they looked at each other as they simultaneously said, “the sock.”

With the boot now gone, Ian’s ankle immediately blew up like a balloon. His sock was stretched as tight as a sausage skin, and Billy doubted he could get it off without really hurting Ian.

“Wait, I have an idea,” Billy said.

“I’m waiting,” Ian responded.

“Do you have any scissors?”

“Yeah, in the office, top left drawer of the desk,” Ian responded.

Billy was there and back in seconds and began to cut the sock away. He started at the top and worked his way down, pulling the sock apart as he went. As the cloth fell away from Ian's ankle, Billy could see the purple and yellow coloring starting to work its way up. He stopped cutting when he reached Ian's toes and the wet sock fell to the ottoman.

"Genius," Ian said, and it was Billy's turn to smile.

With the boot and sock off, Billy could see how bad the sprain really was.

He took the bag of ice and lightly placed it on the top of Ian's ankle. "Twenty minutes on and twenty minutes off, no more, no less." Ian winced once more but kept his foot still.

"It's a good thing you were wearing lace-up boots," Billy said, "or we would have had to cut the boot off as well."

"Tomorrow, I'm buying stock in Justin Boots," Ian laughed.

"We've got to get you out of these wet clothes. Put this on," Billy said as he handed Ian the dry T-shirt. "Now the pants, and no wisecracks this time." Ian laughed and started to unbutton his jeans.

Billy motioned for him to lift up just a little, and Billy slid Ian's pants down over his thighs to his ankles. He removed the icepack just long enough to slide the pants over the now totally black, blue, and very swollen ankle. He replaced the icepack and slid the other leg of Ian's pants over his left foot.

When Billy looked up, Ian sat in a T-shirt and underwear. His bare legs were thick, long, and muscular and were covered in soft blond hair. Staring, Billy was startled when Ian said, "Now what?"

"You know what," Billy responded. "The underwear, but I'll give you some privacy for that move. Do you think you can manage?"

"I think so," Ian replied. "But you need to get out of your wet clothes too."

"Okay," Billy said. "I'll be back in a flash."

Billy ran downstairs to Ian's SUV to gather the clothes and sneakers he'd brought from the ranch. He went to the half bath he'd seen earlier and changed out of his wet clothes. When he returned to the living room in bare feet, dry jeans, and a T-shirt, Ian had his underwear changed and had managed to slip on his gym shorts.

"Good job," Billy said.

"Hey, I had a lot of help," Ian responded.

Billy grabbed a chenille throw from the back of the couch and threw it over Ian's legs.

"Now," he said, "let's get a fire going to warm you up."

"I know of another way I can be warmed up," Ian responded.

"All in good time," Billy said with a sly smile as he kissed him lightly on the forehead. "Now that I have you secure with no chance of escape, I can take my time and torture you a little."

Billy found everything he needed and within minutes had a blazing fire going. Twenty minutes had passed, so he removed the icepack from Ian's ankle and placed it in the freezer until another twenty minutes passed, when it would be time to put it back on. He watched as Ian's eyes followed him around the room with the slightest hint of a smile on his face.

Billy brushed his hands together and said, "Now, let's see what

I can rustle up for dinner.”

“I can’t guarantee you’ll find much in the kitchen,” Ian said, “I don’t cook very often.”

“I’ll come up with something. Let me look around a bit.”

Ian watched from the living room as Billy opened and closed cupboards and drawers and found his way to the pantry. After rummaging around, he came out with two jars of spaghetti sauce and a box of angel hair pasta. He opened the freezer and found a loaf of bread, located the spice drawer, and retrieved a jar of garlic powder.

“How’s pasta primavera and garlic bread?” Billy asked.

“Sounds great to me,” Ian responded.

“Do you have a wine opener?”

“Yeah, but unfortunately, I’m out of wine,” Ian said.

“Not true. I grabbed the bottle of red wine I stashed for today’s ride when we switched vehicles.”

“You’re one smart man, Billy Eagan.”

“Don’t I know it,” Billy said with a smile.

Within minutes, Billy was walking over to Ian with a glass of wine.

“Now for some mood music. Where’s the stereo?”

Ian pointed to the cabinet doors at the bottom of the built-ins on the left side of the fireplace. Billy turned on the radio, which was tuned to 97.9 WSIX, Nashville’s finest, and stood back to listen to what was playing. He identified Ty Herndon singing “Steam” and looked over at Ian to see if he approved.

“Perfect,” said Ian.

Billy went back to the couch, kissed Ian on the lips, glanced at his watch to make sure it wasn't time to reapply the icepack, and went back to the kitchen to start dinner.

“I feel like such a slug,” Ian said.

“Nonsense, this is pretty fun,” replied Billy.

“Maybe for you, but I'm the helpless one, remember.”

“Just the way I like it,” Billy said in his best mad scientist shtick.

CHAPTER 7

TWENTY minutes later, Billy was walking toward Ian with the opened bottle of wine in one hand, a plate of pasta and garlic bread in the other, and another icepack over his arm. He handed Ian the plate of food, refilled his wine glass, and replaced the icepack, then went back to the kitchen and made himself a plate. When he reached the couch, he refilled his wine glass as well. They ate in continuous conversation about the day, the perfect views, and the accident. Like clockwork, Billy removed and replaced Ian's icepack every twenty minutes.

When they were through with dinner, Billy gathered the empty plates and loaded the dishwasher. In a very short time, the kitchen was clean. He then positioned himself behind the couch and, with his hands on Ian's shoulders, began to gently rub what he knew would be sore muscles in the morning.

"Do you have any hand lotion?"

"I think there's some under the sink," Ian said. "Why?"

“You ask too many questions, Mr. Dillon.” Billy laughed and went back to the kitchen, reached under the sink, and found what he was looking for. When he returned with the lotion, he repositioned Ian with his legs at the opposite end of the couch and put a pillow behind his head.

“Lay back and relax,” Billy instructed.

Ian did as he was told, and Billy gently lifted Ian’s feet and slid in under them, examining Ian’s ankle. The swelling seemed to have stopped, but the ankle was still very swollen and discolored. Billy opened the bottle and squeezed a small amount of lotion into his hands. Rubbing his hands together to warm up the lotion, he took Ian’s foot and began to massage.

“That feels great,” Ian said. “I didn’t realize this was going to be a full-service date.”

“I’m a full-service type of guy,” Billy replied.

“No, seriously, you’ve taken such great care of me; I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“I can think of a few ways right off the top of my head,” Billy said.

Ian yanked his foot away. “Okay, okay, I’m just kidding.”

Billy frowned. “I didn’t mean...”

“No, it’s not that, it just tickled for a second,” Ian insisted, and they both laughed.

Just then the phone rang. Ian looked at the caller ID and saw it was Jean. He pressed the “talk” button and said, “Hey, doll.”

“Ian, are you okay?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m fine. Billy has taken great care of me.”

“Jules told me you wouldn’t go to the hospital. Oh, Ian, you’re so stubborn.”

“I’m fine, Jean, and just so you guys will relax, I promised Billy that I would go to the doctor tomorrow to have it checked. I’m sure it’s just a sprain. It’s feeling better already.”

“Is Billy still there with you?” Jean asked.

“Yes, ma’am, and he’s a great nurse.”

“Well, I feel much better knowing you’re not alone. You get some rest and call me when you get back from the doctor tomorrow, okay? And give my best to Billy.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ian replied. He added “Good night” and pressed the “off” button on the phone.

“Jean sends her best,” Ian said as he put the phone back in the carrier. “They’re both such worrywarts, but we’re very lucky to have them in our lives.”

“They are great people,” Billy said. “We are lucky.”

Billy finished rubbing Ian’s left foot and said, “No way am I touching that bad boy,” referring to Ian’s injured right foot.

“Smart,” Ian replied. “Now it’s your—”

Before Ian could finish, Billy said, “Nope, tonight’s all about you.” He slid out from under Ian’s feet, repositioned him once again on the long end of the U-shaped couch, and in one smooth move stoked the fire and then refilled their wine glasses before returning to

the couch. Sitting next to Ian, he put his hand on Ian's leg, propped his feet up on the leather ottoman, and said, "You gave me quite a scare this afternoon. Do you know what happened?"

"Not really," Ian responded. "It was like something or someone slapped Firefly on her hindquarter, hard, and she reacted. It was very strange."

Billy thought before he spoke. "Firefly is very gentle, and I've never seen her react to anything quite like that."

"I guess we'll never know, but it all turned out fine," Ian replied. "And besides, if this hadn't happened, I wouldn't be getting all this attention."

"We'll see about the attention you'll be getting after we get you to the doctor tomorrow," Billy replied.

Touched and concerned at the same time, Ian said, "You don't have to take me to the doctor. You've done so much already. I'm pretty sure I can manage."

"How?" Billy said. "First of all, you can't put any weight on that foot, and I don't see any crutches around. Second, you can't drive with your left foot, unless you are extremely talented. Not that it would be safe anyway. And third, how are you going to get down the stairs?"

Ian's expression changed immediately, and the realization hit Billy like a ton of bricks. Embarrassment flooded his face, and he started to speak as he stood up to pace in front of the couch. "Oh man, I'm really sorry," Billy said. "I shouldn't be pushing myself on you. I'm the caretaker type, and I get carried away sometimes. I'm sure you have plenty of friends you can call. Hell, Jean and Jules

would be here in a flash if you needed them.”

It took Ian a moment to understand that Billy had sensed his apprehension. Before he could say anything, Billy leaned over the couch, picked up the phone, and said, “Can I borrow this? I was in such a hurry to get you home, I left my cell phone in the truck. I’ll call the ranch and see if I can get one of the guys to drive out here and get me.”

“No, wait,” Ian said as he jumped up from the couch on one foot, got tangled in the chenille throw, and stumbled forward toward the leather ottoman. Billy watched Ian as if he were moving in slow motion. Before he had time to think, the phone was flying through the air and he was instinctively diving for Ian. Ian tried to get his balance as the two men landed on the edge of the ottoman, propelling it forward and leaving them on the floor with Ian on top of Billy.

Ian looked down into Billy’s eyes and said, “You’re not going anywhere, cowboy.”

Billy looked up at Ian with a wary look on his face.

“I didn’t mean.... Billy.... I... I’d love your help tomorrow. I just didn’t want to be a burden.” Ian shrugged. “I’ve spent the last eight years learning to fend for myself, and in doing so, I’ve convinced myself that I don’t need anyone to take care of me.”

Confused, Billy asked, “Why would you convince yourself that you don’t need anyone? Did something happen to you? Did someone hurt you?”

Ian simply shook his head and said, almost in a whisper, “I just don’t want to be a burden.”

“I don’t think you’re a burden. Have I been acting like I’d rather be anywhere else?”

“Of course you haven’t, you’ve been incredible. But we’ve only known each other for a couple of days, and well, to be truthful, I’ve only had myself to depend on for so many years, I’m not used to having anyone take care of me. It’s been easier for me that way, for a bunch of reasons.” That one sentence told Billy more about Ian than anything he’d said to him since they’d met.

“Okay, Ian, I get it, or at least I think I get it,” Billy said. “You’re used to taking care of yourself, so I’ll back off some, but you have to understand that this is just the caretaker in me. It doesn’t mean that I want anything from you that you can’t give,” he continued. “You’re right, we’ve only known each other for a very short time, and I don’t know why, but I feel this strong connection to you. If we see one another for a day, a week, or a year, I will never pressure you to give more of yourself than you can give. That’s not the kind of person I am.”

Ian opened his mouth to speak, but Billy put his hand up and said, “Please let me finish. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that, in the past, someone hurt you pretty badly. And by the look on your face right now, I would imagine that the scars run pretty deep. One more thing, and I’ll shut up. You don’t ever have to say a word, but when and if you ever want to tell me what happened to you, I would like to be here to listen.”

Ian sighed and said, “Deal” with a bewildered look on his face. He gently kissed Billy on the lips and slid to one side to allow him to get up.

Relieved that he’d said everything he needed to say, Billy stood

and reached out to help Ian to his feet. Ian braced himself on the arm of the couch, balancing on his left foot with his right leg bent at the knee. Billy found the phone, which remarkably still worked, and placed it back in its cradle. He then turned all his attention to Ian and wrapped his arms around him and held him tight.

As Billy felt the tension leave Ian's body, he thought, *One day I hope he trusts me enough to talk to me.* Ending the embrace, he eased Ian back down to the couch, picked up the throw, and covered him again.

"C'mere, cowboy." Ian tugged Billy down to kneel beside the couch, resting his head in Ian's lap.

They both settled into the silence, and Ian began to stroke Billy's hair. Billy lay there for the longest time, staring up at Ian, and he finally said, "Tell me about your childhood."

There was a long moment of silence before Ian said, "Not much to tell. I grew up in a very conservative Christian household with three brothers and a sister. I went to Bob Jones University but never graduated, and I don't talk to my family."

"Is it because you're gay?"

"Partly," Ian said. "Now your turn."

Billy thought, *He clearly doesn't feel comfortable talking about himself, so hell, I'll bore him into talking with my story.* "I grew up in a Catholic family in New Orleans with two sisters; one has a son and one a daughter. I married at nineteen and divorced at twenty-one. My entire family still lives in New Orleans, and we're all pretty close to each other, in our own way. I talk to them a couple times a week, and they're very supportive of me and my dream."

Billy paused to take a breath, and Ian took advantage of the pause. "Back up one minute. Did I hear 'married'?"

"Yep," Billy said. "I was very confused about my sexuality at the time. I was young and she was pretty and it seemed like the right thing to do. I was the last Eagan boy in the family to carry on our family name, and for some reason that was very important to my father, so that only reinforced my decision," he continued. "My mother is a sweet, fun-loving, nurturing woman. I can talk to her about anything, and we're good friends in addition to being mother and son. On the other hand, my father is a man's man. He bred quarter horses for most of my life, and together we did the rodeo circuit for a time. But what I remember most about our relationship growing up was trying so hard to earn his respect. Looking back now, I can see that my need for his approval and respect drove me to do most of the things I did. Then I got, in the famous words of Miss Tammy Wynette, D-I-V-O-R-C-E'd, and I thought he would consider me a failure, but he didn't. He just said, 'Son, if you're unhappy, then do something about it.' The funny or sad thing, depending on how you look at it, is after all the things I did to try and gain his respect, the one thing that did it was my moving away to follow my dreams. He said he'd never had the courage to do it, and that alone made him the most proud."

"Wow, that's quite a story," Ian said.

"I guess so," Billy replied. "There's a lot more, but you don't get to hear it until I get more about you. Deal?" Billy raised his hand to shake on it.

"We'll see," Ian replied, but he shook Billy's hand anyway.

"It's getting pretty late," Ian said. "What say we head upstairs?"

"Are you sure?" Billy asked. "I don't mind sleeping on the couch."

"Nope, let's go up," Ian said.

Billy lifted his head off Ian's lap and began to stand. Ian tried to do the same, but Billy put his hand on Ian's chest and nudged him back down. "Now come on, Ian, wait one minute. I'll handle this.... I mean, do you mind if I do this my way?"

Ian smiled and nodded as Billy removed the icepack from his ankle, walked over, and placed it in the sink.

"Just stay put. I'm going up to turn down the bed. I'll be right back."

Ian watched Billy climb the stairs as his mind leaped into overdrive. *Is this man real? Why, after all these years, do I feel a connection to someone again? Why now? I don't want this, I don't need this, but the pull is so strong. Should I take this to the next step? Is it fair to Billy?* Ian didn't have any answers, but for some reason, he didn't care. *The only thing to do, he decided, is to take it one day at a time and see how it plays out.* This was probably going nowhere, and it would fizzle out like a dying ember soon enough. Billy was probably just being nice to him, anyway, and wasn't really looking for anything more. That thought made Ian relax a little. After all, he wasn't a teenager any longer; he could enjoy a man's company and not make any more of it than that. Couldn't he?

When Billy reached the bedroom, he turned down the bed and then walked over to the fireplace, which was well stocked with

kindling, wood, and matches, and started a fire. He looked around and spotted some candles artfully placed throughout the room and lit each one. Taking one last look around, he started downstairs. The room looked very inviting, he thought.

He came down the stairs quietly in case Ian had dozed off, but Ian was in the same spot Billy had left him, staring at the ceiling. To Billy, he seemed to be in deep thought, almost troubled.

“Ian,” Billy whispered. “You ready to go upstairs?”

“Anytime you are, cowboy,” Ian replied.

Billy turned off the stereo, made sure the fire screen was in place to catch any stray embers, and turned off all but one lamp.

Just as Ian stood, as reliable as a bill collector, Billy had Ian in his arms again. Ian started to protest and then felt himself melting into Billy’s chest, his face buried against his neck, determined to enjoy the ride.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Ian inhaled the comforting smell of wood burning, and he knew Billy had started a fire. The thought made his heart melt and, at the same time, skip a beat. If he’d had any doubts about taking this relationship to the next level with Billy, they were gone now.

Ian looked around the room as Billy placed him in his bed. “How did you know this was my side of the bed?”

“Well,” Billy said, “the telephone and clock are on this side, so I just figured this must be the place.” He sat down on the bed beside Ian. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty to warm things up a little. With that icepack on and off of your foot every twenty

minutes, I know you must have been chilled to the bone. I didn't want to take you out of a warm, cozy environment and put you into a cool, dark bedroom."

"I don't mind at all," Ian whispered. "You're being really sweet. I don't deserve this."

"You deserve everything in life and more, and don't you forget it," Billy said as he brushed Ian's cheek.

Billy leaned in, and it wasn't long before Ian felt full, warm lips over his. He wanted and needed Billy in a way he hadn't experienced in ages. Ian found Billy's lips to be hungry and forceful but tender and gentle as well. Ian leaned back on the bed and took Billy with him. Moving gently without breaking the kiss, Billy positioned himself on the bed next to Ian, careful not to touch his ankle.

Billy began to explore Ian's mouth, tasting him, taking him, making him feel alive and deserving of all he was being given. Finally Billy broke the kiss. He moved his mouth to Ian's ear and whispered, "You okay?"

"I'm better than okay, I'm great. Please don't stop."

That was all Billy needed to hear. On the way down to Ian's neck, he stopped to run his teeth over his earlobe. Ian shook as if he had caught a chill. His neck tasted soft, sweet, and delicious. Billy covered every inch of Ian's neck with gentle kisses while he rubbed his chest and caressed his nipples through his T-shirt. He lifted Ian to a sitting position and pulled his shirt over his head to expose bronze-colored, perfectly round nipples, well-defined pectorals, and a set of six-pack abs, all waiting to be tasted. Billy was in heaven. He made another mental note about going back to the gym.

Ian felt out of control, shivering like a baby just taken out of a warm bath. He wanted Billy in every way, to cover him, to warm him, to take him. Ian lifted up on one elbow and whispered, "It's your turn, cowboy. Off with the shirt."

Billy blushed but did as he was told. Ian watched Billy cross his strong muscular arms and grab at the hem of his tight T-shirt to pull it over his head. When he threw the shirt across the room, Ian saw Billy's chest muscles flex with the movement of his arms. Ian pulled Billy back down to the bed and ran his lips over his already erect nipples. Billy moaned and whispered, "That feels really good." Ian continued rubbing Billy's chest, flicking his tongue in and out over his nipples until Billy's shivers matched his own. He slowly moved up to Billy's neck and nibbled at every inch while running his hands through Billy's thick black hair. Ian felt somewhat confined, as he couldn't maneuver his right leg as he would have liked, but hell, he didn't care about the pain right now. All he cared about was Billy.

Billy gently rolled Ian onto his back and straddled his waist. He could feel Ian's erection through his jeans, and the thought instantly made him hard as a rock. While staring into Ian's eyes, Billy lifted up on to his knees and motioned for Ian to lift his hips. He slid Ian's gym shorts down and carefully off, never forgetting about his ankle. Billy again straddled Ian and positioned his ass slightly over his knees, careful not to put any weight on Ian's legs. In that position, Billy could see Ian's dick clearly outlined in his tight navy thigh-length Polo briefs. The head of Ian's cock rested right above the waistband. It was perfectly shaped, thick and evenly proportioned. Billy imagined neatly trimmed blond pubic hair and a hefty pair of balls underneath. As Ian watched Billy explore his body, his dick became thicker, and his underwear began to strain a little more against his cock. When

Billy leaned forward, his face was right at Ian's crotch. Billy buried his face in Ian's underwear, inhaling every bit of his aroma. His scent was clean and fresh, with a strong hint of his own male scent.

Billy couldn't stop. He ran his teeth along the length of Ian's dick through his underwear and felt Ian shiver. Billy could feel his pulse throb with every beat of his heart. Ian lifted up just a bit, and Billy slid his underwear off as he had done with the gym shorts. Finally, Ian lay there naked from head to toe. Billy was frozen. All he could do was stare at the beautiful man in front of him.

Ian sat up and grabbed at the waistband of Billy's jeans. "I want you naked."

When Ian unbuttoned the top button of Billy's jeans, Billy gently rolled off of Ian and stood at the side of the bed. Ian watched intently as Billy released the rest of the buttons on his 501s, shimmied his jeans down to his ankles, and stepped out of them. As he removed his socks, he felt a little exposed, but Ian seemed to be enjoying the show. Ian smiled when he saw the outline of Billy's thick, erect cock tucked away in gray Calvin Klein boxers and the trail of black hairs fading from his navel into the concealment of his underwear.

"Now step out of your underwear," Ian whispered.

Billy did as he was told. Ian raised the covers, reached for Billy's hand, and gently pulled him back into bed. Both of them naked now, their breath was hushed as Ian moved his hand over Billy's bare shoulder, running his fingers gently across his flesh, tracing his face.

Billy moved closer and was excited to find Ian's cock still hard and pressing against his thigh. Ian closed his eyes as Billy's other

hand moved down his body, his fingers running along Ian's soft flesh before finding his stiff cock and starting to caress it. Ian moaned with pleasure as he felt himself being taken over by Billy, being consumed by him. When Billy shifted and slid down, he was looking directly at Ian's cock. Ian whimpered when Billy took him into his mouth. The moist heat of Billy's mouth was mind-blowing for Ian. He loved the feel of Billy's tongue as it slid up and down his shaft, curling around his skin. Ian wanted this to go on forever.

When Billy tasted Ian for the first time, his masculine scent filled Billy's shallow gasp for breath. Billy could think of nothing except making Ian happy. This second, this minute, this hour, pleasing Ian was all that mattered. Billy tightened his lips around Ian and slowly slid up and down his shaft, amazed at how warm and alive he felt. Ian's cock felt amazing as Billy gave himself over and let Ian's cock invade his mouth. As Billy continued to pleasure Ian, he felt himself becoming rock hard and ready to come at any point.

Ian reached a hand down to Billy's shoulder and said, "Won't last much longer, Billy. I'm close and I'm not ready to end this just yet. I want to make it last." Billy slowly looked up to the most beautiful pair of piercing green eyes he had ever seen. Ian's wavy blond hair framed his face, and his smile was warm and wanting. He could get lost in those eyes and not care if he was ever found.

Billy slid up to the head of the bed and took Ian's mouth, gently at first and then with a raw need Ian had rarely experienced. When the kiss ended, Ian sat up and gently rolled Billy over onto his stomach. He continuously rewarded Billy's neck, back, and shoulders with sensual kisses. His lips and tongue traced Billy's spine down to the curve of his ass, stopping only to admire his round, hairy,

muscular ass cheeks. Ian brought his knees up, carefully moved his injured ankle over Billy's ass, and straddled his lower back.

"Be careful, Ian," Billy whispered.

Ian knew instinctively that Billy's concern was only for him, and just for a flash, he let himself feel cherished. Then Ian reached up and placed his forefinger over Billy's lips as if to silence him.

Billy took Ian's finger into his warm mouth and savored its taste. Ian felt a bolt of pleasure run through his body at the simple action. He withdrew his finger and began to lightly rub and massage Billy's back, bringing chill bumps to his flesh.

Ian gently rolled Billy over onto his back and eased on top of him. He stared into Billy's deep blue eyes, imagining his head rolling back in pleasure when he came. If Ian had his way, that would be very soon.

He kissed Billy hard on the lips and then pulled away and began kissing his way down Billy's well-developed, muscular chest. Ian's lips found Billy's left nipple and began to tease it with his tongue. He felt Billy arch his back and relax again. He teased both nipples until they were hard and then he began to nibble at them with his teeth.

Ian kissed his way down ever farther to the line of hair that led to Billy's belly button and continued down to his groin. Billy's dick was something to behold, Ian thought as he kissed the tip and began to work it with his mouth. Ian ran his tongue up the shaft and licked the perfectly shaped head, tasting the precum which leaked from the slit.

Ian was rewarded with the sounds of Billy's moans as he

caressed the hair on the back of Ian's head. Ian slowly ran his lips up and down the length of Billy's cock and felt it swelling with each stroke. Ian allowed Billy's cock to slip out of his mouth as he whispered, "Are you okay?"

"Perfect," Billy responded. "You feel so good. Can't hold on much longer."

"Go for it," Ian said.

Billy paused. "I'd like us to come together, if that's okay? I want to jerk you off while I'm kissing you and looking into your eyes."

"Oh yeah," Ian replied. He eased up to join Billy and reached over to open the drawer to his bedside table. Retrieving a bottle of lube, he flipped open the top and squeezed a dime-sized amount into both their hands.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Ian asked again.

Billy only nodded, but Ian got the message.

They were glistening with sweat, and the air seemed charged with electricity. Billy knew he was going to come at any moment and slowly moved his hand up and down Ian's rock-hard cock. His mouth covered Ian's with long, deep, passionate kisses, but never once did he break the gaze into Ian's green eyes. In that moment, looking into Ian's eyes was like seeing everything: the sun, the stars, the universe, past the universe.

Billy broke the kiss for just long enough to say, "God, Ian." He came in a great rushing wave; it moved through him pulse after pulse, forcing his load into Ian's hand.

Still trying to catch his breath, Billy laid his head on Ian's shoulder and licked the sweet sweat that had accumulated there. He began to move his hand faster and faster, and when he lifted his head to look at Ian, Ian's head was back with eyes shut and mouth open.

Gorgeous, Billy thought. He leaned forward to suck on Ian's neck and moaned softly. Then Ian tilted his head down and kissed Billy. Ian's tongue pushed into his mouth, and when it slid over Billy's tongue, Ian's dick pulsed in his grasp, and Ian moaned into Billy's mouth. His come was warm on Billy's hand, and Ian was panting heavily when he pulled out of the kiss.

They lay there against each other for several minutes, not sure of what to say, not even sure if any words were adequate to express what they were feeling. The room was dark except for the embers from what was left of the fire and the candles as the flames danced on the ceiling. The air smelled of sex, lingering around them like a fog, and the silence between them was somehow comforting.

Billy finally broke the silence. "You're really something."

"You're not so bad yourself."

"How's your ankle?"

"What ankle?" Ian replied with a grin.

"Let me take a look," Billy said. He reached over to the bedside table and turned on the lamp and was shocked at the size of Ian's ankle. It had swollen to the point where it looked like Ian's skin would pop at any minute.

"Damn," Billy said. "This doesn't look good at all. Stay put." Billy leaped out of the bed, stopping for a moment to stoke the fire

before he headed for the bathroom.

When Billy found the bathroom light switch and flipped it on, bright lights flooded the room, and he immediately shut his eyes against the intrusion. After a second he slowly opened them and they gradually adjusted.

He stood in the middle of the large bathroom, staring at an oblong sunken whirlpool tub in the center of the room. Beyond the tub was yet another massive stone fireplace. On either side of the fireplace were floor to ceiling palladium windows with frosted glass panes, framed by heavy gold velvet draperies drawn back with black rope tiebacks. He quickly scanned the room. To the right was a long mahogany vanity with double sinks and a closed door that, he assumed, led to the toilet. To his left, running the width of the room, was a large glass-enclosed natural stone shower, with dual shower heads on either end and a large rain showerhead in the center. Billy grabbed a washcloth from the towel rack near the shower and approached one of the sinks. He turned on the hot water and waited for it to heat up.

Ian heard water running, and in a couple of minutes, Billy appeared beside him with a hot washcloth. Ian felt a warm, wet sensation touching his thigh and eventually his hand as Billy wiped away the thin layer of sticky come.

“Thanks,” Ian said.

“My pleasure,” replied Billy.

Billy pulled the comforter up over Ian, and in a flash he was gone again. Ian heard him bouncing down the stairs and, within minutes, climbing them again. This time he had a fresh icepack in one

hand and a bowl of ice in the other. He pulled down the comforter, paused to look at Ian's naked body, and positioned the icepack again on Ian's ankle.

"If I remember correctly," Billy said, "at this stage of a sprain, we should be alternating hot and cold compresses."

Ian just looked at Billy in amazement.

In the blink of an eye, Billy was in the bathroom again. Ian once again heard water running, this time with a heavier flow, and instantly knew that Billy was drawing him a hot bath.

Ian thought, Billy doesn't know it yet, but I won't be alone in that bathtub.

Billy turned the water on in the bathtub and adjusted the temperature. He grabbed a large bath towel from the rack near the shower and placed it alongside the sunken tub. Noticing that the fireplace had permanent logs which he assumed were gas logs, he looked for a way to turn them on. At the base of the fireplace, built into the hearth, was an on-off switch. He flipped the switch into the "on" position, and with a whoosh, blue flames shot out from beneath the logs. Near the bathtub faucet was a footed silver tray holding a grouping of glass bottles and jars, an assortment of candles, and a book of matches. Billy knelt down next to the tray and read the labels, seeing that the bottles contained bath salts and oils, which he knew would make for a nice bath. He chose a bottle of bubble bath and poured an ample amount into the quickly filling tub, and immediately, bubbles started to appear. He lit a couple of candles, stood, took a quick look at his handiwork, and as he was exiting the bathroom, adjusted the lights for the perfect ambience.

Ian had propped himself up on a couple of pillows exactly where Billy had left him, shivering a little from the icepack, but he seemed to be relaxed and in pretty good condition, considering. Billy pulled the comforter down, gently removed the icepack, and for the fourth time in one day, scooped Ian up and carried him into the bathroom.

“Billy?” Ian said as they entered the bathroom.

“Yes, Ian?”

“I need to pee.”

“Okay.” Billy changed direction and walked toward the toilet. “I’ll stand you up at the toilet, but no weight on that foot, okay?”

“Yes, sir,” Ian replied.

Billy balanced Ian on one foot while he took care of business. When Ian was through, he shifted his weight over to Billy, who helped him over to sit at the side of the sunken tub, letting his legs hang over into the welcoming, hot bubble bath. Billy got into the tub and then helped Ian step in and lower himself to a sitting position. Billy stood to get out of the tub, and Ian grabbed his hand.

“Not so fast,” Ian said. “Sit.”

“Nope, I don’t want to chance hitting your ankle. You need to be still, and if I get in this tub with you, all bets are off,” Billy replied.

“Sit,” Ian said again. “Please.”

The look in Ian’s eyes told Billy he really had no choice. Besides, he wanted to be as close to Ian as he could be. He eased back down into the water across from Ian and placed Ian’s foot in his

lap to secure it. Ian simply smiled in victory and leaned, looking at Billy.

Ian relaxed in the warm water. The security of his ankle in Billy's lap and Billy's legs on each side of him made him feel oddly content. *How can this man, a man I've known for such a short time, make me feel this way?*

He unconsciously reached for Billy's right leg, placed his right hand under the heel of Billy's foot, and with his left hand, began to massage his calf. Ian worked his way up and down Billy's leg, massaging intently. He continued his way down over his ankle and, with his thumbs, began to massage the ball of Billy's foot. Ian watched as Billy closed his eyes, laid his head back, and relaxed into the pleasure.

As Ian gently rubbed Billy's foot, he, too, relaxed and closed his eyes. His mind instantly went to this man, this sweet, sensitive man across from him. Billy had been so attentive to his every need. He'd taken care of him all day and continued to do so into the night, with a gentle and genuine touch to which Ian was not accustomed.

Ian tried to get lost in the moment, to simply enjoy what was happening, but his mind wouldn't allow it. The same thought came rushing back to him over and over again. *Can't love and can't trust.*

He had long ago decided that he could never totally give his heart to another man, never totally trust anyone again. The risk of loving, trusting, and possibly losing was far too great. The stakes were too high, and his heart, even after so much time had passed, was still too sensitive to chance it.

Anyway, why was he thinking about this? They had just met. But for some reason this man had affected him, touched him in a way that made him think about things differently. It was way too soon to tell, but if Ian were honest with himself, for the first time since Todd, he felt optimistic about the future. Very scared, but optimistic. Would he be able to make the leap?

Billy opened his eyes. He had dozed off and didn't know how long they had been in the tub, but from the look of his fingers, it had been a while. Ian was resting his head against the back of the tub with his eyes closed. He couldn't resist the urge to lightly pass his hand over Ian's ankle. Ian lazily opened his eyes, and Billy, already wishing he hadn't given into the impulse, said, "I'm so sorry, Ian, I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't," Ian said. "I wasn't sleeping, just enjoying the moment, and besides, it actually felt good."

Looking at his hands and Ian's toes, Billy said, "We're pretty shriveled. We better start thinking about getting you out of here and get that ice back on your ankle."

"You're the boss," Ian said.

Billy gently moved Ian's ankle from his lap and stood. He took the towel he had placed by the tub and dried his arms, back and chest, and then helped Ian to his feet, never allowing any weight to be applied to his ankle. With the same towel, Billy dried the top half of Ian's body, then stepped out of the tub. He finished drying himself as Ian sat on the side of the tub once again. Billy helped him stand and used the second towel from the rack to dry Ian's butt, crotch, legs, left foot, and finally, with great care, Ian's bad ankle and foot.

Ian knew what was coming next and was totally prepared when Billy again lifted him with great ease and walked back to the bedroom. He gently placed Ian on the bed, propped up his head and back with the extra pillows, and covered him with the comforter. After he emptied the melted icepack in the bathroom sink and refilled it with the extra ice he had brought up earlier, Billy returned to Ian, pulled the covers back, and softly applied the last icepack of the night to the tender ankle. He pulled the covers back, kissed Ian on the lips, and said, "Well, this should hold you for a few hours. I'll be right back."

Thankful for the dimly lit room, Ian smiled at Billy as he did the best he could to hold back the tear that slid down his cheek. He silently watched as Billy returned to the bathroom. Billy flipped the lever to release the water from the tub, blew out the candles, turned off the fireplace, and switched off the light on his way out. He crawled into bed and slid over and snuggled in next to Ian.

"Hey, cowboy," Ian murmured. "What took you so long?"

"Just doing my chores," Billy replied.

"I'm glad you're back."

"Me too."

Billy removed the extra pillows from behind Ian's back, and Ian slid down until they were face to face. Ian gently kissed Billy and said, "Thanks for everything today."

"I wanted to do it," Billy said. "I know this probably sounds crazy to you, since we hardly know each other, but something about you makes me want to take care of you and keep you safe."

Ian, with a lump in his throat for the second time in ten minutes, raised his arm, and Billy scooted over and laid his head on Ian's chest. Ian wrapped his arm around Billy and pulled him in close, and that was the way they slept.

CHAPTER 8

IAN woke around nine fifteen to the sound of thunder and rain falling on the roof. He didn't know why, as no one but him had ever slept in his bed, but he instinctively reached over for Billy. The bed was empty, and a brief sense of panic filled him. Then the smell of fresh coffee and bacon met his nostrils, and he smiled and exhaled the deep breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He was just about to attempt to get out of bed when Billy tiptoed into the room with a breakfast tray and a bowl of ice. He was already dressed, which told Ian that he had gone out early to buy groceries for breakfast. Right then, Ian made a mental note to stock the kitchen as soon as he could walk.

"Morning, cowboy," Ian said.

"How's my patient this morning?"

"Better now, but I can't believe you went out in this weather to get stuff for breakfast."

"There wasn't a thing downstairs, and you know breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

“So what’s your specialty?” Ian asked.

“On today’s menu we have... let’s see, where do I start?” Billy grinned. “Fresh-squeezed orange juice, fresh-brewed coffee, a mushroom cheddar omelet, crispy fried bacon, and hot buttered toast.”

“Wow,” replied Ian, “that sounds great. Where’s yours?”

“I’ll get mine shortly, but first I need to check that ankle.”

Billy placed the tray on Ian’s lap and this time pulled the blanket and sheet up from the foot of the bed to look at Ian’s ankle. The swelling had gone down considerably, but it was still very discolored. Billy gently placed the new icepack on Ian’s ankle.

“As soon as we finish breakfast, I’ll replace the icepack with a hot compress and try to get more of the swelling down before we head to the doctor.”

“Go get your breakfast, cowboy, and get back up here pronto,” Ian ordered. “I’m starving.”

Billy obliged and headed downstairs to retrieve his tray. When he returned he found Ian patiently waiting.

“Please eat,” Billy said as he sat down on the bed.

“Not so fast, cowboy,” Ian said in his sheriff’s voice. “In case you don’t remember, I’m naked under these here sheets, and if you’re going to eat vittles with me, you’ll need to be naked as well.”

“No need to remind me about what you’re not wearing, but I’ll do as I’m told,” Billy said.

Ian watched as Billy stripped down and crawled into bed

beside him. Ian reached over to the bedside table, retrieved a remote, and pressed a button, and a flat-panel television rose up at the foot of the bed.

“Cool,” Billy said. “What other tricks do you have in this room?”

“All in good time, my friend, all in good time.”

They ate breakfast as they watched Diane Sawyer interview Tim McGraw on *Good Morning America*. Tim was touting his new album, and Diane was obviously smitten with him because she blushed and batted her eyelashes throughout the entire interview. After they finished eating, Billy took the trays downstairs, and Ian could hear him rinsing the dishes and loading the dishwasher. When he returned, he handed the telephone to Ian.

“Time to call the doctor.”

“Not yet,” Ian protested.

Billy shot back, “Okay, for every minute you don’t call the doctor, I’m putting a piece of clothing back on until I’m completely dressed.”

With that, Ian opened the drawer of the bedside table and removed his address book. He found his doctor’s number, pressed the “talk” button on the telephone, and began to dial, all the while grinning at Billy. Billy was very proud of himself and made no bones about it. After a brief hold and some conversation, Ian hung up the phone. “He’ll see me at eleven thirty.”

“It’s ten o’clock now,” Billy said. “So that gives us an hour and a half. How long will it take us to get there?”

“About twenty-five minutes,” Ian answered.

“Good, just enough time to get a hot compress on that ankle before I get you into the shower and ready to go.”

Billy went into the bathroom, ran the hot water until it was steaming, and soaked a towel for a couple of minutes. He rung out the towel and, within minutes, was replacing the icepack with the hot compress.

“We’ll need to pick up a heating pad,” Billy said as he crawled back into bed and scooted up next to Ian, the expression on his face turning serious. “Can we talk about something?”

“Sure,” Ian replied.

“Look,” Billy started. “I don’t know how to describe what happened between us last night. I mean, I know how I felt and still feel this morning, and I’m not trying to make you say anything about your feelings. But we were pretty intimate with each other, and although I know we should have talked about this last night, I was too caught up in the moment to have an intelligent conversation. I feel guilty about it, so I’m saying it now. I haven’t been intimate with anyone in a little over three years. I was tested for HIV two years ago, and the test results were negative. It’s important to me that you know I would have never done anything to you or with you if there was any chance that I was anything but perfectly healthy, and I’m sorry.”

What is it with this man? It’s only ten o’clock in the morning, and I already have another lump in my throat.

“Billy, don’t apologize. I’m an adult, and I’m responsible for my own behavior. But thank you for saying it. I don’t know what

happened between us, either, and I don't know where it will go, but I do know I want to explore what lies ahead. I'm drawn to you. Your sincerity, thoughtfulness, and kindness shine through from your heart. It's real, you're real, and that is so hard to find. For the record, it's been closer to four years for me. I was tested, too, and the results were negative as well. Also for the record, no one has ever slept in this bed besides me and now you, and I like it that way."

Billy was obviously touched, and the expression on his face showed it. He leaned in and gently brushed his lips over Ian's, then settled in for a long, hot, passionate kiss.

They stayed in that position, making out like teenagers, for more than twenty minutes. Ian's left hand was running through Billy's thick dark hair while his right was holding him tightly by the back of his neck, not wanting to let go. Billy allowed his hands to explore every reachable inch of Ian's body without breaking the kiss.

When they came up for air, Billy said, "If we don't get up, showered, and out of here, I'm afraid you won't be able to pry me out of this bed."

"You'll get no complaints from me, Billy boy."

Billy smiled and said, "If you think you're going to kiss your way out of a doctor's appointment, you're mistaken."

"Busted," Ian said. "Okay, let's go. The sooner we get out of here, the quicker we can get back."

"Now you're talking," Billy whispered. He pulled the covers down to the foot of the bed and removed the now-cool compress from Ian's ankle, then lifted Ian and carried him into the bathroom.

“Billy,” Ian said. “You’ve got to put me down. There’s something I need to take care of, and you can’t help me with this one.”

Billy got the hint and carried Ian over to the water closet to gently set him on his left foot. Ian hopped his way into the water closet and closed the door.

Billy went over to the shower, reached in, and turned on both faucets. He noticed a control panel just outside the shower door which said “Steam Shower.” It had an on/off button and a timer. *This looks interesting*, he thought, and he pressed the “on” button and set the timer for thirty minutes. Finding where Ian stored the extra towels, he retrieved two bath towels as well as two washcloths. When he opened the shower door to place the two washcloths on the built-in seat, the steam was already building, so he quickly closed the shower door.

Billy was hanging the bath towels on the rack when Ian emerged from the water closet. He hopped halfway across the room when Billy met him and helped him into the shower. Ian sat on the seat with Billy towering over him as the hot water, and steam consumed them both.

Billy lathered up a washcloth and began to tenderly wash Ian’s back, neck, and shoulders and then put the washcloth down and knelt in front of Ian. He lathered both of his hands, raised Ian’s left arm and washed his armpit. He then ran his hands down Ian’s arm and soothingly massaged his left hand. When he was finished, he did the same with the right. Motioning for Ian to stand, Billy washed Ian’s cock and slid his hands around and massaged as he lathered his ass. As he ran his hands between Ian’s buttocks, he felt Ian tense up.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay,” Ian replied. “It’s just been a long time since anyone had a hand there, but don’t stop.”

That gave Billy carte blanche to explore and please. Wasting no more time, he lifted the head of Ian’s cock to his mouth and wrapped his lips around it. This time Ian didn’t tense up but gasped and placed his hand on the back of Billy’s head. It was definitely a mouthful, and Billy was enjoying every inch of it. He started to take some long, deep strokes, bobbing his head back and forth as Ian’s gorgeous cock came to life in his mouth. Ian moaned and tightened the grip on the back of Billy’s head and gently pushed him down again and again.

Billy decided to give Ian’s cock a rest and explore his balls. He continued to massage Ian’s ass while he took his balls into his mouth and teased them with his tongue. Ian fell into a state of ecstasy and began to go weak in the knees. Billy slid his fingers up the crease of Ian’s ass, working fingers from both hands into his smooth crack until he felt his tight pucker. He slowly massaged it with his index fingers and could feel Ian flexing his ass muscles in reaction to the pleasure.

Soon, Billy began to test Ian by slowly pushing a finger inside his pucker, fucking him gently with his finger. Billy again took Ian’s cock into his mouth; Ian moaned and began to fuck his face. Billy decided to take a chance and push his finger all the way inside in hopes of quickly finding his sweet spot. Ian began to moan even louder, and within seconds he was shooting his warm load down the back of Billy’s throat.

Right on target, Billy thought as he slid his finger out of Ian’s ass. He continued to suck his dick until he had drained every bit of

come Ian had to offer.

Ian sat down, pulled Billy close to him, and covered Billy's lips with his own. He parted Billy's lips with his tongue and tasted just a hint of himself in Billy's warm, inviting mouth. Ian stopped just long enough to say, "Let me take care of you."

Billy looked into Ian's eyes and said, "Too late."

He looked down, and Ian followed his lead. Without touching himself, Billy had shot his load on Ian's left foot.

Embarrassed, Billy said, "I'm sorry. That was just so damn hot, I couldn't control myself. That's never happened before, and to be honest, it felt incredible. Being turned on so much that you don't even need to touch yourself to come, that's a new experience for me, and I damn well liked it."

Ian smiled sweetly with just a hint of satisfaction in his grin as they finished showering. He continued to tease Billy as he helped him dress.

While Billy was carrying Ian downstairs and helping him into the Escalade, Ian said, "Don't think you're going to carry me around the doctor's office."

"I understand," Billy said. "But please promise me you'll at least allow me to help you into the office."

"I promise," Ian agreed, and they were on their way.

CHAPTER 9

IAN'S estimate of twenty-five minutes was right on the money, and they arrived at the doctor's office with five minutes to spare. An hour and forty-five minutes later, they were leaving the office with Ian on crutches, his ankle wrapped up tight and Billy carrying a set of X-rays showing no broken bones. It was a pretty bad sprain. Ian's doctor had given him the set of X-rays in the event he wanted to see an orthopedic specialist, but Ian felt pretty confident that he didn't need a second opinion.

On the way home, Billy pulled into a grocery store and, while Ian waited in the SUV, bought all the makings for a few nights' dinners: some sandwich meats, more breakfast food, a case of water, and several bottles of wine. He knew Ian would be working from home for a week or so, and he wanted to make sure Ian would have everything he needed.

While Ian waited in the SUV, he took the time to call Josh to fill him in on the details of the accident and let him know he would be working from home for a week or so. Then he called Jean and Jules as he had promised. After waiting for Jules to pick up another

extension, he gave them both the full doctor's report. With relief in his voice, Jules gave his well wishes and goodbyes and hung up the extension. Jean, however, stayed on the phone asking about medications, healing times, and if there was any chance of permanent damage. Then, in the easy way she always had with him, she asked about Billy.

There was a brief silence, and Ian took a deep breath. "Jean, it's the strangest thing. This man has touched me in a way that no one has since, well... you know."

"Todd, dear?" Jean replied.

"Yes, ma'am, but why do you always make me say it?"

"I know you hate to hear his name, but I make you say it because I want you to know how far you've come and that Todd didn't destroy you."

"Okay, okay, but this scares the hell out of me and I don't know what to do about it. Right now he's in the supermarket making sure I have enough to eat. He's carried me around the house, dressed me, fed me, taken me to the bathroom, alternated hot and cold compresses on my ankle day and night, and damn it, I'm enjoying the hell out of it."

Ian could almost hear the smile on Jean's face, but all she said was, "That's good, honey. He's a good man and he wants to take care of you. Don't mess it up."

"Thanks a lot," Ian said.

"Oh, you know what I mean, Ian. Just go with the flow and see where it takes you."

“I’ve already decided to take it one day at a time. It may not last, so why should I be stressing out about it?” Ian explained.

“That’s my Ian,” Jean said. “Always the positive one.”

Ian saw Billy walking toward the SUV with a shopping cart full of food and told Jean he had to go and would talk to her later. Billy put the groceries in the back of the SUV and climbed in. Ian smiled at him and said, “Jean sends her love and thanks you for taking such good care of me.”

“She’s such a sweet lady,” Billy said.

“Yep, she’s a doll,” replied Ian.

They looked at each other and smiled as Billy pulled out of the parking lot. They made one more stop at the CVS to pick up the prescription for pain medicine that Ian’s doctor had called in and buy a heating pad, and then they headed back to Ian’s.

Billy helped Ian out of the SUV, but Ian was determined to make it up the stairs on his crutches alone, without Billy’s help.

“You can’t be here every minute of the day and night,” Ian said. “I need to be able to do some things on my own.”

“You’re right,” Billy said. “So take it slow and I’ll be right behind you.”

“Promise?” Ian choked out as he approached the landing to the stairs.

“I promise, so don’t you worry.”

Slowly, Ian made his way to the top of the first floor stairs with Billy on his heels. They climbed up steadily, one step at a time. When

Ian stepped onto the top of the landing with his left foot, gained his balance, and pulled both crutches up behind him, he sighed with a sense of accomplishment. "How was that?"

"Good job," Billy said, reaching around Ian to open the door .

Ian made his way to the couch and sat down rather shakily. He leaned his crutches beside him and took a deep breath. "These things are going to take some getting used to," he said, referring to the crutches.

"You'll adjust in no time," Billy yelled as he was running down to the garage, taking the steps two at a time. He managed to get all the groceries up the stairs in three trips and had them put away in no time.

Billy reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the little white bag containing the pain medication they'd picked up from the CVS. He grabbed a bottle of water, walked to the living room, and placed the pills and water on the table in front of Ian, taking a long look around the room.

It appeared to Ian that Billy was trying to make sure he had everything he needed before he left. He turned his head away, trying not to show any concern, but was suddenly hit with a sense of loneliness at the thought of Billy leaving. *What is happening to me? I barely know this man.*

Billy, still scanning the room, found the remote control for the flat-panel television and retrieved the cordless telephone out of its cradle.

He placed the other two items next to the water and the pills and said, "Well, handsome, this should hold you until I get back."

Ian relaxed and thought to himself, *He said “get back.” He’s coming back!*

With a sense of relief he hoped Billy hadn’t sensed, Ian casually said, “Sure, I’ll be fine. Where are you going?”

“If I’m going to stay here for a couple of days, just until you can manage on your own, I’ll need a few things from the ranch. My toothbrush, for one thing, and some clean underwear. Now,” Billy continued, “you didn’t invite me, and if you’d rather I didn’t stay, I totally understand, and... if that’s the case, I’ll just prepare your meals for the week, and all you’ll need to do is warm them up in the microwave and you’ll be set. And of course, I’ll stop by every day and make sure you’re okay. I would prefer to stay and take care of you, but I don’t want to crowd you. It’s totally your decision.”

It must have been the combination of the events of the past two days coming together in an awful storm, but tears started running down Ian’s cheeks, and no matter how hard he tried to stop them, he couldn’t, so he just stopped trying and let it all go.

Billy moved closer to Ian, concerned that he had said something to upset him. But it didn’t matter; instinctively, all he wanted to do was put his arms around Ian and hold him.

Ian sobbed into Billy’s shoulder for a while as Billy held him tight, finally breaking the embrace to grab a Kleenex off the table.

“You must think I’m a complete nutcase. Of course I want you to stay, but even if I told you I didn’t, you weren’t going anywhere without cooking my meals and making sure I’d have everything I needed. You can’t be real, Billy. Men like you don’t exist.”

Billy took Ian's chin in his right hand, looked intently into his eyes, and said, "I'm very real, Ian, and there are plenty of men like me who want, no, *need* to do the right thing. Trust me, I am far from perfect. I wake up every morning and look at myself in the mirror, and if I don't like the man I see, I try to become a better man. When it comes down to it, we all have to love who we are before we can expect anyone else to love us."

Ian took Billy's hand and said, "Thank you."

"Anytime. We okay?" Billy asked.

"You bet," Ian replied. "I'll be fine. Now get out of here so you can get back before rush hour traffic."

"One more thing," Billy said. "I'll need to get up about five o'clock so I can get back out to the ranch by six. I have a full load of tours the rest of the week, but I can be back here by six or six thirty. And starting tomorrow, for the next four nights, I'm back at Jean's opening for Jed. You think you'll be up for joining me? You can sit at Jean's table and not have to move until I finish my set."

"I think I would enjoy that. I'm quite sure I'll be ready to get out of here by then," Ian claimed.

"Then we have a plan," Billy said. "If it's okay to use your SUV, I'll see you in a couple of hours."

Ian heard the garage door opening as the engine of his SUV came to life, and then the sound faded away as the garage door closed again.

When the hum of the garage door stopped, the house was suddenly silent. Ian took a pain pill and a sip of water and lay there

with his eyes closed. He couldn't ever remember his house being so quiet. He had bought the place when he'd moved out of the saloon several months after he'd resigned from the bar. His accountant had convinced him that he needed a tax write-off and assured him it was a great deal. It was much more space than he needed, but he'd reluctantly agreed. He had adjusted all right but remembered back to how uncomplicated it had been when he'd lived over the saloon. No stuff and no memories, just a roof over his head and people who cared for him, the closest thing he would ever have to a real family.

This was certainly a great house, but he'd never felt like it would ever be his home, until yesterday. Ian couldn't control his thoughts. What was happening here? He knew that since losing Todd, he had always overanalyzed things, but the way he'd acted the last couple of days wasn't like him. He never cared about having someone with him, never needed anyone to take care of him. He had given up that dream so long ago. Why, all of a sudden, was he considering allowing someone into his life now, someone who could eventually hurt him again? Logically, he knew he shouldn't do it, but he didn't feel in control of his emotions anymore. He was smitten with Billy, and no one was more surprised than him. Within a half hour, while his head was still reeling, the pain pill got the best of him and he drifted off to sleep.

Billy drove Ian's SUV toward the Lazy H Ranch in silence, thinking about what had happened over the past couple of days. Damn if Ian Dillon hadn't taken his heart and run with it. Up until now, Billy had been so career-driven and concerned about keeping his sexuality quiet that he hadn't dared date or have a sexual relationship with anyone. In this business, you could never really tell who anyone was or who they knew. He had heard stories about guys

getting their big break and then being outed by some scorned lover or, worse than that, a one-night stand. He thought back to the big scandal when a particular up-and-coming singer was arrested in a public restroom for propositioning a police officer for sex and wondered what drove a man to such measures. But whether it was true or not, it had brought down his career and he'd never really recovered from it. Billy wasn't the type to have casual sex anyway, but he'd been very guarded about his lifestyle, until yesterday. He thought about how Ian had reacted to being taken care of, cared for. It was clear that he had been a loner for some time, and there was a reason behind that. Someone had hurt him very badly and he had never gotten over it. What did that mean for them? Could Ian get past it? Did he want to help Ian get past it? How would Ian affect his career? Would it hurt his chances of getting a break? Billy knew that eventually he would have to decide these things, but for now, he just wanted Ian. He didn't know what it was or why it had happened, but it had and he was going to enjoy it.

When Billy got to the ranch, he headed right to the bunkhouse to gather his things. Some of the guys from the early shift were already off work, enjoying a beer and discussing what they were going to fix for dinner. A couple of the guys knew what had happened because they had met Billy to take care of the horses when he'd gotten Ian back from Bells Bend. The guys greeted Billy and immediately asked about Ian. He explained that there were no broken bones but a pretty bad sprain and Ian would have to stay off it for about a week. He walked over to his locker, opened it, and began to rummage around for what he needed. After he packed his bag, he told the men he was going to bunk over at Ian's house to give him a hand until he was back on his feet. As the other guides were

walking out the door, they offered to cover for Billy if he needed to be away or do whatever he needed them to do. He assured them that it was under control and that he would see them around six in the morning.

While Billy was putting the last of his things in his bag, one of the guys stayed behind and walked over to Billy. He looked like he wanted to say something but just stood there.

“Is something wrong?” Billy asked.

“I don’t know, maybe,” the ranch hand said. “Look, I don’t know if this is anything or not, but Buck was in here earlier laughing and talking about how the queers were up at Bells Bend having a quaint little lunch and one got thrown off his horse.”

“Really,” Billy said. “Now how would he know that?”

The ranch hand continued, “I just wanted you to know, watch your back, Billy. That guy has got some serious issues.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll keep an eye on him,” Billy said.

The ranch hand left, and Billy finished packing his bag and headed back to Ian’s.

CHAPTER 10

IAN was awakened by the sound of the garage door opening and realized Billy must be home. He sat up, wiped his eyes, and ran his fingers through his hair. *How bad do I look?* Ian was reaching for his crutches when Billy walked through the door with a black leather bag and a great big smile.

He dropped the bag by the staircase, walked over to Ian, and kissed him on the lips. “Hey, handsome, you are so cute when you wake up. I assume you got a little rest?”

Ian licked his lips and sleepily said, “Hey, Billy. Yeah, I think so. What time is it?”

“About six o’clock. How’s that ankle?”

“Right now it feels pretty damn good; it must be the pain pills.”

Billy sat down next to Ian and put his arm around his shoulder. He leaned in and kissed Ian again and pulled him in close.

“I missed you,” Billy said. “The guys at the ranch asked about you and send their best.”

“That’s sweet. Can you help me up? I need to pee, and I want to change my clothes. These tight jeans are killing me.”

“Yeah, but they look hot,” Billy said as he helped Ian to his left foot. “If you don’t mind, I’ll change as well, now that I have some clothes.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ian replied.

Once Ian was up and had his crutches, Billy picked up his bag and closely followed Ian up the stairs. When they reached the bedroom, Ian went directly to the bathroom and Billy took the clothes out of his bag. He kicked off his sneakers and quickly changed into a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt. Ian emerged from the bathroom and made his way over to the armoire. He opened the massive doors and retrieved a pair of long cotton pajama bottoms, and Billy helped him into them.

“Thanks,” Ian said. “That feels so much better.”

“I agree. If you’re up to it, let’s head back downstairs, and I’ll light a fire and pour us a glass of wine.”

“Sounds perfect,” Ian said.

Before Ian could pick up his crutches, Billy, in another one of his fluid moves, had Ian in his arms. “No use wearing yourself out on those things while I’m here,” Billy said. “Besides, you’ll need your strength for later.”

“My hero,” Ian sighed as he buried his head into Billy’s neck and allowed himself to be carried down the stairs.

When they reached the main floor, Billy placed Ian on one of the stools at the breakfast bar. He took a pillow from the couch,

placed it on the stool next to Ian's, and lifted his ankle and gently placed it on the pillow. Then he leaned over and kissed Ian's toes and, looking up at Ian with a smile on his face, sucked on his big toe.

"Don't start something you can't finish, cowboy."

"That's got to hold you for now," Billy said as he kissed Ian's toe one last time, straightened up, and made his way around the bar to the kitchen. He opened a bottle of wine and poured them each a glass.

"Now what?" Ian said.

"I'm going to start a fire, and you're going to keep me company while I start dinner."

"And... what are we having?"

"That depends," Billy responded. "What do you like?"

Ian looked up at the ceiling with a quizzical look on his face.

"Mostly everything: no anchovies on my pizza, no fishy fish, and no animal parts I can't identify. Other than that, I'm good."

"That's good, because we're having shrimp Creole over white rice."

Billy took a sip of wine and walked over to the fireplace. He strategically placed the kindling on the iron grate, placed three small logs on top, and lit the kindling. Within minutes he had a great fire going.

"You're really good at that," Ian said. "I'm impressed."

"I love wood-burning fireplaces. Something about the crackling sound and the smell of wood burning makes me think of home."

For a moment, Ian thought, maybe one day this could be your home, too, but stopped himself mid-thought and shook his head. *Stop it, Ian*, he said to himself again. *This is crazy.*

Billy was looking through Ian's CD collection and saw Ian shaking his head out of the corner of his eye.

"Is something wrong?"

Ian didn't respond.

"Ian?"

In an apologetic voice, Ian said, "What? Oh, sorry, did you say something?"

"Are you still with me, buddy?"

"Yeah, I just got lost there for a minute, I'm back now."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"Nah. Did you find anything you like?"

Understanding Ian was struggling with something and wasn't ready to talk about it, Billy said, "How about Michael Bublé?"

"Sure, he's great!"

Billy loaded the CD, checked the fire, and joined Ian at the breakfast bar. He placed both hands on the back of Ian's barstool and gently kissed the back of his neck. Ian relaxed and melted into the kiss. He turned to face Billy, and they exchanged a long look. Billy said, "Thanks for that, but time's a-wasting."

Ian smiled and said, "What can I do to help?"

“Just sit there and look handsome,” Billy replied.

“I can do that for now, but eventually I’ll need something hard to do.”

“And eventually you will have something hard to do, if you get my drift.”

“I like the way you think, cowboy, but how long is eventually?”

“As long as it takes me to prepare shrimp Creole, meatloaf, and mashed potatoes, and red beans and rice with Italian sausage. That should get us through the rest of the week,” he said with a sly smile on his face.

“Geez, all that. I’d better shut up and let you get to it or we’re gonna be here all night,” Ian said with a disappointed look on his face.

BILLY did a mental review of everything he’d purchased at the supermarket and started by pouring them each a little more wine. He opened a hunk of sharp cheddar cheese and some crackers and put them on a plate to keep Ian occupied while he started to prepare the meals.

They were both quiet for a few minutes, and Billy noticed that Ian was fidgeting like he wanted to talk about something but wasn’t sure if he should. Just then, Ian sliced a piece of cheese, placed it on a cracker, and put it in Billy’s mouth. He took a sip of wine and nervously said, “So... uh, have you had any lasting relationships?”

Now Billy knew what the fidgeting was about. “Well, I’ve only had one, and it lasted about three years.”

“I’d really like to hear about it, if it isn’t too hard to talk about?”

“No, I don’t mind at all, and by the way, my life is an open book, and you can ask me anything you want and I’ll answer honestly.”

“Thanks,” Ian responded. “So...?”

Billy thought back and started the story.

“I was twenty-one, and it was shortly after my divorce. I started going to the only gay bar I knew, but I’d drive around the block over and over again and then leave, because I was too scared to go in. That routine lasted a few weeks, and one night I said the hell with it, and I parked around back and walked it. I stayed all of two minutes because I was so scared. The next time I went in, I ordered a beer, took one sip, and left.”

While moving the base of his wine glass in circles on the surface of the bar, allowing it to breathe, Ian said, “Very interesting, go on.”

“Finally, after a couple of drinks at home, I found the courage to stay for a while. And that’s where we met. His name was Steve. He was a schoolteacher and was cute as a button.

“One night I was sitting at the bar, and a very attractive blue-eyed blond, not near as handsome as you,” Billy added, “named Larry sat down next to me and asked if he could buy me a drink. Still being new to this type of attention, I said sure. Larry, who I found out later that night was also divorced, was the first man I ever picked up

or was picked up by. We met at the bar a few times, then he asked me to his house for dinner, and I stayed. I know, I was a slut, but what can I say. We started a casual relationship, and I soon figured out he was one messed-up puppy. He was into some things that I wasn't familiar or comfortable with, and I, thank God, I had enough sense to break it off. After it ended, we saw each other occasionally because that was the only bar I felt comfortable frequenting, and one night while we were having a drink together, he introduced me to Steve.

“We had an instant attraction, and he asked me out. After several dates, we took our relationship to the next level, and I was hooked. Steve was, how do I put it, pretty promiscuous and didn't really want a monogamous relationship, but as you'll learn, I'm always up for a challenge. I pushed. After all, I was in love with him, and if I was in love with him, he must be in love with me, right? Not!

“I realized that as long as I threw myself at him and waited in the wings for his attention, he was never available. I, of course, tired of that quickly and started to play his games. I shamelessly flirted with any man who would give me the time of day, and that was all it took. After a week or so of that behavior, he was ready to commit to only me, or so I thought.

“We were together, as I mentioned, just about three years, and I was the only one in the entire gay community who didn't know he was sleeping with every man that breathed. I was so in love, so blind, that I didn't see any of the warning signs. Even after I found out he was sleeping around, I continued the relationship, hoping he would change. I became very concerned about STDs or even AIDS, and eventually I found the courage to end it. We tried to get back

together a few times, but he never stopped sleeping around, and thankfully, I'd finally had enough. It was a very difficult and painful time in my life that I do not look back on with any sense of dignity, which nearly killed me."

Billy had tears running down both cheeks, and Ian wished like hell he could get up and hold him. But all he could do was reach for his hand, which Billy took gratefully.

Now Ian had tears streaming down both cheeks as well. Billy didn't know it, but he had touched a sensitive nerve.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that," Ian said.

"Thanks," Billy said. "It was tough, but I survived. My mother believes that everything that happens to us in life makes us who we are, and I believe it. I didn't then, but I do now. For many years after Steve and I broke up, I couldn't trust and I couldn't be in a relationship with someone I didn't trust, so I just stayed single. By the time I matured enough to know that I couldn't control people and they were going to do whatever they wanted regardless of how it made me feel, I was used to being alone, so I just stayed that way.

"Besides, by then, I had made a choice to chase a career in music and thought it best that I simply lay low. I didn't want photos of me in a black leather thong popping up at the CMA awards."

Ian chuckled at the thought and poured Billy another glass of wine.

"In addition, after everything I had been through, I set my standards pretty high, and no one ever measured up, until now. In hindsight, I think it was just a defense mechanism. If no one met my standards, I wouldn't love, and in return, wouldn't be hurt. How's

that for a nutcase story?" Billy said.

"You've been through so much. How do you get beyond the things that broke you down?"

"I deal with them," Billy said, "one at a time, until I've worked through them and they make sense to me. Don't get me wrong, I'm still cautious and protective of my heart, but I've learned to read people, and I think I'm now a pretty good judge of character. Knowing in my heart that a person's genuine gives me courage to go out on the proverbial limb."

By the time Billy's story was over, the meatloaf was in the oven, the mashed potatoes were in the fridge, the red beans were simmering on the stove, the shrimp Creole and a piping hot loaf of bread were ready to serve, and Billy had made enough rice for two or three meals. They ate at the bar with Ian's right leg still on the stool to his right and Billy seated to his left, and Ian proclaimed the meal a success.

"So why now?" Ian asked as Billy started loading the dishwasher.

"What do you mean, why now?"

"You said because of your career aspirations, you decided not to get involved or even date. So why now?"

"Good question," Billy said. "I asked myself the same question while I was driving to the ranch, and the only solution I came up with is you! Maybe I was always open to it, if the right person came along, but he never did, so it didn't matter."

"That's an awful lot of pressure," Ian said.

"No, it's really not," said Billy. "These are my feelings, not yours, and I can't make you feel what you don't. If you don't feel what I feel, there's no pressure. I love myself enough to take care of me, and you should do the same."

"I get where you're coming from, Billy. You know I haven't dated in years, and I have no real idea why you're here with me now. I decided long ago that I would keep myself buried in my work and that was all I needed. After meeting you, I was wrong, dead wrong; work is not all I need. And I feel like I want to move forward, I'm just not sure how to do it."

"Day by day," Billy said.

"You're so open, Billy, with everything. You face your demons head on and get them out of the way. I wish I was like you."

"This demon-facing, as you call it, didn't happen overnight. For the longest time, I was an emotionally wounded man. I went through life on autopilot, but one day I woke up and just couldn't get out of bed. I spent the entire day curled up in the fetal position with thoughts of ending the pain and loneliness consuming me. By day's end, I finally gave in and downed a bottle of over-the-counter sleeping pills with a glass of scotch. Looking back now, I realize how fortunate I was that it wasn't enough to kill me; just, sure as hell, made me sicker than I've ever been.

"When the sickness was over and my body was exhausted from heaving, lying on the bathroom floor, I finally gave in and came apart at the seams. I sobbed for hours and simply let it all go. When I had no more tears, I dragged myself into the shower, and with the steam surrounding me like a fog and the hot water beating down on me, I said to myself, 'No more'. And from that time, I've spent every

day of my life exploring my feelings and trying to be a better man. I look at each new day as a day of self-discovery, and you can't imagine how very liberating that is. When you hit rock bottom, there's no way but up.

"Ian, you didn't ask for my opinion, but I'm going to give it to you anyway. I think you've kept your feelings buried for so long, it's probably easier to let them stay there. I remember those days well, but please trust me on this. You may think it's easier that way, but eventually it will be the emotional death of you."

"I know, Billy, you're right. I'm not there yet, but you give me hope. We all have baggage, and of course I have a history of my own, a very painful history, and I'm just not ready to share it."

"I'm not asking you to. When you're ready, I'll be here, but I don't want you to tell me about it out of obligation. I know that someone hurt you badly, Ian. I can see it in your eyes, I can hear it in your words, but it's up to you to want to get over it. I can't do that for you. Maybe trying to bury the hurt just isn't cutting it; maybe you should start to think about dealing with the feelings instead of burying them."

"Billy, all I really know at this exact second is that you make me want to be a loving, feeling, and living person again. Please be patient with me. I want to do this."

Billy sighed and squeezed Ian's hand. "I'll be patient with you as long as you need me to, as long as it's healthy for me."

Billy put the leftover shrimp Creole in a plastic bowl, removed the red beans from the stove, and placed everything in the refrigerator. The fire had gone out long ago, but he turned off the CD

player, which was on repeat and had probably played three times, brushed his hands together, and said, “That’s it. We’re done!”

“Hallelujah,” Ian said. “Can we go upstairs now?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Billy said. Ian’s crutches were still upstairs, so Billy picked him up, and they headed up the stairs with Ian’s head lying on Billy’s shoulder.

CHAPTER 11

BILLY didn't wait until he reached the bedroom. His lips were already covering Ian's by the time they'd reached the top of the stairs. Ian opened up for Billy, and their tongues explored as if their mouths were the entrance to their hearts.

When they reached the bed, Billy gently sat Ian in an upright position on the edge. In one fluid move, as Billy began to straighten, Ian pulled Billy's sweatshirt over his head. Following Ian's lead, Billy did the same for him.

Billy lovingly nudged Ian to lie back, and when he did, Billy slid his pants down to his ankles. In one continuous move, he slipped Ian's pants over his feet, taking Ian's left sock with it. Billy threw the pants and sock behind him, removed his own pants, and knelt between Ian's legs.

All he could think about was Ian, his hot, muscular body waiting to be taken. Billy began to nibble at Ian's already stiffening cock through his underwear. He turned his head to the side and ran his teeth up and down the shaft of Ian's cock, teasing and tormenting

with every stroke.

Ian began to slowly raise and lower his hips, responding to Billy's tender touch. Billy pulled the waistband of Ian's underwear down far enough to expose his thick, now rock-hard cock. In one slow, tantalizing move, Billy's mouth slid all the way down to the base of Ian's dick, stopping only when he inhaled the sweet smell of Ian's manhood through his crotch hairs. He slowly slid his mouth back up to the head of Ian's cock and began to move in slow, even strokes as Ian moaned with pleasure.

He reluctantly released him when Ian took him by his upper arms and pulled Billy to him. Ian plunged his tongue into Billy's mouth and consumed him with every ounce of passion he could muster. Then a sense of panic overtook him. He knew that in that very moment, he wanted Billy more than he had ever wanted anyone before. His mind was flooded with fear, guilt, and uncertainty. Could he chance hurting Billy? He was so open, so vulnerable, so willing to risk getting hurt. How could Billy be so unafraid of what the future held? After all, they'd only known each other for a few days. These feelings didn't make any sense to Ian, but he was through trying to make sense out of things. In this second, he was more certain than ever that he did want Billy, but could he make it happen, could he forget the past and love again? He didn't know, and at this very moment he didn't care. With so much uncertainty ahead, he just wanted to get lost in this moment with this incredible man.

Billy kissed his way down Ian's chest and washboard abs to what waited below. He again took Ian's erect cock into his mouth and caressed it while he gently lifted his legs. Releasing Ian's dick from his mouth, he ran his tongue over Ian's balls and down the crack

of his ass to his opening. Billy supported Ian's legs over his shoulders and with his hands spread Ian's ass cheeks and slowly licked and teased Ian's hole. Ian arched his back and whimpered from the pleasure.

"Do you trust me?" Billy asked in a very soft voice.

"Yes," Ian whispered.

"I want to be one with you. I need to be inside you so badly."

The silence was deafening.

Billy thought, *He's not ready*, and based on all he knew about Ian, he thought he understood why.

"I want that too," Ian said.

"No pressure," Billy asserted.

"I know," Ian said as he smiled up at Billy.

Billy reached for the bottle of lubricant in the bedside table and laid it on the bed. He slowly repositioned Ian's legs, taking extra care with his bandaged ankle. Billy placed Ian's feet against his chest. Softly, he kissed Ian's toes. He lubricated his fingers and slowly approached Ian's hole and began to massage his pucker.

Ian tensed as he felt Billy's finger touch him. He fought the urge to think back to the last person who had made love to him, but he was determined to make this a new experience between him and Billy and not haul the past into it.

He took a deep breath and tried to relax his inner muscles as Billy gently probed his hole with his finger. Billy took his time, carefully massaging and probing to get Ian used to the feeling and to

make sure he was relaxed enough to accept him.

“Are you ready?” Billy asked.

“Yes” flowed eagerly from Ian’s mouth.

Slowly Billy positioned his dick against Ian and pushed into him. Ian gasped when he felt Billy’s girth. Billy was still for a few minutes to allow Ian to adjust to the invasion. Slowly, Billy started moving, until his dick disappeared into Ian’s accepting hole. Ian swallowed hard and took deep breaths as the pain turned to pleasure and he relaxed into the ride. When Billy saw the shift take place, he began to move in and out of Ian, increasing the pace as he went.

“You feel so good,” Billy whispered.

Ian’s cock seemed to get harder every time Billy thrust fully into him. Ian wrapped both of his legs around Billy’s torso. Billy moved closer to Ian and felt his cock penetrate deeper into him. Through hot breath, Billy drove his tongue into Ian’s mouth. Ian closed his eyes, and Billy couldn’t believe how much he yearned for this man.

Billy spread some lube on Ian’s dick and began to slide his hand up and down over the head, down the shaft, to the base and back up again. Ian was so hard, Billy feared he would burst with pleasure any minute. Billy felt his balls begin to tighten and knew he was about to come. He started to pick up speed and willed his hand to match his pace stroke for stroke as he jerked Ian off.

Within seconds Billy and Ian simultaneously shot their loads, Ian over his stomach and onto his chest as far as his chin, Billy filling Ian’s warm, inviting ass. Out of breath and exhausted from the intense lovemaking, Billy collapsed on top of Ian, and they lay there in silence.

They had just gone to a place never imagined, and there was no reason to believe that they could ever turn back. Billy finally broke the silence.

“Ian?”

“Yeah, cowboy.”

“I think that was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“You think?” Ian said.

“Let me rephrase that. I know that was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“That’s better,” Ian said. Billy repositioned himself at Ian’s side and relaxed his head on Ian’s chest. Ian wrapped his arm around Billy and held him tightly. Billy gently caressed Ian’s chest and teased at his nipples.

Eventually, Billy helped Ian to the bathroom, and they cleaned up and climbed back into bed. They lay there spooning, with Ian’s back tucked against Billy’s chest and Billy’s protective arms surrounding him, where Ian thought he could stay forever. The last thing Ian did before falling off into a dreamy sleep was set the alarm clock for five o’clock the next morning.

CHAPTER 12

THEY were in the same position when the alarm clock sounded. Startled, Billy sat upright. “It’s okay, cowboy, just the alarm clock.” Ian reached over, turned off the alarm, and pulled back the covers, making an attempt to get out of bed.

Billy put a hand on Ian’s shoulder and said, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To start the coffee while you shower,” Ian replied.

“Don’t be silly,” Billy said. “I’ll get a cup at the minimart around the corner. Please... stay in bed.”

Billy got out of bed, and Ian watched his naked body, with the tightest butt he had ever seen, pick up his black leather bag and make his way to the bathroom. He pulled the covers back up and listened to the unfamiliar sound of water cascading off another person’s body, a sound he hadn’t heard in over eight years. He decided he liked it; the effect was warm and comforting but strange and familiar, all at the same time.

Ten minutes later, his cowboy came out of the bathroom. His towel-dried black hair was slicked back, and he was dressed in tight blue jeans and a plaid western shirt.

Billy walked over to Ian, leaned over, and gently kissed him. "I'll call when I stop for lunch, and I'll be back here no later than six thirty this evening."

Ian mumbled, "I'll be fine, cowboy, enjoy your day," as he covered Billy's mouth with his own.

Billy looked around and found what he was looking for. He placed Ian's crutches alongside the bed and whispered, "I'll miss you," as he turned and left the room.

Ian contentedly rolled over and fell asleep almost immediately. He woke to the ringing of the telephone.

"Hello," he said with a sleepy voice.

"Ian, honey, it's Jean. Did I wake you?"

"What time is it, baby cakes?"

"Ten thirty," Jean said. "How's that ankle of yours?"

"Ten thirty? It's doing much better, thanks. Those pain pills knocked me for a loop; I can't remember the last time I stayed in bed past eight o'clock."

"You need to rest that ankle anyway, honey. Don't you worry about it. I just called because Jules told me Billy had to be at the ranch this morning, and I wanted to make sure you were okay and didn't need anything."

"Thanks Jean, I'm good. Billy made me plenty to eat, and he'll

be home about six thirty. If I feel up to it, I may join him at the saloon tonight for his show.”

“Oh, that will be wonderful, dear. I can’t wait to see you both.”

“Jean?”

“Yes, honey.”

“Thanks.”

“For what, honey?”

“Just being you.”

“Oh, I can’t help that, now can I? See you tonight.”

“See you later, baby cakes.”

Ian hung up the phone and said to himself, *Home? Did I just tell Jean that Billy would be “home” at six thirty? Oh man, I’ve got it bad.*

He got up, hopped over to the bathroom, and turned on the steam shower. While he waited for the water to heat up, Ian unwrapped his ankle, which looked and felt much better this morning. He hopped into the shower and allowed the steam and hot water to relax his body. As he stood under the falling water of the rain shower, he decided that physically, he felt pretty good. His ass was a little tender, but that was expected after such a night. But to his astonishment, emotionally, he was okay.

He had crossed a line with Billy that he hadn’t intended to ever cross again, but he was okay. In fact he was better than okay, he was great. *Day by day*, he told himself, *no less, no more.*

Ian rewrapped his ankle, dressed, and made his way

downstairs on his crutches. On the breakfast bar was a note from Billy that said, “Good morning, handsome. There’s fresh coffee in the pot, a breakfast sandwich in the microwave and a container with leftover shrimp Creole in the fridge. Or if you’d rather, feel free to help yourself to anything in the fridge and don’t push yourself too hard today! Billy.”

Ian set the microwave to a minute and a half and pressed “start.” He poured himself a cup of coffee, and when the microwave dinged, he put the breakfast sandwich on a plate and hopped to the breakfast bar. As he ate, he planned his day. He couldn’t drive, nor did he have a car, so he wouldn’t be leaving the house. He would first check in with his assistant to review his calendar. He would make a few phone calls, return some if he had any messages, and use the downtime to listen to the stack of demo CDs he’d neglected for the last couple of weeks. And if he was scheduled to attend any important meetings, he could join in via conference call. He crutched his way to his home office and realized he would manage just fine working from home for the next few days, until he could drive again and go into his office at Capitol.

CHAPTER 13

BILLY made it to the ranch in fifty-five minutes. Jules was already there and offered him a cup of coffee.

“How’s our boy?” Jules said between sips of his coffee.

“He’s doing pretty well, considering,” Billy said.

“I’ve never seen Firefly get spooked; do you know what did it?” Jules asked.

“I have no idea,” Billy replied. “One minute she was fine, the next she was on her hind legs and Ian was in the river. It was the damndest thing.”

Jules said, “We might want to keep her off the trails for a couple of days to see if anything’s up with her.”

“I agree,” Billy said. “I’ll put her out to pasture for the day and start getting the other horses saddled and ready to go. It’s damned near eight thirty.”

“Good idea,” Jules said. “By the way, me and a couple of the boys are heading down to the lower forty to repair some fencing. I’ll

catch up with you this afternoon.”

“Have a good day,” Billy said.

The first half of Billy’s ride was uneventful. As he always did, he pointed out vistas and landmarks and any wildlife he spotted, but mostly he rode in silence and thought about Ian.

When they arrived at the lunch spot, Billy put out the spread and told everyone to help themselves. He opened his cell phone, dialing as he walked away.

“This is Ian.”

“Hey, handsome.”

“Hey, cowboy. How’s it going out there in the Wild West?”

“Oh, about the norm, pretty uneventful,” Billy replied.

“A little less exciting than the last ride you were on, I would imagine.”

“A lot less exciting, and I’m happy to keep it that way, especially if you’re involved,” Billy said.

“Now stop being a mother hen, and thanks for the coffee and breakfast.”

“Anytime,” Billy said. “No one can accuse me of not taking care of my man.”

“I certainly can’t,” said Ian, smiling at the “my man” part.

“How’s your day going?” Billy asked.

“Pretty good. It’s amazing how much I can get done from here. I’ve made a few calls and sat in on a meeting via conference call, and

this afternoon, I'm going to put a big dent in the backlog of demo CDs I've been neglecting."

"Don't you go and find anyone better than me on that bunch of CDs, Buster," Billy said with a hint of jealousy.

"No chance, cowboy. I'm counting on you and that voice of yours to get me a big bonus and maybe a promotion."

"Wow, no pressure, huh?" Billy said.

"Maybe a little," Ian said, chuckling.

"How's the ankle?"

"It's much better this morning. The black, blue, and purple have mostly turned to yellow, which is a sign of healing according to the internet, and a good bit of the swelling has gone down, so I think we're on the road to recovery."

"Damn, I was hoping to take care of you for another week or so before you kicked me out."

"Look at the bright side," Ian said. "I could always have a relapse."

"I guess there's always that slim chance," Billy replied in a sad voice.

"And by the way, no one's kicking you out. I'm getting used to having you around."

"Really?" Billy shot back

"Yep," said Ian.

"Oh, Miss Scarlet, you act on me like a tonic," Billy said in his

best Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind* accent.

“Oh, stop it, Rhett, you say the sweetest things,” Ian replied, and they both laughed.

“So, you think you’ll feel up to coming with me to Jean’s tonight?” Billy asked.

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it.”

“It’s a date, then,” Billy said. “I better get this lunch picked up and these people safely back to the ranch so I can get home to you.”

“Deal, see you soon. Goodbye, Billy.”

“Bye, handsome.”

Billy closed his cell phone and starting walking back to his group. *Did I just say “home” to Ian?* Billy thought. *Oh man, I’ve got it bad.*

THE second half of Billy’s day was as uneventful as the first half. He whistled his way through the rest of his chores as if he were on autopilot. He carefully helped his staff unsaddle and brush each horse, replaced the bits and hackamores with halters, and led them, two at a time, to the walker for a cool down period. While they were cooling down, he sorted the tack and put it away, dumped a bucket of feed into each stall, and helped fill their water buckets. In another thirty minutes, the horses were settled in for the night and he was at the bunkhouse picking out something to wear for the night’s performance. As he was walking out the door, he nearly ran right into

Buck, who was coming in at the same time.

Buck gave him a familiar scowl and drawled, “How’s your B-O-Y-friend?”

Shocked by Buck’s comment, Billy said, “What are you talking about?”

“Everyone’s talking about your boyfriend’s freak accident. He should be a little more careful.”

“That’s funny, I’ve been here all day and no one’s mentioned a thing about it to me,” Billy barked.

“All I know is that your little boy toy better be more careful when something smacks his horse in the ass,” Buck hissed.

Billy thought for a second and decided to keep his mouth shut and simply walk away. He would deal with this tomorrow after talking to Jules. With this on his to-do list for the next day, by a little past five o’clock, he was back in the Escalade and on his way to see Ian.

Ian’s day had gone by very fast. He’d spent a good bit of time on the phone with Josh, talking about Billy. Josh respected him and his opinion a great deal, so it didn’t take much to convince him to come out to Jean’s to catch the show and to bring his wife Suzie, whom Ian really liked. He thought about whether he should tell Billy before or after the show but decided he had a right to know before he performed and would tell him when he got home.

He spent the biggest part of his day, as he had planned, listening to demo CDs. After listening to each one, he sorted them into three stacks. The first and smallest stack was the ones he liked,

and would pass along to Josh for a second opinion. The second stack was the “maybes,” and these he would listen to again in a few days to see if he still thought they had a shot before he passed them along to his boss. The third and tallest stack was the “rejects.”

Ian hated the “rejects” because he knew he was throwing away someone’s hopes and dreams and no one should have the ability to do that to another person. But unfortunately, it was the business and a tough business it was. Only the best of whatever the trend was at the time would make it. He had seen “beautiful people” without great voices make it big because of their looks and marketability. He also saw people with incredible voices not make it because they didn’t have “the look” or “the figure” or “the savvy” to carry it off. It always seemed so unfair to him, but the music business was anything but fair. He wondered how well Billy knew the business he was getting himself into and vowed that if Billy would let him, he would help guide his career and make sure he was never taken advantage of.

Ian had taken the last demo CD out of the player and was inserting it into its paper sleeve when he heard the hum of the garage door opening. He identified the sounds of his SUV’s door opening and closing, Billy climbing the stairs, the garage door closing, and the opening of the living room door.

“Lucy, I’m home,” Billy shouted with a strong Cuban accent.

“I’m in here, Ricky,” Ian shouted, trying to sound like Lucille Ball. In seconds, with a garment bag in hand, Billy stood in the doorway to Ian’s office.

“Hey, stud,” Ian said with a smile.

“Hey, handsome. And enough of that ‘stud’ stuff, okay? Am I

ever going to live that down?"

"Probably not, but I'll cut you some slack because I haven't seen you all day."

"Thanks a lot," Billy said as he made his way to Ian, seated behind his desk. He got down on one knee and kissed Ian tenderly.

When the kiss was over, Billy said, "I've been waiting for that all day."

"You really did have an uneventful day if this is what you looked forward to."

"Funny," Billy said as he studied the three stacks of CDs on Ian's desk.

"How'd it go?" he asked, referring to the stacks.

"As well as could be expected," Ian replied.

"Let me guess," Billy said as he pointed to the stacks in order, "good ones, okay ones, and not-so-good ones."

"And how did you come to that conclusion?" Ian asked.

"It makes perfect sense to me that since there are only a handful of new, really good performers, they would be the smallest stack. And it's also pretty obvious that there are so many aspiring performers without the 'wow' factor that they would be the largest stack, and with those two figured out, I guessed at the middle stack."

"Well done, cowboy," Ian said. "Now take a seat, because I have something to tell you and you have to promise me that you won't get mad."

Billy thought for a second and said, "I promise, and do you

want to know why I promise?”

“Sure,” replied Ian with a quizzical tone in his voice.

“Because... at this stage of our relationship, I’m too in lust to get mad, and besides, I wouldn’t want to ‘mad’ myself right out of another night like last night, now would I?”

“Good point,” Ian said.

“So, out with it,” Billy continued.

“My friends, Josh and Suzie Randal, are coming out to Jean’s tonight to catch your show,” Ian nervously uttered.

“Josh Randal... why does that name sound so familiar?”

“Because he’s my boss, and if he likes you, he can make stuff happen.”

“Are you shittin’ me?”

“Nope,” Ian said.

“Hell, I’m not mad, I’m ecstatic,” Billy replied. “Tell me more.”

“Nothing more to tell,” Ian said. “I can’t really guarantee anything except that he’ll be there and he’ll be watching.”

“I don’t need any guarantees, Ian,” Billy said. “The fact that you went to bat for me is more than I could have asked for. I can’t believe this.”

“Believe it. Hopefully we’ll get him there, but the rest is up to you.”

“We didn’t get him there, you got him there, and now I’ve got to figure out a way to repay you.”

“Oh that, we’ll figure something out,” Ian said with a cunning smile. “What time do we need to be at Jean’s?”

“I go on at nine, so about eight thirty should be fine,” Billy replied.

“It’s six forty-five now, so that gives us a little under an hour to eat and shower,” Ian figured.

“We better get a move on, then,” Billy said.

By seven-forty they had eaten, showered, and dressed, and Billy was backing down the stairs one step at a time, facing Ian as Ian proudly descended the stairs without Billy’s help.

CHAPTER 14

THEY were walking into Jean's by 8:40 to a packed house. Neither Billy nor Ian saw Jean or Jules, but one of the waitresses met them at the door.

"Hey, boys," she said. "Jean's not here yet, but she said for Ian to sit at her table and she would join you as soon as she introduced Billy."

"Thanks," Ian and Billy said simultaneously.

They made their way to Jean's table with Billy leading the way, moving barstools and excusing himself as he asked people to step aside to allow Ian on his crutches to pass.

"Thanks," Ian said as they reached Jean's table.

"No problem," Billy answered. "If you'll be all right for a minute, I'll go to the bar and get us a drink. What would you like?"

"I'll have a Bud Light long neck."

"Coming right up," Billy said.

It wasn't long before Billy was back at the table with two beers and a basket of popcorn. He handed one of the beers to Ian and said, "Here you are, sir," placed the basket of popcorn on the table, and downed half of his beer in one gulp.

"Wow, I'm impressed," Ian said as he watched the beer slide down Billy's throat.

"Don't be," Billy said anxiously. "I needed something to take the edge off. I hate to admit it, but I'm a little nervous."

"That's one way to do it," Ian said with some sympathy in his voice. "Don't worry, you'll be great."

The lights dimmed as Billy and Ian saw Jean walk onstage, followed by the spotlight, and stop before the microphone stand.

"Good evening, all. I'd like to welcome you to Jean's Magnolia Saloon. For all you first timers, I'm Jean and I own this joint, so if you need anything, I'm always around. We have a great lineup for you tonight, starting with our headliners, Capitol Records recording artists Jed Strong and the Renegades." Loud applause and whistling filled the saloon. "And opening for Jed is newcomer Billy Eagan." Before Jean could say another word, the place went wild.

Billy looked at Ian and smiled. "You think that's for me?"

"Oh yeah, it's for you, all right," Ian said.

It finally quieted down enough for Jean to say, "Well, since you're already up on your feet and making a lot of noise, stay that way and welcome to the boards Mr. Billy Eagan."

Ian said, "Go get 'em, cowboy," placed his hand on Billy's shoulder, and squeezed three times.

Billy made his way through the crowd to the front of the waist-high stage, turned around and with his arms bent at the elbows, used the palms of his hands to boost himself up and land on his butt on the edge of the stage. He pulled the mic stand down, removed his mic from the holder, and tipped his hat as the band started the intro to his opening number. During the first week of rehearsal, not knowing why, he'd picked a cover by Rascal Flatts called "Bless the Broken Road" as his opening number. He'd never sung it before and had never been particularly drawn to it, but at that moment in time, he'd felt some type of connection to it, so he went with the feeling. When he started to sing the lyrics, seeing Ian in the audience, he knew why he'd chosen it.

Ian watched with respect and admiration as the crowd responded to Billy, perched on the edge of the stage, singing his heart out. So much so that he felt a quick bout of jealousy at the thought of having to share him. As if hearing the song for the first time, Ian intently listened to the lyrics as he watched Billy sing. Within seconds, everyone disappeared and it was just the two of them, and Billy was singing the song directly to him.

*This much I know is true,
That God blessed the broken road
that led me straight to you.*

He imagined he must have looked like a puppy dog waiting for a pat on the head when Jean whispered into his ear, "Snap out of it, honey."

Startled, Ian said, "Was it that obvious?"

"Yes, honey, it is that obvious."

"I can't help it, baby cakes. That's some guy up there."

"I'm so glad you think so, because I happen to agree."

"Jean, I'm almost ashamed to say, but I'm mesmerized by him. Not only is he the most genuine man I've ever met, but as an entertainer he has this rare ability to take hold of his audience and never let them go. Me included, and I've been doing this for how long now? I thought I was immune to such things."

"He does have that special something that resonates with the audience," Jean said.

"It's really magical, the way he connects with them on every level."

"Oh, Ian, you've got it bad," Jean said with a smile.

"Help me," Ian said, laughing as he shifted his position.

"How's the ankle, honey?"

"It's fine. I just need to stay off of it for another day or two. Then it will be all better."

"That's good. How about another beer? Oh, and by the way, I saw Josh and Suzie at the bar earlier. Did you have anything to do with that?"

"Maybe a little," Ian said with a sheepish grin.

"I thought so. I'll be right back," Jean said.

In just under an hour, Billy was singing his last song and the

crowd was going wild. Whistles and cheers and stomping told the band he was up for one more. He once again sat center stage with his guitar and a single spot and closed his set with "The Love of a Man." He hit every note and sang every word with the sincerity in which he had written them. Billy was a star, Ian recognized; he might not be famous yet, but he was, without a doubt, a star. Billy introduced Jed and hopped off the stage at the same spot he had taken it and headed for Ian.

Jean came back to the table with a couple of beers for Ian and Billy and a Jack Daniels and 7UP for herself as Billy made his way through the crowd. When he finally made it to the table, he hugged Jean, placed his hand on Ian's shoulder, and gently squeezed three times. This ritual was quickly becoming a habit between them to signify an expression of caring that they couldn't physically express in public. In response, Ian gave Billy a tender look that assured him that he understood.

Billy pulled out a stool for Jean, and they both sat. As the three of them chatted about the show, people occasionally interrupted to congratulate Billy, and Ian became a little concerned that Josh and Suzie hadn't made an appearance at the table. He looked around, casually so Billy wouldn't pick up on it, but they were nowhere to be seen.

Jean excused herself from the table, and Billy leaned over to Ian and said, with a melancholy tone in his voice, "It's okay, handsome. Don't worry about it."

"What do you mean?" Ian said.

"I've noticed you looking around, and I assume it's for Josh and Suzie. Maybe something came up and they'll show up another

night.”

Before Ian could catch himself, the words flew out of his mouth. “No, they were here.”

“Oh,” Billy said. “I guess I’m not what he’s looking for. Listen, handsome, you said you couldn’t guarantee anything, and I totally understood that. What means the most to me is that you went out on a limb for me.”

Ian said with some apprehension in his voice, “Billy, just because he didn’t come to the table doesn’t mean he didn’t like you.”

“Time will tell. For now, let’s get you home.”

They said their goodbyes to Jean and left the saloon. They drove home hand in hand, mostly in silence. When Billy did speak, Ian could hear the disappointment in his voice. He wanted to kick himself for telling Billy that Josh was even coming. How could he have been so stupid?

And the more he thought about it, the angrier he got at Josh. It was just plain rude not to make an appearance at the table, whether he liked Billy or not.

When they got home, Billy went around to the passenger side to help Ian out of the car. Billy took Ian’s crutches from the backseat and threw them in the corner of the garage. Before Ian could slide down from the seat of the SUV, Billy picked him up and started for the stairs. Sensing that Billy needed this, Ian didn’t protest but held Billy close as the two men made their way up the stairs.

When they reached the living room, Billy put Ian down on the couch and asked, “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“That would be great, cowboy.”

Billy went to the kitchen, poured two glasses of wine, and sat down next to Ian. Ian placed his glass of wine on the table and told Billy to lie back and put his feet up. He did as he was told, and Ian removed both of Billy’s boots and began to rub his feet. One foot at a time, Ian kneaded the bottom of Billy’s foot with his thumbs, trying for all the right pressure points, hoping that some pleasure might replace a little of the disappointment he was experiencing.

When Ian finished, Billy said, “Thank you, Ian.”

“No thanks needed, cowboy, it was my pleasure.”

“And I apologize for being such a baby. Even I can’t believe how ungrateful I’m acting,” Billy said. “I have this incredible opportunity at Jean’s and the crowd seems to like what I do and, most importantly, I have you in my life. I don’t need any more than that.”

Ian felt a lump in his throat. He bent down and kissed Billy on the top of his foot and said, “You’re not being a baby, and thanks.”

They were about to go upstairs to bed when Ian noticed the light blinking on his answering machine. He pressed the “message” button and heard Josh’s voice.

Ian froze. Billy was sitting right there, and he had no idea what Josh was going to say. He was sure Billy saw the fear on his face, but there was nothing he could do now but listen to the message.

“Ian, hey, I’m sorry we didn’t get the chance to come to the table or meet Billy tonight, but we got a call from our babysitter that the baby was running a fever, so we wanted to get home as soon as

we could. Anyway, Billy is fantastic; I can't believe no label has signed him yet. Of course we need to follow proper channels, but I think he would be an asset to Capitol. I'll call you tomorrow. Good job."

Billy's eyes were wide as saucers, and Ian was sure he was white as a ghost, but he didn't care. Billy was a hit. Billy took both of Ian's hands and pulled Ian up to him, smothering him with slow and passionate kisses.

AFTER a night of celebration, the alarm clock sounded very early. Billy kissed Ian on the neck, climbed out of bed, and headed for the shower. While he washed, he mentally ran through the events of last night. Could this be the big break he needed? Could Ian and Josh pull this off? Was he good enough? He hated to go to the ranch with his career hanging in the balance, but he'd made a commitment to the Lazy H and wouldn't go back on his word.

When Billy stepped out of the shower, Ian was there with a fresh cup of coffee. "Morning, cowboy."

"Hey, handsome, what are you doing out of bed?"

"I couldn't go back to sleep. I'm too excited. At one minute past nine o'clock, I'll be on the phone with Josh to see how we're gonna handle my new discovery."

"Your new discovery, huh? I like the sound of that, even though you make it sound like you found Noah's Ark or something."

"Ha ha," Ian said. "There's a hell of a lot to do. We've got to

pick your first single. We've got to decide which markets to go after first. We've got to find a Capitol artist who's scheduled to go on tour about the time we release your first single to make you an opening act. In addition, we've got to listen to hundreds of demos to choose songs for your first album. Like I said, so much to do."

"Hold on a minute, handsome. This is not a done deal yet, remember?" Billy protested.

"Technicalities," Ian said. "It's all just formalities, so you better get used to the idea that you're going to be a superstar."

Billy stood there dripping wet and lunged for Ian. Ian stepped back just in time to avoid Billy's advances, but he reached for a towel and threw it in his direction.

"You escaped this time," Billy said, "but don't expect to escape next time."

"I don't know, I'm pretty fast when I need to be," Ian responded.

"Yeah, but I'm a superstar and I'm supposed to get everything I want... and right now, I want you, so get over here."

Twenty minutes later, Billy was pulling out of the driveway and Ian was in his office writing down ideas and making notes for his call to Josh. Within minutes the phone was ringing. Ian glanced at the caller ID and saw that it was Billy's cell phone.

"Yes, cowboy?"

"Is this all real, Ian?"

"It's real, Billy."

“Okay, just checking. I’ll call you at the lunch break, but if you hear anything I need to know, you’ll call me, right?”

“Will do, cowboy. Have a great day.”

Ten minutes after nine, Ian was on the phone with Josh. He sang Billy’s praises for nearly an hour, until Josh said, “Okay, stop selling. I’m already hooked.”

“Sorry,” Ian said. “I just haven’t seen this kind of talent in years.”

Josh agreed, and they got down to business, talking strategies, markets, and contracts, making a to-do list with each of them taking away items to complete. Josh said he would put together some musicians and schedule the studio time needed to cut a demo, if Ian would line up a Capitol publicist and start working on a preliminary marketing plan. Josh also agreed to get the label execs to Jean’s over the next few nights to see Billy perform live, as that would make the most impact. Josh said he had no idea why some other label hadn’t signed him already, but he didn’t want to waste any time. If a competitor got wind of Capitol’s interest in Billy, they would be all over him.

Secretly, Ian hoped that would happen because that’s how Billy would get the best deal, but he was under a blanket nondisclosure and non-compete agreement with Capitol. Although he wanted to do the best by Billy, he wouldn’t risk his job playing both sides, and he knew Billy wouldn’t want that, anyway. Josh and Ian hung up the telephone, and although Ian couldn’t wait to get to work, he had promised Billy that he would call him if he heard anything, so he kept his promise and punched in Billy’s cell phone number.

“This is Billy.”

“How’s it hanging, cowboy?”

“Uh, a little to the right, but you already know that, so tell me you’ve got good news.”

“I’ve got good news, but I can’t talk now, I’ve got work to do,” Ian said.

“Very funny, handsome, tell me, pleeeeeease.”

“Oh, how I like it when you beg,” Ian whispered.

“You better stop teasing me and tell me what’s going on, or I’ll make you pay big time,” Billy said in a huff.

“Okay, okay. I spent the last couple of hours on the phone with Josh, and he’s very excited about you. He’s hand-picking musicians and scheduling studio time for a demo.”

“Are you serious, Ian?”

“Very serious. I’m about to get on the phone with a publicist and start on a preliminary marketing plan, and cowboy?”

“Yeah?” Billy said.

“You better start thinking about giving notice at the Lazy H, because your life is about to get very complicated.”

“Wow, Ian, this is all happening so fast.”

“And it’s only the beginning,” Ian said.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Get back to work and call me on your

way home.”

The next week, Billy, Ian, and Josh spent two days in the studio with some of the best musicians Billy had ever worked with. They recorded two demos, a cover of “Moments” by Emerson Drive, which Billy had sung the night he’d won the open mic contest, and “The Love of a Man,” which he always used as an encore at Jean’s. After listening to both songs a hundred times, they were all satisfied that these two songs showed off Billy’s range and his ability to express emotion in his voice.

CHAPTER 15

THE entire next month was a blur to Billy. When they were at Jean's, while he was performing, Ian was entertaining various label executives who stopped in to see what all the hoopla was about. When he and Ian were at home, Ian was on the phone constantly with Capitol's public relations and marketing departments and Billy's new publicist, making plans for Billy's launch. Billy spent endless hours with an attorney that Jean had recommended to help negotiate the contract. Ian was already under an employment contract with Capitol, so he had to play it cool, but behind the scenes, he helped guide Billy in the right direction.

Two weeks prior to the date he was to sign the recording contract, Billy gave his notice at the Lazy H Ranch.

Before he knew it, he was saying his goodbyes to the guys at the ranch, all of them vowing to keep in touch and telling him to remember that they knew him when.

In preparation for leaving the ranch, Billy had to find a place to live. He knew it was too soon to talk about sharing Ian's townhouse,

not that Ian had extended the invitation, but even if Ian had made the offer, Billy knew he should have his own place in case it ever came up with the press. So he did some hunting and found a great little one-bedroom right off Broadway near Jean's. He also figured that it wouldn't hurt to have a place downtown if he and Ian had a late night in town and didn't want to make the hour drive back to Westhaven. It seemed like everything was falling into place. He and his attorney had negotiated what he thought was a great recording contract, he had a roof over his head, in fact two roofs, and most importantly, he had Ian. His life was moving right along as scheduled.

On the morning Billy was to sign his recording contract, he woke to an empty bed. He could barely catch a hint of coffee through a strong smell of burning bacon. He instantly knew Ian was trying to make him a celebratory breakfast and smiled at the effort. Hopping out of bed, he pulled his jeans on and ran downstairs. As he had pictured it in his mind, there was Ian in front of the stove, cursing and mumbling about burned bacon and rubbery eggs. He walked up behind him and snuggled into his back. "Morning handsome."

"What are you doing down here, cowboy? I'm trying to surprise you with breakfast in bed, although I'm not doing such a great job."

"Everything looks perfect to me," Billy said. "Let's eat."

"At your own risk," Ian laughed.

"I'll take any risk if it will make you happy."

"Even if you end up in the hospital and miss the signing of your new recording contract?"

"You've got a good point. You try it first."

“Very funny,” Ian said.

“I’m just kidding. It looks perfect, and besides,” Billy replied, “I’m so hungry I could eat anything.”

“Oh really, but just so you’ll know, that kind of backward compliment will get you everywhere.”

“I’ll remember that,” Billy said.

They finished breakfast, and it wasn’t half bad, Billy thought. Ian’s cooking was getting better, but Billy thought it was best that he continue his role as head chef, just for their safety. Ian rinsed the dishes and Billy loaded the dishwasher, and when they were finished, they went upstairs to get showered and dressed for the big day.

Traffic was pretty light, so they made good time. They pulled into the parking garage at Capitol with thirty minutes to spare. When they reached the glass-enclosed conference room, Josh was already there, as were Billy’s attorney and two other attorneys representing Capitol.

Josh said, “Morning, boys. Since we’re all here, do you want to get started?”

“Morning, Josh,” Ian said, and he nodded to the attorneys.

“Morning, all.” Billy and Ian exchanged smiles, and Billy said, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Ian sat fairly silently as the attorneys shuffled papers back and forth, handed them to Billy for his signature and then to Josh for his. The entire process took less than an hour, and before noon, Billy Eagan was Capitol Records Nashville’s latest recording artist.

When the process was complete, they all took turns shaking hands and congratulating Billy. As a tradition, Josh always took his new talent to a celebratory lunch or dinner, depending on the time, at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. Tootsie's was well known in Nashville, steeped in country music history, and guaranteed to provide a glimpse of country music's finest. Since Josh and Ian pretty much knew everyone in Nashville, as soon as they walked in, Ian got a wave from Troy Gentry, of Montgomery-Gentry, sitting in the corner with his wife. Josh headed over to a table of three men. One was Capitol producer Scott Hendricks and the other two were Luke Bryan and Chris Cagle. Josh waved Ian and Billy over, and Ian said his hellos and introduced Billy to the three men. "So you're the guy we've been hearing so much about," Scott said.

Billy blushed and said, "I don't know about that, but I'm very excited to meet you guys. I love your stuff."

"Thanks, man," Chris said.

Luke nodded and said, "Thanks, welcome aboard."

"Hopefully we'll be able to work together soon," Scott said.

"I'd like that," Billy responded.

As the three men left the table, Josh and Ian explained that Scott had just produced Chris' new album and was about to do one for Luke, so he was a good man to know. They walked back to the hostess and were seated at a table across from the popular "window booth," usually reserved for paying tourists who wanted to sit where famous people like Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson enjoyed some downtime.

After they ordered their lunch, Josh said, "Billy, your life is

about to become pretty demanding.”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Billy said. “I’ve waited for this all of my life, and I won’t let a bunch of demands do me in.”

“Great attitude,” Josh said. “And besides, Ian will be there to make sure you don’t screw this up.” Billy and Ian exchanged glances like guilty six-year-olds, caught with their hands in the cookie jar. *I wonder if he suspects that Billy and I are more than friends?* Ian had never come out to Josh or anyone at work; there was never a need. He’d been able to dodge the “fix me up” game by always working and traveling a good bit, so eventually people gave up and stopped trying. Ian snapped back to reality and straightened in his chair.

“Josh, since you brought up the fact that I will be right there with Billy, I’ve been considering something for a while now and wanted to talk to you about it. In fact, Billy doesn’t even know what I’m about to say, so you’re both hearing it for the first time.”

Billy raised an eyebrow. *Oh my, is he going to tell Josh about our relationship?* Then he thought if Ian trusted Josh enough to do that, then Billy trusted him as well. He rested his chin in the palm of his hand and looked at Josh, as if to say, *Don’t look at me, I have no idea what he’s about to say.* They both looked at Ian and waited for him to speak.

Ian cleared his throat. “Josh, you already know I found Billy and brought him to Capitol, and you also know that I’ve taken a personal interest in his career and getting him signed. And, well, to be honest, we work really well together and, well, I wanted to know... wondered if you’d have a problem with me focusing on his career full time?”

Josh's mouth dropped open. "You want to leave Capitol and manage Billy's career?"

"Yes and no. I would prefer not to leave Capitol, but I do want to manage his career."

Billy's eyes widened. He smiled and looked at Josh and asked, "Could that happen?"

"Technically, yes," Josh said, "but Capitol's management division only handles their top-tier talent and only if it makes a hell of a lot of sense to keep it in-house."

Ian defended his idea. "Before you rule it out, I'm prepared to leave Capitol and go out on my own if that's what it takes, but I would certainly rather have the Capitol machine behind me."

"Now, wait a minute, Ian," Billy said, taking his turn at sitting up straight. "You're not going to quit your job to take a chance on me."

"Listen to the man," Josh said to Ian.

"Too late, boys, my mind's made up," Ian said, "and besides, the label knows what they have in Billy or they wouldn't have signed him so quickly. I think they would prefer to have some control over his career, beyond his contractual obligations. By allowing me to manage him, they get the best of both worlds. Think about it, Josh. If Billy hires an outside manager, his or her loyalty would lie with Billy alone, not the label. And you know from past experience that could get ugly. If they allow me to do it under the Capitol umbrella, I, of course, would do what's best for Billy, but I would do it with Capitol's best interests in mind, as well."

Josh looked up, then in Billy's direction, and finally at Ian. "Let

me think about this for a day or two and run it by a couple of people to get a sense of general consensus,” he said. “Billy’s an unproven artist, and that’s a pretty big risk for the label.”

“No problem,” Ian said, “but Capitol knows my track record, and they know I can do this, so don’t wait too long. I know we have something great with Billy, and the label knows that too.”

“Okay,” was the last thing Josh said as he stood, shook Billy’s hand, and affectionately smacked Ian on the back of the head and left the table.

“Where in the hell did that come from?” Billy asked as he cocked his head to one side and glared at Ian.

“Don’t give me that look; just hear me out. I’ve had this in the back of my mind since our first meeting at Jean’s. I’ve seen new artists get signed just to have their manager clash with the label and get released from their contract in a flash. The best way I know how to guarantee your success is to manage you myself. I know enough people in Nashville and have enough contacts to make this happen. Besides, my reputation is really good, so I’m told. Right now, Josh has his Capitol hat on and he’s playing the game, but he knows it’s the best thing for everyone. He’s a smart man. He’ll make it happen.”

Billy and Ian downed their iced tea and left right after Josh. Since Billy was performing at Jean’s later that night and they had an early meeting at Capitol the next morning, they drove in the direction of Billy’s apartment.

“Hey, cowboy,” Ian said.

“Yes, handsome?”

“I don’t know if you know this, but the Country Music Awards are next week.”

“Of course I know that. What about it?”

“I was wondering if you could help me find a date.”

“Does this date have to be a woman?” Billy asked sarcastically.

“I usually take Jean, but this year I was thinking I wanted to switch it up a bit.”

“How much of a switch?” Billy asked.

“Well, let’s see, maybe someone with a penis. Do you know anyone?”

“Yeah, I have one in mind,” Billy said.

“Do you think he might be interested in going with me?”

Billy rose up in his seat and said “Hell, yes.” Then he caught himself, leaned back in his seat, and said very calmly, “Um, I mean, sure, he might be interested.”

“Oh, he might, huh? What will it take to persuade him, a new dress maybe?” Ian asked.

“Throw in shoes and a matching handbag and you’ve got a deal,” Billy said, laughing.

“It’s a date, then?” Ian asked.

“It’s a date,” Billy responded.

CHAPTER 16

THE next few days after the signing were mostly spent in marketing meetings, planning the release of Billy's first album. They were trying to coordinate the timing of the release so Billy could open for Trace Adkins on his next scheduled tour. That gave them a little over six months to execute the marketing plan. They had to come up with a name for the album, select and record all the songs, choose the first single, design artwork for CD covers and posters, do photo shoots, write bios and press releases, and book some small gigs to get the buzz out. After much deliberation, they decided to go for it, and the plan was put in motion.

The next week was the CMAs. Ian and Billy made their way down the red carpet with Ian saying hello to everyone he knew and introducing Billy as Capitol's latest artist. When they heard the "five minutes until live" warning, they headed for their seat. Because of Ian's position with Capitol and the fact that Billy was a new recording artist, they were fifth row, center.

Billy and Ian found their seats, and right before they sat, Billy placed his hand on Ian's shoulder, smiled, and squeezed three times.

Ian smiled back.

Billy couldn't believe it, but everywhere he looked, he saw a celebrity. When he looked to the left, he saw Reba McIntyre, Barbara Mandrell, George Strait, Tim McGraw, and Faith Hill. He looked to the right and saw Trace Adkins, George Jones and Kix Brooks and Ronnie Dunn. On his same row, a few seats down, were Josh and Suzie Randal, along with Capitol's younger recording artists, Ashley Ray, Emily West, and Eric Church.

Billy couldn't believe he was there. This was big time, and he was eating it up. After the awards show, they went to the Capitol Records party, and Ian introduced Billy to as many celebrities as he could. He was doing his job, and his job right now was getting Billy's name out there.

Ian was very impressed that Billy stayed cool, calm, and collected on the surface, when all the while he knew on the inside he was terribly star-struck. When the night finally ended, Billy was walking on air. He felt like Cinderella at the ball, and Ian was there to share this first big event with him.

Eventually, Capitol came through and allowed Ian to manage Billy's career. Within days, the Capitol Records Nashville marketing machine was moving full speed ahead with no slowdown in sight. After the first month, Billy realized that he'd really had no clue what Josh had meant when he'd said his life was about to become very demanding.

The merry-go-round started to spin faster and faster, and he held on for the ride. The first few weeks had been spent selecting songs for the first album. "The Love of a Man" was chosen as his first single, which made Billy very happy, and since they had already

recorded it as a demo, they laid down an additional instrumental track and it was ready to go. They planned to release it in thirty days and let the momentum build while he recorded the rest of the album. Next came the photo shoots, interviews with Nashville radio stations, more shows at Jean's—but this time as a headliner—small three-day tours in the surrounding area, and lastly, wherever an event took place around Nashville, Ian had him there, smiling and singing.

The morning of the release, Ian and Billy woke at five o'clock to the sound of George Strait singing "River of Love" on Billy's alarm clock. Billy had performed at Jean's the night before while Ian had stayed behind at his apartment, tweaking the final press release. Billy moaned as Ian broke free from his embrace, rolled over, and turned off the alarm clock.

Ian jumped out of bed and made a dash for his laptop computer, then quickly slipped back into the bed when Billy held up the covers as an invitation. He snuggled back against Billy while the computer hummed and clicked to life. Billy softly brushed his mouth against Ian's lips. Ian's faint whimper was all the response Billy needed. The kiss they exchanged was dreamy and heated, filled with lust and desire. But when the computer finished the booting process, Ian said, "Slow down, cowboy. We've got work to do."

"Damn," Billy said, "I was just getting started."

"That's what I was afraid of," Ian retorted. "But don't worry, I'll make it up to you later."

Ian opened his e-mail program and quickly scanned his inbox. He found the e-mail he was looking for from the PR department and double-clicked on it to read the contents. Billy's press release had

crossed the newswire at 4:35 a.m. Ian wanted the release out early so the morning radio shows would get it before they began to broadcast, which was usually around five thirty. He then logged onto the internet and went to CMT's website. He went directly to the "Press" section, and within seconds he had Billy's press release in front of him. The heading read "Capitol Nashville Recording Artist Billy Eagan Releases First Single."

Ian had already confirmed that hundreds of CDs containing the song had been sent out the previous week, as scheduled, to every country music radio station in the United States and Canada with an embargo date to coincide with the press release. The embargo date guaranteed that the song wouldn't get any air play until the press release hit the wire. "Well, cowboy, if I've done my job right, and I think I have, within a day or two, with some luck we should start hearing you on the airwaves."

Billy yawned and said, "I'm always so amazed at how effortlessly you do your job. This all comes so easily to you, like second nature."

"Like any job, when you do it enough, it does become second nature. I imagine like singing is second nature to you," Ian responded with a yawn of his own.

Billy took the laptop out of Ian's hands, placed it on the floor, reached over, turned the clock radio on this time, and said, "Just in case. Now. Where were we?"

"Just about to take a shower," Ian said. "We have the first of seven interviews in just about an hour at 97.9 WSIX, and they asked us to do a few sound bites and promos before the interview, so we've got to get a move on."

“This new career is putting a serious crimp in my love life,” Billy whined.

Ian got out of bed shaking his head, laughing as he walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

The day was as busy as they had all been over the past few weeks, visiting one radio station after another, doing interviews, recording sound bites, taking pictures, and signing autographs. Then off to the next station for more of the same. Billy didn't mind the PR, and in fact, he really liked meeting people and signing autographs, but by the day's end, he thought he would be saying “This is Billy Eagan, and you're listening to WSIX, 97.9, Big 98 Country” in his sleep.

LATER that night was the release party. Billy was to do a short show and a dozen or so press interviews and take as many photos as possible for the Capitol website. The evening went off without a hitch, and when the party ended at a little past midnight, they got into Ian's SUV and drove to Atlanta to repeat the radio station tours and a one-nighter at Miss Kitty's Saloon. The band didn't have to be in Atlanta until four o'clock the next afternoon, so they were leaving in the morning, but Billy and Ian had their first interview at seven o'clock the next morning and one every hour, on the hour, for the other three country stations in the Atlanta area. To help them stay awake, they listened to every country radio station from Nashville to Atlanta, hoping to hear Billy. When the reception started to fade on the one radio station, Ian hit the scan button and stopped it on the next country station. They heard, “This is Trisha Yearwood and

you're listening to KICKS 101.5" and Billy said, "I know how you you feel, honey." Ian chuckled.

"Is it a bad sign that I'm not getting any air play yet?" Billy asked.

"No, not really. Sometimes it takes a few days, but I can guarantee you that when we're done with the press tours, you'll be sick of hearing yourself on the radio."

It was four thirty in the morning, and they still had a two and a half-hour stretch on I-75 from Chattanooga to Atlanta. Billy had been driving Ian's SUV for almost four hours, and he was starting to get a little fidgety. He was about to press the scan button to look for another country station when he heard the DJ say, "Don't miss Cadillac Jack in the morning when Capitol Records Nashville recording artist Billy Eagan stops by to talk about his new single and hopefully give us a live performance. But in the meantime, here's Billy Eagan with 'The Love of a Man'."

"Ian, do you hear that? I'm on the radio, I'm on the frickin' radio."

"Yeah, cowboy, you are, and if I may say so myself, you sound good enough to eat."

Billy was so excited he pulled across three lanes of traffic and onto the shoulder of the road. He got out of the car, ran around to Ian's door, opened it, and pulled him out. He took Ian into his arms, kissed him deeply in the darkness, and then lifted him into the air and spun him three times.

"Thank you, Ian, thank you so much."

“Don’t thank me, cowboy; you’re the one singing on the radio. Now put me down before we get shot by some drunken redneck.”

Billy was so excited he was trembling. He had no idea hearing himself on the radio would have such an effect on him.

“Billy, get in the car, and I’ll drive the rest of the way until you calm down.”

“Okay, good idea,” Billy said. “I don’t want to kill us the same day I hear myself on the radio for the first time. It wouldn’t be good karma.”

Ian got in the driver’s seat and slowly pulled back onto I-75. “What do you know about karma, anyway?”

“For starters, since I met you, I’ve got a record deal, I’ve got a newly released single, I’m on the way to do a radio interview and a show promoting my single, and I’ve got a boyfriend. That sounds like pretty good karma to me.”

“Wow, that’s a mouthful, Billy. I can’t take all the credit. If you didn’t have talent, I couldn’t have done any of this. I think we make a pretty good team, but no labels as far as we go.”

“Gotcha, but speaking of mouthfuls,” Billy said with a smile on his face, “I’m about to get me one.”

Billy reached over with his left hand and started rubbing Ian’s dick through his jeans, and right on cue, it responded immediately. “Billy, we can’t do this here. What if someone sees us?”

“Who’s going to see us in the dark?” Billy said while continuing to stroke Ian’s now semi-erect cock. “Maybe a trucker or two, but even if some trucker does see us, my face will be buried in your

crotch so deep that no one will be able to see it.”

How can I argue with that logic, and I really don't want to anyway.

“Go for it,” he said.

Billy unbuttoned Ian's jeans, and Ian lifted up so he could slide them down to his knees, just far enough to get at what he wanted. Ian's now fully erect dick pushed tightly against his Calvin Kleins. Billy opened the fly of Ian's underwear, and his cock popped out and stood at attention. Billy teased Ian's dick by kissing it and circling his tongue around the head several times, then kissing it again. Ian moaned with pleasure and caressed Billy's head and neck with his left hand while steering with his right. Billy, still teasing the head of Ian's dick, began to suck and nibble while alternating the teasing circular motion.

In one gulp, the head of Ian's cock was at the back of Billy's throat, as if he was attempting to swallow him whole. Ian moaned, “Yes, cowboy” with delight as he began to move up and down, slowly fucking Billy's mouth. With his mouth still paying special attention to the top half of Ian's cock and his left hand around the base, Billy's right hand was attempting to stretch open the fly in Ian's underwear far enough to get to his balls. When the opening was stretched as far as it would go without ripping, he pushed Ian's balls up to meet his mouth. He released Ian's dick momentarily, sucked both balls into his mouth, and tenderly tousled them around until Ian was gyrating in the driver's seat.

Billy released Ian's balls and switched his attention to Ian's rock-hard cock again. He released Ian's dick long enough to stick his middle finger in his mouth and wet it thoroughly. He went back to

bobbing up and down while he slipped his hand up the inside right leg of Ian's underwear. He found what he was looking for in seconds and felt the tight pucker against his finger. He massaged the opening while continuing to swallow Ian whole and then move up, go down, and swallow again. Ian said, "Cowboy, I'm about to—" and Billy pushed his finger in Ian's ass as far as it would go. He felt Ian's ass tighten and release around his finger as he bucked with each shot of his load hitting the back of Billy's throat. When Ian was through emptying his balls, Billy slid his finger out of Ian's ass as he heard him gasp.

Billy bled Ian dry of every drop of come and saliva, and once convinced he had finished the job, he slid Ian's now soft dick back inside his underwear. Ian lifted again, and Billy pulled his jeans back up to his waist. With one knee on the steering wheel, Ian used both hands to button his jeans. Billy leaned back in his seat and, with his left hand resting on Ian's right leg, closed his eyes and said, "That's the first time I've ever done that, and it was damn hot."

"If this means that every time you hear your song on the radio, I get one of these, cowboy, I'm about to start working a hell of a lot harder."

"I think that's a plan, so get to work."

They pulled off at the next exit for a quick bathroom break, got a cup of coffee and a bagel at a drive-through, and got back on the road. They had just enough time to check into their hotel, take a quick shower, and get to the radio station by seven o'clock.

By noon they were finished with the interviews and driving back to the hotel to get some rest before the show. They had sound checks

at seven o'clock and the show started at ten thirty.

When they got back to the hotel, Billy lay down on the bed and Ian went into the bathroom. When Ian came out, Billy was curled into a ball, fast asleep. Ian tried to remove his boots without waking him, but that was impossible. Billy rolled over onto his back, and Ian was able to remove his boots and his jeans. He sat up briefly, and Ian took off his shirt. Billy slipped under the covers while he watched Ian undress. Ian set the alarm for six o'clock to be ready for the seven o'clock sound check, and then they could come back to the hotel, shower, and get a bite to eat before the show. Satisfied that all bases were covered, Ian slipped under the covers with Billy and closed his eyes. Billy lay awake for a few more minutes, turned and snuggled up behind Ian, and said, "I love you, Ian." Ian wasn't asleep, and the words Billy murmured repeated in his head over and over.

THE next six months were more of the same: press junkets, radio interviews, and one-nighters, but they were all paying off because Billy's single was at number fifteen on the country music charts and climbing.

The album was finally finished and the release was scheduled in two weeks, to coincide with the kickoff of Trace and Billy's tour. Billy and Ian had the last week before the tour to rest. They'd planned on going down to New Orleans for a few days, since Ian had never been there and Billy didn't know when he would have time off again to visit family.

But before their vacation, they had to get through Nashville's

Fanfare, an event sponsored by all the record labels and designed to let fans get up close and personal with the artists. Billy had endless hours of meet and greets with his growing fan base, posing for photos and signing autographs, and he thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.

Trace was performing on the last night to officially close the event, and Ian arranged to have Billy open for him to test the line-up for the tour. It was Billy's first big concert, and he was ready for it. He was a sensation. The crowd loved him, the label execs loved him, Trace loved him, and as Ian stood in the wings watching Billy finish his encore, he knew in that very moment that he, too, loved Billy. Not just loved him, but he was in love with him.

The realization hit him hard, and he stood there frozen with his eyes closed on the verge of tears; not tears of happiness, but tears of fear and panic. *This wasn't supposed to happen. How could this have happened? I was so guarded, so sure that I'd had kept everything in the proper compartments.* He had convinced himself that he was only along for the ride. Just get Billy where he needs to be. He could quit anytime and not look back. What was he going to do now?

When Billy came offstage, he was exhilarated. It was like he was high on something, the fans, the lights, and the energy; it was like he had just performed for the first time. *Where's Ian?* he thought. *I need Ian.* People were crowding him, congratulating him, and Josh was there with a huge grin on his face, but no Ian. "Josh, have you seen Ian?"

"He was here with me during the encore, but then he said he wasn't feeling too well and went back to your trailer."

When Billy was finished thanking all the well wishers, he went

straight to his trailer to find Ian. When he opened the door, the trailer was in darkness; he flipped on the lights and realized that Ian had been sitting there in the dark. He ran to his side and saw tears running down his cheeks. "Ian, what's wrong, are you sick? Should I call a doctor?" No response. "Ian, talk to me."

"I'm fine. I just need to go home."

"Okay, I'll have you home in fifteen minutes. Let's go," Billy said.

"No, I want to go to my house, in Westhaven," Ian replied.

"Sure, handsome, whatever you want, but can I ask why?"

"We need to talk," Ian said.

"About what?" Billy asked with panic in his voice.

"Not here," was all Ian said.

THEY drove to Westhaven in silence. Billy tried to get Ian to talk, but it was useless. It was like he'd just shut down. He was cold and distant, not himself, not the Ian he had fallen in love with.

When they got home, Ian walked directly to his bedroom and Billy followed.

"Okay, we're home, now talk to me."

Ian said, "I can't go on tour with you, Billy."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I can't. I'll call Josh and have them assign another manager to your career and you'll be fine. Your career has a momentum of its own now. You'll be okay."

"I don't want another manager, Ian. I want you."

"You can't have me, Billy."

"What are you saying, Ian? This is it, just like that?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. It's better this way."

"Better for whom?" Billy shot back.

"Better for both of us," Ian said. "Go to New Orleans, go on tour, and enjoy your career. You earned it."

"I don't want any of it without you, Ian. I love you."

"Billy, don't say that. It can't work."

"Ian, you can't push me away. I won't go without a fight. You've got to tell me what happened to you, who hurt you so terribly that you're willing to give up on us. This is killing me and it's killing you."

Through sobs, Ian said, "It doesn't matter, Billy. I'm damaged goods, and you deserve so much more than I can offer you. You're the best man I know, and I can't continue to hurt you. You need to let me go."

"Don't begin to think you can tell me what I need," Billy said. "I know you give me everything you can, and I've never asked for anything more than that. You wanted no labels and you got no labels. I kept my feelings to myself. Do you know how many times I wanted to tell you I was in love with you but didn't?"

“That’s why it’s not fair to you,” Ian said. “No one should have to hold back their feelings.”

“But why is this happening now?” Billy asked. “I’ve never pressured you.”

“Because I’m in love with you, too, damn it, and I can’t, I won’t go through this again,” Ian shouted.

Billy yelled back, “You’re going to have to, because I won’t give up without a fight.”

“Please, Billy, don’t make me relive this. It’s not going to change anything.”

“Maybe it won’t, but I need to know. You’re asking me to let go of the most important thing in my life and it’s not fair to make me do that without an explanation.”

“If I tell you, will you go, and move on with your life?” Ian asked.

“If you open up to me and tell me what happened to you, and when you’re through, you still want me to go, I won’t fight you. I love you too much to cause you any more pain.”

Ian sat on the edge of the bed, dropped his head in his hands, and said, “Okay, Billy, you win.” Ian opened his mouth, but it took a couple of attempts before the name Todd came out. “Todd Slocum was my best friend since elementary school. We were on the wrestling team together in middle school; we joined the swim team together in high school and continued swimming in college and became roommates when we went away to Bob Jones University. We were both majoring in marketing with minors in business

administration. Todd's mother was from a prominent South Carolina family, and his father was the district attorney of Greenville. My parents were pretty well-off as well. My mother was a stay-at-home mom who did lots of charity work, and my father was a pediatrician. Our families were long-time friends with strong, Christian values. Somewhere between our junior and senior year in high school, Todd developed a romantic attraction to me that I was unaware of. Coupled with the fear of losing his best friend and the fact that his Bible-beating parents considered homosexuality the ultimate sin and damned all homosexuals to burn in hell, Todd kept his feelings for me well hidden. But what Todd didn't know was that I was experiencing the same feelings.

“As we went off to college, it became more and more difficult to pretend or ignore the strong attraction we secretly had for one another. One night, early in our freshman year, we'd gone to a frat party. I didn't really drink much in college, so I was always the designated driver. But as usual, by the party's end, Todd was pretty intoxicated. I drove us back to our dorm and struggled to get Todd up the stairs and back to our room, as I had done many times before. When we arrived at the door, I propped Todd against it and held him there with one hand as I fished my keys from my pocket with the other. I slid the key into the lock, turned the knob, and because of Todd's weight, the door flew open with a thud. I lost my footing, and with Todd in my arms, we both fell to the floor. I managed to get him to his feet and maneuvered him toward his bed. When we got there, I could no longer support our weight, and I fell to the bed with Todd on top of me.

“I rolled Todd to one side and slid from beneath him. I repositioned him on the bed with his head on his pillow and started to

undress him so he could sleep. As I slid Todd's jeans down to his thighs, I suddenly realized that Todd's dick was very hard. Shocked, I looked up and saw Todd staring down at me from the head of the bed, resting on his elbows. In a flash, he managed to get to a sitting position, hook me under both arms, and pull me up to him until we were looking into each other's eyes. Before I could react, Todd reached one hand behind my neck, pulled my head to his, and covered my lips for a long, passionate kiss. I felt my mouth open to the warmth and exploration of his tongue. He tasted of beer and nachos, but who cared. He was kissing me, and all I wanted to do was get lost in the moment.

"Something jerked me back to reality, and I pulled away. As hard as it was to stop, I couldn't bear to have Todd not remember this in the morning or, even worse, pretend this interlude didn't happen. Secondly, no matter how much I wanted him, I wasn't willing to take advantage of him, not in this condition. His next move took me by surprise; he reached down and pulled my T-shirt over my head. Before I could gain my balance, he pulled me down on top of him and we were again face to face, but this time my bare chest was touching his.

"His hands began to lightly rub my chest muscles, slowly teasing my nipples and finally settling on my waist. As he looked at me with desire, I leaped out of his bed. I needed air, needed to breathe, to think. I didn't want to stop, but I didn't want it this way, either.

"Todd made his way off of the bed and reached out to me. With his blue jeans still around his ankles, he stumbled and lunged forward. I caught him just before he hit the floor. I pulled him back to his feet and wrapped my arms around him, and we stood locked in

an embrace that neither of us wanted to break, Todd in his boxers and me naked from the waist up. I reluctantly broke the embrace and guided him back to his bed. He stepped out of his jeans, and I pulled back the covers and nudged him down into his bed. I will never forget the look of rejection in his eyes when I left his side and moved to my own bed, to think and eventually sleep.

“The next morning, I awoke with Todd in his boxers sitting at the foot of my bed. The words between us didn’t flow easily, but Todd, despite his hangover, wanted to explain and more so wanted an explanation. He still wore the look of rejection, and it hurt me to the core.

“Finally he said he shouldn’t have kissed me last night and that he was sorry. I asked him why he had done it. He looked down at the floor, and I saw tears running down his cheeks. I tried to reassure him and told him it was okay, he could tell me anything. In an almost inaudible tone, he told me he was in love with me. Then he looked at me and told me he’d been in love with me for as long as he could remember but just never had the balls to tell me. But after last night, he couldn’t hide his feelings for me any longer. I told him I’d had no idea and that he’d done a pretty remarkable job of keeping his feelings hidden.

“Then I told him that I’d been looking for a sign, any sign for the longest time, and that I’d almost given up on him and I couldn’t believe this was happening.

“The words had barely left my mouth, and he said he would leave Bob Jones, change schools. Then as if he had just heard me, he said, ‘Wait, did you say you’ve been looking for a sign? What does that mean?’

“I placed a hand on each side of his face, wiped his tears away with my thumbs, and told him it meant that I loved him, too, and I was just as scared to show my feelings. I was so afraid of losing him that I would never have made the first move.

“With tears now welling up in my eyes, I told him that I’d waited forever for a moment like we shared last night. I had dreamed and fantasized about it more times than I cared to admit, but I didn’t want him under those circumstances, not with him intoxicated, not without clear heads. More importantly, I couldn’t bear the thought of his rejection in the morning, if he regretted it, or even worst, pretended it hadn’t happened. I couldn’t have lived with that!

“Todd took me in his arms and told me that he loved me. As the words came out of his mouth, I wasn’t sure if I’d actually heard them or simply imagined them. I thought I might be dreaming. Then I said I loved him too.

“We looked at each other for the first time with the hopes of a future together. Could it really be possible? Could we actually have a real life together?”

“It sounds like you got everything you ever wanted and then some,” Billy said with a little jealousy in his voice.

“Let me finish, Billy. I need to get through this,” Ian said softly.

“After we’d professed our love, Todd pulled back the covers and crawled into my tiny bed, and we simply held on to each other. He told me we weren’t intoxicated now and that we were both of clear minds, dealing with a small hangover, but still of clear minds. He asked me where I wanted to go from there. We made love for the first time.” With a smile on his face, Ian said, “Neither of us had been

with another man before and didn't really know what to do, but we figured it out pretty quickly."

Despite himself, Billy smiled.

"We continued our love affair discreetly through the next semester to the following spring break. Neither of us wanted to think about going home, but our parents were expecting us and we had no good excuse to stay at the University.

"Once back home, we knew we would have to be very careful not to let on how we really felt about each other, knowing our parents would pick up on the slightest indication. Looking back, I think our parents had possibly seen something that we hadn't and had always questioned the time we spent together.

"Spring break came, and we headed home and did the best we could to find time and privacy to be together. The night before we were to head back to school, our parents, who were good friends, were having dinner together and asked us to join them. We declined, with the excuse that we needed to finish laundry, pack, and get a good night's sleep and get an early start in the morning.

"Soon after our parents had left for dinner, we went upstairs to Todd's room and tried to relax. We were both very tense at trying to deceive our parents and still find time for each other. We stripped out of our clothes and slipped between the sheets and started to make love.

"Just as we were getting into a rhythm, the door opened and Todd's mother walked in the room with his father in tow. The look of hurt and betrayal on their faces was beyond what we could have ever imagined. We knew they wouldn't approve, but we thought they

would come around. Todd jumped up and found his underwear and began to speak. At his father's raising of a hand, he stopped. His father yanked me out of bed and instructed me to get dressed and get out. He told me to never show my face in their house again. I did as he was told. I was sure Todd's parents would call mine, but I had hoped to get home to talk to them before they got the call. Unfortunately, when I got home, my parents were waiting for me. They told me how humiliating it was to hear the Slocums tell them things about their son, things that went against everything they believed in, everything they had taught me. They said I made their stomachs turn. They didn't give me a chance to speak, they told me to pack my bags and get out. As far as they were concerned, they no longer had a son, and I could kiss my family and my education goodbye.

“When I tried to explain that Todd and I were in love, my father accused me of being delusional. Then I asked them what the Slocums had told them. As I stood there listening to my father recount the story, I couldn't believe my ears. The Slocums said that they'd caught me raping Todd. They also said, with his hand on the family Bible, Todd confessed to being blackmailed. He convinced them that I first raped him after a frat party, when he was intoxicated and couldn't defend himself. Then after that, I had threatened to tell his parents he was gay and get him kicked out of school if he didn't continue to have sex with me. They also told my parents that if I left town immediately and never contacted Todd ever again, they wouldn't press any formal charges.

“I really couldn't believe what I was hearing. I remember falling to my knees and pleading. I told them that wasn't the way it happened and begged them to believe me, but they refused. They

told me to go and never come back or face prison time. The last thing my father ever said to me was that I was lucky to evade prison, but prison would be nothing like the fires of hell, and one day, that's where I would end up for eternity."

"Oh my God, Ian," Billy said as he sat down on the bed and surrounded him with his arms.

Ian continued with tears in his eyes, "My world had fallen apart in less than two hours. All that Todd and I had acknowledged, the love that I thought would last forever; Todd had given it all up to save his damn education and his inheritance. My life was over. I had no family, no education, and about eighteen hundred dollars in my savings account. So I did as I was told. I left my life and my first and only love, vowing never to let anyone have the opportunity to hurt me again."

Billy continued to hold on to Ian until he stood up, breaking the embrace.

"Now you know," said Ian. "Now you understand why I can never trust anyone ever again."

"Ian, that's the most heartbreaking story I have ever heard, and I can't begin to imagine the pain you were in, but I'm not Todd. I would never sell you out; I could never live with myself."

"It doesn't matter, Billy," Ian said. "My mind's made up."

"You can't be serious, Ian. You can't turn your back on me, on us."

"Billy, you promised that if I told you the story and I still wanted you to leave, you would leave. I also remember you once

saying that you'd never break a promise to me. I want you to leave."

Billy, broken, stood up and walked to the closet and filled his leather bag with some of his things. On the way out, he stopped in front of Ian, put his arms around him, gently kissed his neck, and said, "I love you, handsome." As he approached the doorway he stopped, turned, and said, "Don't worry about my things. I'll come by when I know you're not here and pack them up, and I'll leave my key on the kitchen counter." He stepped through and slowly closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER 17

ALTHOUGH Billy had gently closed the door, the sound rang through Ian's head like the sound of a cannon firing. Billy was gone because he told him to go. He stood at the foot of the bed with tears running down his cheeks. He crawled under the covers, and that's where he stayed.

The next morning he made two phone calls. The first was to Josh.

Josh answered on the first ring. "Josh Randal."

"Josh, it's Ian."

"Hey, what's up?"

"Can you stop by here, or can we meet somewhere? I need to talk to you."

"Ian, what's wrong?"

"Not over the phone, but I really need to talk to you."

"I'll be there in an hour."

“Okay, the front door will be open. Let yourself in.”

“Ian, you’re scaring me. Tell me what the hell is going on.”

“I’ll see you when you get here.”

In under an hour, Josh was walking in the front door. Ian was seated behind his desk with a bottle of Scotch and a glass.

“Okay, I’m here. What in the hell is going on?” Josh demanded. “And by the way, you look like hell.”

“Thanks,” Ian said.

“Well?”

“Josh, I don’t know where to start.”

“Then start at the beginning.”

“Okay, you need to get another manager for Billy’s tour.”

“What? Are you crazy? Why?”

“Because I can’t do it, that’s why.”

“Why not?”

“Josh, I should have told you this a long time ago, and you have every right to fire me, or worse than that, hate me, but Billy and I were involved romantically.”

Stunned, Josh just stared at Ian. “You and Billy. Together?”

Ian nodded.

“Oh, man, that complicates things,” Josh said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were gay?”

“I never meant to keep it from you. I’ve never had a relationship in Nashville, not even a date, so it was a non-issue.”

“Non-issue for you, maybe, but I thought we were friends.”

“We are friends, Josh, that’s why you’re here now.”

“You and Billy,” Josh repeated. “What happened?”

“It’s not Billy’s fault. He is one of the best men I know. Please don’t blame him.”

“I’m not blaming either one of you. You’re both my friends, but what happened?”

“Josh, please don’t make me get into it, but I will say that Billy deserves more than I can give him.”

“Damn it, Ian, I have a right to know, if not as your friend, then as your boss. If this got out, it could have had a serious impact on Billy’s career, not to mention how Capitol would feel about you being involved with a client.”

“I know, I know. We were involved before he signed with the label, and I never expected it to get this far.”

“But it did, and now you and Billy are through and you want out of his career. Do you know the position this puts me in with the label?”

Ian said, “Josh, I’m sorry,” as tears slid down his face.

“Okay,” Josh said, “we’ll deal with the label later. Let’s take care of you.”

“I’ll be okay. I just need a couple of days to get myself together. Billy and I were scheduled to have this week off before we

left for the tour, but I just need a couple of days.”

“Take the week and take care of yourself,” Josh said. “I’ll make up some excuse at work and find someone else to manage Billy.”

Josh looked at Ian and realized that he looked broken. He stood up, walked around the desk, and put his arms around his friend. “Ian, what happened? You and Billy were great together, at least as friends.”

“Josh, thanks for understanding, but it’s a really long story, and I don’t have the energy to get into it with you. Maybe someday, but not today. I assume that Billy’s going ahead with the trip to New Orleans that we planned, so he’ll be back by Friday to go over any last-minute issues before the tour.”

“Do you need anything, Ian?”

“Nothing you can give me, Josh. Time is the only thing I need right now, the only thing that will help.”

“Call me if you need anything, Ian. Suzie and I are your friends and don’t you forget it.” Josh turned and headed for the door.

“Thanks, Josh, I really appreciate it.”

The next call was to Jean. Ian pressed the “talk” button on the phone and started to dial, then hesitated. Jean and Jules were under the impression that he and Billy were going to New Orleans, so they wouldn’t be expecting him to be home or at the saloon, and he decided not to make that call after all. He just wasn’t ready to get into this with them.

He used up all the energy he had to climb the stairs and get into

bed. All he could do was lie there and try to figure out how he would put his life back together without Billy. He told himself it was better this way, on his terms, before Billy could hurt him. But that did little to ease the pain.

JOSH had driven almost halfway home before he suddenly took the next off ramp and turned his car around, headed back to Ian's. He wasn't going to allow Ian to shut him out. They had been friends for too long and had too much history. Ian's happiness was important to him, and so what if he was gay and Billy was gay; they were two of his best friends and they should be happy. They were so good together that he would talk some sense into Ian and get them back on track.

When Josh pulled into the driveway, the house was in darkness. The front door was still unlocked, so he walked in with a determination to make things better for his friends. After searching downstairs, he headed upstairs. He walked into a dark bedroom and flipped the light on. Startled, Ian sat upright in bed with a confused look on his face.

"Get up," Josh said.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Ian yelled.

"I said get up," Josh yelled back. "*Now.*"

Ian got out of bed and said, "Now what?"

"Downstairs," Josh replied.

Feeling defeated, Ian went downstairs as he was instructed and sat on the couch.

“Now tell me what the hell happened to you that was so bad that you would throw away the best thing that ever happened to you.”

Ian snapped, “I said I didn’t want to get into it.”

“I know what you said, and I’m not accepting it. If you’re going to get me into some serious trouble with the label over this, then the least you can do is tell me why.”

For the second time in one night, Ian hung his head and told Josh about Todd.

Josh listened with an intensity that Ian found intriguing. He asked questions and held all his comments back until the story was over. Finally, Ian said. “Now do you see why I can’t go through with this?”

Josh took a deep breath and said, “I can see why you think you can’t go through with this. But Ian, Billy is not Todd. Just because Todd had no backbone, that doesn’t mean Billy will follow suit. I know Billy, and he is loyal to a fault. What I can see is him standing up for you until death. I’ve seen this connection between you two, and until now I never knew what it was. But now I see it all too clear. It was a strong mutual love and support that worked so well for the two of you. Somehow I sensed that Billy would protect you at all costs and you would do the same for him. That’s why I felt so comfortable going against the label’s warnings and pairing you two in business. Ian, don’t allow your fear to run your life. The worst thing that could happen is that this thing didn’t work out. You got over Todd and you can get over Billy, but I have the feeling that you will

never have to experience that. He loves you, and now I know you love him. Ian, take a chance on Billy. He's a good man and he loves you. He deserves a chance because he's never done anything to make you doubt his loyalty. That's all I have to say, and now I'm going home to the woman I took a chance on, the woman I love and trust with all my heart." Josh turned around and walked out the front door as he'd come in and left Ian sitting on the couch.

Ian picked up the phone and started dialing.

CHAPTER 18

BILLY walked out of Ian's house a defeated man. He drove back to town and to his little apartment near Jean's. An hour later he pulled into the parking lot and turned off the ignition, but he couldn't force himself to move. He'd never spent a night there without Ian. How could he enter his apartment without him? His things were still there, Ian's things. Billy put his hand on the door to open it and again hesitated. He thought of Ian, alone and in pain, and that could have easily killed him right then and there if he'd let it.

Sitting in his truck, unable to move, his mind went over and over the events of the night. He was so full of questions and doubt, but in his mind, something didn't add up. His mind brought him immediately to Todd. What could have made him betray Ian in such a horrible way? Ian had said that they were in love and things were going great, so he wasn't looking for an easy way out, or was he? Was Todd as happy as he'd appeared? Ian would have known if he wasn't, wouldn't he? Could Todd have been so scared of his parents and losing his inheritance and education that he'd abandoned Ian emotionally? That didn't sound like the actions of someone in love.

Billy thought what he would have done if he was in that position. He knew the answer without hesitation: he would've told his parents to shove it and he would've been gone. Billy knew the answers he was looking for lay with Todd, and he would be taking a big risk, but he would get his answers. He loved Ian too much to let him go.

Billy took his keys out of the ignition, opened the door of his truck, and, with renewed hope, made his way to his apartment. It was as gloomy and heartbreaking as he'd thought it would be, but he fought the urge to stop and give in to the pain in his heart. He proceeded to the bedroom, stopping only long enough to drop his bag of clothes on the bed and move to the computer. He knew that if he stopped even for a second and lost sight of his mission, he might just collapse on the bed and never get up. He had to stay focused. He logged on to the internet and went to the Google search engine. He typed in "people searches" and reviewed his options. There were many free sites, but he wanted an advanced site which allowed him to enter all the information he knew, which might narrow down his results. He selected a site, and it brought up a full screen of search criteria. He typed in Todd's first and last name and Greenville, SC, as his last known address. He knew that each question he was able to answer would significantly narrow his search results, so he thought about everything Ian had told him about Todd. He continued entering the search criteria by selecting an approximate age of twenty-eight, college graduate of Bob Jones University, single versus married, just a hunch, search area up to two hundred miles surrounding Greenville. And lastly, he clicked the button that signaled the software to provide search results that met all or some of the search criteria. If he got no results, he would expand the search distance until he did get the desired results. He hit the "enter" key.

As the software's little flashlight moved back and forth, indicating a search was in progress, Billy kept his fingers crossed. He knew his results would present many options, but he hoped it would be manageable. No matter how many names came up, he would call each and every person until he found the right Todd. His and Ian's future depended on it.

When the flashlight stopped, the screen presented seventeen Todd Slocums in the greater Greenville and surrounding areas. After entering his credit card information, the software revealed all the known information about the list of Todd Slocums.

The first four were in Anderson, SC, five were in Spartanburg, SC, two were in Greenville, SC, and six were in Charlotte, NC. Only ten of the seventeen graduated from Bob Jones, so he was able to eliminate seven prospects. The results had pretty extensive information, like home address and telephone numbers, employer's name, address and telephone number, spouses, if married, number of children, etc. Of the ten remaining prospects, one worked for a market research firm and two worked for advertising agencies, and Billy remembered Ian saying that they were both majoring in marketing with minors in business administration. If Todd had followed his major and went into marketing, that could narrow the search, but if he'd chosen his minor in business administration, that could mean numerous possibilities. While he printed off the list, Billy wondered if someone knew all this information about him, and if so, how in the hell did they get it?

Since it was early evening, he started by calling the home numbers of the two prospects in Greenville. The first call was answered by a woman. Billy asked for Todd, and within seconds a

male voice came to the phone.

"Hi, my name is Billy Eagan. I'm looking for a college friend of a friend of mine. Did you happen to know a guy named Ian Dillon while you were at Bob Jones?"

"Um, the name doesn't ring a bell. What did he look like?"

"Well," Billy said, "he's about five ten, blond hair with green eyes, and he was on the swim team."

"No, not that I can recall," Todd said.

Billy knew that when he got the right Todd Slocum, he wouldn't have to think about it. Billy said, "Thanks for your time," and hung up the phone. He called the next Todd Slocum on the list. This time a man answered.

"Hi, is this Todd Slocum?" Billy asked.

"Who's calling?" the male voice replied.

Billy told the man his name and why he was calling, and again, no connection.

The next Todd Slocum on the list lived in Spartanburg and worked for an advertising agency. After a four rings, he got an answering machine and left his name and cell number. Continuing on, the next also lived in Spartanburg and owned a marketing firm. This time a man answered, and when Billy asked if he was Todd Slocum, the male voice said, "Nope, hang on a second." He heard the voice yell, "Todd, pick up the phone," and then someone picked up another telephone extension. The man said, "Hello," and Billy again explained who he was and why he was calling. There was silence on the other end of the line.

Billy said, "Hello?"

"I'm here," Todd said.

"Did you know Ian?" Billy asked again.

"Yeah, I knew Ian," Todd said.

Bingo, Billy thought as he heard Todd sigh on the other end of the phone.

"Todd, Ian needs your help."

"Is he in some kind of trouble?" Todd asked.

"No, nothing like that," Billy replied.

"What, then?" Todd asked.

"It's a long story, and you're a big part of it. Do you have time to talk to me?" Billy asked.

"Ian made his decision concerning me many years ago. I don't know what I can do for him or you, for that matter. Does he know you were looking for me?"

"No," Billy admitted. "But please, just hear me out."

"You've got five minutes to tell me how and why I should help Ian," Todd said.

"Deal," said Billy. He told Todd how he and Ian had met and how their friendship had grown into a relationship.

"I hope you two will be very happy together, but I still don't know what this has to do with me."

"Please allow me to finish," Billy said.

He told Todd what had happened earlier that evening between him and Ian and slowly began to recount the story, word for word, as Ian had told it to him. Fifteen minutes later, Billy asked, "Todd, is that what happened? So much doesn't add up to me."

"I can't believe... this can't be true," Todd said in a very shaky voice. "That's not how it happened at all," he whispered. "My parents told me that Ian had blamed me for everything and admitted to them that he was never really into me and had plans to leave town and not return to college. I argued with them for hours that he'd never betray me like that, and when they couldn't convince me of it, they finally told me that they'd paid him twenty thousand dollars to leave town and never see me again. They convinced me that he'd never loved me, and the fact that he accepted the money was surely proof of that."

"Todd," Billy said, "Ian never took any money. Your parents played you both to get what they wanted. They threatened Ian with rape charges if he didn't leave town, with you as their star witness. And they told you that Ian abandoned you for twenty thousand dollars. Todd, if you don't believe me or Ian, maybe it's time you have a talk with your parents."

"I can't," Todd said. "They were both killed in an automobile accident over six years ago."

"I'm sorry, Todd."

"Don't be. We didn't have any real relationship after they discovered that I was gay. They agreed to pay for the remainder of my college if I followed their rules, but once I graduated and they could no longer control me, we broke all ties and never spoke again. I didn't even attend their funeral."

“I can’t believe that both of you had to endure such prejudice and hatred from your own parents. Todd, Ian needs to hear the truth and he needs to hear it from you. I love him dearly, but if he still loves you and there’s a chance that you guys could work things out, I love him enough to let him go.”

“Billy, Ian and I were over a long time ago. I have someone in my life, for seven years now, who deserves my love and respect. I would never turn my back on him for anyone.”

Billy sighed. “I understand and admire your decision, but will you consider making a trip to Nashville, if for nothing else, closure for both of you? Ian is a broken man, and we need to act quickly. I’m very concerned about him”

“Let me talk to my partner and see how he feels about this whole thing, and I’ll call you back shortly.”

Billy gave Todd his cell phone number, along with his thanks, and closed his phone. All he could do now was hope and pray that Todd would help him.

He knew he was taking a big chance. Ian might never forgive him for contacting Todd, but if that was the case, he told himself that if Ian could get some closure, it would be worth it. But in his heart, he believed in Ian and knew that he would eventually understand that Billy couldn’t stand by knowing this information and not share it with him. He lay in the darkness of his bedroom, waiting.

Within an hour, Billy’s phone rang. He looked at the caller ID and took a deep breath. His phone barely made it to the second ring before he answered it.

“Hello,” he said as his voice cracked.

“When do you want to do this?”

“Can you come tomorrow?”

“It’s about a six-hour drive. I’ll leave early in the morning, and with any luck, I’ll be there by eleven,” Todd said.

Billy gave him directions to Ian’s. “I’ll be there to meet you, Todd, and thanks.”

Billy tried to sleep, but it was no use. To be in the bed that he and Ian had shared since he had moved there was useless. Just then the phone rang, and Billy picked it up immediately, thinking it would be Ian. But to his disappointment, the caller ID said Buck Stevens.

“Hello,” Billy said.

“Oh, Billy, I’m so glad you picked up.”

“Buck?” Billy said.

“Yeah, it’s me, Billy. Listen, I’m sorry to bother you, but the smoke alarm is going off in the west barn and I can’t reach Jules and I didn’t know who else to call. I figured since you were the former ranch foreman, maybe you could come out here and give me a hand.”

He sounded so frantic, Billy felt bad for him.

“Okay, Buck, calm down. Wake up the other guys and get all the horses out. I’m on my way.”

“Thanks, man,” Buck shouted into the phone, and then he hung up.

Billy immediately dressed and headed out to the ranch. On the

way, he tried to call Jules, but the phone went straight to voice mail. He left a message explaining what was happening and that he was on his way to the ranch to help Buck.

When he arrived, everything was quiet. Billy first went to the west barn, but all was well: There were no signs of fire, and the horses were all okay. Maybe Buck had confused the west and east barns as he had on Billy's initial job interview? Billy turned to check on the east barn, and just for a split second, he saw Buck with a baseball bat in his hand about to swing. Before he could speak, he felt a blow against his head and everything went black.

CHAPTER 19

AT TEN forty-five a.m., Todd came to a stop in front of Ian's townhouse. The plantation shutters were all closed and the house was in darkness. Todd discreetly parked his car in front of the neighbor's house and waited for Billy to arrive. He hadn't slept at all worrying about the day's outcome. He kept telling himself that, either way, the truth would come out, and that was all that really mattered.

As he waited he relived the call from Billy. He had sounded so desperate, but all Todd could think about was how all these years he'd thought Ian had abandoned him for money, and that hurt so much, but that was nothing compared to Ian thinking that Todd had accused him of rape and was going to testify against him if he didn't leave town. At least I got to finish college and keep my family, no matter how awful they were, Todd thought. Ian was forced out of town with no education and no money. Todd couldn't imagine what Ian must have gone through.

When Todd looked at his watch, he realized he'd been sitting there for over an hour. He tried calling the cell phone number Billy had given him, but there was no answer.

What have I gotten myself into? he thought. *Now what do I do?*

He waited about fifteen more minutes, tried calling Billy one more time, and made his decision. Todd walked up the stairs leading to the front door and stood there for a minute, frozen. He willed his arm to reach for the door knocker. When his hand landed on the knocker, he only hesitated a second and then slammed it against the door, over and over.

“THIS better be important,” Ian muttered as he opened the door, ready to snarl angrily at the noisy intruder.

His emotion quickly changed from anger to shock and then just as quickly to rage as he recognized the visitor. All the hurt Ian had buried eight years ago instantly rushed to the surface, as fresh and fervent as it had been the day he’d left South Carolina forever. “What the hell are you doing here?” he hissed.

As the man started to open his mouth to speak, Ian felt his body tighten, and he involuntarily clenched his hand into a tight fist and lifted his muscular arm to strike the intruder from his past. Taken off guard, Todd put his arms in front of his face, protecting himself from the damage Ian’s blow would surely deliver.

“Ian, don’t,” he yelled. “Billy sent me! Hear me out, Ian, and then if you still want to beat me senseless, we’ll give it a go.”

Ian stared into Todd’s eyes, unsure of what to do next. Should he just beat the man to a pulp now or listen to what he had to say and

then beat the hell out of him? Exhausted from the emotions of the last two days, Ian relaxed his fists, dropped his arm, and stepped aside as Todd Slocum entered his home.

As Ian closed the door, he said, "Say what you have to say and get out. And furthermore, what does Billy have to do with this?"

"He asked me to come," Todd said. "He loves you."

"Yeah, well," Ian said. "After what you did to me eight years ago, I can't love anyone ever again, so you can thank yourself for whatever I've become."

Crushed, Todd whispered, "Ian, my parents played us both."

"What are you talking about?" Ian barked back.

"Ian, they told me you said you never cared for me and accepted twenty thousand dollars to get out of town, and now because of Billy, I know they told you I accused you of rape. Ian," Todd said with tears in his eyes. "They played us, man, both of us. I loved you, Ian. I could have never accused you of rape, but they spent hours convincing me that you sold me out for twenty grand, and after all, you did leave town."

Shaking his head like he wasn't hearing correctly, Ian stood there chilled to the bone. He finally muttered, "Yeah, I left town. I had to. They told me if I didn't, they would have me arrested for rape, and that you were prepared to testify against me."

Todd moved to Ian's side and took his hand. "I know, man, I know. They lied to both of us."

Tears began to run down Ian's cheeks. He pulled Todd into an embrace and said, "I loved you too, Todd. I would never have left

you for any amount of money.”

Todd and Ian looked at each other, and for the first time in over eight years, held each other tight. When they broke the embrace, they sat down and talked for almost two hours. Todd told Ian about his relationship with his parents, how they’d died, his career path, and his relationship back home. Ian shared the pain and loneliness he’d felt at the abandonment of his parents, the road to rebuilding his life, about Jean and Jules, and of course, Billy.

“Billy?” Ian said. “Oh my God, I need to talk to Billy.”

BILLY woke up with the worst headache he had ever experienced in his life. He was lying on a bunk bed with his hands tied over his head and his feet secured to the rails at the foot of the bed. He could feel what he assumed was blood running down his face and neck and he didn’t know where he was or how he’d gotten there. The last thing he remembered was going out to the ranch to help Buck. “Buck.” Then he remembered. Buck had struck him with a baseball bat at the barn.

As his eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light, he saw split rails neatly stacked on one side of the room and rolls of barbed wire on the other, and suddenly, he realized where he was. He was in the old cabin on the ranch they used to store supplies for repairing the many miles of fence surrounding the property. After blinking a few times and scanning the room for any chance of escape, he realized he was not alone in the cabin. There was another bed across the room, and there was a woman tied to that bed as well. His mind was still foggy, but he knew he recognized the woman, though for the life of him, he

didn't know from where.

Suddenly it hit him. The unconscious woman tied to the bed next to him was Tina Roth, the woman he'd competed against at the open mic night and Buck's girlfriend.

"Tina," he whispered. She didn't move.

"Tina," he said a little louder. Still no response.

"*Tina*," he yelled, and she began to moan. Her face appeared to be badly bruised, and she had a black eye.

She was moaning more loudly now and attempting to move. When she realized her hands and feet were tied to the bed, she began to panic and struggled to get free.

"Tina," Billy said. "Calm down, you can't get loose."

"Who are you?" she screamed. "Help me."

"Tina, it's Billy Eagan. I used to work at the Lazy H ranch, and we competed at the open mic night at Jean's, remember?"

"Oh, Billy," she pleaded. "Help me. Buck's crazy. He beat me up last night because I tried to leave him. He said if I tried to leave again that he would kill me."

"Calm down, Tina," Billy said. "I'm going to get us out of this."

Billy thought for a moment. "I understand why he thinks he should be angry at you, but how am I involved in this?" he asked.

"He hates you, Billy. Because you're gay, for taking the foreman job at the ranch away from him, and for destroying my big break at Jean's. He has it in his mind that I would have won the open mic contest and I would have become a huge singing star if it wasn't

for you. Billy, he's lost it."

Tina looked down and said, "I never wanted to sing for a living, but Buck said I was really good and one day I would be discovered, make us rich and we wouldn't have to worry about anything ever again. I know I have limited talent. I guess I went along with it because I loved him. People tried to warn me about him. They told me he saw me as his way out, his meal ticket, but I didn't believe them. I trusted him. Billy, I'm so stupid," she whispered.

"You loved him, Tina. Love is not stupid," he said.

"Billy, there's one more thing you should know."

"What?"

"Buck confessed last night that he was in the woods the day your boyfriend was hurt. He followed you guys up the mountain and saw you when you stopped for lunch. He said he was so appalled at what he saw he went back down the mountain and waited by the stream. When your friend entered the stream, he launched a rock at the horse and spooked her. He told me if I ever told anyone, he would say I was in on it. Billy, I'm so scared. What's he going to do with us?"

"Tina, I have no idea what his plans are, but I'm going to get us out of here."

Just then the cabin door opened and Buck walked in. "Look who's awake," he said with a smirk.

IAN grabbed the cordless phone from the cradle and quickly dialed Billy's number.

He had so many things to say. He needed Billy. He wanted Billy. He was so sorry not to have trusted in their love. The phone rang once and then went immediately to voice mail.

"Billy, it's Ian. Please call me. Todd's here. Please forgive me, I was so wrong. I'm so sorry. I love you. Please call me back."

Ian put the phone back in the cradle and looked at Todd. He hung his head.

"What if it's too late? What if he's already put me out of his mind? What if he's gone to New Orleans without me? I've got to find him."

Ian ran upstairs and put on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and some sneakers. He ran back downstairs and looked frantically for his car keys.

Todd thought he looked like a mad man. "Wait," Todd said. "You're not driving like this. I'll take you, and we'll find Billy together."

Ian grabbed Todd and put his arms around his neck, then quickly guided his shoulders toward the door.

"Where do we start looking?" Todd said.

"His apartment downtown is as good a place as any," Ian replied.

Todd drove as fast as he could, most of the time over the speed limit but not too much over to draw attention. They arrived at

Billy's apartment in just under an hour. When they pulled into the parking lot, even before Todd could bring the car to a stop, Ian jumped out. He ran up the stairs and used his key to open the front door. "Billy," he shouted.

Billy wasn't there. His half-packed suitcase was on the floor next to the bed, so Ian knew he hadn't left for New Orleans yet.

Ian banged the palm of his hand against his forehead over and over. "Think, Ian, think. Where would he go?" Then it hit him. "Jean and Jules, or maybe Josh," he said under his breath.

He opened his phone and called Jean's cell phone. She answered on the first ring. "Ian?"

"Jean, is Billy with you?"

"No, honey, he's headed to the ranch. Jules and I were just finishing up dinner and Jules got a message from Billy saying that the smoke alarms were going off at the ranch and he was heading out there to help Buck. We're on our way there too. Is everything okay?" Jean asked.

"Buck? Why would he help Buck? That guy hates him."

"Ian, I agree, honey, but we'll figure it out when we get there."

"Oh, Jean, I've got to find Billy. I've made a huge mistake. I've got to get to him."

"Okay, honey, calm down," Jean said. "We'll meet you there; we're about twenty minutes away."

Ian said, "Jean, if you see Billy before I get there, tell him I love him and I was so wrong."

“Okay, honey, I will.”

BUCK had a fuel can in each hand when he walked in the door. He kicked the door shut with his right foot, and it closed with a loud thud.

“What do we have here?” he said. “Are you ladies awake?”

Tina was the first to speak. “Buck, please let me go. I promise I won’t leave you.” She looked at Billy with a pleading look and added, “I love you, Buck.”

“You don’t love me,” Buck shouted. “You want to be away from me? Well, you’ll be as far away from me as possible, very soon.”

Billy thought for a second before he spoke. He knew the only chance they had to get out of this was to convince Buck that Tina loved him and that he would help her make it in the business.

“Buck, what’s this all about?”

“You know exactly what this is about, you little queer.” Billy could see the hate in Buck’s eyes. “All you sick queers do is please yourself. You take whatever it is you want at the time. Do you worry about anyone else? Hell, no. Well the buck, so to speak, stops here, Billy. You’ll take nothing away from anyone ever again.”

“Buck,” Billy said in a very calm voice. “What have I taken from you?”

“*What?*” Buck shouted. “You’ve taken everything away from

Tina and me. You took my foreman job at the ranch. You took Tina's chance for success. And you ultimately took her away from me."

"Buck, I didn't know you wanted the foreman job. I didn't even know you then."

"That wouldn't have mattered. You wanted the job and you didn't care who you stomped on to get it."

"As far as Tina's career, I didn't take it. She performed at open mic night every month and she never won. Why do you think I'm the one who took her career away?" Billy pleaded.

Buck looked as if he thought Billy had a point, but he quickly shook his head and said, "Don't try to sweet talk your way out of this, you little sissy, because it's not going to work."

"Buck, if you let us go I'll do my best to help Tina's career. You know I have a record deal and the label's attention when it comes to talent. I promise you I will get Ian to help her as well." He knew this was a lie, because Ian didn't want anything to do with him, but he said, "He used to be a talent scout, and he still has connections."

"Too little too late," Buck said. "Besides, Tina never wanted to be a star. It was all me, always pushing her. She knew she would never make it, and now I know that as well. She's no use to me now."

Buck picked up the first fuel can and poured gasoline all around the inside perimeter of the cabin. When the first can was empty, he poured the second can around each of the beds and over the split-rail fence posts across the room.

Looking around at his handiwork, Buck said, "That should send you both up in a blaze of glory in no time at all."

Tina screamed, "No, Buck, please don't do this, please."

Billy listened to her plead with Buck to let them go, but he knew Buck had already made up his mind. Just then, Billy remembered he'd left Jules a message about the smoke alarms going off. He knew if Jules got the message, he would head straight to the ranch. Maybe there was hope.

I've got to give Jules time to get here, he thought. I've got to stall.

Billy took a deep breath and said, "Buck, you know you won't get away with this."

"Says who?" Buck replied.

"We'll be missed," Billy barked. "Besides, where will you go after you set the cabin on fire? Ian knows you hate me, and I think Jules and Jean are on to you as well."

"Who cares about your fairy boyfriend and those other twits," Buck snarled. "By the time they find your ashes, I'll be long gone."

Buck reached into his pocket, pulled out a small box of matches, slid the box open, and pulled out a match.

"Wait," Billy shouted.

"What now, sissy?"

"There are people looking for us right now," he yelled.

"Okay, queer boy, I'll bite," Buck said. "Who's looking for

you?"

"I left a message for Jules right after you called me, explaining about the smoke alarms and that I was coming out here to help you. I'm sure he's here right now looking for us."

"Oh really," Buck said. "Even if you did call him, which I seriously doubt, and even if he is looking for you, he won't have any idea where to look. And besides, by the time he sees the flames, you both will be toast. Say goodbye, ladies," Buck said as he struck the match and held it in front of him.

CHAPTER 20

IAN and Todd arrived at the ranch and saw Jules and Jean running towards them. Jules had something in his hand.

Ian got out of the car and ran to meet them with Todd on his heels. Ian could see the stress on both of their faces, even from a distance.

“What’s wrong?” Ian said. They looked at Todd. Ian said, “This is Todd, a long story, but I’ll explain it all later. Now, what’s wrong?”

“Okay, honey,” Jean said. “We have problems.”

“What do you mean?” Ian asked with a quizzical look.

“Don’t panic, honey,” Jean said. “But we found this baseball bat in the barn, and it’s covered with blood.”

Jules held the bat up for Ian and Todd to see.

Ian felt his knees about to give out. “Oh my God,” he groaned as Todd and Jules caught him before he hit the ground.

Ian took a second to right himself and said, “I’m okay, but we

need to find Billy *now*.”

“I’ve already called the police and they’re on their way. I don’t like this at all. This is my fault,” Jules said. “I knew that guy was no good. Why did I keep him around? If anything happens to Billy, I will never forgive myself.”

Ian heard the wail of sirens in the distance and turned in the direction of the sound. Just over the hill he saw the sky was illuminated.

“What’s that?” he screamed.

“Oh, my heavens,” Jean said.

“That’s the old cabin,” Jules replied.

Ian shouted Billy’s name. “Jules, Billy’s in that cabin, I can feel it. He’s going to burn to death. We’ve got to get up there.”

Jules told Jean to stay put and direct the police to the cabin when they arrived. Jules, Ian, and Todd jumped into Jules’s truck and sped in the direction of the cabin.

When they arrived, the cabin was engulfed in flames. The walls were burning halfway up the sides and the fire was nearing the roofline. Ian jumped out of the truck before Jules or Todd could stop him and burst through the door of the cabin. Smoke filled the small room, and Ian dropped to the floor. He began calling for Billy.

“I’m over here,” Billy yelled back.

“Billy, keep yelling so I can follow your voice,” Ian shouted.

As Billy continued to call Ian’s name, Ian crawled his way to the bed. Ian immediately tried to lift Billy off the bed, but he couldn’t.

“My hands and feet are tied to the bed,” Billy yelled.

Ian fumbled with the rope that bound Billy's hands and soon got one free. The fire was raging, and now the roof was totally engulfed.

Ian and Billy heard Jules and Todd screaming for them. The rafters were creaking and burning and about to give way.

"Stay out of here, guys," Billy shouted. "It's too dangerous; the roof is going to give."

Ian freed Billy's other hand and moved to his feet.

Billy stopped him and said, "Tina, get Tina."

Ian didn't understand what Billy was talking about. Billy pointed to the other bed, and Ian saw a woman lying on it. She wasn't moving.

While Billy untied his feet, Ian started working on getting Tina free.

Just then, Jules appeared and started to help untie Tina.

As the last rope was untied, Jules lifted Tina off the bed and headed back toward the door. Todd was there to meet him. He took Tina and carried her to safety. Billy and Ian followed, and they barely reached the door jamb when the roof gave way and imploded.

Jean and the police arrived at the inflamed cabin. Jean jumped out of the squad car and ran to Jules.

"I'm fine," Jules said. "Check on the boys."

As the fire trucks were speeding up the hill, Billy and Ian helped each other away from the burning cabin and to safety.

The paramedics took Tina to the hospital with minor burns and smoke inhalation but said they thought she would make a full

recovery. Jules, Billy, and Ian all had minor burns, but none of them would agree to go to the hospital. Billy told the police the full story, and they put out an all points bulletin for Buck and assured Billy they would apprehend him before he crossed the state line.

Ian and Billy walked away from the crowd arm in arm, and Ian finally broke the silence.

“I thought I’d lost you, Billy. I love you. Can you ever forgive me?”

“I love you too, Ian. Can we go home now?” Billy asked.

“Anything you want,” Ian replied.

WHEN all was said and done, Jules and Jean hugged the boys and expressed their deep appreciation to Todd for his help. Although they had a clue, they still didn’t know he was Ian’s Todd, but as far as they were concerned, Todd was a man they could trust and there would be time enough to get the full story later.

Todd drove Billy and Ian back to Ian’s house. During the entire ride home, Ian didn’t let Billy go. For the first time in eight years, he had something to lose, and he felt alive.

When they arrived, Billy went straight upstairs to shower. Ian offered Todd the guestroom and gave him some clean clothes. Ian went to the bedroom to shower as well and talk to Billy, but when he got to the door, Billy was sound asleep on the bed.

Ian thought how exhausted and gorgeous he looked. He grabbed some clothes, tiptoed to the bathroom, and took a long, hot

shower. This was the first time he had to reflect on what had happened in the last twenty-four hours. Even he had trouble believing everything he now knew, but it was real, all of it was real.

When Ian finished showering, Billy was still asleep. Ian tiptoed out of the bedroom and went downstairs, where he found Todd sitting on the couch with a beer in his hand.

"I hope you don't mind," Todd said, "but I helped myself."

"No problem, it's the least I can do. Let me get one and I'll join you," Ian replied.

Ian returned from the kitchen with a cold beer and sat on the couch next to Todd.

"What a day," Todd said.

"You're not kidding," said Ian. "Todd, I still can't believe the stuff our parents did to us. We've wasted so many years hating each other. If we had just made the effort to find one another, this could have all been cleared up."

"Do you think we didn't make the effort because we knew it wouldn't last? Was it easier to hate each other than work through the problems we would have faced if we proceeded with the relationship?" Todd asked.

"We were so young," Ian said. "I guess we'll never know the answer to that question. But I know one thing. I will never forget what you and Billy did for me."

Ian reached over and, for the first time in eight years, kissed Todd. They embraced for several minutes and said their goodbyes. After Todd left, Ian went back upstairs to check on Billy.

Billy was sitting on the bed with his hand over his face, wiping the tears away.

“Billy, what’s wrong?” Ian asked.

“I guess I knew I was taking a chance by contacting Todd, but it was a chance I was willing to take. Now that you both know the truth, will you try to work things out?”

“Why would you say that?” Ian asked.

“I woke up alone and came downstairs. I saw you and Todd embracing and knew I had my answer.”

“Why didn’t you say anything, Billy?”

“I wanted to give you guys some privacy. You were both hit pretty hard with the revelations of the past, and I didn’t want to come between you. I’m sure you had many things to say to one another that, after all these years, needed to be said. I thought you would need this time to sort things out, to see what was left of your relationship.”

“I can’t believe you did this,” Ian said. “This is the most unselfish thing anyone has ever done for me. You took a huge risk bringing Todd and me back together.”

Billy looked up, wiped his tears away, and said, “All I knew was that your story didn’t add up. I put myself in Todd’s place. If you loved him as much as you said you did, and I believed you did, he would have been a fool to give that up. So I tracked him down to find out the truth. Luckily, my hunch proved to be right, and we soon figured out you were both duped. I know I took a risk, but if I lost you by bringing Todd here, then you’re meant to be with him, not me,

and I would live with that. At least I could go to sleep at night, knowing I did the right thing by you and you were taken care of.

“But Ian, I also hoped in my heart that once you knew the truth and if you didn’t choose to go back to Todd, that maybe, just maybe, you’d want to start your life over again. With me.”

Ian looked Billy in the eyes and said, “With you and only you. I love you, cowboy.”

Billy smiled, stood up, and pulled Ian up to him. “I love you,” Billy said as he kissed him deeply. Ian wrapped his arms around Billy and held him there for a long time.

They fell onto the bed, undressing as they went. They landed with Ian on top and Billy’s arms wrapped around him tight. Ian’s mouth melted over Billy’s with an urgency that neither had experienced during any of their previous lovemaking. Billy took Ian’s head in his hands and pulled him back to look him the eyes. “I love you so much, Ian. Please tell me you won’t give up on me, on us, again.”

With his head held tightly between Billy’s hands, Ian looked deep into Billy’s eyes and said, “I am so in love with you, Billy, that I can’t give up on us, but please promise that you’ll be patient with me. I’ve spent the last eight years teaching myself how not to love, not to trust. It’s going to take me a while to undo the damage I’ve done.”

Billy whispered, “You have me forever, just know that. God, I love you.” And those were the last words spoken before the lust and love took control.

Ian, still on top of Billy, could sense Billy’s excitement by the bulge of his cock pressing against his own. His hands caressed every

part of Billy's body without breaking their passionate kisses.

Ian's mouth moved to Billy's neck as he ran his hand down the outside of Billy's arm and held his hand tight. Then he released it and rubbed further down to his thigh and back up again. He felt Billy's warm fingers lightly stroking his back, which sent a chill down his spine. Billy tilted his head into the soft, moist lips teasing and biting at his neck while wrapping his legs around Ian's lower thighs. He reached down with both hands and pulled on the waistband of Ian's underwear, letting Ian know that he wanted them off. He released his legs from behind Ian's back and gently guided Ian up to his knees. Billy slid Ian's Calvin Kleins down to his knees, and as Ian rolled to his side, using his toes, Billy pulled the underwear the rest of the way down to Ian's ankles. Ian, in one quick move, finished the job and was sliding Billy's underwear down and off.

Ian wanted this to last forever; he wouldn't hurry, not this time, no matter how much he wanted Billy. He would tease and torment him until he was about to explode with passion. And then, and only then, would he allow Billy the release he was desperate to achieve. Still lying alongside Billy, he fondled the sensitive skin around Billy's pulsing erection. He lightly ran his fingers through Billy's pubic hairs, never once touching his rock-hard dick. Billy was still on his back with his head turned, watching Ian intently. Ian turned his head ever so slowly, and his eyes met Billy's, and Billy found his mouth again and kissed him hard. Ian continued to gently tease Billy's sensitive areas, and Billy raised his right knee as a silent invitation for Ian to explore at will. Ian reacted by lightly brushing his fingers over Billy's inner thigh and slowly making his way down to Billy's balls.

Ian tousled Billy's balls, gently rolling them through his fingers

as he felt them tighten with anticipation. Billy responded with a sound both ravenous and willing, which gave Ian all the encouragement he needed to continue his exploration.

Ian released Billy's balls and slowly ran his fingers down along the narrow piece of skin to the pucker that was the opening of his body. Billy pulled his mouth away from Ian's and whispered, "I need you inside of me." Ian sensed the urgency of his admission and felt him tremble with anticipation. "I've never before needed or wanted anyone in this way. I want you, Ian, need you."

Ian rolled back on top of Billy and straddled his upper thighs. Ian kissed Billy again and then licked his way from Billy's chin down to his left nipple. He circled and teased it with his tongue, then licked his way to the other and did the same. He continued down past his belly button to the hairs just above his dick. He circled the base of Billy's cock with his tongue, which made Billy's cock jump with arousal.

Ian wanted Billy with an urgency he had never experienced. He kissed the tip of Billy's dick, making Billy gasp, and hooked his arms under Billy's legs and lifted them over his head. Ian pulled Billy's ass cheeks apart, and when his tongue touched the soft pink skin surrounding Billy's opening, he felt him tremble as he moaned with pleasure. Ian ran his tongue around the edges of Billy's pucker and gently tantalized the tender area before pulling his cheeks further apart and probing inside with his tongue. Billy relaxed his muscles, and his asshole opened up to the probing. His breathing was becoming more erratic, which told Ian that he was doing his job and doing it well.

Ian withdrew his tongue and with one fingertip circled and massaged the tight opening. Ian needed to know what Billy felt like

inside. He opened the drawer and reached for the lube, spreading it around Billy's opening and slowly slipping his index finger inside. Billy moaned as his cock jumped and twitched in response. The intimacy of Billy totally giving himself to Ian in this way was overwhelming. Before, he'd never given Billy anything more than his body, but now he craved this new, deeper, emotional bond he was experiencing. It left him feeling somewhat vulnerable and exposed but at the same time, warm, safe, and connected.

Ian opened up to the feelings and let them consume him. He was immediately brought back into the moment by the look on Billy's face as his finger teased and fucked him. Billy closed his eyes and threw his head back as he said, "Oh God, Ian, you feel so good."

"You haven't really had me yet, cowboy, but you will soon," Ian promised him. He took the head of Billy's dick into his mouth as Billy cried out and tightened around his fingers. "I'm going to give you every part of me, cowboy."

Billy inhaled as he trembled. Ian was sure he was trembling at the pleasure of what was to come next. "Yes," Billy moaned, his ass wiggling as Ian slipped in a second finger and fucked him slowly. "I want you Ian, I need you now." Billy fumbled until he found Ian's cock and squeezed and kneaded it like dough.

Ian was now shaking as the look of desire on Billy's face overtook him. His hips began to thrust forward into the feeling of Billy's hand wrapped around his cock.

"Billy," Ian whispered, "is this your first time?"

Billy nodded.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Ian asked.

Billy flushed. "I want you so badly, Ian. I need to feel you inside me. Please fuck me now."

Ian slowly eased his fingers out of Billy, kissing the head of his dick. He again opened the flip top of the lube bottle and squeezed some into his hand. He made sure that Billy was adequately lubricated and spread more along the shaft of his very erect cock. Even as aroused as they both were, it was Billy's first time, and Ian knew he had to take it very slowly, at least at first. When Ian positioned the head of his dick at Billy's opening and applied pressure, Billy tensed up slightly. Ian began to push inside him a little at first, paused for Billy to adjust, and then pushed a little more. After several minutes of gently invading Billy's ass, Ian was in all the way. Ian paused, and their eyes met. "Are you okay?"

Billy smiled reassuringly, and Ian relaxed and began to slowly pull out and ease back in with a smooth, long stroke, repeating it until he was deep inside him again.

Ian bent over and kissed Billy while reaching between them to stroke Billy's erection. He felt Billy's hands gripping his thighs, moving back and forth with each thrust, urging him on.

"God, you feel so good," Billy moaned.

Ian placed Billy's legs over his shoulders and started to fuck him slowly, never breaking eye contact.

Billy arched beneath Ian and groaned with each thrust, moving with Ian and pulling him deeper. "God. God, Ian."

Ian pushed in again. "Fuck, yes," Billy gasped.

Ian kissed him, needing, wanting more. Billy's ass was tight and

warm, more perfect than anything Ian had ever felt before. He pulled all the way out this time. Billy was about to protest when he drove back in with one long stroke until his pubic hairs were smashed against Billy's hot ass. Billy whimpered in ecstasy.

"Oh my God, Ian." Billy was trembling, his cock leaking onto his stomach.

Sliding his hand free and continuing to fuck Billy with strong, deep strokes that drew groans from each of them, Ian curled his hand around Billy's cock.

Billy shuddered and groaned, rocking his hips to meet the next thrust. "God... Ian, don't let go, please, I'm so close...."

Billy was gasping, his body moving as one with Ian's, pushing and pulling Ian with every stroke. Ian's fingers were still wrapped around Billy's hot cock and working it with the same ruthless speed in which he was pushing into Billy.

"Oh Billy, yes...." Ian could feel his balls draw up in anticipation of the release, that moment before it was torn apart and nothing else mattered but the need for one more slide into the tight, welcoming heat.

Billy came in Ian's hand so ferociously that Ian could do nothing but follow him. He cried out Billy's name as the intensity of his orgasm was stronger than anything he'd ever experienced. He collapsed on top of Billy, shuddering and gasping desperately for air.

Billy wrapped his arms around Ian and began to gently rub Ian's back and shoulders with the palms of his hands. He kissed Ian gently and reassuringly as he waited for him to catch his breath.

“No, don’t move, please don’t ever leave me,” Billy said as Ian started to stir. “I want to stay like this forever.”

“I’m not going anywhere, cowboy,” Ian said as he relaxed. He lifted his head and covered Billy’s mouth with his own, kissing him, loving him and hoping his feelings were being conveyed in the kisses because he didn’t think he could put them into words.

He was holding on to Billy tightly when he eventually slipped out of him. He felt and saw the regret in Billy’s eye’s at the unavoidable separation. The trusting way that Billy contentedly relaxed and settled in beside Ian meant more than he could have put into words. Ian realized that it would be easier than he’d thought to trust and build a life with this man, a man who had done something for him that no one else could have ever done: brought him love, peace, and security.

EPILOGUE

THREE years later, after three encores, ten thousand people at the New Orleans Super Dome were on their feet and begging for more of hometown boy and country superstar Billy Eagan. With hat in hand, he took one last bow, waved, and turned to exit the stage. As he walked the span of the long stage, he thought about how much he loved the way performing made him feel. The energy, the love, the acceptance; but all those things, he understood, were for the person his record label and the media had portrayed him to be, not for him. Would his fans ever get to know the real Billy Eagan, the way in which he lived his personal life or the man with which he passionately shared it? That Billy Eagan, they'd probably never know!

From the wings, Ian admired the man whom he loved, cherished, and protected. He watched as Billy went through his final bows, turned, and began to walk toward him. Billy was rapidly approaching with what Ian all too well recognized as the same adrenaline rush he experienced after every show. He seemed to be floating on air. As if seeing Billy for the first time, Ian was again reminded of just how strikingly handsome he was.

Ian was snapped out of his daydream when Billy put his left hand on his shoulder and squeezed three times. Ian instantly knew the sign. It was something they'd developed as a discreet way to say "I love you" when they were in the watchful eye of the public.

They exchanged a glance of mutual admiration when Ian handed Billy a towel and a bottle of water. Billy stared into Ian's piercing sea-green eyes, and he was once again in total awe of this man.

With the crowd still roaring for more, his band played an instrumental version of Billy's latest single and waited for a sign from Ian as to whether another encore was in order. Billy asked, "Should I go out one more time?"

"Are you crazy?" Ian laughed. "Three encores is more than enough on top of a

two and a half hour show.”

“I know, I know,” Billy said sheepishly. “But it’s not easy to know when enough is enough. I certainly don’t want to disappoint these guys.”

“Hell, Billy, this is opening night,” Ian said. “You’ve got to pace yourself. You’re about to do five sold-out shows a week for the next six months. And in ten of those cities, you’ve already convinced the label to add a second show, to make sure everyone gets in.

“Look, I understand how you feel about performing. I know the dedication and love you feel for the people that support you. And I know after me, performing is your lifeline, but you’ve got to be realistic, Billy. You can’t kill yourself in the first week.”

Billy smiled. “You’re right, Ian. You’re always right.”

Ian signaled the band that they were through. They gave a big finish, and within seconds, the stage lights were out, the house lights were up, and people were finally exiting their seats.

“How did I get so lucky?” Billy asked.

“You won’t think you’re so lucky when I tell you about tomorrow’s schedule,” Ian replied.

“I’ll be the judge of that. Give it to me straight,” Billy said.

“Okay, you’re on *Good Morning America*, via the local ABC affiliate, tomorrow morning at seven thirty. At eight forty-five, you’re being interviewed on the morning show at WNOE radio, and immediately following that, a photo shoot for the cover of *New Orleans* magazine. We have a twelve thirty flight tomorrow afternoon, which puts us in Atlanta by two o’clock and will give us a few hours of downtime, before sound checks and the meet and greet preceding the show. The crew and the band, on the other hand, are packing and loading the equipment now and will be leaving tonight, and should make it to Phillips Arena by eight a.m.”

“I’m still lucky,” Billy said as they walked back to his dressing room with Ian’s arm draped across Billy’s shoulders, in a very managerial way, laughing and recounting stories about the night’s performance. Billy sat on the couch with his feet up and watched as Ian, on his cell phone, finalized more details for the next show, and realized that he had everything he ever wanted. His career would someday fade away, but if he had Ian, he needed nothing more. They had overcome so much to get here, and they were never looking back.

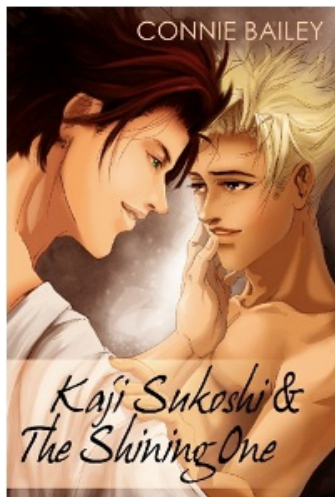
SCOTTY CADE left Corporate America and twenty-five years of marketing and public relations behind to buy an inn & restaurant on the island of Martha's Vineyard with his partner of fourteen years.

He started writing stories as soon as he could read, but only recently for publication. When not at the inn, you can find him on the bow of his boat writing male/male romance novels with his Shetland sheepdog Mavis at his side. Being from the South and a lover of commitment and fidelity, most of his characters find their way to long, healthy relationships, however long it takes them to get there. He believes that in the end, the boy should always get the boy.

Scotty and his partner are avid boaters and live aboard their boat, spending the summers on Martha's Vineyard and winters in Charleston, SC, and Savannah, GA.

Visit Scotty at <http://www.scottycade.com> and Facebook. You can contact him at Scotty@scottycade.com

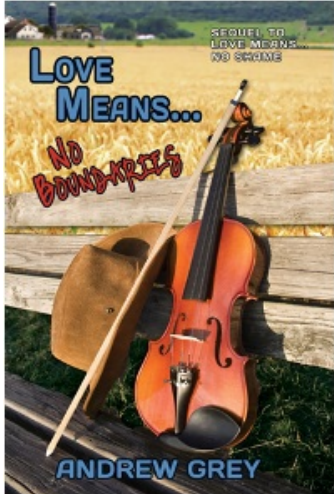
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The background image shows a red electric guitar, likely a Les Paul, with a coiled red guitar cable in the foreground. In the background, the lower half of a person wearing blue jeans and a white shirt is visible, standing on a dark surface. The title text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

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