



When the Bloom is on the Sage

A Torquere Press Single Shot by Dallas Coleman

“Uncle Bonner? Uncle Bonner, come on. Nikki’s gonna blow out the candles. Momma says it’s time!” He watched the little girl bounce and bob, bright red curls looking like springs, sure as shit, tied up with bright yellow ribbons. Lord, that girl was the spitting image of her momma, weren’t she?

“Gonna be a heartbreaker one day, mark my words, girly.” He got himself up, groaning as he stood and his hips and knees let him know that, while the sun was shining now, there was rain coming or his name wasn’t Bonner Davis. “Just like your momma. That daddy of yours is going to have to sit at the door with a gun.”

“That would be a sight, wouldn’t it? David at the door in his khakis, armed and ready. Come on, Janie, get out of Uncle Bonner’s way.” Ellie stood at the back door, camera in one hand, wooden spoon in the other. She had her hair up, a bright green sundress on, and for a second – not long, mind you, not long at all, but for a second – he could see his Janie, just like she’d been sixty years ago, his baby sister all dolled up and getting Maggie and Teddy ready for Sunday school. Lord, Janie’d kept them all in line, back

then, back when the bottle held him close. Back when the only thing keeping him from turning tail and running was the promises he'd made to Momma about making sure Janie had kinfolk. She'd saved him, back then. She truly had.

A gentle hand landed on his arm. "Uncle Bonner? You okay? You with us?" He blinked a little, shook his head as he tried to reckon why Janie's eyes were green instead of blue. All the Davis kids had blue eyes. All of them. "Uncle Bonner? It's time for cake, remember?"

He took a step forward and his knees made that crackle-pop sound and that familiar broken-glass sensation started up and he remembered. Ellie. Ellie was Teddy's girl. Not Janie. He'd put Janie in the ground himself when the cancer got her, damn near twenty years ago now. "Yeah. Yeah, girlie. I'm coming. You make some without frosting for an old man?"

The worried look around her eyes eased and she nodded. Such a good girl. "Of course we did, Uncle Bonner. There's a glass of tea for you too. Come on, now. David's lighting the candles. Can you believe it? My oldest baby is turning six? Time just keeps going, faster and faster..."

Now on that he wasn't sure he agreed. In fact, part of him felt like time was just grinding some. Not stopping, because the good Lord wouldn't do that, but just starting to inch along, the time between dawn and midnight getting pulled so tight that you could damn near see right through it to the other side.

He got settled in his chair – they'd got him a new one for Christmas a couple three years ago, but it weren't right. It smelled like new and it hurt his tailbone and finally David'd just growled and taken it to the game room with the big TV that was too loud for him and he'd got to settle his bony ass into the comfortable grey chair that was his – and sure enough, there was a glass of tea and a cupcake with no icing just waiting.

The dining room was filled with a damn load of rugrats, all starting to sing and bounce and clap as he worked the wrapper off his cupcake.

"You need any help, Oldtimer?" The voice was sorta familiar, but he couldn't quite place it and he peered over, the young man's face like something he oughta know, but couldn't be bothered with right now, not with butter cake to be eaten.

"Nah. I got it. You hiding from the kiddos?" He chuckled as the newcomer nodded, sat down in one of the fancy-schmancy dining room chairs Janie... No. No, Ellie. Ellie'd sat out all over.

"That many kids in one room is an accident waiting to happen, you know?"

Bonner nodded and chuckled. Oh, he knew that. He knew all about that. "I reckon I do. Lucky I'm old enough to be able to enjoy the kisses and cake and avoid the trouble."

The cake was good and moist, clung a little to his fingertips, just like he liked it. Corn bread was like that – little grainy pieces that stuck to his fingers. Corn bread was best right out of the cast iron, outside where you could feel the wind, hear the cattle lowing and the other drovers joshing with each other about whether the beans were cooked through or not.

“Uncle Bonner! Uncle Bonner!” That pretty little girl came bouncing in again, straw cowboy hat between her pigtails, bright red cowboy boots on her feet. “Looky here! Look here! I’m a cowboy, just like you!”

“Well, look at you now. You surely are!” He chuckled and straightened her hat with a finger. “I think you’re probably a touch prettier than I was, when I rode.”

She stopped, looking at him with those serious green eyes. “Uncle Bonner. You’re a boy. Boys aren’t pretty.”

Well, now. Truth was truth, wasn’t it? Him and his new friend sitting next to him just hooted, making her grin as she toddled off.

“So you were a cowboy? A real one? Spurs and chaps and all?”

Bonner nodded. “I was, long, long time ago. Rode all over west Texas, pushing ‘horns for a good man that owned a huge spread north of San Antone.”

“Well, I’ll be. I don’t think I’ve talked to anyone who could even ride a horse in a dog’s age.” Bonner looked over, making sure he wasn’t being joshed with. He didn’t hold with bullshit, just ‘cause he was older than God. Guy didn’t look like a bullshitter, though. Looked right enough.

“It’s been a long time. Before my momma died, even. I’d gone out soon as I could, as soon as I had a way and a plan. Lord, you’d’a thought the world was ending, the way folks went on, but I had my teeth set to it and, sure enough, one bright cold February morning there I was, teeth chattering and fingers damn near locked with it, helping twenty other men put out hay from these rickety wood-sided trucks. Lord...”

He’d thought his fingers would just fall off, those first few days. The way the baling wire cut into them, the knuckles red and raw from the hay and the cold and that damned wind that never seemed to stop calling and laughing at them as it hollered across the grey grass. He spent the first week with them curled into fists and held tight against his chest, trying his damndest to ignore the dull throbbing and just sleep.

“It’ll get better, boy. You gotta trust in that.” A dull thunk startled him as a round tin landed in the blanket beside him, the lid so worn that he couldn’t read whether it was chaw or what. “That and you best buy you some good gloves with your first draw. You hear me? Good leather gloves and a can of that there salve to replace the one I just give

you.”

The drover’s eyes were odd – one dark and the other light, just like a glass-eyed horse – but friendly enough from where they looked down on him in a leathered face.

“This something I can get up to the co-op?” He worked the lid off, biting the inside of his lip good and hard so he wouldn’t wince. Lordamighty, that stuff smelled like the inside of a whorehouse or his Aunt Bertha’s valise. Either way it was vile.

“You can get it from the little old Mexican sitting outside, yessir. He charges a nickel and it’s worth it. You rub that in every morning and every night and you’ll sleep.” He got a grin, quick and wicked as a sharp pair of scissors. “Then maybe you’ll stay still and the rest of us will too. Name’s Buck, by the by. Buck Wills.”

“Bonner Davis. Pleased.” His cheeks were burning – right along with his fingers and his nose hairs, all for different reasons. “Thank you kindly.”

"We got to keep care of ourselves out here, boy. You ain't local, but you ain't no foreigner, either..."

He got himself a fingerful of the gray goop, started rubbing it right in, the burn like to kill him afore the numb set in deep. Good Injun magic, there, praise God. "No, sir. My people's from up near Abilene. Daddy got himself a little spread, got two sisters still there."

"No brothers?"

"No, sir. My brother went down in the big one. I'm the baby."

Buck nodded, that mixture of sorry and proud on his face familiar as anything. Weren't none of them that didn't know one that was lost or broken over the sea, weren't none of them that weren't proud of their boys, even as the women set to crying over it. "I didn't go. Flat feet. Tried though."

"That's what counts."

"Yessir." Buck rolled a smoke, lighting the end with a foul-smelling match. The tobacco smelled right, though, and he thought a minute about rolling his own, but damn if he didn't want to strain his hands, didn't want to just let them rest. "How long you been riding?"

"Since forever, I guess. My daddy ain't real big on book learnin' and once Patterson got buried, it was easier to have me home, working the fence lines and the 'horns."

Another one of those nods and Buck smiled, the look odd and wicked, fine and settling in the base of his brain like the right song would, or a toothache. "You'll fit right in,

assuming you're not afeared of listening to the Good Book on a Sunday morning. The missus, she wants us to get our preaching in, else you can't have supper that day. Tanny's the cook and for her chicken and dumplins? I'll brave fire and brimstone."

"I ain't that much of a heathen. I can bow my head." He stretched his toes, sighed a little. "I heard Jose and Nathan jawing on how we were fixin' to get out riding, round the main herd for auction."

"Auction and branding and to give 'em a looksee. Boss don't hold with his mommas dropping calves in the desert. Too many banditos looking for a bit of what ain't theirs. We'll go in pairs – eight pair, eight directions. Ride hard for three days, then start back, nice and easy." A plume of smoke blew from Buck's nose, thick and white like one of them writing-feathers. "The rules is simple. Bring back all the Boss' stock and iff'n some stick? All the better. Three year back we brung in a dozen wild horses, pretty as you please."

"No shit? Y'all keep 'em here?"

Buck settled down, sitting on the empty bunk that he'd been told had been a German's last. Rattler had found him and the man'd died right there, screaming out words didn't nobody know. "No sir. The Boss, he looks at them and says to me, 'Keep out a stud and a mare, Davis. The rest of them need to run.' So's we let them free and I'll be damned if I wasn't standing in Ft. Stockton last fall, staring at the herd, skinny and branded, broken to the ground and worth naught but glue."

Bonner winced. Weren't right, to take something and make it bad. "What happened to 'em?"

"Don't know, son. You cain't fix things that's that broke. I reckon they went to slaughter." Buck took another long, slow drag, scratched a healing cut on the side of his neck. "My Ysidro? He's the stallion from the pair we kept."

"You got to keep him?"

The snort let him know what a stupid question that was. "I got to buy him. Good price, since I promised to break him and Mariposa both, plus all the foals they threw. I tell you what, cowboy, that stallion didn't intend to have a man on his back. Fought me like the devil himself, biting and kicking and screaming like a woman."

That vision got him to chuckling. He knew some about that. He'd watched Daddy break the Morgans. Hell, he'd helped break Loma and Alba and went ass over teakettle again and again. "How long did it take?"

Buck tapped the dirt off his heel, shook his head. "More than a year and I tell you, he rattled me like the north end of a south-bound snake. Still, when it happened the first time, I knew he'd come round. Horse needs some spirit, 'specially out here."

The button on the man's shirt cuff got worked open, the shirt pushed up and out of the way. Oh, damn. Damn. There was a crescent there, a good hard bite that took muscle and skin and left a forever type of mark. "Goddamn. He wanted you to remember him!"

"You know it. He did that and I damn near drew and laid his ass out. Had a good friend that was there, stopped me. Glad I did, but at the time?" Buck shook his head. "Lord, Lord."

"They throw any foals?" He caught himself rubbing his own arm in sympathy. Damn, that kind of thing hurt deep.

"Yessir. Pair of twins that first year, then last spring Mariposa caught herself a little boy. The twins'll go for breaking this summer when the herds are in. That little girl – little Trisha? You seen her? The one with the crookedy legs? – she's always in the stables, petting their noses."

"She's the Boss' girl, yeah?" He'd caught sight of her, lurching around the main house and the horse stable, but had stayed back. Weren't no use hunting trouble, no sir. He found enough on his own.

"She is. She's an angel that we got to borrow from Heaven. Iff'n you see her, you speak nice and don't stare, you hear? She cain't help her legs."

"I'll be nice. I don't want no trouble."

"She won't bring you none." Buck though, Bonner reckoned Buck might could bring him some trouble, the way those lips were tight and the way the cowboy got all red-cheeked and riled.

Lordamighty, there was a story there.

There had been too, but he hadn't found the truth of it for purt' near a year, believe it or not. There just weren't time for jawing, mostly. Him and Nathan had been sent to ride west, then he'd been put to the iron – hot, nasty, smelly work it was, too, but he was the low boy and he knew it, knew that next year he'd be on the barn roof with shingles with Cesar and some other new drover'd be slinging sweat and cussing the smell of shit and burned leather.

It weren't all bad, nor all work, neither. They all spent Friday nights in the corrals – sometimes right there, sometimes at King Ranch, sometimes at the Rocking B -- watching the bulls buck, lines and lines of cowboys sitting fence and hooting. When they got their draw, a bunch of 'em would ride up to San Antonio proper and have themselves a dinner, see a show, maybe find a little dancehall and spin a pretty little gal around and around. So long as they was back home in time for Sunday preachin', no one minded much.

By the times the fall rains came in, soaking the whole world to mud, Bonner knew his place in the world. Foreman'd hired three new boys, so he weren't squeaky no more, his bed had a picture of Momma and Janie all dressed in their go-to-meetin's pinned above it and he had a little cushion in the bank. Still, all the good in the world didn't mean that a man didn't cuss a storm when the cold rains started falling on him and he had to sprint for the horse barn to wait it out.

The Harris' had grown from little to big, and the stables showed it. What used to be two long old wood stables was now a u-shaped dealie, a new bit connecting the two old. There was a big ole iron gate closing the u off, making a paddock for foaling or doctoring, then doors fore and aft for letting stock in and out and letting the wind blow.

Bonner reckoned whoever thought it must be a lick smarter than him just for dreaming it, but now that he'd seen it, he thought maybe he'd always think that was the way to go.

He slipped into the dark warmth there, slapping his hat against his thigh to get the beads off. Lord, they weren't careful, they'd float off and end in Victoria. The stable door slammed, one of the horses tossing her head back in the turn, and he fumbled with it, got it latched. "Hush, gals. Don't yourself all riled, now."

He grabbed some corn and went over to give treats, quiet everyone down when he noticed a light coming from the turn in the u, heard voices.

"Someone came in, Uncle Buck."

"Hush, gal. Hey! Who's there? Speak up!"

Bonner's eyes went wide and he damn near stilled, tried to hide, but the hay dust was already tickling his nose and hell, he wasn't doing a thing wrong, just sheltering and the stables weren't off-limits now, were they? No. No, they weren't. 'Course he couldn't help but wonder what a cowboy was doing in the dark with the Boss' little girl. Just didn't seem right. Just didn't seem to suit. "Just me, Buck. It came up a howler and I near drownt."

"Bonner? Well, don't lurk, now. You'll scare Miss Trisha and I'll have to hurt you." The words were tough, but the tone was friendly and welcoming and Bonner sorta felt bad all of a sudden, thinking things left unthought about Buck. He headed down the line of stalls, boots clicking and clunking on the hard-pack. There by the foals' stalls were Trisha and Buck, a little oil lantern between them and a pile of little apples.

"Howdy, miss. I hope y'all didn't get caught in it." He tipped his hat, smiling into a pair of bright blue eyes that just grinned up from the little cushioned chair where she sat, poor little twisted legs hid under a blanket. Buck was perched on the stable door, boot heels hitting the wood in a rhythm, hat off, tan shirt showing a smear of grease on one arm.

"No, sir. Uncle Buck came to show me the new filly and it started. You're Bonner? We haven't met. I'm Trisha Harris." A thin, thin pale hand was offered up to him and he wiped his own hand off with a handkerchief before shaking it.

"Bonner Davis. Pleased."

Uncle Buck? He gave Buck a curious look, but the man weren't saying a thing, just chatting on and on about the horses and the weather and the Harris' plans to take a train to Kansas City for Christmas.

The little girl – Bonner reckoned her to be eleven or twelve, not old enough to be a woman, but not a child, not really, not with all that hurtin' in her eyes – just chatted along, sweet and smart as all get out. He remembered his Cousin Andy'd been that way – sick with the blood disease, but smart and dear. Daddy'd told him all folks – rich, poor, whole, sick – all folks were equal in the eyes of the Lord and where things got took away, other things got added. It was how things was, and it seemed to be true here too. Was a damn shame, though. She seemed to be a good little gal. Too bad she was broke.

The rain seemed to ease and the missus came bustlin' in a bit later, skirts tied up a bit to keep clean, hair pinned in a spinster's bun. She weren't a pretty woman, thin and tight around the lips, but there the looks didn't match the truth. Missus Harris was a good woman, knew her way around a horse, around the ranch, and weren't afeared to laugh hard or sew a man when the doc was too far. "Time for the princess to have her doses and her supper, y'all. She's not keeping you from work, is she, Buck darlin'?"

"No, Catharine. We were hiding from the rain. I'll get Bonner here to help with the evening chores and all. You need help getting in, Miss Trisha?"

"No, thank you. Momma'll help."

"Okay, honey. Y'all get on before Thomas comes hunting you both and I have to whup him again." Those glass eyes twinkled and damn if the missus didn't laugh and kiss Buck's cheek, just like that, before helping Miss Trisha up and out the barn.

Bonner stood, blinking some, dazed as if one of the horses had kicked and caught him in the temple. Now. Now, that just didn't...

It just didn't make no sense at all.

"Put yer teeth back in your mouth, boy. I ain't doing nothing wrong. Catharine's my sister."

"Your..." He tilted his head, fingers going for his smokes. Now, they didn't look a bit like they were fighting. "Why ain't you up at the main house, then? Why're you down bunking with the hired help?"

“Cause I am hired on and cause I like it. Shit, Bonner, you seen me. I ain’t the china cup and tablecloth kind. It ain’t no secret me and Cath is kin. It just ain’t no big thing. I like what I do, my life.” Buck lit up one of his own, them boots gone to swinging again as laughter filled the stables. “Shit, iffn you’re looking to move into a big spread like them, you’re gonna have to shoot higher than Miss Greta’s gals in San Antone.”

“Bah. I ain’t. I mean. Hell, Buck, I weren’t even good at hanging over the supper table in my own momma’s house. I don’t reckon on settling down and having a passel of babies.” Hell, he didn’t mind the ladies none, but he didn’t pant over them like some did. It was the smells, he thought, cloying and clinging to a man after all was said and done. Made a man feel right odd.

“Well, then. You get it.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I reckon.” They both watched the wind swirl up the dust and straw, making little wee twisters on the floor. “That Miss Trisha, she’s right smart.”

“She is. As close to angels as they come. You shoulda see’d her as a baby, all blonde hair and babydoll pouting. Doctors never have knowed what’s wrong, just that it keeps getting worse. Still, she’s a fighter.” Buck hopped down, britches creaking a little as those long legs hit the ground. “Come on. You want to see the new pintos we got at auction? There’s a solid dozen of them – nine mares, a stallion and two broke geldings.”

“Yeah? Sure I do.” They took care with the smokes, tamping ‘em out and saving the bits for later.

It was a cold, wet winter, that one, cold enough that they all felt it, young to old. No one picked their heads up long and nobody wanted to head to town. It was early December when the sickness hit the herds, the older head falling one after another to the ague until they started having to shoot ‘em, just to keep it from spreading. It was enough to make a man feel old, feel the weight of the wind as they fed the coyotes and the dogs.

Bonner’d taken to spending evenings in the stables, the talk of worry and money and death in the bunkhouse too much for him to bear, not when there was velvety-nosed yearlings hunting bits of carrot and love.

He heard the sobbing the moment he stepped in, high-pitched and miserable. Little Miss Trisha. Had to be. “Honey? Miss Trisha? You okay?”

“B...B...Bonner?”

“Yeah. You... you want me to fetch your momma?” Lord, he hoped there weren’t anything serious wrong and if there was, Buck was somewhere in the stables to help.

“No! No, please. You can’t.” Damn. Just damn.

He managed to make it to her, poor little face streaked with tears, nose just a'runnin'.
"Honey, what *is* it? Are you hurting?"

"No. No. Jasmine. My filly. Uncle Buck says she's sick, says she's got the fever. Says he's got to put her down 'fore she makes the rest sick."

Oh, lord. "Oh, Miss Trisha. I'm so sorry. That's a sad thing."

Still, sad or not, they couldn't risk the stables, not for a yearling. No way.

"I... Isn't there anything you can do, Bonner? Can't you make him stop?"

"Buck?" He shook his head. "Honey, you can't risk all the others for one. You know that's right, don't you? Buck loves these horses, but you can't kill em all if shooting one'll help it."

The waterworks started up again, the sobs liked to break his heart. Poor, sweet pretty thing, just like his own sweet Janie. It weren't fair, weren't right at all. Not for Jasmine or Trisha or, hell, for Buck. No one wanted to have to shoot something. He crawled up and over into the stall, clicking and whispering at the poor thing, the filly's soft velvet nose pushing hot into his palm. There was some wet in those eyes, the signs of the sickness early. Still. The wee thing ought to be saved, if for no reason than to make Trisha stop crying. Bonner sighed, pushed his hat back. "Where's your Uncle Buck?"

"He said he was going to get Momma. Have her talk to me. Why?"

Shit. Shit. Well, there was a little shearing shed weren't anybody using. If he got the pony out there and settled, maybe he could keep her warm and fed, get her doctored up. It weren't like she'd be any deader if he couldn't.

"'Cause I need to get this baby-girl out of the stables and into the shed and see if I cain't help her afore they put her down."

"Oh. Oh, you think you can, Bonner? For honest?"

He'd've loved to nod, say yes, yes, he could make it all right, but he didn't know that was true. "I can try. Worse thing that'll happen is she'll get worse."

"Okay. Okay, Bonner. That's better than no chance at all, ain't it?"

He nodded, the hope in the little girl's eyes worth the whupping he'd get if he was caught. "Okay. Your Uncle Buck comes back, you tell him Bonner took care of things. That way you ain't telling a lie. I'll do my best for her, but you gotta just be good and let me do it."

"I will. I swear. Her name's Jasmine and she likes green apples best and her ears like scratching and..."

"Miss Trisha, honey. I know. I do. You just hush now." He gathered a blanket and a feed bucket before he clipped the lead on the filly, led her out toward the back, shivering at the bite of the wind, just like a rabid dogs, sinking down through the muscle. Well, at least the drovers were all in and he'd be able to go without no one seeing him.

Lord, lord. What Daddy would say, watching him try to rescue a little sick girl's foal when there was chores to be done and coffee waiting on the stove.

It weren't as hard as he thought it would be, either. He got Jasmine settled and watered and fed a little mash. She was a mite skittish, but Bonner couldn't blame her none, not being moved from the only home she knew into a place that rattled some and smelled of sheep. Still, he'd said he'd do his best and so he would. Damnit.

By the time he got done, it was late-late and the rains were on again, icy and seeping straight through his shirt. He near made it to the bunkhouse before he tripped over something in the mud, landing hard, mud splashing all over him. "Goddamnit!"

The lump he'd fallen over groaned and he sat up, blinked over. "What the hell?"

"Bonner?" Hooboy. Somebody'd fallen deep into a whiskey bottle and was floating to the top. Damn.

"Lord, Buck. That rotgut smells like a goat's back end." It was enough to make him wince, make him slide back in the mud. "You okay?"

"Shit. I. I hated to have to tell Miss Trisha about the horse. Trisha and Caroline both cried and..." Buck took a deep breath, stopped. "Thanks for taking care, Bonner. You're a good man."

"Don't worry on it."

"Hush. I ain't expecting no one to care for my family like that and you did without fussin' or nothing. Makes a man proud."

Ah, shit. "I said it weren't nothing to worry on, Buck. C'mon. I'll get you to the bunkhouse."

Somehow or other he'd get the man bunked down to sleep it off, please God.

It took two or three tries, both of them landing in the mud more than once before Bonner got the man to walking, heading toward the pump so's he could get Buck rinsed off. Buck leaned hard, muttering under his breath the whole time about good folks and riding and dancing and shit Bonner couldn't start to understand.

"Now I'm fixin' to tump this bucket over you. You scream and the whole damn house is gonna come. You don't and you'll be in the bed and warm, lickety-split, okay?"

"Won't scream, son. I ain't that drunk."

Bonner wasn't none too sure about that, but he trusted in Buck's word and poured, the cold water crashing right over the dark head just like that. Sure enough, Buck didn't scream, just stood, mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, gasping.

He did the same for himself, soaking himself down before muscling them into the main room and then toward the beds. "Come on now, I'll help you get undressed and in the bed."

Buck chuckled. "Hell of an offer."

"Hush, now. You'll wake Cesar up." Maybe. Most of the hands slept like the dead. He got Buck's shirt off, then the canvas pant, laying them over the windowsill to dry while Buck got out of his altogether. Bonner looked over just in time to see Buck all bare and broad, body strong and... uh... Proud.

Real proud.

Damn.

"In the bed, cowboy." He stepped close enough to help and Buck turned and damned if Buck's thing didn't brush his wrist and sorta jerk. He pulled away, fast enough that he could ignore the fact that that skin was hot and smooth, soft.

Kinda like his.

"Shit, Bonner. Quit teasing."

"Wasn't. I was trying to help."

"Well, that ain't helping, touching then pulling away."

"Hush, now! It ain't no time to tease!" Not with both of them wet and one of them naked and one of them drunk and one of them's heart beating like it was stampeding out of his chest.

"I weren't looking to tease." Buck finally settled down in the sheets, his Johnson making a little tent where the thin quilt covered him. "You started touching."

"Good night, Buck." He backed away, getting his own kit off and wiping down. The towel was good and soft and his own pecker was thinking thoughts before he was all dry,

curving up toward his belly.

It was natural to wrap his hand around it once he got himself settled, feeling it, thinking about the way Buck felt against his wrist, about the way he felt in his own palm. He looked over across the way, seeing the rows of beds, the dark hair in the bunk two down and over.

It took a second for the clouds to part, for the moonlight to show him that pair of glass eyes staring back over at him. Oh. Oh, he. Uh.

It was too late to slam the barn door, that pony'd done bolted, so he just humped up, trusting in the drink and the dark to keep this secret as he shot, hot and wet against his wrist. Buck's eyes never wavered, never stopped watching him, as his hand slowed and he slumped against the mattress, shivers sliding under his skin.

Even as bad as it had been, the simple act had him relaxing, dozing, cuddling 'neath the quilts and telling himself it had been a dream.

A pure dream.

Three weeks. Three weeks he'd managed to doctor that filly without getting busted. Three weeks of feeding it mash and walking it in the middle of the night to keep the pneumonia from settling. Three weeks of staying right out of Buck's way so's he didn't have to explain – either the sneaking or the way he'd took to looking in the dark. Three weeks of little peace and less sleep and finally, *finally* the Boss took the missus and Miss Trisha to Chicago.

Leastways then he didn't have to keep sneaking 'round to tell the little gal how things were going.

He headed to the shed one night after supper, whistling and smoking as he walked. The night was still and clear, threatening to be plumb bitter and he almost had that filly convinced to live. Almost. He'd be damned if she got chilled and froze on him.

"Bonner." The sound of his name was like a rifle shot, sharp and harsh, making him near jump out of his boots.

"Whut?" He spun on his heel, Buck standing there, arms crossed on his chest, looking for all the world like somebody's disapproving daddy and didn't that just get his back up, yessir it did.

"Iff'n you got something sneaky going on – an' I don't care what it is, a woman, a lover, a still, whatever – you'd best just stop it now. I been watching you and your skulking about."

A woman? In the shed? Good lord. "You've lost your damn mind, Buck. I'm for a walk."

“For a walk? In the cold? Walking a mudhole dry ‘tween here and the old shed?”

“Yeah. Walking.” He kept going, brain just buzzing with it – part pissed and part worry and part just plain... Oh, hell. He didn’t know. Just plain, he guessed.

Buck matched him, step for step, heading with him toward the shed, silent as the grave and only half as welcoming. He couldn’t quite reckon what to do; Buck knew where he was heading and he couldn’t deny that, couldn’t just walk around it and head into the north forty. Hell, maybe he could just lean against the door and smoke, then turn back. Pretend like that was his private place.

‘Course Jasmine wasn’t liking that plan, was she? Nope. Not even a bit. Hell’s bells.

Buck’s eyes went wide as she started whinnying and kicking the shed, wanting out to run a little, wanting her mash and a currying and... “What the fuck have you done? You stealing from the Boss?”

His mouth dropped open so fast his jaw cracked. “I am **not**! I ain’t no crook!”

Bonner yanked open the door with a growl, Jasmine prancing right up, pretty brown head tossing as she whinnied and fussed, nose at his pocket looking for treats. He patted and stroked, pleased to see her looking right and whole. Healthy. There’d been a day or three of honest to God worry, but things’d turned out right.

“That... that’s Miss Trisha’s Jasmine.” Buck looked like he’d been hit.

Bonner pulled his hat down some, tugged his jacket tighter around him as the wind set to blowing. “It is. I doctored her. Been keeping her from the others. She’s gonna be fine. I...”

Buck just stared, first at him, then at Jasmine who’d got herself a bite of carrot, eyes near to blazing under the brim of that dark hat. Then the shed door closed with a dull thud.

The blow happened so fast he never even saw it, head snapping back as Buck’s fist connected with his chin like a sledge hammer, his ears just aringin’. “You had that little girl **lie** to me!”

Then he got popped right in the mouth, his lip splitting like an overripe watermelon in late August, his teeth rattling. Motherfucker!

Shaking his head to clear the birdies, Bonner just managed to catch the next blow with his forearm, bones meeting with a dull crack that sure as hell hurt Buck as bad as it hurt him. He shoved Buck back good and hard, sending the cowboy ass over teakettle to rest on the ground among the weeds. “I did no such thing. She told you the stone cold truth.

That I'd dealt with it. And I *did*, you horse's ass. I ain't done a goldurned thing wrong."

"Don't you play with me, boy. You made a fool of me with my kin. With my niece. Hell, how many of the boys know? Y'all having a good long laugh at my expense every night afore you pull yourself off, thinking bad of me?" Buck pushed himself up off the ground, hurling at Bonner's knees. Fucker was quick as a rattler and twice as smart. They swayed a second, his hands whaling on Buck's shoulders, before Buck's head slammed against his belly. "You think I'm an idjit? Just fallen off the turnip truck?"

One hand pushed up against his balls, shoving and squeezing hard, and he screamed like a jackrabbit in a snare. Bonner's legs buckled, hat going flying as his backside slammed into the side of the shed and he curled into himself. Goddamn, that hurt. Shit, more than hurt, ached deep inside where shit oughtn't ache. His eyes started watering and he started kicking, hoping to catch Buck but good. "I ain't done no such thing! That little gal was cryin' over her filly and I wanted to help her!"

Buck's hands got around his upper arms, shook him 'til his teeth rattled. "You sat there, let me drink and puke and shit. You *watched* me. Did it make you feel good, jackass? Seeing me brought low?"

"What is wrong with you? Did some Mexican slip you wacky weed?" Brought low? The man had lost what little good sense he'd ever been blessed with.

The toe of his boot pegged Buck's thigh and then all that weight landed on him, pushing him down into the dirt, slamming him there and holding, just stealing his breath as Buck made him stay. "Why didn't you *say*, Bonner? Why didn't you?"

"'Cause I didn't know it'd get better. I didn't want you worrying on it twiced, you didn't have to! Hell, I thought we was friends. I ain't a bad man, Buck, I *ain't*!" He hated how his voice sounded, but he couldn't help it, not one bit. He'd been trying to do a good thing, he had.

Those eyes – one so dark, one so pale – just stared down at him, Buck's lips parted as they panted. Finally Buck sighed, head dipping forward, fingers digging into his shoulders hard enough the bones creaked. "No. No, cowboy. You ain't bad. You're just enough to drive a man out of his fucking mind; make him think the very worst..."

"Worst of what? I didn't do. I been trying not to do. Shit, Buck, lemme up, man." Now, his balls ached and so did his belly and he had chores and...

"Shut up, Bonner." When those lips touched his, tongue licking the blood off the bottom one, his heart just stopped and he did.

He shut right on up.

They moaned together, the sound like a hurt animal enough that he gasped, shocked that something like that could come from him, could come from either one of them. Buck didn't seem near as worried, lips mashing down onto his, tongue sliding in to taste him and oh. Oh, wasn't that... Yeah.

Lord.

Part of him was rabbiting away, scared and pissed and confused as all hell, not sure even where to *start* thinking. The rest of him, though, the part that was dead-set on snaring that stupid rabbit thinking thing and popping it in a stew pot, well that part was wrapping a hand around the back of Buck's neck and singing praises because this weren't nothing like them little gals in town, weren't nothing like the simpering and giggling and shit.

This was like riding, like roping. Like the bottom of a good bottle.

Worth being damned for.

Buck seemed right agreeable to it, too, rough old hands sliding back behind him and tugging him close like he weren't more than a sack of taters. So hard above him, Buck felt like stone, but heated, better because even those bits that weren't giving fit into him like a rope in a hand and there was something about the way Buck's buckle bit in that made it better, made it right now and real because that shit didn't happen in a dream.

Didn't happen when you were watching a man sleep and pulling off across the room.

Didn't happen when...

Oh. Oh, good Lord. Buck's hand slid, cupped his prick through his britches and started rolling dough, touching cock and balls. Every single thought sorta faded as he arched, boot heels pounding the dirt.

"C'mon, Bonner. That's right." Buck's lips slid over his cheek, hot as sheets hung in August. "You think I hadn't been watching, too? I ain't been seeing you touch, cowboy?"

He shook his head, panting like a hot dog. He hadn't. He hadn't thought at all.

His buttons popped, that square hand fishing him right out, pulling like his cock was Buck's, like Buck knew just where and how and shit. "Well, now you know. You're enough to make a dead preacher leave Heaven."

That would've got him to laughing, if he'd had a breath one left in him. All he did have was pure need, hips bucking and driving into that strong hand again and again. Buck's voice kept on, too, making promises and telling him about things they could do, things that sent that rabbit-part of him directly to Hell and had the rest of him twisting and begging, his poor sore balls hard as stones.

“That’s it. Give it up now, I’m waiting.” Them glass eyes stared, just barely visible in the dark, and Bonner nodded, the tight need inside him damn near hurting before it let loose in a rush, sending him off like a too-tight spring, heat just pouring right on out of him. Goddamn. He. It.

Goddamn.

Bonner sorta sat and panted, eyes rolling some as he tried to gather his scattered chickens. When most of them was back in the coop and clucking, Bonner noticed Buck was moving above him, something hot and smooth sliding on the hollow between his hip and his cock, just rubbing away with a powerful need. Oh. Oh, now that was only fair, weren’t it, that Buck get to too? His hand slid down, sort of without him telling it to, and cupped Buck’s backside, encouraging it to move. Buck stilled a second at the touch, then sorta sobbed a little, nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, Bonner. Just so.”

Now didn’t that send a flush of want through him? He nodded, kept his hand where it was, used what little strength his noodle-legs had in them to push up and give Buck’s something to feel. Buck seemed right appreciative too, pushing down and grinding against him, leaving a line of wet heat behind. Buck’s lips met his again, the kiss more toothy, breaking his lip open again and adding a sting to the rush and push and wetness that he was still learning. Sorta like the way Buck tasted of hops and cinnamon or how the man smelled of wood smoke and coffee and saddle soap.

How the muscles in Buck’s ass bunched and shifted under his hand or how Buck cryin’ out sounded all needy and all or how the heat of Buck’s seed felt different than his own, hitting his skin.

They stilled, Buck’s body heavy and solid, pressing him down into the dirt. Slowly the cold started seeping in through his britches, the wind honest and truly howling. Buck lifted up a little, looking down at him, one finger tilting his sore jaw. “You’re gonna have a bruise.”

Bonner rolled his eyes, making sure not to wince. “I ain’t the only one. Crazy bastard.”

“Yeah, well. You oughtn’ta lied.”

“I didn’t.”

Buck grabbed a kerchief from a pocket, cleaned them both up and then stood, tucking himself away before offering him a hand. “So, open the shed door, son. I want a look at what you done. See if Miss Jasmine’s well enough to come home.”

He took that hand, went to fetch their hats – his had the good sense to stay by the shed, Buck’s fool thing had to go traveling, hanging up on a Mesquite, thorn poking right through the felt -- after he put his Johnson back where it belonged, out of the wind. “I done a good job. She’ll do.”

“I reckon. Next time? You tell me afore you pull a stunt. I’ve got my eye on you.”

Now that Bonner thought he just might believe, sore balls to rattled bones. He shook his head, handed Buck his hat, hole and all. Their fingers touched a little and it was okay. New. Different. Not broken. Okay. Just fine.

He went and opened the shed up, let Buck give the filly a looksee so’s they could take her home and get back out of the cold.

Things went pretty easy for while, really. Christmas came and went, all of them singing at the fire, the Boss leaving them all an envelope and the Missus giving a new shirt to each of ‘em. His was blue, just like the sky, and good and sturdy. A pale, thin-thin Miss Trisha come home from Chicago to a healthy horse, bouncing and squealing and seeming to perk up, the Boss actually giving him a right pretty pocketknife in thanks – mother-of-pearl handle and three whole blades to it. The Missus started singing while her and Polly hung the sheets and the weather dried up and went chilly but sunny, perking them all into laughter and getting ready for the spring to come.

Add to that the walks him and Buck took once a week or so, and Bonner could call himself a happy man. They was real careful - **real** careful – not to look or touch or nothing, but every now and again, Buck would grab a coat and smokes and he’d get this look before Buck’d head out and Bonner knew, whether it was a minute or an hour afore he could work his way out the door, Buck’d be waiting. Sometimes in the loafing shed. Sometimes in the shearing shed. Sometimes down near the old well where they’d had the brush fires last summer with the new lean-to and the dirt still as black and scarred as ever.

Then Buck’d hand him a smoke and lean and they’d start that dance about whether they would or wouldn’t and whether it was gonna come hard or easy.

Sometimes in the night, he’d think on it, on all the things that glass-eyed cowboy’d taught him, all the touches and the tastes, the quick ones and the lazier ones. The ones that ended in silence and the ones that started with fights. The way that things could be so big he couldn’t breathe for it and the things that was tiny, but still good. Real good. They was all good, all right somehow, even hidden away. Made him wonder if him and Buck was the only ones that took their pleasures that way.

Course, that made him realize that he probably needed to get up earlier and get to exercising the mustangs, because any time a man could lay in the dark and think deep thoughts, he wasn’t working hard enough and was fixin’ to get into trouble. Lord knew he didn’t need no more trouble.

That thought made him chuckle. He needed to get home for a visit, he did. Needed to sit and have some of Momma’s biscuits and listen to Janie go on and on about this beau and that preacher and go help his daddy mend the barn and ride fence. Normal stuff.

He spent a good long time remembering, or maybe it was dreaming, 'cause when he woke up it was morning and Cesar and Hank and that Vic fella was wandering and cussing, drinking coffee and shaving. Buck was standing at the foot of his bed, kicking the metal over and over and rattling him. "Rise and shine. Boss wants you and me to take the truck into town today, fill some orders, then hit the auction in the morning and get a few more breeding stock to replace all we lost. Jose and Bicho is out there doing your chores, so get a move on."

Nodding, Bonner blinked a little, trying to wrap his head around all that, even as he reached for his britches and boots.

It wasn't until Buck walked away, whistling Dixie that Bonner realized what all Buck meant and stared moving faster. Oh. Town. Overnight. In a single room, 'cause the Boss sure wouldn't swing for two and...

Yeah.

He ran a quick brush over his boots and grabbed his new shirt out to air before he went to lather his chin. Cesar chuckled, moseyed over – Mexican boots clacked and ticked different than regular boots, sorta like castanets, weird as all get out, but well-suited - and patted his shoulder.

"Gon' to play wit' the chicas, eh? You get some for Cesar, yeah? Jus' watch them, yeah? They will have los cuchillos, will cut a gringo for his dinero." Those old eyes just twinkled, the bastard loved to tease.

"I ain't worried 'bout them gals, Cesar. 'sides, you give 'em your cash-money up front, they ain't got nothing to cut you for." He didn't think they'd be going to see the gals this trip. Hell, he couldn't remember Buck *ever* going there, now that he thought on it.

Cesar hooted, jabbering in rapid-fire Spanish to Bucho, who'd just wandered in, both of them laughing and nodded. "You a good vaquero, Bonner. You get me a new flask in San Antonio, si? And Bucho needs strings for the fiddle."

A roll of bills passed over and Bonner nodded. Buck'd have a list, too, each man wanting something they couldn't find so close. He needed himself a new whittling kit, something with sharp blades so's he could finish the wee pony he was carving for Miss Trisha and the pipe he was working on for his daddy and...

"Damn it straight to hell, Davis! Either haul your ass out to the truck or I'll take somebody else!"

Lord, Buck was full of piss and vinegar. "Hold your horses."

He grabbed his hat and hustled, managed to get out in time to get the trailer on the old Garford, the wicked thing sputtering and spitting as it rumbled. He checked that they had

extra gas and blankets in the back, then swung up into the seat. There was talk, or had been before the herd started going sick, of the Boss buying them another truck, a Ford maybe, something almost new.

They'd be sitting in high cotton then.

Buck got settled, looking like almost a gentleman, wearing a red shirt, vest and all. Looked fine.

Bonner'd have said so, too, if the road weren't so dusty and the engine so loud.

It took 'em a while to get to town, seemed longer than normal, even, because Buck just drove without talking, lips tight somehow. Bonner wasn't sure what'd happened, but he reckoned something did, just like he reckoned Buck'd tell him or not. Whichever worked.

The pastures were all starting to think green, the bluebonnets threatening on the side of the dirt road, the folks they saw on the way nodding and smiling. Weren't nothing like springtime, really, with the world all coming back to life and the wind singing.

After stealing a look or two at Buck, Bonner just settled, hat pulled down and eyes closed, resting. When the truck stopped they was there, idling in front of the Buckhorn, that big-assed stuffed gorilla staring at him. Buck settled his hand, hopped out. "I gotta run errands and get a room and shit. You coming?"

"Sure 'nough." He nodded and followed, pulling out his list. "I gotta get knives and a flask and fiddle strings and Cook wanted some stuff from the market – a...a... a string of chiles, cuminos, and achiotes."

"I gotta get fabric and feeds and some salt blocks and rye seed." He got a little look. "We gotta stop at the bruja, too."

Bonner tilted his head, frown. Them witch doctors was sorta scary. "Why for?"

"Catherine says... There's stuff they need for Miss Trisha. Stuff to help her from hurting."

Oh. Well what was there to say about that? That little girl'd come home from Chicago looking less like a person and more like a ghost. They'd run her to Dallas, to Houston, but nothing good was ever said. Hell, she only came down to the stables once or twice a week now. "Them doctors in Illinois..."

"Said they couldn't do no more. The weak is spreading right through her."

"Aw, damn."

“Yeah.” He got another look, a weak smile. “The good Lord’ll either heal her or take her home. Either way, it’s good.”

“Amen.”

They was both quiet for awhile, then they got to shopping, wandering and chatting, the bad news a secret shared, rather than one man’s burden. By the time they got done, the roll of dollars they had was shrunk up and the truck was filled. He’d bought himself a good pair of boots off a man looking to head East, Buck’d found a little lady selling rosewater in a pretty bottle. They’d even braved the brujeria – well, the brave part’d been stepping inside through the hanging blanket. The folks inside seemed more normal than scary, just an old woman and her man with a senorita doing the talking, her belly swole like she’d done swallowed two watermelons.

After, Bonner thought it all felt less like witchdoctoring and a lot like when his granny went out and stripped white willow bark to dry and grind for headache powder. Seemed like Buck felt that way too, the hard lines around his mouth and eyes easing up.

“We gonna have supper or find a room, first?”

“I reckon we ought to get a room. Rest. There’s lots to see after dark and I’m wanting to rest my bones.” They kept walking, heading down away from the Majestic and the nicer places, watching the fine folks strutting in and out, sliding out of their shiny black cars, already starting to sparkle some.

“What do you reckon them folks *do* all day, to be so sparkly?”

“Hell if I know, Bonner. You and me? We got gussied up, well enough. I don’t reckon it takes them that much longer. Hell, we’ve done shopped and all.”

He hooted a little, tipped his hat at the man holding the door for Mr. and Mrs. High and Mighty. “Where’d you and the Missus grow up, Buck?”

“Over towards the Pecos. My folks raised big ole Longhorns. Me and Tracer and River, we all drove and rode, you know, followed the cowboy way.” Buck chuckled. “You ever been out that way?”

Bonner shook his head. “No sir. I been to Fort Worth and I been to Wichita Falls, but that’s it, ‘sides home and here.”

“It’s fine country. Harder than here, more desert and less flat, but I swear to you, you wake up of a morning and look out and it’ll bring a man to God.” Buck chuckled, pushed the brim of his hat back. “I tell you what, I didn’t reckon I’d ever leave, swear to God, but things didn’t work that way.” Bonner nodded, listening hard. It weren’t often Buck talked and when the man did, it was worth a listen, worth remembering. “Catherine was – still is – the prettiest gal in West Texas, possibly the prettiest gal anywhere, if it wasn’t

for that Miss Trisha. The Boss came through to buy some seed stock and saw her and my momma said she'd never seen a man woo so hard. Cath fell like a rotted tree in a tornado and when they got married, my folks thought I ought to go with, help the Boss get things started and make sure Cath was took care of."

"You the oldest?" He couldn't imagine having Momma or Daddy telling him to go. Lord, Momma's letters still came with fat ole teardrops splashed on.

"Nope. I'm the baby. Goes Tracer and Helen – God rest her soul – then Catherine and River and Ginny and me."

"I just got me and Sally and Janie, now."

"Yeah. War's a hard thing on a family. Here's the place. The Boss got himself an account here."

Bonner looked around while Buck went up to talk and visit and sign, nodding at the look of things. Not fancy, not filthy. Just good folks, like it oughta be. He spared another look across and down, at the shiny cars and sparkling gals, trying to see him or Janie that way, but it didn't happen. He just couldn't hold with it.

A quick touch came to his elbow, Buck right there. "You ain't them folks, Bonner. There's lots of kinds of folks that the good Lord made, and you and me? We ain't ever gonna shine like diamonds."

He grinned, met those glass eyes and snorted. "Shit, Buck. When on earth does a vaquero need himself a diamond? Give me a good sturdy piece of flint any day. That way at least we can make us a fire and cook supper."

"Amen, Bonner. Amen." The one key was swung on Buck's crooked finger. "Now, you done gawking?"

Oh. Oh, yeah. Yeah, he reckoned he was.

They parked the truck back behind the place, paid the folks extra to watch it and tarped it down good. The lady running the inn brought out a big ole pit fighter and staked it by the front tire, the scarred up thing tugging at the chain and foaming. "Won't nobody touch nothing, now. We all know Lobo. He's a right bastard."

Poor thing. Bonner reckoned he'd be a bastard, too, on that heavy chain. Still, the truck was safe.

Buck went up the stairs – two whole flights of 'em, creaking and cracking and by the third floor that pink adobe was flaking something serious, but the walls seemed whole up under and, hell, so long as the bugs wasn't bad, what did it matter?

"She said the john's there at the end and there's a tub, too." Buck unlocked the door, swung it open and headed in, dropping the old saddle bag on a rickety-looking chair.

It was different, being in a room in the fading sunlight with a door.

Alone.

It didn't hardly seem right, without the wind and the sounds of things they was used to. Without the smell of the dirt and smoke and...

"Bonner."

"Yeah, Buck?"

"It ain't no different right now then it was this morning."

His cheeks went hot as the breath of a wounded bull and he stammered a little, nodded. Shit. Shit, he didn't. He weren't. He. Uh. Shit. "It feels different."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I mean, you ain't one'a them dancehall gals, is you?"

Buck hooted, slapped a hand against one thigh and just laughed before grabbing him, swinging him around in a mock-Schottische, boots just a'thumpin'. "Lord, lord. No, I ain't. I ain't a gal at all, in case you hadn't noticed."

Buck was right there close, close enough he could see the couple white hairs in the black mustache that would likely come off once summer grabbed hold. He wrapped one hand around Buck's waist, held on some. Then Buck took a half step closer and they came together, not even a little shy about it. Well, then. "I noticed."

He honest to God had.

"Good." Buck took his hat off his head, felt weird as hell, too, the quiet of it, the... purpose of it. Buck didn't say a thing, just looked at him, stared at him until the nerves were jumping under his skin, making him itch and start to burn.

He didn't want to be the one that broke first, didn't even understand how it became that – a competition, a fight – but it had and it was and he went with it. Bonner stared, first into one eye as black as a chip of coal, the other like that odd color the sky took right before a tornado hit, pale and icy, green and wild.

Course the sky never stared back and Jesus forgive him but a twister never once threatened to take up his soul like Buck Wills would.

Could.

Did.

Afterwards, when he was in the bottle or riding the rails, he'd think back to that second, trying to remember who moved first, whose hands grabbed and whose lips opened. He never could figure it.

At the time, it didn't matter none at all.

All that mattered was that Buck was there and Bonner could see. He could see the scar on Buck's throat where a horse had throwed the man into barbed wire, could see the nick in one ear from some fight that Buck wasn't talking about for nothing. All that mattered was the way they danced across the floor, boots shuffling together toward that low-lying bed with the tarnished brass all over it. That Buck was moaning into his mouth and that the kiss split his lips and that it only took a single touch to send the buttons at his throat ping-ponging and bouncing on the wood floor.

Then they took to touching on the mattress, Buck sliding down to kneel beside the bed, getting his work boots off and them hands worked his fly open, tugging at his drawers and jeans. His prick popped out like a jack-in-the-box, damn near whapping Buck in the kisser, making them both laugh together, the sound sudden and good, making it easier to be in his altogether with them eyes on him.

Course, that weren't nothing like the sound that tore out of him when Buck dipped that square chin and put that mouth on him. On him.

On him down there and sweet Jesus help him cause wasn't nothing so tight or hot or fine and Bonner reckoned he might be talking, might be making promises or praying or crying or screaming, but it didn't matter because Buck... Buck was sucking on him and moaning and not acting like it was filthy and yes.

Seed poured right out of him in a stampede, thighs and balls and belly tight as a boar's backside, his heart doing its damndest to beat its way right out of his chest.

Buck held him in that mouth 'til he was clean and quiet, blinking up at the ceiling like a newborn baby turkey. Then Buck was right there, bare naked somehow, rubbing against his hip and telling him how fine he was.

Bonner shook his head, made his smart hand work and reach, pulling Buck closer. He could smell himself on Buck's breath, the idea amazing where it settled in his head and wonderful where it settled in his balls. He turned his head, wanting to taste, to kiss, to make Buck feel good.

Not as good as he did, because damn, but good anyway.

Heat splashed on his skin when he pushed his tongue into Buck's mouth and he moaned, loving it. Knowing that it was.

Good, that was.

Buck slumped down beside him, panting some. "Better, cowboy?"

"Uh-huh." Better. Yeah. Yeah, okay. Better.

"Good." The panting got replaced with snores, just like that, and Bonner chuckled, wiggling 'til his back and butt was sitting right. Buck's hand moved, landed good and heavy on his belly, staying like it belonged.

Yeah. Better.

They ended up not going out to supper, both of them sleeping hard and waking up wanting to touch more than wanting to eat and by the time they was done, Bonner was a fan of hotel rooms that had locking doors. A real fan. Buck showed him around the bed, headboard to footboard, making him laugh and moan and reach for that rangy body. Together they sure made them bedsprings sing like a coyote on the full moon. By the dawn, he was rode hard and put away wet, both of them panting and aching, needing a bath in the worst way. Still, there was something right about getting back on the road, heading to auction. Something that let him know maybe all men weren't made to be cooped up with a passel of folks in a city, locked door or not.

Bonner went first, took himself a long bath, scrubbing up good. There was a mark on his belly, dark and round, about a finger-width from his belly button. That made him sit up, look good and hard, fingers tracing over it.

Damn. He. Well, he wasn't sure what to think about that, about the fact that Buck'd left a mark there on his skin that wasn't about riding or fighting or nothing. That mark meant loving and that was it.

Loving.

Bonner scratched his head, grabbed up the soap and started lathering up his hair, remembering how it felt, Buck's cheeks on his belly, whiskers scraping and scratching all the way. Remembering Buck's lips and tongue, the softest, hottest things he ever knew.

Remembering the words Buck said, deep in the night when not even God still listened.

Maybe. Maybe it weren't so odd, knowing he was... something to Buck. That Buck was something to him.

The soap from his hair ran into his eye, stinging like a stone, cold bitch and he dunked himself, started to snort and laugh. Lord, lord, lord.

Maybe he just needed a cup of Joe.

Buck took to the bath after him, chatting with him as he shaved in front of the cracked mirror, the cowboy scrubbing away, looking like he was fixin' to explode in bubbles. "Man, I needed a soak. I smelled like the north end of a south bound goat."

"Pretty words." He scraped the stubble off his chin, his throat.

"Don't cut that now; you need something to wrap your bandanna around."

"I ain't gonna cut it. I been shaving myself for a good while." Asshole. He grinned at himself, seeing two smiles in the broke glass.

"I been thinkin', Bonner. You want to ride with me this spring? Bring the herds in from the west?"

Oh. Oh, now, there was a thought, wasn't there? Him and Buck, Ysidro and Dancer, riding away while the spring winds blew. That was a good thought. "Can you cook something other than beans?"

"Yup. Can you?"

"I can make biscuits."

Buck hooted. "I can do chili and flapjacks, so we won't starve."

"Nope. I don't reckon we will."

Buck nodded, dunked his head under. Guess that was settled.

They headed downstairs early, hunting breakfast and finding it in the little bitty dining hall. Biscuits and gravy, heavy on the sausage and the pepper, a pile of eggs and salsa plopped beside – hell, yes. That and the coffee and he was set for the morning.

He finished before Buck, went to check the truck and all, finding it sitting, right where it had been the night before, that big ole pit growling and panting behind the front left tire, tongue lolling, without a bone or a bit of water. The dog could have been pretty, once upon a time. Now the big old brindle body was scarred and beat up, but there was life in those dark eyes, a dull curiosity, something. "Lord, pup. I bet you're thirsty."

Bonner wasn't sure it was smart, but the pup didn't come for him and he did hate to see a critter suffer, honest to god he did. He rummaged around while Buck settled up with the lady at the front, found a little bowl and a hand pump, got that pup a drink. After sucking up two whole bowls Mr. Growly and Vicious looking a whole lot less than, now. He

heard footsteps and a chuckle, Buck watching him and shaking that head. "You trying to save another critter?"

He rolled his eyes. "Hush. He needed a drink."

"He needs more than that." Buck gave Lobo a look, then went to the truck, giving the pup a wide berth. A bit of jerky came out, laid flat in Buck's hand for the dog to sniff and eat. Bonner stood, watched, ready to jump if the dog snarled or lunged. Well, the worse they got was some drool and some nasty damn sounds as Lobo ate. "You know, that chain could come loose."

Bonner arched an eyebrow, nodded. "It could. Hell, that trailer could be open for a bit. You never know what a dog'll do."

"No shit there." Buck nodded, grinned and grabbed some jerky, tossing it into the trailer. Those bat-ears perked up, the pup's head tilting. Bonner slipped the chain free, watching the pup, waiting to see what Lobo'd do. Lobo stood for a second, sniffing the air, watching them, watching the trailer. Come on, now. Come on, pup. You don't want to stay here anymore than we do. There's bulls to chase, a bunch of cowboys to ride with. Let's go.

He didn't think the pup would take the bait, and he'd never know whether it was hunger or the sound of Senora Garza in the kitchen or what, but Lobo hopped up into the trailer and Buck shut the door, nice and quiet. "Come on, cowboy. Let's go afore they notice."

Bonner nodded, hopped up, just barely swallowing his crowing as they pulled down the street, nice and easy. Chugga-chugga. Stealing a goddamn dog from a hotel. Lord, lord.

Cesar would be *so* pleased.

The damn dog fit real nice, too, after a few tussles with that one big cow dog everybody called Gaucho, but was really named Pete. They struggled out who was boss right quick, though, the cow dog explaining that old and lean meant something against strong and toothy. After Lobo hid and licked his wounds a little, though, it all worked. Critter spent his nights prowling around the bunk house, snarling and snapping at anyone came too close to the front door, and his days either chasing lizards or sleeping at the Missus' feet, happy enough that he oughta have two tails. Miss Trisha liked him, too, sitting pale and quiet on the porch, her hands sliding over his slick short fur.

The pastures bloomed right up as March came in, and Easter came and went, Cook making ham and posole, the new traveling preacher actually coming out to preach to them about the resurrection and the life. Like they didn't know about things coming to life, amen. Them goats were dropping one kid after another, the stallions rearing in the stalls as the mares came in season. Everything from chickens to geese was rejoicing that the winter and those months of sickness were being blowed away by south wind. They spent the early, wet part of spring getting ready to ride, just like before. Bonner shoed

horses and cleaned hooves, soaped tack and braided whips, whistling along as he worked. They were all split up and getting het up – the spring ride was why most of them came out this way. Four week-long spates of riding and roping, of bringing in the cattle, of doing the job God made them to do.

He could hear Billy and his little gal – Josie, Bonner thought her name was – fighting in the stables. Durn fool'd got himself married and got Josie caught pregnant and now that gal was wanting to go back to Terrell, live in town and all, and couldn't hold with Billy riding out for a month. Never ceased to amaze him, how a woman would hook her mare to a cowboy's stallion and think that would make the critter stop bucking.

Buck wandered up, hands full of saddlebags, eyes a-shinin'. "Lord, them two keep it up, Cath's gonna send that gal packing. She don't hold to that language around Miss Trisha."

"Girl's worryin' on Billy riding."

Buck shrugged, spit. "Cowboy's gotta ride."

"Yep." He checked the straps, the bridle. Like he knew. Hell, he weren't looking to build himself a house with babies. He just wanted to ride and jaw with the fellas and have a cold beer on a hot day.

"We're leaving out in the morning. There's gonna be chicken and dumplings tonight."

Yeah, the smell of that and bread and something sweet and apple-y just filled up the air, once you got past the sheets drying on the line. "You all put together for it?"

"I am. I been looking forward to it." They both grinned a little then, looking like monkeys, Bonner was sure. Still, there hadn't been time since San Antonio to take a good walk, especially not with Lobo skulking about in the dark, wanting to stick to his calf. It just was hard to think about wanting, when a man had to worry about them teeth catching a hold of sensitive bits. Hell, in the dark, a man might look like a bone or a snake to a dog, he didn't know, but he sure as shit wasn't looking to find out.

"We'll go northwest. The ground's worst there, but I been riding it longest. There's the Balcones and we'll have the drive them down the river bank, whether it's running or not."

"Ysidro knows the way of it and me and Dancer'll come along behind, catch the strays." They didn't just play in that little riding paddock, God knew. They all learned what it was they were born to, what they weren't. Buck and Ysidro had the steadiest feet going, while him and Dancer ran.

"Yeah, we'll manage." There was something wicked in them eyes and Bonner felt his cheeks go hot and red.

"Where's base camp sitting? Same place as last year?"

"Just on the edge of the ranch? I reckon. Boss has already taken some boys out there to set up with supplies and all. Cesar's in charge of the walk home." New cowboys got the shit work, but Bonner sorta thought the old ones did too. He couldn't imagine being stuck in camp, just running little herds the couple of miles to the pasture and pens all summer. Seemed so sad, somehow. Getting the gentle horse, the one that couldn't buck no more.

Being 'in charge' sure wasn't worth missing the ride.

Hell, weren't nothing worth missing the ride.

Bonner heard the sound of a sharp slap, then another, the angry words cutting off hard, that silly gal starting to sob, Billy's bootsteps angry as a swarm of wasps. Lord have mercy.

He met Buck's eyes, then they both shrugged as Buck headed on to the stalls and he finished checking tack.

They headed out in the dark of morning, two dozen drovers all crouching over biscuit and gravy, not saying much. Billy was there, red handprint visible on his cheek, head down as low as Drunk George, who was probably nowhere near sober yet. Not that it mattered; Drunk George could rope better than anyone else in a hundred miles, in his bottle or not.

"Come on, boyos. Y'all've mostly done this before. Them that hasn't, you listen to the ones you're riding with and things'll go easy." Buck stood, cleaned his plate for the dogs, then they all followed, scraping and muttering, hands clapping each other on the back. Four weeks and they'd be back, cooking up a brisket or four and ready to land in their beds, all rode out and leathered and ready for a night in town, but right now?

Now all any of them wanted was to get to the going.

They headed out, two-by-two, like cowboys heading to the ark. Felt right nice, too, him and Buck running from the sun, heading toward the dull rise of the escarpment. The whole prairie turned the pink of a new rose, like God had just washed it all with light and made it Eden. Well, please God, let the snakes be quiet this ride. The devil had a deep enough grip in them all, they didn't need rattlers too.

Bonner stretched up in the saddle, feeling Dancer move under him like heaven. His Dancer was taller by a hand and a half than Ysidro, and right pretty on his own account, but that sleek black mustang? Damn. Bonner thought he could watch that stallion run, ears and tail up and proud, whether or not Buck was set in the saddle. The fact that Buck was just made it nicer.

They didn't dawdle, but they didn't hurry, the Texas prairie grass making good sounds in the breeze, the spots of red paintbrushes only broken by the patches of bluebonnets. Buck started singing as they rode – *The Old Rugged Cross* and *Amazing Grace* and

Strawberry Roan. He sang right along, from *Dixie* to *Yippie-Ty-Yi-Ay*, just praising and happy and letting it roll out of him, big as Texas.

When they finished, Buck looked over, eyes hidden under that hat. Sorta made him nervy, made his thighs tighten and Dancer shift, both of them wondering what was up. “You got a sweet voice for a cowpoke, Bonner.”

“You ain’t bad neither, for an old man.” Ysidro snorted and stamped, arguing with them both, and when Dancer whinnied and danced, agreeing, they both laughed hard enough it hurt, spooking a barren of hares, them baby bunnies running like they’d seen the shadow of a hawk overhead.

“How many springs have you rode this way?”

Buck shrugged. “I reckon near to twenty. I was fifteen when I come out here. Rode that first time with an old Injun they called Gato. Called himself Tawak, though. Scarier looking fella you’ll never meet, but I tell you what, that Indian could look at a bull and that great critter would just bow down, lay his head right on the ground, if Tawak told it to.”

“No shit?” He’d heard stuff about things like that, heathens that had ungodly powers and all. “Did it scare you?”

“Scare me? Shit, no. Tawak wasn’t hurting nothing; them critters just got him, you know? Just knew what he was telling them.” Buck pushed his hat back a little, stared up toward the sun and shifted them a little north. “That first year, there was just Tawak and me and Boss and this little family of Mexican boys and Black Jim. We rounded up about fifty head out of sixty that Boss’d sent out and lord, wasn’t that next winter lean? I think, tween Cath and Black Jim, we ate nothing but greens and onions for six months. That next spring, though, we knew a little better where the herds walked and where to find them that strayed and we come home with eighty head and liked them apples a little better.”

“That the spring the Missus planted them pecan trees?” There was a decent little grove of ‘em. Not big as the ones back home, but strong and full of nuts, come September.

“The missus, my Aunt Fanny. Like the Boss would have her digging holes. No, it was us that planted them damned trees. More than half of ‘em died too, and sure as shit, we planted more ‘til they stuck.”

Bonner chuckled under his breath; he knew that tone. He’d used it himself when Janie’d come wanting him to build a rabbit hutch or find her a puppy from the farm down the way or help her hang sheets ‘cause she was too little to reach the line. “They’re good trees now, though.”

“Yessir. They set down roots just fine. How ‘bout you, Bonner? You set down roots here?”

He pondered on that a minute, just thought. “I reckon, best I can. I ain’t meant for staying put, but this? This is riding, you know?”

“Yep. Land ain’t mine, here, but then I don’t have to worry on that. All I got to do is work it.”

Bonner nodded, listening to the thoughts in his head that wanted to know how Buck knew about doing them things they did in the night and who did it with Buck first and whether someone else was gonna do it next. They was all good questions, real good ones, but... Well, hell. Weren’t none of ‘em something a man could ask, was they?

So he didn’t say nothing about it; instead they talked about the sky and the Balcones, whether the Boss made a mistake adding Bramhas into the herd and whether the hump would breed true, or the horns from the longhorns. What they’d do if they came up to wild mustangs and whether Ysidro would run. Bonner thought no, Ysidro had himself a good life, food and shelter and a cowboy that wanted him.

Buck just shook his head. “His heart wants free, Bonner. They all do. Ain’t nothin’ born free that don’t ache to stay that way.”

“Then why do you keep him? Iff’n you know that?”

“Because just like it’s his nature to run, it’s our nature to saddle and ride. He don’t hate me for it; he just always wants something he ain’t ever gonna really get. I don’t hate him for wantin’ it; I just thank God that He gives me this little bit. The good Lord made us, Bonner. Takes a smarter man than me to reckon the whys.”

“I guess, Buck. It sure is enough to addle my brains.” Hell, he was just a cowboy; he weren’t no poet.

“Well, shit. I can’t have that.” Buck spurred Ysidro in a big old circle, hooting and hollering and raising a right fuss. It made Bonner laugh, had him leave them deep things behind as he raced to catch up.

It took most of the day to get where they was going, but they found themselves a spot to camp at the base of the Balcones, the riverbed cutting a swath between the rock. It weren’t nothing fancy, didn’t need to be – a little fire, a little can of beans to split between them and some biscuit from the morning. But there wasn’t ants and there wasn’t too many rocks and there wasn’t nobody for miles in any direction.

Bonner leaned back, rolled them both a smoke. “We going up the riverbank tomorrow?”

Buck nodded, finished off a biscuit, crumbs in the man's mustache. "We will. Then up on the Balcones to get them beasties moving."

Worked for him. Hell, they could just ride an extra day or two, far as he was concerned. This was the life, yessir. He lit up his smoke, passed the other on. "Been a fine day for riding."

"Yup. Looks like a right pretty night, too." He got one of them looks, sorta slow and heated, one that said, 'gee, you wanna go walkin' but they didn't have to here. Walk. The other, well, Bonner had himself a powerful need, so they just might have, either together or alone.

"It does." Bonner swallowed hard, took a deep drag, fighting the cough as that burning smoke settled too deep and wanted out "And we ain't got no dogs hunting us this time."

"No, sir. No dogs, no folks. Just you and me and the horses." Lord have mercy, the little bit of firelight sure looked like something, reflected in those eyes. Funny, wasn't it? What a man saw when he looked? "You reckon you can handle that, cowboy?"

The words made him snort – part challenge, part tease, part utter bullshit and all cowboy. Yeah. Yeah, he could handle that. "What? You think I cain't?"

"I dunno. You might could. You might chicken out. Man never knows with you Abilene-types, all farming and northern and not knowing a good gaucho iff'n he bit you on the butt."

"Like y'all are so much better, hiding out here with the lizards and the armadillos, just scared to be around good folks." Abilene-types. Sure. Like they wasn't no-account drovers just like everywhere.

Buck was fighting that grin something fierce; Bonner could see it creeping, see them muscles bunching beneath the faded shirt, the black leather vest set aside over a big stone for airing alongside his lighter one. He felt his own body start to shift, boot heels settling in the dirt, getting ready to move.

"Shit, Bonner. I ain't as scared to be 'round Abilene-folks. Them goats might need to be, but I reckon I'm safe as white sugar."

Bonner hooted, launched himself the rest of the way over to land on Buck, their chests smacking together good and hard. They rolled some, avoiding the fire, both struggling to end up on top, or at least not squashed against the rocks.

He ended up with the better part, this time, hips pushing Buck into the dirt, hands squeezing them shoulders. "Got you."

"Yeah, well? What you gonna do with me?"

Now that was a dare, if there'd even been one, wasn't it?

It was easier this time than in the hotel – he wasn't sure if it was because it had been a while or if was just because things was always easier the second and third time than the first or if it was just that he couldn't turn down a dare for love or money – but he just leaned on in, kissed the smoke right off Buck's lips good and hard, that damned mustache tickling him as he did it.

Made him right proud, too, the way Buck gasped and one big old hand grabbed at his arm. That's right. It was good between them, spark and wonder and he weren't about to jump off the pony yet, either.

Buck knew it too, had to, the way them eyes fastened onto him and stared. Shit. That was almost better than the rubbing and the tasting and God knew he was powerful fond of both of them. Still, sometimes in the dark it was like they both could be anybody, and this? With Buck staring into him like he had Gospel written on his face?

There weren't any saying they didn't know, that this wasn't sinning a'purpose. That they didn't both have a need.

Bonner shoved all that mess aside, focusing on the shit that meant something right now – Buck's muscle against him, the flavor of chile and smoke and river water in Buck's mouth, the sound of them, groaning with it, singing their own type of prayer.

He let go of one of Buck's shoulders, pushing down between them to get to that thick bit of rope that waited and wanted a hand around it. He got Buck's buttons open, Buck's hands liking to drive him crazy as they did the same. Shit, between their fingers and hips and heat all working together, it was either gonna make it impossible or get them free to the touch, one or the other.

Then, just as he thought for sure he was gonna just make a mess and fill up his jeans, Buck's hand fished him out, wrapped around and started touching.

"Oh..." His head snapped back a little, eyes just burning in his head, his hand landing on Buck's belly. "Goddamn."

"Uh-huh. Don't stop, now Bonner. Don't leave me here."

"Oh. I. Right." Bonner shook his head, tried to clear it and get his hand back down where it needed to be. Damned if Buck didn't just keep touching and tugging and distracting his ass, though. "Buck, I cain't. You gotta. Slow down a second."

That laugh damn near got Buck popped one in the kisser, but then the man got himself all swinging in the wind and Bonner could catch hold of that stiff heat.

Then they started stroking together and damn if Bonner couldn't forgive that laugh, both of them pulling away and kissing, shadows moving like wild things on the stones around them.

Buck went off a second before he did, his thumb pressing into the wet slit good and hard, knowing now that little burn and how deep it was, how right. Sort of like the heat on his fingers, the way the slide was suddenly slick and sweet. Sort of like how his own balls drew up like a boar's backside and the rush of pleasure crashed over him, just like that.

He groaned, the sound all gravel and sand, and Buck's hand landed on the small of his back, heavy and sure and keeping him right there. He didn't stay long – the fire needed tending and the bedrolls needed set up, but he stayed a while. Long enough to breathe and rest and listen to Buck's deep voice, singing the *Cowboy's Dream*, the words ringing through the valley.

*And I'm scared that I'll be a stray yearling
A maverick unbranded on high;
And get cut in the bunch with the rusties
When the Boss of the riders goes by.*

They cleared the top of the Balcones together, horses and cowboys both lathered as the sun came beating down, pounding on them, head and shoulder. Bonner stood a second and stared over the high plains, just looked. All that black soil was gone and up here was scrub and limestone for ever and ever. Weren't nobody ever gonna grow nothing up here but cattle. Lord.

Buck grinned at him, nodded. "It don't seem real, does it? Like a new country."

"Yeah." Damn. He'd heard it was like that, that the Balcones was where the west began, where the cowboys broke from the farmers. Still, it was like everything else; you didn't get it 'til you saw it with your own eyes. Them horns was right there, right where Buck'd said they'd be, cows milling around a big ole orange bull, four calves already dropped and sucking.

"Lookit there." He grinned good and wide, wiped his forehead. "Just like they was waiting on us."

"Big Daddy there mighta been. This'll be his eighth year in and that black Angus, we gathered her near five years ago. They know the way." Buck grinned, beard coming in heavy now that it was day four. His own whiskers was lighter, softer too, damn the man. "There's artisians all 'round here, just almost springing up out of the rocks, and they gather round them, make 'em easier to find."

"Yeah? There one close to here?"

"Well, the big ones is over to Otto Weidner's ranch – Honey Creek?"

"The big black and white heifers that sometimes wander over." Them Germans knew dairy okay, but they took a hit in the beef.

Buck nodded, chuckled as they rode in slow circles around the herd, not bothering 'em yet, just shifting them a little, getting them used. "There's a big ole cave there with pools and shit. I heard tell there was some banditos used it as a hideout. Kept a passel of women there and was evil – Indian women and white ones, both. Story is that cave's got haints, them Indian woman taught the Christian ones to curse the outlaws and catch 'em up in the stones."

"No shit?" Now that would be a sight and a half.

"Honest to God." Buck settled into the story, rolling smokes as they moved. "The drovers say there's a room with a lake in it – a whole *lake*, Bonner, under the Earth and all – and when you start a fire on the bank, the walls start moaning and you can see the faces of them men, screaming and bloody, them squaws taking their scalps and damning 'em."

Now weren't that a thought? Some heathen women slicing at your head, your immortal soul caught down in the dark. Bonner shuddered. "That's just the Devil's work, Buck."

"I reckon, but there's a truth to it. Hell, them outlaws violated them women. That ain't right, no matter who they were." The trail of smoke from Buck's cigarette rolled and twirled, looking heavy in the air.

"That don't mean the wicked oughta have cursed 'em. What's on this world ain't forever." That made him feel a little sick, a little like a trapped horse.

"I reckon if they'd taken Miss Trisha, you might think different, huh?"

Oh. Oh, damn. "Well..."

"Look here. Back before the war of Northern Aggression, hell, maybe afore Texas was America and when it was just Texas, there was this Duke or Prince or somesuch from across the seas that come to Texas and brung him a bunch of folks. The Boss' folks? Was called Doeppenschmidt, but the old man changed it to Smithy so's as not to draw attention and all."

"Yeah? So?"

"So, some's of them come from the East – Hell, some's that come from Mexico – don't want nothing to do with foreign folks and Germans is as Christian as us."

Well, hell. His eyes hit the ground, feeling the rebuke in his chest. There weren't a preacher one that would call what him and Buck did holy. He'd best keep all his stones to hisself and just rest inside his glass house.

"Yeah. Yeah, I hear that. Well, you want to start moving 'em today or start off in the morning?" It was the heat of the day and they wouldn't get to a solid spot, if they started now, but Bonner'd let Buck make the call. If they were riding, he wouldn't have to think so.

"In the morning. This is a good spot to stop and let the horses rest a while. You reckon you can hunt us up some rabbit? After the fish last night, I'm spoilt." They slipped off the horses, the bull giving them a look, then bending back down to eat.

"I reckon. Either that or a guinea. I seen some running earlier." He had himself a right handy slingshot even, to save bullets.

Buck wrinkled his nose. "I'd rather skin than pluck, cowboy. Them birds is nasty."

"Lord, you're a woman 'bout some things."

Buck gave him a look, cuffed him almost idly on one shoulder. "You best watch it, boy. It's a warm day to kick your ass."

"Not too warm to threaten, just to do it. 'sides, you might end up a haint." He chuckled, settled his hat back on. It was too warm and lazy to tussle or do much of nothing 'til the wind picked up. "I'll go walk it a bit, see about supper."

"I'll see to Dancer's hooves for you, then." He nodded in thanks before he wandered off, Dancer'd been favoring the left front and they'd been doctoring as they rode. Weren't nothing, but it could be, they let it go.

Bonner wandered a good long ways, thinking about them women trapped in a cave, about them badland men trapped even longer. He thought about him and Buck and the things they was going, the way they was headed and how sometimes a man just... did and trusted to the good Lord with the rest.

Then he caught sight of a fat hare and grabbed his slingshot, aiming true in the low scrub, the long-leggedy thing tumbling head-over-heels 'til it lay down dead.

Well, he'd be hornswoggled. Supper.

He fetched the rabbit up and headed back the way he came, whistling *Spanish is the Loving Tongue* as he went. The wind picked up the tune and sang right along.

Two times they'd gone up and come down and Bonner was getting the feel for it as they headed up the third time. Dancer knew the trails now, no shit, and they'd taken to following Buck nice and easy.

They'd had themselves a right good supper last night, plucking three good-sized crappie

out of the water and frying them in the pan after the corn bread was done. Then they'd pulled out Buck's old cards and played and laughed at the coyotes howling at the moon before settling for the night, Bonner's rifle at one side, Buck at the other.

Then bright and early they'd started up, the early morning still lit up by the moon, the way seeming quicker each time. They smoked as they rode, watching the little critters scramble and hid in the little holes in the stone.

"Hey, you hear from Cesar if we're bringing in good numbers?"

Buck shook his head. "Nah, but the paddocks is filled and the Boss ain't squalling, so cain't be too bad."

"I still hope we can find us some more mustangs."

They didn't find those, but after a good ride, they found a solid herd – five bulls and probably fifty head, all milling and munching and needing to come home. They started moving them, Bonner and Dancer running hard after the two young bulls that were thinking that they didn't want to be herded. The day was coming off dim and cool, for April, so it weren't too terrible.

Least ways it wouldn't be if the weather held. Bonner's eyes kept getting caught by a ridge of clouds to the west, them black things just rolling. "Looks like rain."

Buck looked over, tilted his head a second, squinting. "It'll miss us."

"You reckon?" Stubborn ass.

"Yup, the wind's from the south, gonna push it towards Edwards. Don't fret on it." Buck spit, grinned at him like a newborn fool, and got a little better seated as they crested the rise. The creek bed stood there in front of them, straight down and ready. "Still, I reckon we got time to get these dogies down the bank today. I'd rather be down if it turns."

"Yeah." He'd seen the Balcones in the rain. There weren't but a half-inch of dirt on the rock and what was there got slick as snot. Bonner nodded, slapped Dancer's flank as they rode around the back side of the herd. "Come on, now. Let's get y'all closer to home!"

It was a little tricky getting 'em started down, them heifers didn't like the rocks closing in and that big old bull? Lord, lord. Still, they managed, and once four or five started, the others headed pretty easy. Bonner took the rear, laughing at the rolling line of orange, fifty head just heading down. The dust billowed up some, so he got his kerchief out, covered his mouth. They milled in groups of two or three, too big to turn around, too steep to stop. All he needed do was nudge the backend real gentle like and then they'd make them a nice camp, hang the oilcloth.

No matter what Buck said, he smelled rain.

Buck was whistling, the tune echoing and bouncing off the limestone, the sky going dark as the clouds covered up the sun.

"You sure we ain't gonna get wet?"

"It's gonna miss us, cowboy. Trust me."

"Now, where's the good sense in that?"

Buck's laughter answered him, the sound lost in a crack and slap so loud Bonner almost couldn't hear it, bolt of lightning hitting the top edge of the Balcones. Everything went bright for a second, his body fighting to stay on Dancer's back as the gelding bucked, hooves raking the air.

Dancer landed hard, near rattling his bones and tearing his arms from the sockets. His forehead hit something on the way – rock or horseflesh or tack, he couldn't tell – but damn it made his ears ring. Or maybe that was the canyon, because damn if it didn't just keep going and going and shit, there was dust just thick in the air and...

Everything inside him stopped and went dead still as his head caught hold of his eyes and focused them through the clouds of dust that was billowing back at him. That line of cattle was flat-out running down the riverbank, too scared to back up and too far gone to stop.

Right at the front Bonner could make out Ysidro, black neck stretched as far as it would go, head out and running. Buck rode hard, headed for the opening in the rock, heading for the open field.

"Go. Run, you son of a bitch. Run." Bonner didn't move, him and Dancer just standing there and staring like they was watching one of them silly picture shows. Watching as Ysidro got better footing and picked up speed, a stone's throw from the black land. Jesus, please. Right there. Guide them in. "That's right. Just like that. Run. You'll make it, sure as shit."

Bonner'd never know what tripped Ysidro up, whether it was a stone or a hole or what, but he saw that foreleg buckle, saw both horse and rider slam against the stone. Buck's hand shot up, grabbed hold of the wall as the man tried to kick out of the saddle, get out from under the horns and hooves that was coming.

Heard Ysidro's scream as the first line of longhorns caught him, sent the mustang tumbling.

It was that scream that got him and Dancer to running, barreling down the canyon, like speed now would forgive them for stopping before, heading straight for Buck, who just hung there, holding tight. "Bonner!"

"I'm coming!" He leaned and stretched, pushing the cattle faster, trying to force Dancer to push through. "You hang on, buddy. I ain't leaving you there! Pull up! Pull up, now! Now!"

A horn caught Buck in the back, sent the man scraping along the wall before his head snapped back, body pulled right into the sea of cattle before disappearing.

Bonner's scream echoed, near as loud as Ysidro's had, ringing through the air and fighting the thunder.

He rode up alongside Buck, the man still and quiet, facedown in the dust. His heart stopped a little, then started beating again as Buck's breath moved the dust. Praise God. "Buck? You awake?"

You alive?

You there?

His boots hit the ground just about a second before his knees did, legs just buckling. He rolled Buck over, nice and easy, wincing at the blood and bruises already come welling up. "Buck? Buck, can you hear me, cowboy?"

Them glass eyes opened, staring right into him. "I...I held long as I could."

"I know. I'm sorry. You just rest a second and we'll get you on Dancer, get you home." He dared to look down along Buck's body. Hell, one leg was setting wrong, real wrong, and there was three fingers on Buck's hand that wasn't ever gonna be right again. Shit. Still, the man was alive, wasn't he? "It hurt bad?"

"Hmm? Nah. Nah, it don't hurt none." Buck frowned, looked up at him, eyebrows creasing up. "Bonner?"

"Yeah, Buck?" Well, was that a blessing or a curse, the not hurting? Because it sure looked like it oughta.

"Bonner, I cain't feel my fingers, my legs, nothing."

There were moments where a man felt like he was dunked in ice water. This one was the first he'd ever had and he'd live with the memory of it forever, knees planted in the packed earth, a ball of ice growing in his belly.

"You just need to rest. You just took a tumble." Oh, God. Oh, sweet Jesus, no. He let his hand slip around to the back of Buck's neck, the shape there all wet and wrong. A deep groan from behind him caught his attention, kept his fingers from touching and feeling that horrible bit of wrong back there over and over. "I gotta check on Ysidro."

"Bonner?" He pulled his shirt off, pillowed Buck's head with it, not able to say a single word, meet them scared eyes. "Bonner, don't you leave me here, now."

"I ain't. I ain't gonna, cowboy. I gotta check your horse." God forgive him for his cowardice, but he couldn't. Not right yet. Ysidro first.

The mustang was laying about ten yard away, ribcage crushed in, breath coming wet and weak, eyes just rolling. Bonner walked slow, each step feeling like it was his last, like the ground was molasses and tugging his boots. "Ah, shit, boy. You. Your running days is over, ain't they?"

It weren't fair. It just...

Goddamn.

It hurt to breathe, hurt deep down, but the good Lord didn't mean for beasts to suffer, so he pulled his pistol with a sigh, shook his head as he loaded. "I'm real sorry, boy. Real sorry. There's fields in Heaven though, mares and good grass and ain't no cowboys looking to rope you, I swear to God."

Even sixty years later, he'd swear that Ysidro heard him, easing into the dirt, eyes watching him the whole time.

The gunshot rang out, echoed over and over. Damn near killed him when Buck didn't even jerk, didn't make a move as Dancer started shifting.

He holstered and made his way back over, scared of what he'd find there. Those eyes was looking for him, rolling a little in a familiar way that made his belly sick. "You gonna do me next, Bonner?"

"Whut?" He sat down hard beside Buck, swallowing to keep his gorge from rising. "You done lost your mind, Buck. I'll figure something. Someone'll come in a day or two."

He'd seen men from the war come back worse.

"And what? Bonner?" Buck took a shallow breath, almost fighting for it. "I can't wiggle my damn fingers, I can't feel nothing."

"You're alive, ain't you?" He wasn't talking 'bout this. He wasn't.

"No." The pale eye was all full of blood, rolling off to the left, but the dark one, it watched him. "No, Bonner. I ain't. Not like this, now."

"You want me to... That's a sin, Buck. A going to Hell sin."

Buck snorted, or tried to. "You did it to Ysidro."

"But you ain't Ysidro, Buck. Not to me. You..." Bonner shook his head, fingers on Buck's jaw, feeling the rough growth of beard.

"I ain't no diamond, Bonner. Just a cowboy, yeah? Just like you."

Yeah. Yeah, born to ride. His hand drew the pistol out again, the metal still a little warm in his palm. "I think you shine."

"And you make a man want to damn his own soul." Buck coughed a little, speckles of red blood on the tan skin. "Come on, now."

He looked at his hand, at the six-shooter in it, listening to the blood rushing in his head. Pounding enough that he didn't reckon he'd ever breathe easy again. "I cain't shoot you, Buck. I can't."

He wasn't that good a man.

Those eyes closed, Buck sighing so soft. "It's okay, cowboy. It's okay. It's gonna be okay, now."

Bonner sat up against a stone, carefully pulling Buck up against him, careful of the poor leg, the twisted fingers. The sun was going down, the skies painted purples and blues and pinks like ladies' dresses at a dance.

"You see that, Buck? Them clouds went by, just like you said. Didn't get a drop of rain, not one."

Buck's eyes opened, looked out over prairie, breath rattling in his chest. "I told you, didn't I? I been riding too long not to know."

"You did." He swallowed hard, his eyes burning and raw in his skull. "I... You did."

"Don't let the coyotes have Ysidro, Bonner. He was a good horse. Promise me you'll watch over."

"I swear, cowboy. I'll sit and sing. I'll keep watch." He put Buck's chin in the cup of his palm, felt the smile and the briefest kiss brush his skin as Buck leaned into his hand.

"Sing for me, too, so's I can find my way. I ain't never made this ride."

"You know it."

He started with *Amazing Grace* and *In the Garden*, Buck's voice floating in and out, tuneless and lost. A quick twist and a tug and he heard Buck sigh, felt the tremors against

him ease.

Then Bonner turned his face to the sky and started singing again, daring the coyotes to come.

In a good story, like the ones in a book, Bonner woulda found God, found a good woman, found that losing Buck was hard but he lived through it. In a real life, Bonner reckoned he never lost God, went through a few good men and a few more bad ones. The last, well. He lived. He stayed on for damn near two years after they put Buck into the ground. Two years of working and fighting, of breaking wild mustangs and riding point on the Balcones. Two years of living in the bottle and walking in the dark, Lobo at his heels as they hunted folks that wasn't there.

The Boss didn't give him no shit and the missus give him one of Buck's buckles to keep and stopped asking him to come to Sunday meetings. Him and the boys, they did their share of drinking together, smoking and remembering a glass-eyed cowboy that rode like he was born to it. Bonner even took a ride home come Christmas to see Janie and them, carrying a basket of Lobo and LouAnn's pups on the train the whole time.

Momma'd looked at him then, clucked and fussed and asked him to stay on. Daddy weren't able no more and Janie's man weren't a cowboy and Sally? Well, she'd gone East with folks looking for something better and ain't nobody ever heard from her again. Still, the farm seemed little and crowded – too many folks and not enough space, so he'd kissed her cheek and gone again.

When he got back, River Wills was there, with his eight little ones, come to help his sister. Man looked a lot like Buck, especially in the face, but them eyes was all wrong, that grin not near as crookedy. Still, Bonner found himself liking the man, liking the way having one Wills brother about kept the other sharp inside him.

One Sunday evening in February, he thought, although it coulda been March, when the wind was just blowing, the Missus came into the stables where he'd been put to keep out of trouble, he reckoned. Boss and River was carrying Miss Trish in a soft chair, all wrapped in blankets and looking like an angel. "She wants to see the horses, Bonner."

He kicked the bottle back under some hay, wincing as one bottle clinked against another, and nodded, found a smile for the wee thing. "Howdy, ma'am. You hear that your Jasmine had twins? One of 'em's got a star, the other one's the spitting image of her momma."

"I heard." He got a grin, Miss Trisha's eyes shining with the light of dying. "Let me see."

"Girl, listen to you! Being all pushy! You tell Mr. Davis, please." The missus shook her head, looking like a schoolmistress. Miss Trisha looked just tickled.

"Sorry, Momma, but Bonner isn't a mister. Bonner's a cowboy, just like Uncle Buck."

He chuckled, wishing it was so. "Weren't no one just like that man."

The missus chuckled. "Get the fillies, Bonner."

"Yes, ma'am." He went around the turn in the u, stumbling a bit, opened the stall and put a lead on Star. As he opened the stall, he could hear Miss Trisha's little voice, singing *Riding Down the Canyon*, each word clear as a silver bell, from the coyotes to the canyon to the desert sun.

He sorta whispered the last bit with her, standing there in the stables – in those stables where Buck's boots swung - and all of a sudden the hurt hit him again, dull and heavy, the wanting more than he could bear.

"Bonner? Are the horses sick again?"

He pressed his thumb against his forehead, shook his head. "No, honey. They're fine. Just fine."

He was the one needing care, this time.

"So what did you do, Bonner?"

"What?" Well, shit, marthy. He'd been dozing, he reckoned, probably dropped his cake, too. It was pure hell, getting old. Listen to them baby girls laughing.

"After Miss Trisha sang, what did you do?"

It took him a second, but he sorta remembered. "I reckon I took that gal her horse. She died right soon after, Missus said she was calling her Uncle Buck's name when Jesus took her. I didn't stay after that, though. I... There weren't nothing there needed a drunk cowboy doing."

"Huh. Did you keep riding?"

"Much as I could, yeah. Even tried to break my ass in a rodeo or three. Ain't been in a long, long time. Always wonder if some of that mustang's blood ain't around in the world, though. Makes me kinda happy, thinking so." He shifted, settled in his chair.

"I reckon it is. So, tell me, Bonner Davis, you about ready to head home yet?"

The words confused him for a minute, and he chewed on his dentures, trying to figure them. "Whut?"

The young man sitting beside him chuckled. "You ain't got no better at listening in seventy years. Are you ready to head home?"

Bonner turned his head, looked over to see what damned fool they'd let in. "I am home."

"Are you?" The fella leaned closer, one dark eye looking right into him, other eye pale as milk. "I've been waiting a long, long time for the Boss to tell me it was time to fetch you home, Bonner, put you on the rolls again. You sure you want to make me wait?"

He felt that cold water feeling again, except this time it didn't hurt so much, more woke him up, made his heart race. "Buck?" He shook his head, an ache deep in his chest starting to grow. "You ain't. But. I. Shit, Buck, you're *young*."

"Yup. Looking fine, too." One square hand was held out to him, scar on that arm gone now, the muscle strong and fine, those glass-eyes dancing in a way that they hadn't, even his dreams. Lord, he'd almost forgotten. "There's work to do, cowboy. We're waiting for you to make our spring ride."

"But..." He couldn't. He was old.

Buck laughed, leaned in close. "Folks like us, we gotta take it when it's offered."

"You... you sayin' I ain't no diamond?" He reached out, fingers meeting Buck's and twisting up, just so.

"I'm sayin' you and me? We're just cowboys and there's work to do. Come now, the bloom is on the sage and I got Dancer and Ysidro saddled up. Shit, even Lobo's waiting, wanting to know iff'n you'll still free them that's chained. You ain't chained no more, Bonner. You just gotta come on and ride."

The ache inside him loosened right on up and he nodded, let Buck lift him up and out, laughter of those pretty little girls replaced with the call of that high prairie wind, the scent of wood smoke and Texas sage and leather all around.

Lord, Lord. Look at them shine.

When the Bloom is on the Sage (traditional)

*For most people there's a spot that lives forever,
Deep within their fondest memories.
Tho' I have been a rover I have never
Seen anyplace that I would rather be than---*

*When it's roundup time in Texas and the bloom is on the sage
How I long to be in Texas just a ridin' on the range
I can smell the bacon frying, hear it sizzlin' in the pan,
Hear the breakfast horn in the early morn drinkin' coffee from a can.*

*Just a ridin', rockin', ropin', poundin' leather all day long,
Just a seatin', swearin', smokin', listen to a cowboy song.
Though I know I'll never go there, I would work for any wage,
To be again, be free again, where the bloom is on the sage.*

*When it's roundup time in Texas and the bloom is on the sage,
How I long to be in Texas just a ridin' on the range.
Those purple hills are calling, calling to me from afar,
I'm back again to the Rio Grande and the lonely Texas star.*

*How I long to be living where the prairie flowers grow,
I'd be willing to start walking to the place that I love so.
It beacons and I reckon I would work for any wage,
To be again, be free again, where the bloom is on the sage.*

the end

When the Bloom is on the Sage

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