



**NOTE:** This story takes place during *A True Seed*, the epilogue to the Signal Bend Series, and thus contains **SPOILERS** for the entire series.

### **LONELY HOUSE**

*so I wait for you like a lonely house  
till you will see me again and live in me.  
Till then my windows ache.  
Pablo Neruda, Sonnet LXV*

Len dropped into a crouch just as a fist came at his head. It went over him at full speed, the momentum carrying the body behind it into a spin. He pushed off and sent his body forward, into the guy, and they both flew, Len forward, him backward, into the shower wall. The guy hit the steel taps at about lung height and sank to the floor, trying to suck air into his spasming airbags.

Shithead Number Two disabled, Len turned back to Shithead Number One, who was coming at him with a shiv. He ducked but took a glancing hit, the sharpened toothbrush slicing across the top of his shoulder instead of through the throat at which it had been aimed. Again, Len used his assailant's momentum to gain the upper hand. This guy, though, didn't get off as easy as his buddy. Len dropped Number One and then fell on him, pummeling him until he stopped fighting back.

Then he leaned over and grabbed the dropped shiv. He carved a heart in the asshole's cheek. Just for his own entertainment.

“Wahlberg. Man, time's running out. Count in five, and you need to clean yourself up.”

Len looked up at the men standing watch at the door. He nodded.

When he left the stalls, both men were still alive. The message in that—that he didn't fear them enough to kill them—was a risk, but Len was just about done giving a bloody shit about what he risked. Or anything else.

He was four years into what had been a six-to-twelve stretch until Isaac's throat had been slashed and they had retaliated. Now they'd had another eighteen months added like a rotten cherry on top. He and Isaac had been separated, first in the Special Housing Unit at Marion and then transferred to different facilities. He'd had no word from Isaac, or Tasha, or anyone he loved in five months.

He'd only been released from SHU into the general population here in Colorado five days before. And he'd had to fight in the stalls three times already.

It was Christmas Day. He didn't even know if Tasha knew where he was. He was lonelier than he'd ever been in his entire fucking life. He'd been a man who'd preferred his own company, who'd needed solitude. Well, he'd gotten a lifetime's worth. Two lifetimes. What he needed now was his family. His love. And he was almost a thousand miles away from all of it. On his own.

So no, he didn't give a shit what he risked. Let 'em come. Let 'em all come. He'd kick their asses until he didn't give a shit about that, either. And then he'd let them have him.

~oOo~

Back in his cell, he shoved a towel over his wounded shoulder and yanked a sweatshirt on just in time for count. Then he stood with his hands at his sides and waited for the screws to do their thing and move on.

As soon as he could, Len tended to his wound. He had to be careful; he was prone to infection since he'd lost his spleen, and the meds he got inside were crap. He cleaned and sealed the wound with contraband supplies provided by the new friends he'd made after his first time in the stalls. That was what it was—you fought, you found your alliances, and you identified your enemies. You survived. Inside, especially at this security level, life boiled down to that basic essence. You survived. Or you didn't. There was nothing else.

It could have been worse. He could have been on the supermax block, locked in his cage twenty-three hours a day. At least he could still move around a little for most of the day.

Which was probably why he was still fighting. But he could feel the instinct to keep going fading in him. Hope had flickered out when they'd put him in SHU here in Colorado. Two more months out of contact. And still, even now, no phone or mail privileges yet. That was what would kill him. Nothing they could do to him in the stalls was as bad as not ever seeing Tasha, not hearing her voice, not touching her fair skin. Not even being able to get her letters and hold her words in his hands.

He'd just disposed of the bloody towel and the other remnants of his self-care when a guard came to his cell. "Wahlberg. Against the wall."

Len assumed the position, and the guard searched him. The pawing was too thorough and intimate to be called anything so breezy as a 'frisk.'

"What's goin' on?"

The guard stood back. "Shut your mouth and let's go." He didn't shackle him, so he wasn't being moved or something like that. Len had no fucking idea what kind of Christmas horror show he was in for. He tried to steel himself for the worst thing he could imagine.

He had a lively, and dark, imagination.

But they took him to the Visitors Center. Confused, not daring to hope, he went through the usual search bullshit again, and then the door buzzed, and he was ushered through.

At first, all he saw was other inmates and their families. Not many; they would never let many inmates congregate with civilians at once in a prison like this. But no one he knew.

And then she stood up. Her bright ginger hair was shorter, just brushing her shoulders. She was wearing a sweater in vivid blue, like cobalt. Her color. Oh sweet fucking hell, she was beautiful.

His vision swam, and he blinked until he had control of himself. Then he turned to the guard. "It's Christmas. Please. I haven't seen her in five months."

The guard knew what he was asking. He stared hard at him, then nodded curtly. Then Len crossed the room and grabbed his wife into his arms, holding her as tightly as he could. She made a sobbing, gasping sound as his hands touched her, and then she wound her arms around his neck until he was nearly strangled.

He didn't care. He would happily die right now, in this embrace. The first glimmer of anything like happiness he'd felt in months.

But he couldn't push it too far. There was something more he wanted. So he loosened his hold and set Tasha back just enough that he could see her face. She was crying, and her cheeks were wet. He cupped his hands around her face, feeling the cool of her tears on his palms, and kissed her, holding her, pushing his tongue into her mouth.

She flinched at first; she knew that this contact was prohibited. But then she moaned and kissed him back, her tongue sliding along his, her hands grabbing his shoulders, digging into his fresh wound. He welcomed the pain. He wanted to carve every single sensation, every moment into his head.

With Tasha in his arms again at long last, Len understood just how deep his despair had pulled him. He could feel it in the sluggishly erratic beat of his heart, like it had forgotten what to do with pleasure, with joy, even the bittersweet, anguished joy he felt now.

“Wahlberg!”

At the guard’s warning, Len set Tasha back. He wanted to be able to hold her hand. He wanted to be able to wrap her up again when she left. So he gave up the passion of that kiss. What he’d taken would carry him through.

He took her hand now. “How’ve you been, Doc?”

She sobbed again; this time it curled around a laugh. “God, it’s so good to hear you, to see you. I thought I’d lose my mind these past months.”

He led her to sit, and he pulled a chair around to sit next to her. “I’m sorry, Tash. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

Her fingers tightened around his. “Don’t. You don’t owe me any apologies. I get it. I miss you so much I feel like my heart is flaking off in pieces every day. But I understand it all. I will wait for you forever. Even if my whole heart flakes away. But try to get home as fast as you can.”

He knew he would. Seeing her, even like this, in this worn-out, grey room filled with misery and shattered dreams, had filled him back up. He would fight. He would survive. Because someday he would go home, where life and love were waiting for him. Where Tasha waited. She was more than his love. She was his hope. She had been as long as they’d been together.

“I will. I love you, Doc.”

“I love you. Merry Christmas.”

He laughed and lifted her hand to his lips for a quick kiss. “It’s pretty merry after all.”

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