



HIS WOUNDED HEART
R.L. SYME

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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2013

Print Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-220-2

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-219-6

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my family, who love me unconditionally and believe in everything I do. Even the dumb stuff.

Praise for R.L. Syme

R.L. Syme develops the setting and characters so well, that you become immediately immersed right from the beginning. ~ Steena Holmes, Amazon bestselling author of *Emma's Secret*.

His Wounded Heart is a warm, moving story of how love can heal wounds of all kinds. This is a realistic, touching love story. ~ Jennette Green, author of *Her Reluctant Bodyguard*.

His Wounded Heart is a wonderful story, and I can't wait to see what else R. L. Syme brings us! ~ Alexa Bourne, author of *Her Highland Champion*.

In *His Wounded Heart*, R.L. Syme brings us an inspiring tale of two souls with shattered dreams and guarded hearts. The healing power of God's love, and the solace he provides, are beautifully written with wholehearted feelings that enable the romance between an unlikely pair to blossom into a hopeful future. I'll be looking forward to more from Syme. ~ Mary McCall, author of *Highland Promise*.

1

Sean Raleigh threw his shoe, barely missing the idiot woman's retreating head. When she popped back into his bedroom to protest, he chucked the other one. Like the first, the second shoe crashed against the wall and *thunked* onto the floor.

He sat in satisfied silence and waited for the front door to slam. If he'd been aiming for her head, he might have felt remorse. But Sean always hit what he aimed at.

"Carter," Sean rumbled. When silence greeted him, he yelled again. Still nothing. He stretched out on his bed and groped for his crutches, but Nurse Ratched had propped them against the far wall.

Typical. With the wheelchair overturned halfway across the room, he was stuck.

Carter's tall frame filled the doorway, blocking the dim light from the hallway. Still dressed in chef's whites, his best friend's imperial reserve came across as fatherly, but a smirk softened his severe appearance. He offered defensive hands when Sean took a deep breath, ready to launch. "I know, I heard. You fired her. Just tell me you didn't throw anything this time."

"Dude, she tried to make me wear my Sharks." Sean lanced a sharp look at the closet. "I told her no, but did she listen?"

Carter glanced at the open closet, and his face fell. "I thought I put all your climbing gear away."

Sean stared at one carefully contoured sole of his old shoes and drew his eyebrows together, a bubble of rage building in his chest. "I asked you not to let these women in the house anymore."

Carter took a step into the room, then winced and raised a hand, fanning the air. "You need to open a window. It reeks in here." He walked past the discarded shoes and around the overturned wheelchair. Leaning over the cluttered desk, he pulled open the sliding window, and a crisp mountain breeze drifted in.

His parents' vacation house wasn't as comforting as it had been when they'd first offered to let him stay in Montana. In the beginning, it had been nice not to have to get on a plane and fly back east, but some days, he would rather be surrounded by the city.

The Montana air filled Sean's senses, and the tension in his chest expanded. The clean, fresh scent of pine trees only made him think of being in the mountains, of running free across slopes thickly carpeted with underbrush, brimming with wildlife. And then of the accident. He shuddered. This was why the window stayed closed.

Sean gestured at his immobile legs, each bracketed, ankle to thigh, in locked rehab braces. "I can't exactly run a marathon, here."

"But you can probably hobble to the window." Carter stepped back to the door, avoiding the scattered piles of clothing and assorted garbage. "Or get your nurse to help you out." He pushed the crutches to the end of the bed, then twisted away with a long, frustrated sigh. "Wait, you can't. You just fired her."

"Where are you going?"

Carter flipped on the light and turned his head,

revealing the profile of his unsmiling face. "Somebody's gotta make dinner, Crip, and you just fired the help."

Sean pulled his left leg off the pillows Nurse Ratched had placed under his calves. The throbbing pain that began just below his knee, spread through his entire leg. Each movement, no matter how tiny, brought a new twinge, and all he could do was push at the pain with gusts of air.

Like a woman in labor. But whatever worked.

Sean scooted himself off the edge of the bed until each heel rested on the ground. The pain stopped for a moment with the pressure of his feet on a solid surface, but began anew as he rocked to an upright position and gripped the crutches.

The nurse had put socks on him, even though he'd insisted he never wore them. When she went looking for better shoes than his ratty sandals, everything spilled out of that closet. His Camelback, his Mad Rock Shark climbing shoes, the walking stick he'd carved last summer, thick loops of rope, his cross-country Moabs. Everything he'd asked Carter to put away before he got back from the hospital now spread over his cluttered floor.

His arms stung from carrying his entire frame, but his legs still couldn't take any real weight. Well, not without the blinding pain, anyway. As he grunted with each step, the locked braces stilted any quick progress he hoped to make. Getting to his feet had taken so long, he almost forgot what he had been about to do.

Right. Follow Carter, stay angry, stop him from hiring any more idiot nurses. In that order.

The dim hallway stretched before him, but the light from the kitchen spilled along the end of the

amber carpet. He could see the lip where the carpet met the kitchen's wooden floor. That extra inch of clearance would have been inconsequential to him two months ago. Might as well have been Mount Everest today. He paused in front of it, trying to rotate his right hip high enough to clear the edge with the heavy weight of his leg.

"Do you want chicken or pork?" Carter yelled, not turning around from his stance in front of the open refrigerator, less than ten feet away.

Sean didn't answer, turning from his friend back to the carpet. He made a mental note to have a tiny ramp put in. There were people who did that stuff, right? If a guy could carve personalized ice sculptures or bake cakes shaped like Fenway, there had to be someone who could build ramps for crippled invalids.

Sean swore out loud when one of his toes caught on the edge of the lip, and a moment of blinding pain caught him by surprise. Before he knew what had happened, Carter had him by the shoulders. Sean shook off his hands and tottered on unstable legs, the muscles in his stomach tensing as his body swayed on his crutches.

Carter arched an eyebrow, the beginnings of a scowl covering his features. "You're only supposed to use those to get into your wheelchair."

"Don't coddle me, man. I can do this."

"You can't." Carter pulled one of the chairs away from the kitchen table. "Sit. And ask for help next time."

"I got out of bed myself. I don't need you *nursemaid-ing* me. I just kicked some old lady out of my house for that."

Sighing, Carter sank into the chair across from

Sean. "That was the third one in a week."

"You're not my dad." Seeing the wrinkled concern on Carter's forehead sent a pang of guilt through him, so he tried to soften his voice. "That's why I asked you to move in here. I don't need parenting. I just wanted a little help."

"It's been almost two weeks, now. And you need more help than just laundry and cleaning." Carter pulled at his short dark hair, sad frustration creasing his face. "I'm your friend, not your maid. I have a job, remember? You can't keep sending these women away. They're here to help you."

Sean tried adjusting his legs to find comfort, but there was none to be had. "I don't need their help."

Carter shook his head. "You need someone's help." He stood from his chair and walked back to the refrigerator.

Sean pretended he didn't hear that, even though it stung. Briefly, the memory of throwing his shoes flashed in his head. The woman had gaped at him when he fired her, like he didn't have the authority or something. Forget that. She'd protested, and his anger boiled. He didn't need a nurse.

Carter pulled one of the containers from the shelf of the fridge and flicked a button on the stove. After several tiny clicks, a flame burst underneath the waiting skillet. He stood for a moment in silence, then his head jerked, as though he'd remembered something. "I meant to tell you, I got a call from Jaclyn this morning, from my church."

Sean rolled his eyes.

Would Carter never give it a rest? Sean wouldn't be caught dead going to church. Or hanging out with some religious girl. That was the last thing he needed.

Someone thought he would be a great project to take on. *Jesus-y* people always wanted to fix him, although he didn't need fixing.

Carter walked to the refrigerator again, dropping the plastic container in the sink as he passed it. "She's coming up this weekend."

"Coming for what?" Sean raised his eyebrows. "Is there something going on between you two?"

"Not that. She's just here for the summer. I'm gonna show her around."

"Can't fault a guy for hoping, dude. You need a girlfriend."

Carter laughed, pushing the air through his nose. "I don't have time for a girlfriend."

The words hung between them like a rotten stench. Sean knew what he meant. He didn't have time now. Because all his time was spent here.

Carter sighed and turned back to the pork, picking up the wooden spoon. His big frame, so straight and proud before, slumped over. He just stood over the crackling pan.

"I can't keep this up, Sean. I have a job. And you need rehab. Your doctor said it would only take a few months, and you'd be good—"

"Don't say it." Sean's voice was sterner than he meant it to be, and he wanted to apologize. Instead, he hauled himself to his feet, leaned on his crutches, and started to hobble away. *I'll never be good as new.*

Sean moved across the smooth wood of the kitchen floor, progressing toward his bedroom. The scars throbbed under his braces.

If I can just get back to my bed, I'll be fine.

Even he didn't really believe that. He wasn't fooling anyone.

Sean took a deep breath and closed his eyes. The feel of the cool mountain air against his skin reminded him of running the ski hills in the summer. Like every other summer since he moved here. Except this one.

“Admit it: you’ve missed this.” Carter pushed the wheelchair to the edge of the trail and put the brakes on, leaving Sean less than a foot from the rippling waters of Lake Levinsky. Carter hadn’t sounded this not-angry since the nurse-firing the previous day. Finally off the eggshells, Sean snorted and let the sarcasm roll off his tongue.

“It’s not like I haven’t been outside. Every time you take me to the doctor I have to go outside, don’t I?”

“But you haven’t been out just to be out. Not in a long time.”

The still expanse of the lake stretched to the base of the mountains. Sean’s legs twitched. He wanted to tear off these stupid rehab braces and run up the green slopes, into the wilderness. But he couldn’t even navigate his own hallway without crutches. There would be no more running in the woods for Sean Raleigh.

“Take me back.”

Carter looked his way with weary eyes. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.” Sean unlocked one of the wheel brakes. “If you don’t do it, I’ll leave you here alone.” He popped the other brake and pushed himself away from the end of the trail.

“What’s this all about?” Carter gripped the

handles tightly, stopping any progress Sean might have made. "You were the one who wanted to come here."

"Well, now I'm the one who wants to go back." Sean spun the right wheel hard and caught Carter unaware. He rolled down the trail toward the house, leaving Carter at the lakeside.

Here only the crunch of his wheels sounded in the cool air, minus the occasional hum of a vehicle on the far-away road. Big Sky was great for one thing in the off-season: silence.

Thankfully, most of the ride from the lake's edge to the house was downhill. He didn't have the strength to wheel himself up alone today. His arms hurt, and he needed to lie down.

As he cleared the tree line, he noticed an unfamiliar vehicle in the driveway, mostly hidden by trees. He wheeled around the side of the building instead, trying for stealth. This may be Montana, but it was still civilization, which meant crime. And in a ski town, where most residents were seasonal, robberies spiked in the off-season.

Sean wished he had a bat. Really, he wished he had use of his legs. But a bat would do in a tight spot.

He backed up to the edge of the house and leaned his head awkwardly to crane around the corner, but kept his wheelchair out of sight. Two large trees along the side of their driveway concealed the vehicle from view, but he could see someone's shadow in the vestibule.

A quick rap on the door echoed against the mountain on the other side of the house.

OK, probably not an intruder then. Criminals tended not to knock. He cleared his throat and moved

toward the door. "Hello."

A girl turned toward him, her mouth open. He hadn't expected a girl, and not such a pretty one, at that. Her dark eyes shone, even in surprise, with a happy luster he couldn't place. He wanted to forget himself and stare into them.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Her eyes widened, and Sean realized he'd been studying her perhaps too closely.

"You tell me, honey. You were knocking on my door." Sean closed the gap between them and crossed his arms.

Fidgeting with her right hand, she looked at the house. "I thought this was where Carter Grant lived. I'm sure this is the address he gave me."

"He's my roommate."

She exhaled and put a hand on her heart. "Oh, good. I've never been here before."

"Nope. Pretty sure I would remember you."

Deep scarlet flamed in her cheeks, and he drew the corners of his mouth into a smile. It had been a long time since he'd smiled, willingly or not.

This must be the girl, even though she wasn't supposed to be here until the weekend. How like a girl to be early. She had a churchy feel to her.

But Carter hadn't prepared him for how beautiful she'd be.

Her casual clothing and brown hair pulled into a lazy ponytail said she wasn't particularly worried about impressing Carter, or she would have dressed with more care. Still, she was stunning. Her cheekbones crested sharply below her eyes, defining the contours of her heart-shaped face. Her copper skin was perfect, except for one tiny dent in the middle of

her forehead.

And he was staring. Great. The drooling moron in the wheelchair scares her off, and Carter loses his future wife. Gotta get that under control. The man needed a girlfriend, in a bad way.

Her glossy lips drew together. "Is Carter here, then?"

"He's up by the lake."

"I see." She turned toward her car, a green hybrid. Another girl sat in the passenger seat, talking on a cell phone. "Is it easy to get up there? Or will he be back?" Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she asked, "How far is the lake? He hasn't gone for a hike, has he?"

"Not too far. I'd take you up there myself, but" — he gestured at his legs — "I'm not the best hiker."

He watched for the typical shifting discomfort that crossed people's faces when he mentioned his wheelchair, but it never came. No creasing worry, no eye-averting anxiety. She just continued to stare hopefully at him, apparently waiting for an answer about Carter.

"He's not hiking. The lake is just beyond those trees."

"I suppose I can wait for a while if he's coming back."

"I'm sure he's right behind me."

"I'm Jaclyn, by the way." She extended her hand.

As he moved to take her hand, he happened to glance beyond the handshake to her bare legs. She had a jagged scar on her right knee. Immediately aware of his own exposed scars, he pulled his hand away and covered the spot where his shorts ended and his spidered scar tissue peeked out between brackets of

the heavy braces.

"I'm Sean." He gestured back toward the lake, and Carter, with his head. "So you're one of the Jesus freaks, eh?"

She laughed, and he hadn't expected that. Most *Jesus-y* people got all paranoid and offended or puffy and self-righteous when he said things like that. But not this girl.

"I don't know about that. But I am a Christian, if that's what you meant."

"No, I meant Jesus freak."

Again, her laughter caught him off guard. It was sweet and kind, not feigned. This girl was unlike any of Carter's other church friends he'd met.

Jaclyn's eyes followed the noise of approaching footsteps, and their chocolate brown deepened in recognition. Or was that admiration? Sean's chest clinched, and he suddenly wished she would look at him like that instead of Carter.

She stepped past him as she moved toward Carter and put her hand on Sean's shoulder. "Well, I'm sorry that you see it that way, Sean. But I can understand why you might."

Jaclyn left her hand on his shoulder for a moment as she felt her stomach lurch. She'd learned to recognize that nudge by now. God's way of speaking to her lately had that same silent, physical certainty.

She was here for a reason, and not just at Carter's, but in Montana. Was that reason to help this man?

Before she realized she was still holding on, Sean shrugged his shoulder. She should be careful not to

creep out the guy who had issues with Christians. Carter loped down the path that snaked out of the forest next to the house, and she moved toward him. The tightness in her stomach disappeared.

"Jaclyn. I didn't expect you today." Carter took her offered hand, then looked behind her toward Sean. The concern in his eyes touched her heart.

"I know, I know. It's the middle of the week, and I said Saturday." She gestured toward the car where her best friend still chattered away. "But Katie and I had the week off from camp, and she just sort of woke up this morning and wanted to go to Yellowstone. I tried to call, but—"

"Sorry, I've had my phone off." His dark eyes still didn't meet hers. He nodded at Sean. "Have you met yet?"

"Just briefly."

"Don't worry, dude. I didn't poach on your territory." Sean had turned his chair around to face them. "And I tried not to scare her off."

She wasn't here for that. She didn't have those feelings for Carter, much as she wished she did sometimes. Yet as the thought of being Sean's "territory" crept into her mind, heat rose up her neck to her face.

"Oh, you're not fooling anybody with the nice-guy act, Sean." Carter's laughter was tighter than she'd expected, but his gaze remained soft.

"I wasn't attempting to fool anyone."

"Jaclyn is my friend."

"So you've said" Sean's eyes bored into her.

While the warmth in her cheeks hadn't settled down, his blatant scrutiny made her self-conscious. Her pulse quickened.

Shaking herself from Sean's gaze, she faced Carter. "Carter said if I ever wanted to go to Yellowstone, I should stop by and he'd take me on a tour."

Sean's brow rose, almost in defiance. "Not from around here, eh? Or are you just trying to get Carter alone in a vehicle?" His eyes were bright, deep blue, almost like crushed turquoise. Even as they flared at her, she saw the lines of anger in his face didn't extend to those eyes. A different fire burned there.

She pulled in a breath. "I'm not from around here."

"Well, don't let me keep you." Sean pushed on his wheels and rolled along the edge of the driveway toward the house. Carter grabbed the handle of the wheelchair.

"We could all go. You haven't been out of the house for so long, except to—"

"That's not such a good idea." Sean backed up and pushed hard on the wheel, but Carter's hold was firm.

Carter looked at her, a question in his eyes.

"We can find our own way, really. Or we could plan to go another day." Jaclyn gestured to Sean. "I know this was short notice."

She'd seen him staring at her knee. And she'd seen the scars he tried to hide.

"We don't have any other plans." Carter moved to stand behind Sean's chair and then pushed him toward the house.

"Are you sure?"

"We really don't have anything else to do that can't wait."

"Katie would love to meet you, I know. And we can take separate cars if that's easiest."

Carter shook his head and looked at her. His kind