

Landing
Booth with
Feet
A Thatcher Novel

By
Julia
Talbot

Landing with Both Feet
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Caged

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Chapter 1

"Going out again?"

Jed Thatcher watched Eli get his gear together—the man carefully packing everything into his rucksack. All that shit would just get packed again at the jump center, but that was Eli's way of knowing he had it all. Smokejumpers lived because they were careful, Eli always said, and a careful smokejumper had all of his gear.

"Yeah. Got the call while you were out feeding. There's a big one down near Naturita."

"Grand Junction or Montrose?" They lived halfway in between the two Western Colorado towns, so Jed never knew which tiny airport Eli would go out of.

"Junction."

He nodded, fingers worrying a frayed spot on his jeans as he stood there, noting each item as it went in. Boots, helmet, clean underwear.

"I'm headed over there for the air show. Let me give you a ride."

Eli glanced up, a knowing look in those dark brown eyes. God, the man still took his breath, despite a few more lines around the eyes and mouth, and the few gray hairs sprinkled here and there.

"You don't have to."

"I want to. Besides, I need to get down there and run pre-flight checks on Amel Wilson's crop duster. No way am I doing tricks in it on his say so."

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"Yeah. Last time you had an engine go out." That grin just did all sorts of funny things to Jed's belly. "Okay, yeah. You can drive me, Thatcher. But you'll have to step on it."

"Let me get my bag."

They got moving after that, and Jed called Junior Austin on the way out of Cedaredge, asking him to take care of the horses. The dogs, all four of them, took up whatever space their bags didn't in the backseat. The rearview looked funny without Jumbo, who'd died last winter, but the Roice-Hurst shelter down in the Junction had advertised Great Pyrennes-Newfoundland mixes not long after, and Eli had browbeat him into getting one. The damned fuzzy thing was near as big as Jumbo'd been now, just a little wider and shorter without the wolfhound blood.

"Seems weird that Ojo is the old man now, huh?"

Ojo was the one-eyed dog Jed had found in his barn about a year before he'd met Eli, and the mutt had to be ten years old now, but still going strong.

"Things change."

"You okay?" Eli gave him a look. "Not fretting about me, are you, Thatcher?"

Well, sure he was. Eli was getting about as long in the tooth as Ojo. But he stifled the urge to say it. "Just be careful, Mister. Okay?"

"I always am, Jed."

Jed drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as they blew through Whitewater, turning off at the speedway to loop around Clifton to the airport. It didn't take long enough to make the drive from Delta when Eli was going out on a jump.

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Not long enough at all.

"Okay, Thatcher," Eli said when they got to Walker Field. "Behave yourself. This is supposed to be a seventy-two rotation. Will you be home by Sunday?"

Jed nodded. "Sure. If you need a ride, holler."

"Will do." Eli popped the seat belt and leaned over, giving him a hard kiss right there at the jump station. "Don't worry. I'll be fine."

He touched his tingling lips as Eli hopped out and gave all the dogs a scratch before grabbing his bag and striding off, whistling a damned jaunty tune.

It was part and parcel of Eli's job that Jed had to watch him walk away, getting ready to jump into the fire. After nearly six years, he was used to it.

But that didn't mean he had to like it.

* * * *

"That was some kiss you planted on your man, Marshall."

Hal Landeman clapped him on the back, the grizzled old bastard just grinning to beat the band. Eli just smiled. He liked Hal. The man was one of the best jump instructors in the four corners.

"He's worrying again. I try to distract him."

"The man flies tourists to Aspen in snowstorms, but he worries about you. Amazing."

"Fucking A." Eli humped his gear into the shed, greeting the team that had already assembled. "When do we go?"

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"They're dumping water on it now, making us a hole. The plane will be here in twenty. We leave in an hour, so have your buddy check your 'chute."

"Got it."

Fuck, he usually ended up checking everyone else's chute. He was one of the old men now, the ones the new kids looked to for guidance. It was kind of bizarre. Kind of cool.

He greeted each and every one of his crew, checking their gear, letting Tuff Granger check his. Tuff was a good one, as Jed would say. Solid as a fucking rock, and always careful.

"Do I need to go over procedures?" Eli barked.

Ten heads shook in unison.

"Good. Be careful where you land. They've cleared us a hole, but we're burning all the way around. Last thing I need is for one of you cherries to ruin my rep by catching a thermal and burning to the ground."

This time all the heads bobbed in agreement. Their pilot, AJ Martinelli came in. "You folks ready?"

"Let's do it."

Excitement coiled in Eli's belly. There was nothing like a big burn to make a man pumped up. Nothing. They'd fly in, jump, and dig like hell.

A man just couldn't ask for a better job than that.

* * * *

"Baby? Are you going to work today?"

Ross Thatcher headed into the bedroom after his run, expecting to see Kevin still sprawled in bed. He'd gotten up a

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couple hours earlier, and Kev hadn't even stirred, not even to watch Ross get dressed.

Of course, these days, he rarely did anyway.

The bed was neatly made, the rest of the house deserted. A quick check of the garage told him Kevin had left for work without so much as a peck on the cheek. The back of his neck started to ache, and Ross rubbed at it, going to get some cereal. He washed Kev's dishes, too, feeling like a Christian martyr, then decided he needed to stop pouting and get over it.

Kev was busy. So was he. Big deal.

He picked up the phone and hit his brother Jed's number on speed dial. Jed always knew how to perk him up. The phone rang and rang, and he finally gave up with a sigh, wondering when the man was going to move into the twenty-first century and get voicemail.

Maybe he should take a shower and get to work. One of the chief advantages of owning his own business was that he set his own hours.

It was also one of the chief disadvantages. He didn't have a student until one. He had a shitload of paperwork to do, though; so off he went, packing the recycling in the back of his truck, to take in while he was at it. So California. If anyone back at Bragg could see him now, hauling around aluminum cans and newspapers, they'd laugh their collective asses off.

Not that Ross minded Monterey. Not at all. The scenery was a hell of a lot better than Fayetteville, and he loved the beach. So did Pancake, Kev's dog, who was really more Ross'

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dog in practice, as Kev was the one with the day job, and Ross had more time to spend tide pooling with the damned mutt.

"Hey, boss. You're in early." Maggie Gutierrez grinned up at him from where she was checking lines and packing chutes.

"Yeah, yeah. Watch out, or I'll have Pancake bite your leg off."

"Sure. Like he would." She had that right enough, because just about that time, the big yellow lab just came up and drooled all over her as she bent to scratch his ears. Retired military, Maggie had ruthlessly short salt-and-pepper hair, a sweet smile, and a personality that reminded Ross a heck of a lot of his mom.

"He's kinda worthless that way. Do we have any coffee?"

She gave him a sideways kind of look. "Are you in a mood for a reason?"

"No." He bit it off, working on keeping the rest of the retort he wanted to make locked away. No sense ripping her head off and shitting down her neck because he was pissy about Kev. "I'll get over it. Gonna go finish up the paperwork."

"Sure thing, boss."

For a while, Ross immersed himself in tax forms and student apps. Then he wandered out and helped Maggie fold chutes, the repetition soothing his antsy hands and feet. He couldn't let his mind wander while he did that, either; so his constant dog-with-bone worrying the Kev situation stopped for a while.

Finally he gave in and called Kev at work, something he rarely did, because even as a civilian, if you worked for the Army someone had better be dying for you to get a call on the job.

"O'Donnell."

"Hey, baby."

"Ross! Hey. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, don't worry. I'm fine. Look, I just ... do you want to do lunch? Maybe about eleven-thirty? I thought we might do tacos."

"Sure. Okay. Wanna meet at Go Taco?"

"Yeah, that sounds good. See you at eleven-thirty."

He hung up, already feeling better, and puttered until it was time to go meet Kev with a smile on his face. It was a gorgeous day, the traffic wasn't awful, and Kev waited for him with a carton of picadillo tacos for him, and fish tacos for Kev, three little cups of green salsa all laid out.

"This was a good idea, Ross."

He wanted his kiss, but the picnic table in front of the little drive-through taco stand was a little too public, so he settled for playing a little footsie under the table. "It was. Missed you this morning."

"You were out for your run. I had a seven-thirty meeting." Kev gave him a wry smile, and Ross was struck by how much older he looked, more confident a man now than the kid he had been when they'd met.

"That's an obscene time to be at work."

"Hey, you used to say you did more by eight a.m. than most people did all day."

"I did." The rigid discipline of Army life wasn't something he missed, but the excitement? Sure. The constant busyness? Yeah. "Now I just cram it all in during the afternoon and evening."

"Yeah." Kev got kind of this faraway look, and Ross shook his head.

"Baby..."

"Ross..."

"You go first."

Kev grinned. "No, you."

"I want to do something tonight. Together. Just me and you. We don't have to go out, but I want to cook supper and maybe watch a movie or something."

"That's what I was going to say." Kev grinned, looking really young all of a sudden. "I think we need to just go home tonight and hang out. We've been so hit-or-miss."

"Yeah. Yeah, we have." Hell, he almost bounced. "What do you want for supper?"

"Mom's fried chicken?"

Their first year together he'd learned to make Kev's mom's fried chicken recipe, soaking it in buttermilk and adding her special ingredients to the breading before frying it in, like, two inches of oil as hot as it could get. It was fucking amazing.

"You got it. And biscuits and gravy and green beans."

"And I'll stop on the way home and get some of that fancy beer."

Fat Tire was fancy beer to Kev. It always made Ross grin. "You got a deal, baby."

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"Cool."

He still wanted his kiss. But he figured he could wait and get it at dinner. If he did a good enough job on the chicken, he might get a lot more.

Ross couldn't wait.

* * * *

Jed practiced loop-d-loops. He did low flyovers and rolls until a normal man would have been puking his guts out. And when he was done, he stuck around while they cleared the airspace and the Blue Angels went to practicing. God, those Hornets were pretty aircraft.

He thought sure all of that would distract him, but a glance at his watch told him Eli ought to be right over Naturita about then, and his stomach churned.

Shit. Maybe he ought to go get a beer.

Yeah. The dogs were all at a buddy's place out on D Road, so he didn't have to worry about them sweltering in the August heat, which was about 102 degrees in the sun. Jed hopped in the truck and cranked up the air, sweat trickling down his neck. Goddamn, sometimes it was nice to remember why he lived up in Cedaredge. That extra couple thousand feet made a huge difference.

The Rockslide brewpub sat right on Fourth and Main downtown, and it was in that in-betweeny stage where they were done with the lunch rush and not ready to start supper, so Jed went and sat in the bar. He could order food there just as well, especially if he sat in a booth.

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Some cute little thing in khaki shorts and a Rockslide logo shirt took his order, trotting off to get him his Widowmaker wheat and calzone, and just as she left, Jed heard his name called.

"Thatcher. Jesus, long time, no see."

"Ray!" Jed stood up and shook the guy's hand, grinning a little when Ray lingered too long. Looked like maybe he still had it. "Man, I haven't seen you in a month of Sundays. How's it going?"

"Good, good. Hey, you mind if I join you?"

"Nah, I could use some company."

Ray gave him a wide grin. "Man, I've been waiting years to hear you say that again."

Laughing, Jed waved to the other side of the booth. "I'm still taken, Ray. All I can offer is good conversation and a free beer."

"I'll take it." Ray still looked good. He'd been Jed's type once, all wide shoulders and dark hair. Hell, that was still his type; he just liked it better in one specific man. "You still seeing that smokejumper?"

"Eli. Yeah."

"Lord, I remember when you two were first fighting it out. Best fucking I'd ever gotten from you."

The Widowmaker wobbled a little as the wide-eyed server put it down, and she almost ran off before Ray ordered. Jed didn't even have the grace to blush, he just nodded. "It was a good night. But if that's all you're gonna reminisce about, buddy, we've got a problem."

"Okay, okay." Ray shook his head. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go for it."

They ended up sitting and talking for a couple of hours, Jed really enjoying Ray's company. Hell, maybe he needed to get out more, stop putting all of his eggs in one basket. He and Eli weren't just exclusive, but obsessive.

"Hey, you wanna come back to my place?"

That smacked him right out of his good mood. "Ray, I told you..."

"Yeah, well, you can't blame a man for trying. You're still the hottest thing going, Jed."

"Thanks." He meant it; it was nice to hear. "But no." Tossing a few twenties on the table, Jed got up, smiling over. "I need to go pick up my dogs. You have a good one, Ray."

"You, too, Jed. If you change your mind."

"I won't."

"Well if you do, here's my cell phone number." Ray scribbled it on a napkin. "See you around."

"Yeah. See you."

Jed headed out to get the pups from their baby-sitter, feeling mellow and happy, and a lot less worried. Sometimes a man just needed to be reminded that he had options, even if he'd never even think seriously about them.

Now he could go home and wait.

* * * *

Dinner was a success. The fried chicken came out crispy and full of flavor. The gravy stayed good and thick, but with no lumps. Ross figured he was lucky he'd even managed the mashed potatoes considering how long it had been since he

made them. The biscuits didn't rise as well as they could have, but a pat of butter and some honey fixed them right up.

They sat back, picking over the chicken bones and feeding Pancake little bits of dark meat. The candles Ross'd lit guttered a little, swimming in melted wax, and Kevin groaned, leaning back to pat his belly.

"Oh, man, it's been a long time since I ate like that. You've still got it, Ross."

"Thanks, baby." Hoo yeah. That was what he needed to hear. Idly he wondered if he still had it in other ways. "What do you say we skip the dishes and go right to the cuddling?"

"Well..." Kev frowned, and Ross's heart kinda sank. "We need to at least clear the chicken bones out so Pancake doesn't get them and choke. But the rest we could let him lick clean."

"Yeah?" His smile dawned huge and happy. "You sure?"

"Uh-huh. Let's do it."

So they got rid of the bones and laid the plates on the kitchen floor to keep Pancake busy before piling on the couch together, some old John Wayne movie playing on AMC.

"I missed this," Ross said. "Missed you."

"I've been right here."

But you haven't. He didn't say it out loud, but it hung there, bald and impossible to miss. Ross didn't take it back, though. Couldn't.

Kev turned in his arms, swarming over him, lips hovering over his. "Kiss me? I need you to kiss me, Ross."

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Kisses he could do, in huge amounts. Much, much easier than the words. They kissed long and hard, deep kisses that burned his tongue. Ross cupped Kev's fine ass, his best attribute really, and pulled, rubbing them together. Even through his jeans and Kev's soft sweats, he felt it when Kev got hard, felt the heat and length of it pressing his lower belly.

He stroked the small of Kev's back, ran his hands up under the thin t-shirt, counting the bumps of Kev's spine, the ridges of his ribs, getting a chuckle for his effort. So ticklish.

"Ross."

Oh, yeah. Kevin sounded drugged, lips swollen and dark as he pulled back to look him in the eye. All sex-kitten Kev. How long had it been since he'd seen that face? Too damned long for sure.

"Yeah, baby. Come on. Get me naked. Get you naked, for that matter."

"Mmmhmmm."

Still long and lean, though with the heaviness through the shoulder and chest that came with a more mature man, Kevin was beautiful as he undressed. Ross touched him, from collarbones to upper arms, pushing under his arms to stroke the soft hairs there, making Kev wiggle. Then he went for those sweet, pink-red nipples, pinching at them.

"Oh! Ross. Yeah." Kev rocked and rolled against him, hips moving over and over, before realization flashed in his eyes and he jerked back, working Ross's shirt and jeans. "No fair, getting me all distracted."

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"I like you all distracted, baby." Unrepentant but willing, Ross let Kev strip him down, even let go of that luscious ass long enough for Kev's sweats to disappear, and then they were all skin, all sweat and heat, rubbing together.

"Love the way you feel."

Dark eyes half closed, brown hair flopping in his face, Kevin was fucking amazing. Ross moaned and arched, trying to get more, and Kevin pressed down against him, rocking their cocks together. Little electric shocks ran through him every time their skin pulled just the right way, and his balls drew up tight and hard.

It had been so long.

"Gonna come, baby. So good."

"Yeah. Okay. I want. Uhn. Ross." Kev reached down between them and grabbed Ross's cock, damned near making him scream. Ross came like a ton of bricks, hips rolling, eyes squeezing shut.

It took maybe five seconds for Kev's come to join his on their skin, wet and hot and good.

"Damn," he panted. "Sorry I didn't last, baby."

Kev just hummed. "S'okay. We'll do it again. In bed. In a little bit."

"Sounds like a plan." Did it ever. Sounded like the best plan in a month of Sundays.

He could live with that.

Chapter 2

Four Years Earlier

"What did you just say?"

"I said I'm out of the army, baby. In less than a month. I opted out."

Kevin O'Donnell stared at Ross Thatcher, unable to believe what he'd just heard. "Why?"

Brilliant smile fading, Ross shrugged. "Thought I'd been in long enough. Twelve years is a long while, baby. They gave me an out, and I said sure. It's time to go home."

"Home." That one took him a minute to catch onto. "To Colorado."

"Yeah. I'm too old for this shit, Kev. I thought we'd go to Colorado, maybe help Jed with the farm, maybe teach tourists how to jump out of airplanes."

"We."

"What are you all of a sudden? A parrot?"

Cold suddenly, Kev crossed his arms over his chest. "No. Just confused. What am I going to do in Colorado?"

Ross frowned. "I don't understand, baby. What do you mean?"

"I mean, I have a job here at Bragg. A life. A fucking house. What am I supposed to do with that? Where do I fit in with the whole Colorado scheme?"

He avoided Ross when the man reached for him, curling into himself as he waited. The frown on Ross' face was melting into concern, and it was hard to resist, but he couldn't let it go this time. Not this time.

"With me," Ross said. "You'll be with me."

"Doing what? I don't think I'd do kept man very well. And there's not much call for cryptographers out there, is there? And I'm good at what I do. I love it. But you want me to leave it and go with you, and you can't even tell me what I'll be able to replace it with."

Something in his chest was winding tight, a hard knot forming, getting bigger by the minute. Stunned to silence, Ross just stared at him, something like understanding dawning in his eyes, and Kev wanted to scream, but the noise might just shatter him. The little clock on his mantle chimed three.

Finally Ross spoke, breaking the thin-stretched quiet. "I'm sorry, baby. I never thought."

"You never do." He almost clapped a hand over his mouth, but the words spilled out instead, and he couldn't stop them. "You never think, you just bulldoze me into what you want me to do. You courted me, you made love to me, you moved in with me, you made all of those decisions for me, and now you want to take away the one thing I love to do more than anything in the world!"

By the time he was done, he was yelling, the last of it ringing in his ears, and Ross was pale beneath his tan. Very pale, blue eyes glittering at him with an expression he just couldn't read. "You saying I've bullied you into the whole year and a half we've spent together?"

Ross was so quiet he had to strain to hear, something in his voice making the knot in Kev's chest tighter and tighter. "No," he answered, just as quietly. "But I do think I let you

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push me into things sometimes, because you're more sure, and so convincing. And I can't just be happy about this, because what if I don't want to leave?"

"Then we figure something else out."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, baby. I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"Yeah. Obviously."

Blowing out a sharp breath, Ross ran a hand through his hair. "No need to get sarcastic, baby."

"Don't call me baby. I hate that."

Forget pale, Ross looked downright stricken, taking a step back, like Kev had hit him. "I didn't know that, b ... Kev. I'm sorry."

Somewhere, some little part of him felt bad for putting that look there. The other parts of him just felt a savage sense of satisfaction. "You should be. You use that to soften me up, make me do things your way. But I can't spend the rest of my life doing it, or I'll hate you for it."

"Sounds to me like you already do. I think I'm going to go out, okay? I know we have to finish talking about this, but I want to give you some time to think. Much as you need. You call me on my cell when you want me to come back, okay?"

Miserable, Kev looked at the floor. "Okay."

"Yeah." The door clicked behind Ross so quietly he almost missed it, and he blinked rapidly. Ross had looked ... old, before he walked out. Tired. And Kev put that look there. It hurt him, but everything he'd said to Ross was true, if somewhat exaggerated. When Ross was around, he didn't

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think straight. Well, okay, not straight. Um, he just couldn't think. And he had to think about this. Long and hard.

* * * *

He didn't call. And he didn't call. Right after he left Kev, gut churning, Ross went back to Bragg, sat down on the bunk in the quarters he still maintained there, and waited. He didn't know what else to do. So he'd wait until Kev worked it all out in his mind and when the kid called, he'd go. Whenever that was.

But Kev never called. Ross checked his cell to make sure it didn't need charging, checked to make sure it was on, even checked his voicemail in case he missed it somehow, but Kev didn't call. Not that first day, or the day after. Ross figured should never have walked out that way. Fucking should have stayed until they'd worked it all out. But Hell, the whole bit about never letting the kid make his own decisions had hit like a fist in his gut.

God knew he liked to get his way. Tell him he was right, and he was like a bug in a rug. Happy. But he'd never figured he was crowding Kev into things he didn't want. Never once thought he might be wrong about the way his baby, and he couldn't even call him that now, felt about him. Sure, he was headstrong, and sometimes headlong, but he wasn't such a bastard that he would hurt someone he loved just for disagreeing with him. Was he?

The urge was strong to call his brother Jed, get his opinion, but Ross didn't know if he could face up to that. When he'd told Jed about Kev a few years back, Jed had

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warned him against hurting Kev. How did he keep Kev from hurting him? Or how did he keep from hurting, knowing he'd hurt his ... Kev so badly?

After three days of Kevin not calling, Ross sucked it up and picked up the damned phone himself, dialing Kev's number and trying not to hold his breath. The machine picked up, not the man, and Ross fought the bitter disappointment as well as he could. He almost hung up, but he'd decided to make the first move, and he damned well would.

"Hey, b ... um, Kev. It's me. I wanted to make sure you were all right, since you hadn't called me. If you still aren't ready to talk, I can live with that, but I'm worried about you. And I miss the Hell out of you. Just at least leave me a message or something, okay? Love you."

He hung up, feeling worse than before he called, and decided maybe he'd just go back to bed.

* * * *

Kevin knew he was all sorts of a coward, but he just couldn't call Ross. He couldn't. Because then he'd have to deal with all of the things he'd said, and deal with the stark fear that he'd screwed up, and with the whole mess. All of it. That was just too hard.

It wouldn't be so bad if he weren't so miserable. He hadn't slept in four days. Had barely eaten. He missed Ross horribly. He went to work, and he came home and stared mindlessly at a book of crosswords, and that was about it.

Which was what he was doing when the doorbell rang. Scared him half to death, at first because the noise seemed

huge in the silence of the house, second because he had a feeling he knew who it was.

Ross looked haggard. There was no other word for it. Hard lines bracketed his mouth and eyes, and there was no smile for him at all. Even when they were fighting Ross could find a smile for him. It made him hurt, and he knew it was his fault as much as anyone else's.

"Hey. Can I come in?"

Kev nodded, not knowing what to say, and stepped back to let Ross in. He closed the door, the quiet click the only sound in the whole room. Ross didn't sit, didn't go any further than the foyer. Just stood there and stared at him until he shifted from foot to foot, face heating, which hit him hard. This was Ross' house as much as it was his, and it didn't feel like it right now.

"Well?"

Ross nodded, once, sharply. "I want to come home, Kevin."

"Home?"

"Yeah. Here, with you. You're right. I should have asked, and I'm sorry. I miss you."

"It can't be that simple."

The words were out, and once again he wondered where they came from. He wanted Ross back. He did. But this felt bad. It felt broken.

"Why not? I love you. I want to come home. I made a mistake, but God knows it's not the first time. Why can't it be that simple?"

"What about your plans? What about your discharge?"

Something like regret flickered in Ross's eyes. "I talked to my CO, b ... Kev. He never turned my forms in, said he was going to wait a week to make sure I didn't change my mind. So it's good. I re-upped."

"What?" He couldn't believe it. "Why?"

Something else flared in those familiar blue eyes, and it was much hotter than regret. "Because I want to stay with you! Jesus, baby, what do you want from me?"

"I want you to do what you want to do."

"I want to be with you. I would swear I just said that. So, you won't leave, so I'm staying."

"That's very noble." That tension was back in his chest and belly, building and building. "But you'd hate me after a while for that, Ross. I don't want to fuck up your life."

"Yeah? Well, you seem to be laboring under a misapprehension, baby. It would be pretty fucked up without you."

"Bullshit." The way Ross' pale brows drew together was an ominous sign, but he went on anyway. "You'll do perfectly well without me. It's the freedom you'd lose staying here that you would miss, and I won't sit around and wait for you to decide you've had enough. Better for you to go now." God. There it was, out in the open.

"You sanctimonious little prick."

Kev's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"You heard me. Jesus. All this time you put this on me, and it's because you're scared. You never trust me. Never. All you can do is sit there and tell me, after more than a year loving you, I'm going to up and leave. After I put my job on

the line moving in with you. After I took you home and introduced you to my mother and said, 'This is the man I love', you still think I'm going to go. So why not push me away and make it happen? You're a fucking coward, baby."

The urge to say "am not" was strong, but that would just sound childish. And hadn't Ross just said he was a coward?

"Maybe I am." It came out as a whisper, but Ross heard. He always heard.

"Oh, Kev. I love you. I'm not going anywhere without you. You have to trust me some time. Why not now?"

God. Oh, God. He wanted to. Just because he wanted Ross back with him. He wasn't just lonely. He was lonely for Ross.

"But you hate it here."

"Hate's a strong word." Ross watched him intently, looking like he was holding his breath.

"I don't want you to hate me, either."

"I couldn't. Baby, please. I need you to trust me."

"And I need you to tell your CO to turn in the first set of papers." That came out just like everything else, in a rush and it made Ross' face go blank.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you need to get out. And I'll go with you."

Ross gave him a slow dawning smile, one full of hope. It lightened his face, made him look like Kev's Ross again.

"God, I love you. Can I come home now?"

"Yes. Please."

He didn't even have time to blink before Ross was kissing him breathless. "Thank God."

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Yeah. Thank God. He might not believe it, still, after all this time, and they had a lot to discuss, but he was just selfish enough not to want to let Ross go.

Present day

Ross had mustered out. But he'd stayed on as a civilian contractor. Or something. Kev never asked for too many of the details. One way or the other, Ross had stayed for him. Given up on the idea of going to Colorado, at least for a little while. Two years to be exact.

Kev had come up with a compromise after that. He probably should have talked to Ross before he did it, but Kev applied to the Army's Defense Language Institute in Monterey. Closer to Colorado, far away from North Carolina, and they both knew people who had transferred to California before they did. With his language skills on top of his years in crypto, they snapped him up. He'd had the offer in his hand two weeks after he'd put in.

Hoisting himself on one elbow, Kev looked down at Ross as he slept, thinking about how young and unsure he'd been back then. Him, not Ross. Ross had always been so sure, such a presence. Not just physically, though with his lean, wiry body, sandy blond hair and bright blue eyes Ross was a sight to behold. It was more than that. Ross was always just so *on*.

It had taken Kevin more than a year in California to start making friends, to stop feeling like he'd left the easiest part of his life behind. He'd studied a lot that first year, brushing up

his Russian and his Spanish, becoming much more viable. Ross, though, well, in time Ross had gotten a loan and started a skydiving school, hooking up with a couple of pilots willing to work with him.

He didn't like to be bored, he said.

Rolling to his back, Kevin sighed. He was at that point in his life again, just like he had been when he'd made the move to California. He had a decision to make, and he wasn't sure what to do.

"Mmm. You're staring at me, baby."

"I am. You have a good face to stare at."

The little lines next to Ross' eyes and mouth just made him sexier. It was so not fair. Kevin figured he was just getting older and losing his own boyish cuteness.

"Thanks." Ross sat up, too, sliding one hand behind his head to pull him down for a kiss. "You don't have to go in?"

"It's Saturday." Kev grinned. Ross might be a working man still, but he didn't have the Monday through Friday mentality at all anymore.

"Is it? Cool." His throat got kisses, his collarbone a sharp nip. "Then we have the day."

"I thought you had lessons on Saturdays."

"Nope. Got Maggie and Jorge to take them all today. They're really jonesing on the power, I think."

Ross' beard shadow scraped his sternum as those hot lips closed around his nipple. Kevin groaned. "Coffee. Crossword."

"Later, baby. Later."

Oh, he couldn't think when Ross did that to him, that hand between his legs, just something. Kevin's eyes rolled back in

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his head, and he gave into the one thing that had never changed between them; the physical pleasure they could give each other.

When it was over he was a sweaty, gooey mess, limp and utterly drained. Ross lay heavy on him, chest heaving as he fought for breath, and Kevin stroked Ross' sweaty hair, thinking that for a moment, at least, he'd forgotten all about the hard stuff. All about the decisions and shit.

Maybe he'd forget them for the rest of the day. Just to have one more day with Ross where nothing came between them but sheets, or shower water, or maybe clothes if they went out.

Then he'd work out the rest.

* * * *

The kid had no fucking sense. Eli wanted to beat him into the goddamned ground. Too bad he didn't have the time to spare, the way they were all digging like hell.

He'd known the new jump captain straight from Bend, Oregon was young, but he'd be fucked with a chainsaw if that excused incompetence. When a man had three jumpers with nearly twenty years experience telling him he was jumping the wrong way against the wind, he should damned well listen. But no, Adam had stubbornly gone with his own coordinates and dropped them right in the worst hot spot on the mountain. The only reason Eli hadn't flat refused to jump was because there were so many new kids that would die if they didn't have some guidance.

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The crew already had one man down. Tony Elan had twisted his line coming down, ending up in a tree with a broken ankle and some busted ribs. If they could get a break in the fireline Tony would make it. If not, well ... If not they were all purely fucked, as Jed would say. And that would suck.

* * * *

3 Years Earlier

The embers flew as fast as a swarm of angry wasps, stinging his face and hands as the wind chased Eli and his crew up the hill. The crest of the goddamned ridge would be the worst place in the world once the flash reached it, so Eli was determined to be up and over it before that happened.

He scanned the scene, noticing Tom Billings straggling behind the group, really laboring. The man's back and shoulders heaved as he leaned on his trenching tool, and he dropped to his knees as Eli watched, clawing at his mask.

Shit.

"Gonzales! Take point."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gonzales nod, then he pelted back down the slope, his gear so fucking heavy he thought he was running through honey. He reached Tom's side in a matter of seconds, but it felt like hours, and damned if his boots didn't feel like they were melting on him.

"Up, Billings. Come on. We don't have time for this."

"Can't breathe. Eli..."

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Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Something was wrong with Tom's oxygen. Eli grabbed the man under the arms and started dragging him up the hill, screaming orders as he went.

"Drop whatever the fuck you're doing and hit the other side of the hill, you grunts! This place is about to flash. Get your fire blankets out and hunker down. Now! Move, move, move."

Gonzales got everyone else moving; he could see them surge over the hill, dropping tools as they went. Fuck the gear. If they could survive the flash they'd get a pick-up and another crew would take their place.

Tom started struggling about ten feet from the crest of the hill, the gurgling noises telling Eli that breathing wasn't going so well, but he couldn't stop.

"Hold on, buddy. Hang on. Don't do this to me."

Up, down, up, down. Eli willed his legs to keep moving, to keep going, and they did, all the way up until he lost his balance and tumbled over the crest of the hill, hauling Tom with him. He wrapped around the guy and rolled just as he felt a heat blast from the other side, saw the red hot monster arrive as trees started exploding above.

The fire sheet barely covered both of them, but it worked, and Eli prayed like he hadn't since his mother's funeral, tearing at Tom's mask, trying to clear his airway. Tom heaved, taking great, gasping breaths before the heat bore down on them and no one could breathe, only hope it would be over before they fried to a crisp.

* * * *

Present Day

They'd made it out of that one, all of them, the helicopter picking them up on the canyon wall right there in Glenwood. Jed had fucked him raw when he got home, holding him down and checking every part of him for burns, cursing the phone call that had told him Eli's crew was stuck on the mountain.

He wondered if Jed would be so forgiving this time. Or if there'd be a him to forgive.

The kid was starting to panic. Eli saw it in the way he whirled around like a kid's top, trying to figure out which way to go. Gonzales was with him again this time, the man a fifteen year veteran of the summer fire season, helping him haul Tony along.

"We may have to take him down, Gonzales."

The kid got a long, considering look. "That would leave you next in line, Marshall. You can handle it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I can do it. Our main objective is to get out, right? I think if we break south we'll hit a spot where the worst is over and we can burrow through."

"Sam and I will get Tony, then. You take care of the mutiny."

He nodded, slogging over to their barely-shaving leader. "Laymon, you're off point." Eli barked it, putting every ounce of command he'd learned over the years into it.

The kid turned on him, wild-eyed and grimacing. "Says who? You? You've had a hard-on for me since I got here. You are *not* taking my squad, Marshall."

"Goddamn it," Eli roared. "Then turn south. Just do that much, or we're all dead men."

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"No! We keep north, along the ridge. The manual says..."

"Screw the manual. You got a wife and two kids, Laymon. We go north, you'll never see them again."

Fuck, but the kid wavered, right on the edge of making a good decision. Eli saw it the minute he decided to make a bad one, the smooth face going hard as stone. "We go north."

"No. You go north. The rest of us are breaking south and taking our chances with the smolder." Raising his voice, Eli turned, waving his arm high and tight. "Gonzales, Freemont! Turn south. Get Tony moving..."

He was still issuing orders when something crashed against his helmet with blinding force, and his whole world went bright white. Then completely dark.

Chapter 3

Jed spent three days trying to pretend he was just fine, keeping himself busy. He rode fence. He chopped corn and picked peaches. He cut a load of wood for old lady Foster. He took the dogs swimming.

And he paced by the phone.

Three days on, three off; that was what Eli was supposed to get. Jed had usually heard from him by now, that grumpy voice demanding a pick-up at either Grand Junction or Montrose, sometimes down at Delta if Eli could get a lift.

Scorch had started to fret, too, and as the silly black lab was far more Eli's dog than any of the others, Jed didn't question him. Just let the worry ratchet up another notch.

The phone rang, predictably, when he had a pan of bacon and eggs on the stove, merrily popping away in grease.

"Shit!" Sucking at his burned hand, Jed reached for the phone with the other, managing to turn off the gas and move the pan to another burner. "You'd best have a good excuse, Mister."

"Uh ... Can I speak to Jed Thatcher, please?"

"Speaking." His heart set up a-beating, the blood draining to his boots. "What can I do you for?"

"I'm Mike Calumet with the jump center over here in Grand Junction. You're listed as Eli's next of kin."

The pan flew off the stove as Jed groped for something to hold himself up, grease spattering up against the new paint he and Eli had put in last year, black and slimy on the creamy yellow. Bile rose in his throat.

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Well, he's in Saint Mary's here in town. They air-lifted him in about an hour ago."

"Is he? I mean..."

"He's not too bad off, all things considered. He has a concussion and some smoke inhalation damage, as well as a broken wrist. A few minor burns, nothing past first degree, I'm amazed to say. They're keeping him twenty-four hours for observation, maybe longer, depending on his lungs."

His legs gave out, and Jed ended up sitting on the floor, whooping for breath. "Can I come down and see him?"

"Yes." The guy laughed. "In fact, I wish you would, as he's been kinda ... grumpy."

Jed snorted, watching Ojo lick up broken egg yolks, and Spot scarf down the lost bacon. "I bet. He sure can get that way. I'll be down in maybe two hours."

"Cool. I'll mark you off the list."

They hung up. Man, if there was a list then the whole damned jump must have gone south. The phone was still in his hand, so Jed dialed his mom's place, hoping to get someone to feed the pups.

"Joe's Bar and Grill, you stab 'em; we slab 'em."

Recognizing the voice of his stepdad's ranch hand, Brodie, Jed cleared his throat. "Hey, Brod'. Is Mom around?"

"Sorry, Jed. She and Lloyd went to Crawford for the day. What'd you need?"

"I have to go down to the Junction. I ... It's Eli. He's banged up."

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"Shit. You need someone to come and take care of the dogs and all? I can come pick them up and bring them back here, do the feeding and all."

Brodie was the salt of the earth, a damned good guy. "Would you? I'll lock the dogs up, you can let them out when you get here, let them run while you feed. I made a mess in the kitchen. Just leave it until I can clean it up."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of shit. Just let me tell Stu and I'll be on my way."

"Thanks, man. You know where the key is."

"You bet."

The dogs protested being left behind, and Jed missed Jumbo more than ever. That big mutt had been a heck of a herder. Finally he got them settled, though, and headed down the hill to Delta, then across the stinkin' desert to Grand Junction. He made it in fifty minutes, thanking his lucky stars that no Delta County deputies had been on the road. They had a real hard-on for Thatchers, thanks to his brother Ross' youthful indiscretions.

At Saint Mary's he found out that Eli was in a regular room, not ICU or something, which he took as a good sign. The elevator ride seemed endless, and he drew some stares, mumbling about ripping Eli a new one.

Dark and hushed, the room had him feeling like he had to tiptoe. It was a double, but there was no one in the first bunk, so Jed peeked around the curtain of the second one, his breath rushing out as he saw Eli lying there so still and quiet. He moved slowly up to the bedrail, cataloging every bandage and bruise, every little burn.

Eli's eyes popped open, his thick brows drawing together as he glared. "No more medicine."

"I'm not here to shove pills down your throat, Mister."

"Jed?" Eli's voice came out all mangled and rough, but it was his, and it had never sounded better.

Jed felt his hands curl into fists to keep from ... what? From pummeling the man? Loving on him?

"What in God's name did you do?"

That furious frown appeared again. "Fucking little prick hit me."

"What?" Eli wasn't making sense. "What hit you?"

"Not what, who." Reaching for the glass of water next to the bed, Eli cursed. Viciously.

"Hold on, now, I'll get it for you. No need to fuss." A little sponge thingee sat in the glass, and Jed used it to wet Eli's lips before letting him have a few sips of water.

"Laymon. Little bastard from Oregon. He hit me when I tried to take over. He was leading us right into the flash."

Sick, cold dread balled up in Jed's gut. Jesus, Eli coulda died. "But you got out?"

"Somehow. I don't know how. He hit me with his fucking trenching tool so hard I blacked out. Woke up here."

"Fuck, Eli. You gotta start watching that." Christ. He was shaking.

"What? I was supposed to let that rookie team leader kill us all? What do you want to bet I sparked a mutiny? Go me."

Eli looked so damned self-satisfied that Jed wanted to smack him. "What do you want to bet I'm pissed at you, Mister?"

Mouth dropping open, Eli stared at him before convulsing into a coughing fit that sounded like he was trying to produce a lung. "What the fuck? Why are mad at me?"

"You should have flat refused the jump, that's why. What the hell were you thinking?"

God, Eli knew better. Didn't he? Surely he wasn't so eager for the rush that he'd deliberately put himself in danger. Well, more serious danger than usual. A man had to have limits.

"I was thinking there were eight other guys on that jump. Two veterans, two guys with maybe three years in, and four rookies. Four. I was thinking maybe I could keep them from fucking getting killed."

The coughing started again, and Jed sighed, pulling one of those awful hard, plastic chairs up close so he could sit and take Eli's hand.

"Calm down, Mister. I just got scared for you, is all."

Eli grabbed a hold and clung, grip tight and hard. His other hand, Jed noticed, was all wrapped and plastered. "So did I, Jed. All I could think about was you."

He rubbed his thumb over the back of Eli's hand. "Scorch is fretting." Scorch was Eli's black lab mix, and a very particular pup he was, too.

"He would. I'll have to call your mom's and talk to him."

"Yeah. Brodie came and picked them up."

"Oh, he likes Brodie."

They just sat a while after that, until the nurse came to kick Jed out. "Visiting hours are up, honey."

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"Okay." Jed rose, leaning over the rail to kiss Eli gently, not wanting to full on block his air supply. "You get some rest. Anything you want?"

"A cheeseburger." The nurse snorted, and Eli grinned. "Barring that, find out how the rest of the crew is?"

"That I can do. Had me worried, Mister. Don't do that again."

The grin faded; Eli nodding, eyes almost black. "I promise, Thatcher. I won't ever do that again."

* * * *

Eli stared at his hands, one covered in little pocked burns, the other swollen and black under his cast. They looked like his hands, but they felt clumsy and stupid.

"We lost one."

Jed glanced over at him from the driver's seat, eyes hidden by dark sunglasses. The lines around Jed's mouth tightened, though, and Eli knew that meant Jed was thinking about how close he'd come to being lost.

"Yeah. One of the rookies. Jason Swain. I'm sorry, Eli."

"Me, too." Fuck, he was sorry. Maybe if he'd kept his big mouth shut he'd have been conscious when Jason went down, and the kid would still be alive.

One of Jed's hands left the steering wheel to close over his. "This is not your fault. Tony Elan told me you saved his life. If it wasn't for you, and then Gonzales, he would have died out there. So stop it."

His head throbbed. "I just feel like I should've done more, like I could've helped if they hadn't had to drag me out."

"You tried. Laymon is getting brought up on charges, you know."

Shit. He didn't want that on his conscience either. "I think he needs counseling more than he needs jail."

"Yeah."

They were silent most of the way through Delta and up the hill to Cory. By the time they hit Eckert, Jed was humming. Eli felt the beginnings of a grin. That man loved his home. Eli had grown to love it, too.

The farm looked damned good, and the dogs spilled out of the house in a pile of paws and ears, all barking their fool heads off. Jed grinned.

"Hold up. I'll distract them with goodies, but you watch that hand. Scorch won't be put off, I bet."

Sure enough, the silly mutt was around on his side of the truck, wagging and whining, looking desperate. Desperate enough to pee all over. Eli rolled his eyes as he got out of the truck, moving clear of the puddle before crouching down to scratch ears.

"Hey, you. Yeah, you're a good boy. I'm home, all in one piece."

"Well, that's a good thing."

"Hey, Nancy."

Jed's mom was a fine looking woman still, tall and strong and prettier than her sons. She came out on the porch and lit a cigarette, stuffing the battered pack of Camels back in the pocket of her denim shirt.

"Hey, Eli. You sure had us all worried."

"Sorry." Climbing the stairs so he could kiss her cheek, Eli breathed in the smell of wood chips and cigarettes, shaking his head a little. It had taken him a long time to get used to the idea of being a part of a family as big as the Thatchers, what with his mom dead now, and his dad gone since he was a kid.

"You are. Sorry-assed brat."

She smacked his ass, and even Jed laughed at that, coming on up to give his mom a huge hug. "Thanks for taking care of them for me."

"Don't thank me; thank Brodie when you see him. I think they were good company for him."

He and Jed exchanged grimacing looks. Poor Brodie. In the five years Eli'd known the kid, he'd gotten married, had a baby, and then lost them both to a snowstorm car accident.

"Yeah, well, he's welcome to come play anytime."

"You're a good man, Eli Marshall." Stubbing out her smoke, Nancy patted his cheek. "Now come eat. Lloyd made tamale pie."

"Oh, yum." Lloyd was Nancy's second husband, Jed's dad having died when the infamous Thatcher brothers were still kids, and was a first-rate cook. "I'm there."

"Yeah, and you can take that one med you aren't supposed to take without food."

Eli glowered. "Yeah, yeah. Screw you, Thatcher."

"Not until the doc gives us the go ahead."

He blushed, Jed smiled, and Nancy's laughter trailed behind her as she went into the house. Yeah, sometimes it

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was fucking weird being in a family, but when he needed the support like he did today? It was all good.

* * * *

"Hey, baby. Let's go get some ice cream."

"I'm busy, Ross."

Ross stared at Kev's bent head, trying to figure out if this was one of those times that Kev meant he was busy, or if it was just that Kev wanted to be convinced.

"You sure? We'll get those fancy build your own sundaes."

"I said I was busy! I have to study."

All Kev did these days was study, and while it was cute as Hell to see scholarly Kev practicing his Russian verbs, it was also more than a wee bit lonely.

"You want me to bring you anything back?"

"No. I want you to leave me alone."

He got an evil glare out of one red-rimmed dark eye, and Kev was up, hauling all of his books and notebooks into the tiny guest bedroom, leaving Ross staring at his back end. A back end he wasn't seeing near enough of lately, especially not naked.

Damn. Ross blew out a sigh, thought about going and working on the punching bag for a bit, but figured it wouldn't work. A man could only punch out so much sexual frustration. He thought about going on and getting him some ice cream, too, but he really only wanted to do that if Kev came along, and while hot fudge was a fine cure for many ills, it wouldn't do much for him now.

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Shaking his head, Ross headed for the shower, stripping off as he went. Goddamn. Kev was always worried he was gonna go traipsing off with some woman, but who needed one when he had a Kevin O'Donnell? Kev was just as bad as any woman as far as Ross understanding him; in other words, the kid was clear as mud.

He turned the shower on as hot as he could get it, sliding in and letting it hit his skin, the immediate raw feeling soothing as the tingling died down. Groaning, Ross turned his back on the spray, reaching for the fancy soap his mom had sent him, grinning at the thought of how she'd hoot if she knew what he was about to do with it.

The punching bag and the hot fudge sundae both faded from his consciousness as soon as Ross touched himself, soapy hand sliding over his half-hard dick. If he closed his eyes he could almost believe that Kev was in there with him, watching him, maybe reaching out to help him, and he got fully hard at the thought, sliding easily in and out of his loose fist, hips pumping.

Yeah, that was what he needed, just like that, though it would have been better with Kev right there, maybe with Kev's pouty mouth instead of his own hand, or maybe that sweet, round ass that he didn't get enough of. Who was he kidding? He'd never get enough of it, even if Kev gave it up to him every time he wanted it.

Bracing his feet, leaning one elbow against the shower wall, Ross worked his cock harder, grunting with the force of it. Hell, it wasn't Kev's fault he was bored and lonely. He had

the skydiving school. He had a life. He should be happy ...
Oh.

There. Right there. Ross moved his thumb over the head, pushing against the slit, riding his hand like crazy, feeling how close he was in his balls and his back and in the soles of his feet. Yeah. Just like that. He thought of Kev's ass one last time as he went over the edge, a little wistful, a lot horny, and just let it go, his come splattering all over the floor of the shower, draining away with the hiss of the rapidly cooling water.

Ross washed off quickly, toweling dry roughly after he stepped out, figuring on going on to the jump school and packing chutes or something. Wasn't like him to sit around moping and doing nothing, and he needed to just get on with it and do the next thing.

And maybe if he left Kev alone for a few hours, he'd get that hot fudge sundae. And that ass. Never hurt to try.

* * * *

Kevin stared at his book, his eyes feeling gritty and sore. God, he was turning into a dickhead, but he couldn't seem to help himself. He didn't want to have to choose between work and Ross, but work seemed to be getting more and more complicated, and Ross...

Well, Kevin had ears. He could hear the shower going.

When he finally got up the nerve to leave the guest room, Ross was out of the shower. He was, in fact, out of the house, the only sign of him the lingering scent of his fancy new soap and the note on the table that said, "Going to jump."

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He sighed, going to get his wallet off the console table by the door. The business card was right where he left it, tucked in with his ID. It was Saturday, but Kevin knew the man who'd given him that card would answer, 24-7.

"Special Agent Diaz."

"Hi. Um. This is Kevin O'Donnell. GS10. Monterey."

"Kevin." Just enough warmth crept into the man's voice to make it sound like he was glad to hear from Kevin. Very practiced. Very government issue. "What can I do for you?"

A deep breath swelled his chest, pushing down the panic as he answered, "You can tell me when and where I need to be to start my new job."

* * * *

Two Years Earlier

"I decided to take that job in California, Ross."

He could see Ross' fingers clench on the knife handle he was using to pare peaches, but that was the only sign of any kind of stress.

"Yeah? Well, you said you'd probably have an offer in no time."

"Uh-huh." Nibbling on a piece of romaine, Kevin watched Ross closely. "That means I'll need to get ready to move."

"Well, if I'm good at anything, it's moving, baby. I'm ex-Army after all."

"Right. So you *are* coming with me?"

He got a look, Ross' eyes too-too blue. "What do you think, baby?"

"I think you will." His hand shook. "I love you, Ross."

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"Love you, too, baby. I go where you go."

His breath whooshed out. "Oh, good." He didn't want to go without Ross. No way, no day. Thank God he didn't have to.

* * * *

Present Day

When he hung up with Diaz, he had a new job and a two month window to move. A moving allowance of twelve thousand pounds, and a whole packet of paperwork on its way to him.

Kevin also had a sick feeling in the pit of his belly.

This time he would have to go it alone.

And sooner or later he had to stop being a coward and tell Ross that.

Chapter 4

"Goddamnit, Jed. I'm not a baby."

"Then quit acting like one." Fuck, he hated it when Eli was down. Not that the man was a crybaby. He just got so grumpy that he was impossible to live with, especially when he was almost better.

But not quite.

"I'm not. I just don't see why I need those damned horse pills. My lungs feel fine."

"You stubborn son of a bitch." Jed smacked the pills down on the bedside table. "You're lucky they heal faster because you're in good shape. But you live at high elevation, damn it. You need the pills."

That lower lip almost came out in a pout. Good thing Eli was way too old and masculine for it to be cute like it was with the nieces and nephews.

Eli crossed his arms. "No."

"Fine." Turning on his heel, Jed headed for the door. "Then you don't get the massage."

"Hey! Thatcher, you promised. I was looking forward to that."

"Then take the fucking pills."

The clink of the water glass and shifting of bed sheets told him that Eli was doing just that, which made him unbend a little. If Eli didn't take care of himself, who would? Jed sighed. He would, that was who.

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He turned back to Eli's bedside, trailing his fingers up one leg. "That's much better. See how easy it is when you do what I tell you, Mister?"

"You just offered me the right bribe, is all. Come here and touch me, Jed."

He shouldn't, but he did, knowing that just lying in bed made a man sore, especially one as big as Eli. He started with the big feet, grinning at how Eli'd insisted that he lock Spot out of the bedroom to keep him from licking Eli's toes when he couldn't fight back. That dog had purely never outgrown the urge, and had done his damndest to teach Scorch how to do it, too.

His fingers dug in just under the ball of Eli's left foot, and he got a groan, Eli sinking down into the pillows and wiggling a little.

"Feels good, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. Man, you don't realize how stiff everything gets."

"I usually like you stiff." He chuckled, moving over to the other foot to give it the same treatment before shifting up to rub Eli's fuzzy calves. "But in this case, I'll do what I can to make it stop."

"Mmmm. I'll let you. God, your hands, Jed."

Eli had complimented his hands more than once. Sometimes it still amazed him, the things he was willing to do for Eli that he'd never done for anyone else. Never even wanted to. Oh, he'd not been a blushing virgin when they met by any means. Just a solid top, for sure.

"You know I like your body, Mister. So it's not a hardship."

"Something's getting hard."

Sure enough, Eli's cock poked up under the quilt, bouncing a little as Jed drew the cloth away to work Eli's muscled thighs. His own cock had been hard since he put his hands on that fine skin, aching in his jeans.

"We probably shouldn't," Jed said. "You're still recovering."

"I took my pills." Eli's good hand closed over his, drawing it to Eli's stiff prick. "And it's part of the massage."

"Is it? Well, never let it be said that I shirked my duty."

"Nope. A Thatcher never does that." All husky and rough, Eli's voice sent shivers up and down his spine.

It had just been too long, and Jed couldn't wait any more. He stroked Eli's cock, letting his fingers play over the head, thumb pressing the slit. Eli arched for him, a deep flush staining the chest and belly all stretched out for him, those eyes watching him like a hawk's.

"What do you want, Eli?"

Eli's cock jerked in his hand. Somebody was thinking something good.

"I want your mouth, Jed. Please."

"You bet." No teasing, just bending and wrapping his lips around Eli's hard length. The man's lungs could take it, but Jed might not be able to take it if he *didn't* get to suck that pretty prick, didn't get to assure himself that Eli was still in one piece, whole and mostly well.

Riding up and down, Jed sucked and licked, tasting and loving the heated, salty flavor. He'd never been much on sucking before Eli. Getting sucked, yeah. But not doing the doing. Eli was fucking addictive.

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Cupping Eli's balls in one hand, Jed braced up on the other to get better leverage, and bobbed up and down. The skin against his palm drew up tight, the balls rising as Eli thrust, fucking his mouth good and hard, gasping for breath.

Jed only stopped once to make sure it wasn't the bad I can't breathe kind of gasping, learning better than that when Eli clunked him in the head with the cast.

"Get back down there, Thatcher."

"Mmmhmm." He got, sucking, licking, making Eli moan and grunt and finally come like a ton of bricks, hot fluid falling against his tongue and down his throat. Fuck. Oh, fuck.

Jed rose up on his knees, tearing at his jeans, hand closing around his cock and pumping furiously. Oh. Yeah. His eyes rolled back and he bit his lip, and when Eli reached out and touched him, fingers pushing against his slit, he lost it, crying out as he came, everything in him just giving in to that simple touch.

"That's way better medicine than pills, Jed."

"Uh-huh." He crawled up, careful to stay on Eli's good side, and curled up next to the man, nuzzling against his neck.

"Much much."

"You've got a hell of a bedside manner, Thatcher."

"Thanks. Wait until you see what I can do with a sponge bath."

* * * *

Three days later, and Eli thought he might go crazy.

He was sick of Jed playing nursemaid, making sure he didn't do anything strenuous. If he didn't start working out

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again, he'd lose muscle tone, and at his age it took longer and longer to get it back. There wasn't a thing wrong with his legs, and he could do curls with the one arm. Doing lateral lifts with the cast worked his bad arm enough for now, along with all of the weird little therapy things he was supposed to do.

Pushing the dogs aside, as they all nosed around the bed when he got up, Eli slipped out from under the covers and grabbed a pair of workout shorts, heading for the spare bedroom they'd made into his weight room. He'd do leg extensions, sit-ups, that kind of shit. Maybe he'd even get done before Jed came back from the Safeway down near Delta.

It was dog food day. Which was why he had dog sitting duty. They couldn't be trusted in the back of the truck with a bag of Alpo.

After maybe twelve reps on his legs, Eli felt the burn in his lungs, his breath heaving in and out. Five sit-ups later his ears rang, his vision sported spots, and his hands shook. He lay back on the weight bench, wheezing.

He must have been pretty out of it, because he didn't even hear the dogs make a ruckus when Jed came home, just the sound of Jed's cursing. When his eyes focused, Jed hung upside down over him, blue eyes just blazing.

"What the fuck? Are you trying to kill yourself, you stupid son of a bitch?"

"No." His brain felt like month-old cheese. "I just wanted to start slow, build. I got carried away."

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"You think?" Jed eased him to a sitting position. His head spun. "Goddamn it, I can't leave you for a minute."

"I'm sorry." He really was, too, because fuck if he wasn't going to puke.

"You're green, is what you are. Come on."

Jed led him right to the bathroom, where he heaved up breakfast, ending up sitting on the floor with his back against Jed's chest, a cold washcloth pressed to his forehead.

"Sorry," he repeated, head lolling, and Jed nodded, stubble scraping Eli's cheek.

"I know, Mister. I know."

His wrist throbbed. "I hate being weak."

"You're not weak. You're recovering. Give yourself time. You want to do something to keep your conditioning up, we'll start walking come morning. Something slow and easy."

"Okay." God, that washcloth felt good. Eli sighed. "We'll walk. You mad at me?"

"Worried." He could tell it was true, could hear it in Jed's voice. The anger came from worry with Jed. The man just didn't get mad about a lot of shit. Only when Eli did stupid stuff to hurt himself.

"Well, I'm okay. Help me back to bed?"

"Surely."

He made it back to the big bed before he drifted off, all of the dogs staring over the edge of it at him, like some surreal painting of a three—or four, in this case—dog night.

* * * *

"So is he behaving himself?"

"Hell, no." Jed tucked the phone between his shoulder and his ear to pull the pup, Gargantor, away from the hot stove. Silly mutt hadn't figured out that frying bacon was hot. "He's trying to lift weights, for God's sake."

On the other end of the phone, Ross chuckled, the sound a little strained, and Jed frowned.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"Huh?"

"You sound down, Ross. You can't fool me, so what's going on?"

A long pause crackled over the line. "I'm wondering if I can come visit a week or so."

"You and Kev taking a vacation?"

The next pause lasted even longer. "No. Just me," Ross said, sounding tired as all hell.

"What's going on?"

"We're ... well. Remember how it was before we moved to California?"

Hell, yeah, Jed remembered. Ross had been like a wounded bear, looking for a fight and growling impartially at all. He'd come to visit, and he and Jed had torn it up, ending up with bruises and scrapes and at least one split lip. Shit. If it was that bad again, there was trouble.

"You two just have a time of it."

"I know. So can I? Mom and Lloyd are all over the map traveling since Brodie became foreman, and I don't want to impose on him."

"Sure. Just call me when you know when."

"Will do. Thanks, Jed."

"Love you, Ross."

"Ditto."

He hung up, staring at the phone a while. When Ross had first started dating Kevin O'Donnell, after a long stretch of dating solely women, Jed had jumped all over him, telling him not to hurt the kid. But those two just seemed destined to be at odds, and it wasn't always Ross doing the hurting. Not by a long shot.

He rubbed the back of his neck, his mind running over what all could've happened, and almost missed the fuzzy bullet that went by as Garg tried to make another rush for the stove.

After a battle that ended with him on the floor with bacon grease splattered all down the wall, and Garg in his lap happily licking his face, Jed got up and cleaned up, heading in to tell Eli they'd probably have company soon.

"You okay? You look a little worse for wear," Eli said, eyeing him carefully.

"We had an altercation over the bacon. Again."

"So breakfast is..."

"Ruined. Get up, we'll go in to Cedaredge and get doughnuts." The bakery across from the Cedaredge high school had the best pastry.

"All right." He got another look as Eli climbed out of bed. "What's up?"

Jed sat on the bed, picking at the quilt while he watched Eli cover up that fine male form. "Ross and Kev tied it up again. Ross wants to come for a visit."

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"Wow. I thought they were doing better." One leg into the jeans, then two. Then that amazing ass disappeared.

"They were. I swear, Eli. We fight like cats and dogs sometimes, but we've never even thought of leaving. I'm glad for it."

"You and me both." Still bare-chested, Eli came over to drop a kiss square on his mouth, pressing his lips open to push in and taste. It curled his toes up, and he put his hands on Eli's chest, feeling the steady ka-thump of Eli's heart.

"When's he coming?"

"He said he'd call."

"Then we won't worry about it until then."

"Okay." They just rested like that a minute before Jed pushed away. "I need to clean up a little. You need help with a shirt?"

"Nah. I'll wear a pullover."

Nodding, he headed into the bathroom to wash off grease and dog spit, staring at himself in the mirror for a minute after he splashed water on his face. He had it damned good. Damned good.

Sometimes it was just nice to have a reminder.

Chapter 5

"What are you doing?"

Ross glanced up from his kit bag, where he was neatly packing his deodorant and toothbrush, too many years of military training making it impossible to be messy. Kev leaned against the doorjamb, staring at him with big, dark eyes.

"Gonna go see Jed for a week or so."

"Oh."

Something, a little catch in Kev's voice, or the look that came into his eyes, had Ross' hands stilling, his whole body tensing. "What, baby? It's just a week. I thought you could use the time to study, what with me out of your hair."

"Uh-huh." Those hands, the ones that he knew so well, started twisting together, restless, Kev picking at his sleeve cuffs.

"Okay, what is it? You don't want me to go, say the word."

"No, no word. I mean, I have words. We need to talk. But not exactly about that."

"That sounds ominous, baby." Ross put it lightly, but Kev was babbling, and just looked so serious that it gave him a pause.

"It is, kinda." Kev wouldn't look at him now, just stared down at his hands, picking at one thumbnail. God, Kev was looking hard, deep lines etched on either side of his mouth and around his eyes. It wasn't like Ross hadn't ever noticed it, but today it seemed worse.

"So, lay it on me," he said, wanting this out and over with, whatever it was.

Kev shifted from foot to foot, and Ross reached for him, instinctively wanting to comfort, but Kev shied away, hands fluttering.

"No. If you do that, I won't tell you."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. I just, I need to tell you."

Ross took a deep breath, waiting. Waiting for Kev to look at him, so he could read what was coming in those pretty eyes he knew so well. Those eyes couldn't lie to him. Finally, Kev looked at him, and what Ross saw there made his belly clench.

"You know how hard I've been working..." At his nod, Kev rushed on. "I got a job offer. A transfer."

"Yeah? Where?" Fuck, he didn't want to hear that, and didn't want to ask the questions that tried to pop out. Why? How? How could they make it through another move? But it explained a lot. Ross remembered the last one, how it almost did them in, and the ache in his belly got worse. Loads worse.

"I ... it's actually ... Well, I wouldn't be working for the DoA anymore. It would be a new agency. And it's in Maryland."

Back to the east coast. Ross cringed inwardly, even while he put on an encouraging face. "Is it a good upgrade, baby?"

"Oh, yeah." Kev's face lit up, making him look almost like the kid Ross had fallen in love with. It hurt. Hurt bad, because he couldn't remember the last time he was the one to put that look there. "It's much better money, but even better, it's serious crypto. It's, well ... it's the NSA, Ross. They want me. Isn't that awesome?"

"Yeah. Awesome." About as awesome as a sack of dead cats, but what could he say? This was a hellacious good opportunity for Kevin. There was no better place for a crypto officer than the NSA. Hell, they even had a museum. "So, when do we leave?"

"Well, I have to be there in two months."

"Wow." That wasn't enough time to sell the house and Ross' business and get everything settled. "So I guess I'll stay here and sell everything and come on after you get settled. So much for my vacation, huh?"

"Actually. Well." And here Kev glanced away again, face going red, then white. "They offered me the job specifically because I wasn't married, or you know, attached. There's lots of travel involved, and they liked that I didn't have anyone that might get upset being left a lot."

Ross stared, mulling that over, and then over again before replying. He had to be misunderstanding. "So what are you saying, baby? I can't live with you? You want to come visit me while you're in town, like a sailor on shore leave?"

"No! That would be skeezy, and you know I'm not like that."

"I know." Ross sighed. He did know. Kev was nothing if not honest with him. Eventually. "So what do you mean?"

"I mean ... I think you shouldn't come with me."

Fuck. That was like a sucker punch to the gut, and it almost doubled him right over. "Not now? Or not ever?"

This time when Kev looked up there were tears in those big puppy eyes, real ones, and Ross wanted to scream, torn

between punching Kev's lights out and taking Kev in his arms and just holding him.

"Not ever."

"Baby. I don't understand."

"I haven't been your baby, Ross. Not for a long time. I—it's been hard for a while now."

"I know, but I thought we were working it out, Kev. I thought..."

Hell, he'd thought a lot of things.

"You thought eventually I'd retire, and go to Colorado with you. Or quit. You thought you'd wear me down."

Oh, now that wasn't fair. Not fair at all after he'd shelved all his own dreams and done what he had for Kev. Moving to California for fuck's sake. "I haven't even mentioned that in what? A year? Maybe more. Damn it, baby, don't you put this on me."

"I'm not!" God, he was gonna just sit down and bawl. Especially when Kev's tears spilled over and started running down those hollow cheeks. "I know you stopped talking about it, but you never stopped wanting it. We just, I don't ... want that. I want my job, I love it, and this is the biggest of the big breaks. And you don't want to go back to the east coast, and it would be mean to ask you. We just want different things out of life, Ross. And that's not going to change. I know that now. We're just rubbing on each other like sandpaper because of it."

It almost sent him to his knees. Kev was babbling, like he always did under stress, but that meant it was coming right

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from the heart, the rehearsed feel of what Kev was saying earlier completely gone. "You really want to leave me."

"No! I just want both of us to be happy. Have what we want. You ... you can find someone else, Ross, Someone who wants the same things you want. And I won't have to worry that I'm making you hate me."

"Coward."

"What?"

Ross nodded, stabbing a finger in Kev's direction. He'd called Kev a coward once before, back when he'd tried to muster out and move them to Colorado. This time it was even more evident. "You're a coward, and you always have been, baby. So convinced I was going to leave that you keep driving me away, time and time again. Well, this time? I'm going to let you. If you're so fucking sure you can live without me, then fine. You go on and do it. I'll get my shit and get out."

"I..." Kev hiccupped, the tears flowing freely. "I'm sorry. I don't want you to go, but I don't see how it can ... Stay with me until I go? I don't. It's only two months. I know it's a lot to ask, but I—Please."

"You got balls of solid brass, baby." He couldn't believe it, and yet at the same time, he knew he would. He'd stay until Kevin left him. He was stubborn and stupid that way. "I'll stay. For as long as you let me."

Kev gulped back sobs, moving right into his arms and holding him so tight. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Ross."

"I know, baby. So am I."

* * * *

Kevin didn't know if he'd ever recover from putting that look on Ross' face. He'd actually seen Ross' knees buckle, seen the shock and pain in every line of that lean body. He guessed as bad as things had gotten between them, Ross still didn't expect him to leave, to just break it off and go, but he had to. He just had to.

He sat on the bed, their bed, with his knees drawn up, head resting on them, feeling gritty and exhausted and broken inside.

A soft knock came on the bedroom door, Ross standing there when he looked up.

"Hey, baby."

"Hey." His voice came out as a croak. Kev cleared his throat. "What's up?"

"I made supper."

A ghost of a smile stretched his cheeks, stiff as they were from stupid tears. "Yeah? What'd you make?"

"Pancakes."

Oh. Not fair. Comfort food. So much so that he'd named the silly dog after them. Such a him-and-Ross thing that he might never eat them again, if he wanted to be really dramatic. Then again, maybe he could make this last batch of pancakes a good memory, not a bad one.

Scrubbing his hand over his face, Kev crawled off the bed, making to pass Ross on the way out. Ross just grabbed him, like Kev had grabbed Ross a few hours ago, holding on. Kevin leaned on him, head resting on Ross', reminding him that for all of his lover's superman persona, he was taller than Ross.

"I'm sorry," he said for about the millionth time.

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"Hush. There's no sense in beating it to death, b ... Kev. Just let me hug on you a bit."

"Sure. Okay." He wrapped his arms around Ross' waist in return, and they just swayed, just sort of rocked, holding on to one another. It could have been hours. Could have been minutes. Finally he lifted his cheek off Ross' hair. "The pancakes will get cold."

"They're in the oven."

He laughed, the sound a little desperate. In an emergency, Ross thought of everything. Everything. "Did you heat the syrup?"

"Of course."

Oh, God, he didn't know if he could give this up, if he could just walk away from six years of loving and of knowing how Ross liked his eggs and what kind of shorts he wore, and how he voted, and from hearing Ross snore at night. But he had to. He'd made up his mind and changing it now would be a lie.

"I love you."

"I know, baby. Too bad it's not enough. Come eat."

"Okay. Yeah. Let's eat."

It felt like the last meal of the condemned man. They sat in silence, Pancake (the dog, not the food) leaning on his leg, whining from time to time. Even the dog knew it.

"The dog. You should take Pancake with you."

"No, I got him for you."

"I know." God, all the good memories with Pancake, taking him to the beach, playing Frisbee with his Army and Marine friends at Bragg, going for long walks with Ross just tossing a

stick. "But I'll be in a tiny apartment in Maryland, and you'll give him wide-open spaces. He's getting older."

"You really don't want any part of me, do you?"

Shit. Oh, hell, oh, damn, oh, fuck. "That's not it. Please. Ross."

Ross' face closed up, the rough, tanned skin looking lined and leathery. Tired. "Okay, baby. Whatever you want."

Maybe he'd been wrong to ask Ross to stay the two months it would take him to get ready to move. Maybe he should have just cut ties, asked Ross to go. Maybe he was a fucking coward.

"Did you put pecans in the pancakes?"

"Uh-huh. I toasted them first."

"They're good. Kinda like the harvest nut ones at IHOP."

"Yeah, you like those."

He finished off his pancakes, slipping the rest of the sausage to the pooch under the table, his fingers getting a thorough licking for his trouble. Kevin felt awkward. Cruel.

"Do you want to go now?"

Ross rocked back in his chair, crossing his arms, those blue eyes glittering fiercely. "Do you want me to?"

"No, but it's not fair."

"Life's not fair, Kev." Ross shrugged. "We need to sell the house. I have to get the papers drawn up to turn over the jump school. I want to make love to you like it won't be our last time. I'll stay."

God help him, he wasn't strong enough to ask Ross to leave again. "Then I'll do the dishes. We need to change the sheets."

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"I can do that while you clean up here."

Agreeing to leave it at that, they got up and started doing the chores, the simple everyday shit that you did when you were living with someone.

Kevin was desperately afraid he was going to miss that the most.

* * * *

Two years earlier

"Damn it, baby. If you don't get that mutt out of my way..."

"Hey, you got me the mutt!"

Pancake slunk off, and Kev made a mental note to give him a Bonz later. He hadn't been paying one bit of attention to Pancake. Heck, he hadn't been paying any attention to the box he was packing either.

He was just watching Ross parade around in a pair of fatigue pants so old they were almost see through and nothing else. He could even tell there was no underwear under there. Every time Ross bent over to lift another box.

"If you pack everything like you're packing those dishes, we'll never make it to Monterey, baby."

"I'm not the one who's moved all over and can pack a box in five minutes."

Ross didn't really sound mad, though, so Kev didn't start working again. Just stared. Lean muscles stretched over ribs and chest and arms, all covered with gold skin and a light covering of gold hair. Pink-brown nipples. That little vee of hipbones and pubes. God, it was a good thing.

"Flapjack! Get back here with that."

Kev snapped back to himself just in time to see Pancake slink out again, this time trailing Kev's good tablecloth behind him like a flag. Damn.

"I'll get him."

"Put him outside. We'll take a break."

Oh. Oh! Those blue eyes twinkled at him, all naughty, all 'I know what you were looking at', and Kev grinned even as he blushed. Okay. He could do that. Getting tablecloth and dog separated cost him a good five minutes, but he shoved Pancake out the back door and got him a treat, threw the cloth toward the laundry area, and jogged back to the living room just in time to see Ross lose the pants and disappear down the hall to the bedroom.

That ass. He could bounce a quarter off that butt. Maybe he should bounce him off it. Kev hit the bedroom at a trot, his clothes flying in all directions. He bounced on the bed, getting a laugh from Ross, who lay back with his hands behind his head.

"Ready to play, huh, baby?"

"Uh-huh." Yeah. Oh, yeah. Ross' cock stood hard and high for him, so Kev grabbed it, giving it a few good strokes. He watched Ross' head fall back, those brilliant colored eyes closing for him.

"Kev. Good."

"Feels good to me, too." It did, not just the hard flesh in his hand, but the touching. Things had gotten ... strained.

"Oh, good." Ross gasped it out, hips already starting to roll, a flush trailing down the muscles of Ross' chest and belly.

He leaned down, propping up on one elbow so he could watch his hand as it moved. Up and down, up and down, until beads of moisture started to rise from Ross' slit, slick and hot. Kev gathered them up with his thumb, rubbing them into the shaft.

"What do you want, Ross?"

"Your mouth. Suck me, baby. Please."

That'd been one of the first things they'd done together. Kev still loved how it made Ross crazy. "Okay."

Bending even more, he set his mouth to Ross' cock, letting his lips close over the head before pulling back to push at it with his tongue. A deep groan answered that movement, so Kevin did it again, licking hard before sucking Ross in, and moving as far down as he could with one swallow.

"Baby!" Ross stroked his hair, pushing it back off his forehead. So he could see better, probably. Ross loved to watch him suck.

His tongue rubbed against the vein on the underside as he bobbed up and down, making Ross squirm, making him moan. The only thing that made Ross crazier was when he added his hands to the mix, one at the base of Ross' cock, holding him, the other cupping his balls. Deep and musky, Ross' scent filled his nose, making *him* moan and groan, his hips fucking air.

"Baby. Need. Gonna come. And I..."

"Mmhmm." No, he wanted Ross to come in his mouth, wanted to taste, to feel the weight of Ross' load. Kevin sucked harder, squeezing with his hands, and he could feel the wrinkled balls draw up, could feel the pulsing of Ross' cock as

it shot, salty and warm and wet in his mouth and down his throat.

Ross just lay there, panting, arms thrown out to the sides. Kevin raised his head. "Good?"

"Real good, baby."

"Cool." Kev grinned, licking come from the corner of his mouth. "Gonna fuck you now, 'kay?"

The sight of Ross nodding and grabbing his knees to pull them back and open for him almost had him coming before he could even lube up that tiny hole. No way was he gonna waste this one, though, and Kevin grabbed the little tube and got to work, two fingers sliding right into Ross' body, in and out, just like Ross' cock had slipped into his mouth.

It took maybe ten seconds before Ross opened up to him; just like Ross. Always jumping into things. His cock slid home in one long thrust, the ring of muscle scraping at him, his eyes rolling back in his head. This never paled. He never got tired of it. Never.

"Kev..." Ross moaned his name, hands reaching for him, stroking his chest, fingers pulling his nipples. Already hard, they fucking ached now, sending jolts down to his buried cock, making it jump and twitch.

"Uh-huh." All he could do was rock, his hips punching his cock into Ross' ass, his whole body jerking. "God. Tight. Love the way you feel inside."

Even when things went badly outside of the bedroom, this never changed. When his hands touched Ross' skin, they communicated just fine. Ross groped for his hand, putting it on Ross' still hard cock, and Kev started stroking in time with

their fucking, uncoordinated as hell, but Ross didn't seem to care.

Sweat beaded and ran on his body, down on to Ross' skin. His cock pushed in and out, his arm moved up and down, and before he could even gasp Kevin shot, his hips sawing back and forth, filling Ross deep. The prick in his hand jerked, Ross crying out and clamping down hard on him, squeezing out everything

"Uhn. Baby. Love you."

"Uh-huh. Love you too, Ross."

He did. Even with all of the troubles, he did. They'd move to California. They'd make this work.

Even if it killed them.

* * * *

Present Day

Packing got hard about the third day. Ross started looking at all of the shit Kev didn't want, or wasn't going to take, and it started to hurt. Well, it always hurt, but this set a new kind of pain right under Ross' breastbone, making it hard to breathe.

"Do you want the dishes, Ross?"

"No." No, where would he put them? He was gonna stay with either his mom and Lloyd, or Jed for a while. Hell, maybe even his other brother Ken and his wife Mandy. He wouldn't need dishes. "No, you take them."

Kev glanced over, just a flash of dark, hollow eyes.
"Ross..."

"What? I don't need the fucking dishes, baby."

Flinching, Kev nodded, getting a new roll of paper and taping up a box. His shoulders stayed hunched near up between his ears. Ross sighed.

"I'm sorry, Kev."

"No. It's okay." Kevin turned to him, coming right into his arms.

They held each other more easily now than they had in maybe a year, but Ross knew it was false comfort. Now it wasn't need or tenderness. Now it was desperation.

"It's not okay. But we'll live."

"Yeah." Kev's cheek rubbed the top of his head. "I just keep thinking, and you know thinking is bad for me."

Ross barked out a laugh. "No shit on that one, baby. Now gimme a kiss and let's get busy."

He got his kiss, Kev's lips soft and bruised from biting them, sweet as summer rain. Then Kev spun away, going back to packing dishes. "Are you sure you want to move, Ross? You've got your jump school, friends. The house."

Yeah. All that and more. Ross tried not to snort, his hands automatically sorting cups from mugs. "Baby, you know I came here for you. I've tried not to be a jerk about it, and I've been okay, but if you're not here, California isn't for me."

"I'm..."

Ross cut him off. "If you apologize one more time, I'll smack you."

The little chuckle sounded so much like happier days that it almost took him to his knees. "You wouldn't. Pancake would bite you."

"Baby, Poundcake wouldn't bite a burglar."

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"Pancake!"

"Flapjack."

"Pancake!"

It was an old argument, but it eased the tightness under his sternum, letting him breathe again.

Ross figured if he made it through the next month he could count himself as a saint.

Too bad he'd never aspired to sainthood. Not one little bit.

Chapter 6

"Do you think the guestroom will be okay?" Jed looked around, and darned if it didn't look sparse in the guestroom these days. No one ever came to stay. 'Course now Ross was going to, wasn't he? Damn. That just ... damn.

"Sure. What's wrong with it?" Eli poked his head in the door, grinning to beat the band. The damned fool.

"Well, aside from the fact that we cleared out shit to put your weight set in here and now it looks empty as hell."

"And the living room looks smaller with my new screened-off weight room. Look, why don't we just go down to Delta and go to the Salvation Army? We can get a little desk or something, and a new nightstand." That knowing look Eli gave him said his man wasn't missing a thing, not one thing about how upset this made him.

Blowing out a breath, he rubbed his hand over his hair, newly short from a trip to the barber the day before. "Yeah. Okay. We can do that. I tell you, Mister. Them breaking up has really thrown me for a loop."

"I know." Serious now, Eli came over, good hand coming up to stroke his cheek. Dark whiskey eyes looked into his. "Not gonna happen in this house, Thatcher."

"Good. I knew that, though, you know?" He did. It was more that he'd come to kinda think of Kev as family, and this just made him hurt, for Ross and for Kevin both. Jed leaned on Eli, arms going around the man's solid back. "Glad you're here, Mister."

"Me, too."

They rested like that a minute before Jed pushed away, a grin stretching his cheeks. "All right. Enough of that mushy shit. Let's get this place furnished so Ross has something to hang his shit on when he gets here next week."

Eli laughed out loud, following him out of the room. "You got it, Jed. And besides, you should be looking forward to seeing him."

"I am." Lord knew it had been a long time, six years since he and Ross had spent more than a few days together. He just worried.

"Come on. I'll buy you lunch at Carl's Jr." Eli clapped him on the back, steering him toward the door.

"Bacon cheeseburger?"

"You know it. With extra large fries."

"I can get behind that. We could even buy some kids' packs for the muttleys."

"We could."

Oh, if Eli was willing to pay out to feed the dogs special stuff, then he must be looking down in the mouth. "You're my hero, Marshal. You really are."

Eli just kissed his neck, a quick careless smack. "Yeah, and don't you forget it."

* * * *

"What do you mean if I want to keep my eligibility I have to go to ... Oh, fuck. Okay, okay, but you have to get me the hopper flight up there. Uh-huh. Whatever."

Eli hung up the phone with Gary Ruiz, the new director of the smokejumper's center in Grand Junction, staring at it for

a minute, his mouth pulled to one side in a grimace. Goddamn it, why did everything have to happen at once?

"Jed!"

He went looking for Jed, the late September sunshine warm on his bare feet as he crossed the living room. The nights had gotten crisp, the leaves were turning, but it was still warm enough during the day to go without thick socks.

No Jed. Damn. The truck sat out in the yard, though, and the dogs were all still milling around out in the yard, so Jed had to be close.

Oh, hell. There he was, out by the barn, shirt off, sweating like crazy as he raked up leaves and branches, stuffing them in the burn barrel. Eli's cock twitched as he watched. He still thought Jed had the most amazing ass he'd ever seen, had since the first day they'd met at the smallest airport in the world.

Then Jed turned that wide, lazy-assed grin on him, and Eli fell for the man all over again. "Hey, you. How's that wrist feel?"

Eli looked at it. The cast had come off three days ago, and while it still had to be wrapped up, he figured it was doing well. "Good. You look hot."

"Metaphorically, or literally?"

"Both." Shit, he shoulda brought a beer or something. "I, uh, need to talk to you about something, Thatcher."

"Oh, that sounds bad." Jed grabbed a water bottle up off the ground and gulped some down. "What's up?"

"I got a call from the jump center. Since I missed part of the season, they want me to go up to Bend for some fucking regurgitated training."

"Huh." He got a keen look from those bright blues.
"When?"

"Next day or two. Gary is making the flight arrangements as we speak."

"Well, damn."

Yeah. He felt the same way as Jed. He hated to be leaving right when Ross was supposed to show. "Sorry, Thatcher."

"Me, too." Jed shrugged, lashes coming down to shield his eyes. "But you gotta do what you gotta."

"You pissed?"

"Not at you." Now he got that grin he was looking for. Fucking A. "At the world in general? Yeah."

Eli moved closer, reaching out to slide his hand along Jed's ribs. "Anything I can do to make it better?"

"Hmmm." A shiver rocked the skin under his hand, and he saw Jed's nipples draw up into tiny points. "Fajitas for supper?"

Eli didn't cook much, but fajitas he could do, and Jed loved them. Somehow he always ended up with Jed on top of him and tortillas stuck to his back. "You bet. But I was thinking something more immediate."

"Like this?" Easing over, Jed put a hand behind Eli's neck and pulled him down for a kiss, lips opening under his.

Fuck, yes. God, he loved the way Jed responded to him. It never got old. Never.

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The kiss went deep and a little toothy, Jed's teeth hard on his lower lip, bruising it right up. That never failed to send shocks straight to his cock, and Eli groaned, trying hard to keep his balance as his legs shook.

"Want you," Jed said, stroking the nape of his neck, the little hairs there standing on end.

"Got me. Right here if you want."

"I do." Fingers tugging at his t-shirt and jeans, Jed pushed and pulled, getting him naked in the sunlight.

That kind of thing used to make him nervous as hell, being au naturel in the great outdoors. Jed had this way of making it seem perfectly normal, though, and Eli was all for it these days. He struggled with the button and zipper of Jed's jeans, and damn, there they were, all skin and muscle, rubbing all over each other.

"Good, Jed. So good."

"Uh-huh. Wanna fuck you, Eli." Stroking his back, his ass, Jed grinned up at him. "Yeah?"

"God, yeah." Like he was going to say no? Turning, feeling like the biggest slut, he bent and spread himself, waiting for Jed to get him ready.

He heard Jed groan, the sound long and deep, before Jed plopped to his knees behind, thumbs spreading him wide so Jed could get in there and lick at him, getting him wet, opening him up. That tongue speared him, Jed really fucking him with it, setting his nerves on fire with every touch. Little shocks of sensation trailed up and down his spine, and Eli grabbed his cock, working it in time to Jed's licks and pushes.

"Ready?"

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All he could do was nod frantically. Jed rose behind him, hands on his hips to hold him steady and pull him down so his knees bent a little. Then Jed's thick cock prodded him, the head hot against his wet hole, him so stretched and ready that Jed slid right in, no waiting, no fuss.

"Fuck, mister," Jed said, voice rough and strangled.

"That's the idea, Thatcher. Don't keep me waiting."

A breathless chuckle was his answer. Well, that and Jed started moving, just really going to town, cock sliding in and out of him. Thick, heavy, and so hot he burned, Jed fit him perfectly, so fucking good he cried out, hand clenching on his cock as he forgot to move, forgot everything but the feel of Jed inside him.

Jed wrapped one arm around his chest and shifted, hitting a whole new spot in him, and that made him yell again, his prick twitching wildly, the long muscles in his thighs starting to quiver.

"Love you, Mister."

God. If there was one thing guaranteed to set him off ... Eli came like a ton of bricks, cock jerking in his hand as he shot on the ground between his feet. Everything in him squeezed down, every damned muscle going tight and hard.

Jed grunted, thrust two or three more times into him, and came, filling him so deep and wet that his eyes rolled back in his head and his legs gave out, toppling them to the dirt.

After a while he rolled to his back, staring up at the sky that went on and on in Colorado, blue and white and blinding.

"That was a fine attempt at making me all better, Mister," Jed said, laughing, resting his cheek against Eli's chest.

"I thought so. I think you ruined me for life, though."

"Is that a complaint?"

"Hell, no." No way, no day. "It was merely an observation."

"Well, if I didn't manage it this time, I can try again after you make me supper tonight." Jed didn't sound pissed anymore, just mellow, which meant he'd done his job. It was still going to suck to leave, but that was the way it went.

Eli would just have to make it up to Jed over and over. Luckily he enjoyed that as much as Jed did.

* * * *

One year earlier

"Eli? I got some bad news, Mister." Jed went looking for Eli out on the porch, finding him there just like he figured he would, sipping on a beer.

"What?" Eli didn't even put his feet down off the porch rail, looking loose and comfy, scratching Scorch's ears.

"That little flight we were gonna take up to Aspen? I can't do it now." He hated it like hell, but he had a contract with one of the tourist outfits, and they'd tapped him for a flying tour of the Black Canyon Park.

"Yeah?" Now, Eli didn't look so relaxed. "Well, that's a shame, but I'll live."

"I know, but I'm sorry for it." They just hadn't had much time to connect since jump season started, and Eli had this whole stretch of time off, and...

"Stop obsessing, Jed." Eli smiled for him, easing him.

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"Well, now, you know how I am about that," he said, grinning right back.

"I do. That's why I said it. Get a beer and come sit with me a while."

That he could do. "Okay. Be right back." He headed on into the house to get a cold one, shaking his head at himself. Eli never got pissy about shit like this, and Jed didn't know why he expected it.

They were rock solid. Sometimes he just needed to think about that before he started worrying things to death.

* * * *

Present day

"You sure you're gonna be okay?" Kev looked at Ross, his stomach feeling like it had a big rock in it.

"No, but I'll live," Ross replied, shoulders hunching. "You should get on, baby. You're gonna miss your flight."

His flight. To BWI and then to his new apartment, leaving Ross behind for good. Oh, God.

"Is it selfish of me to want you to tell me it's okay to write?"

"Yes." Ross cracked a smile for him, though, coming over to stand close, reaching out to touch his arm. "But I want to know where you are and what you're doing, Kev. Even if it hurts."

Kevin wanted that, too. They should probably make a clean break, and he knew it, but somehow he had to know that even if they weren't together Ross Thatcher was out

there somewhere, living large like he always did, and breaking hearts just by walking into the room.

All of his stuff was gone, the movers taking it the day before, and the house echoed weirdly as he made his way to the front door with his carry-on. Pancake whined, trotting up, tail beating Kev's legs, and he squatted to rub the dog's ears one last time.

"Take good care of him."

"You know I will."

"Yeah. I know." Ross took care of everything. Always. "I love you, Ross. I just never ... I never really believed it enough."

Face blank, Ross nodded, the only hint of how he felt in the clenched hands. Ross' hands always gave him away. "I know, baby," Ross said. "And I'm sorry for it."

"It's not your fault." He would have said more, but his cab pulled up in front of the house, honking once. "I'll call you when I get there."

"Yeah. Just leave a message on my cell if I don't answer."

"Okay."

Kevin just stood there, willing his feet to move, unable to get them going. He couldn't do this. He just couldn't. Not with Ross' smooth façade cracking a little around the edges, those blue eyes glittering at him, his dog at his feet, licking his hand. Oh, he just couldn't.

"Time to go, baby. You'll be late." Ross came over and gave him a kiss, a soft, lingering touch of lips, and for a minute Kevin hoped wildly that Ross might ask him to stay.

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But then Ross was opening the door for him, holding Pancake's collar. "Goodbye, Kevin. Good luck."

And suddenly that was that. He was out the door and it was closing behind him, and all he could do was walk away.

Kev stared at the closed door a minute, jumping as the cabbie honked again. "Goodbye, Ross," he whispered, and headed off to start his new life.

Alone.

* * * *

Ross waited maybe five minutes after Kev left to pick up the phone. He dialed Jed's number, working real hard not to punch the stupid buttons right off into space.

"Lo?"

"Hey." He paced around a little, looking at all of the empty space. He had to shampoo the carpets before he left, as the buyers had stipulated that due to pet odors. Pancake paced with him.

"Hey, Ross. How ... I mean. Is he?"

"Yeah. Look, I was going to hit the road tonight, but I think I'm going to get the work done around here and then get a hotel for a day or two."

"What? Why?"

He blew out a sigh. "Because I'm gonna get drunk, that's why. And I don't want to wait fifteen hours to do it."

"Yeah? Well, asshole, Eli is gone up to Oregon, and I'm kicking around all by myself. Stop being a fuckhead and get your ass here. We'll get drunk together."

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Ross pondered that for a minute. Did he want company on his bender? He looked at Pancake and sighed. He might not, but the dog deserved better company than him. "Yeah, okay. I'll be there by tomorrow morning."

"Cool." Jed paused, the silence loud and awkward. "Drive safe. Love you, bro."

"You, too. See you in a while."

Hanging up, Ross took stock of what he still had to do. Might as well get to it. He had no reason to stall anymore. Time to get the hell out of Dodge.

* * * *

Jed hung up with Ross, staring at the phone a minute and biting his lip. He thought about calling his mom and having her call Ross, but he wasn't sure his brother would appreciate that at all. Maybe he should get their middle brother Ken to call. Just to see if he could get a little more of a push in there to get Ross to come on home instead of drowning his sorrows.

Speaking of drowning sorrows; well, if Ross wasn't going to be in until the following morning, Jed figured he could go on down to town that night and tie one on himself. It was probably the whole Ross and Kevin deal, but Jed was missing Eli fierce, and was sick to death of staring at his own four walls.

He fed everyone, mucked out the barn, did some work for Louise Brooks down the road, and headed out to the Junction about four in the afternoon, actually putting the sun at his back for a change.

This time he bypassed the Rockslide, going to the Village inn for supper, and then heading to the Corral to play some pool while he drank, figuring that would keep him from getting too bombed to drive.

It didn't, but it was a good thought.

Sure enough, he sat there for maybe four hours, steady drinking and getting tipsy as hell. By the time he was ready to go, his legs were so unsteady, Jed thought he might just fall over right there on Colorado Avenue and sleep.

"Hey, are you all right, buddy? Jed? Hey, it is you. This is what, the second time in a month?"

Jed blinked, trying to focus. "Ray. Howdy."

"You shoulda called me."

Called. Number. Right. "I lost your napkin from last ... month? Besides, you know I don't have a cell phone."

"Well, come on. I'll drive you, and you can pick up your truck tomorrow. Where are you staying?"

Jeez, Ray was a nice guy. Too bad Jed couldn't tell him. "I'll just sleep in my truck. I don't have a place tonight. Was planning on going home."

Ray snorted, peering into his eyes. "Well, you're bombed, so that'd be a big no. Your man out fighting fires again? I thought burn season was pretty well over."

"Oregon," Jed mumbled. "Training."

"Well, you can stay with me. I promise to be good."

"Kay." Okay, yeah. He could do that. Damn, he might just toss. "Ray, I think I need to go back inside. Gotta puke."

"Shit!" Ray hustled him back inside and stood out in the hall while he ralped, then took him home, muscling him in

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and out of Ray's big dualie like he was a sack of potatoes. Hell, maybe he was.

"You gonna be all right on the couch?" Ray asked, and Jed nodded.

"Just gimme a trash can." He hadn't had bedspins since the Army. Lord, lord.

"Sleep it off, Jed. You can buy me breakfast." Ray patted his sweaty head and turned the light off, leaving him alone in the dark, blessedly cool and quiet front room.

Hoo, yeah. That'd been a good idea. Jed resolved right then and there not to feel sorry for himself anymore.

It just wasn't good for him.

Chapter 7

Ross finally crawled out of the bottle three days after Kevin left.

Instead of getting a hotel, he'd gone to a campground, one with beach access so Pancake could run some. Then he'd holed up in a two-man pup tent with a bottle of Jack and a pack of smokes, even though he'd quit years ago.

About nine the third morning, he remembered he'd told Jed he was just going to come on. Fuck. Oh, man, he stank. Ross crawled out of the tent, grabbing his phone and heading to the truck to plug it in and charge it, figuring he'd have about a zillion messages from Jed.

Sure enough, there were six voicemails. All increasingly inflammatory. Ross sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. The last one was from his mom.

"Ross Thatcher, you get your ass here," she'd said. "Don't make me have to track you down like the rabid dog you are."

Count on Mom to make him smile. The one message that wiped the smile completely off his face came from Kevin.

"Hey. Um. Hi. I guess you're not answering your phone, which is totally understandable, because you know, you have every right to not want to talk to me. Anyway, I got in okay, and I start my job tomorrow. I'll send mail to you at Jed's right now, okay? I miss you lots, and I can almost hear you say I don't get to, because I'm the one that left, but I do. Love you, Ross. Take care."

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Ross scrubbed one hand over his face, feeling stubble like he couldn't believe. Pancake blinked one lazy eye at him, snuffling.

"Yeah, buddy. I need to get off my ass, huh? Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid."

The water at the campground showers came out icy cold, and that woke him right up, sending him back to his tent with his skin covered in goose bumps and his balls trying to crawl up into his body. It took him ten minutes to break down camp and feed Pancake, and then it was down to the beach for one last walk before starting the trek back to Colorado. To home.

Kevin had loved the beach, and he would love it this morning, Ross thought. The sun was up, the wind was down, and it was already about seventy degrees. The water crashed against the shore, the constant roar something he knew he would take weeks to stop listening for. Lord, lord.

Once he'd hit the road and gotten him and Pancake a McDonald's biscuit, he called Jed.

"Hello?" Jed sounded about like he felt. Groggy.

"You still in bed, lazy ass?"

"No. Well, yes, but not like you think. Caught a cold down in Junction a few days back. Where the hell have you been?"

"In the bottle, of course. Camping out at the beach. I'm on my way now. Can you call Mom?" Ross really, really didn't want to call his mom.

"No. Coward." Now Jed was laughing at him. "You have to. I'm a sick man."

"Oh, fine. Kev called. He got there okay."

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A long pause answered that. Finally Jed said, "Well, that's good, yeah?"

"Yeah." He guessed. "Look, I'll be there in another fourteen hours or so. This time I'll make it. Promise."

"You'd better. If I felt human, I'd kick your ass. As it is I'll settle for chicken soup. Homemade." Poor Jed really did sound awful, clogged to the gills.

"You got it." Hell, that would give him something to do besides go looking for trouble. "Be there soon."

"I'll be waiting on you."

"Later."

The highway stretched out in front of him. California, little parts of Arizona and Nevada, a huge honkin' stretch of Utah and then home. Ross reached over and turned on the radio, getting a lick on his cheek from the dog.

Fourteen hours was too damned much time to think.

* * * *

Three Years Earlier

"Jed, roll over." Eli poked Jed in the ribs, trying to get him to stop storing.

"Mmmn?" Rolling right into him, Jed turned, looking at him with heavy-lidded, bloodshot eyes. "Wha'?"

"Oh, man, you look awful. You feeling sick?" The guy just looked like he'd been on a three-day bender, which Eli knew he hadn't, as they'd been home. Together.

"My head is all stuffed." Jed sounded like he'd swallowed a foghorn.

"Shit." Eli kissed Jed's forehead before rolling out of bed. Whatever it was, he didn't want to catch it. "I'll make you some honey lemon tea."

"Thanks."

Escaping the croaky one, Eli headed for the kitchen to make that tea. Of course he had to stop and piss, and feed the dogs, and let them out and let them in. By the time he got the tea back to the bedroom, Thatcher was flat on his back, arms wide, snoring like the Latvian chain saw drill team.

Eli debated. For all of about five seconds. Then he grabbed one of Jed's feet and yanked. "Hey, Thatcher. I didn't go to all of this trouble for you to be asleep on me and not drink it."

"Huh?" Covers flew in all directions as Jed flailed, trying to sit up. God, he really sounded bad. "Sorry. Din' mean to fall asleep."

"I know, Jed. Come on and drink up like a good boy, and I'll let you go back to bed." They'd certainly been together long enough to know that the best thing to do on the rare, rare occasions that Jed got sick was to leave him alone. Completely.

Jed drank the tea and took the aspirin Eli gave him before snorting a little and burrowing back under the covers. It was actually kind of cute, which made him the biggest sap alive, because only a man in love would think a sick Jed Thatcher was cute. Well, maybe Jed's mom might, too. Maybe.

Speaking of, Eli figured he ought to call and tell Nancy they wouldn't be up for brunch. Mom Thatcher tended to fret when they just didn't show, something Eli had found out the

hard way. He'd never forget the time he and Jed had gotten busy on the living room couch and forgotten about a lunch date. Nancy had burst in on them at the wrong moment, and it had taken almost a week for Eli to recover from throwing his back out.

He dialed up, pulling out the Frosted Mini Wheats and tossing one to Scorch.

"Hello."

Eli grinned. He loved the way Nancy said hello, with all of the emphasis on the first syllable. And it was never a question.

"Hey, Nancy. It's Eli."

"Well, duh. How's it going, honey?"

"Not so good." Damn it. Eli nudged Spot away from his feet. He should have put on slippers. Damned toe-licking dog. "Jed's got the creepin' crud."

"Oh, Lord. Then keep him away from here. You know sure as shit that Lloyd and Stu will both come down with it."

"Hell, yes." He'd never seen anyone catch anything as quick as Nancy's husband Lloyd and their old ranch foreman Stu. "I just thought I'd let you know we won't be at brunch."

"I'll pack you a basket and come on later today."

"Oh, you don't have to..."

"I know that, honey. But I'm his mother. You know that means I'm biologically obliged to come and fuss."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll get Lloyd to make chicken soup, and I'll bring you some of that ham steak we're having."

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Sometimes it was good being a part of a family. "Thanks, Nancy."

"No trouble at all, son. You sit tight. We'll fix him up."

"Bye, Nancy."

"Bye."

Eli hung up and wandered back into the bedroom, looking at poor Jed, who was on his back again, struggling for each wheezy snore. Poor guy.

As long as Jed didn't give it to him, there'd be sympathy. If Jed did, all bets were off.

* * * *

Present Day

Jed had woken up after his bender with a pounding head, a dry mouth, and a frog in his throat. He'd also had an aching chest and a queasy stomach.

And no fucking clue where he was.

He'd been on someone's couch, but he hadn't figured out whose until he'd gotten up and run to the bathroom, and seen Ray asleep and bare-assed naked on a big four poster. He knew that ass, and he knew that bed.

Well, at least Jed himself had been on the couch. And fully clothed.

"What in Hell's name was I thinking?" he'd wondered aloud, and headed into the john to clean up. Ray'd passed him on his way out, morning wood poking out in front of him. Now that had been awkward.

After buying Ray doughnuts for taking him back to his truck, Jed had driven home, taking the curving, hour-long

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drive to Delta a little slow and a lot careful, getting some serious reproach from the dogs for showing up late to feed them.

Four days later, Jed was still paying for his night of decadence with a vicious cold.

He was on his own couch, wrapped in a quilt and shivering in the crisp October air when a pounding set up on the door that had all of the dogs barking their fool heads off, making his ears ring.

Groaning, Jed hauled his ass up and went to answer the door, finding a younger mirror image staring back at him, bloodshot eyes and all.

"Hey, Jed."

"Ross." He croaked it out, wincing as his throat just felt like raw hamburger.

"Lord, you look like shit." Ross gave him a grin, blue eyes twinkling a little.

"So do you. Come on in. You need help with your shit?" God, he hoped not.

"There's not too much of it, and it can stay in the truck. When was the last time you were sick?" Ross followed into the house, boot heels clicking, petting noses and scratching ears.

"Oh, two, three years ago? When was the last time you went on a three-day binge?" Asshole wasn't getting away with the implied accusation. Not one bit.

Ross grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, yeah. Look, I need a shower, and you need to crash. Why don't we start over in a few hours?"

Yeah. Jed nodded, figuring that sounded like a plan. If they kept talking after they got off on the wrong foot, they'd end up pummeling each other, and Jed was in no shape for that. He took a good long look at Ross before he said anything else, though.

Shit.

Jed just stepped right up and wrapped his arms around his brother, hugging him tight-tight. "Welcome home, little brother."

Stiffening for just a moment, then sort of sagging, Ross hugged him back, making his ribs creak. "Thanks, Jed. Thanks."

There just wasn't much else he could say, he knew. But it was a long time before Jed let go.

* * * *

Eli unloaded his duffel from the plane's tiny cargo area and clapped pilot John Parker on the back. "Thanks for the hop, man. I'm glad I didn't have to go commercial."

"Yeah, well, if that man of yours had half a brain, he would've come and got you."

Shaking his head, Eli hoisted his pack on his back. "He's sick as a dog and his brother just got in to town. No way was I gonna ask him to fly up and get me."

"Your loss."

"Hey, you don't have to tell me." Eli knew. He'd missed Jed fiercely this time, even though it had only been five days. Maybe it was because he knew they'd have very little time alone in the next few weeks, maybe months, what with Ross

there and Jed's busy season starting up. Funny how that always happened when Eli's crazy part of the year ended.

"Well, go home and play nursemaid. See you around, Marshall."

"Later." The tiny Delta airport wasn't as tiny as it had been the first time Eli'd landed at it. It had gone upscale now, with all sorts of houses there that had hangars instead of garages. You could live right on the landing strip with your plane. He'd teased Jed more than once that they should just move down and buy one.

Jed just laughed and laughed, thank God.

"Hey, Marshall. You need a ride up? I've got to go to Cedaredge," said Marty Johnson, a fellow smokejumper who lived up their way. "I can drop you off."

"Sounds good, man. Thanks." Marty was an okay guy. Eli'd liked him right away, thanks to a firm handshake and a pair of twinkling green eyes. Not to mention that Marty was an old man like him.

They loaded their shit in Marty's truck pretty much in silence, heading through Delta's small commercial district, turning left to head out toward the turnoff to Cedaredge. Only when they were halfway up the hill to Orchard City did Marty say anything.

"Look, Marshall, it's probably none of my business, but I was down in the Junction the other night..."

"Good for you. And?" He hated it when people started a sentence with that none of their business shit. It usually meant it really wasn't their business.

"Well, I saw Jed over there," Marty said, giving him a sideways glance. "And he wasn't leaving the Corral alone."

His back went up right away, and Eli gave Marty a level stare. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means he was leaving with someone else. Ray Calvallo to be exact. Now, Jed was awful drunk, staggering drunk in fact. So I would bet on nothing happening. But you know how word gets around."

Eli wracked his brain trying to think who Ray Calvallo was, and he came up blank. Then it occurred to him. "He and Ray used to see each other."

"Yeah." Marty nodded. "Just a heads up, man."

He wanted to say 'gee thanks' or 'fuck you very much', but Eli just held it in. What good would it do to come down on Marty? Shit, it probably didn't mean anything at all; it was probably just gossip. That didn't keep his cheeks from heating, or keep him from slumping down in his seat with his arms crossed.

They rode in silence the rest of the way, until Eli unloaded his gear at the gate to his and Jed's house. "Owe you gas?"

"Nah. And I'm sorry I brought it up, Marshall. It's probably nothing. See ya." Waving out the window, Marty tore off up the road, leaving Eli to unlock the gate and fend off the thundering herd of dogs that came at him, barking their high-pitched 'you're home' barks.

"Yeah, yeah, I missed you guys, too," he said, fighting them off. "But I don't have a free hand."

They jumped around his legs, nearly tripping him up, Scorch especially trying to get his attention. Eli finally

dumped his duffel on the porch and started scratching ears, murmuring to them all.

When the front door finally opened, it was Ross standing there, not Jed, though if he wasn't mistaken that was Jed's blue flannel shirt.

"Well, hey, Eli. Welcome home."

"Hi, Ross." Eli got up and climbed the little stairs, going to give Ross a back pounding hug. "How're you holding up?"

Not that it wasn't easy to see how Ross was doing. His cheeks looked hollow, his eyes dull and old.

"I'll do. You look hale and hearty."

"All that training. Makes a man fit." They shared a tiny grin, neither of them really in a laughing mood. "Where's Jed?"

"I see how it is. We're not good enough for you, the dogs and me."

"I just need to talk to him." God, he'd snapped that out, and Ross was too fucking perceptive, giving him a keen look.

"Well, you missed him. He's down in Delta, at the doctor. They wanted to do a strep test."

"He's been that sick?" Wow, he knew Jed hadn't been feeling well, had sounded like shit on the phone. But usually Jed bounced back so quick.

Ross nodded. "Yeah. Fever surges, exhaustion. I swear, Eli, it's like he has narcolepsy. We'll be talking and bam, he's asleep at the kitchen table."

"Damn." Made it kinda hard to vent your spleen on a man who had some dread disease. Not that he wouldn't do his best

when Jed got home anyway, because he would. "I need a shower."

"Too right, you do," Ross agreed, pretending to scent the air around them. "You're ripe, buddy."

"Fuck you, man. I've been on the tiniest plane known to man for hours and hours."

"One of those that you have to flap your arms to keep in the air, huh?"

"You know it. I could use some food, too." Made it good Jed wasn't there yet. He could get a little more human before they talked.

Nodding, Ross led the way inside. "Why don't you go take a shower, and I'll whip up something. Just bacon and eggs sound all right?"

"Sounds like heaven," he said, dropping his duffel by the laundry alcove and heading back to the bathroom. His wrist ached and his back hurt, and damn, he was a thoroughly pathetic specimen.

The bathroom looked good. Like home. They'd just redone it last year, with blue Mexican tiles around the sink and tub, and high-gloss Saltillo on the floor. Fluffy towels sure beat the ones in the barracks up at Bend, reminding him that he and Jed had a place here. Surely Jed wouldn't do anything to fuck that up.

Surely not.

By the time he got out of the shower and got into a clean pair of jeans and a soft sweatshirt, Eli felt much better, physically and mentally. No way would Jed do him dirty. No way.

The eggs and bacon smelled fantastic. Home cooking had been in short supply the last few days. That was one thing all three of the Thatcher brothers could do in spades. Cook. Even Ken, who had a wife who could whip up a meal while holding two of their five kids and dodging dogs, could still make a mean roast beef.

"That looks great." Though it looked like enough for an army, with a huge mound of eggs already sitting on a plate and another plate full of toast next to it.

"Uh-huh. Jed called. He'll be back in a few, and Ken called to say he's on his way back from delivering a horse to a rancher over in Collbran, and wants to stop in and see me and check in on Jed." Ross gave him a rueful grin. "So I just cracked more eggs."

"So domestic," Eli teased, and dodged Ross' swat. "I guess I'd better set the table then, huh?"

"Yeah."

They moved around the kitchen silently, Eli shaking his head at how seamlessly Ross always seemed to flow right into the house, without even so much as a ripple until he and Jed tied it up and beat each other bloody. Still, there was something about the set of Ross' shoulders now, something weary and kind of defeated.

"So," he began, and Ross glanced over. "How goes it? Really?"

Ross looked away, hands clenching on the counter, head hanging a moment. "It sucks pretty hard, Eli. Hurts."

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"Yeah." Fuck, he hated it. Eli'd always liked Kev, and it was hard to believe the kid would just up and leave Ross like that. Ross loved him so hard it hurt to see sometimes. "I'm sorry."

Just about the time Ross opened his mouth to reply, the dogs set up an unholy ruckus outside, and Eli went to look and see who it was. Poor Jed looked like crap, gray and shaky, so Eli went on out to help him fend the furry monsters off.

"Hey." Eli leaned in for a kiss.

Jed drew back. "Got strep, Mister. Best to stay away."

"Gross." Eli hugged him anyway. He'd just avoid the swapping spit. Jed hugged him back so hard his ribs creaked,

"I missed you, Mister," Jed said, just leaning on him for a minute. "Like hell."

He thought about what Marty had said for all of a second before nodding and kissing Jed's cheek. "Same here. Ross is cooking. Did he tell you Ken is coming?"

"Uh-huh. Good thing on the food. I have antibiotics I'm supposed to take with some." Jed put an arm around his waist, steering him inside. "Good training? How's your wrist?"

"It's better. Still aches. What happened to you?"

Jed snorted. "Well, the night you left, I went down to the Junction and got drunk. Doc thinks between that and maybe me getting a dirty glass at the bar or something, I just let myself in for it. I tell you, Eli, I haven't been so sick in an age."

"No kidding, You sound like a frog." He was just about to bring up Ray when the dogs set up a howl again, and Jed

rolled his eyes, turning back to get the door. Eli steered him the other way. "You sit. I'll help Ken get in."

"Thanks, Eli."

It took nearly a half an hour to get everyone settled, but finally they were all at the table eating, having bribed the dogs to stop whining at the door with a load of bacon. Eli looked around. Damn, the Thatchers were a good-looking crew.

And one that was about to explode, if Ken kept pushing Ross.

"Well, you're clearly miserable," Ken was saying. "Why not just call him? By now I bet you anything he misses you as much as you do him, and will gladly have you back."

Ouch. Even Eli winced at that.

Ross just growled, getting up to take his dishes to the sink. "Fuck you, Ken," he said. "I lived through two months of watching him slowly but surely work me out of his life. By the end of the last week, I was sleeping on the couch, and he'd sold or gotten rid of everything that was "ours" that I didn't want to keep."

"But..."

"Give it a fucking rest." A plate broke against the counter, splitting in two. Ross swore and started sucking his finger.

Jed sighed. "Ken, stop it. Ross, go get a Band-Aid." When Jed got up, he swayed, and Eli got up, too, grabbing him, glowering at the other brothers.

"Both of you stop it," Eli said, hauling Jed up against him. "And *you* are going to bed. Now."

"But I—"

"No. Now."

He pulled Jed down the hall and into the bedroom, pushing him down on the bed and helping him take off his boots and jeans. They got Jed settled, covers up under his chin, and Eli patted Jed's belly. Poor guy was half-asleep already.

"You and I need to talk when you get up, Jed," Eli said, stroking Jed's forehead.

"We do?" Jed sounded all muzzy. "'Kay."

"Yeah. You took your pill, right?"

"Mmmhmm. Thanks, Mister. Glad you're home."

"Me, too." He was, despite his attack of the grrs. "Sleep."

"Uh-huh..."

Eli left Jed already dropping off, eyes closed and breathing steady, and went back out to where Ken and Ross were starting up again.

"Take it outside," he said. "Jed's asleep, and I swear if you two wake him with your squabbling, I'll get in on it."

Ross' lip curled. "You and whose army."

Eli advanced, his bad wrist already giving him a twinge. "Don't make me, Ross. I don't want to tie it up with you."

"Sure you do. So do I. He's being an ass," Ken jumped in. "He needs a good drubbing, and if you don't do it, I will."

"And Mandy will beat you twice as bad when you get home." Ross' scoffing could make a guy really grit his teeth. This looked like no exception.

Ken stepped up, hands clenched. "You fuckhead."

"Out. Side."

By the time they got out on the porch Ross and Ken were pummeling each other, Eli was dodging flying fists, and the

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dogs had disappeared. He knew from experience that all he had to do was referee if it got to be too much. Punches landed with dull thuds, grunts pushed out with air when those punches hit hard, and curses flew as fast as the blows, but no one fought dirty, so Eli let it go.

The fight ended predictably enough. Ross won. Ken wound up on his ass in the dirt. There was no grinning and handshaking at the end, though. Ross just turned away, scrubbing his face with his hands.

"I'm sorry, Ken."

Ken grabbed Eli's proffered hand and hauled himself up, climbing back up on the porch before going to Ross and putting a hand on his hunched shoulder.

"Don't be," Ken said, pulling Ross around to grab him in a hug that looked like it might make Ross' bones creak. "It's gonna be all right."

"I know. I know."

Eli's gut just hurt for the guy. He went up and clapped both brothers on the back. "Okay, who's for ice cream?"

Ross and Ken both grinned at him. "Add in an ice pack and you're on," Ken said, fingering his already blackening eye.

Eli nodded, the tension starting to ease away. "You got yourself a deal."

* * * *

Jed woke up with his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth and his eyes all gooey and gross. Oh, blegh. He rolled to his side, looking to see if maybe he'd been smart enough to put some water on the nightstand. He hadn't, he remembered,

but some enterprising soul had put out a Nalgene bottle full, complete with a little coaster under it.

His mom had crocheted about a million goddamned coasters while she was trying to quit smoking. It hadn't worked, but none of the family ever had wet rings anymore.

Jed grabbed the bottle and unscrewed the lid, and fuck, that water tasted like manna from heaven, clear and cool and soothing on his throat. Half of the bottle later, he felt almost human, and he went looking for two things. The bathroom, and Eli.

After staggering out of the john, he went searching and found Eli asleep on the couch, wrapped up in another of Mom's quit smoking projects, a hideous afghan done in burnt orange and harvest gold. Jed figured she must have used Grandma's leftover yarn.

Ross was asleep out there, too, in the big easy chair, head back and mouth open as he snored away. His lip was split, and he had a huge bruise on his chin. Jed glanced at Eli again. Not a mark on him. It must have been Ken.

Legs a little wobbly, Jed wandered over and dumped Eli's legs off the couch, plopping down next to him, wondering how Eli could sleep under that afghan as it scratched against his arm.

"Huh, wha'?"

"Wake up. You said we needed to talk, Mister. Let's do it while I can stay awake."

Eli sat up, dark brown hair sticking up everywhichways. Those pretty eyes were all foggy as Eli blinked at him, but

they cleared up soon enough, sharpening as Eli glanced at Ross.

"This is kinda private, Jed."

"Okay." He got up, trying not to wobble, and headed for the kitchen. "You can make me a can of soup."

A soft chuckle followed him, the afghan rustling as Eli got up and came after him. "Yeah, I can do that."

Eli seemed reluctant to bring up whatever it was he wanted to talk on, bustling around and getting a container of Lloyd's famous chicken soup out of the freezer to thaw (no canned for him, woo-hoo) and making tea with lemon and just ... fussing. Which really wasn't like Eli at all.

Once they sat and he started slurping, though, Jed just asked again. "So what's the deal, Mister?"

"Well, that night you went to town. The night I left..." Eli fidgeted, playing with the salt shaker, not meeting Jed's eyes.

"Yeah? What about it?" Man, he'd been so damned sick...

"I heard from one of the guys that you spent the night at Ray's."

Jed frowned. He didn't even think Eli knew Ray, but maybe it was a smaller world than he thought. "Yeah, I was drunk as a skunk, and it was way too late to call John." John was the one who usually babysat the dogs when he went to Grand Junction, the one who usually took him in. His boyfriend jumped with Eli.

"So you called Ray?"

"No." Jed gave Eli a look. "I met up with Ray coming into the Corral as I was staggering out. I was gonna sleep in the truck, but he put me on his couch. I got up the next morning

with a hangover that would fell Garg, and bought Ray doughnuts for taking me back to my truck. End of story."

He would swear Eli let out a relieved breath. "Oh. Okay."

"Mister, you'd best not be telling me you thought something hinky went on." No way would Eli think that. No way.

"No." Deep brown eyes met his finally, serious as a heart attack. "No, I didn't really, but it doesn't keep the part of me that's not logical from worrying when I hear shit, Jed. Especially with Ross and Kevin and all."

"Yeah, I guess I can see that." Not to mention that he and Eli were spending more time apart than they were together these days. Jed sighed, his throat just throbbing, it hurt so much. "You know you're the one for me, Mister."

"I know." Smiling, Eli leaned over and kissed his forehead. "Now eat the rest of your soup before it gets cold."

His answers really seemed to settle Eli, who stopped fidgeting and fussing, so Jed did like he was told, sucking down egg noodles and letting the magic of chicken soup soothe his poor, raw throat. He'd just about finished up when Ross wandered in, looking for all the world like he'd been on another three-day binge.

"I swear to God, Jed, if I'm catching what you've got..."

Jed snorted. "What you've caught is a few hard punches from Ken. Don't go blaming it on me."

"Yeah, yeah." Ross scratched his chest idly. "Do you need me to do feedings or anything?"

Eli rose, grinning. "Nah, I got this one. You can do dishes, Ross."

Before either he or Ross could protest, Eli was gone, whistling as he headed out, the dogs romping after him.

Finishing up his crackers, Jed got up, headed for the sink. Ross stopped him.

"Sit down before you fall down," Ross said with a snort, grabbing the heavy earthenware bowl that came from a set his mom had gotten him and Eli for Christmas the year before.

"Thanks."

"No problem." Ross washed up for a moment before looking over at him, frowning a little. "Is it me?"

"Huh?" Maybe he was just slow because of the meds, but Jed wasn't following. "Is what you?"

"You and Eli were looking pretty serious about whatever it was you were talking on. Am I cramping your style?"

Lord. Jed did get up this time, going over and wrapping his arms around Ross to give him a bear hug, trying not to laugh at how lurid the shiner looked close up, like a bull terrier's eye. All blue ringed in black. Poor Ross.

"No, it's not you. He heard a nasty rumor and wanted me to tell him it wasn't true ... we've just been apart more than we have together, and it's hard to know what's what."

"What can I do?" Ross squeezed him right back, just resting against him for a minute.

"Hang out. Help around the house." Jed had a bright idea all of a sudden, pulling back to grin at Ross hugely. "Maybe housesit while he and I take a mini-vacation?"

He got just as big a grin in return, Ross' blue eyes twinkling at him. "That's a fine idea. You don't have any tours coming up? No flights?"

"Not for two weeks. Eddie Owens was going to pay me to build his fence..."

"Well, you know I know how to do that. You call Eddie and tell him I'll be doing it for him. You two go on and do something fun. Oh, hey, you could go to Orvis."

Orvis was a clothing optional hot springs over next to Ouray. Eli would shit a brick. Jed hooted. "Nah. But we might go to Ouray." There was a hot springs pool there, too, and they could go jeeping. They didn't call Ouray the Switzerland of America for nothing. Hell, it might even be snowing there.

"Sounds like a plan. Just let me know when you want to go." Ross looked so darned pleased at being able to do something nice.

"I'll make the reservations for this weekend. I should've been on the meds long enough by then to feel human." He clapped Ross on the back. "Thanks, little brother. This is gonna be fun."

"Yeah. And God knows y'all deserve some of that."

Jed just nodded. Truer words were never spoken. He and Eli could use some time off. Together.

Chapter 8

Ross woke up feeling like the entire first cavalry and their horses had slept in his mouth. Goddamn, what had he done last night? Moaning, he stretched and made to roll over, ending up ass over teakettle on the floor as he rolled right off the tiny loveseat he was sleeping on.

The only thing that looked familiar was the afghan. It wasn't Jed and Eli's, but it was a different pattern in the same hideous colors. He had to be in a Thatcher house somewhere.

Man, that brain-wracking hurt too much, though. Fuck.

"Well, it's about time you woke up." The sound of boot heels ringing on a wooden floor accompanied those words, as did the smell of strong coffee. Oh, thank God. Brodie, his mom, and Lloyd's hired hand.

"What the hell did I do last night?"

Brodie grinned down at him, handing the coffee down. Brodie was tall and solid, with curly brown hair and gray eyes, a serious, quiet cowboy with a heart of gold. Ross liked him.

"Went to town," Brodie answered. "Went on a tear."

"How'd you end up with me?"

"Sheriff called your mamma. She asked me would I come get you."

"Which would explain why I'm in the bunkhouse." It still cracked him up that Lloyd and his mom had built the new bunkhouse for the hands, and Brodie was the only one who lived there, the other two old hands having each gotten married the year before and moved out.

"It would indeed. You feeling queasy?"

"No, just crusty. My mouth is gross."

"Well, you can't use my toothbrush, but you can use the paste and your finger, if you want."

"Yeah. That'd be good. Before the coffee, even." He rolled up off the floor, hoisting himself by using the couch to prop up on. "Be right back."

He had the prodigious urge to pee, too, so he did that, washed his face, and brushed his teeth with his finger. Ah. Better.

"Thanks, man," he said as he came out, grabbing up his coffee. "Sorry you had to come get me."

Brodie just grinned and shrugged. "Well, with Jed and Eli on vacation and all. I called John Alan. He's gonna go on over and feed Jed's dogs and the horses and all. I can't drive you back across the way until late this afternoon."

"You're far too good to me." The coffee was like heaven, strong and hot, just a tiny hint of milk to cut the bitter.

He got another shrug, this one a little more deliberate, Brodie not meeting his eyes. "I know what it's like."

That took him like a sucker punch in the gut. Brodie had it worse than any man should have, far worse than he did. Hell, at least he knew Kev was alive and happy somewhere. Brodie had lost his wife and brand-new baby two years ago to a car wreck. Fool's Hill had claimed them on an icy winter night.

Made him feel downright selfish.

"Yeah, well. You had a right, Brodie. I'm just a damned fool."

"Doesn't make you a fool to be missing someone you love, Ross. No matter how you lose them." Brodie cleared his

throat. "Now, I got just enough time to heat up some of Lloyd's famous cinnamon pumpkin bread and make some eggs before I have to get out and do the feedings."

Ross shuddered. "You heat the bread. I'll make the eggs." Brodie's eggs were notoriously runny.

That sparkling grin was back. "You betcha. Then you can hop in the shower and come on out and help me work."

"Good deal."

The shower did him a world of good, the work wore him out, and after a hearty lunch of leftover green chile and chicken enchiladas, Ross sacked out on the couch again. He couldn't help Brodie with the horse training he had to do anyway. When he woke up again, he could smell cigarette smoke and wood chips. He opened his eyes and sure enough, there sat his mother.

"Hey, Mom."

She grinned at him. "Hi, honey. Brodie redecorated the place. I like it."

Ross sat up, blinking and stretching. "Me, too. Got that old-timey lodge feel now, instead of Nancy and Lloyd cast off."

Hooting, she got up off the coffee table and held out a hand. "Wanna smoke. Come on out with me."

Scrubbing a hand over his bristly cheeks, Ross nodded and took her hand with his free one, hauling his ass up off the couch. Then he started chuckling, looking his mom over good. "Bet you're thrilled it's cool enough out to wear that."

"That" was a hideous flannel shirt in what his mom would no doubt call autumn tones, green and gold and this god-

awful orange. Nancy Thatcher lived in flannel and Levi's all winter long.

"You know it. I love this shirt. Lloyd got it for me for Christmas a few years back. Don't you say a word against it," she said, heading out to the little porch, patting her shirt pocket for her battered pack of Camels.

He followed, settling on an upturned bucket so she could have the old metal lawn chair.

"You gonna ream me?" he asked.

"No. This was your free one." Her blue eyes, so like his and Jed's, twinkled through the cloud of smoke as she pulled out her Zippo and lit up. "You do it again, especially getting me a call from the new Sheriff again? I'll kick your ass here to Sunday."

"Yes, ma'am."

They sat for a bit while she smoked, but when his mom stubbed out the butt Ross knew it was time to talk turkey.

"How're you holding up, honey?" his mom asked, studying him good and hard.

"I'm hurtin', Mom. I just. I'm not sure what to do without him. I keep reaching for him in the middle of the night."

"It was that way with your daddy."

"Yeah, but Dad died, Mom. You had a reason."

She gave him a shrewd look. "You thinking you don't have a right to be mourning, just because he's still alive?"

"Makes me feel like a selfish ass." Ross shrugged, spreading his hands. "I feel like compared to you, or Brodie for instance, I just don't have any reason to be so torn up. Hell, I even knew it was coming."

"Sure you did." She tapped out another cigarette and lit it, drawing hard. "Just like I knew rodeo would kill your daddy someday. Just like it did. Baby. Even if you know it bone deep, it still scars you up when it happens."

"So what do you do?"

"You go on. You remember the good times. You drink a little and rage a little, and in your case, party it up and get in fights. But most of all you don't try to tell yourself that it's not okay to be mad."

His mom got this faraway look in her eyes, smoke pouring out of her nostrils.

Ross tilted his head. She'd talked a lot about his dad growing up, but never about how she'd dealt with his loss.

"Were you mad at him? I don't remember that at all."

"You were so young," she said, shaking her head. "I was furious with him. Mad as hell that he had the damned nerve to die on me; pissed off that he loved his rodeo more than me. You name it. I just tried not to show you kids. I wanted you to remember him in a good way."

"We did." That made him feel better somehow, knowing that his tower of strength mom had been through it, too.

"Thanks, Mom."

She stubbed out the second cigarette, climbing to her feet. "You're welcome. Now come on up to the house and eat before Brodie drives you back. The hands are all coming up. Lloyd made roast beef and squash casserole."

"Yeah? That sounds good." It did, too, amazingly enough. Looked like the hangover was gone. Ross stopped her before

they headed off to the house, giving her a bone-crushing hug.
"Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome, honey. Come on, supper's getting cold."

Ross followed, deciding right then and there not to involve his family in any more of his benders. He would stop trying to pretend he had no right to be upset. But he wouldn't make them suffer for it either.

* * * *

The phone rang, startling Kevin O'Donnell out of a deep sleep, one where he was dreaming about Ross going down on him. He blinked, groggy, his cock aching as he reached for the phone.

"Hello?"

"Kevin! It's Jonas Freidman. From the office? I thought since you're the new kid that you might like to go out to lunch."

"It's Saturday, right?" Was it Saturday? God, he hoped it was since it was nine a.m..

"Yes." Jonas sounded terribly amused. Kevin liked Jonas. The guy was maybe eight or ten years older than him, not hard to look at, and a crack crypto man. "Lunch?"

"Um. When? And where?" He still didn't know his way around the area, and traffic was worse than even California.

"How about I come pick you up at noon?"

"Okay."

They hung up and Kev rolled to his back, staring at the stark white ceiling of his little one bedroom apartment. He was still not used to it. He still listened for Ross' breathing

and for the jingle of Pancake's tags. How could he miss that silly dog so much? Sometimes he thought about calling Ross just to ask to talk to Pancake, but he'd read in some pet journal or other that it might just make Pancake's separation anxiety worse or something. So he never did.

Maybe it would be good for him to get out. He really hadn't since he'd been in Maryland, and he was starting to get lonely, not just for Ross, which he guessed was good, but for company, plain and simple.

Jonas was a good start.

Kevin finally got up, got a shower, and got dressed. Then he flipped open his book of cryptograms and did puzzles until Jonas came, determined not to think about how it used to be with him doing crosswords, and Ross cooking breakfast, and Pancake begging bacon and ... maybe he should get fish.

The buzzer going off came as a huge relief. He hit the gate open button and waited for the knock on his door.

"Hi! I mean, hi, Jonas. Come on in. Unless you don't want to come in. I mean, if you would rather just go."

Jonas smiled, the little lines around his eyes crinkling up. Kev liked that. He always had liked it on a man. Jonas had kind of a big nose, and a little gray at his temples, but he stayed trim and fit, and Kevin liked his open, friendly smile and his constant geeking on chaos theory.

"Chill, Kev. If you need me to come in so you can get shoes on or something, I will. Otherwise we can just head on to lunch," Jonas said.

"Okay. I'm ready." Kevin grinned back, fumbling for his keys.

"Cool. You like Chinese?" Jonas led the way down the stairs to the street below.

"I love it. Wonton soup. Dumplings..." Mmm. Dumplings.

"Oh, that sounds good. I like the little fried things. Crab rangoons? Whatever they are."

He followed Jonas, chattering away, feeling a smile stretch his cheeks. He was feeling better than he had since, well, since he told Ross he was leaving. Maybe this whole social thing was going to work out better than he'd ever thought it would.

* * * *

The sun came through the cheap blinds at the Comfort Inn Ouray, hitting Jed square in the face. He blinked, squinting against it, trying for a moment to remember where he was. Oh, yeah. Vacation.

Mmm. Vacation. They'd driven up the day before and gone hiking, on up the upper Box Canyon Falls trail, then over to the top of Cascade Falls. After that they'd taken their sore muscles to the Hot Springs pool, then hit one of the few restaurants that didn't shut down after Labor Day, the Silver Nugget, for green chile burritos. They'd both collapsed into bed that night, he and Eli just exhausted in that good physical rush, high-altitude way.

Now, though, he was all rested up, and just realizing they had a whole two more days to play.

Jed rolled over on his side, propping up on one elbow to get a good look at Eli. Goosebumps rose on his skin. Lord, it was getting chilly in the mornings, especially this far up.

He pushed the tacky hotel bedspread down, watching Eli's nipples draw up from the cool air. Oh, yeah. Bending, Jed licked one, watched as Eli twitched, listened to the little moan he drew out when he closed his teeth around Eli's flesh and bit gently.

"Mmm. Time to get up and feed the dogs?" Eli asked, and Jed chuckled.

"Nope. Vacation, Mister."

"Oh, yeah." Eli grinned up at him, hand coming up to stroke his chest and throat, fingers catching on his beard stubble. "God, this is good. We should have done this ages ago."

"No rest for the wicked, right? You had work, so did I." Hell, sometimes working for himself kept him busier than flying rescue runs for the Army ever had.

"Yeah, well, now we get some." Scooting up against the little headboard, Eli hauled him over, half on top of that wide chest. "Whatever will we do?"

They shared a kiss, Jed savoring the howdy and good morning of it, his prick perking right up with interest. "I think we're creative kind of guys. We can think of something."

Another breath stealing kiss later and Eli was agreeing, "We can. Whack-a-mole? Mini-golf on the side of the mountain? Fucking like jackrabbits?"

"Oh, I like that one." Jed grinned, rubbing up on Eli a little, feeling Eli's legs fall open so he could slide between. Hell, yes. Their cocks met, slid along each other, giving him some damned fine friction.

"God, I love the way you feel, Thatcher. Just fucking love it."

"Good, because I plan on a lot more years this way. Though not necessarily in a hotel."

"Uh-huh." Eli looked fascinated, lower lip caught between his teeth as he traced a path down around one of Jed's pectoral muscles, thumb scraping a nipple, making Jed jump.

"Oh, man. Do that again," Jed said.

"What? This?" Eli did it again, just pushing and pulling his skin.

"Uh-huh. And with your mouth, too."

"Okay."

He got what he wanted, Eli licking at his skin, teeth running over his nipple, sending shocks right down to his cock. He humped air for a minute before having a bright idea.

"Come down here." He grabbed Eli's hips and yanked, making the man whack his head and swear as he slid on the sheets. Jed just chuckled, turning to straddle Eli, thighs on either side of Eli's head as he bent to take Eli's cock in his mouth.

Eli moaned, and a split second later Eli's hotter than hot mouth closed on him, too, closing the circle. Oh, oh fuck. They didn't do this enough. Tasting, being tasted. It was all too damned good.

Rocking, Jed started bobbing his head, taking Eli in as far as he could before backing off, using his tongue against the vein beneath. He got a moan, Eli's hips rising and falling, pushing up into him. Addictive. Fucking addictive.

They got caught up in the pleasure until all Jed knew was Eli, his sight and smell and feel. Jed stroked the rough hair on Eli's thighs, the rough skin on the outsides of them and the tender flesh on the insides. Then he went for Eli's balls, hefting them gently.

The sound Eli made around his cock went straight up his spine, exploding in his brain. Eli's big hands moved to cup his ass, spreading him, one finger dipping between his cheeks to push at his hole, and it was Jed's turn to moan and wiggle, to feel his balls draw up and his belly muscles pull tight.

Close. Goddamn, he was close. Jed went all the way down, straining a little to take in Eli's wide prick, but he did it, and that got him a muffled shout, Eli's lips going slack around him as Eli pumped hot come into his mouth.

Jed swallowed and swallowed, finally pulling back to breathe. Good thing, too, as that was about when Eli remembered he needed some help, and started sucking him like there was no tomorrow.

He wallowed in the pleasure for all of ten or fifteen seconds before he shot so hard it rattled his teeth, filling Eli's mouth and throat.

When he was done he just sorta ... flopped. Until Eli pushed him aside, gasping for air.

"You trying to kill me, Thatcher?"

"Nah." Jed rolled back up until he was face to face with Eli, grinning over. "But it would be a hell of a way to go."

"Oh, sure. That's just what I want on my headstone," Eli said, laughing. "He died happy."

Landing with Both Feet
by Julia Talbot

Some unknown impulse had him lifting up on his elbow, his other hand on Eli's chest. "Are you?"

"Am I what?" Eli covered his fingers with one big hand, bringing it up to his and lick.

"Happy? I mean..." he trailed off. What could he say? Do you really like being a part of my big boisterous family? Is it okay to be apart half the year?

He got a look, Eli's dark brown eyes searching his face, that damned almost black hair flopping down over Eli's wide forehead. "I am. Aren't you?"

"Hell, yes." He grinned wryly. "I just worry sometimes that I forced my life on you."

"You did." Eli held him when he would have pulled away. "And thank God. I didn't really have one until I met you."

"Yeah, but..."

"No, buts. Just you, me, and our Jeep guide this afternoon, okay? Now, feed me, Thatcher."

Jed grinned some more, nodded. "Okay, okay. How about griddle cakes and bacon down at the old hotel downtown?"

"Sounds like the best plan you've had all day," Eli said, stealing a kiss.

Jed hooted. "It's early yet. Gimme a chance and I'll come up with something better."

"I just bet you will, Thatcher. You always do."

* * * *

Three and a half years earlier

"Hell of a way to waste my vacation days," Eli grumbled, leaning against the window of the little Cessna as the scenery beneath flashed by. It was all a blur. He was just numb.

Jed glanced over at him from the pilot's seat, a quick flash of concerned blue eyes before he went back to watching the controls. "Oh, Mister, don't be that way."

Eli sighed. Yeah, don't be that way. Shit. How else was he supposed to be, flying to Oregon to make the arrangements for his mother's burial? He hated shit like this. Fuck, it wasn't like they'd been close. His mother had disapproved of his lifestyle, and after he'd moved in with Jed, had practically disowned him.

He could forgive a lot, but not even giving Jed a chance was not one of the things Eli could let go.

"I just want this over."

"I know. But you said the lawyer told you most of it was arranged. You just need to sign."

"Yeah. Yeah. I know."

"Gonna start the descent, okay? Buckle up."

Straightening, Eli buckled his seatbelt, watching as they banked and started dropping into the municipal airport in Bend, Oregon. It looked damned desolate to Eli, but that shouldn't surprise him. Colorado was home now.

The wheels touched the ground nice and smooth, Jed doing his job well, as always. There was no one there to meet them.

Eli shook his head, drawing a look and a brief touch from Jed. The contrast between the sterile little airport where

people looked at him strangely and the send-off they'd gotten after he got the call...

Well, there was no comparison.

Jed had called his mom, who had come over with her dogs, ready to house-sit for them until they got back. She'd brought smoke-scented hugs and worried eyes, fussing over him in her gruff way until he had to smile.

While Jed packed, Ken had come, too, bringing them a cooler full of elk meat and a worried face, clapping him on the shoulder.

"How are you holding up?" Ken had asked, and Eli'd wanted to fucking laugh.

They had no idea how much more of a family they were to him in just over two years than his mother had been to him in his whole life.

"Wait, Jed," Eli said when they had the rental car keys in hand and were heading out to the parking lot. "Let's go to a hotel."

"You have a key to your mom's house," Jed said, coming to stand close. "Are you sure you don't want to stay there?"

"Not until..." Eli cleared his throat. "Not until after. After the service, after the will. If it's left to me, then we'll figure out what to do."

He didn't think he could do it. Eli just wasn't sure he could go to his mom's house with the cabbage rose wallpaper and the scent of her hand cream and the guest bed that creaked when you rolled over at night.

He didn't know if he wanted Jed to really see how he'd grown up.

"Okay. Sure. We'll get a hotel."

Jed just patted his arm, and he knew if they were alone, Jed would be all over him. Hugging him. The Thatcher family was all of the opinion that hugs cured all ills. At first Eli'd thought they were nuts. Right now he figured he could've used one.

"Let's go, grab a bite to eat, check in, and call that fancy lawyer fella, okay?" Jed said, starting them moving again.

"Uh-huh."

He went, and that started a weeklong ordeal of death certificates and wills and putting his mom's house on the market. Through it all, Jed stayed right there with him, calming him when he wanted to scream, keeping him exhausted with pleasure at night so he could sleep.

Eli had never been so grateful to have Jed at his side.

Or so resentful of how he used his vacation days.

* * * *

Present Day

"Do we have to go back?" Eli asked, arm muscles bulging as he crossed his hands behind his head.

"Looks like it, yeah." Jed grinned before bouncing on the bed and pulling at his armpit hair.

"Ow! Fuck, Thatcher. That hurt." Not that it really had, but Eli liked to let Jed think he was getting to him. "We still have today. Ross isn't expecting us back until tonight."

Jed gave him a grin that spoke of pure evil. "We could go to Orvis."

He tilted his head. "Did Ross dare you to ask me that?"

"Possibly."

Eli grinned. Clothing optional hot springs. In the off season. He wondered if Jed knew what he was about to get his ass into.

"Sure," Eli said, running one hand casually down his bare chest, letting his fingers graze his pubes. "As long as you promise you'll let me fuck you in the pools."

Jed stared at him, mouth dropping open. "Do what?"

"You heard me. You sit on my lap and ride me? I'll go naked swimming with you."

"You. I. In public?"

Jed just looked flabbergasted. Eli wanted to laugh his ass off.

"Yep. We got a deal?"

"You son of a gun. You bet we do. You'll never do it in a million years." Oh, the flustered look was gone, a confident smile taking its place. "But I'll say yes, just to see you strip down and hop in."

"Don't bet the farm on me backing out, Thatcher." Eli'd show Jed. He was just feeling mellow enough to do it. In fact, he decided he would.

The whole time they packed, checked out and drove down out of Ouray, Jed kept smiling over at him. It was a 'yeah, right' kind of grin, one designed to egg him on. Even when they pulled into the Orvis lot, Jed didn't seem to believe.

It wasn't until they paid and tiptoed past the indoor pool to private room number two, carefully not glancing at the lady with the terrifying red dye job who looked suspiciously like the DMV clerk from Delta, that Jed started looking like he

thought might be in trouble. Eli grinned as he shucked his sweater and started on his jeans.

He chuckled as his boots hit the floor and he stood straight, hands on his hips, naked as a jaybird. Jed stared, eyes wide and dark blue.

"You're really gonna do it."

"Yep." He splashed down the stairs, settling himself deep in the super-hot water, grinning up at Jed, who still had on flannel and boots and jeans. Eli patted his thighs. "Come and get it, Thatcher."

Jed's cheeks went red. Really red, like Eli hadn't seen them in years. Oh, fuck this was too much fun. The man just looked ready to bolt.

"It's one thing out by the creek, Eli," Jed said. "But here? I mean ... It can't be sanitary."

"They drain and clean the pool everyday. And I know how to be a good guest. If you get in my pocket you'll find the rubber I bought at the gas station. Just so we don't make a mess."

"You bought a..." Jed just stood there, mouth opening and closing. "Jesus Christ, Eli."

"Get naked and get down here." Oh, yeah. Too damned good.

Jed finally snapped out of it, slipping out of shirt and jeans, toeing off his boots, and finally grabbing the condom out of Eli's jeans before gingerly stepping in and settling beside Eli on the bench.

Coward.

"Nope," Eli said, his grin refusing to go away. "Up here. You said you'd sit on me and ride me. At least I didn't make you do it in front of DMV Darla."

"Oh, God." Jed turned, climbing onto his lap, face hidden in Eli's neck. Jed's shoulders shook with laughter, though. "I thought that was Darla. That hair. Oh, Jesus."

"Uh-huh." Might as well go for broke now that he actually had Jed where he wanted him. Besides, it would be Jed hanging out for all the world to see. He was covered. His cock twitched as Jed's skin rubbed against his, rising hard and hot. Maybe not as hot as the water...

"You're enjoying this," Jed said, sounding accusatory.

"Well, fuck, Thatcher. It's you. Of course I am."

Jed finally relaxed against him, chuckles sounding wry, but natural. "Okay, have it your way, Mister."

"Have *you* my way, you mean."

"Yeah. Who's wearing the condom?"

"You are." Eli nipped at Jed's neck, laughing at the odd flavor the water lent to Jed's skin. "I'll be in you. We can ease out before we, uh, ease out."

"Or," Jed came back. "You could wear it and then I could sit on the side of the pool while you suck me."

Win, win. And that would really be nicer to whoever used the pool after them, drained and cleaned daily or not.

"We'll do that, then. Want in you, Jed."

Jed nodded, eyes going all heavy-lidded and hot, finally getting into it. Eli kissed him for it, kissed Jed to get them revved up. There was nothing like their mouths together. Just nothing.

They rocked awhile, the water lapping at the sides of the little pool, at first gently, then harder as the got more intense. The soft skin of Jed's inner thighs rubbed against the harsher flesh of Eli's legs, making them both gasp at the contrast, making them both jump.

"Damn," Jed said, grunting as he pinched one dark nipple. "Damn."

"Uh-huh. Rubber, Jed." Eli emphasized the command by cupping Jed's ass, running one finger down the crease to press against Jed's hole, reminding him why they were there. As he slid one finger deep into Jed's body, Jed opened the little foil packet and smoothed the condom on Eli's prick.

"It ... uhn. It says it's not effective disease control over a certain temperature. Did you know that?"

Goddamn, that man was a tease. Eli bit Jed's shoulder, hard. "Good thing we don't worry about that. This is just about containment."

"Right. Oh, there."

Eli slid two fingers in and crooked them again, finding Jed's gland and giving it a good stroke, getting a harsh cry for his trouble, quickly stifled. Hell, yeah. If Jed tightened around his cock like he did around two fingers...

"Ready, Thatcher? Ready to ride?" Eli asked.

"Uh-huh. Yeah. Oh, God, Mister." Jed kissed him again, climbing his body, the water giving them buoyancy.

Eli positioned his cock, letting the head push right into Jed's body, the fit a little too tight, too snug, as if the condom just added that much width, that much drag. The water

swirled around them, hot as anything, both of them sweating like crazy, Jed's short hair starting to curl a little.

Finally Jed just sat back, hips and ass punching down, taking him all the way in. The muscles stood out in Jed's chest and arms, his face screwing up with the strain, and Eli just stroked him, petted him, kissing away the sting.

"Love you, Thatcher. Fucking love you."

"You, too, Mister. Believe ... believe it." Up and down, Jed started moving, the slick tile beneath his knees and Eli's ass making it hard to get traction until Eli grabbed Jed's ass and held on, helping, moving him.

Then they got the rhythm going, got the feeling right, Jed's cock against his belly and the steam and the 'goddamn, we're doing this' going to his head, making him dizzy. He could hear little noises, grunts and groans, coming from Jed's throat, could feel them in the way Jed's body worked him.

He humped up and up, getting more, feeling fucking illicit, wondering who might be out there listening. He wasn't an exhibitionist by any means, but he didn't care who knew how much he needed Jed Thatcher. Fuck, yeah. He needed it bad.

Another kiss had him jerking, rocking, his body working toward orgasm, but he had the presence of mind to grab the base of Jed's cock and hold on.

"No coming," he gasped out. "Not yet."

Jed grunted, bit his lower lip, punishing him for stopping the freight train bearing down, but Eli wanted to suck that prick, wanted to taste it. Plus there was the whole fucking mess factor.

Landing with Both Feet
by Julia Talbot

Jed held on, bouncing on him, starting to cuss him a little, alternating between that and love words, egging him on. The heat became almost too much, sweat running off them, steam rising around them. Finally Jed just clamped down on him so hard he saw stars, that tight, hot body squeezing him so tight he cried out, and Eli came, the sound of his own blood rushing in his ears, drowning out everything for long moments.

When he snapped out of his daze, he realized that Jed was still moving, frustrated little noises coming from the man.

"Mmm. Jed."

"Eli. Mister. Please,"

"Yeah." Yeah. Jed's turn. Heaving, Eli pushed Jed off his cock, pressing him up on the little walkway around the pool. Jed sprawled, legs spread wide, cock flushed deep red, the vein pulsing on the underside. The way Jed's balls drew up, it wouldn't take anytime at all. No time at all.

Eli bent, licking along the shaft before sucking the head of Jed's cock into his mouth. Jed tasted like heat and man and whatever weird shit was in mineral water, and Eli went looking for more, pushing his tongue against the slit.

"Oh, fuck!" Jed nearly shouted it, whole body arching under his touch, strong hands coming up to hold Eli's head.

"Need more, Eli. Please, need to come."

"Mmmhmm." Helping Jed along, Eli reached up to roll those tight balls, fingers stroking the sacks, slipping beneath to press at Jed's stretched hole as he sucked all the way down to the base of that sweet, thick cock.

Landing with Both Feet
by Julia Talbot

Jed cried out, body going stiff for a moment before he started bucking, coming like crazy right into Eli's waiting mouth, right down his throat.

Fucking A.

For the longest time the only noise was him and Jed panting for breath as they rested, his head on Jed's hip, his nose pressed to Jed's curls. The Jed stroked his hair, chuckling a little.

"You never cease to amaze me, Mister. Fucking me in the hot springs. Jesus." The chuckles turned to outright laughter, Jed just shaking under him.

Eli grinned, poking Jed's belly. "One of these days you'll stop baiting me," he said.

"Nah." Jed sat up, pulling him up out of the water. "Where would the fun be in that?"

They shared a kiss, flavored sharp with Jed's come.

"Good vacation?" he asked, stroking Jed's cheek.

Jed just nodded, kissing his mouth, a sweet touch of lips and tongue. "The best," Jed replied. "The very best."

Chapter 9

Jed pulled into the driveway and they were immediately set upon by the dogs, all of them wagging and barking and drooling. There was one voice that he didn't immediately recognize, but soon enough Jed remembered that Pancake had come to stay, and the poor yellow lab looked like he was frantic for some loving and reassurance.

Poor thing.

"Goddamn it, would you mutts get off me?" Eli sounded put upon, and probably with good reason. Those dogs loved him with the same unreasoning passion that Jed did, and took every opportunity to prove it, en masse.

Jed whistled, and they all came bounding over, Garg just knocking him down and sitting on him, Ojo farting all over, and Spot licking his damned boots. Scorch stayed with Eli, and Pancake ran in circles barking, finally peeing all over the damned place. Jed just laughed his ass off, watching Eli scowl and stomp while he scratched ears.

"Welcome home, huh, Mister?"

"Yeah, no shit."

When he finally got up and headed up to the porch, Jed kinda stopped on a dime, staring. His mom was sitting in the old oak rocker she'd refinished for him a few years back, just a rocking and smoking a cigarette.

"Hey, Mom."

"Nancy," Eli said, coming up beside him. "Is something wrong? You and Lloyd have a fight?"

She blew out a mouthful of smoke. "Your brother's gone AWOL."

"Who, Ross? He's not in the Army anymore."

His mom gave him a look. "I know that, honey. I mean he's disappeared. I came over to take care of the dogs."

"What happened?" That wasn't like Ross at all. Not a bit. The man just didn't shirk his responsibilities.

"Well, he went on a bender. Stayed at the ranch one night after Brodie hauled him in from the Sheriff's office. Then he just up and disappeared after Brodie brought him on down here. We'd had a nice talk..."

Oh, Lord. Jed shook his head. His mom's talks always seemed innocuous enough, but after you thought on them a while they started digging in on you, making you itch. "About what?" he asked.

"About his man, and them breaking up and all."

"Mom..."

"What?" She raised one sandy-colored brow. "I didn't give him a hard time, honey. We did talk about your dad, though, so that might have upset him."

Eli unloaded their bags, giving him a look as he passed. Jed nodded. They'd get their shit settled, then he'd start calling. "You called his cell?"

"Straight to voice mail, yeah," his mom answered, rolling her eyes. "I'm not an idiot, baby."

"I know, Mom." Jed sighed, pushing through the throng of mutts and heading on up to kiss his mom on the cheek. "I'll start calling around. I know all the places he might have gone."

"Okay, honey. Do you want a sandwich? Lloyd sent fresh bread."

God bless him, Lloyd always cooked in an emergency.

"Yeah, that'd be great."

"Turkey or ham?"

"Both, please."

He tried the Sheriff's department first. Then the Delta police. Nothing. Jed tried the hospital, the morgue, and the police down in Grand Junction. He even called the manager of the bowling alley to see if Ross was asleep out in the parking lot. Then he tried Ross' cell again.

"Lo?"

Jed didn't spare a thought for how croaky Ross sounded. He just let him have it with both barrels. "Where the fuck are you?"

"Huh?" He heard rustling, a loud thump and a distinctly feminine shriek. "Sorry, honey. Jed? S'that you?"

"Yeah. If you tell me that you set my dogs and our mother up for a fuck? I think I'm going to kick your ass. And I can do a lot better job of it than Ken did."

"I. Uh. Oh, fuck. Is it Monday?"

Oh, the fucker. Jed looked up as Eli came to stand next to him, arm sliding around his waist. He mouthed 'asshole', and Eli nodded, dark eyes serious.

"Yes. Yes, it is. Where are you?"

"Olathe. I think." There was a murmur of voices. "Yeah, Olathe. I'll be there soon. I promise."

"You damned bet you will. I'll be here. We're gonna talk."

"Okay. I'm ... Well ... I'll see you in an hour or so."

Jed figured he wasn't going to feel sorry for Ross, no matter how ravaged his baby brother sounded. He and Eli had gone off on vacation trusting Ross to do one simple thing.

Which he hadn't.

"Did you find him?" his mom asked, handing him a plate piled high with a triple-decker sandwich and pickles, chips on the side.

"Yeah, he answered his cell." Goddamn it.

"Well, I'll just go on, then." She reached up and hugged him hard. "I won't tell you to go easy on him. I will tell you not to kill him."

"I won't." He hoped.

It might come to that yet.

* * * *

Four years earlier

"Are you drunk?"

"Hmm?" Ross said, looking innocent. "No."

Kevin stared at him. Ross had just snuck in after trying three times, loudly, to unlock the door. He'd been "out with the guys" from his unit, which Kev had been okay with, but he wasn't okay with Ross coming home drunk as a skunk.

"You smell like a bar," Kevin said, wrinkling up his nose.

"I was in one. Playing pool. You know. Fun." Those blue eyes were already a little bloodshot.

Ross had told him once that he used to be a real party hound, always getting himself in trouble. Heck, they'd met during a barroom brawl, started when a couple of Special Forces guys had decided to beat Kevin up for being queer. It

shouldn't surprise him that Ross occasionally still went on a tear, but it did.

"It's late," he said. "I'm going back to bed. You need a shower before you come."

"Baby..."

"Nope. Not negotiable."

Ross gave him a lopsided, adorable grin. "You could shower with me."

Kevin tried not to smile back. He was not going to be swayed by cuteness. "Nope. Go. Get clean. Brush your teeth. I'll snuggle if you do."

"Oh, snuggling. Okay, baby." Ross passed him, pressing a sloppy kiss to his cheek. "See you soon."

He just shook his head. "Don't drown."

"Mmmhmm. Promise."

Kev sighed, heading back to the bedroom. That man was probably going to be the death of him. But what a way it was to go.

* * * *

Present Day

By the time Ross got to Jed's, he had a pounding headache and a massive dose of the guilts. He'd left Brodie and gone to feed the mutts, then immediately headed into town for a beer, despite all of the new resolve to act like he had half a brain. To his credit, though, he figured he'd really only planned to have the one beer until the pretty lady with the red hair and freckles had sat next to him and started buying.

Thank God for small favors, he had found condoms in the trashcan, so at least he'd been safe.

Well, fuck. His duffel sat on the porch, leaning half-assed against the railing. Even the dogs weren't out to greet him. He heard them inside.

Man, was he in trouble.

Ross ate his pride, though, and went and knocked on the door.

"What?" Jed asked as he answered. "Oh. Well, it took you long enough."

"The phone woke the lady. Took me a while to explain that I wasn't gonna marry her."

"Serves you right," Jed said, one corner of his mouth turning up. He didn't smile, though, just crossed his arms and looked down at Ross.

"So I guess you're kicking me out, huh?" Wouldn't be the first time one of the family had done that. He'd gone to stay with Ken once over in Gunnison, when Ken was going to Western State. He'd gotten buck wild with a couple of college girls, and Ken had sent him packing.

Lord knew he never did have any sense.

Jed nodded. "I am. I'm sorry, baby brother, but when I leave you to take care of my house, I expect you to do it, not be off gallivanting all over the Western slope."

"I know it." Ross shrugged. "That's cool. I suppose Mom was over?"

"She was. She says you can bunk with Brodie if you want, but she and Lloyd can't have you coming in at all hours."

"Yeah. I figured that." He looked Jed square in the eye.
"I'm sorry. I was out of line."

"I know you are, and that's part of the problem."
Unbending, Jed sat on the front porch steps, jerking his head to get Ross to come join him. "But I can't support one of your benders anymore, Ross. I'm too fucking old for this shit."

"Well, you got a life now, too. With Eli." Chuckling, he leaned on Jed a little as he sat down, pushing, always pushing. "Who was the cool head back when you were trying to win him, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah. And you kicked me out of my own house and sent me to Oregon."

They sat for a few minutes, neither of them saying a thing. Finally Ross looked over at Jed, feeling tired down to his bones. "Tell me it gets better."

Jed put an arm around him, squeezing tight. Ross almost laughed. The man reeked of sex, just like he did.

"It gets better," Jed said, patting his shoulder. "You just gotta take it in your own time and in your own way. But I can't be depending on you if you've got a wild hair up your ass you gotta work out."

"Yeah." God, he could just stay there forever, soaking up Jed's strength. "You'll hang onto the rest of my shit for the time being?"

"Hell, yes. Even the dog, if you want."

"Nah. I'll take Pancake with me. I think Brodie might like having him around." Ross figured Brodie was about as lonely as he was, after all. The man needed a little canine

companionship. "You got enough of them, and he'll have Mom's mutts to play with."

"Fair enough." Turning, Jed hugged him tight-tight, making his ribs creak. "Goddamn it, Ross, you be careful, okay?"

"I will. I promise. No unprotected sex, no driving drunk." The rest he wouldn't promise. He had a self-destructive streak a mile wide, after all. Always had. Shit, if he hadn't been out so long, he'd re-up with the Army. The discipline there had been good for him. "Well, I ought to be getting gone."

"Okay. Look, when I get settled back from this vacation..."

"We'll go have a beer," he finished, not wanting Jed to promise anything he shouldn't just because he felt sorry.

"Love you, Jed."

He got another bone-wrenching hug. "Love you, baby brother. Feel better."

"I'll try." Or at the very least, he'd try really hard to feel nothing for a while.

* * * *

"You think he's gonna be okay?" Eli asked, once Ross had roared off with his duffel in the back of the truck, Pancake hanging out the passenger side window with a huge doggie smile on his face.

"I don't know. Maybe." Jed shrugged, coming to loop both arms around his waist and lean on him. "He's in a world of hurt, still, and like a bear with a sore paw. You know?"

"Yeah. I remember being that way when I left you, and that was after only a few weeks together. I can't imagine six

years." He just couldn't imagine losing Jed now. He really couldn't.

"I know. But he has to do it on his own. You get why I kicked him out, yeah?" Jed looked up at him, blue eyes a little uncertain, a little hurt. God knew the man hated having to fight with his family. Hated it.

"I do. You did the right thing."

"You think so?"

Eli squeezed, kissing Jed's forehead. "I do. Fuck, we need a shower."

"God, yes. And a nap."

They laughed, turning and heading in, letting the dogs out to tumble and play outside. A shower sounded fantastic. Soon enough they'd have to go back to working and working out, but today they'd just play one more day.

The rest of the world could wait.

* * * *

Lunch with Jonas had been a really good idea. Even a week later, Kev was still a little bouncy from it. They'd gotten along so well, and it wasn't like a sex sort of thing. More of a friend sort of thing, if that made any sense.

They were going out to supper tonight, his treat this time, and Kevin looked at himself in the mirror. Khakis. White shirt. His hair looked like he'd combed it, at least.

He still looked about eighteen, instead of, well, way older than that. He sighed. Luckily he wasn't nervous about impressing Jonas or anything. The man just put him at ease.

The buzzer down at the street went off and Kev clicked the intercom dealie. "Hello?"

"Hi, Kev. Are you ready?"

"Sure, be right down."

Tickets. Did he have ... ah. There. Kevin grinned and grabbed his jacket, thundering down the stairs from his apartment, narrowly missing his neighbor from three-B, a little old lady with purple hair. She scowled as he apologized, shaking her cane at him.

He got down, though, and met Jonas at the gate. "Hey. I hope you like murder mystery dinner theatre."

"Really? Oh, I love it." He got a grin, Jonas clapping him on the arm. "Even if I do figure it out sometimes before the end."

"Me, too!" Kevin grinned back. "But it's still a great thing."

"Yeah. Are we driving?"

"I thought we might have a few drinks. Let's take the metro." He didn't drink much, but once in a while Kevin liked a cocktail or two, and he knew Jonas did, too. In this town, even if you didn't drink, driving could be dangerous. Better not to take chances.

"Fun!" Jonas fell into step beside him. "So are you settling in better? You don't seem so..."

"So what?"

"Lonely? Sad?" Jonas gave him a sideways look. "You've been missing someone pretty badly, Kevin."

"I ... yeah." His shoulders hunched right up.

Jonas backed off. "I don't mean to pry."

"I know. It's still just a little raw." God, he hoped it would get over scraping his every nerve all the time. "The job is good, though, and knowing people like you make it easier."

"Oh, man. You mean they broke up with you because you were changing jobs? That sucks, man." Jonas patted his arm, all righteous sympathy. That made him feel even worse.

"No. I broke it off because of it. They kinda offered me the job because they thought I was single, you know?"

Brows drawing together, Jonas shook his head and said, "No, I'm not sure I do."

"So do you think they'll have prime rib? I hear this place, it's the Mysterious Diner, by the way, I hear they have good prime rib, and coconut pie." There came the babble, right on cue. Kevin just couldn't talk about how bad he'd screwed up right now. Not with Jonas.

"I bet they will. And asparagus. I love asparagus."

Ew. Kev wrinkled his nose. "It makes people taste funny."

Jonas laughed out loud. "Does it? I'm not sure I've ever licked someone after asparagus. And no one has ever complained to me, but then, I tend to be, er, extraordinarily careful."

"Oh. Right. Well, I only ever tasted one g ... er, person. The one I mentioned before. And that was a six-year thing."

"Six years. Wow," Jonas said, sounding impressed. "Hey, whoa. We take a right turn here."

"Sorry." His cheeks flushed. "I'm still ridiculously lost."

"It gets easier."

It did, in fact, get easier as the night went on. Jonas switched to talking about work, and football, and new

crossword puzzle books, and Kevin just relaxed and let himself babble a little. They had prime rib and a couple of mixed drinks and yes, pie, and by the end of the night, Kev was sleepy and happy and just feeling good.

"Let's take a cab home," Jonas suggested. "That way we don't have to worry about either of us getting lost."

"Mmm. Good idea." Grinning, Kev staggered out to try to flag down a cab, only realizing how late it was when he saw how little traffic there was.

Jonas yanked him back up on the sidewalk. "I'll call. I have one programmed into my cell."

"You were a Boy Scout, weren't you?"

"Something like that," Jonas answered, eyes crinkling up at the corners in that cute way.

"I like that."

"Oh, good."

Kevin woke up when the cab pulled up to the curb at his building. Someone had an arm wrapped around him, and his head rested on a nice, bony shoulder. "Ross?"

"Huh? Wake up, Kevin. You're home."

Oh. Jonas. Right. Kevin sat up all the way, blinking, trying to get his wallet out. Jonas stopped him gently, opening the door and easing him out, coming with him to the gate.

"That's okay, Kevin, you paid for supper and all. I'll get the cab."

"Okay." He blinked, trying to get awake enough to talk. "I had a great time."

"Me, too."

Jonas bent, and it took Kev a full second after Jonas' lips met his before he realized what was going on. Then he backpedaled so hard he banged up against the side of the building.

"No. I ... I'm sorry, Jonas. I can't. I'm not ready to ... I'm sorry."

Whatever he expected, it wasn't the gentle smile he got, Jonas sticking his hands in his pockets and nodding. "That's all right, Kevin. I knew I was moving too fast. It just felt nice, you snuggling against me. Sort of made me a little reckless. Friends?"

"Oh, definitely. I really like you, Jonas. And it's not that I don't find you attractive. I so do. I just..."

"Can't. I get that." Jonas came over and kissed his cheek, smiling, really smiling so it reached his eyes. "A bunch of the guys are coming over to my place on Monday night to watch the game. Would you like to come?"

Oh, relief. He'd been worried that friends or no, Jonas would just quietly fade away after being rejected. Looked like he was really to allay those fears.

"I would love to," Kevin answered. "What do I bring?"

"Chex mix. Like you brought to the office last week. The game starts at seven, but if you want pizza, be there at six."

"Will do." Impulsively, he reached up and hugged Jonas tight. "Night."

Jonas hugged him back, lingering only a little. "Night, Kevin. Call me if you need to talk."

"I will. I promise."

And he would, too.

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Once he was ready to even talk to himself about it.

Chapter 10

"Hey, Brodie? You in here?" Ross dumped his duffle and pulled back on Pancake's leash. He wasn't gonna let the mutt run wild in the bunkhouse until Brodie told him it was okay.

"Yeah. Just a minute."

When Brodie finally came out to the living room, he was dripping a little and wrapped in a towel. Ross couldn't help it. He just stared.

Damn.

Who knew?

The man was built. Now, that shouldn't come as a surprise, considering what he did for a living, but it did anyway. He smelled good, too, like soap and man. Something pine-citrus.

"Uh," Ross finally said, getting his shit together. "Hey. Look, if it's gonna be a problem, me moving in."

"Hell, no," Brodie said with a grin. "I could use the company. Hey there, boy. You're a pretty pup, yes you are."

Pancake wagged and whined, and when Ross let him loose nearly bowled Brodie over, licking and beating him with that heavy tail. "I think he likes you."

"Of course he does. I'm irresistible. Look, stop worrying, okay? This place was built for at least three hands, possibly five, and it's not like we have to share a room. And I don't mind the dog as long as you vacuum twice a week."

"I can do that. You don't leave dirty dishes in the sink, do you?" These were the little things you had to work out with a roommate. Or with someone you moved in with who

eventually kicked you out. Ross sighed, shook his head. "Sorry," he said, "just teasing."

"No, you weren't. It's a good thing to know," Brodie said, scratching Pancake's ears, the towel starting to gape as he bent. "Christ, you're jumpy as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs, Ross."

"It's your house."

Brodie went still, looking up at him, eyes just shooting sparks. "No. This house belongs to your momma. My house was the place I lived with my wife and my baby girl. It's gone. You get settled, pick any room but mine. I'm gonna go get dressed."

The bedroom door clicked shut behind Brodie, leaving Ross feeling like the biggest ass. God knew how he would be if Kevin had up and died on him. Fuck, he was selfish. Ross patted Pancake when the silly dog came wagging on over, then got to hauling his shit into the small bedroom.

He probably wouldn't be there much to use it anyway.

* * * *

Jed got the popcorn. He got the beer. He set up the TV just right so he could lay out the queen-size air mattress, instead of sit on the couch. He was ready.

Ross was gone, which Jed had mixed feelings about, but baby brother had to stop sulking at some point and start getting on with his life. Jed could only help him so much. And while he missed the man already, he was looking forward to the afternoon.

The dogs had gone out for a run with Eli, and Jed had left a note on the door to leave them out when Eli got back. He had to go on several tourist runs to Aspen tomorrow and the next day, so Jed figured they oughta extend the vacation as much as they could, which was why he'd set up the porn.

Goddamn, Jed loved to watch porn.

It still embarrassed the hell out of Eli, but he got into because Jed did, and that was all that mattered.

It wasn't like he didn't know it was cheesy. Lord knew he'd never seen those looks on Eli's, or anyone else's, face during sex. Nor had he put his hand up behind his head to show off his muscles and sniff his own armpit.

No, what Jed liked was the male bodies, the rawness of the actual meeting of those bodies. He liked cock, sure enough, and porn was a nice safe way to get his rocks off watching without pissing anyone off.

He'd gotten past the first lame set up where a couple of guys were out in the woods skinny dipping and then were suddenly on each other, his hand working his cock through his jeans, when Eli came in.

"Jesus, Jed. Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"What? I'm fully clothed. Come on, Mister. I made popcorn."

Eli kicked off his boots and flopped down next to Jed, making the air bed rock and roll. "This is still too weird."

"Yeah, but remember the whole thing we got out of it a few years back?"

Eli's cheeks heated, and Jed grinned. Yeah, looked like Eli remembered the whole hand inside Jed thing ... of course, so did Jed.

"Yeah, yeah," Eli said. "But that about runs the gamut of what I like about it."

Scooting closer to Eli's big, warm body, Jed put a hand on Eli's chest, feeling how damp his shirt was from running, how fast his heart was beating. Nice. One tight little nipple pressed against his palm, and Jed pinched it through the soft cotton of Eli's t-shirt.

"Oh, come on. I like their bodies." He liked Eli's better, hard body that it was, and right there under his hands, but he liked to tease.

"Asshole."

Jed tilted his head, looking at the screen. "More like ball sac."

"Very funny, ha ha." Eli smacked him good and hard. But he was watching the video, just like Jed was, eyes wide when the top started really pounding the cute little twink on the bottom. Finally Eli looked over at him, frowning a little.

"You ever think of it?" he asked.

Jed blinked. "Think of what?"

"Doing it with other guys?"

That made him sigh, made him thumb off the remote. "Didn't we go over this with the Ray thing? I'm not gonna cheat on you, Mister, and I'm not wondering if the grass is greener, okay? I just like porn."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just. Damn, I've been twitchy lately. I think I must be getting on to my mid-life crisis, Thatcher."

"Could be." Lord knew, Eli wasn't old, but they both knew what a toll jumping every year was taking on him. "Have you thought about taking on a trainer job?"

"Yeah. I even talked to Dan about it. The regional coordinator guy."

"Really?" Hell, that was a step in the right direction.

"Uh-huh. I just figure it's time."

Jed kissed him. Hard. "Well, that works for me."

Eli grinned back at him. "What about you? You ever think about hanging up flying into snowstorms for rich folks?"

Did he? Sure. Could he afford to? Not really. "Can't yet. But I think about that more than I do sleeping with anyone but you."

"Oh, good." Laughing a little, looking uncomfortable as hell, Eli grabbed the remote and turned the TV back on. "I'm being an ass."

"No. You're not." It was actually kinda cute. "You wanna turn that back off? We could just hang out, eat popcorn."

Snuggle.

"That'd be good." Silence reigned again as Eli clicked the TV off, tossing the remote aside and putting an arm around him.

It didn't always have to be about cocks. Sometimes it just needed to be about them. And no one else.

* * * *

Ross tiptoed in at, like, two a.m., a little wobbly and a little scratched up from falling in the bushes. He wasn't *drunk*,

really. Just tipsy as all fuck and happy to be that way. In fact, he was wondering if there was any beer left in the fridge.

He was halfway through the little living room before he realized he wasn't alone. The TV was flickering, and soft noises were coming from the couch, the unmistakable sounds of heavy breathing and flesh on flesh.

Oh, fuck. Brodie might have company. It never occurred to him, after the way Brodie was about his wife and all, that the man might want some time with some special lady. Hell, he had his cell. Brodie coulda called.

Stopping mid-tiptoe, Ross stared. Well, damn. Brodie wasn't with anyone but his hand, jeans down around his thighs, shirt off, and looking like dessert. Hellacious better than another beer, and Ross was just drunk enough to wander over and watch.

"You always use a condom when you stroke off?"

Brodie's eyes snapped open, big hands both flying down to cover his privates. "Holy shit, Ross. What the fuck?"

"What? I came in, you were here." Brodie smelled good. Male. Ross had been tearing up the town, but he'd been doing it with women. Sure, he loved the ladies, but sometimes...

"Ross?" Staring at him, eyes going huge in the low light, Brodie squeaked as Ross dropped to his knees on the floor in front of the couch, pushing Brodie's legs wide.

"Shh. You got another rubber? This one has too much lube on it."

This was probably incredibly wrong, but Ross just ... needed. He needed to touch and feel and give someone something good, someone he knew, not just a nameless face

or a pretty pair of tits. He smoothed the condom up off Brodie's cock, took the new one Brodie offered. The man just looked dazed. And horny.

The second rubber rolled right into place, and Ross stroked a few times, getting Brodie back to full hardness, back to gasping and making those little noises. Then he did what Kev had always said he'd learned to do best.

He sucked.

Brodie's hands came up to hold his head, slick with the lube, and the man just moaned, his whole body flexing and shaking as Ross went all the way down, nose to pubes. Ross closed his eyes and pulled with his lips, missing the real flavor of skin, hating the latex, but he could smell Brodie, could feel the way those wrinkled balls drew up under his fingers, and he knew he was making good things happen.

Thighs hard as rock under Ross' arms, Brodie thrust and thrust for what seemed like forever, but was probably only a few minutes before crying out, head falling back and mouth opening as he came, hips sawing back and forth so hard that Ross had to hold him down for fear of choking.

As soon as Brodie settled, staring down at him with half-lidded eyes, Ross opened his own jeans and started stroking, just panting with it, arm swinging like crazy. Took all of twenty seconds for him to come, grunting almost silently, his whole body so hot he thought he might spontaneously combust.

Silence reigned for a good while, Ross just sitting there on the floor, both of them just looking at each other.

Finally Brodie broke the stalemate. "You drunk?" he asked.

Ross snorted. "Not near enough to pass this off tomorrow," he answered.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Getting up, Brodie turned off the TV and hitched up his jeans before holding out a hand to help Ross up. He held on when Ross would have pulled away. "Come on. Let's go to bed."

Ross went. They stripped off and settled in together, Ross just barely noticing that Brodie's bed was a good bit bigger than his. He was more interested in the hard, warm body against his, not because he was still horny, but because it gave him something to hold onto.

He figured Brodie must have felt the same way. The man didn't let go of him all night long.

* * * *

"You're looking awfully pensive," Jonas said, tapping Kevin's shoulder.

Kevin jumped nearly a foot, making Andreas Fillmore laugh. Andreas was working with him on a code project. Kevin had forgotten he was even there.

Black face splitting into a wide smile, Andreas got up and grabbed his coffee cup, clapping Jonas on the shoulder. "I'll leave you to him. He's been worthless all morning."

"You want to go to lunch?"

Kevin looked up, met Jonas's eyes and nodded. "I think so, yeah, if you don't mind me babbling."

"Don't mind at all."

Jonas had really pretty brown eyes. Kev wondered why he really hadn't noticed before. "Cool. Just let me get my shit out of my desk."

He got his wallet, his keys, and when he thought about it, his jacket. Late October in Maryland was way different than California, or even North Carolina. It made a man remember he had nipples, too...

"So what's up, Kev?" Jonas asked, snapping him out of contemplating the changing leaves.

Sometimes he felt almost guilty for continuing to see Jonas after telling him he just wanted to be friends. The guy just ... well, he was a good. He mentored, he was Kevin's friend, and still wasn't hard to look at.

"I called my ex."

"Yeah? What did he have to say?" Jonas asked, steering him into a Thai restaurant. Oh, that smelled good. Like lime and cilantro and lots of fresh stuff...

"He was kinda tipsy."

One dark eyebrow went up. "At this time of day?"

"No! I called him last night. He was at the bowling alley having a few beers."

"The bowling alley..."

A giggle escaped him as he tried to picture Jonas in his suits and ties at the bowling alley down between Delta and Cedaredge. He couldn't.

"It's a really small town area," Kevin said, still chuckling a little. "The bowling alley is the closest place to get a beer."

"Did you spend a lot of time there?"

"Most of the major holidays, yeah. Ross' family is, was..." Oh, heck, probably was. He drew a deep breath. "More like family to me than my own. My dad never really got his head around me coming out."

"Shame. You're a great guy. He's missing out." Jonas smiled, looking so earnest. Guilt flared for a minute, but Kevin tamped it down. Jonas knew the score. Knew Kevin wasn't ready to do more than be friends.

"Oh, I still see them, and we get along. It's just not the same. Ross' family ... well, I've never had anyone welcome me like that." He tilted his head. "Except maybe you."

Laughing, Jonas folded his menu up. "Well, there you go. I think Pad Thai."

"Oh, no, I want the vermicelli bowl with the ginger beef." Mmm. God, he loved those little weird noodles.

"So he gave you a hard time, huh?"

Kevin blinked. "Who?"

"Your ex," Jonas said, before sipping his tea.

"Oh. No, he was just a little drunk. He told me it hurt to hear from me and that my dog missed me."

"That's low, using the dog against you."

"No. I don't want to make him sound like that. I mean, I miss Pancake, too. And I called, you know? I'm the one who can't make a clean break." He so was. Ross seemed to be doing okay ... well, not okay, but at least able to control the urge to check up on him all the time. Kevin couldn't help it. The Thatchers were his family.

"So, what did you say?"

Playing with the paper from his straw, Kevin shrugged. "That I missed them, too," he replied. "But that things were going well."

"Are they?" Jonas took his hand, stilling its restless motion. "Are they going well, Kevin?"

Were they? He thought about it a minute. "I like work. I like you." The apartment was okay, the town was decent...

"But?"

"But I miss some stuff." Like waking up with Ross. Like playing catch with Pancake. Like just laying around on a Sunday morning trading out comics for sports. He sighed. God, he was a sap, and it was his own fault, and he should stop mourning it because he'd done it and...

"Stop beating yourself up. I can see you doing it," Jonas said, squeezing his hand again. "Don't let guilt keep you from loving your new life."

Kevin squeezed back, smiling as their food came and he had to let go, digging into his steamed dumplings. That was a fine piece of advice.

Maybe he would try taking it. Just to see if he could.

* * * *

For the first time in maybe two weeks, Ross woke up at the crack of dawn with no hangover. No pounding headache. No dry mouth.

Wasn't the first time he'd come awake next to a warm body, but it was male this time, not female.

Brodie.

Ross tried to decide if he should do the arm slide and get out of Bodie's bed, or if he should do the 'snuggle up his cock to that fine ass' and stay awhile. Really, the former seemed a better idea, but the latter felt good. Lord knew he was hard enough.

"Not sure you ought to be pokin' me with that thing, Ross."

He tried to gauge the man's mood by his voice, but Brodie just sounded sleepy and kinda lazy.

"No?" he asked, not quite knowing what else to do.

"Nope." Scooting away a little, Brodie turned over to face him, propping up on one elbow. "You know last night; it was about comfort, Ross. I'm not that way."

He nodded. No, Brodie wasn't that way, but he'd let it happen because it had helped them both make it through the night. Ross liked that about the man. No recriminations, no swearing or shouting, just a calm statement of the truth.

"I know. I just didn't want to let go this morning," he said, smiling right back as Brodie gave him a grin. "Didn't mean to poke and prod."

"Well, I tell you, Ross. You're welcome in my bed any time you need a warm body to hold onto. But I won't do that."

"Fair enough." Ross rolled to the edge of the bed, sitting up and scrubbing his hands across his face. "You want me to make breakfast while you take a shower?"

"Sure." A warm touch ghosted across the small of his back, oddly intimate, yet completely friendly. "I'll see you over eggs."

As soon as Brodie left, Ross flopped back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Well, it wasn't like he'd been hoping or

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anything. Hell, he knew Brodie was pretty much a straight arrow, and that had been the nicest kind of rejection.

He should be glad to know he still had enough of the juice to get a guy who didn't lean that way to let him perform a little.

Grinning, he got up and hunted down his jeans, heading into the kitchen to crack eggs in a bowl and toss some bacon in a pan. He and Brodie were just good friends. And somehow, from Brodie, that was okay with him.

Chapter 11

"Okay, Eli, I'm out of here," Jed said, grinning as he caught Eli on the way through to the back door, dancing him around in a slow circle before kissing him good and hard. "I'll be back on Monday. You behave."

"Don't I always?" Eli grabbed him when he would have waltzed right out the door, and kissed him again. Then one more time. "You be careful."

"I will, Mister. Promise."

He headed out, patting Garg's ears. The other dogs were hiding, knowing something was up. Somehow they always knew the difference between say, a trip to the grocery store and one of his long weekends away. Garg didn't get it, poor puppy that he was, and he whined all the way to Jed's truck, dancing around until Eli had to whistle him up from the porch.

Waving his thanks, Jed headed off to Montrose, where he was meeting the client, whistling along with the Eagles as he floored it and really went, burning down the side of Jackrabbit hill, the Russian olive trees looking gray in the bright sunshine. It was a glorious day, but off to the east and slightly north it looked damned cloudy. He'd have to make sure he checked the forecasts before they left.

Not that he didn't always, but he'd be watching those clouds extra careful.

He got to the airport, waving hey to Annie Labrowski who sat behind the United Express counter flipping through a travel magazine.

"Hey, Annie. Still dreaming of Aruba?"

She grinned, her overbite really going to town, her blue eyes twinkling. "You bet," she said. "Just another two flights."

"Cool. Send me a postcard, lady." Jed waved and grinned. Annie was a nice lady. Had the cutest twin boys, too.

"Will do," she called as he swiped his card and headed out on the flight deck.

Jed went on out to start the pre-flights on the little Cessna Caravan he used out of Montrose. The nice thing about being a local boy was that he managed to co-op ownership of two or three planes with other guys, so he didn't have to pay for everything himself. He only really had to worry about the Beech he kept in Delta.

Still, that meant he had to be extra careful pre-flight, because despite the flight logs, you never knew who had taken the girl out last.

Everyone knew to leave the plane at the far-east end of the second hangar, though, and sure enough, there it sat, the sexy little beast.

Jed loved planes. This Caravan was white and red, had eight seats with a thirty-six inch pitch and a sweet twenty-five inch wide aisle, and would go amphibious if he outfitted it right. What more could a man ask for? Aside from a nice little three-blade prop engine that ran like a dream?

He got his clipboard and his earplugs and started pre-flight checks. Jed figured he had nearly two hours before the Adamsons showed up, looking for their hour and a half scenic flight to Aspen. It only took about forty minutes to fly up there, really, but the paying customers wanted to see mountains and snow and pretty rocks.

An hour and a half later he was done, having checked fuel and brake lines, checked the fuselage for buckling, checked the engine casings and props and every other damned thing on the list.

Time to go schmooze.

"Hey there, Mr. Adamson," Jed said as he walked into the airport office, wiping his freshly washed hands on a towel. "How are you today?"

"Good, good. How are you, Jed?" Adamson shook his hand, a little barrel of a man with a shiny bald head. "Have you met my daughter Katie? And this is her new stepmother, Laura."

"How do, ladies?" Katie looked to be about fourteen, freckled and redheaded with sweet green eyes. Laura was the stereotypical trophy wife of mid-life crises everywhere, maybe ten years older than the daughter and very blonde. Shame. He'd always liked Adamson's first wife Maria. "You folks gonna do some early skiing? I hear there's nine inches of fresh powder."

"Oh, I think I will," Katie said. "I'll be amazed if Dad and Laura get out of the room."

"Katie!" Mr. Adamson blushed like a kid. "That's no way to talk!"

"Oh, now," Jed said with a grin, trying to defuse a little. "Ain't nothing wrong with the kid knowing the facts of life, is there?" Lord, family politics were something else, weren't they? "Where are your bags? I'll go ahead and load them up while you make any last minute trips to the necessary."

He made a strategic exit with one round of suitcases, loading them in the small cargo area. They didn't have so

much stuff that he couldn't have put it in the cabin, but it was just safer not to have it floating around if they had turbulence or something.

"Jed! Glad I caught you." Reese Griggs, the resident meteorologist, came trotting up. "I see you filed for Aspen-Pitkin."

"I did, yeah," Jed answered, pushing his gimme cap back on his head. "Is that bad?"

"Not yet, no. When are you out?"

"About twenty minutes. Planning an hour and a half run."

"Well, just be careful," Reese said. "It's ugly over on the Front Range, and could move in lightning fast."

"I thought those clouds looked horrendous. Thanks, buddy."

"No problem. Have a good run," Reese said, running off again with a wave.

Damn. Jed went out and looked east. All of the sophisticated technology in the world probably couldn't stand up to a pilot's instincts. Jed watched the clouds move for a minute before shaking his head and getting his ass back inside.

"All right, folks, I'm not one to rush, but there's a storm brewing over where you're looking to be, so we need to get a move on. Anything else you don't want to take onboard with you?"

They all shook their heads no, so he loaded up the cooler he always took with water, sodas and snacks, and headed on out, chattering.

"Now, Carl has been out with me before, but you ladies need to know what's safe and what's not," he said, feeling like one of those flight attendants. "You'll need to pick a seat, not everyone on the same side if you don't mind. And you'll need to stay belted in unless I say it's safe, all right?"

They all nodded as he got them settled, Carl on one side, Katie and Laura on the other so Katie didn't have to look out the window. He counterweighed the short side with the cooler and the carry-ons.

"If we get bumpy, the same rules apply here that would on a big jet. Head down, arms crossed, seatbelt low and tight across your lap."

Another round of nods had him grinning, nodding back. "You want me to play tour guide, Carl?" he asked. "Or will you?"

"Oh, would you?" Mr. Adamson asked. "You're much more entertaining than I am."

"Surely. I'd be happy to." He grinned. Lord knew he liked to hear himself talk. "I've got a few more pre-flight checks to run, so just settle in and I'll let you know when we're set to go."

He checked the prop again, and the landing gear before he was satisfied. They'd always said in the Army that if you didn't get it right the first time, you shouldn't be in the air corps, but he still felt like the things that could fall off deserved a second look. Satisfied, Jed took one more look at the sky, shaking his head. Damn, those clouds. He'd just have to really keep an eye peeled.

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"Okay, folks," Jed said, climbing in and sealing the hatch. "Just lean back and let me do the work. This ought to be a fun ride."

* * * *

The dog started barking the minute the truck turned down the drive, and Eli set the barbell back in the cradle and got up, grabbing his towel to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. Squinting out the window told him it wasn't Jed, which he kinda knew, since Jed's flight should just now be hitting the end of the tourist thing and the start of the real flight to Aspen.

Besides, Jed's truck didn't have a horse trailer attached to it.

The back screen door slammed, and the dogs' yelps went all high-pitched doggie ecstasy, so Eli knew before he even went out in the front room who it was who'd come in.

"Hey, Ross," he called. "Grab some coffee. I'll be out in a sec."

"Heck with coffee," Ross called back. "We want lunch."

Lunch? Yeah, he guessed it was about noon. Eli got some pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt on before wandering on out, finding Ross and Jed's mom's hand, Brodie, digging through his fridge.

"Help yourself."

"Thanks," Ross said, grinning over. "Looking good, Eli."

His cheeks heated. Ross looked so like Jed sometimes that it was scary. And he was three times the flirt, which was

saying something. "You look like you feel better," Eli said, noting the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed demeanor.

"Some, yeah."

There was something about the look that passed between Brodie and Ross that made Eli tilt his head. Something fucking intimate. It kinda freaked him out, made him want to pull Ross aside.

"Make me a sandwich, too, will you?" he asked. "Turkey and ham. I need to take the dogs out."

There. See him not be nosy. Living with the Thatcher clan had made him all too eager to get up into people's business. If they were ... well. Damn it.

"Ross! Give me a hand, will you?"

"Sure, buddy."

Ross came and helped him, hauling out Ojo, who had been so blissful at seeing Ross and Brodie that he'd passed right out, while Eli grabbed Garg and started the daily push and pull.

"So," Eli started once they got outside, the crisp fall air making him shiver. "It's none of my business, but you know Brodie's straight, right?"

Stumbling on the stairs, Ross staggered, almost dropping Ojo as the mutt woke up and started wiggling. Then he looked at Eli with both eyebrows raised.

"Yeah. I knew that."

"I don't think he's even a little bi, Ross."

Ross stared some more, putting the dog down and putting his hands on his hips. "I know that, okay? I'm not falling for him; I'm not trying to seduce him."

"So why are you bumping hips and sharing looks?" He should let it drop. But damn it, Jed wasn't there, so it was his job.

"We're friends."

"You're not sleeping together?"

"Occasionally." Ross held up a hand to stop him when he would have opened his mouth. "But we're not fucking, okay? He's drawn very clear boundaries. It's just a comfort to us both, is all."

"Okay." Yeah, okay. Eli sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. It just seemed ... wrong. Still, who the hell was he to judge? Before Jed, he'd been the king of dysfunction.

"Soup's on, boys!" Brodie called from inside, breaking the stare-off he and Ross were having.

Ross turned on his heel and headed in, leaving Eli to follow more slowly, feeling rotten because he'd spoiled Ross' good mood. Maybe they could get it back. He should just leave fucking well enough alone.

Thankfully, Ross was smiling again by the time he came back in, clapping him on the back and handing him a great big Dagwood sandwich. "Here, eat up."

"Thanks." Eli grinned, nodding at Brodie. "How's it hanging?"

"Fair enough," Brodie replied, looking from him to Ross. "Any trouble?"

"Nope. None at all." He'd stay out of it. Yep. He would.

"Cool."

"So what are you two doing over here?" he asked before chowing down.

"Delivering a horse to old Mr. Abrams in Olathe," Brodie answered, stealing Ross' pickle, which almost made Eli choke. Ross. Pickle. Yeah.

"You're getting good at that whole training deal. Making good money on the side."

"Yeah. I'm real lucky Nancy and Lloyd let me use their facilities."

"Shit," Ross snorted. "They wouldn't know what to do without you."

Brodie flushed a little, smiling, and Eli shook his head, clamping his mouth around his sandwich. Lord, lord, as Jed would say. Still, if both of them knew what they were getting into...

The phone rang, cutting off his thoughts, and Eli wiped his mouth on a napkin before trotting over to answer.

"Lo?"

"Eli? This is Reese Griggs, over in Montrose."

"Oh, hey Reese." Reese was the weatherman over at the Montrose airport, and a genuine good old boy.

"Eli, I ... I got some bad news."

His mouth went dry. "What?"

"There's a storm over around Aspen. Jed's flight would have taken him right out that way. He hasn't called in for his descent authorization, and we haven't been able to contact him at all. They ... they think he might've gone down, Eli."

He just shorted out, his breath caught in his chest, the world going gray around the edges. Eli groped for something solid, a harsh sound tearing out of him, just utterly fucking lost. No way.

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There was no way in Hell Jed was gone.
There was just no way.

* * * *

The clouds started looking ominous about the time Jed banked and started toward Aspen. Well, more ominous than before, and fast as the Roadrunner outdoing the Coyote, for sure. He checked his fuel, his gauges, his airspeed. Yeah, they needed to get their asses on the ground. The air temp had dropped fucking dramatic-like.

The Cessna shuddered as they hit their first bit of turbulence, making him bite off a curse. "Okay, folks," he said into the headset. "We're going to bounce a bit, so hold onto your seats. We should be starting a descent into Aspen here in about ten minutes."

"Did you hear that, Katie?" Carl asked. "You need to buckle up."

"Daa-ad."

"No, he's right, missy. Get that ass planted and put that seat belt on." Jed would apologize for being nasty later, but right now they were flying right into a cloud he couldn't seem to get above or below, the plane doing one of those sickening swoops that left his belly three feet above the rest of his body.

Katie squeaked, but she did buckle up, so Jed let it go, concentrating instead on the suddenly bucking and kicking plane. Goddamn, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been hit so sudden, and it was taking all his skill to keep

them in the air. He couldn't go lower for fear of scraping them against the mountain, so he went higher.

"Gonna try to get above some of this, folks. Sorry. I was eyeing this storm, but it came up damned fast."

None of his passengers said a word, and heck, who could blame them. They were probably all trying not to puke as the plane took another dip, sideways and then straight down. Jed gritted his teeth and fought it, sweating bullets for sure.

Fuck. His de-icing boots had to be overwhelmed. Fuck, fuck, fuck. They were nowhere near close enough to the Aspen/Pitkin airport. Not close enough to be safe. They were losing altitude at a pretty alarming rate.

Time to admit defeat.

Jed turned off the cabin radio so Carl and family wouldn't hear, and picked up the radio, trying to raise Aspen. Getting nada.

Damn it.

Jed tuned back into the cabin, keeping his voice light and calm. "All right, folks, it looks like we're going to have to set it down to wait out the storm. We're icing up a little. My charts show a Forestry Service landing strip right close, so I'm going to put her down. It will be bumpy, but if everyone could just stay calm, we'll be fine."

"Icing?" Carl sounded a little panicky. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the de-icer can only do so much and this is a hell of a blow. I want you folks to make sure all of your stuff is stowed nice and tight, and I want you to get your coats if you can. Wad them up and put them between you and the seat in

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front of you, then do the crossed arms and bend over thing. Okay? We'll be down in no time."

They all moved around, and he heard them talking in low, sorta panicked voices, but Jed couldn't concentrate on that, only on getting them down in one piece. Then he'd have to worry about keeping them warm and in food until they got rescued and/or could take off again. And Eli. Oh, Jesus, would Eli worry.

Fuck, he hoped to God he was on target. According to the coordinates he was, but even at only a few thousand feet he couldn't see his hand in front of his face out there, and Jed had no idea how on he was with no visuals. When they finally broke free of the clouds all he saw was snow and trees, trees he scraped the tops of as they went over. He held on, keeping them as steady as they could, and damned if he didn't hit the little landing strip, sliding on the ice and feeling the landing gear skid, making a sickening turn and sliding down the tiny break in the trees sideways.

The last thing he knew was trees and snow, right before they hit something hard, and he hit something harder, and everything just went black.

* * * *

"Eli, what is it?" Ross put his hand on Eli's shoulder, squeezing to get the man's attention. Eli's face had gone plumb gray, and the sound he'd made ... well, it had sent shivers up Ross' spine, making goosebumps pop up hard.

Eli just looked at him, eyes almost black, the pupils were so dilated. "Jed. They think Jed's crashed up in the mountains."

Bile rose in Ross' throat, and he swayed, his legs threatening to give out. "Who? What? Tell me what they said."

"That was Reese. You know Reese?" At his nod, Eli went on, "He says they're not making radio contact, the storm is bad, and he's not landed in Aspen. They ... they can't find him, Ross. What if they can't find him?"

"Stop it. Just stop that right now." No way was he going to let Eli believe that, feel that. "He's fine. I'm sure. We just need to go get him."

Casting a look at Brodie, Ross pried the phone out of Eli's hand. Brodie stepped right in, steering Eli to the couch and going to get a big glass of orange juice while Ross called the ranch.

"Hello?"

"Mom."

"What is it, honey? What's wrong?"

God, moms always knew. "It's Jed, Mom. They think. Well, he took a bunch of tourists up and there's a storm and..."

"Oh. Oh, my God." She'd never panic. Not in a million years, but Ross could hear the fear in her voice. "Where? Where were they going?"

"Aspen."

"Okay. Are you at Jed's?"

He nodded without thinking, then answered out loud. "Yeah."

"Okay, round them up over there and bring them here. As soon as you get here we'll head out," she said. "We'll go stay up there, get them moving on a search and all."

"Right." She made him feel better, made the world less spinny. "See you soon."

"Get your ass on the road, baby," she said, just before hanging up.

He set the phone in the cradle, staring at it for all of five seconds before turning to Eli and Brodie. "Better?" he asked Eli, and got a nod in return. "Good. Brodie, can you go to the Austins' place and ask them to feed the animals? Eli, pack a bag for both you and Jed. He'll need a change of clothes. I'll round up the dogs and get the house closed up."

Having something to do helped. In fact, it was crucial to him to not go fucking crazy worrying. It looked like Eli felt better having a plan, too, and Brodie just did as he was asked, radiating quiet support.

Ross figured for right now he'd just do the next thing.

Sooner or later they'd figure out what they really needed to do to get Jed back, safe and sound.

Chapter 12

Two years earlier

"Will you quit nagging?"

"I do not nag," Jed said, hands clenched in the singed fabric of Eli's jump suit. "And I don't fret. I do sometimes worry that you'll burn up parts of you I really like."

"Well, I won't, okay?" Eli came over to kiss him, easing the suit out of his hands and tossing it aside. "I'm good at what I do."

"Don't patronize me, Mister. I know you are, but that doesn't make it any less dangerous." Jed swallowed hard.

"You came too damned close this time."

"Bullshit, Thatcher. Stop it. I'm fine."

Jed nodded. Eli was fine this time. He should shut up about it. He really should. But it was next time that he worried on. And the next time after that.

* * * *

Present day

It was the cold that woke Jed up. That and something cold and powdery landing on his forehead. Fuck-a-duck.

Snow.

Through a broken windshield.

His first thought was that he'd slid off the road into a ditch, but then Jed remembered the plane, and the landing and ... yeah. A mental inventory told him that nothing was broken, just bent and bruised, so he took stock of the situation next.

Trees. They were in the trees, but not too deep in. The wreck hadn't been that bad, as far as he could tell, but it'd been enough to scatter his chickens for sure. Jed unbuckled his seat belt and tested his legs. A little Jell-O-like, but not bad.

The Adamsons. Oh, shit.

Stumbling, Jed slipped and slid out of the cockpit, going back to the cabin. Everything seemed intact save for a few front windows, but man it was quiet back there. Jed went to Mr. Adamson first, finding a nice strong pulse. Just passed out. Laura and Katie were a little more banged up on their side, Katie with a huge bump on her forehead, Laura with a split lip, but as he patted Katie's cheeks she opened her eyes, and both pupils were the same size.

She stared up at him. "Dad? Laura?"

"Out cold, honey. Can you move? I need to get to your stepmom, see if she's okay."

"Sure. Sure I can." Her hands scrabbled, sort of aimless, and Jed finally got her under the arms to haul her up, dancing her around to a seat in front of her dad. She was a little green around the gills as Jed stuffed her into her coat. Fuck, it was cold already.

"Talk to your daddy, honey. Try to wake him up," Jed said, chafing Laura's hands, rubbing her arms.

"Dad?" Katie said, obediently doing as he asked. "Come on, Dad, wake up. I need you."

Carl stirred and Laura woke up, and soon enough he had them all huddled up together in the back seat, which was one big bench, and right near the emergency hatch. Jed piled all

of their stuff from their carry-on bags on them to keep them warm.

"All right, folks. I'm going out to get your ski gear and check for fuel leaks. If there's nothing, we can stay on the plane. If I find anything and I tell you to evacuate, you pop that hatch and come a-running. You got it?"

They all nodded, looking shell-shocked as he felt. Lord, what a mess.

Jed bundled up in his coat. Finding his gloves under the co-pilot's seat, Jed hopped out into the howling wind, feeling his way along to the tail of the aircraft. God, he hoped they weren't leaking fuel. And he hoped he could find his bag by feel, as he had ski goggles and heavier clothes in there.

A full, or as full as he could get in a fucking blizzard, check of the tail-section later. Jed grunted in satisfaction. As far as he could tell there was no leakage. Now, he wouldn't go lighting a fire inside the cabin, but still. Now he just had to get to the small luggage storage and get all that shit back in the plane.

Water wouldn't be a problem. Melted snow in the empty Coke cans and water bottles would work just fine. Food they might run out of. The cooler and bag he'd taken on the plane had sandwiches, trail mix, and fruit, along with soft drinks and juice. He had survival rations in the cockpit, and more in the storage area, including granola bars, peanuts, and chocolate chips. That *should* last them until the storm blew over and they could radio in help, but it never hurt to be prepared for all eventualities.

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One at a time, Jed hauled the bags in, trying to keep the snow out as much as possible. He'd have to cover the broken windows, find the survival blankets, and ... yeah. The wind howled, buffeting him, sending him smacking up against the plane once, all of his air whooshing out of his lungs. Fuck. He couldn't see anything but white. It was like an avalanche, only there was no calm at the end.

Finally he got back in and fought the hatch, sealing it up behind him. When he took off his gloves to try to duct tape some cloth over the broken windows, the tape cut his hands, leaving blueish-red stains on his uncharacteristically pale skin.

"Here, let me help you," Katie said, leaving the huddle, her hands shockingly warm on his.

"Thanks, honey."

Together they made short work of it, and Jed was able to sit finally, grabbing the first aid kit and wrapping up his hand. He had a feeling his lips were still blue. The feeling was kinda confirmed when Katie wrapped a survival blanket around his shivering shoulders.

"Well," Carl said, shattering the tense silence. "How bad off are we?"

"Not as bad as it could be," Jed answered. "We're on a Forestry Service airstrip, so we should be fairly easy to see, and there'll be an access road somewhere. We have food and water for a good few days if we go sparing on the food. Mainly we just need to wait for the storm to blow over and stay warm."

"And then they'll come looking for us?" Laura asked.
"They'll know we were supposed to land?"

"Ma'am, they probably *already* know we didn't land like we were supposed to. As soon as the storm blows by, they'll be looking for us, I promise."

Hell, Eli would soon be tearing the woods apart with his bare hands, storm or no storm. And his mom. Lord.

"Let me warm up and I'll look at those bruises and scrapes," Jed said, getting a chorus of nods. That would keep them all busy, as he wanted to make sure no one fell asleep with a concussion or something. Hell, it would keep him busy, too, so he wouldn't think about his family, or what he and the Adamsons might have to do to get out of this mess.

Thinking in a blizzard was just always a bad idea.

* * * *

They got to Aspen about four hours later. Ross drove one truck, Brodie the other, and they fought that bitch of a snowstorm for the last hour on the road, slipping and sliding, finally stopping to put on chains.

The worse it got, the more worried Ross got.

They'd left Eli's dogs with Stu and his wife. Lloyd'd come with them, along with Brodie, his mom packing food and supplies, chain-smoking and barking orders like his first drill sergeant.

By the time they got to Aspen and got a cabin rented, Ross thought he might just go nuts.

"You okay?" Brodie asked as they unloaded, bumping hips with him.

"Huh? No. Not really, no." Hell, Brodie knew that. He was just trying to help. Ross summoned a smile. "I'll be fine when we find him."

"We will." Brodie patted his back. "I promise."

He watched Brodie shoulder Lloyd's duffel and head on inside, that cowboy walk just making him smile and shake his head. God, he was a fool. No doubt about it.

"You coming in, baby? It's snowing fierce." His mom came out, distinguishable mainly by the glowing red end of her cigarette.

"In a minute. Can I have one of those?"

"They're really bad for you." Still, she cupped one in her hand to keep it dry and handed it over, giving him her Zippo, too.

"I know."

God, he hadn't smoked sober in an age. Ross made a face at the taste, but it did help his nerves. In. Out. Suck the smoke in; blow it out. His eyes automatically sought the surrounding mountains. "When do you think it will let up?"

"I don't know. Probably not before tomorrow."

"Damn."

"Yeah. Lloyd has a friend, someone who heads up search and rescue teams in the area. They're making a plan." She sounded just as tired and worried as he did, and Ross stubbed out his cigarette half smoked, going to give her a bone crushing hug.

"He's tough. He'll be fine," Ross said, convincing both of them.

"He will," she agreed. "Come on in."

"I will in a minute."

His mom kissed his cheek and patted it after. "Okay. But don't be long. No getting frostbite."

Ross laughed, the sound strained. "I wouldn't be much good, then, would I? Go on. I'll be there soon."

She left him out in the snow, little squares of light from the cabin the only illumination in the whole rotten day. Ross stood there for a minute, staring off into space, before pulling out his phone.

When Kevin answered on the other end, all Ross could say was, "Kev, baby? I need you."

* * * *

Kevin packed his bag, listening to the phone ring, cursing under his breath. "Come on, come on ... Jonas? Hey."

"What's wrong?"

Sweet guy, that Jonas, already knowing him well enough to know right away that something was up. Kevin took a deep breath and started babbling.

"Hi. I called work already, and they said I could take the time off, but I need someone to feed the fish you got me, and maybe just stop by and check my place to make sure it's okay? Can you do that? I have an extra key I could drop off on my way to the airport."

"Whoa," Jonas said, cutting him off. "Why? Where are you going? What's going on?"

"Oh." He stared at the sweater in his hands, trying to decide if it would be heavy enough for Aspen. "My ex, Ross."

He called. His brother is missing. In a plane crash. He needs me."

"Kevin," Jonas said gently, "he's your ex."

"I know. I know, but Jonas, his brother. Jed? He's like ... he's family. So is Ross' mom. And Lloyd. And there's the dogs, and Ross is ... I want to be there for him. He called *me*, Jonas. Not as a lover, but as a friend, you know? And I need to help."

"All right, all right, Kevin. I won't say anything more. I'd be happy to take care. Look, why don't I take you to the airport? That way you don't have to leave your car, I can get the key, and I can..." Jonas trailed off.

Kevin paused, looking at his ditty bag. "You can what?"

"See you off," Jonas answered, voice a little strained.

Kevin's head tilted to one side. "I'm coming back. On Tuesday. Whether we find him or not. I just ... I need to do this."

"Okay. Okay, when do you leave?"

"My flight leaves in four hours."

Jonas muttered something that sounded like "shit", but then said, "Which means I need to leave now. See you in forty-five minutes."

"Okay." Jonas was too good to him. "And Jonas?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

* * * *

Kevin drove into Aspen at, like, two a.m., trying hard to find the cabins Ross had said he and his folks were staying at.

The night was light enough to see pretty well, thanks to the snow that was piled halfway to an elephant's ass. The storm had quit, and it had turned off cold, cold and clear, making the road like a sheet of glass.

Still, the clearing meant they could search in the morning.

He pulled up, finally, at the Ski-easy Cabin Rental, grinning at how plain and homey and practical the place was. Trust the Thatchers to find the one place in Aspen that wasn't fancy. Half expecting to hear dogs set up a ruckus, Kevin got out of his rented SUV and went to knock on the door of cabin five.

A very blinky Ross met him at the door, barefoot and clad in sweatpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt. "Wow. Hi."

Kevin grinned a little, shivering even in his fancy wool coat. "Uh. Hi. It's cold."

"Oh! Yeah. Come on in." Stepping back, Ross let him in, staring at him, those blue eyes glittering in the half-light of a little wall sconce. "You look good, baby."

"I probably look jet-lagged." Unable to resist, Kevin dropped his bag and took a hug, his arms folding around Ross as he breathed in the smell of sweat and wood smoke and Ross.

"No, you look great. I'm probably looking like shit on a shingle, though." Ross laughed, hugged right back, warm breath on his ear making Kevin shiver.

"So what can I do?" Kevin asked.

"Right now you can sit and talk to me," Ross said, leading him into the tiny cabin kitchenette. The place had that sort of worn-homey look, with cane chairs and rough-hewn counters,

little quilted curtains hanging at the windows. Ross made it all look kinda dainty.

"Have you heard anything?" Kevin settled, watching Ross pace a little. All that pent up wanna help just had nowhere to go.

"No. No one would even think of searching until daybreak, storm or no. And even though I hate it like hell, I get it. It's vicious out there."

Oh, if he could help wipe that haunted look out of Ross' eyes, he would. He so would. "Well, Jed's a smart guy. And he's not out there alone, right? They can share body heat."

"They can." Ross stared at him a minute before asking, "You want anything? We have hot chocolate, coffee."

"Hot chocolate would be good. How's your mom holding up?"

"Why not ask me yourself. Hi there, Kevin." Nancy Thatcher had always treated him like a son, and she wasn't making exceptions now, just because he and Ross had broken up. She gave him a big hug, her solid, compact body warm from sleep.

"Hi, Nancy." Kevin grinned ruefully at her. "I didn't mean to wake you."

She smiled right back, her blue eyes twinkling, making it so obvious where all of her boys had gotten their coloring. "Who can sleep? Hot chocolate sounds fine, Ross. Real fine."

Kevin nodded. "Do we need marshmallows? I passed a Quick Mart that was open."

"No, we got the kind with." Moving around, Ross started heating water, getting out mugs.

Before long, Eli and Lloyd had joined them, one wearing sweats, the other crazy, trout-patterned PJs. Eli gave him a big hug, Lloyd a cordial little nod. Lloyd wasn't much for talking. He just cooked, and this was no exception, the man making a huge load of pancakes and bacon, even though it was just barely three.

"Is Ken coming up?" he asked the room.

Ross answered. "Uh-huh," he said. "He should be in here in a bit. He had to get someone to help with the winter feeding before he could come down. Well, you know how much colder it is up there."

"Mandy's brother ought to be able." That came from behind him, and Kev turned to see Brodie, Nancy's ranch hand, wandering in, curly hair in wild disarray.

"Hey, Brodie."

Brodie gave him a quiet, neutral look. "Howdy, Kevin. Glad you could come on out."

Something was odd there, something about the way Brodie went to Ross and clapped him on the shoulder. Maybe even something in the way Ross looked back at Brodie, eyes warm, smile grateful. Kev stared a little, something twisting in his belly, until he realized that everyone was kinda staring at *him*.

Kevin smiled brightly. "So, what can I do to help?"

"You like puzzles," Nancy said. "Maybe you can look at the maps, see where the likeliest place is to find him, based on the last coordinates we have."

"Sure. Sure, I can do that." Anything to stop thinking that maybe Ross and Brodie weren't ... wasn't Brodie married once?

Ken showed up, they ate, Kevin looked at the maps, and Brodie and Lloyd went back to bed to catch another few hours of sleep. Nancy tactfully withdrew, hauling a not so tactful and very curious Ken off with her.

Leaving him alone with Ross.

"So are you sleeping together?" Kevin blurted.

Ross turned, hands all soapy from doing dishes. "Huh?"

"You and Brodie. Are you sleeping together?" He couldn't help it. It was none of his business. He had to ask anyway.

All of the muscles in Ross' body tensed up, those shoulders hunching as Ross bent over the sink. He'd bet Ross was biting off a 'none of your business', or a 'why do you care'. He did care, though. That had been his prerogative once.

"Occasionally," Ross finally answered. "But not like you think."

"You did, though."

"Once. I ... He didn't." Ross sighed before going on, voice just raw. "I took advantage once, okay? When I was drunk and he was lonely. But that's it. I've crawled into bed with him a few times since, but only for company."

"Okay." The tablecloth suddenly seemed fascinating. A little sticky, too, from the syrup they'd spilled on it.

"What about you?" Ross asked, making him look up again.

"What about me what?"

"Are you seeing anyone?" Ross watched him closely. Heck, Ross knew he couldn't lie worth a shit.

"No. I mean kinda. There's Jonas." God, he wanted to babble. He stopped himself in time, though.

"Who's Jonas?"

It hurt to see Ross' face fall, to see pain flash in those pretty eyes, but at the same time, it finally felt like maybe he could admit how much he liked Jonas to someone. Ross would always listen, even if they couldn't talk as well as they used to, even if on the phone it was easier to say no.

In person, Ross just couldn't turn him down.

"He's this guy at work," Kev answered, smiling a little.

"He's older than me, but he and I have a lot in common. And he's been ... patient."

He got a ghost of Ross' old twinkle in the look that came his way, wicked as all get out. "You haven't slept with him."

"Not yet, no. I told him I wanted to wait. I ... I didn't think it would be fair until I was over you." There. Let Ross make what he would of that. Heaven knew, Kevin was the one who'd left, but he really wasn't fickle at heart. He really wasn't.

"Yeah. Baby, I ... Well." Ross got up, came over and pressed a soft, lingering kiss on his lips. No intent. Just a thank you. "Thanks."

"No problem, Ross," Kevin said, not sure if he was talking about flying out to help, or about waiting to sleep with Jonas. "No problem at all."

* * * *

Bitter cold seeped through all of the cracks and crevices of the aircraft's body. Somewhere long about three in the

morning, Jed had given up the whole invasion of space thing and huddled right into the puppy pile, Katie and Laura making room for him on the end so they could all get more warmth.

Now it was later in the morning and he was awake again. They weren't in danger of freezing to death, or even of frostbite, not yet at least. Still, it was damned cold. The sun looked to be up from what he could see, though, so maybe there was a good day to be had after all.

First, Jed figured he'd take stock of the situation. See where they were, then what they were up against. He needed to see if the radio was working now that the storm was done with them, too.

Easing out of the pile proved more difficult than Jed thought. He was stiff, sore, and moving with a slowness that kinda alarmed him. Plus Katie tried to cling, not wanting to lose his warmth.

Stiff-legged, Jed clumped up to the cockpit, pulling his coat around him and blowing into his gloves to steam up the air around his nose. Damned if his nose hairs weren't crackling.

The radio just gave him white noise and feedback.

Well, why not? Jed sighed, digging out a scarf and wrapping it around his nose and mouth. The moisture would keep the dry, bitter cold outside from damaging his lungs. Hopefully.

Man, that was the worst kind of winter storm. The ones that hung around for days usually weren't bad. Oh, they'd dump a lot of wet, but the ones that whooshed through, leaving twelve inches of dry powder and a humidity of, like, ten percent? Those were the worst.

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Everything crunched when Jed opened the hatch. The whole world blinded him, the sun bouncing off the snow so bright that he stumbled back in to get his sunglasses. Fuck-a-duck.

The crust really tore at his boots, but he had ski pants on over his jeans now, so at least he wasn't soaked to the skin like he'd been the night before. Goddamn, it was bright and cold as a witch's tit in a brass bra. His whole body shivered, trying reflexively to warm itself.

They were well and truly snowed in, about eighteen inches of fresh stuff. It would be enough for the skis, if they were intact after the crash, so they could get out if they had to. Carl and Laura might not make it though. Carl was out of shape, and Laura was skinny like a beanpole, no meat to warm her. Katie, now, that girl was athletic looking.

He got the skis, got them checked. Yeah. Yeah, they would work, thank God. The little propane stove was a goner, though, which just pissed him off. He wanted coffee.

Finally getting the rest of the supplies piled up to move inside, Jed took stock of their surroundings. Not too bad, just like he'd thought the night before. If he could find a flare he might be able to start a fire. On a day this clear, the spotters would see that for miles.

And he'd get coffee out of the deal, too. Not a bad way to go.

* * * *

Eli wandered. They had to wait for the search and rescue people to get moving, and while he appreciated that it took a

while (he did work in the fire business after all) he wanted to go and find Jed fucking *now*.

"Hey. They're ready for us, Eli," Ross said, coming up and clapping him on the shoulder. "You got your gear?"

"Yeah. I got it. We on the chopper?"

"We are. Lloyd and Mom and Brodie and Kev are taking the ground patrols."

"Ken?"

"He's manning the relief station back here, staying close to the radio. He's got that bruised-up foot."

When Jed and Ross' brother Ken had showed up in the wee hours, he'd been limping like a dog with a sore paw. All he'd gotten for hurrying through all of the feedings was stepped on.

"Good. Okay, let's go." He shouldered his pack, hoping they wouldn't need half of the first aid crap in it. Maybe all they'd need was the coffee and protein bars. Maybe. Jed was a smart cookie.

They boarded the chopper, the pilot one both Eli and Ross knew by name, and hit the air. The day was so pretty it almost hurt, making the whole situation even more macabre and disheartening.

"You'll have to tell Kev thanks for me if I forget to," Eli shouted as they took off. Kev had read the maps, formulated and triangulated, and figured out the best places to search. Bless him, he'd come up with no less than ten likely spots.

Ross nodded, eyes already on the trees.

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Eli watched, too, his binoculars trained on the earth. If they'd broken up in the trees the search would be a hard one. Goddamn, he hoped Jed had been luckier than that.

He knew damned well the man was *smarter*.

They'd just have to hope that was enough.

* * * *

The fire blazed merrily away, and it actually made it warmer outside the plane now than in, what with the shade inside. Jed had built it in a shallow depression he'd dug out with a trenching tool, then lined it with strips of foil, of all things. To shelter them from the wind, he erected a little lean-to out of two of the survival blankets. The black side caught the sun while they huddled against the reflective inside, all of the heat thrown right back at them.

They were actually melting a little circle of snow.

"How long do you think it will be, Jed?" Carl asked.

"I dunno, Carl. I imagine they're already looking." If Eli knew ... he'd be looking. Along with Jed's mom and Ross, possibly Ken depending on how Mandy was doing, that was a formidable team. "As long as it's by sundown today, I'll be happy. Katie honey, I know it feels a lot warmer, but keep that scarf up."

"It's scratchy." Poor kid had started to sound petulant about an hour ago. She had to be tired as hell, and much as she was in better shape than her dad, she was still a teenager, needing way more sleep than any of the rest of them.

"You could go curl up in the plane, if you want. We can heat some rocks up here by the fire and wrap them up to put around you. Like old-fashioned foot-warmers." The ground was too damned cold to lie on, it really was.

Her lower lip came out mutinously. "I want to do my share of the work."

Jed put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing, feeling how stiff she was with the cold. "You have, kiddo. Trust me. Ain't nothin' else to do until someone comes or nightfall hits, whichever comes first."

"I could use a nap, too," Laura said, smiling through the new lines on her face. "Why don't we go lie down, Katie. That hot rock thing sounds amazing."

"You go on, make a nest. Carl and I will bring your warmers, huh?"

Carl gave him a grateful look as the girls wandered off and said, "Thanks, Jed."

"For what? I got you into this mess."

"Oh, come on," Carl said, giving him a clap on the back. "I've been riding in small jets for years. Long enough to know that storm came on too darned fast and there was no way we could have predicted it. I saw those clouds. If I'd thought one minute they'd hit like they did, I would never have risked the family."

Giving Carl a long look, Jed finally nodded, letting out a deep breath. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, Carl, that's what I keep thinking, too. If I'd have known..."

"Yep. I trust you, Jed. You're a good pilot and a good guy. Now," Carl went on, stomping his feet and waving his arms to

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get going before heading to find rocks. "Let's not keep the ladies waiting."

Jed grinned, nodded. Yeah. God forbid.

Besides, this would give them all something to do until ... well, until Eli came to take him home.

* * * *

"Anything?" Ross shouted into the radio, getting static back for a moment before Ken answered him.

"Nope. Mom and Lloyd are striking out. Kev and Brodie have exhausted their search area and are starting west."

"Okay, keep us posted."

"Will do," Ken said, signing off.

Made sense to keep the radio open, just in case. Ross sighed, bringing his binoculars back into play. Goddamn, he hated this. Hated it. He'd hated search and rescue in the Army, and then it hadn't even been a relative he'd been looking for. With it being Jed down there, the sense of worthlessness just ratcheted up about fifty notches.

"We need to refuel," the pilot said. "We'll set down for about ten minutes. If you guys need to pee or whatever, now's the time."

Ross looked at Eli, who was grinding his teeth. They both knew it was a necessary evil, but damn it, every minute was precious. It was already afternoon. They both nodded, though, and the pilot turned them back toward base.

They'd take a leak, get some food and some fresh, hot coffee for when they found Jed and the others.

Because they had to find them. And soon.

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* * * *

"I know Ross really appreciates you coming."

It was the first thing Brodie had said to him in nearly an hour, and Kev started, looking over.

"You think?" he asked.

Brodie just nodded, eyes on the road. Not that Kevin could blame him. The roads had been plowed, but they were still slick as snot, and they had chains on for when they hit the back roads, where snow sat deep.

"I do," Brodie answered. "He's been missing you fierce."

"Well, I couldn't not come. Jed's like a brother to me."

"They suck you in and make you family, huh?"

He heard the wry grin in Brodie's voice before he saw it, and it made him chuckle. "Heck, yes. I swear, the first time I met Ross' mom I thought I was gonna pass out, but she just made me feel right at home."

"Nancy's a fine woman," Brodie agreed. "Just like Ross is a good guy. I'm hoping you two don't get to doing anything that will make him think you're staying."

"No, that would be your job," he blurted out before he could stop it. Damn it, him and his big mouth.

"What Ross and I do is our own business, for sure. But it ain't like that, Kevin."

"I know." Kevin's cheeks heated, because he really shouldn't be jealous, and he wasn't sure he even was. Maybe more ... baffled.

"After my wife died ... Well, Ross is a good friend, and sometimes friends comfort friends."

"He wouldn't want a pity fuck, Brodie."

"Shit, I know that, Kevin. I surely do. But it can't hurt to have someone to hold onto at night."

That was true enough, and Kevin had been tempted with Jonas, but he wanted to want the man for himself, not for the rebound. Not because he still woke up dreaming of Ross, though when he thought on it, that happened less and less.

Only when he was really horny.

Or jacking off.

Which was kinda both.

"Yeah. Just ... just don't you hurt him either, okay?"

Brodie nodded. "I won't. You got my word."

Well, if there was one thing Kevin had learned from visiting Colorado over the six years he and Ross had been together, it was that you could trust a cowboy's word. "And you have mine. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Do you see smoke?" Brodie asked, excitement threaded through his voice.

Following Brodie's pointing finger, Kev nodded, eyes wide as he reached for the radio. The thin trail of gray black smoke rose above the trees, clear as day. "Ken? Ken, get a hold of the helicopter pilots. Tell them to come to these coordinates. We have a fire somewhere up ahead. This might be it."

* * * *

It was getting awful late in the day. Jed had started to prepare for nightfall, hauling stuff into the plane, trying to figure out how he was gonna bank the fire and how he could

maybe set up something that would wake him up every so many hours to tend it.

Katie and Laura had slept most of the day, waking only to sip water and eat some trail mix bars when he and Carl made them. Carl held up surprisingly well, but the man was getting clumsy, and that spoke of hypothermia.

Damn, he was getting worried.

The irony of it came with the beauty of the day. The sky overhead hurt his eyes, the sun shone so bright in it. Not a cloud marred the blue beauty, and the whole place looked like nothing so much as a winter wonderland out of a Christmas dealie.

He was just about to take their little lean-to down when he heard the sound of chopper blades whump-whumping. Hot damn.

"Carl! Help me! Toss some more of that wet bark. We need to smoke the hell out of this thing."

They got the fire going really well with the smoke, and Jed pelted out into the open part of the airstrip, ready to jump up and down and make a damned fool out of himself to be seen.

"The red tarp, Carl!"

"Oh! Oh, good idea." Carl came chugging over, too, waving the red tarp like a Spanish bullfighter.

The chopper went right over them, and for a sickening moment he thought they'd missed seeing them, thought they were gonna get passed right over, the only hint of the chopper the whipping of the tree tops and the cold fucking wind. Then the pilot doubled back, dropping down toward the clearing, and Jed hooted, clapping his numb hands.

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"Go get the girls, Carl. I think we're saved."

* * * *

The pilot set them down pretty easy, considering, and Eli was out of the side door before they even settled good, running to meet Jed. Jed moved a hell of a lot slower to meet him, grinning to beat the band, gray as ash under his fucking tan.

He was the prettiest thing Eli had ever seen.

They embraced hard, Eli lifting Jed right up off his feet, holding on tight. Goddamn, Jed felt cold and stiff, but his laughter came warm and deep, and the kiss Jed planted on his throat heated up those lips fast.

"I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life, Mister," Jed said, squeezing him until he could barely breathe.

"God, yes."

"Hey, let the rest of us in." A sharp jab to his ribs reminded him that Ross was there, too, and reluctantly, Eli let go, watching the brothers laugh and pound each other's backs.

Carl came up with the girls, an arm around each, and Jed immediately went into herding mode, just like his old dog Jumbo used to.

"Come on, guys. Help me get these three in that chopper. You got blankets and all?"

Eli's hands clenched and unclenched, wanting to grab Jed again, but he just did like Ross and nodded. "Yeah, and hot coffee and cocoa. Food. All that."

"Oh, good. Ross, this is Carl, Laura and Katie," Jed said. "Why don't you get them settled? I need to go get the black box and all from the plane."

Ross gave Eli a look, but only nodded, grabbing the girls and helping them into the chopper. Jed started off again, back toward his plane, and Eli's mouth went dry when he looked. God, if it had slid in at a different angle, or if the tail section had hit first...

A truck roared into the clearing. Brodie and Kev hopping out. Eli sighed with relief. "Kevin, hey. Why don't you go help Ross? Brodie, you can help me and Jed."

And help him get Jed someplace warm. Brodie didn't mind muscling people around like cattle.

Jed turned, blinked, looking at Kevin. "Lord, now I know I'm hallucinating."

Kevin grinned, his face red and chapped, the look in his eyes one of profound relief. "Hi, Jed. Hope you don't mind I came to visit."

"Hell, no. Good to see you, Kev."

"You, too, Jed. Alive and in one piece. I'll see you back at the motel."

As Kev waded off through the snow, Brodie came up, punching Jed on the shoulder. "Worried us a bit."

"I know. Sorry about that."

Eli grinned. Damn, that Brodie could say more in fewer words ... "Jed needs us to help scuttle the plane so we can get him someplace warm."

Brodie gave Jed a long, even look. "Now, don't you think Ross can do that later? Or you and Ross, tomorrow? You

know that Federal Aviation feller will want to come with you. Right now your mamma and brother Ken want to see you."

Jed's already pink cheeks went deep red. "Well, yeah. I mean, I guess that's fair. Okay, but I get to sit in the back and make out with Eli."

"You bet."

Thank God. Eli grabbed Jed's arm and dragged him toward the truck, wanting to just sit and hold onto him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Brodie give the chopper pilot the signal to take off, and the clearing went quiet, as the bird moved off, the rotor sounds fading.

Together, he and Brodie bundled Jed into the king cab's backseat, and Eli hopped in, covering them both in the blankets Brodie passed back. Now that they were on their way back to a warm bed and a hot meal, his hands started to shake.

"You want some coffee?" Eli asked as they pulled out, the chains chewing through the snow and ice.

"No." Heavy and cold, Jed leaned against him, their breath starting to steam up the windows. "God, you feel good."

"So do you." Eli buried his face against Jed's throat. "Scared me, really did."

"I'm okay," Jed murmured, stroking his hair. "I'm okay."

"I know. Love you." What else could he say? Everything else could wait. "More than anything."

"You, too, Mister," Jed said, eyelids drooping. "You, too. Take me home."

"Soon, Thatcher. I promise."

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They'd go home soon. And then they had some talking to do.

Chapter 13

Two and a half years earlier

Jed paced the hospital waiting room, hands in his pockets. He hated hospitals. Hell, he knew Eli did, too, so it must be worse to be the one in there getting treated for smoke inhalation.

"What, you didn't keep your mask on, Mister?" he'd asked.

Eli had flipped him off.

It really was a wonder that Eli had lungs left.

Jed paced a little more until finally a sweet little nurse came on out and called for him.

"Mister Thatcher?"

"That'd be me, honey."

She smiled in that reassuring way that made him bite his lip to hide a grin. Bless her heart.

"The doctor has finished his exam, but we want to move him to a cubicle and observe him for an hour or two. He's asking for you."

"So it's okay for me to come back?"

"It is. Follow me."

He followed her back to the back of the ward, where the smell was stronger by far, and the little curtained off cubes held moaning, grunting people.

Jed sighed. Goddamn he hated hospitals.

* * * *

Present Day

Now he was back in one, only this time Jed was the patient. The doc put the freezing cold stethoscope away and stepped back, giving him that patented, hmmm, mmhmmm look.

"You're very lucky, Mr. Thatcher. You're in great shape, and your body is recovering quickly. But you were well on your way to hypothermia."

Biting back his instinctive 'no shit', Jed got his big jacket back on and nodded. "It was damned cold, doc. The Adamsons gonna be okay?"

"They are. Both of the ladies were a little worse off with the cold, as they simply have less mass, but that was a sharp idea, warming the rocks to put around them."

"Basic log cabin stuff, doc."

"Well, I call it damned quick thinking. I want you to stay another half hour or so, so we can monitor your body temperature. I'll have someone show you where to go here in a minute."

"Thanks."

As soon as the doctor slipped out, Eli slipped in, and Jed grinned, holding out his arms. Eli came right over and stood next to him, so he could lean against that wide chest and put his head on Eli's shoulder.

"You made me come here as revenge, didn't you?" he asked, breathing in deep.

"No, you dork. I made you come here because search and rescue insisted. So did your mom." Soft lips pressed against his temple, Eli kissing down his cheek to his mouth.

They pulled apart as the nurse came in, her pink and blue flowered scrubs looking oddly cheerful and clashing with all of the stainless steel. She just grinned at them a little, and it was cute to see Eli blush because of it.

"Jed? If you'll just follow me? Did you want something to drink? We have orange juice and apple juice."

"Apple juice would be just fine, thank you."

By the time they got him settled on one of the most uncomfortable cots he'd ever felt, worse than anything the army dished out, Jed was exhausted. Eli just held the little straw from the box of apple juice to his lips, petting him randomly.

"You're looking peaked, Jed."

"I'm feeling done in. I need to go lie down. With you," he said, sitting up to beckon Eli over so he could lean some more. His man was so much better than that thin, ratty mattress. "I don't think I can take another hour of this, Mister."

"You're tough. And the beds at the cabin have down toppers and quilts. When we get out of here, we'll sleep for two days."

"Fuck, yes. That's enough to bring me to tears, Eli." He said it lightly, but damned if it wasn't true.

"Well, then we'll have to do it. And just think. This is all about warming you up enough that you can take a hot shower without going into shock. I'm really not up for a lukewarm one."

That made him gurgle with laughter. "No. Me either. Okay, hot shower, hot toddy, nap. Hot sex."

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"When you're up to it I intend to nail your ass to the bed, Thatcher. Count on it."

He would. God knew, he really would, every minute that he was stuck in this fucking hospital.

* * * *

The Adamsons were safely in their ski lodge, no worse for wear. Jed and Eli were ensconced in the cabin Lloyd and Mom had abandoned when they went home. Brodie had gone with them, saying he needed to get back to work.

So that left Ross with Kevin, watching as Kevin packed his bag to get ready to drive back to Denver.

Seemed like he was forever watching Kevin leave. This time, though, the feeling was just bittersweet, not crushing.

"Sure you don't want me to ride along?" he asked, watching Kevin's long fingers roll a pair of socks.

"You'd just have to rent a car or fly back or something. I'll be okay." Those dark eyes flashed up to meet his. "Are we okay?"

"Yeah, baby. We're okay. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you being here." He really did. Someday soon, he'd stop getting the urge to call Kevin when something went wrong. He really would. In fact, if this hadn't been a family emergency of epic proportions, he wouldn't have called. Kev was still family, no matter what.

"It was no problem. I was as worried about Jed as anyone."

"I know."

Kev put the rest of the clothes into the suitcase and got his ditty bag out of the bathroom, the silence stretching between them. When Kevin had everything packed and ready, they stood and stared a minute, both of them just sort of teetering before Ross went over and gave Kevin a bone crunching hug and short, hard kiss.

"I think you should go out on a date with this guy. Jonas?"

Kev stared at him, mouth half open, lips wet and bruised.

"You think so?"

"I do." God. He wanted Kevin to be happy, not feel like he had to be loyal to something that wasn't there anymore. "I want you to have fun, be happy."

"I love you, you know," Kevin said, stroking his cheek.

Ross closed his eyes and nodded, turning to kiss Kevin's finger. "I know, baby. I love you, too. Probably always will."

He opened his eyes again, gave Kevin a smile. "Now, you'd best get on before you miss that plane."

"Yeah."

They shared one more kiss before he helped Kevin out to the rented SUV, stowing his little suitcase away. "I'm glad you called me," Kevin said. "Do you think ... do you think I can call now, when I just want to chat? Or will it still be too hard?"

That had hurt Kev when he said it, Ross could tell, but damn it, he'd needed the time. He thought he could handle just being friends now, though. "You can call me anytime," he replied. "Anywhere."

"Cool."

"Have a safe trip home, baby."

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Kevin grinned, opening the driver's side door and hopping up. "I will. And Ross?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks. Really. Thanks."

"No problem, baby," he said, watching as Kevin drove away. "No problem at all."

* * * *

"You feeling better?" Eli asked, stroking Jed's chest. As soon as everyone had left them alone, he'd stripped Jed down and stuffed him in the shower, then taken him to bed and examined every bit of him. Just to be sure it was all there.

"Some, yeah."

Poor Jed looked gray with exhaustion. The lines etched around his eyes and mouth looked hard, deep cut. Eli started kissing them, watching them ease.

"I can wait to fuck you into the mattress until we get home, you know," Eli said. "Go to sleep."

"I will soon." Jed laughed a little. "I just want to hang on right now, okay?"

"So much more than okay." He could completely understand that urge. Eli wanted to hold Jed until they fucking fused with each other. Never wanted to let him go again; in fact, he really got it now, how Jed felt about him jumping into a fire.

Maybe it was time to own up to the fact that his priorities had changed.

"You know," Eli started, "Dan Keefer offered me a job." Dan Keefer was the regional training coordinator, based over

in Denver. But Eli could live where he was, do rookie training right on the western slope.

"Yeah?" Jed pulled away just enough to see his face.

"Doing what?"

"Rookie training. Refresher courses for the older guys."

Long moments passed while Jed chewed on that, finally shaking his head. "You'd miss it, if you quit."

"Fuck, yes. But don't think I'm putting this on you, Thatcher, and that I'll hate you or resent you or anything ... sure, this whole mess has had a lot to do with the idea making sense, you know? But it's mainly that it's sharpened my sense of what I want out of life."

"Which is?"

"More time with you, not less. I'm not getting any younger." Hell, he was getting on up there, as far as jumpers were concerned.

"We'll talk on it. I like the idea, but I want you to be sure." Jed's eyes, serious and bright, watched him, studied him.

"Okay. We'll talk." Eli gave Jed a kiss, their whiskers burning each other's skin. They'd talk on it, sure.

But he'd already made up his mind.

He'd call Dan as soon as he got home.

* * * *

Ross got back to the bunkhouse early a couple nights later. He'd been out doing some odd jobs that Jed had contracted for, but was still too pooped to do, bless his pea-pickin' head. Ross got it, though. He'd been through the early stages of hypothermia once, while skiing with some cute girl in Vail

who'd gotten herself stuck in a snow drift for the better part of an hour while Ross dug her out.

Brodie looked up at him with surprise as he came in. "Hey," Brodie said, "no hitting the bar tonight?"

"Nah." Grinning, Ross plopped his Safeway bags on the table. "I did get us a six-pack and some cold cuts. That baby Swiss you like, too."

"Cool."

They sat in front of the TV to eat, watching some random hockey game. Every so often, Brodie would look at him out of the corner of his eye, one of those 'are you okay' looks that Ross just thought were so funny and kinda sweet.

"I'm not missing going out and getting drunk, okay?" he said, popping the last Cheeto into his mouth and licking orange off his fingers.

"I didn't say you were."

The way Brodie watched him seemed almost hungry, which couldn't be right, really. But those eyes were just glued to his tongue. Maybe it was more of a remembering kind of look. Ross certainly had given that one blow job his all, hadn't he?

He licked his lips one more time before scooting closer. "Something you want, Brodie?"

"Lonely as hell, Ross. I just ... I am ... you know?"

Fuck, yes, he knew, especially after the way Kevin had come and gone. He knew all about how it dug a hole in your gut. He also knew this was a bad, bad idea, but damned if he could help himself. Ross reached over and stroked the placket

hiding Brodie's zipper, keeping in mind what Brodie'd said about what he would do and what he wouldn't.

Of course, it kinda blew all the rules out of the water when Brodie turned and swarmed over him, pressing his back painfully against the arm of the couch and kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

Ross let his eyes slide closed, let himself luxuriate in the pleasure of a hard, male kiss. Brodie tasted like beer, heat, and need, maybe even a little like desperation, but Ross would think on that later. Right now he'd just feel.

Brodie's hair curled around his fingers, warm and alive, and Ross massaged Brodie's scalp, licking at that full lower lip, nipping at it. Long thighs fell on either side of one of his, and Brodie moaned, rocking hard, not teasing one little bit. The man seemed completely intent on getting off.

When they finally came up for air, Brodie pulled back to look at Ross, cheeks flushed, lips dark red.

"Is this ... it's okay, yeah?"

God, the loneliness in those eyes was enough to break his heart. Ross nodded, stroking the back of Brodie's neck, watching him shiver.

"It's better than all right, Brodie. It's okay. I promise."

A soft moan fed into his mouth as Brodie bent to kiss him again, and Ross put his hands on Brodie's ass, encouraging him to move, to get the friction they both needed, shifting so his cock could rub and grind against Brodie's leg. His zipper pressed his prick, his back bent at an unnatural angle, and finally Ross gave Brodie a little shove, sending him sprawling back, blinking and dazed.

"Ross ... wha'..."

"Hush," Ross said, opening his jeans before lunging for Brodie's zipper, pulling out the man's pretty cock and stroking it.

"Oh, oh, damn."

"Uh-huh." It was his turn to straddle, pushing up on Brodie's thighs to bring their cocks together, getting a low cry for his trouble. Brodie bucked like a bronc, hips rolling that hot flesh alongside his as he squeezed and petted, making them both pant and groan.

They kissed one last time, a hard push of lips and teeth, the metallic taste of blood just barely there, before Ross came, his head falling back, a deep groan rising in his chest. Brodie came all of a few seconds behind him, grunting hard, hot come spilling over Ross' skin.

The couch creaked under their weight, making Ross shift, both of them panting for breath.

"Is it too early to move this to bed?" Brodie asked.

Chuckling, Ross shook his head. "Nah. I'd say it's a pretty good idea."

With a casual strength that Ross associated more with him than his lovers, Brodie lifted him up and off before standing and holding out a hand, looking debauched as hell with his wet cock and mussed hair and bruised lips. How could Ross refuse an offer like that?

He couldn't, and he took Brodie's hand, letting the man lead him to the bedroom and do shit to him that no one had since Kevin.

Not even close.

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And somewhere in the dark hours before dawn, while Ross laid there bruised and pleasantly sore, Brodie's big body wrapped around him, Ross decided he had to leave.
For both of their sakes.

Chapter 14

"Would you stop treating me like an invalid?" Jed slapped at Eli's hands, trying to get the damned fool man to leave him alone. He was fully recovered, had been home two days, and he could dress himself just fine after bathing, thank you very much. He wasn't a child.

"I'm just trying to help," Eli snapped right back, stalking off with his arms crossed. "Jesus, you're prickly as a fucking porcupine."

"Fuck you."

"I would if you'd let me."

They stared at each other from opposite sides of the room. They'd been snarly ever since they'd gotten back from Aspen, and Jed knew it was mainly because they had a lot of shit to talk about, but neither of them seemed capable of spitting it out.

Even the dogs were avoiding them.

Of course the eight inches of snow hadn't helped, making them both twitchy at being housebound.

Just about the time Jed opened his mouth to apologize, the dogs set up a racket, howling and barking, and Eli turned on his heel and left Jed standing there with his jaw all slack. Shaking it off, he followed, the blast of cold air as the front door opened and shut making him shiver.

"Hey, Eli. Is ... oh, hey, Jed."

It was Ross, bundled up in a shearling coat that wasn't his and a gimme cap. Jed nodded, looking him over carefully. He looked tired, but not hung over.

"Hey, Ross. What's up?"

"Not much. You're gonna get frostbite."

Rolling his eyes, Jed buttoned up his shirt, ignoring Eli's pointed glance. "So if nothing is up, what do you want?"

"Gee, it's nice to be loved."

"He's been that way all day," Eli chimed in, sharing this commiserating look with Ross that just set Jed's teeth on edge.

"Fuck you both. I'm going out to muck stalls."

Eli started to say something, but Ross held up a hand, cutting him off. Thank God. "I'll come with you."

"I'm perfectly capable of..."

"I know," Ross cut him off. "But I need to talk. No offense, Eli."

Eli just nodded. That was one thing his Eli had gotten used to. Sometimes family drew together. And sometimes brothers needed to talk alone.

"Okay. Come on, then, if you're coming."

His own coat felt damned heavy, but no way would Jed admit it, stomping into his boots and out into the snow. By the time he got to the barn, his legs felt like lead.

"You gonna sit down before you fall, Mr. Stubborn?"

Jed sat on a bale of hay before answering, "Yeah, but if you tell Eli, I'll rip your head off and shit down your neck."

"Yeah, yeah." Ross looked up, blue eyes dark and serious under the brim of his cap. "I needed to tell you first, big brother. I'm leaving town next week."

"What? Why?"

"Because, what am I going to do around here, huh? And besides, things are getting sticky."

Jed gave Ross a long look, mulling that over. "Brodie?"

"Partly." Lord, Ross was nothing if not honest, that little rueful grin making Jed smile back. "I could fall for him, Jed. That would be purely stupid."

"It would. He'll settle down again eventually, have more kids." Brodie was a good guy, but just lonely. Not like that.

"Yeah. And it's partly that all I can really accomplish here is drinking and fighting, you know? I mean, if I had someone to keep me out of trouble, it'd be one thing. But I need to move on, just go for a bit."

Jed nodded. He knew Ross thought of Colorado as home, but his little brother had always had itchier feet. It'd been real apparent when Ross didn't get out of the Army as soon as his first tour was up, like Jed had.

"Well, much as I love having you around," Jed said, "I want you to be happy. And getting into fights and coming home drunk ain't gonna do that."

"No."

Fighting to his feet, Jed started over to grab his shovel, intent on mucking. Ross got there before he did.

"Look, why don't you go in and make up with Eli. I'll do this. We can go out sometime this weekend and tear things up as a going away party."

Too tired to argue, and perversely wanting Eli now, Jed nodded. Well, maybe it wasn't so perverse. Every time Ross got to talking about loneliness, Jed wanted to go hang on to what he had.

"You sure?"

"Yep. Go on, Jed. I'll play with the dogs and take care of the rest."

"Thanks." They shared a bone crunching hug, Jed just leaning on Ross for a minute, letting it all soak in, all the shit he just wasn't gonna say because he sucked at it. He felt Ross nod.

"Yeah. Me, too, Jed. Me, too. Now go on."

Jed went. Right back up to the house, sending Garg running for a stick so he could get in the door without tripping up, and making a beeline for the weight room where he could hear the clack-clink of Eli's bench bar.

"Hey, Mister," he said, leaning in the doorway, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. "I owe you an apology."

"You do," Eli agreed as he breathed out, arm muscles flexing as he lifted, bulging as he lowered.

"Well, I'm sorry. I was an ass."

God, he could watch Eli's body move for hours, watch each little rivulet of sweat as it worked its way down over planes and valleys. His cock twitched. Ross would know what they were gonna do, would leave them alone.

Time to take Eli to bed.

"Ross is doing the chores. I'll be in the bedroom, you still want to help me with my clothes."

The bar clattered back into the cradle, and Eli was on him before he ever made it down the hall, heavy, sweaty body pressing him against the wall.

"You want me, Thatcher?"

"Yeah, Mister. Yeah."

"Come on, then."

They hadn't touched like this since the crash, like Eli had been afraid he'd break. Now there was no fear, just Eli dragging him down the hall to the bedroom, pushing him down on the bed to rip at his shirt and jeans. His boots thudded to the floor, his clothes went flying, and Eli stepped out of a tiny pair of workout shorts before climbing up on the bed with him, rubbing all up on him like a cat.

Jed wrapped his arms around Eli's shoulders and kissed the Hell out of him, pushing his tongue in deep, tasting and exploring, staking his claim all over again. Eli moaned, laughed, drove those heavy hips against his, their cocks rubbing and pushing.

"Wanna fuck you, Thatcher."

"Yeah. Let you do the doing."

He could lie back and watch and let Eli fuck him. He surely could. There wasn't much foreplay to it, no slow touching or buildup or anything. Eli just found lube and slid two fingers inside him, opening him up for Eli's thick cock, pushing in moments later. Jed thrashed a little, the pressure almost more than he could bear, the pleasure so big it hurt.

"Jed."

God, Eli's voice just sounded blown. So fucking hot. Jed nodded, his hands on Eli's hips, urging him on, probably bruising his skin.

"Need you, Eli. Need you right now. Fuck, you're amazing."

"Yeah. I ... oh."

Eli groaned and really started pounding into him, actually making his body slide along the sheets so he had to grab hold

of the headboard to keep from whacking his skull. Jed just grunted with each thrust, sweat running off his skin, fucking steam rising between them.

When Eli finally grabbed Jed's cock, he just shouted, coming hard, his body clamping down so hard that Eli hollered, shooting deep inside him, whole body shaking in time with Jed's.

All he could do after was lie there, stunned.

"You okay?" Eli asked, nuzzling his throat.

"Better than I've been in days. Love you, Mister." He had to say it sometimes, just to hear it, just so Eli heard it.

"Ditto, Thatcher. Don't ever do that disappearing thing to me again."

"Nope. Never."

His bad mood was gone just like that. Of course there was still Ross to worry on, and to tell Eli about that. Jed yawned.

He'd worry about it after he took a nap.

* * * *

Six and a half years earlier

"So you think I should go out with him?" Kevin asked, tucking the phone under his chin so he could reach for the Fruit Loops.

"I absolutely do," Robbie answered. "You need to live a little. You like him. He's hot. Go for it."

Robbie was his ex from college, a bouncy, happy guy with a bubbly personality and a cute, cute ass. Almost as cute as Ross said Kevin's was. Almost.

Kevin grinned, licking milk off the side of his bowl. "Okay, okay. I'll go for it. I just hope I don't live to regret it."

"He's probably not an axe murderer, Kev."

"He's 82nd Airborne, Rob."

"Oh." There was a long pause. "Oh, God, that means he has an amazing body. Can I come visit?"

"No. I'll try it."

"Good. Good luck, Kevin."

"Thanks, Robbie. It means a lot."

"Of course it does. It's me. Love you, honey."

"You, too. Bye."

"Bye."

Kevin hung up, staring at the phone. Looked like he had the seal of approval from the ex. What more could a man want?

* * * *

"Hi, Jonas. Can we maybe have supper tonight?" Kevin twisted the phone cord around his fingers, hoping it would be a yes. He had the ex-boyfriend seal of approval to call. It was getting to be a habit.

"Kevin! I'd be delighted. When and where?"

"Someplace where we can get, um, a table for two? I'd like to talk. If that's okay. Talking." God, he was babbling.

"Talking is good. How about Friolo's? It's dark and quiet, and we can murmur like spies."

Jonas was laughing at him, but it was the good kind of laughter, and Kevin hooted. "Okay. See you there."

The good smells of garlic and tomatoes surrounded him an hour later as Kevin sat across the table from Jonas, trying to figure out how to say 'hey I'm ready to date' without sounding like he was being a jerk, or like he thought his shit didn't stink or something. It wasn't like he was bestowing a great gift or anything.

"That tablecloth must be fascinating, and yet to me it looks like a standard red and white checked vinyl dealie."

Kevin chuckled, looking up, fingers still tracing squares on the pattern. "Sorry. I just—You know I went to see my ex, right?"

"Right."

Damn, that was the wrong way to start. It made Jonas' face kinda close up.

"Well, we talked about a lot of shit. And we ... or at least, I am ready to move on."

Really, he didn't know how else to say it, or what else to say. So Kevin just sat there staring at Jonas, willing him to get it. That Jonas wasn't a rebound thing. That he was ready to go for it.

Their salads and bread arrived, and Jonas nibbled thoughtfully on the end of a breadstick for a minute before replying. "So does this mean we're on a date?"

His cheeks heated, but with pleasure, not embarrassment. "If you want to be, yeah."

"I do indeed. I'm glad to hear it, Kevin."

Wow. That smile was something else. It really was. Jonas' eyes crinkled all up, and his mouth turned up, and Kevin

sorta melted. That, more than anything, told him he and Ross had made their peace.

When supper ended, Jonas walked him home, turning to him as they reached his stoop. "Are you going to invite me up for a drink?" Jonas asked.

"Should I?"

Warm hands closed over his shoulders, Jonas bending down to give him a kiss that warmed him all the way to his toes, even though it was cold as anything outside.

"Yes, Kevin. Yes, I think you should."

* * * *

"So, you're leaving us, huh, baby?"

Pulling another bale of hay down, Ross peered over at his mom before dropping it and wiping sweat off on the back of his sleeve. Even as cold as it was, he'd worked hard enough to work up a good one.

"Jed tell you?" he asked.

"Well someone had to." His mom sat, motioning for Ross to join her, pulling out a cigarette and lighting up. "That bad, honey?"

"No. Not really. I just..." Neither he nor his mom was much on the touchy-feely, so Ross searched for what he meant, for the easiest way to say it. "I think I was looking for what you and Lloyd have; for what Jed and Eli do. Always figured if I could get Kev to come to Colorado I'd have it, and when he left it was the first place I thought to come. But much as I'll always love this place. Well. It's not going to give me what I'm really looking for just by being a place."

"You sound like your dad. He was always searching." She smiled at him, her eyes a little sad, but full of understanding. "You know you always have a place to come to."

"I know."

She smoked and he sat, until finally she stubbed out her butt and patted him on the back. "I'll want to have a party, over at Jed's. When are you gone?"

"Next week."

"All right, then. You'll come on up to the house tonight to have supper?"

He grinned. That was her oh-so-subtle way of saying she wanted to spend time with him before he left. Ross nodded.

"I will," he agreed. "About six?"

"Yep. I'll be in the woodshop if you need me. Got me a new heater. Works like a charm."

Ross watched his mom wander off, her jeans and flannel-clad form dear and familiar. He'd miss her. Hell, he'd miss everyone, but Ross knew he was doing the right thing.

The barn went quiet for a good while, the watery sun coming through and sending dust motes dancing on the air. Ross almost dozed, and very nearly jumped out of his skin when a big hand fell on his shoulder.

Brodie.

"So."

"Mom tell you, too?"

Brodie nodded, squatted down in front of him. "Not leaving 'cause of me, are you?" Brodie asked, eyes dark and serious.

"Only partly." Reaching out, Ross stroked Brodie's cheek. "I could fall for you, buddy, and that'd be bad all around. We

both know you'll find another nice girl, settle down. I can't tell you how much ... well. You've been good to me, man."

"Just like you have to me." Brodie just grinned, the look a little crooked and rueful. "I do appreciate it, Ross."

"Yeah." Leaning, Ross took one last kiss, letting it be soft, lingering. "So do I. You got no idea."

That just got him a laugh, a quick press of lips to his before Brodie rose, knees popping. "You might be surprised, Ross Thatcher," Brodie said over his shoulder as he left. "You might just be surprised."

Maybe he'd done Brodie some good after all. He surely hated to think he'd been nothing but a waste of space while he'd been in Colorado. Sometimes a man needed to think he'd helped.

Lord knew he hoped it was true.

* * * *

The party had gone well. Ken and Mandy had come up from Gunnison with the kids. Mom and Lloyd had brought Brodie, as well as Stu and his wife. There'd been Austins and Lluellens and folks Jed didn't even figure he knew. They'd had roast and bacon-wrapped baked potatoes, and some of Lloyd's Italian cream cake, and just stuffed themselves right silly.

Now there was just a heck of a mess and just him and Eli to clean it up. Well, Ross was out there in the front room, scrubbing beer out of the floorboards, as he was gonna leave from their place, but that was it.

Landing with Both Feet
by Julia Talbot

Jed and Eli stood at the sink, Eli washing, Jed drying, their hips bumping as they looked out the window at the silly dogs romping in the snow. Jed felt better than he had in a long damned time. About everything.

"Did I tell you I called Dan?" Eli asked out of the blue.

"Dan?"

"Yeah, Dan Keefer. I told you I would."

"Oh, the regional guy." Yeah. Eli'd said it, but Jed would've understood if he hadn't.

"Yeah. I'm on rookie training starting in March."

Jed reached over and turned the water off, grabbing Eli to look him right in the eye. "Are you sure?"

"You asked me that before." Grinning, brown eyes twinkling, Eli bent to kiss him, letting it linger. "I know what's important, Jed. Sometimes I'm just stubborn. I didn't want to admit I was getting older. Too old for jumping all season long."

"Well, okay, then." He paused a minute, listening to Garg bark outside. "We can compromise. I won't fly the snow route anymore."

"Really?" Eli's hands landed on his shoulders, pulling him close, so close he could see each eyelash, each little fleck of gold in Eli's eyes. "You're something else, Thatcher."

"Purely yours, Mister."

They shared a kiss, and Jed knew it would be all right. They'd struggled a little through Ross and Kev breaking up, like it had thrown a mirror up on the stuff they needed to work out.

Landing with Both Feet
by Julia Talbot

Jed figured he'd just have to see to it that they talked more from now on.

"You two gonna make out or come see me off?" Ross' voice came from the other room, breaking them apart, both of them laughing at the put upon tone.

Arms around each other's waists, Jed and Eli wandered out to the front room, watching as Ross did the last minute check of his duffel.

"I left Pancake with Brodie," Ross said. "He needs a dog."

"He said." Jed felt his heart squeeze, knowing his little brother was still hurting, still baffled. He'd be all right, though. "You be careful."

"I will. Don't worry, big bro. I'm on the mend." Grinning, Ross came over and gave Eli a huge hug, smacking him on the back, before turning to do the same to Jed.

Jed held on an extra minute, squeezing tight, murmuring, "You know where to find us."

"I do," Ross replied. "I always know I have a place."

They finally let go, both of them reluctant, and Ross picked up his duffel, heading for the door, his steps slow and steady.

"Call me when you get there, wherever that is," Jed called, and Ross nodded, tossing him a grin that came close to his old devil-may-care before walking right on out the door.

Leaving.

Again.

Maybe going to New Mexico or Arizona or Texas, Ross'd said.

Landing with Both Feet
by Julia Talbot

Jed sighed, leaning up against Eli, who put an arm around him again as they moved to the front porch, watching Ross roar off in his truck.

"You think he'll be okay?" Eli asked, nuzzling his temple, leaning down to pet ears as the dogs came running up.

Jed nodded, watching the trail of exhaust that steamed out in the cold air as Ross drove away. Ross would be fine. So would he and Eli. They all would.

To Eli he just said, "Yeah. He'll land on his feet. We Thatchers always do."

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