

ELLE KEATON

HOME IN HOLLYRIDGE BOOK THREE

LOVE

finds a home



LOVE FINDS A HOME

HOME IN HOLLYRIDGE

ELLE KEATON

DIRTY DOG PRESS

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*For Sandy B., thank you for inspiring me to finish Love Finds a Home.
Wyatt, Bennet and Wicket were stuck on my laptop waiting to be freed.*

And to CCBelle for naming Wicket, she said it and...it stuck.

*To all my readers who love Hollyridge as much as I do, I hope to keep
writing more.*

To my ARC readers who continually amaze me.

And, as always, to MrE for continuing to believe in me. I love you.

Elle

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ONE

Wyatt

“THANKS FOR THE RIDE,” Jordan called out again after he slammed the door shut and turned to walk backwards away from Wyatt’s truck with his backpack slung over his shoulder.

“No worries,” Wyatt replied, grinning at his friend.

Jordan shook his head. “I keep telling you a four-hour ride is a big deal. Seriously, thanks, man.”

Wyatt rolled his eyes. “I’d do it for anyone.”

Wyatt watched as Jordan climbed the stairs of the porch and obviously fumbled with his key a bit before waving once more and disappearing inside the house he shared with several other college freshmen.

Sliding his old truck (a 1990 Ford 250 with rebuilt engine, thanks to the help of a friend) into gear, Wyatt pulled away from the curb to head back to I-5 and then I-90 and east. An eight-hour round trip to drop off someone he didn’t know very well would seem a bit weird to many folks but, for one, Wyatt liked driving, and two, he liked his friend Jeff’s younger brothers—Jordan was one of a set of identical twins and he’d been in Hollyridge visiting his brother for a few days but managed to miss the bus back to Seattle much earlier that morning. Plus, Wyatt always wished he had siblings so he’d kind of adopted him.

The notorious Seattle traffic fell away once he passed North Bend, where I-90 climbed up and over Snoqualmie Pass, his truck chugging along past the slower semis and RVs. Wyatt loved this time of year, when the leaves were just beginning to change. Mixed in amongst the evergreens that made up the Snoqualmie forest were bigleaf maples, cottonwoods, ash trees, and aspens, all dotting the hillsides with color and showing off their red, orange, and bright yellow leaves.

Without Jordan in the passenger seat, the car was quiet. Wyatt chuckled; Jordan talked even more than he did, and that had to be some sort of achievement. Reaching over to the stereo console, Wyatt turned up the volume and settled in to enjoy the ride while Madonna, Maroon Five, U2, and My Chemical Romance battled it out.

He couldn't imagine a better day.

HE AND JORDAN had left Hollyridge early enough that it was only just after noon when Wyatt crossed back over into Eastern Washington. The pass was steep on the west side, but on the east side the highway meandered downward, taking its time before finally crossing the Columbia River and reaching the desert floor. Many people thought of Washington State as wet and green, but a huge portion of the state was high desert. Summer temperatures could get up into the 100s, but now, in the early fall, it was pleasant; Wyatt rolled his window down, letting the sunshine warm the side of his face.

At Vantage, after a short debate with himself, Wyatt decided to take the back way around Hanford Reach. The road was only two lanes, but he was tired of dealing with all the semis and other traffic heading through to Yakima and beyond. And, if he was lucky, one of the farmers along the way might have a fruit and veggie stand open with fresh-picked corn, or even apples and pears. If there were apples he'd stop for sure; maybe he could convince his mom to make a pie.

If Wyatt hadn't had his window down, he might not have paid attention to the battered cardboard box on the side of the road. As it was, he only saw it out of the corner of his eye. He'd driven another mile or so before what he'd seen coalesced, and he had to go back and make sure he'd been wrong. After slowing to a stop on the shoulder, he maneuvered a three-point turn and turned the truck to head back.

This stretch of highway, while busier now since people had been moving to the area, was still fairly quiet. As he retraced his route, only one car passed him going the other direction, and for miles all you could see was the brown of summer in the desert—tumbleweeds, scrubby rabbitshrub, sagebrush and bunchgrass. The Columbia River was miles behind him, and the road didn't find it again until the Tri Cities, where the Snake River joined it from the east.

Wyatt drummed his thumb against the steering wheel and tapped the brakes, slowing down so he wouldn't miss the spot where he'd seen the box. The thing was, the desert was dry as a bone this time of year and the only wild creatures living between Vantage and Richmond were pygmy

rabbits, coyotes and birds of prey. Not fuzzy white things. And he'd seen *something* sticking out from the dingy box, something alive.

Up ahead along the right side of the road Wyatt once again spotted the cardboard box. He pulled over about fifteen feet from it, shut the engine off, and climbed out. Hot wind gusted at him from all directions, creating dust bunnies and mini tornadoes before settling down again; a tumbleweed rolled across the road.

The box was shaking, and the top flaps, which looked like they had been taped shut, were bouncing up and down. A smallish hole had been punched through where the flaps intersected, and smaller holes dotted the sides, but none were big enough for whatever was fuzzy and white to escape—yet. At least Wyatt knew the box wasn't full of snakes—as far as he knew there were no furry reptiles—but just in case he was going to do a search when he got home.

A truck whizzed by, heading toward Richland. Somebody shouted out the window, but their words were stolen by the wind, and Wyatt's attention was on the box anyway. It wiggled and shook, the ever-present wind picking up again and banging a big tumbleweed against the container. The box whimpered, and leaning closer Wyatt saw something fuzzy and white—was that an ear?

Shaking off his reluctance, Wyatt stepped closer and crouched down to peel back the box flaps. Two glittering black eyes peered back at him. Quickly, he opened the flaps all the way so he could reach in and pull it out—a filthy, possibly white (really, the only thing white at this point was the one ear he'd seen) puppy.

They stared at each other for a heartbeat. And Wyatt fell in love.

Again.

Because he was already in love—but he wasn't thinking about that right now.

The puppy wiggled, its long pink tongue escaping its mouth and swiping Wyatt across the face and everywhere else it could reach.

“Awww, you're welcome. No way am I licking you back, though.”

Clasping the puppy to his chest, Wyatt trotted back to his truck and climbed inside. The puppy was grimy, covered with dirt and probably bugs.

“What happened to you?” Wyatt asked.

The puppy wiggled and licked Wyatt some more.

“Somebody just left you there, in a box? You could’ve been eaten by coyotes! Who would do that to you? Dude, you are lucky I came along. But what am I going to do with you?”

Wyatt tried setting the dog next to him on the passenger seat but, sensing Wyatt’s weakness, it scooted right back over and crawled into his lap. The pup was small, right? He’d been through a traumatic situation and needed the reassurance.

Carefully Wyatt flicked a lever and pushed his seat back as far as he could, allowing him to reach the gas and the clutch, but giving enough room for the wiggle monster to make himself comfortable.

“I can’t take you home. We can’t have pets at my place. But I promise you, I’ll find you a home.”

TWO

Bennett

BENNETT HEARD WYATT before he saw him. Wyatt had no sense of quiet, he talked *a lot*. When they were working and Bennett didn't feel like talking, Wyatt would talk *and* answer himself, which was pretty handy. This time, however, it was his enormous gas-guzzling truck Bennett heard before Wyatt's voice. He didn't think Zach had scheduled Wyatt to work at the vineyard that day, but maybe he was wrong, and Bennett could always use the help. Wyatt worked as hard as he talked—*was that even a sentence?*—so Bennett didn't mind his companionship. If he was going to be honest with himself, he actually looked forward to having Wyatt around.

Ducking between and around the grapevines heavy with fruit, Bennett made his way to the parking area. By the time he reached the gravel lot Wyatt was parked next to Bennett's truck—a Chevy, which Wyatt constantly rode him about.

He watched Wyatt climb out of his truck, a little awkwardly since he seemed to be holding something in his arms.

“Hey, Bennett.”

Wyatt was always careful to call him Bennett and not Ben, which Bennett appreciated—for whatever reason, being called Ben bothered him.

“Wyatt.” Bennett moved closer. “What is *that?*” he asked as something furry squirmed and wiggled in Wyatt's grasp.

“Wicket.”

“A what?”

“Meet Wicket.” Wyatt held the wriggling... *thing* out toward Bennett. “He needs a bath, but I think he's going to clean up pretty well.”

Bennett did not take the offered animal, but he did move closer to inspect it. Button-like eyes latched onto his gaze, and its entire body began squirming and wiggling even harder, if that was possible.

“He likes you!” Wyatt exclaimed.

Curiosity overcoming him, Bennett asked, “How do you know its name is Wicket?” He didn't see a collar, but maybe it was in Wyatt's truck.

“He and I thought of it ourselves, while I was driving. Doesn’t he look like an Ewok?”

Bennett narrowed his eyes at Wyatt and the dog. “You thought of the name together?” No one but Wyatt would come up with a name like *Wicket*. Although, and Bennett would never admit this to Wyatt, it did kind of suit the animal.

“Yes?” Wyatt said innocently, his dark brown eyes dancing with laughter, “I was running through ideas and Wicket just came to me—it’s perfect I think.”

Bennett shook his head. What was he supposed to say to that?

“It has nothing to do with the Star Wars marathon you were telling me about? Again, why are you here with a filthy animal?” The dog was gray from dirt and Wyatt’s shirt was dark where he’d been holding the puppy close.

Wyatt clutched the animal back to his chest, widening his eyes dramatically. “It’s not Wicket’s fault he’s filthy! Some asshole left him in a box on the side of the road, didn’t they?” Wyatt scratched the top of Wicket’s head. “Someone who is going to burn in hell, if I have anything to say about it,” he crooned, “but I’m not going to use violent language around an innocent puppy, am I?”

“Okay... but why are you here?” Bennett needed Wyatt to focus on the actual issue—the stinky puppy, not karmic justice. Because suddenly he was feeling slightly jealous of the attention a mangy dog was getting.

“Well, Wicket needs a bath and a placetostayforalittlewhile.” Bennett imagined Wyatt crossing his virtual fingers that Bennett would say ‘yes’, as he added “I can’t take him to my place, my mom is allergic. I’m not taking him to the shelter; he’s already been traumatized. You’re the only one I could think of who could help us.”

In Bennett’s opinion, the dog did not look one bit traumatized. He looked pleased with himself because a sucker named Wyatt had stopped and picked him up.

He must’ve hesitated a moment too long. “Please, Bennett? He’s just a little guy and the world has already tried to do him in. It won’t be for long, I’ll get him cleaned up and take him to the vet and then I’ll, uh, put flyers around town or something. Please?” he repeated. “I have to go be at work in two hours.”

If Wyatt had to be at work in two hours, that meant he wasn't sticking around to help Bennett take sugar samples for Zach, the owner of the vineyard and Caesura Winery. *Damn.* Wait, he wasn't... disappointed, was he? Disappointed that Wyatt, who generally drove him up a wall, was only stopping by to foist a doggyish thing onto Bennett?

No, of course not.

"Sure, I guess. But only for a couple days. Zach has the crew scheduled for next week if everything keeps ripening as it is, and I'm going to be too busy to watch a pain-in-the-ass dog."

Wyatt rolled his eyes. "Dude, Bennett, I'm part of the crew. Zach has me out here every day for the foreseeable future. But today I'm working an afternoon shift at Demeter's."

Demeter's was a tasting room in town. Kind of in competition with Caesura, but the wineries in Hollyridge acted like a big extended family. Maybe a little dysfunctional at times, but they looked after their own.

Bennett knew, almost better than anyone else, how hard Wyatt worked, so he shouldn't be giving him a hard time. Wyatt's mom had been sick and lost her job, and Bennett didn't know what the problem was. But she wasn't working right now so, at twenty-one years old, Wyatt was shouldering the responsibility of paying her bills and rent along with everything else.

And still he had an amazingly positive attitude. Sometimes, rarely, and only in the dark of night, Bennett wished he was a little more like Wyatt. A little more positive, that he could let the weight of the world just roll off his back. All his life he'd been told by his folks how important this, that, or the other was—and failed them.

Instead of complaining about not being able to do the things other guys his age did, Wyatt just got on with it. He was working three jobs as far as Bennett knew—and yet, he always had time for people, he always had a laugh, a smile, a joke.

"Okay."

Wyatt's grin escalated to supernova bright. "You will? Really? Thank you! Wicket thanks you, too!"

Wicket let out a timely woof, as if he really was thanking Bennett.

Before he knew it, he was being hugged by both Wyatt and the stinky dog who managed to lick him right across the nose.

"Eww." Bennett wiped his face. "I hope he doesn't have mange. Come on, I think there's a tub in the big storage barn. You can use that, and I think

there's dish soap around to get the worst of it out."

"Dish soap? He's a dog, a very special dog!"

"If dish soap is good enough for oil-covered birds, it's good enough for him. You can always get some, I don't know, fancy dog soap later on."

IT TOOK both of them to wash the five-pound menace. One look at the silver tub and Wicket did his best to escape. By the end of the bath, which — from the howls—a stranger might think they were torturing the dog rather than quickly dipping him in the water and scrubbing him down, both men were soaking wet. Bennett grabbed a stack of clean shop towels and wrapped them around Wicket while Wyatt held on. After toweling the dog off as best he could, Wyatt set him down. Wicket proceeded to run in circles, barking and shaking himself dry, until he finally came back and plopped down directly onto Bennett's foot.

"He does like you," Wyatt said.

"Only because it wasn't me dunking him under water."

Wicket leaned more heavily against Bennett's ankle; he was not getting attached to a fuzzy footwarmer. No way.

Wyatt looked thoughtful. "Maybe. Well, I gotta go because now I have to go home and change clothes before Demeter's."

Bennett had been trying not to notice the way Wyatt's damp T-shirt clung to his frame, accentuating his broad shoulders and lean chest, his tanned skin and long fingers. Okay, the T-shirt had nothing to do with how sexy Bennett thought Wyatt's hands were. Or might be, if he had feelings like that. Since he didn't (have feelings like that), he met Wyatt's dark gaze instead.

His eyes were equally dangerous, but Bennett steeled himself against them, against the amusement, the laughter, the happiness that always simmered in them. For one thing, Wyatt was only twenty-one, too young for Bennett. For two, Bennett was a failure in so many ways—actually living "out" was something he didn't think he could do. His parents hardly accepted him as it was.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Zach has me scheduled the whole day."

Wyatt bent down and picked up Wicket, who'd begun sniffing around the shed, and plopped him into Bennett's arms.

It wasn't until Wyatt had left, a dust cloud following him out to the highway, that Bennett realized he was going to have to go into town and buy dog food and some sort of leash for Wicket.

THREE

Wyatt

WYATT UNLOCKED the flimsy hollow door of the apartment he shared with his mom and pushed it open, the door squeaking where it grazed the wood floor. He wished, not for the first time, that he could afford something better for the two of them, something not in the crappy part of town, but that was impossible with the medical bills piling up. No matter how many hours Wyatt worked, it seemed like they were always short, or behind, or juggling one bill to pay another. Their apartment wasn't even a true two-bedroom, Wyatt's room was actually the dining nook. When they'd moved in years ago, his mother Mariah had found a three-panel wooden screen, painted it, and set it across the entrance to give Wyatt privacy. It worked, but it also meant he was never bringing a date home.

His mom was resting on the couch with her eyes shut. The TV was turned on, but Wyatt didn't think she'd been watching anything. It looked like she had it on the QVC channel, which was really just reality-comedy-TV.

"Hey, Mama, I'm home but I need to change and head right back out for my shift at Demeter's."

"Okay, baby."

"How're you feeling?"

His mom smiled. "It's kind of a bad day," she admitted wanly.

After a few years where she'd tried to hide how ill she'd felt before collapsing and ending up in the hospital anyway, Wyatt had made her promise to be honest with him. If he didn't know, he couldn't help. He'd felt terrible for missing the signs of her illness.

"Have you eaten? Had enough water? Taken your medication?"

"Yes, baby boy, I've had tons of water, and enough pills to choke a horse. I'm mostly stiff and feel sore, like somebody's been banging on me with a stick at night."

Stiff and sore meant she might have an episode soon, or it could mean nothing. Wyatt wished her doctors would hurry up and figure out what meds would work for her MS. He hated seeing his vibrant mother quiet and

still. She'd been sick a long time now, but he remembered when she'd take him to the park and play tag or walk with him along main street, window shopping all the things they couldn't afford. Everything tired her out nowadays.

"I'll be home around ten, I think."

"Okay, but if your friends want to do something... you'll say yes? I remember what it was like to be your age, you don't need to be stuck here."

It was sweet how his mom worried he didn't have a good life, that he didn't get time with his friends. Wyatt knew who his real friends were, and they weren't people who tried to make him feel guilty or bad about taking care of his mama. He had a small group of real friends: Jordan (based in Seattle anyway); his boss, Zach; Zach's boyfriend, Jeff; Jaime, one of the owners of Demeter's; and Theo, who'd left Hollyridge last year to follow his dreams of discovering his family's heritage and making big bucks doing documentary photography. There wasn't anyone Wyatt wanted to hang out with after work outside of that group. Except Bennett.

"I was up early; a friend needed a ride. I'm tired, but if something comes up, I'll text."

As he headed to his makeshift room, his mother lifted her head and took a good look at him. "Baby, what did you do to your shirt?"

Wyatt glanced down at his chest. It pretty much looked like he'd wrestled with a small grubby puppy, exactly like he had.

"Oh, I found a puppy on the road, between Desert Aire and Richland. He was just in a box on the side of the road!"

Mariah lifted herself up onto one elbow. "Was he okay? What did you do with him?"

Wyatt found himself grinning. "I stopped at Caesura and twisted Bennett's arm a little. He's going to keep it until we can find it a home."

His mom slumped back onto the couch. "Bennett, huh?" She shook her head. "Do you think you can win his heart through a puppy?"

Wyatt sighed. "I've tried just about everything else, Mom. Maybe Wicket will finally melt his cold, cold heart."

Because, yes, Wyatt and his mom were that close, and she knew all about Wyatt's unrequited crush on Bennett. She patiently listened every time he returned home—foiled again by the handsome, *only slightly* older man. Bennett acted like the eight-year difference between them was as wide as the freaking Mississippi River. He was constantly bringing up how

young Wyatt was, how the world was Wyatt's oyster (he hated oysters, FYI). That is, when he did talk. Really, his protests only made Wyatt work harder at chipping away Bennett's gruff exterior, trying to expose the kind and sexy man he knew was underneath.

As far as Wyatt knew, Bennett had never dated men. But he wasn't dating women, either, so... Bennett was fair game. And every once in a while, when Wyatt subtly flirted with Bennett, he was fairly sure Bennett flirted back. Unintentionally *possibly*, but Wyatt was convinced he was flirting. And that's why he wasn't giving up. That's what kept him coming back again and again. That's what led him to deposit a puppy in Bennett's care.

"Be careful, baby boy. I don't want you to get hurt."

His mom's words brought him back to the present. Wyatt snorted. "I don't think that's how it works, Mama. Sometimes our hearts don't get what they want—so we get hurt."

"No—I mean, yes," she smiled at him, "but what I mean is, from what you've told me about Bennett, he has been hurt somehow. I don't mean by a girlfriend or boyfriend; I mean by life. Why else would he live out there, away from everyone he knows?"

Mama, who loved the idea of family even though it was just the two of them, had a point. But from the minute he'd met the quiet, almost taciturn, vineyard manager, Wyatt had wanted him—it was instantaneous lust. Since then, the lust had only grown into something more. Unbeknownst to Bennett, he'd been headlining exclusively in Wyatt's private fantasies for several years now. Fantasies that not only involved sex—because YES—but also Bennett as his. Bennett and Wyatt setting up an apartment together, grocery shopping, vacuuming....

At five-eleven, Wyatt wasn't small, but Bennett was a giant. Six-four at least, with golden skin from being outside all day long. His white-blond hair was short, almost cut to his scalp, and all Wyatt wanted to do was run his fingers across Bennett's skull and feel his spiky fringe. The first time Bennett whipped off his T-shirt as he and the crew worked together to bring the grapes in, Wyatt almost lost the ability to speak. Almost. It had taken Bennett giving him a funny look to realize he'd stopped in the middle of saying something. Who knows what he'd been talking about?

"Now he has Wicket to keep him company," Wyatt said lightly. "I need to get going."

DEMETER'S WAS PACKED. The heat of the day had lingered on, and every table on the patio was full as well as inside. Originally, Hollyridge had just been a small farm town in Eastern Washington, but back in the 1970s someone had the great idea of importing and planting their own grapevines—and the rest was history. It turned out the terroir around Hollyridge was perfect for lush red wines, and now the region competed globally for its own spot in the wine market, bringing in a lot of tourists who wanted to check out the cellars, vineyards, and tasting rooms for themselves.

Wyatt had no desire to move away from Hollyridge, but he loved meeting the people who came to visit. Once he'd met a guy from the Lost Apostles (one of his favorite rock bands) who'd been there with his boyfriend. He didn't need to leave Hollyridge to experience the world, the world came to him.

Business finally began to slow down around dinner time. Demeter's didn't offer food, although patrons could bring in their own snacks if they wanted. Most, however, chose to eat at the upscale restaurants dotted along on Main Street.

"Man, who abandoned the tourist bus full of people around the corner?" Wyatt teased Jaime when they were both taking a minute at the end of the wine bar.

She shook her head. "I have no idea. I did *not* expect it to be this busy tonight. I'm not complaining, but man, I am going to sleep like a log when we get home."

"Me too." Wyatt suppressed a yawn.

"Up late?" Jaime cocked an eyebrow at him.

"No, Jordan missed the bus back to Seattle this morning, so I gave him a ride."

"The early bus?"

"Yeah, the 4:15 never showed up. There were a couple other people waiting too, so it wasn't his fault. But I'm pretty beat now." He was about to tell Jaime about Wicket when she placed a hand on his arm.

"Don't look now, but *he's* here."

Sadly, Wyatt didn't have to ask who *he* was. Jaime had figured out Wyatt's crush on Bennett and appointed herself both big sister and

wingman.

“And... he has a puppy!” Jaime’s voice rose when she registered what Bennett was carrying. She loved dogs but she and her husband, Dag, didn’t have one at the moment.

Wyatt turned around so he could watch Bennett walk in. Was there anything hotter than a sexy-as-fuck man holding a puppy? Maybe a naked sexy-as-fuck man holding a puppy.

Wicket was tucked underneath Bennett’s muscled arm, his little pink tongue stuck out of his mouth like he forgot it was there. Now that he was clean, his white fur glowed against Bennett’s tan skin. Wyatt knew the minute the puppy spotted him, as his body exploded into motion, up-down and side-to-side.

“When did Bennett get a puppy?” Jaime asked.

“Uh—”

But Wyatt was cut off by Bennett’s growl.

“Wyatt pawned this excuse of a canine off on me this afternoon and then left me alone with it.”

“Not an it. *Wicket*,” Wyatt corrected as he moved toward Bennett and took the wiggle monster from him. If possible, Wicket wiggled even more, and his tongue managed to swipe Wyatt across both cheeks and his forehead before he got the puppy settled in his arms. His little body vibrated against Wyatt’s chest.

“He’s adorable!” Jaime said. “Where did you get him?”

Wyatt told her about seeing the box on the side of the road and discovering Wicket inside it.

“He is one lucky pup,” Jaime crooned as she scratched him on the head and let him kiss her hand, “but now we’ll need to wash our hands. Great to see you, Bennett!”

Wyatt was sure Jaime thought she was doing him a favor by leaving them alone but from the stormy expression on Bennett’s face, Wyatt didn’t necessarily agree.

“So, hey, what’s up? Did you just stop by to say hi?”

Wyatt tried to be nonchalant but, jeez, Bennett looked good enough to eat. He was wearing a favorite T-shirt of Wyatt’s, one that fit him like a glove, stretching across his pecs just so. *Sunnyside Fruit Farm* was visible in faded lettering. He’d taken a shower since Wyatt had seen him and changed into not only the aforementioned shirt but a pair of jeans that left

nothing to Wyatt's imagination. As he moved closer, Wyatt got a whiff of his aftershave. Something spicy, like cinnamon, he thought.

"He can't stay with me," Bennett growled, *again*.

"I don't have anywhere else! My mom is allergic and anyway, she's not feeling well, and a puppy would be too much."

"You didn't tell me she wasn't feeling well again."

Wyatt loved that Bennett's tone immediately changed from grumpy to concerned. It warmed something in his heart—and was one of the many reasons Wyatt was still in love with the man.

"She's—" Wyatt wagged his head back and forth because releasing his grip on Wicket wasn't an option. "The docs changed her meds and she's having a hard time getting used to them. I'm not really sure, she doesn't like to worry me so sometimes it takes a little while before I find everything out."

Bennett ran a hand across his head. He kept his nails short; his fingers were thick and nicked in various places from working on his truck and the harvest equipment and whatever else Zach needed him to do.

"Damn, Wyatt. I'm sorry. But seriously, I cannot get anything done with Wicket around. I had to take him into the shower with me! I tried to leave him in the living room, but he howled and cried until I let him in."

A stab of jealousy shot through Wyatt—Wicket had seen Bennett naked. Something was wrong with the world.

"He's just little and scared. Can you imagine being left in a box on the side of the road?"

Bennett rolled his sky-blue eyes. "Of course I can't imagine that! I'm not a terrible person. But I can't have him underfoot, and I have a feeling," he glared at Wicket, "I won't be getting much sleep. And tomorrow is going to come early, the next few weeks are crazy."

"There's a solution, you know." Jaime was back and leaning against the bar. "Wyatt can stay with you and then you can take turns getting up with him and letting him pee. A puppy is a little bit like having a baby—or so I've been told. You'll probably need a small crate too, so he feels like he has a safe place to sleep."

Wyatt felt his eyes widen and, quite honestly, was speechless. He glanced at Bennett; surely Jaime's suggestion was going to be met with disdain.

“If you leave now, Southside Feed is open until nine and they sell all the doggy stuff you need.” She looked at Wyatt. “Go on, leave now while the leaving is good.”

FOUR

Bennett

“WHAT JUST HAPPENED?” Bennett muttered as they climbed into his truck. He’d driven into town fully intending to make Wyatt repossess Wicket and instead he ended up with both Wicket and Wyatt on his hands. If he believed in weird woo-woo shit he’d wonder if maybe it was a full moon.

“It’s not a full moon, is it?” he asked, purely out of curiosity.

Wyatt shook his head. “No, I think we just experienced hurricane Jaime.” Funny how Wyatt knew the direction Bennett’s brain had gone.

Hurricane sounded about right. Bennett didn’t know the co-owners of Demeter’s all that well, although they did buy grapes from Zach occasionally. In the years he’d been back in Hollyridge—almost eight now—he’d spent as little time as possible in town. This had been a very special trip.

“The feed store is on Rose,” Wyatt said.

“I know where the feed store is,” Bennett grumbled. “I did grow up here after all.”

“I always forget. I never see you around town, only out at Caesura.” Wyatt made his statement sound more like a question, but Bennett didn’t bite. Nope.

Yes, there was a reason he didn’t flit around town. Wyatt, on the other hand, was a social butterfly, the exact opposite of Bennett. Ignoring Wyatt’s comment, Bennett started up his truck and pulled out of the parking lot, turning right toward Rose Street.

He’d driven the thirty miles into town to ditch Wicket and ten minutes later not only did he still have Wicket, but he’d acquired Wyatt. Wyatt who was somehow now staying at his place.

“I’ll drop you off at your apartment, you don’t need to come home with me. I can take care of the dog on my own.”

Suffocating silence filled the cab of his truck. Bennett risked a glance over at Wyatt.

“Did you hear me?” How could he not have heard him; he was two feet away.

“I heard you. I’m sure you meant I could run inside and let my mom know where I’ll be and pick up some clothes for harvest, not just leave me there and drive off with Wicket. Probably to leave him on a street corner somewhere to fend for himself.”

Bennett opened then closed his mouth. Wyatt actually sounded *hurt*. Wyatt was never anything but upbeat. The only times Bennett had seen him down was when he found out his mom was sick a couple of years ago. Wyatt unhappy was something Bennett hated.

His thoughts executed a U-turn; unhappy Wyatt was not what he wanted. Hold it. He could *not* want Wyatt. Wyatt was... a bright light in his life, Bennett reluctantly admitted to himself. Zach had brought him on for harvest about three years ago—who was he fooling, it had been almost exactly three years. Three years of knowing his happiest days were when Wyatt Reeser showed up to work at the vineyard.

Three years of taking himself in hand because the beauty that was Wyatt Reeser overwhelmed him on a daily basis. Three years of knowing he’d never be good enough for someone like Wyatt. Wyatt was young, only twenty-one, and had his whole life ahead of him; he could do anything. Bennett felt ancient in comparison.

He’d left Hollyridge at eighteen and returned a disgrace in his parents’ eyes. But he’d had nowhere else to go, nowhere else he wanted to be. One day shortly after his return to Hollyridge, not knowing what he was going to do with his life, he’d been driving aimlessly around when he’d passed by a patchy plot of land near the Columbia River. Zach’s ancient Jeep had been sitting on the side of the road with its hood raised and a defeated-looking guy leaning against the fender.

The rest was history. Zach hired him on the spot, and he’d helped Zach build the winery and vineyards from the ground up, as well as fixing the Jeep when needed. He had started as general handy-man and now was vineyard manager—a title which meant he got up very early most days in the summer, worked eighteen-hour days during the crush, and was out checking on the vines in the winter as if they were his own babies.

“You do need clothes, right? We’re not going to disturb your mom?”

Wyatt let his too-long silence slide, thank fuck.

“She’ll probably be asleep; I’ll be quick and quiet, leave her a note.”

THEY MADE it to the feed store with half an hour to spare. The grizzled older man behind the front counter grunted at them when they pushed through the door, Wicket clasped in Wyatt's arms. The pup seemed to have calmed down; at least he wasn't wiggling quite as much.

"Puppy stuff?" Wyatt asked the man.

"Far back corner."

Together they made their way through the slightly dusty aisles to the back of the store. There were two full rows of dog supplies and crates of all sizes were stacked against one wall.

Bennett quickly announced, "I'll grab a crate; I don't know anything about food and stuff." Plus standing there next to Wyatt while he quietly crooned in Wicket's ear—telling him what a good boy he was, how he was going to be safe and happy now, how nobody would hurt him ever again—gave Bennett a punch in the gut.

One small crate, a soft bed, a couple of chew toys, a leash, a bag of dog food (organic, of course), and food and water dishes later, Bennett was beginning to think pet ownership was a racket.

"Doesn't he need to see a veterinarian or something?" he asked Wyatt as they settled back into the truck, Wicket still snuggled against Wyatt's chest.

"Yeah, I'll call tomorrow. I should've done it today but, in my rush, I forgot."

"Your apartment next?"

"Yeah."

Bennett had never been to Wyatt's place, although he knew he and his mom lived in a less desirable part of Hollyridge. The apartment was in an older building with nonexistent landscaping; the lawn in front was dry and brittle, and an abandoned lawn chair lay on its side in the middle of the grass.

"Here"—Wyatt pushed Wicket into Bennett—"I'll be right back."

Bennett watched as Wyatt jogged to the front door and disappeared inside. Jeez, as far as he could tell, there wasn't even a security lock on the thing.

Absentmindedly, he scratched Wicket's ears. "What am I going to do with the two of you?"

Bringing Wyatt home... bringing Wyatt to his house was a terrible decision. Maybe, he thought, this was some sort of test? If it was, he wondered if failing meant losing Wyatt from his life. He didn't know if he would survive that.

Yes, he and Wyatt were nothing. But Wyatt meant everything to Bennett—Bennett had just never acted on it, had barely acknowledged it. Because Wyatt deserved so much more than a hometown failure, a man who'd snuck back to Hollyridge with his tail between his legs and still, eight years later, was hiding out on the Caesura vineyard, avoiding his family.

The family he hardly ever talked to, because when he did it put him in a crappy mood for days. Wicket grunted and Bennett released his grip, realizing he'd inadvertently squeezed the pup.

Being the oldest son of Wes and Nancy Meyer came with certain expectations, and Bennett had deftly managed to fail at every one of them. From a young age, he preferred action to reading and books. He strained against their rules that school and homework always came first. When he tried to explain that he *just couldn't*, his words fell on deaf ears. He'd wanted to please his parents—what kid didn't? So, at eighteen he'd gone off to college in Seattle and come home a little over two years later, having burned every possible bridge in the city.

The passenger door opened, startling him out of his depressing thoughts.

“That was fast.”

“Mom was sleeping. I left her a note. She'll be fine, she's already got friends coming over to hang out with her.”

BENNETT LIVED in the small farmhouse that had come with the vineyard. It sat far back from the highway, perched over the Columbia River. The house had been unoccupied for years and Zach had planned on tearing it down. But when he first hired Bennett all he could pay him with was a place to lay his head and a couple hundred dollars a month. Bennett had leapt at the chance and he was still there. Over the years he'd done a few things to make it more livable, but it wasn't anything special.

“Wow!” Wyatt spun in a circle taking in the comfortable living room Bennett had cobbled together. “This is amazing!”

He set Wicket down, who immediately started sniffing around.

Ignoring Wyatt's compliment, Bennett asked, "Where should I put the crate?"

"Your house, Bennett, I've never been here before."

"Right, let me give you the ten-cent tour and then we can decide."

"Is there anything dangerous out here? Basement stairs or something you don't want chewed on?"

"There's a cellar, but the entrance is outside."

It took Bennett three minutes to show Wyatt his house and the entire time he was figuring out where Wyatt would sleep. The house had two bedrooms, but Bennett had turned one into a home gym and the other one was... his. Looked like Wyatt was going to be sleeping on his couch.

"Bathroom here." Bennett pushed open the door to the very basic bathroom. Its redeeming feature was an extra-long claw foot tub Bennett had installed himself. "Kitchen. There's a— sleeping porch, I guess they're called—out that door."

"What's upstairs?" Wyatt asked.

"A couple more rooms. I mostly use them for storage. Don't really see the reason to spread out." The rooms upstairs were a mess, with walls covered with discolored wallpaper from the 1940s, floorboards warped in places, and single pane windows in need of replacing. Bennett had considered cleaning them up since both rooms had a nice view of the Columbia River, but he never had. Instead he kept the door at the bottom of the stairs shut and ignored it as much as possible.

Wyatt decided the gym room was the best place for the crate. "That way we can take turns letting him out—it's close enough for both of us to hear him."

"Okay," Bennett agreed. Wyatt's plan sounded totally reasonable. If a damn puppy was reasonable.

It was... weird getting ready for bed with someone else in his house. Wyatt in his house. Tomorrow he and Wyatt would spend the entire day preparing for crush. There was so much to do and people to coordinate. Zach had already texted to let Bennett know the full crew would be arriving in two days—rain or shine, it was time to bring the grapes in.

Thirty minutes later everyone was in bed, including Wicket, who had not been impressed by the crate. He had everything he needed in there, including water. Bennett dug up an extra blanket and pillow for Wyatt.

“The couch isn’t all that bad, I fall asleep on it often enough.” He had bought the extra-long piece of furniture off Craigslist.

“’K, boss,” Wyatt replied.

Bennett wanted to linger but couldn’t come up with a reason, so he headed to the safety of his own bedroom, offering a quick, “Goodnight.”

BENNETT DREAMT WYATT was in his bed. Wyatt’s long lean body was pressed against his own and his long legs were wrapped around Bennett’s, holding him close. Wyatt’s tricky fingers found his shaft and began to stroke him, up and back down with a little twist, just as he liked. Then the fingers travelled downward to his balls, already high and tight with need.

It wasn’t going to take much for Bennett to come. Sure, it was a dream, but he could even smell Wyatt, his earthy scent an aphrodisiac for Bennett on any day—and he actually got harder. Coming awake, he rolled over onto his front and let the dream sweep through him; he was so hard it edged on pain. The pressure of the mattress wasn’t enough; more awake now, he shoved a hand underneath his body and took himself in hand.

He drew his knees up a little to get a better grip and pumped his leaking cock. “Fucking fuck,” he grunted into his pillow. The dream whispered back into his consciousness and he pretended his fingers were Wyatt’s. That maybe Wyatt was kneeling behind him, getting ready to penetrate Bennett. He wanted that. He wanted Wyatt to fuck him until he couldn’t think. Bennett widened the space between his knees and slid his other hand so he could touch himself there. All he had to do was push the tip of his index finger inside himself and Bennett would be coming. He jackhammered into his hand with his finger up his own ass, thinking about Wyatt Reeser sleeping innocently on his crappy couch.

“Fuck, Wyatt!” he groaned loudly into his pillow, wanting more, needing to come now.

The bedroom door burst open. “Bennett, are you okay?” Wyatt asked in a panicked voice, followed by, “Oh.”

FIVE

Wyatt

“OH.”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

Bennett Meyer, the man of his dreams, had been jacking off and Wyatt had thought something was wrong. Something *was* wrong. Bennett was masturbating when they could both come—together.

Wyatt was going to be changing that.

Bennett was naked and glorious; he was on his knees with his hips tilted upward. Maybe it wasn't intended to be an invitation, but Wyatt was going to accept it. He stripped off his sleep pants. His erection, immediate upon seeing Bennett, demanded satisfaction. Now.

Wyatt said, “Don't move. Don't you dare move.”

“Wyatt.” Bennett's voice was laced with need.

“I'm getting in bed with you.”

Bennett nodded. It was the middle of the night, the room was lit only by moonlight, and Wicket had just been outside to pee. Wyatt's ultimate fantasy was coming true.

“Bennett.” Wyatt lowered his voice, hoping he was making it clear Bennett was not to move. Bennett didn't.

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

Bennett nodded.

“Condoms?”

He shook his head.

“I've got some. Always prepared, that's me.”

In seconds he was back. Bennett still hadn't moved. Wyatt tossed the condoms and lube next to him on the bed then climbed on himself.

He paused a moment. “Bennett, do you know how long I've dreamed about this?”

“Less talking, more fucking.”

That sounded like the Bennett he knew and loved.

“I'm gonna, but we're going to talk in the morning.”

“Fuck talking.” The arm under Bennett’s body started moving as if he was pumping himself.

“No.” Wyatt grabbed his shoulder to make him stop. “I’m the one getting you off.”

Kneeling behind Bennett, Wyatt ran his hands up and back down his strong back, reveling in the feel of him, his skin, the curve of his ass. He wasn’t sure how long he’d be able to last; he’d wanted Bennett for so long. *Years of want.*

Grabbing the lube, he squeezed some out onto his fingers and spread Bennett wider, watched his hole flex, another invitation. Wyatt dripped lube onto Bennett’s opening and slowly began to massage the ring of muscle. Wyatt was fairly sure Bennett hadn’t had anal, or any sex, in a while. He was going to do the best he could to make sure Bennett never forgot this.

His own cock throbbed and dripped onto the sheet as he began to finger Bennett, slowly but surely working one digit past the first ring, rubbing the lube in, feeling Bennett’s heat. Suddenly Bennett pushed backward, impaling himself on Wyatt’s finger.

“You want more?”

Bennett nodded.

Wyatt added a second finger and thrust in and out, getting Bennett ready, watching as his hole relaxed. Not that Wyatt had an enormous ten-inch dick, but prep (he’d learned) was always appreciated. He turned his hand and felt around, searching for—Bennett jerked and moaned—his prostate. Bingo.

Bennett was a different man when he was aroused and wanting, begging for Wyatt to *fuck* him already. He had an abandonment to him, trusting Wyatt would take care of him, which Wyatt had suspected but hadn’t known for certain.

He pulled his fingers out and quickly rolled on a condom—he’d hoped for this to happen but hadn’t really believed it would. Scooting forward so he was flush against Bennett’s thighs, Wyatt pressed his cock against Bennett’s hole. His balls twitched, and it was his turn to moan with pleasure. Counting to one hundred in his head while slowly breaching Bennett’s ass was the only thing that kept Wyatt from coming immediately. Impatient, Bennett pushed backward, forcing Wyatt all the way inside his heat; Wyatt’s control wasn’t going to last long.

“Oh, fuck, Bennett.”

Grabbing Bennett's hips, Wyatt tried to get ahold of himself, but he was close, the sensation so much and *so wanted*, threatened at every moment to erupt. Bennett growled, guttural and deep and the sound went right to Wyatt's balls. Giving up on trying to control himself, Wyatt thrust into Bennett then pulled back out, dragging across his prostate over and over, watching for any sign his lover was not enjoying himself. From the grunts and shouts of "don't you fucking stop now," Wyatt thought he was doing okay.

Bennett released a howl of frustration before trying to drop his hips enough so he could touch himself. Wyatt got there first, reaching around Bennett's body and grasping his rock-hard cock. He was molten steel, hot and pulsing in Wyatt's grip. Wyatt pounded into Bennett as he pumped him.

Bennett shouted as his balls released, hot come spewing across Wyatt's fist and onto the sheet. To keep himself from falling, Wyatt dropped his other hand to the mattress as his orgasm took over. Bennett's ass clenched around him as if it didn't want to let him go while Wyatt filled the condom, his balls aching from being so full; finally he slumped against Bennett's back. They were both slick with sweat and smelled like come. Wyatt had just had the most incredible sexual experience of his life and they hadn't even kissed yet.

As gently as possible Wyatt pulled out of his lover.

"I'm getting a washcloth and cleaning you up and then I'm crawling in your bed and staying here until we have to get up."

Bennett grunted, still on his stomach, resting his head on one arm; Wyatt decided it was an agreeable grunt. When he got back from the bathroom, Wyatt saw Bennett had rolled over onto his back and his greedy cock twitched with want. Bennett's eyes were half open, watching as Wyatt carefully wiped him clean and then covered the wet spot on the bed with a hand towel. Impulsively Wyatt leaned down and kissed the tip of Bennett's mostly slack penis. He still smelled like come and Wyatt had to remind himself they needed to get up early, in only three hours if the digital clock next to Bennett's bed was correct.

Then, as he'd promised, Wyatt slipped into the bed and pulled the top sheet up over both of them. After about two seconds of contemplation, Wyatt rolled so he was snuggled against Bennett's side. Bennett was still for a moment, his chest rising and lowering as he breathed deeply, and then, as

Wyatt had hoped, Bennett dropped an arm across his back, keeping Wyatt in place.

THE ALARM WENT OFF FAR TOO SOON. Wyatt was in the middle of a dream where Bennett was stroking his morning wood and he was grinding his ass into Bennett's groin. His eyes flew open. It wasn't a dream; Bennett's arm was around his hips and as he jacked Wyatt, he gently pumped against Wyatt's ass, Bennett's erection hot and heavy against his skin. Wyatt was in that half-awake state where there was no such thing as control. His hips had a life of their own, and as Bennett's hand sped up, Wyatt's balls pulled up and tightened, and in the next moment he was coming, gasping as the slick come made it easier for Bennett's hand to slide up and down, caressing him. As he pumped his hips, Bennett's cock slid in between his cheeks—fuck, that was hot.

“God, yes, come there, come there now.” He wanted to feel Bennett spill on him, he wanted to be marked so Bennett wouldn't forget what they'd done.

Bennett continued to drag his cock between Wyatt's thighs, back and forth across his perineum. Wyatt clenched his ass, Bennett tantalizingly close to his throbbing entrance—that would be next. He wanted Bennett's rod inside him, and he opened his knees in invitation even knowing they didn't really have the time. The action caught and held Bennett for a moment right at his entrance. Wyatt began to harden again in anticipation.

It was just light enough in the room that Wyatt was able to see the head of his cock slip in and out of Bennett's large fist. His tip was red and almost angry-looking, and as he watched, his cock throbbed and a bead of precome pulsed out. Bennett immediately swiped his callused thumb across the sensitive head, making Wyatt quake with need, another bead following the first. He didn't think he'd actually get off again but then Bennett orgasmed, groaning in his ear, thrusting again between his legs and biting down on the back of Wyatt's shoulder with a deep needy groan. His slick come dripped between Wyatt's ass, making him slippery and needy. Fucking hell, he was coming *again*, it was on the edge of painful as his balls completely emptied, but he pushed out a few more pulses of liquid onto Bennett's fingers before sagging back into the mattress.

Bennett had his head buried in the crook of Wyatt's neck; they were both breathing hard. Wyatt didn't know what to say, he didn't want to ruin the moment. Luckily Wicket chose that moment to whine, reminding them he needed to be taken care of before they left for the day.

"Jesus Christ," Bennett began, "if I smoked, I think I'd need a cigarette about now."

"Isn't enough that you're smokin' hot?" Wyatt quipped, ignoring Wicket for the moment to roll over and look at Bennett.

Bennett rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You are ridiculous."

Wicket barked again.

"You love my ridiculous."

Wyatt immediately regretted letting the word "love" slip between his lips, but Bennett didn't cringe or frown. As he often did, he acted as if Wyatt hadn't said anything.

"Don't you have a dog to let out?"

All this deflection, *fine*. Wyatt would wear Bennett down; he'd get past those defenses. Sex was just the beginning. What Wyatt really wanted was Bennett's heart.

With a groan he sat up, his head spinning a bit, and grabbed his sleep pants from where he'd dropped them on the floor rug a few hours ago. Today was going to be a long day.

ASIDE FROM WAKING up in Bennett's bed, the nice thing about staying at his house was the commute. Instead of a half hour or more, it only took ten minutes to drive from Bennett's to where the sheds and equipment were set up. And this was only the first of many long days. The grapes were harvested by hand and sorted for quality before being transferred to the winery where the crusher-destemmer waited. At the winery, they were fed into the machine, destemmed, crushed, and then poured into stainless steel containers to begin the first part of the fermentation process. And repeat from now until November.

Zach was already waiting for them. If he thought it odd that Wyatt and Bennett showed up together, he didn't comment on it.

Grape harvest was dirty, hot, and sticky work. The worst enemy was the fruit fly, something Wyatt thought was funny, but those little bastards were a pain in the ass, and everyone did their best to kill as many as possible.

Because they collected the grapes by hand, everyone was armed with clippers and leather gloves, and wore bandanas to keep the worst of the bugs away. Zach and Bennett would decide which vines were ready and the crew would follow behind.

“Morning,” Zach said.

“Hey boss,” Bennett replied. “What’s the plan today?”

Zach ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. He was hot, but Bennett was hotter.

“Only a quarter crew today. But I’ve been watching the weather and they’re predicting a rain over the weekend. I’ve pulled out all the stops to get a full crew here ASAP so we can get the first grapes off the field.”

“I think the cab grapes can handle being on the vine for a little longer, even a week, but we need to get the Chardonnay and Sémillon grapes in,” Bennett commented.

Grapes were so fickle, a rainstorm or an unexpected change in temperature and the crop could be lost. The Brix, so carefully monitored, could change in a matter of days.

“Alright then, what are we waiting around for? As Zach always says, ‘the grapes aren’t going to pick themselves,’” Wyatt quipped.

ZACH ALWAYS MADE sure his crew was fed. A food truck trundled in at eleven and the crew swarmed it, hungry for the tacos and sopa. There was fresh lemonade and sparkling water too. Zach’s boyfriend Jeff drove out from town to say hi, but apparently he wasn’t allowed near any actual wine-making equipment.

“Jeff’s a numbers guy,” Zach said, after kissing Jeff in front of everyone. Jeff blushed but it was obvious by the way he leaned into Zach that he loved the attention.

Jeff had brought Jura, Zach’s yellow lab, along with him. Before Jeff arrived on the scene, Jura’d spent all his time with Zach, hanging out at the vineyard or winery, but ever since Jeff entered the picture, Jura split his time between his humans. Jeff joked that the dog thought neither of them could be trusted on their own.

Jura trotted over to where Wyatt was sitting at the picnic table next to Bennett (he couldn’t help it; the guy had his own Wyatt-specific gravity) and began sniffing his work boots.

Wyatt looked down. “He probably smells Wicket—Oh, shit! Wicket.”

“Who, or what, is Wicket?” Jeff asked with a frown.

Wyatt quickly explained how he’d found Wicket by the side of the road and asked Bennett to take care of him for a few days, wisely not mentioning he’d stayed at Bennett’s the night before, “Until we find him a home.”

“I think ‘ask’ is stretching things a bit. Wyatt showed up yesterday afternoon with this absolutely disgusting furball and demanded I do my part to save him. You would’ve thought he—the dog, not Wyatt,” Bennett clarified, “—had narrowly escaped Storm Troopers.”

“Regardless,” Wyatt broke in, “one of us needs to go let him out and love on him a bit—he’s just a baby.”

Bennett sighed and shuffled around. Lifting his ass up from the wooden bench so he could dig into the pocket of his jeans, he pulled out the keys to his truck and held them out to Wyatt. “You think you can manage the Chevy?”

Wyatt snatched them from his palm. “You are such an ass. I’ll be back in a few.”

SIX

Bennett

FROM ACROSS THE gravel drive Zach was staring at Bennett, eyes wide, as if he'd suddenly grown a second head.

"What?" Bennett asked.

"You just let Wyatt drive off with your *precious*."

Jeff was gaping at him too, along with a couple of the other workers.

"So what?"

He knew *what*; he never let anyone drive his truck.

Zach's eyes narrowed. Instead of answering, he crossed over to the wooden picnic table where Bennett sat, a small mound of waxed paper crumpled up on his paper plate. Jura sniffed around under the table, looking for scraps.

"Let's go check the containers." Zach said.

"They're fine, I checked them when we got here." Bennett purposefully ignored Zach's tone.

Zach shot him the hairy eyeball again, so Bennett huffed out a sigh and extricated himself from the picnic table.

Inside the storage barn was cool and shady compared to outside in the sunshine, where it'd been in the high 90s and rising when last he'd checked the temps. All the extra barrels and random equipment stored inside had been pushed to the walls to accommodate the containers waiting for the grapes needing to be sorted before they left for the winery.

Zach turned to face him, demanding, "Are you sleeping with Wyatt?"

What was this? An inquisition?

And why would Zach leap from Bennett giving his truck's keys to Wyatt to Bennett sleeping with Wyatt? And, even if the answer was a resounding yes, it had only been one time. Last night. Or this morning, but that seemed like splitting hairs.

Hell, he hadn't even had time to process what they'd done. Bennett scuffed at the ground with the toe of his boot. He didn't know how to answer this question—or why Zach seemed upset about it.

“Look.” Zach had his hands on his hips now, and a half pissed-off expression on his face. “Normally I wouldn’t interfere. Wyatt’s old enough, you’re old enough... but Bennett—Wyatt is into you. Seriously into you and has been since he first came to work for me. Wyatt has the biggest heart of anyone I’ve met. He would literally and happily give his last dollar to you if he thought you needed it. He’s been trying to get you to look at him for years. And you, generally, just treat him like a little brother. What gives?”

Bennett stared at Zach for a minute, trying to decide how to answer and what Zach was actually asking him. Narrowing his eyes at his employer he asked, “Are you questioning... my intentions?”

“Buddy,” Zach replied, “I wasn’t even 100 percent sure you swung our way. You keep things close to your chest, too close if you ask me. I don’t want you using a man I consider a good friend as an experiment.”

God, there was a fucking reason Bennett hated talking about shit. It was hard and painful and all too often he couldn’t find the right words. But here, in the relative quiet of the barn with dust motes floating down from the rafters, maybe he’d give talking a try.

And even though he wanted to say them, the words still seemed to get caught in his throat and he had to force them out.

“It’s not an experiment. I’m gay, I’ve always been gay.”

Something in his tone had Zach’s expression softening; he nodded and crossed his arms over his chest.

“I guess I’m not surprised. I suspected. But since I’ve never hidden my sexuality, I thought you’d feel comfortable around me if you were gay, are gay.”

Bennett let out a sigh. “It’s complicated.”

“Things are usually way less complicated than we think, just saying. Humans have a way of building stuff up in our heads until we can’t see over the pile of shit.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Is it your parents?”

Bennett nodded. “And other stuff.”

“Look, for what it’s worth, coming from me, I’ve always thought Wyatt would be good for you—but it’s been like three years?”

“I’m a slow mover?” Bennett replied. “Kind of glacial pace, I guess. He stayed over last night, one thing kind of led to another.” His pace had gone

from glacial to tsunami.

He was about to explain further but at that moment the shed's door burst open and Wyatt stormed in—or, since Bennett had his back to the door, that's what he *thought* happened. Turning, he saw Wyatt standing there with Wicket in his arms, and he was furious. But his anger wasn't directed at Bennett, it was toward Zach.

“Zach, I would very much appreciate it if you would remove your nose from Bennett's and my business. I am perfectly able to take care of myself and communicate with him. If you've messed up years of groundwork, I'll... I'll quit!”

Wicket let out a sharp bark, squirmed, and jumped out of Wyatt's grasp to race over to Bennett, whining for his attention.

Suppressing a smile at Wyatt's protectiveness, Bennett leaned down to pet the squirming pup and receive happy licks in return. He glanced back up at Zach who was holding his palms out in surrender.

“I don't think I've done any lasting harm. And with that”— Zach held both hands out from his body in a placating motion and moved toward the now open door—“I'm headed back to work. I'll see you two in a few minutes.” Zach ducked through the opening and pulled the door shut behind him, leaving Bennett and Wyatt alone.

Now that Zach had left, Wyatt's expression changed from fierce to unsure.

“Uh...” he started.

Bennett closed the distance between them, stopping Wyatt's words with a finger across his lips.

“You don't have to apologize. I really appreciate you racing in here to protect me from evil Zach.”

Wyatt's dark eyes were still wary.

“But I have to know. Did my truck arrive back in one piece?”

A wide grin spread across Wyatt's handsome face and he barked out a laugh. “Only a couple dings.”

Bennett couldn't resist, he let his hand slip around the back of Wyatt's neck. Wyatt's eyes widened in expectation, full of hope and want. Licking his lips, Bennett pulled Wyatt closer.

Their lips touched and Wyatt's breath mingled with his own. Almost immediately, Bennett was so hard for Wyatt he ached. Wyatt's mouth opened, plush, hot, and inviting him in for more. Bennett's tongue swept

inside, tangling with Wyatt's, chasing the addictive taste—a bit like tacos but also cola, the barest hint of coffee, and Wyatt's own special flavor—the flavor Bennett was beginning to crave.

Wyatt groaned and pressed his body against Bennett's, Bennett could feel Wyatt's cock against his hip, and it ramped him up even more.

Someone banged a fist on the door. Zach's deep voice penetrated Bennett's haze of lust.

“Harvest isn't going to wait for the two of you to get your rocks off, the grapes aren't picking them damn selves.”

“Damn,” he muttered against Wyatt's lips.

Wyatt pulled away. “We need to get back to work.”

“How come you're the one being logical?” Bennett asked as he adjusted himself in his jeans.

Grinning, Wyatt answered, “I do *not* want Zach to give us crap for the rest of our days. It's going to be bad enough today.”

IT SEEMED like once Wyatt was in Bennett's house, in his bed, the world was a better place. Harvest went well, the rains held off. No one got hurt or sick, even the fruit flies didn't seem as bad as past seasons. Wyatt still had shifts at Demeter's, so once or twice a week he left the vineyard early to shower and change and then, like clockwork, he was back at Bennett's after closing. He'd strip down and slide in between the sheets where Bennett waited. Wyatt's scent was enough to make Bennett's dick hard. And that was taken care of almost every night, too.

The Saturday after harvest began, the two of them took a few hours to take Wicket to the vet, where he was declared fine and given several shots. Wicket was not impressed. Then the three of them piled back into Bennett's truck and headed back home.

Wyatt started bringing Wicket's crate to the vineyard so they didn't leave him cooped up all day. After a week or so of that, Wyatt arrived home one night with a leash, one end of which was wiggle-proof. When Jeff and Jura arrived at lunch time, Wyatt clipped Wicket to the patient Labrador.

“There, dog sitter.”

Bennett was skeptical. He was sure the two dogs were going to get tangled up and instead of working, he'd be spending his time untangling

and trying to figure out where the hell they were. Wicket was only a puppy; the vet had thought he was about four months old.

Amazingly, Wyatt's solution worked. Wicket quickly learned to stick by the older dog's side, and since Jura never went anywhere that Jeff or Zach weren't, Wicket was safe. When it was too hot, they lolled in the shade together. Jura seemed to actually like the ridiculous puppy and when he arrived with Jeff, he would immediately go find his partner in crime.

It wouldn't last, Bennett knew. There was no way Wyatt was going to stick around with a communication-challenged boyfriend. But it felt right, so Bennett didn't say anything about Wyatt still being at his house long after Wicket was crate-trained, long after the posters they'd put up around town were ignored and then faded into obscurity by the harsh sun.

Bennett worried about Wyatt's mom. He worried that he was keeping Wyatt from spending time with her. He hadn't met her yet, but Wyatt's voice was full of affection and love when he talked about her.

Wyatt assured Bennett that Mariah Reeser did not need him hanging around all the time. She had a tight-knit group of friends who visited her, brought her food, and sat with her if she was having a bad day. And Wyatt visited her every day he could manage; she was on a new medication that seemed to be making a difference.

Bennett didn't know how Wyatt did it, how he managed to work eighteen-hour days, sometimes longer, and still be this cheerful, thoughtful guy who lit up Bennett's world.

THE EARLY FALL days bled into late November. Zach's goal, the goal of all the valley's winemakers, was to have the grapes in by the Thanksgiving holiday. For once Bennett wasn't looking forward to the end of harvest because it meant Wyatt, and Wicket, would be leaving. Why would they stay? Sure, it looked like much of Wyatt's closet had migrated to Bennett's house, co-mingling with his clothes in the laundry basket, but that was merely convenience. Harvest would end, Thanksgiving would arrive, and Wyatt would leave.

With the winter barrel-tasting coming up right after the holiday, Bennett already knew Wyatt would have full-time shifts at Demeter's as the multitudes of wine tasters rolled into town from all over the country wanting a first taste of whatever barrels the wineries were tapping for the

first time. Zach already had orders for several hundred cases of Caesura wine, and he and Jeff would be swamped with pouring tastes and selling even more.

The thought was depressing. Bennett was depressed. *Life After Wyatt* would be difficult. Even if Zach was right and Wyatt had been “into” him for years, he was bound to have realized the truth about Bennett in the last six weeks—whatever Wyatt had been attracted to was a mirage. He’d come to his senses.

THEN, the Thursday before Thanksgiving, Bennett’s mother called. Bennett hadn’t talked to his parents all summer; he’d completely put the holiday and anything Meyer family related out of his mind.

Wyatt had a shift that night at Demeter’s, so Bennett was on his own. He was tossing a miniature tennis ball across the living room, trying to tire out Wicket. Spoiler: it wasn’t working. When his phone buzzed, he didn’t check the screen, just answered on the assumption it was Wyatt, or maybe Zach.

“Bennett, your brother will be home Saturday. We’ll have the family dinner Sunday evening; we expect you to join us.” She never said “hello” or asked how he was doing, as if she felt she was doing him a favor by calling at all.

He could hear clinking sounds and soft chatter in the background and wondered where his parents were—at home, or more likely, eating dinner out. Nancy Meyer didn’t cook and neither did Bennett’s father.

Wicket brought the little ball back to Bennett. When Bennett didn’t take it, he dropped it on the floor and watched it roll under the couch.

Taking a deep breath, Bennett said, “Hi, Mom. How have you been?”

“You’d know how your father and I have been if you bothered to keep in touch.”

“The phone lines go both ways, Mom.”

He didn’t know why he was antagonizing her; it would only make the Sunday dinner even more excruciating. And then there was Thanksgiving to dread.

“Your brother calls once a week, sometimes more.”

Ah, yes, Elliot, Bennett’s younger brother. The perfect son, the one who didn’t hate college, hadn’t dropped out, didn’t argue with their parents

about what program he should focus on. Didn't show up back in Hollyridge after only two years at college, having failed most of his classes.

His brother also wasn't gay, as far as Bennett knew. Elliot, who could've gone to the exclusive West Coast Ivy League college in Hollyridge but was offered a place at an even more exclusive Ivy-of-the-West college and was now in his last year. Bennett and Elliot didn't talk much, not ever actually, not since long before Bennett left and came back. He'd heard from his mother that Elliot was applying to grad school at the UW. Great, another thing for her to crow about and hold over his head.

“Dinner will be at six, don't be late.”

Click.

SEVEN

Wyatt

“SO,” Jaime began, her bright eyes sparkling, “how’s it going with lover boy?”

Wyatt rolled his eyes. Jaime seemed to think she was responsible for Wyatt and Bennett getting together. Wyatt was willing to concede she’d hurried the pace, but he would have broken through Bennett’s defenses, eventually. And Wyatt had a sneaking suspicion he hadn’t fully destroyed them just yet.

Harvest had been insanely busy; the crew put in long days and Wyatt and Bennett fell into bed every night too tired for much more than a blow job. Way too tired for any of the talking Wyatt knew they needed to do. They’d gone from Bennett ignoring him or treating him like a little brother to incredible sex on a daily basis, but he feared it ended there.

“Good, I think,” he replied.

Jaime cocked her head, asking, “You *think*?”

Wyatt leaned against the tasting bar. He was tired, exhausted actually, but the wage and tips he earned from these shifts at Demeter’s went to help pay for the meds his mom needed that weren’t covered by her insurance.

“He’s a quiet guy, hard to read. And this past week he’s been quieter than usual.”

“Well, you’re both working hard,” she mused.

“I don’t think that’s it.” Wyatt let out a sigh. “It’s a different level of quiet. I keep think he’s going to tell me I can’t stay but then... he doesn’t.”

“Hmm. So, you guys haven’t made everything official yet?”

Wyatt laughed, “Hah, no. I jumped his bones and basically haven’t left yet. Plus, Wicket.”

“But he hasn’t asked you to leave?” she confirmed.

“No, and most of the time things are great, amazing, awesome. But...”

“It sounds to me like you need to do some talking.”

Wyatt stared at his employer and sort-of mentor, slapping his hand over his heart. “Are you telling me to talk *more*? I thought I talked too much.”

Now Jaime shook her head, smiling. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. When Dag and I got together it was similar. I’d had my eye on him for ages and then we were at a party together and I went home with him. At first, I thought ‘whoo hoo, my work here is done,’ but of course it wasn’t. It took me a while to figure out that the number his first wife had done on him meant I had my work cut out for me. But it was worth it.”

“What did you do?”

Jaime smiled over her shoulder at her husband Dag. He was, as usual, behind the tasting bar, pouring a taste for a customer and patiently answering questions. He caught her look and winked, mouthing “love you”. The exchange made Wyatt’s romantic heart nearly melt into goo.

“I figured out Dag reminded me of this rescue dog we had back when I was a kid. The dog lived in the woods behind our house. Someone, who is hopefully now burning in hell, had abandoned him. Anyway, we started feeding him. He’d come to the back door and eat, but he refused to come inside. I started sitting outside with him while he ate, just talking, and eventually, he let me pet him—lord, he was an ugly dog. We bribed a vet to come out and take a look at him and she declared him healthy. The dinner and chat went on for a few months and then one day I stood to go inside like I always did, and he just followed me.” She shrugged. “He finally realized that we were okay, but it took a lot of time and patience.”

“Are you telling the dog story again?” Dag’s deep voice floated over Jaime’s shoulder.

She grinned and looked over at him. “Maybe.”

“I love being compared to a dog,” he said, sort of grumpily.

“I’m not!!! I’m trying to help Wyatt with Bennett.”

“Ah, the matchmaker strikes again. Since Rory and Brett and then Zach and Jeff, Jaime is riding high.” Dag cocked his head. “What’s up with Bennett? I don’t know him that well,” he pointed across the tasting room with his chin, “but those are his parents.”

Wyatt did his best not to whip around and stare. The older couple standing and sipping wine at one of the tall tables pushed against one wall were nothing like he’d imagined Bennett’s parents would be. They were... posh. The woman was angular and thin, her steel gray hair cut into a steep bob, the perfect curve ending right at her chin. The man was tall and definitely who Bennett got his looks from, but there the resemblance ended. His shoulders were stooped as if he spent a lot of time hunched over

reading or at a computer. He wore a Palouse College sweatshirt, while the woman had a Palouse College windbreaker over her shoulders.

“They teach at the college,” Dag said.

Bennett was so... large, and unassuming too, but he had a presence that Wyatt at least couldn't deny. His skin was tanned from being outdoors all the time, his hands rough from hard work, his hair had light streaks in it from the sun. When Bennett spoke, people listened. It seemed to Wyatt that Bennett's parents had created someone larger than themselves, not only physically but in his very essence.

“Huh,” was all Wyatt said.

“They come in once a month or so. I only know that's who they are because once they were here when Bennett was delivering some cases of wine for Zach.”

“Yeah?”

Dag shrugged. “They didn't talk much. I had the impression that Bennett would rather have bamboo stuck under his fingernails than interact with his parents.”

AS WYATT DROVE BACK to Bennett's that night he thought about Bennett's parents and what Dag had said. It was hard for him to relate to parents who didn't get along with their kids, or care for their children. His mom was the single most supportive person in his life. Oh, he'd gotten in his share of trouble, but his mom had always been there for him.

When he'd come out to her at the young age of ten, he may not have wanted to have sex with anyone yet, but he knew full well he was not interested in Wendy Parrish or Melony Atkins the same way his boy schoolmates were.

“Thank you for telling me, mi corazón. I love you,” she'd said after giving him a kiss on the head.

A few years later she told Wyatt she'd known he was gay when he was as young as four. They were in Target shopping and stopped in the entertainment aisle, where a movie poster for Lord of the Rings was displayed, and out of the blue, he'd announced he was marrying Orlando Bloom.

Wyatt had never been given a reason to question his mother's love.

BENNETT'S front door opened as Wyatt was climbing out of his truck. He was struck, as he often was, by just how gorgeous Bennett was. Slipping past his man, he stepped into the house.

"You're up. I thought you'd be in bed by now," he commented.

They still had a couple more days of field work before Zach declared the harvest season officially over, although the main crew had been released.

Bennett ran a hand through his unruly blond hair—he hadn't had time to get it cut to its usual short length in the past weeks. Wicket greeted Wyatt enthusiastically, barking and spinning in circles like the ridiculous animal he was.

"Yeah, my mom called a while ago and now I'm feeling restless, I guess."

"That's a coincidence, your parents stopped in at Demeter's tonight."

"You know them?" Bennett looked slightly shocked.

"No, but Dag does, and he pointed them out to me."

"Mmm." Bennett responded in that way he did when he actually had a lot to say but the words just weren't there.

"Let's put Wicket here to bed so we can go to bed too," Wyatt said.

Wyatt picked up the squirming dog and pressed his face against Wicket's wiry fur. The puppy twisted around and managed to lick him several times on the face before Wyatt set him back down.

"Do you mind putting him to bed while I take a quick shower?" he asked.

BENNETT'S BATHROOM was nothing special, Wyatt supposed, but for a kid who'd grown up living in tiny apartments it was enormous. The clawfoot tub with the shower surround was sublime. He turned on the shower spray and quickly stripped off his clothing, leaving it in a pile in the corner; he always slept better if he showered before bed.

He was soaping himself up when the bathroom door opened and Bennett came inside. The shower curtain was pulled aside and there stood

Bennett, naked and needy. Already erect, his thick red cock pointed directly at Wyatt like a dowsing stick.

“Can I get in with you?”

Wyatt snapped out of his stare. “Fuck yes. Get in here right now.”

Bennett climbed in with Wyatt. The tub was big, six feet long, but the two of them together took up all the space. And maybe all the oxygen too.

“Turn around, I just want to hold you,” Bennett whispered.

Wyatt turned around so the spray hit him in the chest while Bennett moved to press against Wyatt’s back. It felt perfect, Bennett’s erection snug against his ass cheeks. Wyatt widened his stance so Bennett’s cock could slide between his legs.

“Fuck, Bennett.”

“Yeah? You like this?”

“Bennett, I like everything you do.” Wyatt wiggled his ass against Bennett, encouraging him to go further.

“What am I going to do, Wyatt?” he whispered into the shell of Wyatt’s ear.

“What do you mean?” Because suddenly Wyatt wondered what they were talking about here, sex or something more? And he thought about Bennett waiting for him, opening the front door, as well as what Dag had said about Bennett’s parents.

“When you leave?”

Wyatt almost missed Bennett’s words. The shower suddenly seemed deafening, but he didn’t miss them he heard them, loud and clear.

Squashing the feeling of panic deep in his gut, he replied, “Why would I leave?”

“Why would you stay?” Bennett’s voice was hoarse.

“Bennett?” Wyatt said.

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

“Can I turn around? There’s something I need to tell you.”

Bennett didn’t answer immediately and for a minute the only sound was the water hitting the shower curtain. Bennett’s broad chest rose and fell against Wyatt’s back. Then Bennett’s strong hands were on Wyatt’s hips, turning him to face Bennett.

Wyatt lifted his hands to cup Bennett’s face; his cheeks were rough with stubble and water dripped off his nose.

Looking directly into those blue eyes, the color of the sky on a hot summer day, Wyatt began. “Bennett Meyer, in case you haven’t figured it out yet, I am not going anywhere unless you tell me to leave. I love you, Bennett.” Maybe the shower wasn’t the most romantic place to tell Bennett he loved him, but these were desperate times.

“When I say, ‘I love you’, I mean it in *all* the ways I know you, *all* the ways I love you. I love that you can’t talk before coffee in the morning, I love that you don’t cook but have every cooking contraption known to mankind. I love how kind you are, how you listen to people and hear what they aren’t saying out loud—like when Ray Martinez’s kid was sick, and you gave him the day off but still paid him. I love that you try to watch TV with me at night but fall asleep—every single time. I love that you love Wicket but won’t admit it.” Wyatt stopped for a minute. Bennett was staring at him, eyes wide as if Wyatt were speaking in tongues, so he decided to keep his list going. “I love that you think your Chevy is better than my Ford when we both know my truck is the winner. I love that when you think I won’t notice, you look at me like I’m something special. I love that—”

Bennett’s mouth came crashing down on his, as if he were going to devour Wyatt. When Wyatt parted his lips, Bennett pushed his tongue inside, greedily licking across his palate, tangling with Wyatt’s tongue.

Wyatt’s own erection, which had been on a sort of low simmer, hardened against Bennett’s hip. Letting one of his hands fall from Bennett’s face to his ass, he tugged Bennett even closer. It was a damn good thing Bennett had installed those no-slip things on the floor of the tub because otherwise they’d both be on their asses.

One of them moaned. Bennett shoved his free hand between them and began to jack their erections together. The sensation was almost too much for Wyatt to bear—Bennett’s cock hard and slick against his own, the shower, Bennett eating into his mouth, all of it. A spark at the base of Wyatt’s spine bloomed, and with a grunt he thrust against Bennett. Fuck, he was coming, and Bennett was coming too, his big body shuddering with his release.

“My fucking God,” whispered Wyatt when he could breathe again, leaning against Bennett, letting him hold them both up.

The shower water started to cool off, and Bennett, still with one arm around him, pulled away.

“The hot water tank probably isn’t big enough for this kind of stuff,” he grunted.

“Maybe we need to fix that,” Wyatt said.

THEY WERE TUCKED into Bennett’s king size bed, the alarm set for five the next morning. He snuggled into Bennett’s side, head resting on his shoulder and one knee slung over Bennett’s thigh.

“You want to tell me what that was all about?” Wyatt asked.

The bedroom was dark, and the only sounds were the wind buffeting the house and Wicket turning around in his crate at the foot of the bed. Now that he was trained Wyatt figured it wouldn’t be long before he was sleeping on the bed with them.

Bennett took a deep breath and released it in a gusty sigh, Wyatt loved how it felt under his cheek. Another thing to love—the way Bennett felt against him.

“No. But I will.” His voice was quiet. Wyatt had to strain to hear him.

“You don’t have to.”

“Wyatt?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m pretty sure I love you too.”

Wyatt’s heart seemed to skip a beat at his words, “That’s... good, right?”

Bennett’s arm tightened where he had it wrapped around Wyatt’s body. “It is good, you goof. It’s just that my mom called today and all I can say is my relationship with my parents is complicated, it makes me tired thinking about it. And you deserve so much more than I can give you.”

“Are you out to them?” Wyatt wanted to argue that he was the one with nothing to offer. A townie who never wanted to live anywhere else but Hollyridge, who hadn’t wanted to go to college. Who’d spent an awful lot of his childhood watching Golden Girls reruns with his mother. All he had to give Bennett was his heart.

“I suppose.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t exactly fit the idea of who they think a child of theirs should be. Being gay, that’s just one of many ways I’ve failed them.”

“How is that possible? You are amazing!”

Bennett chuckled. “Wyatt, I think you belong to an exclusive club of one.”

“I—Bennett,” Wyatt growled.

“Both my parents teach at Palouse College.” Wyatt knew it was something like that with what they’d been wearing at Demeter’s. “My dad is an English professor and my mom teaches chemistry and physics, but she also researches laser particles and complicated stuff like that. I do none of those things. I think my dad would be okay with me, but I don’t even like to read. You know how you hear about those kids who grew up nerdy, skinny, and too uncoordinated to play any sports, whose folks were disappointed in them?”

Wyatt nodded.

“I’m like the opposite. I’ve always been super active and wanted to play sports, go camping, hiking, that sort of thing. School? Never my strong point. But I tried because it meant so much to them. I was glad to go away to college, but I failed there too. Middle of sophomore year a guy I was friends with suggested I get tested for dyslexia. This was something teachers had asked my parents to do while I was living at home, but heaven forbid their child have a learning disability. They wouldn’t even consider it.

“Long and short, I am severely dyslexic and it’s kind of too late for me to relearn everything in a way that makes sense to my brain. Reading is horrible, it takes me forever. Besides, I don’t need to read a lot to ride a bike or climb a mountain.”

“Or have sex, thank fuck!” Wyatt added.

Bennett chuckled again, his deep rumble echoing through Wyatt’s body.

“So, you can’t read? Or it’s hard for you to read?” Wyatt asked. He wasn’t a big reader but couldn’t imagine not reading at all.

“Reading more than a few pages takes fucking forever and gives me a massive headache. My parents still refuse to believe I’m dyslexic. Being gay doesn’t seem to matter, I came out to them when I was eighteen—or maybe they just ignore that part of me because I’ve never brought anyone home. Not being smart enough, that’s where they draw the line. An uncrossable line, in my case.”

“That’s like... the worst thing I’ve ever heard! Being dyslexic doesn’t mean you’re stupid,” Wyatt exclaimed.

“It is what it is.” Bennett shrugged, making Wyatt’s head wobble. “Nothing’s going to change. My folks aren’t suddenly going to change their

opinion that I just never tried hard enough.”

Wyatt let that sink in for a bit, the fact that Bennett’s parents *doubted* his efforts. Bennett was one of the hardest-working people Wyatt knew. He was first out to the vineyard in the mornings and last to leave in the evenings. And even though he downplayed it, Bennett had soaked up a lot of knowledge from Zach about grapes and winemaking. Zach trusted Bennett to make his own decisions about grape quality, what grapes were ready to pick, and which needed a few more days on the vine.

“Why did your mom call anyway?” Wyatt asked.

“There’s a family dinner this weekend. My perfect younger brother is home for the holidays. It’s going to be awful; it always is.”

“What’s your brother’s name? What’s he like? How much younger is he than you?”

“Let me see, so many questions.” Bennett planted a kiss on Wyatt’s temple. “Elliot is six years younger than me, but he graduated high school a year early. He’s very smart, top of the class, that sort of thing.” Bennett didn’t sound jealous, he sounded proud of his brother.

“But what’s he *really* like? He’s more than grades, right? Maybe you should connect with him before you see your parents? I bet it’s been a long time since you guys hung out, it might be nice to see him before you have to go to dinner.”

Not that Wyatt was the smartest guy on the planet, but he’d bet his left nut that the uptight couple he’d seen at Demeter’s from afar did nothing to encourage closeness between their sons. He could be wrong, but from what Bennett had just shared, he had a feeling he wasn’t.

EIGHT

Bennett

BENNETT STARED at the contact list in his phone. His brother's number was right there, easy to call. That is—if he hadn't changed it. Taking a deep breath, feeling a little as if he was on the high dive, Bennett selected it and pressed the Call button.

A voice deeper than he expected said, "Hello?"

It had been a long time since Bennett had heard his brother's voice.

"Uh, hi, Elliot, it's Bennett."

There was the tiniest silence, just long enough for Bennett to wonder if Elliot was going to hang up on him.

"Oh, hi, Bennett, what's up?" Elliot's voice was both cautious and curious.

Curious, as in, why are you calling me? Cautious, likely because he and Elliot had never really had the same friends, even before college they hadn't been the kind of brothers who did things together. Bennett had been too busy trying to keep shit from collapsing and who knew what Elliot had been up to.

"Um." God, this was hard. "I wanted to know if you wanted to meet up for beers or something before dinner with the folks." He rushed his words out, he'd gone this far he might as well get all of them out. "I'd like to introduce you to my boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?"

Elliot didn't sound horrified.

"Wyatt Reeser, he's from Hollyridge."

There, he'd said it. Bennett may have come out at eighteen, but he'd never been with someone he considered introducing to his family. Wyatt was different, he was a spark that couldn't be muted.

"I don't recognize the name."

"He's from the south side of town." A nice way of saying Wyatt hadn't gone to the newer high school, but instead had attended the older, run-down high school on the "wrong side of the tracks."

Bennett knew it was kind of cheating. Wyatt probably hadn't meant for Bennett to bring him along to this mini reunion with his brother but, Bennett admitted to himself, he needed the support. He had no idea what to expect from this meetup with Elliot, and Wyatt made even the bad things better.

"Where do you want to meet?"

"The Stone Hut?" It was kind of a test; the Stone Hut was absolutely in the wrong part of town. Not a wine bar or an upscale brewery, the Stone Hut was exactly that, a beat-up old bar located in an old building with river rock walls that kept it cool in the hot Hollyridge summers. They had pull tabs, Bud and Blue Ribbon on tap, a hot nut bar, and sticky tables. During state fair time, which happened right across the street, rodeo cowboys had been known to ride horses into the bar and order cold drinks.

The owner, Wallace Kenton, was one of the toughest men Bennett knew. He was also gay and out, and tolerated no shenanigans. Bennett thought it was kind of funny how even the big talkers left their attitude at the door when they arrived. No one wanted to get eighty-sixed from the Stone Hut. Wallace Kenton had a one-strike policy and he was very unforgiving about it.

"Okay, around four? I'm kind of busy until then."

Bennett clicked off and shoved his phone into the back pocket of his Levi's. He wasn't sure if seeing Elliot would be good or bad, but he guessed he'd know soon enough.

THE PARKING LOT for the Stone Hut was about a third full. The sun was shining but the day was chilly, cold enough that he'd had to scrape a thick layer of frost off his windshield that morning. Bennett eased his Chevy into one of the open spots and heard gravel pop under his tires. It had been a few months since he'd been here, and he noticed Wallace had added some outdoor seating with a couple propane heaters so drinkers wouldn't freeze to death. Bennett scanned the parking lot but didn't see a car he recognized as Elliot's, not that he had any clue what Elliot drove.

Wyatt was quiet—which frankly scared the hell out of Bennett. He climbed out of the passenger side and came around to meet Bennett at the back of the truck.

Bennett took a deep breath; the icy air rasped his lungs.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Wyatt glanced at him, his dark brown eyes somber. “I am nervous as shit.”

“Why? You’re fast-talking Wyatt Reeser, what do you have to be worried about?”

“Fast-talking, huh?” Wyatt finally cracked a grin.

“Fast talking got you in my bed.”

“Well, I’ve never met parents or family before. I’m nervous, I want your brother to like me—I want to like your brother.” Grasping Bennett’s bicep so he would stop walking, Wyatt continued, “Family is really important to me, I’ve always been taught that it’s *the* most important thing. I don’t want to be the cause of more problems with your family.”

Bennett wanted to kiss Wyatt right there in the parking lot of the Stone Hut but that was going a bit far, even as much as Hollyridge had changed over the years.

“Wyatt, you are my family. You are the family I want,” he said. “I didn’t get to choose my parents or my brother, but I choose you. No matter what happens, remember that.”

“Jesus Christ, Bennett, why do you say this stuff when I can’t jump your bones?”

“Anticipation, Wyatt. Anticipation.”

The interior of the bar was dim. Bennett glanced around but didn’t see Elliot right away. “The corner booth?” he asked. Wyatt nodded.

Bennett moved to claim the spot, his favorite because it sat against two windows which allowed some light inside---he liked to be able to see his food and drink. Wyatt headed over to the bar to order drinks and Bennett couldn’t help but notice how pleasantly his Wranglers fit across his ass and hugged his thighs. Wyatt lived to wind him up, constantly giving him crap about his Levi’s and the Chevy, claiming real country boys drove Ford trucks and wore Wranglers. Bennett just preferred them both to be naked. He shifted in his seat; probably best not to think about that right now.

Instead he thought about how his life had changed for the better in the past few months. He was perfectly aware that Wyatt had used Wicket as a way to invade his heart, but it had worked. Bennett hadn’t known how to break his own barriers down; he’d been stuck in a permanent loop of self-protection. He still didn’t think he was worthy of Wyatt, but his lover ignored his claims or, better, hushed him with blow jobs whenever Bennett

tried to explain how Wyatt could do so much better than a half-literate vineyard laborer.

“Bennett?”

He looked up to see his brother Elliot standing at the end of the table and looking like he felt awkward and out of place. Bennett hadn’t seen him for almost a year; his “little” brother had grown more and if Bennett wasn’t wrong, Elliot was even taller than he was. Elliot wasn’t as muscly as Bennett yet, and his hair was darker and longer, but it was his brother and Bennett felt a swell of unnamed emotion rise in his chest.

He half stood from the bench seat and offered his hand for Elliot to shake.

“Oh, for crying out loud, this is your brother, give him a damn hug.” Wyatt stood behind them with a pint in each hand, watching the brothers with amusement sparkling in his eyes.

Bennett met his brother’s gaze, rolled his eyes, and folded his arms around Elliot, squeezing him tightly. Elliot squeezed him back, not letting go for a long moment, until finally he released Bennett before stepping away and glancing over at Wyatt.

“What can we buy you to drink? I’m Wyatt, by the way.” Setting the beers on their table, Wyatt moved as if to head back to the bar. Catching Bennett’s gaze and winking at him, Elliot intercepted Wyatt and engulfed him in a hug of epic proportions. Wyatt squeaked and his eyes were as big as saucers.

Grinning, Elliot let him go.

“What was that for?” Wyatt exclaimed.

“*That* was for getting my brother to call me.”

“Oh, *that*.” Wyatt flipped one hand towards Elliot. “How do you know it was me?”

Elliot raised one eyebrow. “Trust me, I know.”

Shaking his head, Wyatt walked back over to the bar to order another beer and a basket of peanuts before returning to claim his spot next to Bennett.

IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD Bennett a few months ago—hell, a couple days ago—that he would spend the afternoon with his boyfriend and his

younger brother talking about anything and everything, he would've told that person they were several cards short of a full deck.

"You should bring Wyatt to dinner on Sunday," Elliot said.

"What? Hell no, I don't want to expose him to their crap."

It had become clear that their parents had been telling each brother the same thing— "he's too busy to talk on the phone, come to dinner, spend time with..."—until both of them had given up. Bennett was the first to admit he didn't always communicate the best and it had seemed easier to just let Elliot go.

"I'm not the best at that stuff," he allowed.

"Like blood from a stone," Wyatt muttered under his breath.

Elliot snickered into his pint glass, and Bennett shot him a look that should've scorched his ears.

"Anyway, quit hiding from Mom and Dad. Bring Wyatt to dinner, lay your cards on the table, and see what happens. I'll be there to support you. Frankly, I think it's time one of us calls them on their behavior."

A hand, Wyatt's of course, landed on his thigh and squeezed. Trust Wyatt to know Bennett was scared.

He looked at Bennett. "I'll go if you want. If you don't, I'll hang out with my mom for the evening. Maybe I can bring her to—"

Wyatt stuttered to a stop. Bennett knew he'd been about to say "our place" but caught himself. Because as much as Wyatt was living there, Bennett hadn't said anything to make sure Wyatt understood it was permanent.

"To our place," he finished for him, "and that way Wicket won't be left alone for hours."

Ignorant of the momentous event that had just occurred, Elliot asked, "Who's Wicket?"

Bennett thought Wyatt would answer Elliot's question, but he continued to stare at Bennett.

"Wicket is our puppy. What kind of dog he is, I have no idea. Wyatt rescued him from the side of the road a few months back. He's a wiggling, tireless, love-machine. Want to see some pictures?"

Bennett whipped out his phone and began to show his brother pictures of Wicket, chuckling because he'd managed to stun Wyatt into silence.

NINE

Wyatt

WYATT WASN'T sure what to expect at the Meyer pre-Thanksgiving family dinner, but he figured it would be awkward at the very least. Bennett was stressed and anxious, even though he tried to hide it from Wyatt. He'd called his parents from the bar Saturday evening and left a message saying he was bringing his boyfriend to dinner. They'd never returned his call and now dinner loomed.

Scenario after scenario tromped through Wyatt's head; anything was possible. The thing he knew for sure? Elliot was on Bennett's side. Wyatt liked Bennett's younger brother, except it sounded like Elliot was a brainiac. Wyatt didn't consider himself unintelligent, but he had better things to do than add and subtract all day, while Elliot was, in his own words, "a numbers geek."

"Do I look okay? Should I find something different to wear?" He hoped not because they'd need to stop by his mom's place for that.

Bennett glanced over at him, taking in Wyatt's dark-blue plain button down, newer Wranglers, and black Converse. "You'll do," he grumbled, stopping what he was doing, and crossing the space between them to straighten Wyatt's collar and re-tuck in his shirt like he was twelve.

"You look great too." Bennett was wearing his signature Levi's, a white button down still hanging open over a tight white T-shirt, and black leather shoes. This close Wyatt could smell his aftershave, woodsy with a hint of something like cinnamon, and his cock twitched in reaction. Wyatt needed *something* to loosen him up or he was going to break into pieces. Wyatt snuck a glance at the heavy silver watch on Bennett's wrist; they had plenty of time.

Leaning closer, he breathed in Bennett's scent before rubbing his nose against his neck. Bennett stiffened as Wyatt nibbled at his ear lobe. Over the past eight weeks or so, Wyatt had learned Bennett's ears were extremely sensitive. He licked where he'd nibbled and slid a hand down the back of Bennett's jeans, undoing the work Bennett had done getting dressed.

"Wyatt," Bennett growled, but he didn't stop him.

Wyatt let his fingers do the talking, massaging Bennett's round ass, feeling the strong muscle under his hand. Moving from his earlobe to his neck and collar bone, Wyatt also shifted his hands to the button on Bennett's jeans and pulled them open.

"Wyatt." Not quite so grumbly.

Bennett's cock was half hard already. Wyatt let his fingers rest for a moment against him, loving the feeling of the reaction to his touch. Sneaking a finger under the elastic waistband of his boxers, Wyatt pushed them and the jeans down to mid-thigh and dropped to his knees. Bennett's cock, heavy, cut, and fully on board now, was right where he needed it.

"Jesus, Wyatt."

The floorboards in the bedroom were cold but Wyatt wasn't stopping now, Mission Relax Bennett was full speed ahead. Sticking out his tongue, he licked Bennett's tip, loving his taste too. Slightly bitter with a hint of sweet, a fine cock. Bennett's hands landed on his head, his fingers running gently through Wyatt's short hair. Wyatt loved how gentle Bennett was, always aware of his own strength.

Without any further preamble, Wyatt wrapped his fingers around the base of Bennett's girth and took him into his mouth, all the way to the back of his throat. He'd had a lot of practice lately and knew exactly what Bennett liked best, how to take him from zero to sixty in sixty seconds. Bennett groaned, the sound of his arousal reverberating against the bedroom walls enough to make Wyatt's own dick, stuck in his jeans, even harder. Quickly he unfastened them just to give himself some space.

He loved when Bennett fucked his face and what he wanted tonight was that, every time Bennett looked at him over the dinner table, he'd think about where his cock had been only a few hours earlier. Hopefully, it would counteract the negativity the brothers expected.

Bennett tried to control the movement of his hips as Wyatt sucked just a bit harder and pulled back to let his tongue taste more of him. Pushing Bennett's thighs apart as far as the jeans would allow, Wyatt massaged his heavy balls and rubbed his perineum, all while sliding his mouth up and down Bennett's length, his tongue and lips doing the heavy lifting. The taste of precum bloomed on Wyatt's tongue. Bennett's hips began to move a bit faster as he forgot to be careful, letting his impending orgasm force thoughts about his family and the upcoming dinner out of his head.

Wyatt pushed his finger back just a little further, tracing Bennett's hole. Bennett moaned and tried to spread his legs apart for more. Wyatt sucked and pushed just the tip of his finger inside Bennett's body. Bennett liked the feeling of pleasure-pain, of not quite being entered, of feeling full. He hadn't told Wyatt this; Wyatt had learned it on his own. He was an A student when it came to Bennett.

Who was right on the edge, Wyatt could tell. As Bennett's big hands tightened in his hair, Wyatt pushed his finger just a little further inside and Bennett's balls tightened, his come spilling into Wyatt's mouth. Wyatt swallowed as much as possible and held on until he stopped shaking. When Bennett let out a big sigh, Wyatt let his spent cock slip out from between his lips and leaned back on his calves.

"Better?" he asked, looking up at Bennett. His own erection was hard and aching, but this was not about him and they were on the borderline of being late.

"Jesus, Wyatt," Bennett repeated.

"You keep saying that, it's gonna go to my head."

Bennett bent and lifted Wyatt to his feet, cupped his face, and claimed his lips with a crushing kiss. Wyatt pressed against him, wanting release regardless of the practical thought he'd just tried to have.

"What do you need, baby?"

To call him baby again, that's all he needed; he'd come, and his life would be complete. He must have made some kind of sound that Bennett interpreted as "my boyfriend is about to die from a hard-on." Reaching between them, he shoved his big, warm, calloused hand into Wyatt's oh-so-not-sexy underwear and ran his thumb around Wyatt's cock head, because Wyatt had his things too. He felt himself pulse, Bennett rubbing the liquid across the top of his cock as he moved his mouth from Wyatt's lips to his clavicle, where he began to suck as he slowly jacked Wyatt.

After blowing Bennett it wasn't going to take Wyatt long. Hell, he was half hard around Bennett all the time anyway. Bennett pumped him, up and a caress along his tip, down with a little twist and flick against his balls. Then he bit down hard onto his neck and the spark Wyatt had been half fighting exploded up his spine, his hips jerked, and he was releasing into Bennett's hand, his boyfriend murmuring nothing and everything into his ear as Wyatt saw stars.

They were both breathing hard, smelled like sex, and were going to have to at the very least change their underwear before they left for town. From the look of relaxation and satisfaction on Bennett's face, it was totally worth it.

BENNETT'S PARENTS lived in the posh neighborhood around Palouse College. Of *course* they did. The house was a classic 1900s Edwardian, three stories, painted a dark blue Wyatt thought (it was hard to tell in the evening light), and well kept-up. Bennett parked his truck on the street and came around to meet Wyatt as he jumped out of the cab.

The front door opened as they made their way up the walkway.

"You're late," the older woman Wyatt had seen at Demeter's said.

The two men stopped walking and Bennett rested his hand against the small of Wyatt's back. "We had something to take care of. Mom, this is my boyfriend, Wyatt Reeser. Wyatt, this is my mom, Nancy."

She shook her head, the gray bob not budging. "Come inside, we don't need the neighbors gawking."

Elliot appeared behind Nancy's shoulder. "Mom, nobody cares what we do. For chrissake, Mr. Dietz across the street is gay and has been with his partner for years."

Nancy huffed and moved aside to let Bennett and Wyatt in. Elliot grinned and rolled his eyes as he shut the door behind them.

"I came out to them as bi over breakfast."

Nancy's lips thinned to a tight line; she'd started to move away but heard Elliot's comment. From the stiffness of her shoulders, Wyatt figured the news hadn't been well received.

"Come on," Elliot said, "dinner is getting cold."

A thought struck Wyatt. "If you guys have an annual Sunday dinner, what do you do for Thursday?"

"Mom orders a full dinner from the Palouse Hotel, turkey and everything." Elliot slowed his pace and whispered, "She really can't cook, avoid the carrots."

They reached the dining room where Mr. Meyer waited at the table. As they entered the room, he stood and made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Have a seat, boys."

The table was set like something out of a magazine, a white linen tablecloth, white china, and what Wyatt suspected was actual silver silverware. He wondered if Mrs. Meyer worried he might run off with some of it. A candelabra sat on each end of the table and a huge flower arrangement took over the middle, effectively making it impossible to talk to anyone except for the person sitting next to them. Thankfully, he'd been seated next to Bennett, with Elliot on the other side and their parents at either end.

Elliot sat down then immediately stood again to lift the flower arrangement out of the way, setting it on a long low cabinet behind him.

"Elliot," Nancy said.

"Mom," replied Elliot as he sat back down.

That pretty much set the tone for dinner. And the food was—Wyatt felt guilty thinking it—terrible. Mushy carrots, dry chicken breast that may have been marinated but perhaps not, a salad consisting of only lettuce. It made him wonder what the Meyer boys had eaten growing up and how they'd both managed to grow as big as they were.

Wyatt decided at that moment he would be doing something about the Thursday holiday. The history behind Thanksgiving was not something he celebrated, but he loved the family time. Before his grandparents had passed and his aunts and uncles had moved away from Hollyridge, Thanksgiving had been a huge Reeser family get-together. It had been loud with people talking over each other and spilling out into the living room because there was not enough space. He had fond memories of sitting at the kids' table with his cousins, drinking juice from wine glasses and eating until his stomach hurt.

Dinner conversation at the Meyers' was the most passive-aggressive experience Wyatt had ever endured. Comments about college and the future, not one question about Bennett's life, or any attempt to get to know him. He supposed he was glad Mr. and Mrs. Meyer pretended as if he wasn't eating their food as he sat next to their son. Every once in a while, Elliot would catch his eye and shake his head. Bennett's hand spent a lot of time on Wyatt's thigh.

After dessert, which Wyatt couldn't actually identify, he decided he'd had enough. Enough of bland nothing-and-everything conversation. Not one time had the Meyers asked Bennett how harvest had gone, how the winery was doing, if he'd done anything interesting, how he and Wyatt had

met. Elliot did his best to steer the conversation, but Nancy just talked over his comments and ignored Bennett and Wyatt as best she could.

“Boys, are you interested in a scotch? I have a nice bottle waiting for us.” Wes asked.

Wyatt stood and began collecting the dessert plates. “No, we’ve got to get home and feed our puppy. He doesn’t like to be left alone for too long.”

“A puppy?” Nancy asked. “Isn’t a puppy permanent? A real responsibility?”

Wyatt stopped in mid-plate-grab. “Excuse me?”

“I think what Nancy means,” Bennett’s dad began, “is that a puppy—”

Wyatt set the plate back down and Bennett gripped the back of his knee, in warning or support, Wyatt didn’t know which. He stared hard at Nancy Meyer and then at Wes Meyer. “I think you are trying to insinuate that Bennett and I are just a flash in the pan, a hookup or something. You hope that Bennett will go back to being the son you want, that you won’t have to acknowledge Bennett is gay or dyslexic—or both—neither of which he can control. You want Bennett to stay in his quiet sad place because it means he’s not rocking your boat.

“Listen to my words: Bennett and I are together. As in TOGETHER. We have a puppy and we live together in Bennett’s house where you have never bothered to visit. A puppy is permanent because Bennett and I are permanent. Is everything clear to you now?”

Snatching the last plate from in front of Mr. Meyer, he smacked it on top of the pile. “And while I appreciate the invitation—we appreciate the invitation—we will not be staying for scotch. I hate scotch and I don’t feel like pretending I do just to make you like me. Also, don’t expect us Thursday, we’ll be spending it with our real family.”

With the stack of plates in his hands, he marched out of the dining room and into the kitchen and, because his mother taught him to, he rinsed and stacked them in the dishwasher. There was murmuring from the dining room, but Wyatt couldn’t hear what was being said. Frankly, he didn’t care.

Elliot came into the kitchen just as Wyatt was closing the dishwasher door. “Can you get our coats?” Wyatt asked. He did not want to stay here one minute longer than he had to.

“Sure, I’ll walk out with you. Bennett wants to talk to the ‘rents for a minute.”

Wyatt moved to storm back in the dining room, but Elliot caught his arm, stopping him. “Let him, he needs to do this. I doubt it will take long.”

TEN

Bennett

BENNETT FOUND Wyatt and Elliot outside on the front porch waiting for him. As he shut the door, they stopped talking and Elliot held his parka out to him. It was cold, and he wondered idly if they were going to have an early snow this year.

“Well, big brother?” Elliot probed, not subtle at all.

Bennett shrugged into his jacket. “I doubt anything I said will stick but at least I’ve had my say.”

Wyatt glanced at Bennett, even as he texted someone, fingers flying. He scowled, and Bennett wanted to kiss the expression off his face. Wyatt should always be laughing and smiling, the scowling left for Bennett.

“We’re having Thanksgiving at our house,” he announced fiercely. “I refuse to let them ruin the day.”

“Oh, we are, are we?” Bennett suppressed a grin. He loved it when Wyatt got feisty.

“Yes, we are. Feel free to invite your parents, but we are not coming here.” He looked back down at his phone muttering, “Catered shit, what the ever-loving hell.”

Bennett met Elliot’s amused glance.

“I think he’s good for you,” Elliot said.

“Yeah,” Bennett agreed, “he is.”

APPARENTLY HAVING people over for Thanksgiving meant Wyatt had to start cooking on Tuesday. Wyatt knew his way around a kitchen but during harvest they’d lived on pizza and sandwiches; he was very excited to be cooking a big meal for his friends and family.

Wyatt texted his mother so many times Monday evening that Tuesday morning Bennett drove into town to fetch her, figuring it was possible Wyatt might use up his unlimited texting. And Mariah Reeser was thrilled

to be spending time with her son. Bennett felt bad they hadn't had her out before, but it had been a busy, long harvest.

Mariah was just like Wyatt, dark hair and olive-toned skin, except in miniature. She even talked like him, hands swooping all over the place like drunk birds. She hugged Bennett the minute she realized who was standing at her front door, turning to grab her purse from a table behind her. It was hard not to compare Wyatt's mom— "Call me Mariah, honey"— to his own parents and find the senior Meyers lacking.

Wyatt had had an apple-blueberry pie in the oven and had been busy putting together another crust so he couldn't leave the house when Bennett left to pick up Mariah. Instead, Bennett had brought Wicket along for the drive in to Hollyridge; the puppy was definitely underfoot while Wyatt cooked.

"Oh, he is sooo cute!" Mariah exclaimed as Wicket wiggled like mad and tried to kiss her face when Bennett helped her climb into the cab.

"Crud," Bennett said. "I just remembered you're allergic! I'm so sorry. Um..." Bennett cast around, trying to come up with a solution so Mariah wouldn't be covered with dog while they drove back out to his place. Their place.

"Oh, no, I'm not allergic to dogs. Who told you that?" A knowing smile crossed her face. "Wyatt told you I was allergic, didn't he? That boy is a rascal." She shook her head.

He was indeed a rascal, and Bennett couldn't wait to call him out. He wondered what incredible justification Wyatt was going to come up with.

"Don't be mad at him," Mariah continued. "He'd been trying to get you to look at him for so long. I think this was his Hail Mary or whatever it's called when you try to score at the last minute."

"I'm not mad. You knew?" Bennett asked as he pulled away from the curb.

"Are you kidding? The very first day he met you, he came home and told me he'd met the man he was going to marry. That was over three years ago. And I know he hasn't dated anyone since."

Bennett remembered with clarity the first time he'd met Wyatt. He'd known, too, that he wanted him, but he'd pushed his feelings aside and tried to stomp them out of existence. Wyatt had only been eighteen, and for some reason that had felt like an insurmountable gap. Bennett had felt old and

dried out, where Wyatt was a young vibrant man who had the world at his fingertips. He didn't need bumper Bennett bringing him down.

"He was persistent. Got what he wanted, didn't he?"

Bennett nodded. "He did. I hope he's happy because I'm not letting him go."

It had taken Bennett longer than it should have and, maybe, he'd forced Wyatt to resort to desperate measures, but now Bennett couldn't imagine his life without Wyatt or Wicket playing starring roles.

UNLIKE THE SUNDAY DINNER, Thanksgiving was full to bursting with laughter, noise, and amazing smells wafting from the kitchen. Zach and Jeff showed up with Jura—a godsend because it gave Wicket something to do besides search for scraps. Glancing around, Bennett didn't think there'd ever been this many people in his house before. It felt good.

There was more to celebrate today than their patchwork family and friends. Mariah had good news about her MS. While it wasn't going away, her symptoms had responded well to a newer medication and she would be going back to work after the holidays. Wyatt had cried when she shared the information. Wyatt was never afraid to show exactly how he felt; this was just one of the many things Bennett loved about him—how honest he was with his feelings.

He was leaning against the doorframe between the kitchen and the living room, a glass of dark luscious Caesura cabernet in his hand. Almost everyone else was packed in the kitchen as if there were no other rooms in the house. He liked it.

"Our kitchen is still in stasis," Jeff commented, eyeing his fiancé, "as in it's the same as it was when I moved in."

Zach had his arm wrapped around Jeff's waist and pulled him closer to kiss him on the side of the head. "We're getting there."

Jeff's twin brothers had made the trip from Seattle. Currently Wyatt and Jordan were on the other side of the kitchen debating the merits of salted versus unsalted butter. The other twin, Jason, was playing with the dogs in the living room.

There was a knock on the front door. As Jason was closest, he dropped the ball and crossed to open it.

“I’m here!” Elliot called out in a sing-song voice. “I didn’t bother bringing any wine, but I did find a six pack of cider from Ugly Apple, that’s like wine, isn’t it?”

His brother bypassed Jason and marched into the kitchen, headed directly for the refrigerator.

“It’s full. Put it out back where it will stay cold,” Bennett suggested.

Elliot spun around to head toward the door, his gaze landing first on Wyatt and then Jordan where they were now arguing about stuffing, then back out to the living room where Jason was back to playing tug of war. Elliot stopped moving, his eyes widened in what Bennett recognized as surprise. Just as quickly Elliot shuttered his gaze and moved past the self-appointed sous-chefs and official head chef, Mariah Reeser. Opening the back door, he stepped out into the small mudroom but didn’t come back inside right away. Bennett could see his dark figure through the kitchen window.

Wicket raced past Bennett’s ankles and into the kitchen, an orange ball gripped between his teeth, with Jura right behind him. Sprinting around the farm table Bennett had set up in the center of the kitchen, Wicket ran to hide under the stool Mariah was perched on. Jura slid to a stop, his tail wagging wildly as he tried to steal the ball back from the white ball of fluff.

“Wyatt, I can’t believe you told Bennett I was allergic to dogs.” Mariah chuckled as she watched the dog’s antics.

Wyatt stiffened and Bennett grinned. He hadn’t said anything to Wyatt about that little deception, figuring it didn’t matter. Wyatt really had been forced to use underhanded tactics in order for Bennett to open his eyes.

“What?” asked Jordan, glancing between Wyatt and Bennett.

Wyatt turned around with a dramatic sigh, rolling his eyes at the same time. Crossing his arms over his chest, he leaned against the kitchen counter.

“I may have inferred Mom was allergic to dogs.”

“Inferred?” Bennett snorted.

“Okay, yeah, I told Bennett Mom was allergic. But it is true that we can’t have pets in our apartment. And, dammit, I couldn’t figure out how to get Bennett to stop treating me like his little brother.”

Elliot chose that moment to come back into the kitchen. “I can assure you he treats me entirely differently.”

Everyone laughed, a sound that distracted Jura so Wicket dashed back out to the living room, the ball still tight in his jaw.

“Well, until I snuck Wicket in under his defenses, Bennett *acted* like I was a little brother—thank f-heck he doesn’t anymore.” Wyatt had his hands on his hips and wore an apron he’d found somewhere that had *May the Forks Be with You* printed across the front. “There’s only so much a man can take before he cracks. And it worked, didn’t it?”

Everyone laughed. Wyatt looked so... cute, all fierce and flashing eyes with his hands on his hips, Bennett couldn’t help himself. He left his post at the kitchen entry and crossed to where Wyatt stood, his gaze locked on Wyatt’s as he moved closer until he was standing in front of his boyfriend.

Wyatt had a defiant and slightly defensive expression on his face that Bennett wanted to make disappear. With everyone watching, with his kitchen full of people, their friends and Wyatt’s mom, Bennett took one of Wyatt’s smaller more delicate hands in his own, running his thumb across his knuckles.

“Wyatt Reeser,” Bennett began, staring into his boyfriend’s brown eyes, so dark they were almost, but not quite, black, “would you do the honor of officially moving in with me? My house is only a home when you share it with me. Until you stormed into my life, I wasn’t truly living. You make everything better, brighter, more colorful, even taste better.”

“That’s because you can’t boil water,” Wyatt grumbled, but his eyes were suspiciously moist. Bennett lifted his free hand, stroking Wyatt’s cheek before clasping his other hand.

“So, Mr. Big Talker, you want to make this official? Me and you, in front of all these people?”

Wyatt opened his mouth and shut it, instead nodding his head.

“What? Have I rendered you speechless?” Bennett teased. “What did you say?”

Their guests were quiet, waiting for Wyatt’s reply. Just at that moment, the front door opened again and by the greeting from Jura and Wicket, Bennett figured it must be Jaime and Dag. Bennett had invited them at the last minute; the more the merrier, right?

Jaime took in the quiet tableau while Dag set down a casserole dish he’d been carrying onto the counter.

“What did we miss?” she demanded.

“Bennett just asked Wyatt to officially move in with him,” Jordan answered. “Wyatt has been stunned into silence.”

Jaime snorted. “Of course he wants to, he just thought it was going to take him a lot longer to wear Bennett down.”

“Hey!” Wyatt exclaimed.

She raised an imperious blond eyebrow. “Am I wrong?”

“No. And, yes, Bennett Meyer.” Wyatt looked back at him, his eyes full of emotion. “I will officially move in with you.”

Bennett couldn’t resist, he leaned in and kissed Wyatt, lingering for a moment longer than was good for polite company.

Into Wyatt’s ear he whispered, “I love you, Wyatt Reeser.”

The rising flush on Wyatt’s cheeks was all the answer he needed.

A timer beeped and Wyatt jumped as if he’d been electrocuted. “Crap, the pie crust.”

And with that, the moment was over. Everyone started talking again.

Elliot came over and whacked Bennett on the back, “Good job, big brother. Wyatt is good for you.”

THEY WERE all sitting around Bennett’s dining room table—a piece of furniture he never thought he’d use but had come with the house—when there was another tentative knock on the door. Bennett glanced at Wyatt, who simply shrugged, so Bennett shoved his chair away from the table and went to see who it was.

He was surprised to see his parents waiting on the front porch. Bennett had invited them on Wyatt’s suggestion, feeling like it was an effort he needed to make, but he hadn’t expected them to come. He’d made sure they understood that *if* they came there would be no negative conversation, they would be expected to treat his friends and his boyfriend with the courtesy they deserved.

Wyatt spoke from behind him. “Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Meyer. Come inside, we’ve already sat down, but we can make space. Nancy, may I take your coat?” Trust Wyatt to just welcome the extra guests and try to make them comfortable even if he didn’t like them.

In the end they had to drag a second smaller table into the dining room. Elliot, Jason, and Jordan crammed themselves around it. As Elliot was

bigger than Bennett, it was a bit comical seeing him shoulder to shoulder with the twins; the three joked that they'd been relegated to the kids' table.

Bennett's parents sat together, between him and Jaime. Wyatt was on Bennett's other side, with one hand on Bennett's thigh for most of dinner. It was comforting, although Bennett didn't need it. His parents behaved, but if his mom had thought sitting next to Jaime, instead of Mariah Reeser or Wyatt, meant she could be her passive-aggressive self, she was entirely wrong.

"Jaime, I'm surprised to see you here," Bennett's mom said.

Bennett sighed and Wyatt's grip tightened on Bennett's thigh. Bennett was surprised he didn't have a permanent Wyatt handprint on that thigh. He smiled slightly.

Jaime, who'd been about to take a sip of wine put it back down on the table. "Oh? Why?" Her voice had the slightest edge to it.

Nancy Meyer, while perhaps not the most emotionally aware person in Hollyridge, seemed to hear the underlying tone. Her gaze darted around the table. After half an hour of laughter and conversation, the room fell quiet, everyone waiting for Nancy's answer. Except for Bennett's father who appeared to be oblivious, instead busy slathering butter onto a flakey buttermilk biscuit.

Jaime answered her own question. "The people around this table are some my best friends in Hollyridge, Dag's too. I don't know your sons as well as Zach and Jeff, Bennett's kind of a quiet guy and this is the first time I've met Elliot, but we were honored to be invited and not having to cook is a bonus. Wyatt has been teasing me about his cooking skills since he started working for us, there was no way we were missing this."

Bennett's dad finished chewing the bite of biscuit he'd popped into his mouth. "These biscuits are incredible. Nancy, you should try one." Which was the closest Bennett had ever seen his dad come to telling his mom to be quiet. Maybe there was something to the way to a person's heart being through their stomach.

"The biscuits were my grandmother's recipe," Wyatt offered, "and so are the brussels sprouts."

His dad took another biscuit, placing it on his mom's plate. "Here you are, try it with that spicy butter." He looked across the table at Bennett. "Thank you for having us, son."

BY NINE, everyone had left, and the house was quiet again. Regardless of her claim about not doing dishes, Jaime and Dag had insisted on helping them clean up. So, by the time all the guests had departed, the kitchen was almost back to normal and the few leftovers tucked into the fridge. Zach and Jeff were the last to leave, taking Jura with them. Both dogs were so exhausted, Wicket had barely raised his head from his dog bed in the living room to say good-bye to his friend.

Wyatt flopped dramatically onto the couch, throwing his forearm over his eyes. “That was exhausting. I’m so tired, why did we do that?”

Bennett grinned, taking in his boyfriend’s long, lean form draped over the cushions. “I think you were trying to either piss my mom off or impress her and I think you managed to do both.”

“Yeah? And you asked me to move in with you, in front of everybody.”

Once he made sure the front door was locked, Bennett crossed the room and climbed onto the couch with Wyatt. They didn’t both fit very well, so Bennett decided to simply lie on top of his boyfriend—not a hardship.

“I did.” Bennett nuzzled Wyatt’s exposed neck, nibbling on his collar bone before heading up to his earlobe. He tasted a bit floury, which made Bennett smile.

“For real?”

Bennett lifted himself up onto his elbows, tugging Wyatt’s arm off his face so he could see his eyes.

“You didn’t just offer because everybody was listening?” Wyatt had an uncertainty to his voice that Bennett was not used to hearing.

“Wyatt Reeser, now that we’re alone and no one is listening, except possibly Wicket who I suppose might have a stake in this too—would you please to do honor of officially moving in with me? You make all the things that I think are difficult about my life easier.”

“Yes, Bennett Meyer, I will officially move in with you.” Wyatt wrapped his arms around Bennett’s neck and pulled him back down. “What made you ask though? I basically snuck all my stuff in during harvest and moved myself in anyway.” He shot Bennett a glance from underneath his thick lashes. “I should be sorry for that, but I’m not.”

Bennett grinned. “I asked because I’ve spent the last couple of weeks paranoid I would come home someday soon and find you gone. I thought this was a harvest hookup or something.”

“What the hell is a harvest hookup?” Wyatt demanded, his arms still around Bennett’s neck.

“So many questions.” Bennett leaned in and pressed his lips against Wyatt’s, which parted, letting Bennett’s tongue slide inside. Just kissing lazily like this had Bennett’s body responding, and he could feel Wyatt’s erection against his hip. Wyatt released a tiny whisper of a moan. “*Bennett.*”

Reluctantly Bennett rolled off the couch, offering a hand to Wyatt. “Let’s go to bed. Tomorrow we’ll move the rest of your things in. And maybe we can shop for a tree.”

“A tree! Together?” The way Wyatt’s eyes lit up Bennett almost wondered which he was more excited for, moving in the rest of his belongings or finding a Christmas tree.

“Do you want to get one? We don’t have to.”

“Yes, dammit, I want to get a tree. But right now, I need to get you in bed so I can ravage you.”

“Ravage? Where do you come up with this stuff?” Bennett chuckled as Wyatt dragged him down the hallway to his—*their*—bedroom.

“I may have read the romance novels my mom left lying around the apartment. They filled me with ideas, ravaging is one of them. After my Legolas period I moved on to pirates.”

“Let me guess... Johnny Depp.”

“Well, yes, the man is unfortunately good-looking. But...” they rounded the bedroom door and Wyatt dropped Bennett’s hand to lift his T-shirt up and over his head. Bennett loved Wyatt’s lean body, his smooth chest and abs that were extremely ticklish. “I also have my own idea of a pirate.” He waggled his dark eyebrows as he pushed his jeans down along with his boxer briefs.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Wyatt crawled into the bed, not bothering to pull down the comforter, and turned to lay on his back. “Pirate...”

The way he enunciated *pirate* had Bennett’s cock rock hard almost instantly, he was lucky he didn’t get dizzy.

“I thought you were too tired,” he said after he’d stripped and climbed onto the bed, lowering himself onto Wyatt.

“I’m never too tired to play pirate.”

Wyatt’s wicked smile and playful eyes were his, and Bennett was the luckiest man in the world.

EPILOGUE

Wyatt

ONE YEAR later

“SO, do you think Wicket will spend the next three weeks barking at the Christmas tree?” Wyatt wondered out loud.

Last year they’d gone to a local scout lot and picked out a tree which, considering it was a tree and would only last a few weeks, had taken a ridiculous amount of time. Bennett had opinions when it came to Christmas trees. Not too tall; full, but not too full; no twisty branches; etcetera, etcetera. Wyatt was drawn to the sad trees, the ones that leaned and maybe had a big hole in one side along with some scraggly limbs. They’d compromised and this year it was Wyatt’s turn to get last say.

Bennett chuckled as he parked in the lot between another pickup and a SUV.

“I guess we’ll find out.”

Wyatt climbed out of the cab, pulling his jacket around him and a knit cap further down on his head. There was a wicked wind today, but that wasn’t stopping him from picking out a tree. Wicket yipped his displeasure at being left on the seat, so Wyatt snapped his leash onto his collar and set him down on the ground.

Last year after they’d dragged the tree into the house and set it up, Wicket had lost his little doggy mind. From the first minute he laid eyes on the beautiful blue spruce, he’d hated it, and spent his waking hours barking and growling at it. Bennett had thought once they decorated the tree, he’d calm down, but the sparkling lights and decorations made no difference. In Wicket’s world, trees were not meant to be inside.

Wyatt had come up with a solution, *he hoped*; Wicket was going to pick out the tree this year.

“Let’s go see what they’ve got,” Wyatt announced, wrapping the end of Wicket’s leash around his wrist and stepping over the cement parking

barrier to reach Bennett.

This year they were shopping at Wyatt's favorite Christmas tree lot. The family who owned the tree farm had built it up over the years and aside from trees they offered cider and hot chocolate, fresh wreaths, and cheesy holiday music. Wicket happily led the way, sniffing and snuffing his way along the pathways between the trees.

"This is going to take forever," Bennett grumbled.

"You got somewhere better to be?" Wyatt teased.

"At home, still in bed."

Wyatt lifted his wrist looking at an imaginary watch, "Dude, it's nearly noon. You don't sleep past eight."

Bennett slung one arm over Wyatt's shoulders, tucking him in close to his side. His lips brushed against Wyatt's ear and he rumbled, "I'm not thinking about sleeping, Wyatt."

Wyatt's cock immediately reacted, making him stumble, but, of course, Bennett didn't let him fall.

They were at the back of the lot deep in what Bennett called "pathetic tree land" when Wicket started barking and wildly wagging his tail.

"Hush, Wicket, you're going to get us thrown out of the tree lot!" Wyatt scolded. The dog was acting as if he recognized someone, but Wyatt only saw bundled-up fellow tree shoppers ahead lifting a tree from the rack, twirling it, and generally deciding it wasn't good enough. They plopped the tree back where it had come from and headed around the corner.

"There was nothing wrong with that tree," Wyatt hissed, as they drew closer to the rejected sheered pine.

"Let's look over here." Bennett said, tugging Wyatt along.

"But—fine, we'll come back to that one."

The couple ahead rounded a corner heading to where a group of shoppers had paused by a particularly depressed tree. Its top was so twisted that no star or other ornament would fit on it, and, even from half a row away, Wyatt could see it was missing random branches and needles were dropping from it like rats fleeing a sinking ship. He looked closer at the people who appeared to be guarding the forlorn conifer; Wicket yipped and charged, pulling free of Wyatt's grip and racing to greet... Jordan?

"What's Jordan doing here?" He took in the rest of the crowd: Zach, Jeff, Jason, Bennett's brother Elliot, and his mom. The couple they'd followed turned to be Jaime and Dag. The hell?

“What is everyone doing here?” Wyatt glanced at Bennett. “Did I miss something? Are we going out for brunch?”

Bennett gave him a wobbly smile; instead of answering, he dropped down to one knee in front of him. “Wyatt Reeser, I know I’m no Legolas or Jack Sparrow. Regardless of my failings, would you do the honor of marrying me?” He dug into his coat pocket, pulled out a small square box, and popped it open. Inside, a set of plain silver rings glittered in the winter sunshine.

Wyatt eyes widened. He opened his mouth and shut it again. He was going to cry, there was no way for him to stop the tears from falling. Bennett gazed up at him waiting for his answer, his sky-blue eyes full of love and trust and also, *hope*. Jesus, Wyatt was a lucky man.

“Yes, Bennett Meyer,” Wyatt finally managed, the threatened tears spilling down his cheeks. His voice was raspy, but he got the words out. “Yes, I will marry you.”

Their friends cheered and whistled as Wyatt took Bennett’s hand and pulled him up to plant a big fat mushy kiss on his fiancé. Wicket barked and spun in a circle in appropriate doggy celebration.

“Give me your hand,” Bennett said. Wyatt complied and Bennett slipped the heavy silver band onto his ring finger; the weight of it felt perfect.

“I love you, Bennett, I can’t believe you set this up,” Wyatt whispered, pressing his face into Bennett’s neck and breathing in his unique scent.

Bennett grumbled, his breath tickling Wyatt’s ear, “Now we just need to get rid of them so we can celebrate properly.”

YES, there will be more stories from Hollyridge! Keep your eyes peeled for the next one coming spring 2020.

DID you miss Love [Limited Edition](#), first in the Hollyrdige series? *Will bookish magic, an adorable dog, and a little assistance from their friends,*

help Brett and Rory realize the world is what you make of it, that a chance at happiness is something to be seized, not tossed aside?

CHECK out the first in my Hamarsson and Dempsey romantic suspense series, [Conspiracy Theory](#). A jaded big city detective and a small town Sheriff meet again...murder brings Niall and Mat together, will it tear them apart?

DON'T MISS my Accidental Roots Series, beginning with [Storm Season](#), *Death brings him home, will love keep him there?* Agent Adam Klay is home to bury his father, not fall in love. Storm Season is a *dual POV* about a terminally grouchy Federal Agent who discovers his softer side and a sweet man who thought he had nothing to live for.

A THANK YOU FROM ELLE

If you enjoyed *Love Finds a Home*, I would greatly appreciate if you would let your friends know so they can experience Wyatt, Bennett and the rest of the gang. As with all of my books, I have enabled lending on all platforms in which it is allowed to make it easy to share with a friend. If you leave a review for [Love Finds a Home](#) or any of my books. on the site from which you purchased the book, Goodreads or your own blog, I would love to read it! Email me the link at elle@ellekeaton.com

Keep up-to-date with new releases and sales, [The Highway to Elle](#) hits your in-box approximately every two weeks, sometimes more sometimes less. I include deals, freebies and new releases as well as a sort of rambling running commentary on what *this* author's life is like. I'd love to have you aboard! I also have a reader group called the [Highway to Elle](#), come say hi!

ABOUT ELLE

Elle hails from the northwest corner of the US known for, rain, rain, and more rain. She pens the Accidental Roots series, the Hamarsson and Dempsey series, and Home in Hollyridge all set in the Pacific Northwest. Elle is chief cook and bottle washer, the one always asking ‘where are my keys and/or wallet’ and ‘why are there cats?’ (This question not yet answered).

Elle *loves* both cats and dogs, Star Wars and Star Trek, pineapple on pizza, and is known to start crossword puzzles with ballpoint pen.

Thank you for supporting this Indie Author,

Elle



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