

rough waters

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Chapter One

Boxes were everywhere. And the sight of them just made me sick to my stomach. I couldn't believe that I was just calmly packing up my life, calmly sorting through the last ten years in this house, calmly making "sell," "donate," and "keep" piles.

Nancy came into the living room. "How're you doing, kid?" She reached out and ruffled my hair. I let her, but only because I knew it was for her reassurance too. Nancy had been our neighbor since we moved in when I was three. She had become an adopted aunt; we didn't have any of our own. I didn't even know we had an uncle until we were told our parents had left us in his custody.

I heard the shattering of glass from the kitchen, and "Dammit" close on its heels. Nancy gave me a weird combination of smile and frown as I started to leave the room. "He's having a hard time," she said softly.

I tried not to roll my eyes. "So am I," I said as I left the living room, "but at least I'm willing to admit it."

When I walked into the kitchen, Gregg raised the dustpan and broom in self defense. "I don't want to hear it," he snapped.

"Gregg," I began.

"No, Scott, I don't want to hear it. I'll get it cleaned up. Just go get the living room done."

"Gregg, we don't have to do all of this today."

"Yeah, we do, Scott. We've got to get the house cleaned out so we can get it sold."

"It will sell," I said, barely keeping my patience. He was my older brother; he was the one who was supposed to do the comforting.

He bit his lower lip, and I saw the tears start to form in his eyes. He dropped the broom and dustpan with a clatter. "I think I'll go take a bike ride."

I shook my head. "Why don't you go take a nap?" His blue eyes had a haunted look, enhanced by the black smudges under them. "I know you haven't been sleeping much." I had been getting just barely five hours a night myself, and he was awake every time I went to sleep and again when I woke up.

"I feel fine. I just need some fresh air."

I sighed and picked up the broom. He left without looking back. I heard him argue with Donna, the social worker, and then the back door slammed. A few minutes later, Donna came into the kitchen.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine," I said, wishing people would quit asking such a stupid question. I wasn't fine and I wasn't going to be fine for a long time, but they didn't want to hear that.

"Your brother went for another bike ride."

"I know."

"He should be sleeping."

"I know."

"So should you."

I swept the last bits of my mother's favorite vase into the dustpan and dropped them into the trash.

"Scott?"

"I heard you."

"But you don't have anything to say?"

"No," I said, "I have things to do, but nothing to say."

"Holding it in like this isn't healthy for either of you."

"Well, you all know Gregg's having a hard time, so why don't you just track him down and make him get healthy first?"

"We know you're having a hard time, too," she said quickly.

"Whatever," I said, heading back to the living room.

She followed me. "It's okay to feel this way."

I looked at her for the first time in the conversation. "Feel what way?"

"Well..." she hedged.

"I haven't told you how I feel, so how do you know it's okay?"

Nancy stepped in. "Scott, it is okay."

"No," I said. "It's not okay. My parents are dead. It is definitely not okay, and neither is Gregg, and neither am I. Just leave us alone so we can finish packing up our lives."

I turned and climbed the stairs two at a time. I walked down to my parents' room, ignoring the boxes lining the hallway. I forced myself to enter their room. I hadn't been in it since we had been taken to the social worker's office two weeks ago and told that our parents had both been killed in a car accident.

I sat down on their bed, and felt the hot tears trying to escape. I knew why Gregg kept going for bike rides instead of sleeping. It's when you curl up to sleep that you really realize what's wrong, what's missing. That's the time your mind starts to remember, and when it becomes impossible not to

cry. I knew that Donna and Nancy were bothered because Gregg and I weren't crying in front of them, but that just wasn't our style. I knew he had cried himself to sleep that first night, just like I had. I didn't know if he had cried since. No matter what I was doing, the tears just kept sneaking up on me, but I had become better at keeping them hidden. All through the funeral, Donna kept telling us it was okay to cry. And I kind of think that the more she told us that we should cry, the more convinced we became that we shouldn't.

Who was she to come in and tell us what to feel? Just some social worker hired by the courts. She didn't know us from a hill of beans. Nancy had been one of the few friendly and familiar faces at the funeral. Out of the seventy or so people that showed up, I think I knew maybe fifteen. We didn't have any family, other than our parents. It had never seemed to be a problem before.

But the courts saw it as a problem now, to have a fifteen and seventeen year old without other family members. They were going to place us in a home. That's really where I thought we were going to have to go.

Then, five days ago, we got a phone call from Uncle Dave. I never even knew we had an Uncle Dave. Gregg remembered some stories about an uncle, but he wasn't sure if it was Dave or Dan. Apparently the last will my parents had drawn up placed us in his custody. The will was almost fifteen years old, but it was the only one they had ever done. So now we were leaving for Buena Vista, Colorado, in two days—leaving behind the house we grew up in, our neighborhood, all our friends. I tried not to think about it.

When I stretched out on the bed, I could smell my mother's perfume in the bedspread. This was the only room in the house that hadn't been touched, the only one that still looked like it was our home. Neither Gregg nor I had been willing to come in and sort through our parents' personal belongings. But we weren't willing to let Nancy do it either. I thought Gregg was going to hit her when she suggested it. He didn't, but from the way she flinched, I think she had the same thoughts.

"We'll do it," he had snarled. "We're just not going to do it today."

I looked around the room, confused for a moment because it seemed blurry. Impatiently, I wiped my hand across my eyes, drying them. There really wasn't much of a reason not to let Nancy help us in here, I thought. It wasn't like we were going to keep any of their clothes or furniture or linens. We could barely take anything with us as it was. Uncle Dave had made it clear that he was willing to take us in, but that it was a very small house and most of it was already full of his stuff.

"Hey."

I jumped. Gregg was standing in the doorway.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Just sitting here," I said. "You went for a ride, so I thought I'd take a break too."

For a minute, it looked like he might actually come into the room, but then he just let himself slide down the door frame so he was sitting on the floor, leaning against it and propping his feet on the other side. He let out a big sigh. "This sucks."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Well, yeah, I guess you could say that."

He went on as if he hadn't heard me. "I'm almost an adult. I'm going to college in three months. What do I need with a guardian I've never met for a lousy three months?"

I looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I know you need a guardian; you're only fifteen, but I'm an adult. I can be legally responsible for myself. Why do I have to go to Colorado? I've never been there. It's a stupid hick state and I'm going to be stuck with a stupid hick uncle who doesn't know us or even want us there."

I ignored the implication that he was willing to let me go alone.

"How do you know he doesn't want us?"

Gregg snorted. "You heard him on the phone. 'Your parents were under the delusion that I'd be a good guardian for you.' That doesn't sound like he wants us. And then all the talk about how small his house is and how we can't bring much. And how he's been living alone for eight years and he's not sure how easy it will be for him to adjust." Gregg shook his head. "He was just waiting for one of us to say we didn't want to go so he could back out of it."

"So why didn't you?" I countered. "If that's all it would have taken, and you don't want to go anyway, why didn't you just tell him that?"

Gregg didn't answer, and I knew he wouldn't. When Uncle Dave had called, he had sounded as spooked and unsure of himself as we were.

Gregg closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the door frame. Without opening his eyes, he said, "What do you miss about them the most?"

I was surprised. This was the first time he had brought them up. I closed my eyes too. "I don't know. There's so much that hurts to think about that I can't seem to remember anything."

"I wish I was like that. I feel like I'm remembering everything at once. Dad and I were supposed to go surfing this weekend."

"I know."

"And Mom was going to chaperon the yearbook party, even though I didn't want her to."

I didn't say anything.

"It's not fair, Scott. They had no right to leave us like this. No money, no one to live with, nothing. What were they thinking?"

"They were thinking that they were only in their forties, and that they weren't going to die anytime soon. And I'm sure they didn't think they'd die together like that." They had been on their way home from a party. Neither of them had their seat belts on.

"Yeah, I know." Gregg sighed. "But after all the lectures about saving money and being prepared and doing things today instead of tomorrow, it's just a nasty surprise."

I knew Gregg was really upset about the money. We didn't have much now, which was going to be different after growing up in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Hermosa Beach. The life insurance and sale of the house would cover the second mortgage, the funeral, and most of the credit card bills. The cars were both leased, so the one still in working order was going back to the company. The Lexus had been totaled beyond repair, but the insurance in the lease had covered it. There had apparently been some losses in their investments that had taken a big chunk out of the bank accounts.

Gregg had been accepted to UCLA, but he was nowhere close to getting any kind of scholarship. There was barely enough money left in the accounts to cover his first year in school. After that, he was either going to have to take out loans or get a scholarship somehow. He had been counting on Mom and Dad to put him through school. I had, too, but at least I had a few more years in high school, and if I could keep my 3.8 grade point average, I would stand a good chance of getting a scholarship.

We sat quietly for a long time like that, just thinking our own thoughts. I was confusing myself, because I knew I had come to their room on purpose, but now I just wanted to get my mind off my parents. Mentally, I was finishing the inventory in my room of what I was going to take with me. Clothing, books, a few tapes. Nancy had agreed to store some stuff for us. She would ship my computer and my models later. I was also trying to picture Colorado. I had always lived in California, and our family vacations had never taken us to Colorado. Gregg had a huge map of the U.S. on his bedroom wall, and before he took it down, we tried to find Buena Vista. We couldn't. That meant it wasn't a major town in Colorado.

And I didn't know what to think about Uncle Dave. He was apparently my father's brother. Why hadn't I even heard of him before? What kind of man loses touch with his only brother for over ten years? But then again, I didn't know if it was my uncle's fault or my father's. Knowing how much I

loved my father and how close we had been as a family of four, I was pretty sure that if he couldn't get along with his brother, there was a good chance Gregg and I were going to have a hard time getting along with him too.

I heard a hushed whisper from the hallway. "Oh, look, they're finally asleep."

"Shh, Donna, you'll wake them."

I raised my head and looked toward Gregg, who was turning his head to look at me. We shook our heads at the same time, and I began to stretch.

"Well," Gregg yawned, "I guess we ought to get back to work."

"Are you sure about that?" I asked. "I think we could just lie here and let somebody else take care of everything."

"That's what we keep telling you," Donna said. "We can do all this for you. We can hire some packers and they'll do it all."

Gregg closed his eyes for a moment, and I could almost see him counting to ten. He never used to have such a short fuse, but in the last week he had been blowing up at everything and everyone. A couple of nights ago, he had blown up at me. I told him to quit being such a jerk and start counting before he answered people when he was mad. I was glad to see he was taking my advice.

"No, Donna," he said slowly, "that's not possible. We're not just moving. We have to get rid of most of the stuff, and we're the only ones who know what we want or need to keep. Therefore, we have to do this ourselves."

She opened her mouth to say something, but Gregg cut her off. "If you really want to be useful, why don't you go get us dinner? I'm really in the mood for Chinese food. In fact, I'd love some Szechuan beef from the Golden Star. Would you go get us some?" The Golden Star was about twenty minutes from our house.

"Yeah," I said, "I'd love some sweet and sour pork. And an egg roll."

"Mmmm," Nancy said. "That sounds great, but I'd like a spring roll instead. Tell you what," she said, turning to Donna. "Why don't you leave now, and I'll go call the order in. It should be ready by the time you get there." She began walking Donna toward the stairs.

"Nice work," I said in a low voice to Gregg.

"Thanks. I suppose now I'll have to eat some of it." He hadn't been eating much lately either.

"Small price to pay for getting rid of her, even for just forty minutes."

Gregg actually smiled. "She never had a chance, the way you and Nancy joined up with me so fast."

I nodded. "Hey," I said carefully, "why don't we let Nancy pack up this room? It'd be easier on both of us." I hurried on as I saw his face begin to shut

on me. "And it would help her feel like she's doing something for us." He didn't say anything. "Come on, Gregg, neither of us is ready to go through all their personal stuff. At least let her help, so we don't have to do it all."

"Okay. Fine. Whatever." He got up and walked down the hall to his room. The door slammed behind him.

Nancy came back upstairs. "What was that all about?" She came into my parents' room and sat down on the bench in the bay window.

"I told him I wanted you to help us with packing up this room."

Nancy's eyes got a little bigger. "I didn't think either of you wanted me in here."

I shrugged.

"I'd be happy to help if you really want me to, but I don't want to bother Gregg by doing it."

"There's nothing that anyone could do right now that wouldn't bother Gregg," I said.

"I know he's upset."

"We all know he's upset. But deciding not to let you help us is stupid. You're basically part of our family."

"Thank you. I've always felt that way too, but it's nice to hear it."

I shook my head. "I still don't understand why we can't stay here with you."

"Life doesn't work that way. There's the matter of blood ties and the will, and the courts would be much more likely to award custody to an uncle than to a neighbor who merely watched you go to kindergarten the first day."

"And skateboard the first time."

She laughed. "And kiss a girl for the first time."

"You did not!"

"I most certainly did. You and that little girl Cindy, in, God, what was it? You were probably in fourth grade."

"Third," I said automatically. "I can't believe you were spying on me."

"I wasn't spying. I was in the backyard weeding. It wasn't my fault you chose the bushes by my house to try to kiss her."

"Hey, she tried to kiss me!"

"And I also saw Gregg drive for the first time, and get dressed in a tux for prom."

"And you went with us when he had to go to the hospital after he wiped out on his dirt bike."

"And I went with your parents to see you get inducted into the National Junior Honor Society."

"I remember drawing on your kitchen table when Mom and Dad would go out and you baby-sat us."

"I haven't had to baby-sit you for a long time," she said softly.

"Yeah, but you've always been there for us."

She smiled, even though there were tears in her eyes. "You know I'll always be here for you."

"A phone call away' is what you've said a hundred times."

"It's true," she said quickly.

"I know, Nancy. But right now I'm afraid that even a phone call feels too far away."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. I wish it could be different, Scott."

"Me too."

"Well," she said briskly. "I suppose I ought to go place that order now."

"I thought you were going to do that as soon as she left."

Nancy winked at me. "I figured you and Gregg wouldn't mind if she had to wait an extra ten or fifteen minutes at the restaurant."

"Thanks, Nancy, you're pretty cool."

"I always have been, honey." She started down the stairs. "I'll help you with your parents' room," she said, loud enough for Gregg to hear, "but only if you're both in there with me. You should both have a say about what goes or stays."

Needless to say, a lot more went than stayed. We put their wedding album and our baby books into a box to be shipped to Colorado. Gregg kept Dad's pocketknife and compass. I took his wedding ring. He had hardly ever worn it, because he didn't like to wear jewelry. I also kept a ring he had given Mom for their twentieth anniversary. Gregg gave me a funny look when I put it in my pocket, but I still kept it. We each took a couple of his shirts. Then, whether it was sold in the estate auction, donated to Goodwill, or thrown away, everything else went.

Two days later, so did we.