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To Hell You Ride  
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**To Hell You Ride**  
**By Julia Talbot**

**Chapter 1**

Every Saturday during the summer, Big Roy Marsh made his way down from the boarding house he lived in, precariously attached to the mountain, all the way down into Telluride. It was a hellacious trip, but he owned his own mule, which made him something of a wealthy man, and he was big enough to keep her, too, which made him doubly lucky.

So on Saturdays, Roy climbed on his mule and went to town, stopping first at the livery to stable her, then going on to the barber for a shave and a bath. Roy always brought his own bread and cold meat in his saddlebags so he didn't have to eat in town, saving his money for what he truly wanted; a night at the Opera House.

Oh, the fellers laughed at big Roy, they truly did, telling him he was trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, going and getting all cultured, and that they were amazed that the fancy even let Roy in. Sometimes it amazed him, too, but he was always clean and always wore his Sunday go to meeting clothes, and his money was as good as anyone else's, wasn't it?

Sitting in the dark in the theater, watching the singers and actors and other stage folk, no one even noticed Roy with his scarred hands and his hulking shoulders, no one even cared. A man couldn't ask for more than that. He surely couldn't.

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"You heading into town again, Roy? Getting a might cold for that, isn't it?" asked Eli Goldman, coming up to pat Roy's mule, Annie, on the nose.

"I reckon, but I mean to go, anyhow," he answered. He smoothed the blanket into place on Annie's back before hoisting the saddle easily, getting it strapped on good.

"Well, you watch yourself on Fool's Turn."

Roy nodded, giving Eli a tiny smile. Out of all of the fellers he roomed with at Miss Lee's boardinghouse, Eli was the best. Small and dark, with curly hair and a harelip, Eli worked his ass off every week, setting charges and running, quick enough to stay one step ahead of the blasts. Roy liked him.

"I'll do that. Is there aught you'd like from the sundry?"

"Nah." Eli gave him one last grin before sticking his hands in his pockets and turning about. "I'm not fastidious like you, Roy. You have a good 'un."

"I will."

He mounted up and headed out himself, the early morning air so crisp Roy could see his breath. He sighed. Wouldn't be long before the first snows came, and then he'd not be going to town

more than once a month if he was lucky, and then on snowshoes. He'd not risk Annie's life for his own frivolity.

The ride down took nigh on two hours, and the town had just started to wake up when Roy paid John Colfax ten cents to stable Annie for the day.

"You might oughta stay the night in town, Roy," John said, spitting into the straw and manure in one of the livery stalls. "Gonna be cold as a witch's tit tonight."

"I'll think on it, John," Roy replied, nodding his head, feeling his too long hair brush his collar. "If I do I'll leave another dime for you in the tinder box."

"Much obliged, Roy."

The next stop would be the barber. The other miners laughed at his clean shaven face as much as they did his Opera house visits, but one followed the other, didn't it? In the hard winter he'd let his beard grow out, but as long as he was visiting town, he'd get it cut off.

"Mornin', Roy," said old Geezer Harris as Roy walked into his shop. The place smelled like Bay Rum and tonic and sweat, with that undertone of burnt hair that made his nose sting.

"Morning. Shave and a haircut today, Mr. Harris." Roy was probably the only man in Telluride who called Geezer Mister, but it never hurt to show some respect, did it? Especially to those who didn't get it elsewhere. Roy knew what it felt like to be thought low of, and he knew he didn't like it one bit.

"That'll be two bits, then, Roy."

Up front. Just in case Geezer cut his throat or something and he couldn't pay. Roy grinned and dished out a quarter dollar, settling in the chair for a little pampering. Geezer didn't have the best hands or nothin', but he did have hot towels, good quality shave soap and a well-honed razor.

By the time his beard got scraped off and his hair trimmed back down, Roy felt almost human, almost good. Until Geezer slipped a little chunk of mirror into his hand to see and he had to look at his big old nose and square chin, his eyes still just as odd a yellow as a cat's.

"Well," he said. "You didn't make me no more good looking, Mr. Harris, but you sure cleaned me up."

"You're a good feller, Roy. Twice as good as any of the others, and three times as good as the placers up on the west end. You don't need a pretty mug."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Harris." There was no rancor in it, though. Big Roy knew what he was and what he wasn't.

"You going to the Opera House tonight?" Geezer asked, grabbing up a stick of broom and sweeping up the fallen locks of dark brown hair.

"I am." Didn't he always? And didn't they always have just this same talk?

"I hear they've got some fancy new actors. Them's gonna do a play by Mister Shakespeare."

"Yeah?" Well, that would be a first in Telluride. Roy had seen a play by Mister Shakespeare once, in Topeka, long time ago. He'd barely understood any of it, but had been transfixed by the costumes and the fancy accents and all. There had been a man who'd played the lead, some Prince or other, and he'd worn tight black pants, almost like stockings. It had made Roy twitch in a good sort of way.

"Yessir. From back east, even."

"Well then, they ought to do a good job," Roy said, smiling as he donned his coat and hat. "Good day to you, Mister Harris."

"And to you, Roy. Enjoy the show."

Whistling, Roy made his way out to the street where the shops were just starting to open. He'd go to the general store, he decided, and get a new shirt. Then maybe he'd look for a nice quiet place to sit a while, perhaps eat his lunch.

He'd gone perhaps a block when he was hailed by Andy Laury, who ran the town newspaper. Andy had sandy hair and no eyebrows to speak of, and always seemed to wear a surprised expression. He talked fancy, too.

"Roy! Glad to see you. Are you, by chance, attending the play this evening?"

"Yessir, I am. I hear tell it's by Mister Shakespeare."

"It is," Andy agreed. "Sadly, I cannot make the showing. I was hoping you might give me your opinion. Will you stay in town tonight?"

Roy scanned the sky, frowning a little at the clouds gathering. "I'm not sure I ought, Andy. I'd hate to get snowed in."

"Oh, please?" Andy patted his arm. "This is the most interesting bit of culture to hit our town in some time, and I should like to have a story. I would be glad to buy you breakfast at the hotel in the morning."

Oh, now. The hotel had fluffy eggs and light as air biscuits and Roy had only ever eaten there once, because he just couldn't afford it. So he nodded.

"All right, then, Andy. I'll do it."

"Good man. I shall see you at eight then, at the hotel."

"You betcha."

Whistling some more for the pure joy of it, Roy headed over to the livery and put an extra dime in the box, because he might as well while he could, then went to the theater to get his tickets. Mrs. MacGruder always opened the box office promptly at ten. He'd want to be there to get the best seats he could, wouldn't he?

"Good morning, Mrs. MacGruder," Roy said as he strode up to the box office window.

"Why, good morning, Roy. How are you this morning?"

"Looking forward to the show, ma'am."

Mrs. MacGruder was a frosty old dame who wore hats with dead birds on them. She had paper-skinned, wrinkled hands, and her lips always looked so dry you'd think she had been left out in the desert to cure awhile. She always had a smile for Roy, though, and that warmed his heart, because she was a fancy lady, and fancy ladies usually hadn't the time of day for men like him. He admired her, too, for her tireless volunteering at the theater. Without her, Roy'd not have so many good shows to watch.

"As you should be," she replied. This is a fine company. And they are staying on all winter."

Roy felt a little leap of excitement. Maybe if he restrung his snowshoes, he could come down without Annie. He just wasn't willing to give up his mine job for the mill, as some married men did in the winter.

"Well, that's right fine, ma'am. I hear they're doing Mister Shakespeare."

"They are. Macbeth in fact. One of the bard's best."

He didn't rightly know what a bard had to do with Mister Shakespeare, but he didn't want to look ignorant, so he didn't ask. "I'll take one ticket as close to the stage as you can get me for fifty cents, ma'am."

"I'll take your fifty cents and give you a dollar ticket. We'll not get many in tonight, as it might snow." She smiled at him, her lips sort of crackling, and handed him his ticket.

Roy blushed, but damned if he would argue. He wanted to sit right close. And he had an excuse.

"Thank you. Mr. Laury will thank you, too. I'm giving him my jaw for his review tomorrow."

"Oh, how wonderful! Be fair, but do not give anything but your true feelings, Roy. You're a discerning theater man, now."

Now that liked to make him fall over in a faint, it was so nice. Roy tucked his ticket away and tipped his hat. "I do thank you kindly, ma'am. I'll see you tonight."

"You certainly shall. Good day, Roy."

"Good day."

Could a man get any luckier? He could indeed, as he found a room at Mrs. Alma Joy's boarding house for the night, which meant he didn't have to stay at the saloon. That nasty place would give a man fleas. By the time the show was about to start that night, Roy figured he was having the finest kind of day a man could have.

Not much of a crowd at the theater, which Roy had kind of figured on. Was gettin' on toward winter, after all, and lots of folks who came to town for the cooler summers left come snow fly. It suited him to the bone, for the fewer well-dressed, high-toned folks there were, the better he felt in his new shirt and pink scrubbed face, his hair slicked back with tonic.

Oh, what a play. Roy didn't understand much of the fancy language, he had to admit. He liked the witches, though, and understood enough to know how that Macbeth feller killed the king and how Macduff killed Macbeth at the end because Macduff was unnatural born or something.

Roy figured maybe a man ought not admit to that.

Still, the costumes and the funny accents and the fancy sword fighting held Roy entranced. And Macduff...well the man they had playing Macduff was something else again.

Billed on the program as Sir Edward Clancy, he was a golden-haired angel of a man. Tall and lean, though not at all a boy, the man moved like a dream, like water in a sluice. He was simply beautiful, and his voice. Oh, his voice gave Roy tingles all over.

Roy just sat, the uncomfortable theater seat and lack of leg room fading away in the face of such a man, and he remained rapt until the very end, when the players took a bow. Then he erupted into thunderous applause.

All the way back to Mrs. Alma Joy's, Roy thought about Sir Edward's performance, about how good the man looked in those tight trousers and the big puffy tunic and about how his leg muscles had flexed as he danced about the stage with his sword.

"How was it, Roy?" Eddie Freemont asked as Roy passed by the saloon. The old feller always sat outside, even when it was cold as a witch's tit, smoking a smelly old pipe he'd bought off a Ute over to Montrose.

Roy started a little, stopping in his tracks. He'd been so wrapped up he hadn't even smelled that pipe. "It was glorious, Mr. Eddie. Just fine."

"That's all right then. I sure don't understand why you go to them things, Roy."

"Well, I reckon lots of folks don't. I like them," Roy said, smiling at the man. Wasn't Eddie's fault he had no culture, nor a wanting to acquire any.

"Won't be many more you can come to, I suppose."

Roy had thought not either, but for Sir Edward Clancy he would make the trip. He only nodded to Eddie, though. "Well, I ought to head on. Night Mr. Eddie."

A cloud of smoke enveloped Eddie's whole head as he breathed out. "Night, son."

The boarding house sat quiet and close and Roy took off his boots just inside the front door, stealing as quiet as a man his size could up the stairs. He didn't want to talk to nobody else, he just wanted to wash his face and crawl into bed and contemplate whatever happy circumstance had brought Sir Edward Clancy to Telluride.

If doing what he was about to do with his hand could be called contemplating.

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The next morning Roy woke with the dawn, happily declining Mrs. Alma Joy's offer of breakfast, as her biscuits were hard as a brick, in favor of his free meal at the hotel. He had time to get his meager belongings together (and make sure he'd not left a mess on Mrs. Alma's sheets) and take them to the livery. He brushed Annie down and fed her, leaving another dime for the sweet feed he took, then cleaned his boots off carefully and headed back into town.

A light skiff of snow covered the ground, the air crisp as anything. The mountains above rose white against the lightening sky, pure and good. He'd have to be careful getting back up to the mine, for sure.

Perhaps ten paces from the steps of the hotel Roy stopped dead, his feet refusing to move anymore. Sir Edward Clancy was coming down, wearing a fine wool coat and a top hat.

Heavens above, no man should have eyes that green.

Roy dithered, almost too long, but he finally got himself going, snatching his hat off and stepping right into the man's path as he reached the bottom of the steps. Turning his hat in his hands, near squashing it to a pulp, Roy stuttered.

"Mr. Clancy," he said, his voice shaking. "I just wanted to tell you..."

"That's Sir to you," the man snapped, pulling on a pair of pristine gloves. "Now out of my way, if you will. I have errands to attend."

Eyes wide, Roy stood there, gaping. "But sir, I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed..."

"I said move." And Sir Edward Clancy shouldered past him so rudely that Roy stood, stunned, for at least a full minute after, watching the retreating figure with a strong sense of being cheated.

Nothing that pretty on the outside should be so ugly.

He finally shook it off, climbing up to the hotel foyer and wiping snow and mud off his boots before entering. A sweet little Chinaman took his coat, liquid brown eyes full of sympathy.

"That one is mean to all of us," the feller said. "You should not mind him."

Roy nodded, finally getting his mouth to close, lifting his chin. "I won't. That's for sure. Is Mr. Laury here? I'm to meet him for breakfast."



"Yes, sir. In the dining room. I take your coat? Your hat too?"

Handing over his smooshed hat and his rough coat, Roy nodded and gave the feller a nickel.  
"You keep an eye on it."

He got a wide, toothless smile. "Yes, sir!"

The dining room had the kind of hushed elegance that made Roy right nervous. Dark paneled wainscoting, striped wallpaper, and velvet covered chair set at stained oak tables made the place feel almost like a church. Roy stifled the urge to tiptoe.

Andy sat waiting for him, coffee and biscuits with butter and jam already out on the table. Standing when Roy came over, Andy held out a hand to shake.

"Roy! Good morning. Thank you so much for agreeing to meet me this morning."

"Good morning, Andy," Roy said, shaking before settling gingerly on a chair.

"What will you have? Eggs? Bacon? Some of those wonderful oats?" Andy looked as ink-stained as always, hair standing up in agitated tufts. Roy wondered if he ever slept.

"Whatever you're willing to buy, Andy. I'll keep."

"Ha! A man who works as hard as you and is as big as Big Roy?" A wave had a waiter at their side. "Coffee, my good man. Eggs. Bring us a little of everything, hmm?"

Roy smiled a little, his ears heating like they did when someone was particularly nice to him.  
"You're in a good mood, Andy."

"I am." As soon as the waiter left, Andy pulled out a little notebook and a stub of pencil. "Now, tell me how the play was last night."

"It was wonderful," Roy began, explaining all about how the stage looked and the costumes and how good the sword fighting had been. Then he frowned. "That actor, though. Sir Edward Clancy? He ain't so nice..."

## Chapter 2

"Must you really go?" Edward Clancy asked his relatively long time lover, John, as he rolled over, shifting on the sheets that smelled of sex and man. His hand slid along John's ribs, feeling the bump of each bone, the silkiness of the skin there.

John chuffed a little laugh, muscles twitching as his touch tickled. "Yes. I must. I must or go mad," John added dramatically, just like the actor he was. Rolling up on one elbow as well, John smiled at him, blue eyes twinkling.

"Honestly, Clance, snow fell last night. If we don't get out now, the toll road will close for the season and we'll be trapped in this godforsaken place."

"I cannot come with you, John." Sadly, he was stuck until spring. He had signed a bloody contract.

"What? Why not?" Shifting to straddle him, John rocked against him, reminding him why he had followed that perfectly shaped behind all the way from Kansas City. "We had planned to go to San Francisco."

"I know, my love." Clancy gripped John's arse, intent upon making one last stab at it, so to speak. "I cannot help it. I had signed before I knew what it was, really."

"Well, I am still leaving." That pouty look had wooed hundred of women from the stage, had made many a heart beat faster off as well. It no longer held anything but amusement for Clancy.

He simply laughed and smacked John so hard it had to sting. "I know, love. You must write to me."

John nodded, bending to kiss him. Neither of them would do something so laborious as pen a letter, and they both knew it. They should enjoy this morning, as Clancy had the distinct feeling they would not see one another again.

Pushing his tongue into John's mouth, Clancy explored every inch of flesh he could reach, coming back again and again to John's muscular bottom, his fingers sliding against the crease until he found the tiny, stretched hole there. John moaned like the whore he was, arching, prick hot and hard against Clancy's belly, and Clancy smiled into the next kiss, bringing his hand around and sticking it between their mouths.

"Suck," he said, and John did, getting his fingers good and wet so he could reach behind again and slide two fingers in where he had been so recently, twice the night before alone. John loved to be taken.

It worked well, for Clancy loved to take.

They moved, John rolling off him to go up on hands and knees. Humming, Clancy moved behind him, spitting into his palm to slick his cock as well, finally pushing right up and in, John's body closing hotly around him.

Both of them moaned, the fit nearly as perfect as such things could be, and Clancy began to move, rocking in and out. The flex and play of muscle in John's back and arse inspired him, made him strive for greater heights, and the motion of John's shoulder as he braced on one hand and used the other to pleasure himself seemed hypnotic, thoroughly arousing.

Clancy thrust harder, his hands flat on either side of John's spine, his belly tight as his balls drew up. He tried to make it last, oh yes, for who knew how long it would be 'til he found another warm and willing in this backwoods town, but he could not. The pleasure simply overwhelmed him, had him shooting deep inside John, stifling a cry that surely would have awakened the neighbors in their tiny hotel.

John cried out as well, only the sound seemed one of frustration instead of happiness. Clancy slipped free, pushing so that John toppled, and rolled the man onto his back, bending to take the long, red prick into his mouth. There. Yes. Now the sounds came from joy, not pain, and John thrust up into him, hips sawing back and forth, possessing Clancy as surely as he had possessed John. The spatter of John's release hit the back of his throat and Clancy swallowed it like the connoisseur he was, licking his lips as John went limp and lay there, panting.

"Was that a fine enough goodbye for you, John-love?" Clancy asked.

John only nodded, eyes closed, lashes creating dark fans on his cheeks. Reaching out, John patted Clancy clumsily. "Yes. Yes, you know I hate goodbyes."

"Indeed." Clancy took one last kiss and rose, heading for the wash basin. "Which is why I shall take myself off while you pack and go. I shall see you in San Francisco six months hence."

A soft laugh floated over to him as he dressed. "Yes. Yes, of course. I shall miss you, Clancy."

His waistcoat and boots in place, Clancy grabbed his coat and nodded, hand already on the door. "And I you, John. Farewell."

And with that he left. With any luck, John would go before he returned.

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The Telluride Daily Journal office appeared dark and the door would not yield to his hand, but Clancy remained obdurate. He tapped the head of his cane against the window again, more forceful in his action this time. He was in high dudgeon, his morning meal positively ruined by reading the local rag and finding his name besmirched.

Some five minutes after he began his knocking, a bedraggled, ink-stained fellow appeared at the door, hair standing up in wild tufts.

"I beg your pardon sir, but we're closed."

"I have an issue to take up with one Mister Andrew Laury. Would that be you, sir?"

"It would indeed, but really it is not even eight in the morning. I would be happy to make an appoint...erk."

Clancy shoved past the man, striding into the newspaper office, smelling ink and tree pulp. "You, sir, have printed slanderous material, and I insist you retract it."

"I have no idea who you are." Laury, in turn, pushed past him to take up a pair of wire glasses and put them on, blinking at him. "Perhaps if you could be civil..."

"Believe me, I have been ere now."

They stared at one another for long moments. Laury broke first. "What is it you wish to lodge a complaint about, Mr....?"

"Sir Edward Clancy."

"Ah."

Ah, indeed. Comprehension had dawned, so clearly the man knew what he had done wrong. Clancy tapped his hands on the handle of his cane, staring some more.

"I fear, however," Laury went on, straightening his bed robe, "I cannot retract what is, essentially a review. You know full well that such things are opinions, and perhaps had you not been so rude..."

"Rude! I assure you we have not met before, sir." The gall.

"I am well aware of that." Smiling, Laury handed him the front page of the morning newspaper, having rummaged about until he found it. "If you read carefully I am not the one who attended your performance."

Clancy frowned, the expression one of his best and he knew it. "I do not recall meeting a Roy Marsh at the performance either."

"That's because you didn't. He attended the performance, much to his delight, and had rave reviews of even you until he encountered you outside the hotel the next morning."

Clancy wracked his brain trying to think who he might have met at the hotel that he offended. Certainly no well-dressed theater-goer sprang to mind. "What does he look like?"

"Roy? He's large. Rather pugnacious looking. Muscular. He works in one of the mines."

"Good heavens. You mean that illiterate brute who accosted me first thing the next morning?" He had only the vaguest memory of a scarred chin and muddy eyes.

Laury drew up, thin chest puffing out. "I assure you, Roy is no brute. He is the kindest sort of man, and one of the most decent I have ever met. He may not measure up to your standards of physical beauty, but I have no doubt his moral fiber is far superior to yours."

All he could do was to stare. "You would rather print slander on his word than apologize to me?"

"I would."

"I see." Thoughtfully, Clancy tapped his fingers against his chin. "Where can I find this Roy Marsh? I wish to set him straight on the matter."

"I told you, he works up at the mines. You are, of course, quite welcome to join a mule train up, though they have gone to once a week now that the snows have come."

That smile made him want to smack Laury square in the man's thin, twitchy little nose. He should like to march right up to the mine just to see it wiped off when he returned, but there might be an easier way.

"I assume," he said, "that Mr. Marsh is a regular theater attendee."

"He is. He may not come down again this winter, however, unless you stage something other than Macbeth." Laury got a pinched look on his face. "Even then he might not come, thanks to you. Really, you might have ruined his enjoyment of the playhouse."

"You are quite the rudest fellow I have ever met." Clancy pulled at his gloves and straightened his coat. "Tell me where Mr. Marsh resides."

"At Miss Lee's boardinghouse, just off the Smuggler Mine. You can't miss it. It's the largest structure outside of the mines."

"Well, thank you for very little, Mr. Laury. I shall contact you when Mr. Marsh wishes to make a retraction." Ignoring Laury's snort, Clancy turned on his heel and marched out of the newspaper office, intent upon making his way to the general store to inquire about when a shipment of sundries would be made to the mine Roy Marsh worked at. He would send the man a letter, requesting his apology.

Surely that would be enough to make the man see the error of his ways and Clancy would put no more thought to it.

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Two weeks passed with no reply. This would have gone unremarked by Edward Clancy except for the fact that the theater manager called him out on his supposed rudeness, telling him he needed to be patient and kind to all of their patrons. Reminding him, of all people, that everyone paid the same to plant themselves in a theater seat.

The reprimand, and its repetition before the next week's performance, rankled. In fact, it angered him enough that Clancy found himself on the back of a mule, slipping and sliding his way up to nearly eleven thousand feet on the most dizzying, miserable ride he had ever encountered. Two and a half hours' worth.

The mule did not seem to care for him much, either.

"Whoa, mules! Whoa!" the lead rider called out, halting the entire line.

Clancy blinked his sun dazzled eyes and resettled his beaver cap. Snow covered shapes began to appear to him, little shanty huts and a few corrals and a few large buildings teetering precariously on the side of the mountain. "Which one is Miss Lee's?" he asked the mule team man.

The fellow spat, leaving an ugly brown stain on the snow. "That 'un," the man said, pointing to what was indeed the largest of the buildings. "She charges a dollar a day."

"Oh, I have no intention of staying on."

Watery blue eyes peered at him. "Don't leave out again 'til tomorrow, weather permittin'. You'll stay tonight or sleep in the snow. Be here at seven am sharp, you."

The man waited for him to climb stiffly down off the mule before clicking and getting the line moving again, heading for one of the corrals. Clancy shook his head. Really, these western people...the driver had not mentioned at all that he would have to find overnight lodging.

Miss Lee's was surprisingly tidy on the inside, for all that it smelled of fried meat. It had cabbage rose wallpaper and wildly patterned rugs on the stairs, and a tiny, wizened Chinese woman met him at the counter.

"Rooms one dollar," she said, smiling a rather toothless smile.

"I will need a room for the night," Clancy said, digging out a dollar coin. "But I should also like to see Roy Marsh, if you please."

Quick as a hummingbird, the woman took his money, snatching it out of his fingers as easily as any cutpurse. "Room 304 for you. Big Roy working."

"Where does he work? May I inquire there?"

She looked at him as if he lost his mind. "He work deep. Dangerous. Boss not let you in."

"When does he return home?"

"Late night. You see. I tell him." She smiled again, and really it was an amazing picture she presented. "You want food, twenty-five more cents."

"I think I shall manage without," Clancy said, his nose wrinkling at the lingering odor in the hallway.

"You change your mind, you ring bell." And with that she was off, making nary a sound as she disappeared behind a faded silk curtain. She had left a brass key with a piece of ribbon attached sitting on the counter.

Trudging, Clancy made his way to the third floor, the house unnaturally quiet, the only sound his labored breathing. By the time he stood in front of the door to room 304, his ears rang and spots

swam before his eyes. He felt nauseated in the extreme. Goodness, but the mines were high. How did men work in such conditions?

The room had a well worn but washed look, neat as a pin. The simple beadstead and washstand were augmented by a wardrobe, the only other piece of furniture being a cane chair. Clancy set his hat aside on it and lay down, his inability to breathe properly making him feel weak and sleepy.

A pounding at the door woke him much later in the day, if the lack of light was any indication. It must, in fact, have been evening. Clancy could barely lift his head, managing no more than a croaked, "Yes?"

"Begging your pardon, sir. My name is Roy Marsh. Miss Lee says you're wanting to see me?"

The voice on the other side of the door boomed through the panels, for all that the man seemed to be trying to whisper. Clawing at the ticking, Clancy managed to rise and stagger to the door, leaning heavily on frame as he opened it.

"Indeed, sir," Clancy said. "You have maligned me. I wish to take that up with you. I fear, however, that I am indisposed."

And with that Clancy was violently ill, all over Roy Marsh's mud-encrusted boots.

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Well if that didn't beat all. The man tossed his stomach on Roy's boots and then demanded \*Roy\* apologize. The feller had more balls than brains, that was for sure. After mopping up and getting his boots off, Roy got the fancy man undressed and in bed, and called Miss Lee up to get some of that magical tea she used to dose men who wasn't used to the high reaches, and a cold compress.

Then he sat down on the little chair next to the bed, listening to it creak under his weight, clasping his hands in his lap. His dirty hands. Lord, he'd not even had time to wash.

"Now, why is it again that I need to be sorryin' up to you?" Roy asked.

The actor feller, for that was who it was, Roy could see that now he wasn't green and heaving, rolled a baleful eye over, glaring.

"You maligned my good name, sir."

"Name's Roy. Calling me sir's like calling a mule a Thoroughbred."

The man blinked. "Yes, well, you may call me Sir Edward."

"I may call you other things, you don't stop getting on your high horse. I ain't the one left my lunch on someone else's shoes."

Roy was a firm believer in respect, and in treating everyone with kindness, but this feller really rubbed him the wrong way.

"Why you...you may apologize, and then leave."

"No."

Those pretty green eyes widened, showing how bloodshot they were, and the voice Roy had admired so rose dramatically, "No?"

"No, sir. I won't apologize for something that's true." Roy stuck to his guns. "All I said was you were rude, and that it spoilt how I felt about the show. That's the God's honest, and I won't take it back."

Sir Edward Clancy blinked at him, face taking on a calculating expression. "Am I to be forced to call you out?"

Roy gaped. "Call me...well, now. If you do, I get to call weapons, if I recall, and I'll choose fists."

Well, now, it looked like Mr. Clancy'd not thought on that, and to emphasize what a bad idea it was, Roy lifted one hand and made a fist. It was nearly as big as the other man's head.

"I see. Well, then, I shall be unsatisfied. Go away now, if you please, and leave me to die in peace." Sir Edward turned away, facing the cabbage roses on the wall, an extraordinary grimace on his face.

Roy bit his lip. He didn't like to see nobody hurtin'. "Gonna get cold tonight," he said. "Lot colder than it is down in town, and you don't have a fire. Can I getcha a spare blanket, at least?"

"You may not."

The finality of it made Roy sigh and stand. "Well, all right. But if you need anything besides your apology, you stubborn cuss, I'm in room 209."

Damned high-falutin' actor types. Roy sure did love to watch them work, but he thought maybe he never needed to meet another one, lest it spoil his love for the theater.

If they were all like Sir Edward Clancy, Roy just didn't want to know.

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Somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, well before dawn, Edward Clancy awoke. It was his teeth chattering that did it, rocking his head back and forth on the pillow. God in Heaven it was cold. Colder than he could ever recall being in his life, really. His fingers took long moments to unbend from the quilt, and Clancy shivered ever more violently as he sat up, his head swimming for a moment.



He had a desperate need to visit the necessary, and he found to his great relief there was a pot under the bed. He lidded it tightly when through, and grabbed the quilt again, wrapping up in it like a man in his shroud.

What on earth had possessed him to do such an idiotic thing as climb this piece of rock to confront a block of stone named Roy Marsh?

More shivers wracked him, and Clancy cursed. Viciously. He would just have to go wake Roy Marsh and take him up on that extra blanket.

It would serve the man right to lose sleep.

He was mindful of the other inhabitants of the house, though, not wishing to wake some ruffian and get his behind kicked for his trouble. Clancy crept down the stairs and tread carefully on the worn rugs until he reached 209, hoping Roy was a light enough sleeper that the soft knock would wake him.

Sure enough, the door opened not ten seconds later, Roy Marsh standing there big as life, wearing a violently red union suit, odd yellow eyes blinking at him.

"Whut?"

"The blanket, if you please."

"Well, I can't now, can I? Miss Lee is asleep."

Clancy poked Roy in the chest, making the man stagger back, yawning and blinking some more. He stepped into Roy's room to give the man a piece of his mind, and the warmth was heavenly. "You have a fire," Clancy said, accusing.

"I have a brazier, yeah."

"Well, then you can trade rooms with me for the night."

Those bushy brows lowered, Roy shaking his head like a bull in a pen. "I don't think so, Sir Fancy Britches. I'm past bein' nice to you."

"I beg your pardon?" Clancy put every bit of his skill into his voice, making it at once haughty and outraged. "I would not be here, were it not for you."

"Keep yer voice down," Roy snapped, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling him the rest of the way into the room so the door could shut behind him. Then the big man shook him, rather like a terrier with a rat. "I won't lose my home because of you and your swelled head. You want to sleep on the floor here, you go ahead. That's all you'll get from me."

"But I..."

He got another shake. "Shut it."

Clancy shut it, the face of Roy's resolve rather frightening. Gone was the benign ox look, and in its place was the stern look of a man used to being obeyed.

"Now, you can stay here, or you can go back and freeze, but I'll not have another peep out of you. Got that? I have work to do in the morning and you're keepin' me up."

His mouth positively refused to open, a first for him. Clancy only nodded, watching Roy move back toward the bed. The candle snuffed out, leaving him in the dark save for the sullen glow of the little brazier, and he stood there, shivering, feeling a fool indeed.

"Well, come on," Roy's disembodied voice said, making him jump. "I ain't got fleas and I ain't gonna make you sleep on the floor, for all I said so."

He thought about protesting. For all of five seconds. Then the promise of the warmth that big body might provide decided him and Clancy crawled gingerly onto the too small for both of them bed, trying to hold himself away. The bed was warm and good, and smelled of wood smoke and man, and was not unpleasant at all, surprisingly.

As he drifted off he could hear Roy Marsh snoring, and thought, not for the first time that this was the strangest situation he had ever found himself in. Then, finally warm, Clancy slept.

## Chapter 3

Roy woke with a warm body snuggled up to the cradle of his, a sweet, firm ass pushed back against his groin. It was such an unusual feeling that at first he thought it was a dream, and he let himself luxuriate in it. He put several faces to his fantasies, but surprised himself when he kept coming back to that green eyed monster, Sir Edward Clancy.

The man irritated him like a piece of shale under the skin, but he surely was pretty. That fair hair shone with health and soap, the lithe body made Roy sweat, and those eyes. Well, there was a good bit more'n anger behind those eyes.

Moaning a little, Roy rubbed his hardening prick against the buttocks pressed to him, letting the good feelings bring him fully awake.

Which was when he practically jumped out of the bed, staring in horror at the man who had shared it with him.

Deprived of his warmth, Sir Edward snuffled, rolling up in his quilt, brow furrowed, though not before Roy saw an answering morning hardness under the man's soft trousers. His mouth watered and Roy turned away, picking up his trousers and stepping in.

He dressed fully, stirred the coals down in the brazier, and splashed tepid water on his face before waking his unwanted guest.

"Hey, Mr. Clancy, come on now and wake up before you miss the mule train." Roy went over and shook the man's shoulder gently, pushing him to get awake and go.

"John?" Clancy murmured the question, hands sliding on the sheets, body starting a lithe sort of undulation that made Roy hot and prickly all over.

"I don't know who John is, but he ain't here. Just me. Now get up." With that Roy smacked the man hard on the butt, figuring that would get the feller up and moving. He figured right.

Clancy went bolt upright on the bed, hair everywhichway, blinking furiously. "Where! Who? How dare you!"

"You're the one in my bed. 'Sides, you miss the mule train, you'll be here until next week."

"The mule train! Good gad." Sir Edward leapt out of his bed, shivering and cussing, giving him an evil look. "You still owe me an apology. I will not tarry to collect it, but I will expect you at the theatre this Saturday night, sir."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Clancy waved him off, turning on one heel and marching out, leaving him staring. He just couldn't believe the gall. Of course, that didn't stop him from reminding himself to fix the webbing on his snowshoes. He thought he might go on down into town this weekend after all.

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The ride down the mountain took more out of him than the ride up, and Clancy took to his bed and stayed there for a day and a half, until the theatre manager came to him, furious.

"You have rehearsals," Hector shouted at him, "Get your lazy bum out of bed."

"I have rehearsed more Shakespeare than you have ever read, I daresay. I know the play."

"You will not act in it if you do not rehearse."

Shaking, still exhausted, Clancy pulled himself to the edge of the bed and sat up, immediately retching. Hector stared at him.

"You drank yourself into a stupor."

"Hardly," Clancy snarled in return. "I went to try and undo the damage done with the cretin who besmirched my name, as instructed. The air is most thin up there."

Both of Hector's brows flew up on his forehead. "You went to the mine?"

"You needn't act so shocked. I too, am concerned about the company." The reputation of the company had been the last thing on his mind when he awoke with Roy Marsh, but there it was. The big man had felt...warm. Good.

Clancy sighed. Maybe he was missing John more than he thought.

"You may skip the afternoon rehearsal. But I expect you at the dress tonight, do you hear?"

"Yes sir."

Head hanging, Clancy listened to Hector leave before falling back on the bed, one arm over his eyes. He considered Roy Marsh carefully for a moment. The man's face had the crooked look of a pugilist. His eyes were an odd, muddy gold, and his hair was undistinguished. But lying in the man's bed, Clancy had dreamed of the most lascivious things, had awakened with a stiff prick that rivaled any he had possessed before.

Sadly, he had been unable to make use of it. Even now it was enough to cause a lingering throb. Clancy thought on it a moment, then decided it might help ease him back into sleep, so he pushed a hand into his linen smallclothes and grasped his prick in his hand, imagining the incredible solidity of Roy Marsh's body against his, the length and breadth of the cock he'd felt against him in his hand.

Yes. Oh, better already with something else to concentrate on, something to do. It was ridiculous, abusing himself to the image of a man he did not like, let alone one he did not find all that attractive, but there he was, pulling at his prick and breathing heavily, his balls starting to draw up. He imagined Roy letting Clancy take him, imagined that big body bent to his will, and his excitement reached fever pitch.

Clancy's skin felt over-sensitive, his nipples had pulled into hard little bits and his cock... Oh, it was glorious how that felt, his thumb working the foreskin as he imagined it was Roy's tongue working him. When the picture of his prick filling Roy deep came to him, complete with the idea of how Roy Marsh might sound while being well and truly had, Clancy spent himself, his hot fluid spurting out on his chest and arm, coating his hand.

He lay there, panting, his eyelids weighing heavy, and wondered at himself. Really, this provincial little backwater was starting to get to him.

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"Roy! What in hell are you doing down here on a day like today?" Geezer Harris stared at him, eyes wide, as Roy stamped snow off his boots on the little braided rug by the door.

"Come to get a haircut and a shave, Mr. Harris," Roy replied, his feathers not ruffled one bit.

The brass spittoon rang hollowly as Geezer spat into it, shaking his head. "I know you didn't chance Annie in this storm."

"No, sir. Just me. I came down on the old road, on snowshoes."

The walk had near numbed his fingers and toes and nose right off, but Roy had enjoyed it nonetheless, singing to keep himself occupied as long as he was out of the avalanche areas. Now he was at the barbershop, needing to clean up before he went to the theatre and bought his tickets.

"You wantin' a bath, too, Roy?" Geezer asked.

"No, sir. Thank you kindly, but I've got me a room at Alma Joy's again, and she's heating water for it right now. All I got to do is go get tickets and I can have a private scrub."

"Now, there's a fine thing. She's a handsome woman, is Alma."

Roy stared. Well, to each his own, he figured. "She's a fine lady, she is. Always gives a man a fair deal for his money." Knowing the mention of money would have Geezer asking for his up front, Roy fished out two bits. "Just a trim on the beard, Mr. Harris. I need it for warmth."

"Don't you worry, Roy, I'll make you look like a gentleman."

Well now, Roy didn't believe that a minute. He snorted. "You just make me look like less of a wild thing, Mr. Harris and I'd be obliged."

"I can do that for sure."

They chatted as Geezer cut his hair, and Geezer kept the steady stream of talk going as he trimmed Roy's beard, and by the time they were done, Roy was purely caught up on all the gossip. He knew about Abel Fry's new mail order bride, and about Kathleen Mullawney's baby, and about most of the goings on at the theater. And didn't they all center around one arrogant actor?

"So he really threw a fit and stomped off stage?" Roy asked, unable to believe a man could be so childish.

"That's what I heard Mrs. MacGruder tell Vera Bell, out on the sidewalk t'other day."

"Well, I'll be damned."

In a way all that gossip made Roy feel better, because it surely wasn't just him Sir Edward Clancy reacted to that way. On the other hand, it made him feel worse, because he was there to see Sir Edward Clancy, wasn't he, immaturity and all.

"Thanks much, Mr. Harris," Roy said, avoiding the mirror Geezer stuck in his face. "I'm obliged. Think I'll go have me that bath at Alma Joy's now."

"No problem, Roy, and you be careful getting back up at the mine. We need more like you, not less."

"Yessir."

Roy liked to think of himself as a practical man, so why he was paying another fifty cents for a bath and trudging about in the snow for a man he didn't even like escaped him. But when he sat in the theater watching Macbeth for the second time, Roy decided he should not try to reason it out. There was no reasoning, not with the way Sir Edward Clancy's fancy pants fit, and not with the way that voice settled at the base of Roy's spine, making him squirm in his seat and sweat.

When the performance ended, Roy mourned it, and he was slow to get up and leave, savoring the last words for long, long moments.

"You liked that, did you Roy?" asked Mrs. MacGruder, who looked even more wrinkly with the paint she wore on her face bunching up that way. She smelled of attar of roses.

"I did," he replied, hoping she'd not look down and see how much he'd enjoyed it. Looking at her ought to cure him of that, though, especially if he thought of her naked. Yep, there you go.

"Well, I'm sure we're all glad to hear that. Perhaps this time we will receive a better review. Mrs. MacGruder, what a pleasure to see you."

That was from Sir Edward Clancy himself, hopping down off the stage and bowing over Mrs. MacGruder's hand in the most dramatic fashion. Roy rolled his eyes. Mrs. MacGruder fluttered.

"You were magnificent tonight, Clancy," she said, hands flapping like dying ducks.

"Thank you, madam. I certainly tried." Those eyes sparkled as Clancy turned a wicked grin on Roy. "Good evening, Mr. Marsh."

"Evenin', Sir Edward. You put on a good show."

He got a laugh on that, one that told him Clancy knew he meant just now, not the play. "Why thank you, Roy. Mrs. MacGruder, I believe Hector would like to speak with you. If you don't mind I should like to steal Mr. Marsh and give him a tour backstage."

"Oh, how thrilling. Roy is such a wonderful patron, he deserves it. Good night, gentlemen." She patted Roy's arm as she went by, her fingers light as feathers.

"Are you really giving me a tour?" Roy asked, skeptical now that Clancy's audience was away.

"I am. I must try to redeem myself for leaving my meager stomach contents on your boots. Come along."

Unlike Mrs. MacGruder's, the paint on Clancy's face made him seem exotic, foreign. Roy followed along, climbing the narrow stairs at the side of the stage and laughing to think if a bear like him working the curtains or sets, as he once thought he might like to. He never woulda fit.

The backstage area immediately fascinated him. There were still actors back there, milling about, and more people besides, gathering up costumes and set pieces, looking at him curiously. Most nodded, some just stared, and Roy felt like a fish out of water. Still, he wasn't willing to lose this chance, and asked Clancy question after question.

"That pulley system works the backdrops, and that young man, Henry, is there just to climb the scaffold if they don't come down properly," Clancy said by way of reply to Roy's last finger pointing. "You really do love the theater, don't you?"

Roy ducked his head, his cheeks heating. "Guess that seems silly, for a man with no schooling, huh?"

"Actually I find it most admirable." At his look, Clancy laughed. "Yes, it quite surprises me as much as it does you."

"I'll thank you for it anyway."

"How kind..." Those shrewd green eyes twinkled at him. "Have you had supper?"

"I. Whut?" Lord, didn't he sound stupid just then.

"I asked have you dined? You could join me at the hotel for a late supper. My treat."

Roy couldn't help it, he gave Clancy a suspicious glare. "Why're you bein' so nice to me all come a sudden?"

"Because I hope for a better review, naturally." At his look, Clancy threw up both hands. "Oh, come now, Roy. I am asking you to supper. On my nickel. Why be so harsh?"

"All right, then." Roy frowned, wagging one finger. "I won't be the butt of any of your jokes tomorrow, if'n I should used the wrong fork or something."

"Of course not. Where is your coat and hat?"

"Out front."

Clancy nodded, tugging at the hem of the short shirt thing he wore. "Then I shall go and change and take my paint off and meet you out front. No more than ten minutes."

"All right."

Honestly, Roy figured he'd get stood up, so when Clancy actually came out about eight minutes later, he started and stared.

Clancy simply grinned at him. "You seem surprised. Since we are dining in I have no reason to make sure I got all of my stage make-up off or that my tie is perfectly straight, hmm?"

"Well no," Roy agreed. "I just figured...I mean, I thought. Supposed you might change your mind, is all," Roy finished, staring at the toes of his boots.

"I may be many things, Roy Marsh, but I am not an Indian giver. Now come along."

Roy went, tugging on his hat and marveling at himself. A man would be a fool to turn down a free supper, sure enough, but when that supper was with a man who'd tossed on your boots and bitched at you all night long while imposing on your hospitality...

"You had a bath."

"I did. Is that bad?" He didn't think he'd stunk before, when they met, but he had been working. Maybe he smelled flowery now.

"It's not, no. You smelled fine before though."

Roy would swear he saw Clancy's teeth clamp together, the man biting off the last word as if he hadn't meant to say it. The flush on Clancy's cheeks might have been because of the cold, but Roy would bet his suspenders it was embarrassment.

"So did you," Roy said, trying not to chuckle as Clancy gave him an incredulous look.

"Well, thank you," Clancy returned, voice thick with some emotion Roy could not identify. When the laughter burst forth, though, he knew what it was, and it made him frown and stick his hands in his pockets. Clancy laughed harder. "Oh, come now, Roy. Can you not see what a ridiculous conversation that is?"

Only a few moments before he had. Now he was...angry. A little hurt. Roy shrugged. "Sure."

Clancy sobered. "Really, I cannot entertain you if you have no sense of humor, Roy."

"I don't mind laughin'. Just bein' laughed at."

"Well, I am used to both, being on the stage." Clancy reached out and patted his arm. "Do not be this way, Roy. I fully intend to enjoy our supper."



"But why?" Roy finally burst out, stopping, ignoring the light snow that began to fall. "I just don't git it." He didn't believe the review excuse for a minute, and he didn't think Clancy wanted his kind of company, and confound it the man baffled him.

"Because you intrigue me, Roy Marsh, and I am not ashamed to admit it. You are uncouth, rough, and not well-spoken, but you felt good to lie against and you love the theatre. These things do not go together, and yet with you they do."

Well, that sounded honest enough, and though he might cringe at the first set of attributes, they were true enough.

"I find you rude, arrogant and insufferable," he told Clancy in return. "How's that for well-spoken?"

"Excellent." Clancy grinned at him, eyelashes wet with snowflakes. "Then why are you coming with me?"

"Because you're buying." And because he wanted to return the honesty, Roy added, "And you're pretty enough to make a man ache."

That got him a flash of green eyes the likes of which he'd never seen as Clancy nodded, licking his lips. "Well, there you have it. Can we go in now? It's wet."

Sure enough they were right at the hotel, almost to the steps. Roy nodded dumbly, following Clancy inside, his body tightening. Surely his poor self was being too hopeful. This was supper, no more, no less. Trouble was trying to convince his johnson.

They went right to the front desk, where Clancy ordered a hot supper for two. The look the bell clerk gave then had Roy squirming and blushing, but he didn't know the feller, so he just didn't say nothin', going on with Clancy as he sailed right up the stairs like nobody's business.

Roy figured his johnson was right and his head was wrong as soon as the door closed behind them, because Clancy turned right about and laid a hand on Roy's chest, going up on tiptoe to kiss Roy's mouth, right at the corner.

"I. What are you?"

"Do you ever just be quiet?" Clancy asked, one hand slid behind Roy's head, digging into his hair, and the man pulled him right down for another kiss, this one mashing their lips together, making Roy gasp. Just like he was a girl in a penny dreadful book, Clancy pushed him back and poked into his mouth with that hot tongue and Roy stood there, wide eyed, hands clenched at his sides.

"Well?" Clancy asked when the kiss ended.

"You shouldn't..."

"Why not?"

"Well, we oughtn't."

Clancy smiled and Roy's pulse tripped over itself. "We will, though, hmm?"

Oh, yes, Roy thought as Clancy took another kiss, then another.

They would.

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Clancy pressed harder against Roy's big body, needing more. He was hungry for touch, he hadn't realized how much, and Roy seemed to him only real candidate in Telluride now that John had left. The rest of the company had made it most clear how they felt about that sort of thing, and he certainly didn't want anything that might reside above the saloon.

Roy March may not look like a thoroughbred, but he certainly kissed like a man who loved other men.

The kiss went so deep it burned, almost like taking a drink of something too hot. Clancy practically crawled up Roy's body to get more of that heat, more of the flavor, his hands clutching Roy's shoulders. Roy kissed him right back, hands cupping his arse to lift him up close, rubbing them together.

The knock on the door had them springing apart, Clancy's feet landing with a thump, Roy jumping away from him as if burnt.

It took him a full minute and another flurry of knocks to remember why he should answer the door. Ah yes, the food.

Clancy opened the door, handing over two bits to the waiter. "Thank you, my good man. If you might put the tray just there."

The fellow put the tray down, eyes bright as a squirrel's as he looked from one of them to the other. Then he scurried out, leaving them alone. Clancy latched the door.

"Shall we dine?" he asked.

Roy stood there, staring at him, fingers touching Roy's bruised lips. Then Roy frowned. "I can't play whatever game it is you're playin', Sir Edward Clancy. I appreciate the offer of supper, but I'd best be going."

Bending, Roy picked up the hat that had fallen to the floor as they kissed, straightening it with those big, rough hands. Those hands he suddenly needed rather desperately. He'd always been good at wanting what he could not have.

Clancy put his acting skills to use. "I am not playing, Roy. I assure you."

He got a dubious look, but Roy finally nodded slowly and put the hat aside, shrugging out of the heavy coat as well. "All right, then. That sure smells good."

Strangely enough, it did smell good. Clancy usually railed about the food at the hotel, but perhaps that was more habit than anything these days. When he uncovered the tray there was pot roast and potatoes, steaming hot biscuits and coffee, and pie. A feast.

Conversation while dining seemed not to be Roy's strong suit. Clancy supposed he should be grateful that the man chewed with his mouth closed and knew how to use a fork. To be fair, Roy's table manners were quite good, and Clancy could not help but comment on it.

"You eat rather more neatly than I would have expected, Roy."

Really, they must work on Roy trusting him. The suspicious looks were going to spoil his meal. Finally Roy shrugged, evidently deciding he meant no harm with his comment.

"My momma was a lady once. A good woman who deserved more'n she got. She taught me how to do things like eat real fine and read and all."

"So you do read. I had wondered, when you said you had no schooling."

"Well, it's a skill like any other, I suppose." Roy took another bite of potatoes, eyes closing as he chewed. "I don't get to much, so it ain't easy for me anymore, but I try to at least read the newspaper when I can."

"It would be quite a shame if you forgot how." Clancy smiled a little, doubting that Roy could forget how to read, indeed, but he supposed it would grow rusty, like anything else that took practice. "Pie?"

"Uh." Roy's ears went red. "You mind if I have the last of the beef?"

"Not at all." Poor fellow, he was probably starving. Anyone that big must eat their weight in food. Clancy picked at the apple pie until Roy was able to join him in dessert, then ate the rest with surprised enjoyment. It was the best meal he'd had since arriving in this godforsaken little hole.

Roy sat back, patting his belly and smiling, and Clancy rather thought Roy agreed.

"That was right nice," Roy said. "Thank you."

"You're quite welcome." They could be civil. What a wonder it was.

"I should. Should I?" Roy blew out a sigh, surging to his feet. "I ought to head on."

Clancy sighed as well. This was going to be an all night battle. "But why? There's still coffee and we haven't even begun to talk."

"What have we got to talk about?" Looking a little lost, Roy just stood there, hands hanging at his sides.

Clancy stood, going to take one of those big hands, leading Roy to his bed. "You're absolutely right. The time for talking it quite over."

"But I." Roy pulled back a little, staring at him, heavy brows drawn down. "What are you?"

What was the phrase? Oh, yes. "Shut it, Roy," Clancy said, before going up on tiptoe just as he'd done before supper to plant his mouth against Roy's in a kiss that took his breath.

Roy moaned, but did not protest, instead pulling him closer, those hands cupping his buttocks again and yanking. The man was wonderfully responsive. Clancy could already feel Roy hardening between them, that large prick he remembered from his sojourn at Miss Lee's tantalizing him beyond all reason. Clancy reached down between them and squeezed it, right through the cloth, humming at length and breadth of it.

A harsh groan came from Roy's chest, and suddenly the room spun as Clancy felt himself flying through the air, landing on the bed hard enough to knock his breath loose. Laughing, he stretched a little, beckoning.

"So eager," he said. "Come on, join me."

Roy wasted no time. Well, the man did stop to strip out of his clothes with an endearing single-minded intensity and a surprising lack of modesty. Clancy stared.

And stared some more.

"Good God, Roy. You are magnificent."

The beauty of Roy's body astonished him. What the man's face lacked in beauty, that body made up tenfold. Tall and seemingly too wide in his clothes, without them Roy was perfectly proportioned. His shoulders stretched an amazing width, heavy muscles in those upper arms balancing them, and the chest had only the lightest dusting of hair that arrowed down over the ridged belly to flare again at the groin. Roy had legs like tree trunks. And his prick.

Clancy's mouth watered.

Roy let him look, cheeks pink, before coming to him and putting those big hands on him, starting to strip him as well. Clancy did not help much, instead reaching for Roy's cock and stroking it.

"You ought not. I'll spend too soon," Roy said, sounding strangled.

"We have all night," Clancy returned, rolling to the edge of the bed and leaning to take that hot prick into his mouth.

Roy shouted, hips thrusting forward to shove into Clancy's mouth, and yes, oh yes, that was what Clancy needed. It had been too long, far too long since he'd felt and tasted a man, since he'd had the power that came with pleasure. Lovely.

The skin under his hands was hot, damp with sweat, as the flesh in his mouth was even hotter, wet with Roy's need. Clancy worked that heavy vein underneath with his tongue, lips tight, sliding up and down and he could feel Roy's balls draw up, feel the spasms begin as Roy spent for him, the deep growl of Roy's completion ringing through the room.

Clancy pulled away, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand and looking up to meet Roy's dazed eyes, which somehow seemed more gold than yellow now, seemed much more attractive.

"Stay the night?" he asked, and Roy nodded, crawling on the bed and reaching for him.

"Yessir," Roy said, pulling him up as easily as a rag doll. "I'll stay."

## Chapter Four

Roy had snuck out of Clancy's hotel room like a thief in the night, just before dawn. Only thing he'd taken had been his own shoes and coat, assuming them after he was out in the hallway, bright with its fancy electric lights that looked so odd to Roy. Any light that didn't flicker with the wind just oughtn't be trusted.

The trek back up to the mine had been right hard, blowing snow an icy cold making him figure he should sit his ass at home the next Saturday and not go down into town.

His hands were gettin' numb now as he swung his hammer, the only light in their section coming from the sparks that flew every time steel met steel. Kit held his pin today, and the boy was fast; Roy hadn't smacked the kid's hand yet. He was working up a good rhythm, thinking of how Edward Clancy had felt against him, thinking of the swing of a man's arm grasping his cock, when suddenly his hammer hit plain stone instead of the pin, Kit pulling it right out from under him.

"Shitfire, boy," he roared, the clanging of metal and rock still ringing in his ears for long moments. "What'd you go and do that for?"

"Did you feel that, Roy?" Kit asked, moving close, hand grabbing his and clinging, right above the handle of the hammer. "We're shaking."

He'd not felt a thing while he was working, the vibrations of the hammer hitting far too vicious for him to know any other sensation. Kit was like his own personal canary, though, always feeling the tiniest little tremors. Roy took a deep breath and held it...

...And felt the earth shake down deep like fire gathering in the belly of the beast.

"Go," he said, shoving Kit away from him. "Run."

They both ran, their boot heels thumping as the little bits of dirt and rock and water started falling, the timbers above them creaking ominously. They always worked in the oldest shafts, because Roy was strong enough to wring more ore out of an almost dry vein, but it came with risks, that did. Heavy ones.

They made it to the main shaft just as the ceiling behind them came crashing down, dust and gasses making them wheeze.

"Marsh! Kit! You boys all right?"

Roy was impressed how fast the shift boss got to them, all things considered. He nodded. "Yessir. Just fine."

"Anyone else working that vein this morning?" the foreman asked.

"Nope."

Kit agreed, shaking his head, looking pale under his freckles in the light from the foreman's lamp.

"You want to take the rest of the day off, I won't dock your pay."

Roy and Kit both stared until the foreman, name of Isaac Hallow, shifted his feet and spat. "What? It's been the last three cave-ins for you two. Now either get while the getting is good, or get back to work."

A man only needed to tell him that once. Roy grabbed Kit before the kid could start to go on and on like he did with the thank yous and headed right out, trudging up the steep shaft with Kit near dangling under one arm.

"You need a bath, Roy," Kit said, voice muffled by Roy's shirt and muscle.

Roy laughed out loud. "Well, maybe I'll have me one if Miss Lee will have her daughters draw. You want it after?"

Poor Kit made less money than a lot of the other miners, being too damned small to swing a hammer and too nervy to be trusted with the blasting, which was what the little 'uns too often did. They'd light dynamite up a drilled hole and then try to beat the blast back down while rocks the size of a man's skull fell on them. Most of 'em just didn't have a Chinaman's chance in Hell.

Kit might be lucky, come to that.

The kid wiggled until Roy set him down, then bounced along beside him. "Thanks, Roy. I'll take you up on it. Thank you."

Hot water wasn't nothin' to sneer at. Roy'd figured Kit would say yes. He just shrugged, knowing he'd cut his own bath a little short just so Kit could still get some warmth out of it. But you did for others if you had the means to. His momma had taught him that.

"No trouble at all, Kit," was all he said, clapping the kid on the back. "No problem at all."

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Clancy sat in the big copper tub at his recently acquired permanent accommodation, the bath water steaming around him. He raised one leg, washing it with the sea sponge he preferred for such things, almost purring. So much better than the hotel. Not that the service at the hotel had been bad, really, but privacy was so much more preferable.

The soap was soft, the water too hard, but really it made no difference. He had enough suds to make it worthwhile. And the addition of a charming young Chinese valet as his bath attendant. Luscious.

"A little more hot water, I think, Lin."

Lin smiled for him, pretty brown eyes alight as the lad looked at him, pouring a nice stream of hot water from the kettle. "Enough, sir?"

"A bit more, I think." Clancy liked it so hot he could barely stand it, liked how it eased muscles sore from hunching against the cold. They called Telluride the town without a bellyache because supposedly no one had any reason to complain there.

Ha!

He could think of a hundred, starting with the bitter snow.

Lin, though, Clancy could not complain about. In fact, he should take advantage of the sweet thing's many charms immediately so he could remember how lucky he was.

"I have a spot I cannot reach," he said, leaning forward to expose his back. The way Lin's eyes traveled down the length of it gratified him. "Perhaps you could come and help me?"

The light black robe that Lin wore hit the floor, the young man slender and fine boned, skin smooth and dark, compared to Clancy's. Lovely. And completely different than that rawboned ox, Roy Marsh. Just what he needed.

Slipping into the tub behind him, Lin took the sponge and washed his back thoroughly, the heavy length of Lin's prick hot against the base of his spine. Clancy closed his eyes, but they popped open again the minute the image of a wide, muscled miner flashed before them. Oh, no. That would never do.

Water splashed about as Clancy rose up on his knees to turn and look at Lin. Yes. Better.

Lin smiled at him, eyebrows rising a tiny bit. "You wanted me to wash your back."

"I changed my mind. Now you may wash my front."

"Mmm."

The little sound Lin made had Clancy's cock leaping to attention, lifting up out of the water as he stretched, showing off a bit. The sponge traveled over him, from his throat to his groin, guided by Lin's almost delicate hand, nothing at all like the rough, square hand he had so recently enjoyed.

Enjoyed it he had, too, for all that he was piqued that Roy could leave him so easily, without even a word in the morning. Roy had treated him as though he were a special gift, fingers callused and hard, but gentle at the same time, clumsy enough that Clancy believed it had been a long while since the man had touched anyone else. Then the care had exploded into wildness and Roy had taken him to the stars. Really, it was still hard to believe.

His attention snapped back to the present when Lin pushed him back against the lip of the tub, all but climbing atop him to kiss him. Demanding little bugger. Clancy chuckled into the kiss, cradling that tight, oddly flat behind in his hands, feeling the deceptive strength of Lin's muscles as they flexed.

So eager to please, so eager for his own pleasure.



Clancy took the kiss deeper, his fingers stroking down Lin's crease and circling the tight, hot entrance to that lean body. He moaned.

"Already ready for me then, lad?"

Lin flushed, but nodded, eyes carefully downcast. "I had hoped, sir."

"All you have to do is ask, sweet."

"Please?" Oh, now Lin looked up at him, eyes so dark as to be almost black, nothing at all like the odd, fierce yellow of Roy's.

Nothing at all.

"Yes." He spread Lin's arse, using his thumbs to open the lad fully, and slid his prick against the sweet hole, his body bucking at the feel of it, ready to begin the dance. Clancy slid inside Lin's body easily, sweetly, nothing forced or awkward, just the practiced glide of two men who knew how this worked, and who were good at it besides.

Really, it was almost a disappointment.

Still, the heat and friction gave him what he needed, and his hand found Lin's prick and began to move in concert with their hips, giving the lad something to feel as well, and soon they rocked together hard and fast, the water slipping farther and farther up the sides of the tub until it splashed over as they sped their pace.

Lin cried out for him, cock jerking in his hand, the smell of spunk mixing with the scent of soap and wet flesh, the sensation as Lin squeezed down upon him exquisite. Clancy bore it as long as he could, wanting it to last, wanting to reach the point where it almost became pain holding it in.

Then he shot his own seed as well, filling Lin deep, moaning as the last bit of tension left his body and he sank down against the long end of the tub, panting for breath.

"You scrub very well indeed, Lin," he said, stroking the lad's young man's cheek.

"I do my best for you, sir," Lin agreed, leaning against him, the water swirling about them.

"I know you do, sweet." He did know. And he appreciated it. Even if it was Roy Marsh's face he had seen when he arrived at his little death.

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Roy stepped out of the big wooden tub and wrapped up in as many layers of flannel and wool as he could before stomping into his boots and bellowing for Kit. "Kit! Getcher ass in here, boy, before it gets cold."

Kit came a'runnin', boots untied and flap on his union suit just flopping in the breeze. Kit dropped the quilt he had wrapped around him and started to strip off, half glancing at Roy and blushing like a fool.

"You. Um. You wantin' to stay, Roy?" the kid asked, and Roy felt his own cheeks get as hot as a kettle forgot on the fire.

"No. I got one last pot of hot water here, I thought I'd let you get in and then pour in for you."

"Oh!" Kit laughed and splashed right into the bath after that, settling in with a sigh. "That's real nice of you, Roy. You're a good man."

Oh, now, if he was a good man he wouldn't have looked at Kit that-a-way when the kid wasn't looking. Of course, sneaking a look told him Kit wasn't as young as he thought, either, old enough to be completely a man. Roy cleared his throat and used a scrap of flannel to pick up the kettle.

"You ready?"

"I am," Kit said, nodding.

"Tell me when." Roy commenced to pouring, stopping only when Kit gasped and waved a wet hand.

"S'enough, Roy. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Just don't forget this is here come time to rinse. I'll leave you to."

He trudged up from Miss Lee's little bathhouse to the main house, climbing the stairs, intent on using his unaccustomed time off to take a nap, or maybe read the newspaper he'd gotten on the last mail delivery.

"Roy!" He heard the mule train come in while he was in the bath, and now old Farris Mayhew was calling him. "You din' git fired, didja?"

"No sir." He grinned. Nosy old fart, was Farris. "We had a bit of a cave in. Got me a free day."

Farris spat. "Well, that's one forward-thinking boss you got there. Got somethin' for ya."

Roy stared. "For me?"

"Yep. Some Chinese fellar dropped it off." Farris held out a cloth wrapped bundle, grinning a gap-toothed grin. "Ifn I could read I woulda kept it."

Carefully holding the small package in his big hands, Roy pulled a nickel out of his pocket.

"Thank you, Mr. Mayhew."

"Yer welcome, Roy. Oh, that Chinese feller says if you want tuh send something back, he'll pay me for my time and space."

What he could possibly have to send to a man he surely didn't even know Roy couldn't fathom, but he agreed. "Sure, Mr. Mayhew. If I have anything I'll get it to you before you leave in the morning."

"Thanks. See you, Roy."

Well, wasn't that a mysterious and fine how do you do? He turned the package over and over as he climbed the stairs to his room, waiting to open it until he got inside. What he saw made him gasp.

It was a tiny set of chapbooks, worn near to falling apart, but all there all the same. The legend on the front read, "Hamlet: A Tragedy by William Shakespeare" and there was some scrawled writing on the inside of the front of the first book, so flowery that Roy could hardly make it out, limited as his reading skills were. He traced it with his fingers, though, sounding it out.

*Dear Roy, it said. I hope this finds you well. You said you were out of practice. I do hope this helps. Yrs. C*

The C was huge compared to the rest, and Roy figured it sure enough didn't belong to no Chinaman. Sir Edward Clancy was sending him gifts. Books.

Him.

Roy simply stared at it then for the longest time, unconsciously caressing the C with his blunt fingers. Then he laid the books carefully on the quilt on his bed and pulled on a clean pair of trousers before going back down to Miss Lee's desk to ring for her.

"Roy!" Miss Lee bustled out, her gums shining at him as she smiled. "Good bath?"

"Yes, ma'am. Would you happen to have some paper and a pencil, ma'am?"

"What for? You need to make a list?"

"No, ma'am. I need to write a letter."

"Ah. Girl back home." She nodded sagely, like that was perfectly normal, even though he'd lived at her establishment near on two years and had never once sent a letter before. "Ten cents."

"Yes, ma'am." Ten cents seemed exorbitant for the stub of pencil and rough, woody paper she gave him, but Roy wasn't gonna complain. He handed over his dime and went over to the parlor to sit at the little table in the corner and write.

It was a laborious process, and his letters come out a wee bit crooked, but all in all Roy was proud of the finished effort. It read:

*Dear C.*

*I thank you very kindly for the gift of the books. They came at the best time, and I look forward to reading them. Weather permitting, I hope I may call on you this Saturday.*

*Yrs truly,*

*R.*

His momma would be proud. He'd used proper words and everything, and while Roy thought he might have spelled a few wrong, it looked readable enough. He folded the letter carefully and sealed it up with a little string he paid a nickel for and then he went to Farris' room and dropped it off.

"Now, don't get it wet," he said. "Else he won't be able to read it."

"You want me to give a letter to a Chinaman?" Farris said, eyebrows rising.

"I do. Thank you, Mr. Mayhew."

"You're welcome enough, I guess."

Thank goodness old Farris Mayhew couldn't read. Roy clattered back up to his room, feeling downright lazy as he shucked his clothes and crawled into bed, settling in with a lit lamp and the first of the chapbooks. He'd take his unexpected good fortune and be grateful, he decided. He was going to spend the day reading.

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Friday night's performance was one of his best, Clancy decided. Surely that accounted for his sunny mood on Saturday morning. Yes, that must be it, that and not the anticipation of seeing Roy Marsh again, for that would be quite ridiculous.

The day had dawned bright and cold and clear, the weather perfect with not a cloud in the sky. Surely Roy could make it down the mountain on a day such as today.

Not that it mattered in the least.

The newspaper yielded a glowing review from none other than Andy Laury himself, the man finally having given in to the lure of the free tickets Clancy had sent him and coming to see the play for himself. Clancy smiled. It was amazing what a little effort could produce in people's perceptions. If he had to winter in this hole of a town, he might as well be popular, he had decided.

"Lin? I need you to do something for me, sweet."

"Yes sir?"

"I need you to go to the hotel and wait for Roy Marsh, just until suppertime. If he's not there by then, come on home." Clancy handed Lin a quarter. "They should feed you at the back door for this."

Eyes wide, Lin took the quarter and stared at it a moment, then grinned and nodded. "Big Roy?"

"Yes, big Roy. Go on, now. He does not know I have moved here."

The dear boy looked so happy to be on a mission. And no doubt the prospect of hotel food was something of a treat, since Lin did the cooking for Clancy. Clancy watched him bounce out, shaking his head. He did not think he had ever had that sort of youthful energy. He had been amazed to find that the lad was not that much younger than his own twenty-five years, perhaps two or three at best.

Clancy set himself to rights, assuming a warm lounging jacket over his shirtsleeves and trousers, settling before the fire to read a little. And wait.

The day passed slowly, with no sign of Lin or Roy, until late in the afternoon, when he heard the stomping of boots that were far too big to be Lin's outside. Trying to pretend nonchalance, Clancy did not even rise, waiting instead for Lin to bring Roy to him, which he did, sure enough.

"Big Roy, sir."

"Thank you, Lin. Did you want to spend the evening with your family?" Lin was devoted to his mother, and would welcome the suggestion.

The lad nodded and smiled and was gone like smoke, leaving Roy Marsh standing before him, twisting a floppy felt hat with both hands.

"That's some Chinaman you got there," Roy said.

"He does all that I require, yes." Clancy stretched, watching Roy watch him. The look was very much that of a starving man who has seen a feast and cannot quite believe it is real. "Have you eaten?"

"No." Roy flushed a dull red. "Nor shaved or bathed, either. I was going to stop at the hotel and tell you I was in town and then go. There ain't no play tonight?"

"I fear not. We had a lovely performance last evening, one of our best, but unfortunately immediately after part of the roof fell in from the heavy snow." It had been at once amusing and horrifying, as the boards had landed right on Clancy's end mark. If they had fallen even a half hour sooner...

Nodding, Roy shifted from foot to foot, the floorboards of the new cottage creaking like a rusty gate. "We had a wee cave in at the mine, so I know what you mean."

"A cave in." Somehow it had never occurred to him that what Roy did might be dangerous, which was ridiculous, as Clancy clearly remembered coal mines at home and how perilous they could be. "Was anyone injured?"

"Nah. Was just me and Kit and we got out afore it got bad." Those yellow eyes took him in, all but eating him up. "So, you got nowhere to be, then?"

"Nowhere to go," he agreed, spreading his arms. "Whatever shall we do?"

One step, then another, and Roy knelt before him, smelling strongly of snow and smoke. "I dunno. I suppose I could eat. Take a bath."

"You're not stinking." Strangely enough Roy smelled good to him, male and heated and not at all unpleasant.

"No? But I am hungry." One big hand cupped his head as Roy leaned forward to kiss him, and Clancy let himself get lost in it, opening his mouth to let Roy's tongue in. Roy tasted just slightly of whiskey, more strongly of mint, and the softness of Roy's lips contrasted deliciously with the roughness of the man's beard.

Clancy found himself hungry as well, lifting up off the settee to twine his arms about Roy's neck. They leaned, Roy's strength never wavering, and somehow that was the most arousing thing, the one thing about Roy that had allowed Clancy to see past the man's more obvious faults.

They kissed until he was breathless, until the feeling running up his spine and exploding in his head was so overwhelming that he feared he might spend just from a kiss. That was when he pulled back, licking his lips, staring a little. Breathing.

"Is this all right?" Roy asked, lips swollen and cheeks blazing. It transformed the man's face, somehow, that hard look of need. Made him look almost dangerous. Clancy liked it.

"Yes. We should go to my bed, though. I think you'll like it."

Most everything in his little house had been there when he procured the rental, but Clancy had gone to the general store and ordered the bed, which had been made by hand from local wood, in an amazingly short amount of time. The thing would hold two men Roy's size, and sported a down coverlet.

"Oh, then you hafta let me wash up," Roy said, pulling all the way back, breaking contact. "I ain't one to get the sheets all dirty."

"Very well. Lin is gone, so we cannot draw a full bath, but we can heat some water by the fire."

Roy's brows drew together. "I can pull my own water. I ain't helpless."

"And you think I am?" His own flare of anger surprised him, white hot and red behind his eyes. "Do you find me worthless, Roy Marsh? Do you think I have never worked a day in my life?"

His accent slipped, betraying him a little, but Roy did not seem to notice. No, indeed, Roy seemed baffled. "What's wrong with you?"

"I simply despise being treated like an imbecile."

"I wasn't treatin' you like that. You're the one said you couldn't draw a bath. I can, is all."

"Then by all means, do so. Let me show you to the pump, you strong, capable man." Clancy got up and stalked to the kitchen where the woodstove burned and where a pump sat in a heavy sink.

"I...I'm sorry, Clancy. I didn't mean to upset you."

When he turned to rail at Roy again the big man stood there, shoulders and head down, hands clutching each other and Clancy sighed. How could he heap more on a man who looked so contrite?

"No, I apologize, Roy. It is simply an erroneous assumption that I have always had servants. I enjoy them now because I can."

"I ain't never had anyone wait on me, so I just don't know. You want to help me draw up some water?"

There. Peace offerings on both sides. Clancy smiled. "Yes. Yes I think I should like that a great deal."

"Oh, good." He got a blinding smile, the expression transforming Roy's face entirely, making Clancy stare. Roy primed the pump and then began lustily yanking the handle up and down. Clancy had never seen water splash so quickly from the spout. He finally thought to put a bucket under the flow, smiling a little as Roy grumbled at how much he'd wasted.

They got two buckets and a kettle on the stove, and then stood about, hands in pockets, staring at one another. Clancy cast about for something to say, finally deciding on, "Did you enjoy the book I sent you?"

Roy beamed. "Oh, yes. Read every word. Thank you, Clancy. That was kind of you."

He still had no real notion of what had possessed him to send it, but for that look he was glad he had. He moved closer to Roy, the smell of wood smoke adding a tang to the deeper smell of Roy's skin.

"Of course," he told Roy. "I am the kindest of men."

Roy just laughed, the sound booming and merry. "Uh huh. And I'm Saint Nicholas."

"You wound me, Roy." His hand covered his heart and Clancy made a moue of upset with his mouth.

Apparently his acting failed to impress. Roy simply grabbed him and pulled him close to kiss him soundly.

"Doesn't matter to me if you're rotten to the core, Clancy. You're pretty and I like you."

"Such a ringing endorsement." Still, it was one he could appreciate, even find amusement in. Roy was a study in contradictions, sometimes so innocent, other times so practical.

"It's not enough that I like the look of you and the feel of you?" Roy squeezed him, hands dropping to cup his buttocks and lift, rubbing them together.

That caused Clancy to gasp, to wrap about Roy and slide his body up and down, his cock rising again where it had subsided. It was enough. For now. This would last him until spring, when he could move on, perhaps to San Francisco to join John.

The whistling of the kettle had them springing apart finally, Roy's answering hardness clearly visible through his trousers. Clancy wanted to fall to his knees and open those trousers so he might suck Roy dry. Really, such urges he had for such an unlikely man. Instead he reached out to touch it, cupping the bulge with his palm.

"We should hurry."

Roy gasped, going up on tiptoe. "We should, yeah."

They poured the buckets of hot water in, reserving half of one, and Roy drew one of cold so they could mix the two to rinse. Then Roy stripped off and got in the tub, taking up the lion's share of the room. Clancy put his hands on his hips, staring in mock indignation.

"And where am I to fit?"

"Take your kit off and I'll show you," Roy replied, his grin something to behold.

Clancy pulled off his shirt and trousers, his cock springing out, hard as stone. He took Roy's proffered hand and stepped into the tub, settling into the cradle formed by Roy's chest and knees. Oh, the warmth felt glorious, staining his skin pink. The thick ridge of Roy's cock rubbed up against his arse, making him moan even as Roy drew him up for a kiss, hands hard on his upper arms.

"No marks," he murmured. "The company would disapprove."

Roy grumbled, but nodded, mouth moving along his throat, down his chest. The thought of Roy marking him...appealed. How odd.

Roy bent him back, rough knees digging into Clancy's back as Roy explored him, mouth hotter than the water, hands finding his prick and stroking slowly. That Roy had little experience was evident. That he made up for it in enthusiasm even more so.

Clancy arched into Roy's touch, his arms sliding up above his head to give them more space, and he'd be damned if Roy did not raise one hand to grasp both of his wrists, leaving him stretched that way, like a bow, spread for Roy's delectation.

Each of his nipples received biting kisses, Roy's teeth stinging his flesh until it throbbed and burned enough to drive him mad. Roy's other hand never left his prick, and before much longer Clancy was squirming and grunting, begging for it, the thick cock beneath him tantalizing beyond his capacity to resist.

"Roy. Please. In me."



Roy lifted up to stare at him, brow furrowing. "What?"

"Inside me." Clancy struggled. Roy let go of his hands. Clancy reached back to open himself, rubbing his shockingly sensitive hole against Roy's cock. "Here."

Roy's mouth fell open. "You can. I mean, we can...well, damn."

"We can. We shall." It had been a long while, but Clancy opened himself, stretched himself, the water making it at once easier and more difficult. Then he took Roy in, his eyes fluttering closed as his body stilled, trying to accept the invasion. There. Oh yes, there.

When he opened his eyes Roy was staring at him, eyes bright gold, wide as they could be. Then Roy seemed to convulse, every muscle straining as that big body began to move under him. Within him.

They rocked, Roy moaning with every thrust, telling him how beautiful he was, how hot and good and how he felt, tight around Roy's cock. He knew how that felt, knew it intimately, and hoped fervently that Roy would return the favor very soon.

He rode, moving up and down, begging for Roy's hands again and getting them, his prick jerking madly as his balls emptied, his seed splashing on Roy's belly. Roy hollered for him, head back and humping up madly, wet heat filling Clancy where they were joined together.

When they finally relaxed, the water had gone cold.

They rinsed off and Roy folded a bath sheet about him, keeping the chill away. They went to his bed then, staying there all the night through, and most of the next day besides, and when Roy had to leave him to make the long trek up to the mines, Clancy actually felt a pang.

It was definitely time to start thinking of leaving in the spring.

## Chapter 5

Christmas came and went without Roy being able to get down the mountain. In fact, he was snowed in for nearly a month and a half, which upset him right mightily, as he really wanted to give Clancy the gift he'd gotten for the man.

It weren't much, just a little token, but Roy would bet Clancy liked tokens. The man was a mite taken with himself, and liked pretty things. The shaving kit with its little silver mirror and fancy straight razor ought to be just the thing.

He hadn't let himself hope that Clancy'd gotten him more books.

When the snow finally let up in early February, Roy strapped on his snowshoes and gave Annie a withered up carrot before heading down into town, his pack carefully balanced on his back. The trip wore him plumb out; the snow was just too loose and powdery, and he kept slipping. By the time Roy fought his way into town he felt like a drowned rat and was bleeding from a hundred tiny cuts where he'd snagged on the rock, even through his thick winter kit.

He tramped the snow off him as he got to Clancy's little house, the warm glow from the windows and the smoke from the chimney like a balm to his weary soul. He took off his glove and knocked, his numb fingers feeling so strange. So strange.

"Roy!" Clancy's fair hair, all ruffled from somethin', shone in the light like an angel's halo. "What are you doing here?"

The look on Clancy's face didn't bode so well. Roy frowned, taking off his hat and turning it round and round. "This a bad time, Clancy? I wanted to. Uh. Well, I wanted to drop by and say howdy. Deliver a present I got. Been thinking on you."

"Have you, now?" A burst of laughter from inside cause Roy to crane around Clancy's shoulder, and for Clancy to push the door shut so just his face showed. That sure didn't sound like Lin.

"I have. Powerful like."

"Well." That look was almost pity. It surely was. "I'm sorry, Roy. I am ill prepared to receive you. I am entertaining a few of my fellow players. You understand..."

Stung, Roy stepped back, his hat collapsing under the force of his grip. "Sure. Sure, I do. Not like I could send a calling card on ahead or nothing," he said, drawling it out as nasty as he could. "And of course me, I'm too rough in my ways for polite company."

Now Clancy scowled at him. "Don't be that way, Roy. That is not at all what I meant."

"Sure it is." He took another step, then another, jamming his hat back in his head and reaching for his snowshoes. "You enjoy your party, Sir Edward. I'll just take myself off."

Clancy looked back into the house, then came outside, rubbing his arms. That thin dressing gown sure wasn't gonna be no protection against the cold and Roy was savagely glad of it. Let the man feel even a bit of his own deep down frost.

"At least let me pay for you to stay at the hotel," Clancy said.

"Don't need yer money," Roy replied. "Thank you all the same. G'night."

With that he turned on his heel and marched right into the lengthening darkness of the evening, his back stiff and straight, his head held high.

Clancy never said a word to stop him.

Miss Alma wouldn't let him take a room so late in the day, not after supper was served, and he figured he didn't have enough to stay at the hotel. He's spent his small savings on Clancy's gift. Maybe he could sell it tomorrow, make some of his hard earned siller back. The saloon sounded raucous and full, and Roy couldn't stomach the idea, so he went to the livery, hoping maybe he could sleep in the tack room. There should be blankets there.

No one was about, so he dropped a dime in the tinder box and went to the tack room, easily busting the twist of leather holding it closed. He'd pay for that later on; he wasn't one to do damage and not make up for it.

His stomach rumbled loudly, but Roy ignored it. Wasn't no sense in thinking of what a man couldn't have, and he couldn't afford a meal anywhere he would actually eat. So he wrapped himself in a rough blanket and lay on the floor, closing his eyes. It was way gone early to go to bed, but he tried anyway. Might as well. It would pass the time until he turned tail tomorrow and went back to the mine, a smarter man than when he came down.

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Neither the hotel nor Miss Alma Joy's had yielded Roy. Stricken with unaccustomed guilt less than an hour after Roy left, Clancy had disbanded his little debauched soiree and had gone on the hunt, leaving Lin to clean the house before he returned with the big miner in tow. The big, stubborn miner. The big, stubborn fool.

The night air felt ever more bitter, sneaking in around any gap in coat, hat and gloves, causing him to shiver while he made his way up to the saloon. Jeer and catcalls met him as he walked in the door, the smell of unwashed bodies hitting him in the face, making him gag behind his hastily drawn out handkerchief.

"Well ain't you a fine one?" the barkeep said when Clancy stepped up to the scarred, tobacco stained bar. "What'll it be?"

"I'm looking for someone, actually. A miner named Roy Marsh."

Someone snorted and called out, 'He's too fine for the likes of us.'

Another hollered, "He'd be over at some fancy boarding house."

"Where else might he stay?" Clancy asked, putting every bit of polite disdain in his voice that he could muster.

The bartender looked at him askance. "Well, he might try the livery."

"Thank you." A single coin flipped onto the counter and soon enough disappeared into the barkeep's pocket. "You have been most helpful."

"Oh, any time."

The livery. Why a man would sleep at the livery Clancy could not fathom, especially when there was such a fine hotel in town. Nonetheless, he tried there, and surely enough, found Roy asleep on the floor in a little back room. Shivering.

"Roy. Roy, wake up and come home with me." Kneeling and reaching to shake Roy's shoulder, Clancy let out a curse at the coldness of the floor.

"M'sleepin'." One big hand swatted at him, Roy's growl terribly impressive, if not effective.

"Well, come and sleep with me," Clancy said, pulling harder at Roy's rock-like shoulder. "Come along, Roy, it is entirely too cold here."

"Clancy?" Their heads clunked together when Roy sat up, the sound loud as a rifle shot.

Reeling back and clutching his head, Clancy moaned, tears streaming down his face. "I was. I am undoubtedly scrambled now."

"You're in the livery..."

"You're terribly observant. Shall we go?" His teeth chattered horribly. Really, they needed to go. Now.

"But you didn't want me..."

"Roy Marsh," Clancy snapped. "I kicked my friends out of my home for you and came out into the cold and dark to retrieve you. What does that say about my intent? Now \*get up\*."

Roy rolled to his hands and knees, blinking at him, eyes like a cat's in the dark. "S'cold."

Really, had Roy damaged his brain? Clancy hoped not, for that truly was Roy's most beautiful part. Well, perhaps aside from Roy's amazing prick which also Clancy hoped was undamaged by the cold.

"It is indeed. My arse is freezing. And I will kick you in yours if you do not rise."

Something got through finally, for Roy lumbered to his feet like a bear just out of hibernation, horse blanket flapping about him like a great pair of shaggy wings. Then the man looked around

rather stupidly. "I need to pay for the lock. But I ain't got no money. I can't leave a note, neither. No pencil."

"You could write it on the wall in dung..." When Roy just blinked at him, Clancy sighed and pulled a quarter from his pocket. "Will this do? If you leave it with the lock just there?"

That got him a smile, the first real sign that the Roy he knew and, well, the Roy he knew was present and accounted for. Then he got a hug that nearly cracked his ribs. "It'll do just fine. You came for me."

"I did. You are wasting time we could use to repair to my house and warm each other."

"I am? Well, by damn, then. Let's get a move on."

They moved. Roy brought his snowshoes and tromped along beside him, humming with the rhythm of their steps. Really, he was the oddest man Clancy had ever met. Perhaps that was what made Roy so interesting.

When they got back to his little house, which appeared neat as a pin thanks to Lin, Clancy dragged Roy in to stand before the fire. "How thoughtful. Lin has even left us a few buckets of hot water."

"Oh, that's good. I can wash the horse smell off."

"Yes, I can see where that would be beneficial." With a sideways kind of look at Roy, Clancy began to strip down, smiling as Roy stopped unbuttoning his own coat and stared. "Do you like what you see, Roy?" he asked as he let his suspenders fall and shrugged out of his shirt.

"Well, I ain't never made a secret of that, have I?"

"No. No, you haven't. Even when you disliked me."

Roy tilted his head, a strange look coming into his eyes. "Still not sure I like you all that much sometimes. But I sure do like how you feel."

Well, there was honesty for you. Clancy supposed he deserved it, after leaving Roy to sleep in the livery stable, but it stung nonetheless. "You are not endearing yourself at times."

The odd look disappeared, replaced by a glinting grin as Roy took to undressing again, stripping off the heavy blanket and coat, then the trousers and shirt. Oh, that man had the finest form imaginable. And a sweet laugh.

"And I'm ugly besides," Roy agreed. "But you like the way I touch you."

"I do." How could he argue with that? The water felt heavenly as sluiced some over himself with a rag. Roy took the cloth from him and bathed him carefully, each stroke of the cloth at once soothing and arousing. His body arched into the contact, a low sound escaping him. When the cloth scraped over his cold-sensitive nipples, Clancy gasped, his cock jerking as it hardened and grew.

"Yeah. You sure do like that." Sounding intensely satisfied, Roy continued with the assault until Clancy could take no more.

"Roy. We need to wash you, too. Bed. I need..."

"Mmmhmm." Roy handed him the cloth and smiled, the look daring him to refuse.

As if he would turn down the chance to touch the man all over. Wetting the cloth once more, Clancy began with Roy's face and neck, careful not to hurt. When he got to Roy's chest and back, though, he dug in a little with his strokes, loosening tight muscles, drawing groan after groan from Roy. He turned Roy about and bent him at the waist, carefully pushing the cloth between Roy's buttocks. That got more of a shocked noise.

"Clancy?"

"It's only fair, Roy. I let you do it to me." He pushed against the tiny hole just slightly, letting Roy feel how good it felt to have that sensitive skin played, how it made shivers run up a man's back.

"Oh...all right." The muscles in Roy's thighs quivered, but he'd be damned if the man didn't push back, bear down like a natural. If he had oil...

Instead Clancy pulled away, finishing the sponge bath by swiping at Roy's heavy balls, stroking quickly at Roy's hard cock. Then he popped Roy's bottom, laughing when the big man jumped.

"Off to bed. Come along."

"I ain't no child, Clancy, to be whapped."

"Oh, are you too old and dignified to play, then?"

"Is that what you call it?" But Roy laughed for him now, one big paw swatting at him as he danced away, leading the way to the bedroom.

"It is indeed. What good is having a lover who doesn't enjoy himself?"

The world tilted as Roy lifted him and tossed him lightly on his bed, coming down atop him with shocking speed. "Is that what I am? Your lover?"

"Among other things, yes." For now.

"Oh, good." Roy kissed him like a man starving, lips pushing his open so Roy's tongue could push into his mouth.

It felt like fire after the indecent cold he'd endured to get it, and Clancy wrapped about Roy, letting the man kiss him until they were left breathless from it. The muscles he'd so diligently relaxed with their bath were rock hard again under his hands, and Roy's cock prodded his belly, hot as a brand.

"I thought I was doing the doing this time," Clancy said when they broke apart, panting for breath.

"Anything you want, Clancy. Just tell me."

Such generosity in a lover was a rare thing and Clancy knew it. He should be grateful. Too bad he was such a selfish wretch. "Over on your back, then. I want to see you."

Obediently Roy rolled to lie on his back, smiling at him, reaching for him. Clancy avoided Roy for the moment, looking for the oil. He might be able to take Roy with only bathwater to ease the way, but this would be a very different case indeed.

Once Clancy had the little stoppered bottle in hand he returned, rewarding Roy's patience with a kiss. It was very nearly his undoing, as he forgot himself quite handily, sinking into the meeting of their mouths, pushing in with his tongue to taste Roy's unique flavor. Such need. Roy had such need for him and it had the effect of opium, drugging his senses, addicting him.

Finally Clancy remembered what he was about and sat back, panting, one hand on Roy's wide chest. "You make me somewhat crazed, love"

Those funny yellow eyes all but glowed for him, going deep, rich gold. They were beautiful that way. "You'd make a dead man rise, Clancy."

Some unknown impulse made him correct, "Edward. My name is Edward."

An impish smile lit Roy's face. "And a pretty name it is, too. Clancy is easier."

For a moment he only stared. Then he laughed out loud, nodding before taking another kiss, then another. "So it is," Clancy agreed, before slipping down to spread Roy's legs and kneel between them. The thick cock he so admired quivered for him, and he gave it a pat, more or less a promise to return for better things.

"This might feel strange to begin, Roy. You must trust me and relax."

Roy nodded. "I trust you, honey."

Honey. Clancy tilted his head for a moment, considering the utter inappropriateness of such a sweet name for him. Still, it warmed him.

"Good. The oil will ease the way." With that Clancy opened the bottle and wet two fingers, using them to circle Roy's hole, watching the muscles in Roy's thighs twitch and jump. The fact that Roy liked it was evidenced by the steady throbbing of another muscle, however, and Clancy smiled. Yes. Feel that, he thought. Feel how good.

One finger slid deep inside, scraping a little as Roy felt tight, so tight, and Roy stiffened so that Clancy had to stop and use his other hand to pet Roy's belly. "Breathe, love. Breathe deep and then let it go and relax. You must not tense up."

Watching him with the intensity of a hunting hawk, Roy did as he asked, taking a long inhalation before blowing it out and bearing down. Perfect. Clancy's finger slid deep, and he turned it, finding the tiny spot he searched for, stroking over it and knowing it would send Roy flying with pleasure.

He was right.

Roy shouted for him, body bucking up, almost tossing him off the bed. He used his hand on Roy's belly to hold him down. "Easy, Roy. Easy. I would not hurt you."

"You...you won't. I know you won't." The man panted for him, hips starting to roll up, begging for more of his touch.

Clancy gave it, sliding the second finger in along the first, judiciously adding a few more drops of oil. It helped open up that too small space, helped Roy to soften around him, and Clancy watched Roy's face as he touched on that spot within once more.

Contorted in pleasure Roy's face was not beautiful, but it was a sight to behold, a study in wonder and need. It made him feel tall as a mountain, and hard as one as well, suddenly unable to wait any longer.

"Are you ready for me, Roy? Can you take me now?"

He got a frantic nod, Roy's hands clenching in the sheets. "Yes. Clancy. Please."

Oh, good. Clancy quickly oiled his prick, stroking only a few times for fear of embarrassing himself. He'd had the bodies of some of the most practiced whores on two continents, but somehow none of them had excited them as much as Roy's willingness did. When he placed himself at Roy's slick entrance they both groaned, and when he forced his way in a scant inch he had to stop and regain what little composure he had left to him.

"So tight, Roy," he said, gritting his teeth against the intense sensation. "You are so tight."

"Ain't never...I. Clancy. More." Roy all but thrashed beneath him, hands opening and closing, face red as a beet.

"Yes, more." Deeper and deeper Clancy pushed, finally seating himself completely in Roy's body. Oh. His eyes tried to roll, but Clancy had arranged Roy this way so he could see Roy's face, so he determinedly kept his eyes open and focused, wanting to watch.

They began to move, Roy forcing the issue by arching up over and over, his big body so strong that Clancy still felt he was the one being taken. So Clancy did the only thing he could to help his situation, pulling Roy's legs into the air, draping them over his shoulders so the big man lay off balance, only able to take, to receive Clancy's thrusts and his caresses.

Roy could reach down, though, and stroke his own prick, and the sight was nearly Clancy's undoing. Crying out, he thrust harder, his hips snapping as he lunged into Roy's body, needing to spend so badly he could barely see. When Roy gave a desperate roar and spilled between their bellies, that was all he could bear, the tight clasp of Roy's body enough to make his head spin.



He came, shouting Roy's name and thrusting with no grace or rhythm until he simply collapsed, landing hard on Roy's chest.

They lay there, both of them dozing, until the chill of the room had Clancy shivering and he withdrew to find a quilt and put away the oil. When he returned to the bed Roy enveloped him immediately, holding him close throughout the night.

He woke, though, to find Roy gone, snowshoes and all. In the man's place was a clumsily wrapped package with a scrap of faded calico ribbon on top, a gift perhaps? Surely it was, and while Clancy missed Roy's warmth he reached for the bundle as eagerly as a magpie reaches for a shiny bauble.

Oh. The tiny silver mirror with its tin frame and the bone handled razor with a brand new strop were perfectly lovely. Quite the most wonderful gift he'd seen in some time.

What a shame it was, for it made him ever more fond of Roy, and that would make it harder still to leave.

Which he was going to do at the first sign of a spring thaw, come Hell or high water.

## Chapter 6

The letter came early enough in the day that it awaited Roy when he got back to Miss Lee's boarding house. Spring was very nearly sprung, which meant it was full on avalanche season, so Roy'd not been able to get down to town as often as he'd like. The prospect of being able to read Clancy's letter, for who else'd be writing to him, and perhaps find a bit of solace from that, made him nearly bounce up the stairs to his room.

Sure enough when he opened up the letter, Clancy's pretty handwriting flowed across the page, and Roy wiggled into a more comfortable position on his bed and turned up the lamp so he could see better, loving the very weight of the fancy paper in his hand, and the faint red undertone Clancy's ink took on.

*My Dear Roy,*

It began. Clancy had taken to calling him dear or love, and he couldn't help but grin every time.

*By now you might well know we have started a new production, this one a comedy. It's called Twelfth Night. Alas, I do not have a copy to send you to read. I do hope, however, that the trails open up enough for you to come and see it before we end its run.*

*I admit to missing you greatly, Roy, and I am fearful that I will not get a chance to talk with you ere you hear things you might misunderstand. Can you at least send some sort of missive via the mule train to let me know when I might see you again?*

*Lin says hello in passing, by the way. I believe he misses you as well, especially your games of draughts.*

There Roy smiled. He'd taken to playing a game or two of checkers with the Chinaman when he had time, and it was a pleasant diversion for both of them while Clancy was still lazing abed and snoring his head off. Not that Clancy would ever admit to snoring. The man had a powerful vanity.

The whole bit about him hearing things he ought not concerned him, but Roy knew well enough that Clancy had tomcat ways. He put up with it because he loved the man fiercely. Even if he didn't much like what Clancy did sometimes.

*Oh, the things I would do to you were you here, Roy. I vow, you help to pass the endless time here like no one else. I hope you will come to see me soon, though as you know I would have you put yourself in no real danger for me. Think of me, though, as you find your bed at night, as I shall think of you. Let me know when I may see you again.*

*Yours,*

*Edward*

His. Oh, Roy did like the sound of that for sure. And he sure enough thought of Clancy when he went to bed, dreaming of him more often than not and wakin' up with a hard prick, just wanting someone to snuggle right up to. As for the things they might do together, well, Roy'd not ever thought on some of the things Clancy got up to with him. That man's mouth had to be made by the devil, not in God's image at all.

Thoughts like that were gonna keep him in bed, and he'd miss his chance to get a return letter on tomorrow's trip back down the mountain, so Roy got up, adjusting his cock in his trousers, and got out his carefully stored cache of paper and stubby pencils, purchased at great cost from Miss Lee.

Then, tongue between his teeth, he sat to write Clancy a short note.

*Clancy,*

*I will come this weekend. Please don't have no parties. Miss you.*

*Yours,*

*Roy*

For he was just as much Clancy's as the other way around, wasn't he? He might be a damned fool for it, but there it was. Right now there wasn't anything in the world he wanted to be more.

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Clancy had Lin clean the house once more, including putting clean sheets on the bed, and then had the lad leave a meal on the stove, two tin plates covered with cloths. With a kiss and a smile and a pat on Lin's bottom then, Clancy sent his manservant off to spend time with his doting mother, and took himself off to the theatre for the show he had to perform.

There was a very good chance that Roy would not be there until late Saturday, but once before Roy had come down at night, claiming it easier to avoid the possibility of avalanche that way, as the sun was not beating down on the snow, melting it in spots. The moon tonight shone bright and full, so Clancy had high hopes that he might find Roy in his bed when he returned home.

The play went well. He did a fine Orsino if he did say so himself, even if his origins were as far removed from a Duke's as any could be, despite his affected "Sir". No Irish gutter rat had anything in common with a real peer of the realm. The audience seemed to accept it, though, so Clancy returned home in the wee hours with a smile on his face and a spring in his step.

His smile widened as he stepped through the door to find Roy Marsh in his kitchen, warming up buckets of water. Really, when had he become so ridiculously fond of such a big, ungainly, unruly, unattractive man?

Not that he found Roy unattractive anymore. Indeed, he'd grown genuinely fond of that pugnacious, crooked face and those odd yellow eyes.

"You came!" Clancy exclaimed, throwing himself at Roy in an utterly undignified way.

Roy caught him up, nearly lifting him off the floor to give him a kiss that tasted of peppermint liquor. "I did. I worked the night through last night so the shift boss'd let me go early. Had to pay him off to get it, too."

"Pay him? Really! The cheek," Clancy said, putting on a case of affronted dignity. "I am glad to see you, Roy. Will you stay for the show tomorrow night?"

"I will." Those big hands cupped his buttocks, pulling him up for another kiss, then another. "I'm sorry I didn't have time to shave and all."

"Well, then I shall simply have to shave and bathe you."

Roy gave him a disbelieving look, as though he could not believe Clancy would do such a thing. He'd really not thought to actually do it, but that look stung him into action, and he pulled away, smacking at Roy's hands.

"Disrobe, sir."

He got another look, but Roy did as he asked, baring that heavy, pale body for him. The muscles that hard labor put on a man shifted and bunched, creating a fascinating play in the firelight. Clancy all but drooled. His fingers twitched, and to make use of them Clancy dipped them into the buckets on the stove.

"Oh! Perfect." Giving Roy a wry grin, Clancy heaved one bucket up. "It's unfair to ask for help, hmm?"

Roy's booming laugh never failed to have him laughing right along, and together they filled the tub. When Roy would have reached for him, though, Clancy pulled away, going to find his new straight razor and strop, the very ones Roy had given him. He dipped a towel in the hot water and put it on Roy's face to soften the whiskers, having done this for many a lover before.

"Mmmm," Roy mumbled. "Feels good."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it? Lin did it for me just this morning. I can only hope my hand is as steady as his."

One yellow eye peeked out from under the towel in a baleful glare. "You cut my throat and I'll be pretty unhappy," Roy said.

"Oh no, love. I have plans for you tonight." While the towel worked its magic, Clancy stirred up some shave soap, getting it good and foamy. Then he peeled away the towel and lathered up Roy's cheeks and chin. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"I am," Roy replied, watching him closely.

It became a bit unnerving, that stare, as Clancy was accustomed to his subjects closing their eyes when he shaved them. Unnerving and erotic. The first stroke had Roy gasping, though not because Clancy cut him, and the tiny sound made Clancy's cock rise in his trousers, pressing

against the button placket. He ignored it, pushing his tongue between his teeth to pull the razor once more across Roy's skin, every motion clear and deliberate.

Truly, time took on an odd unreality, passing very slowly as he scraped the whiskers off Roy's face, and yet it did not matter, for each moment seemed somehow precious. Ridiculous, but true. When Roy's face finally came clean and Clancy had rinsed it off, he bent to take a kiss, and found himself splashing into the tub fully dressed, Roy kissing him like a starving man.

He could understand it. The experience had fired his blood as well, and Clancy wrapped his arms about Roy's neck and held on, riding out the undulations of that big body beneath him. Roy's cock prodded at him, hard and hot as a brand, and Clancy worked at his own trousers, trying to free his prick so he might rub them together.

"Uhn," Roy said, and pushed his hands aside. The sound of cloth ripping seemed unreasonable, wet as his clothes were, but soon enough he was free of all of them, the remains nothing more than a sodden lump on the floor, and Roy's hands were on his skin.

Clancy moaned, the sound harsh and wanton to his own ears, and he bucked against Roy, the feeling more than he could bear. And yet bear it he did, the water sloshing about them, Roy's thighs hard as stone under him. His body seemed intent on pouring out every bit of pleasure inside it, and his head fell back as his hips began to snap. Steam rose around them and Clancy thought it was not so much because of the hot water as it was the warmth of their skin.

Finally Roy got one big paw wrapped about both their pricks and started to pull, making Clancy's eyes roll in his head as he rode the feeling. Good. So good. All he needed was...there. Oh, God. The tip of Roy's thumb pressed against his slit and Clancy shot, his seed spattering Roy's chest and belly as his cry rang out in the room.

Roy arrived right on his heels, a grunt sounding as Roy convulsed, muscles twitching and jumping under Clancy's suddenly clumsy touch, cock throbbing as it spent itself. There was something beautiful about Roy when he came; something transcendent that made him beautiful.

They sat until the water began to cool, both of them panting. Then Clancy pushed against Roy's chest. "There's another bucket to rinse with?"

"You know I always warm enough," Roy said with a nod. "Now up we go."

His feet dangled, the cold air sweeping over them as Roy stood, holding him. Clancy held on as the world shifted and Roy sluiced them with warm water and then dried them off, hauling him to bed.

"What are we gonna do now?" Roy asked, grinning like a fool and propping up on one elbow. "Do I get more reward for getting here without setting off an avalanche?"

"Oh, my yes," Clancy replied, smiling back. "I think maybe you deserve my mouth."

Roy's eyes went deep gold, glittering at him like those of a wild animal. "I could handle that, honey. I surely could."

"Then," he said, sliding down Roy's body. "Let me oblige."

They had much to talk about later in the weekend. Clancy thought he might start making it up to Roy now.

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They lazed in bed all of the night and most of the next day. Roy felt like some kind of pasha or somthin', just like he'd read about in one of Clancy's plays. Lin had come home and fed them breakfast, eggs and rashers of bacon and some homemade biscuits, and Roy reckoned that a meal fit for a king, even if saying it made Clancy laugh at him.

He went to Clancy's play Saturday night. The comedy sat very differently than the other had, the lighter theme really showing off Clancy's charm and wit, making Roy laugh and laugh. Even when he didn't quite get the gist of what they were sayin' in all that fancy language Roy could tell when he was supposed to laugh, and all that prancin' and posturing and wait I'm not a boy-ing had his belly hurting.

The footlights showed Clancy to his best advantage, and Roy could see why this was where the man belonged. If he felt a little pang because he knew he'd not ever fit in there, well, so be it.

It made him proud as punch when Clancy came out after the show and greeted him like he was someone special, like a real patron of the arts, even introducing him to the manager of the troupe.

"This is Roy Marsh," Clancy said. "As you can see I have not soured his love of the theater. In fact, he has forgiven me for the churlishness that caused his initial bad review, have you not, Roy?"

"I have," he agreed, smiling at the manager, who looked at him rather quizzically. Hell, he couldn't blame the man. Roy wasn't the average theater goer.

"Well, that's good," the man said. "I hope you'll continue to come see us even when Clancy has gone."

Gone. He looked at Clancy, who steadfastly refused to meet his eyes. "Well, I sure hope he stays on a bit longer, but I promise to come if the trail's open."

"We shall be glad to have you." The man shook his hand, smiling, and left them.

Roy stared at Clancy.

"Well," Clancy said brightly. "I should go and get this paint off. Shall I meet you back at the house?" Amazing, how those green eyes would light on anything but him.

"Sure. Sure. I'll see you there."

Trudging back to Clancy's little house made Roy feel cold and stiff. A heavy ball of dread lodged in his belly, feeling slimy and frozen. Was this the news? Was this what he wasn't supposed to hear from anyone but Clancy?

The house seemed dark and cold, even though Lin met him at the door with a plate of little pie crusts twirled up and covered in cinnamon and brown sugar, just like his momma used to make out of trim. Stickies, she'd called them.

"Mr. Roy? You look sad. Is something wrong?"

Lin was a sweetheart, he really was, all big eyes and concern. Roy patted him roughly on the shoulder. "Not a think, Lin. Those smell good. Did I ever tell you my momma made them?"

"Yes. This is why I try. You like?"

"I do." Roy licked his fingers before he even thought of it, reaching for another. "Lin, do you know when Mr. Clancy is leaving town?"

Those dark eyes went sad, too. "I think as soon as the snows melt enough, Mr. Roy. Is this why you are sad?"

"Yeah, Lin. Yeah, I'd say that's what made me sad." Sad and angry and like a bear with a sore paw. Roy wanted to roar.

"You still come play draughts with me?" Lin asked, waving the tray under his nose.

"Course I will, Lin." Roy summoned a smile. "Course I will."

When all the stickies had disappeared Lin went back to the kitchen, leaving Roy alone with his thoughts. The house seemed cold and empty, even with the fire Lin had built up. The creaking floorboards sang a tune as Roy paced. Waiting.

"Well," Clancy said when he finally came through the door. "Something smells good."

Roy gave the man a look. "Lin made stickies."

"What would that be?"

"Some pie crusts with butter'n all on 'em."

That aquiline nose wrinkled right up. "Oh, I see. Well, I hope you enjoyed them."

"I suppose. When was you gonna tell me, Clancy?"

Clancy sighed, shoulders slumping a bit. "Tonight, Roy. I was going to tell you tonight. I had been thinking about it, but I had not truly made a decision until recently."

"And now you're leavin'." It shouldn't surprise him. No, sir, he shoulda known. It still hit him like a fist to the gut.

"Not today, no. But soon. Yes. I..." Clancy held out a hand to him. "I'm sorry, Roy. But I never gave you the slightest indication that this was anything close to a permanent situation for me."

"Sure. Sure, I know that. I just. I had a powerful hope I'd have you a while longer." Hell, he'd been thinking about getting a job down at the mill in town just so he could be closer, so he could see Clancy more often. Guess he didn't have to do that now.

"I wanted to be the one to tell you, Roy. I am sorry."

They stood not three feet apart, but he might as well have been up at the mine for all the closer Roy felt. He crossed his arms and shrugged again.

"Sure. So what're you gonna do with Lin?"

"One of the actresses has agreed to take him on. She'll be far better to him than I, I daresay."

"No doubt."

Well. Maybe he ought to leave. The silence stretched so thin he figured it might just shatter. Roy shifted from foot to foot, taking in a deep breath to brace himself to say so long.

Clancy stopped him by pressing two fingers to his lips. "Stay."

He hesitated, but when Clancy pressed right up against him and near crawled up his body to kiss him, Roy gave in. This might be his last chance.

Roy kissed Clancy hard, plunging into that sweet, lying mouth with his tongue, tasting the heat and need there for him. Too bad Clancy just didn't need him enough. That sort of thinking was gonna deflate things, though, so Roy pushed it aside. Damn it. He could worry later.

They moved as one, both of them driven to the bedroom where they tumbled down to the bed, mouths and hands moving. This was no smooth, calculated loving. This was fast and desperate and Roy groaned as Clancy pushed him down and pulled at his clothes, yanking until buttons plinked against the floor.

"Love," Roy said, meaning it with every bit of him, all the way to his curled toes. "Oh, love."

Clancy didn't say nothin' back, just looked down at him as clothes came off, those green eyes blazing as Clancy stripped for him. The man still glowed like a lamp in a mine, his skin so pale and fine that sometimes Roy feared touching it.

Not tonight, though. Tonight he touched hard enough to leave bruises.

To leave marks.

They might not stay for long, but for at least a while Clancy would see them and be reminded of how Roy felt. Of how much Roy needed him.

Once Clancy had shed his clothes, Roy rolled them so he was on top, intent on doing some of the things to Clancy that the man had done to him, starting by using his mouth. He licked along



Clancy's throat, tongue scraping over the pulse point, feeling Clancy's heart beat for him. Then he moved on, lips and teeth pushing at Clancy's chest, testing the muscles there.

Clancy groaned for him, hands coming up to touch his hair, fingers digging in and holding on. Looked like he was doing all right so far, didn't it? Smiling a little, Roy moved even lower, nuzzling Clancy's flat belly, letting his tongue work down along the little trail of hair, seeing now why Clancy liked to do this. The tastes and scent were addictive.

He hesitated a moment when he reached Clancy's cock. It was one thing to hold it. Hell, he'd even let inside his most secret place. But somehow putting it in his mouth seemed...too raw. Almost too much. Still, Clancy had done it for him. Roy took a deep breath and closed his eyes before licking at the tip, moving the foreskin back and forth with his tongue.

"Roy!" Clancy went tight and still under him, and he could feel the tension in Clancy's grip. He half expected Clancy to go crazy and start humping, but there was more self control there than he gave credit for, and Clancy simply moaned and maybe thrashed a little.

Finally Roy got the courage up to pull Clancy all the way in, trying to shield his teeth with his lips so he didn't hurt. He felt clumsy as all get out, but they got a rhythm going, Clancy pushing in, Roy pulling off. If he messed up he didn't think Clancy noticed. Clancy's skin held a rosy sheen and his breathing came fast and hot, salty drops slid from his prick faster than Roy could clean them off.

It was a damned heady thing.

Finally Clancy couldn't take no more, though, and the man shouted, pulling at Roy's shoulders as he spent, his seed falling on Roy's tongue, rich and earthy.

It surprised Roy, made him pull back so he wouldn't choke, and he stared at Clancy while he licked his lips. "Was that good?"

"Good? Oh, yes." Clancy pulled him up for a kiss, tongue searching his mouth.

Roy wiggled at the thought that he was sharing Clancy's come with him. When they broke for air, he smiled. "Well, I have a powerful need, now, Clancy."

"Do you, now?" Clancy rolled them and put him on the bottom. "Shall I ride you?"

"No." They were gonna get dizzy, they kept rolling around like that, but Roy wanted to do the doing, so he put Clancy on his back. "I want to do this my way."

Green eyes going wide, Clancy nodded, biting his lip in the most sensual damned way. "Very well. The oil is just there..."

Roy couldn't wait long. He gave Clancy the consideration of two quick fingers, pushing them in and out and making Clancy grunt before pulling away and slicking up his cock. Then he pushed at Clancy's hole, needing to be inside the man one last time, because Lord knew he'd not come back down the mountain until after Clancy left. He couldn't take that, no sir.

He could hardly bear it now. The tight, hot clasp of Clancy's body worked him, squeezed him. Roy groaned and started thrusting deep and heavy, his movement rocking Clancy, making them both shudder. They didn't say anything, didn't talk love words or nothin', they just rutted, Roy moving faster and faster, his hips slapping Clancy's ass.

When he came it was with a sob, everything in him pouring out, his gaze holding those amazing eyes, his face screwed up and tight with pleasure. Roy figured the whole street heard him when he shouted.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, when it was darkest out, Clancy stroked his hair and asked him, "Come with me, Roy."

He figured it was as close to a declaration as he was ever gonna get, and it warmed him, even as he knew Clancy didn't really mean it. He turned his head and kissed the corner of Clancy's mouth. "Sleep, honey."

"But Roy..."

"Hush. We'll talk on it later. You sleep now."

When Clancy's breathing had taken on that slow, even rhythm again, Roy kissed the man one more time and slid out of his bed, intent on being gone before Clancy woke to save them both the awkwardness of it. He couldn't help but look back at the fine sleeping form when he reached the door, though, and smile.

"I love you," he said, so quiet even he could hardly hear. "Edward."

## Chapter 7

"But why you go now?" Lin asked as Clancy stuffed more clothing in a valise. "Mr. Roy not ready to go with you."

"Mr. Roy is no longer invited," Clancy snarled, staring at the thin linen shirt he had just torn. "I asked him to go with me and he snuck out like a thief in the night."

The spring that was well upon them, the "runoff" as the locals called the veritable flood as the snow melted at its peak. Everything felt soggy and gray and Clancy had had quite enough, thank you. He wanted civilization. And be damned to Roy Marsh.

The coward.

Lin seemed intent upon taking Roy's side. "Is harder for him to find work than you," Lin said, taking the shirt and going to his little sewing box. The lad was determined to remain helpful until the last moment.

"Pshaw. An able-bodied man like him? He simply does not want me."

It was completely unreasonable of him, he knew, to expect Roy to go with him. He had not professed his love, nor would he, for such was not his way. Edward Clancy loved one man. Edward Clancy. It left little room for another. Still, to know that Roy would rather creep away like a beaten dog than tell him a proper goodbye rankled.

The look Lin gave him spoke volumes of disbelief. The impertinent pup. "Mr. Roy want you like no man ever has," Lin said, nodding firmly as if to say that was that.

"Bull feathers." Saying an indelicate thing made him feel better, so Clancy chose another. "Bloody rubbish. You should keep that shirt. It looks far better on you."

He had a fond moment remembering how Lin looked in only his shirt, arse hanging out in back, bits hanging out in front. Yes, lovely.

Lin smiled at him, a sideways blushing sort of look. "I would come with you..."

"And have your mother hunt me to the ends of the earth and beat me to death with her rice pan? I think not." Lin's mother and her heavy, beaten copper pot were most intimidating.

"Then go up mountain and get Roy."

"Nonsense. I will not run after the man." Clancy sat on the bed ticking, hand on the post. "Really, what good would it do? We're not at all suited."

"No. He love you. You love you. Only thing you have in common."

Clancy glared. "That is quite enough out of you. Don't you have a new job to attend?"

"Tomorrow."

"Well, I think you should go now." He bounced up again and began filling his trunk now. A hard knocking on the door had his heart beating loudly for a moment when it came, Clancy hoping for a wild instant that Roy had come for him. Then he heard the theater manager's voice.

"Open up, Clancy. I have your last bit of pay."

Sighing, Clancy went and opened the door, as clearly Lin had no intention of doing so. He held out his hand for his bills. "Why thank you for delivering it. I would have come by."

"I know. I simply did not wish to have you upset my new Orsino."

"Ah. You have replaced me already." That had not taken long. It had been less than a fortnight since Clancy had given his notice.

"I have. He came in on the train just today." Hector looked at him, a shrewd light in those weasely eyes. "It's William Winters."

"Ah." William was a former lover, a fine player, and the most two-faced and weepily emotional man Clancy had ever met. "Well, I daresay he will treat the public better than I."

Hector glanced at Lin and back again. "Oh, I don't know. You've been very friendly with some of the locals."

Lips pressed hard together, Clancy took the money Hector handed over and waved to the door. "Thank you. Good bye, Hector."

There. His replacement had arrived. His job was well and truly gone, so he could not change his mind.

Clancy could only wonder if Big Roy Marsh would sit in the audience of the next performance and admire William Winters as much as he had Edward Clancy.

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There was a certain serenity to swinging a hammer. Oh, Roy knew most people wouldn't think so, standing in the dark and pounding away as he was. Roy knew better. He knew there was peace in hard physical work. It got him through the day and it got him through the nights, too.

Roy worked so hard he fell into bed at night without thinking. If he dreamed he tried not to remember it, no sir, no thank you. Damn that Edward Clancy anyway.

Though really, Roy wished the man happy, he thought as he swung his hammer over and over, the feeling of it ringing right up his arms and into his shoulders. His back had started to ache, telling him he was near two third through his shift, and he wasn't near tired enough for tonight.

He was working with Kit again, and thank goodness, because his mind wasn't on his work, and anyone else would have smashed fingers by now. Kit, though, he could move that boy, always leaving Roy with sore arms if he got too careless. No way did that boy do what a lot of others did

to stop him swinging, and just put their hand over the end of the pin. No, Kit pulled it right out from under him.

This time it wasn't Kit who warned him about the rumble. This time it came big enough that Roy felt it under his feet, the ground shaking him like he had the ague. Roy stopped swinging and waited, his breathing harsh as the tiny candle stub they had to work by went out.

"Roy?" Kit hollered over the ringing that still filled his ears. The question was plain.

"Yeah, Kit. We should move up to the next level for a bit."

He could hear the kid scrabbling in the dark, headed the right way but having real trouble, and Roy reached out to grab him, holding on as Kit yelped and struggled a moment.

"Hold up, Kit. I have some matches here somewheres."

"Bless you, Roy. You're a good man."

Kit was always saying how good he was. He guessed he had the kid buffaloed. "There ya go," Roy said as he lit the candle and handed it to Kit. You keep it going, now, 'cause I ain't got but one more match."

"Yessir."

They worked their way up the shaft ladder toward the next level, both of them breathing hard but otherwise hushed as the earth protested beneath them like an old man with a bellyache. The ominous creak of weakened timber sounded, seemingly right next to his ear, and Roy started pushing at Kit's backside, the situation so dire he didn't take even a moment to enjoy it.

"Go, Kit," Roy shouted as rock the size of his own fists started to rain down on them. "Go!"

They made it to the next level up and Roy thought they might have a chance to join the small trickle of miners heading for the main shaft. For one moment there was complete silence but for the sound of running feet.

Then came a crack like the worst thunder Roy had ever heard, and the world came crashing down on them, blocking out everything but crashing rock and pain.

\*\*\*

Clancy decided to spend one last night in town before he left. 'Twas his own fault, really, for he dawdled just long enough to miss the train. Really, he was disgusted with himself. Why on earth had he thought Roy Marsh might come looking, begging Clancy to take him along?

He went to the hotel for that last night. His little house was not rented yet, but without Lin and with most of his belongings either sold or packed away, the place seemed empty and cold. The hotel would undoubtedly serve him better.

When he tried to secure a room, however, he was informed they were full up.

"Mostly folks from your company, Sir Edward," the fellow behind the counter said. "Either going out, like you, or coming in. Some high mucky mucks from the Tomboy here, too."

The initial urge to yell and stomp passed rather more quickly than he might have imagined. Goodness, perhaps Roy's good natured politeness had rubbed off on him.

"Indeed," he said. "Well, perhaps you might let one of my colleagues know I need a space for the night?"

"Only one not doubled up is a Mister William Winters."

Clancy sighed. He supposed that figured. "Could you send him a message?"

The poor fellow looked so harried. "I'm sorry, Sir. We ain't got no one right now. He's in Room 3A."

"Thank you. You are most kind." He pulled a quarter from his pocket and slid it across the desk. "I do appreciate it."

The poor man's eyes went wide. "Thank you, Sir!"

Waving a gloved hand, Clancy went up the stairs, leaving his trunk at the desk with the bellman assuring him it would be safe as his sister's virginity. Such colorful language they had in Hell. Someday he would write a play about it.

The door opened only moments after his knock, his old lover standing and staring at him with wide brown eyes.

"Clancy. As I love and breathe. I thought you had left town."

"I would have, but I missed the train. You know me and my sloth," he said lightly, stepping past Will into the room.

"I do indeed. What do you want, Edward?"

"A place to sleep for the night, not to put too fine a point on it."

Will looked good, his thick black hair combed back from his high forehead, his dark eyes shining with good health. His sensual mouth had always tantalized, and it did not fail to do so now. Clancy moved close, putting his hand on Will's hip.

"I shall make it worth your while, Will."

"I suppose you would. Very well, Edward. You may stay. Shall we have supper?"

"I would like that." Were he completely honest the thought of staying the night with Will made him uneasy, but given the choice between that and going back to his house, where even the ticking had been stripped off the bed, he would take the hotel room.

They dined well, on steaks and roasted root vegetables and a fine cake of lemon and sugar. Will was, as always, a charming companion with a ready smile, and Clancy quite found himself forgetting his situation until much later in the evening, when Will got up from where he leaned on the bed and began to disrobe.

When he sat and did nothing, Will raised a perfectly tended eyebrow. "Come, Edward," he said. "Surely you have not gone shy on me. You never were before."

The leer that accompanied those words near turned his stomach, but Clancy nodded and rose, stripping off his jacket and blouse. How many men had he awarded that same smile? Oh, he knew he was being melodramatic, but still, he wallowed in it a bit as he dropped his trousers.

"Mmm. You always were a fine on, Edward. Come to bed."

He went. Climbing into the soft bed, Clancy admired Will's trim form and pale skin, but found himself longing for a heavier body with a working man's muscles. Really, he thought, disgusted with himself. When had Roy' Marsh's body become the epitome of a man in his eyes?

If he closed his eyes he could lose himself. Will's kisses had a smoothness to them that Roy's never had, and those soft hands never pressed too hard or played too rough. A consummate lover, Will knew just how to please him, hands and mouth working in tandem, and Clancy thought how empty it seemed, and how six short months ago it would have been more than enough for him.

Finally he wanted it over, and Clancy rolled Will to his back. Kissing and licking his way down past the pink nipples and flat belly, Clancy fed Will's cock into his mouth, tongue running down the underside. He remembered how much Will liked that, and he was right.

Will moaned for him like the most practice whore, writing on the crisp hotel sheets, hands digging into his back and shoulders.

Clancy never let up, sealing his lips around Will and sucking hard, his own hands spreading Will's legs even more so he could touch the furred balls, rolling them along one palm. Greedy bastard that Will was, it seemed to take forever, but finally the man shouted for him, spending hard between Clancy's lips, his seed hot and bitter, but not unpleasant.

Not to be outdone, Will pulled Clancy up and grabbed his bobbing prick in one hand, tugging at it roughly until Clancy came against their thighs, only a soft sigh escaping him as his body found release.

They lay together for awhile, Will stroking his back, and Clancy sighed, patting Will's chest.

"I fear I lacked my usually fire," Clancy said.

"You did. T'was most pleasant, though. Do you know that Hector never told me you were in town? I knew, because of the playbills. But he never said a word."

"He did not wish for me to upset you, Will. He knows how you get."

Will gave him a vicious pinch on the bum. "I'm not as bad as I was, Edward. You might stay and see."

The thought of staying on now that he had said his goodbyes to Roy Marsh made Clancy feel oddly tight in his chest, a lump of lead settling at the pit of his belly. "I think not, Will, but thank you."

"Well, if you have to leave I am glad you stopped to see me."

Clancy thought about that. It had been pleasant, even if the end of their evening left him feeling rather like the cheap strumpet he was. Still, it was nice to see that not only he, but Will, could mend their ways somewhat as they aged.

"It was good to see you, too, Will." And it was. But that would not keep him from sneaking out in the morning like a thief, much as Roy Marsh had done to him not long ago.

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Clancy his trunk at his feet and his beaver hat on his head as he stood at the train station, resolutely ignoring his cold feet. Spring in Colorado was still quite cold, especially in the high reaches, as it were, and he was ready to be gone. So ready, in fact, that he determined he would not lollygag and miss the train this day. No indeed. In fact, he was quite early. The little window had not even opened yet, and most of town was not yet astir.

Which made the sight of some very agitated fellows running to the train station in nothing but trousers and boots and union suits even more disturbing than it might have been.

One of the men ran right past him, a huge ring of keys jangling as he opened the door to the office just off the platform. The other fellow Clancy managed to catch by the arm.

"Your pardon, sir. Is there a fire?"

"No!" The man shook him off roughly, smoothing his hair, which stood up in wispy tufts. "There's been a cave-in up at the mine. I have to send a telegram to the owner who is to Denver this week. Pardon me."

"A cave-in? When?" His heart in his throat, Clancy took the man's arm again, determined to get an answer.

"Late yesterday. There's at least twenty men trapped. Now if you \*please\*."

Twenty men. Surely Roy would not be in that number. Roy was too strong, too savvy in the ways of what he called "that old bitch of a mine."

Surely Roy had escaped to safety.

Heart pounding, Clancy took up his trunk and headed back to the hotel. Yes, surely Roy had gotten out.



But there was no way he could leave Telluride until he knew for sure.

## Chapter 8

When Roy woke up he figured he wasn't dead. If he was dead he'd be seeing light, wouldn't he? It'd be either the glow of Hellfire or the bright, pure light of Heaven, not the suffocating, dust filled darkness of a mine shaft.

Years of working without being able to see his hand in front of his face kept him from panicking, kept him from moving until he could figure out his situation. That it was pretty dire was a given. How dire was a matter of degree he'd have to think on.

Weighted down by something immense, his legs refused to move. The pressure and pain tore at him pretty good, but Roy took that as a fine thing, because he'd seen men with broke necks and backs who couldn't feel nothin', and that wasn't him. His right arm held a heavy weight, too, but it weren't rock. This one felt pliable, and a little cold, but definitely human.

"Kit? Kit, honey. Wake up."

The kid stirred, and Roy breathed a sigh of relief. Not dead then. Thank God.

"Kit, can you move?"

"I...I dunno, Roy. It's dark."

"I know, Kit. I still got one match, if I didn't lose it, but I can't get to that pocket with you all up on me."

"Oh." Kit sniffled a little, but dutifully rolled off his arm with an ease that relieved him no end. The boy wasn't trapped at all. Thank God. One hand stayed on Roy's arm, though, clutching his sleeve. Poor Kit.

"Now grab something else, Kit, because I need that arm still."

"Right. Sorry." The air moved a little as Kit shifted, both hands falling on his shoulders as Kit lifted his upper body a little and put his head on the skinniest pair of knees Roy had ever occasioned to feel.

His lower body screamed in pain as everything shifted, but Roy didn't figure it did no good to say nothin' to Kit, who was just trying to help. The match had broken in two. Roy sighed.

"Did you drop the candle?" he asked Kit.

Kit sniffled harder. "I did. I'm sorry."

"Stop that. You got any dry cloth on you?" Roy was soaked with sweat, and the ever present damp in a gold mine had seeped into his clothes.

"Part of my shirt, mebbe," Kit replied, and the sound of cloth ripping made him jump.

"Good. Now this one's gonna take grit, son. I need you to feel around and find a piece of timber."

"I can do that if it'll get us some light."

Bless Kit's heart. The kid eased him back down on the floor and Roy whimpered at the twisting in his legs. God, that hurt. He didn't know how long their make shift torch could go without oil or something, but it might last long enough to see what they were up against. See if any of the others had made it.

"Here. I got some, and it's kinda splintery, but it's dry."

"Good boy. Now wrap that shirt piece around it and I'll light the match. We got to be careful to make sure it catches, you got it?"

"Yessir."

Soon enough they had a sullen little torch going, one that Kit hovered over protectively. It gave Roy a chance to look around, and he grimaced. Fallen timber and rock lay everywhere, including on his lower left leg and on his right leg all the way to the thigh. A pair of boots protruded from the worst of the fall, the wear on the right sole telling him it was old Gimp MaGee. God rest his soul.

"That's. Is that?" Kit's voice quavered.

"It is. Say a prayer for his soul, Kit. You see anyone else?"

A groan answered, and Kit handed him the little torch and scrambled off. Roy could only twist so much to try and see, but before he knew it, Kit was back, one of Seamus Demar's arms slung over his shoulder.

"Look, Roy!"

"I see. Howdy, Seamus." The incongruity of such a polite greeting under such odd circumstances had him all but laughing, and Kit's worried brown eyes looking upside down into his didn't help. "If you two get to feeling better, could you maybe dig my legs out?"

"Oh! Oh, God, Sorry." Kit dropped Seamus like a hot rock, making the other man grunt.

Seamus moved a lot slower, his face gray in the flickering light, but sure enough he moved to help. He kept Kit from digging like a puppy, warning that moving just the wrong rock might bury them all alive, let alone Roy, and Roy was grateful.

Finally they had his left leg mostly free, both Kit and Seamus panting as the air got thicker with dust, and Roy called a halt.

"Take a break, boys. We need to clear the air a little, and someone needs to get more fuel for our little torch."

"But, Roy."

"No buts, Kit. You let that torch go out and we'll be in a much bigger world of hurt." He had to keep Kit busy. Seamus needed to rest, and the man slumped down a few feet away, nodding at Roy before closing his eyes and immediately dropping off.

Roy hated to admit it, but it was getting hard to breathe even without the dust and the little flame Kit kept finding things to feed was burning less orange and more blue...

They were running out of time.

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"What do you mean, you're not running up this week?" Clancy snarled at the mule train man, Farris Mayhew. I need to go up to the mine immediately."

"I done loaned them all of my mules but one yesterday," Farris said, a long stream of tobacco juice hitting the muddy ground between Clancy's feet as Farris spat.

"Whatever for?"

"They help clear the rock."

"Oh." God, nearly a day had passed since he'd heard about the cave-in. Clancy had no way of knowing if Roy was all right, or if he had even been in the mine, and it was making him crazed. "How else might I get up there?"

"You could hire a mule at the livery. Or you could get someone to guide you up. You'll still need snowshoes that far up, though."

"I see. Thank you."

Clancy went to see John at the livery.

"Sure, I got one. Swaybacked as all Hell, but you can rent her for oh, ten cents a day. What you going up to the mine for, anyway?" John eyed him with an amused look. "You lookin' for a job?"

"No." Clancy held his temper by only the shortest thread. "I am looking for news of a friend that might have been in the cave in."

John sobered. "If you mean Big Roy Marsh you need not oughta bother. He was in the section that caved. He's a goner."

Staggering nausea welled in his belly, and Clancy worried that he might go to his knees with the pain of it. Instead he drew himself up and said haughtily, "Not that it is any of your concern, but yes, it is Roy I seek. And I refuse to believe he is dead."

"Suit yerself. I ain't saying it ain't a damned shame, because Roy sure enough is worth two of you."

"He is indeed. I'll take the mule, thank you."

And so Clancy found himself once more on the back of a mule, wending his way up the mountain to Roy's mine. At one point he almost turned back, as the melting snow started a small landslide, sweeping half the trail away behind him, it seemed. Instead he kept going, needing to know about Roy, his stomach churning as his mind raced through all of the possibilities.

Riding a mule on a steep Alpine trail gave a man far too much time to think.

The mining camp buzzed with activity. Men and mules came in and out of the main shaft, the ingoing ones with empty carts, the ones coming out bearing loads of rock and timber. Fear surged in him, sending his heart into his throat. This cave in looked to be far worse than any Roy had spoken of ere now.

"Excuse me," Clancy said to a passing miner. "Could you..."

"Outta my way, Mister! I gotta get back in there."

"But I..." The man nearly bowled him over, and Clancy straightened his hat and coat with a snap, determined to find someone who would talk. He would simply have to go to the mine office.

"I beg your pardon," he said to the well dressed gentleman just inside the office door. The man appeared as incongruous as he himself did in the rough surroundings.

"What?" the fellow barked, looking up from a map pinned to the wall.

"I have come to enquire about one of the miners. He's a dear friend of mine."

The fellow looked him up and down with icy blue eyes. "Is he now? A real patron of the arts, is he, \*Sir\* Clancy?"

Damnation. Obviously this man was not a patron of the arts at all. "He is. And a fine one at that. His name is Roy Marsh."

"Ah ha." Now the man had an ugly twist to his mouth. "I heard Roy had a fancy man in town. Pity. He was a good man."

Spots began to swim before his eyes as the world spun a bit. "Was?"

"Well, he was in the lower shaft during the collapse, so I would assume so, yes. Generally after twenty four hours...I'm sorry. You seem genuinely distraught."

"I...I am. I'm sorry. I shall waste no more of your time."

"Sit." The man pointed to a chair. "Henry Cage, by the way. I own a heavy share in the mine. I'll check with the shift boss, see if anyone's heard or seen anything of Roy."

Clancy sat. He didn't know what he would do if Roy were dead. Leaving the man, knowing he would be whole and happy again sometime very soon, was one thing.

Knowing that Roy did not go on might just shatter him.

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His right leg was almost free when Roy heard it. Another ominous creak. He coulda just bellared like a mommaless calf. Goddamn it, they couldn't take another cave in and live.

"Come on, boys. Get me loose so I can help dig us out of here. She's gonna go."

Kit and Seamus dug frantically, and by this time Roy could sit up and help, pushing the rock aside as they lifted it off. In their hurry they almost put out their torch, but Kit saved it, yelping as it guttered, feeding it with a couple wood pieces. When Roy finally saw his leg it kinda turned his stomach. The bones and muscles didn't look crushed, but there was some nasty cuts and scrapes and a piece of timber had gone clean through right next to his shin.

He caught Seamus' hand just as the man would have pulled it out.

Serious eyes met his. "That looks bad, Roy."

"It does. And if you pull it out now I'll bleed right on out. Leave in and it'll keep plugging it up. Here. Just wrap it in my shirt."

They got him wrapped up, which made him sweat and shake and have to put his head back down a minute. Then Roy just gritted his teeth and made himself get to his feet so he could assess the situation.

"Well," he finally said. "The main shaft is that way. We gotta start digging, but we'll have to shore up as we go. Kit, you start gathering stuff we can use as props, and you keep that Goddamned torch going. You got it?"

Kit nodded, his face a mask of blood and sweat and grime. "Yessir."

Roy glanced over at Seamus. "You and me, we dig."

They dug. It seemed like they dug for hours, pulling away pounds and pounds of earth and rock and timber. Water trickled in from somewhere, like it always did, making them shiver in the steady cold temperature when they stopped working for a break. Then they'd get back to working and sweat like lathered horses.

Roy had just about given them up for dead, as the torch would barely flicker and he could hardly suck in air anymore. That was when they broke through.

Just a tiny bit, mind, but there was a hole at the top of the pile, and damned if Roy didn't feel fresher air on his face.

"Seamus!" he croaked. "Git yer ass up here."

Seamus lifted his head off the floor, where he'd fallen. "Huh?"

"Come on, man. Air." Stifling his groan of pain, Roy bent and lifted Seamus up, hauling him over to take some deep breaths. It seemed to revive the man, and Roy shook him a little. "Get Kit."

"Sure. Sure, Roy." Staggering, looking for all the world like a drunk, Seamus went and dragged Kit over, the poor kid pretty much unconscious. Together they lifted him, and soon enough Kit had sputtered back to life.

"S'dark," Kit murmured.

"The torch is almost out. Let's get it over here and feed it." With the new light from the torch burning in the added air, Roy took a peek through their tiny hole. "Well, boys, the shaft looks clear but I can see maybe three feet."

"It's better'n here," Seamus said. "Let's get back to work."

Roy couldn't ask for no one better to be trapped with. Seamus worked like a dog, and Kit helped as much as he could. Roy couldn't help but spare a moment to wonder what Sir Edward Clancy would do if trapped in a mine shaft. To his credit, he'd probably get out. That man was a survivor, through and through.

They worked until all of them fell over from exhaustion, and still they didn't have enough room for even Kit to wiggle through the hole and go get help. At least, Roy thought while he drifted off to sleep, they could breathe. As long as there was air, they had a chance.

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"I assure you, I can work just as hard as any man," Clancy argued, pacing the shift boss of the mine as the man strode toward the entry of the main shaft. "Please. I am not asking for money. I simply wish to help."

The other man appeared skeptical. Clancy could hardly blame the fellow. He looked as out of place in his fine suit and tie as the mine workers would have looked on stage. Still, Clancy felt compelled to help.

"Why?" came the bald question.

"A friend is trapped in there."

"Well, the chances of him being alive..."

Again, Clancy took such a prediction like a blow, but he recovered quickly this time, determined. "I know. I simply must know, though, and if I might help save even one..."

"Hmph. Well, I guess we can use all the hands we can get. You can haul rock."

If the man thought Clancy had never done so before, he was in for a rude shock. He'd once helped build a wall of rock, hauling them in one by one from the surrounding fields. The backbreaking work may have been long in his sordid past, but Clancy would bet his body remembered how.

"Show me where," he replied.

Which is how he ended up digging far in the depths of a secondary shaft, having crawled down from the main shaft hours earlier. The warren of little veins and ladders amazed him. 'Twas no wonder people became lost forever in a mine. Surely Roy could find another profession.

Clancy would tell him that when they found him.

He had no idea how long he had been below ground when a cry went up from somewhere beneath him, the sound of cheering echoing insanely around him. Clancy dropped the sling he'd been using to haul rock and staggered off in search of the sound, hoping against hope. When he found the source of the joyous sound, his heart sank. Two miners limped along, held up by their companions as they headed up toward the main shaft.

Neither of them stood tall and broad enough to be Roy.

"Have you seen anyone else?" someone asked, and Clancy's hopes were once again dashed as both men shook their heads, looking dazed and bruised. Surely they were a good sign. Where there were two, there could be more.

Clancy looked at his bleeding hands and bit back a hysterical laugh. His fine, soft hands appeared truly ruined. Someone pushed past him roughly, buffeting him, and Clancy moved into line to start hauling debris once more, this time in buckets. Time to get back to work. Because Roy's time had to be running out...

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Roy woke Seamus and Kit who knew how much later. He'd been the first one up, and he'd been working on widening the hole they'd dug through the cave in, shoring it up with whatever he could find.

"Kit. Kit, wake up."

Kit's eyes fluttered open. "Did I let the torch go out?"

"No, honey. I got it. I need you to try to wiggle through that hole."

"I'll try, Roy."

A man couldn't ask for more than that. Seamus stirred, groaning, and got up to help. They gave Kit a leg up, and lo and behold the kid got his head and shoulders through. After that it was easy to stuff him through like a greased pig, and they heard him exclaim as he landed on the other side with a thud.



"Roy?" Kit asked in a quavery voice. "Can you make me another torch? I...it's dark."

"I don't think we have enough for another." A long look passed between he and Seamus, who finally jerked his head up and down, and Roy carefully put the torch through. "You take it, Kit. You bring someone back."

"I will, Roy. I promise."

For a little while Roy saw the light Kit held moving away. Then total darkness descended again, and Roy moved gingerly to sit where there was no fill dirt or rock.

"You with me, Seamus?"

"I am." Seamus came to him, probably following his voice, and sat close. But not as close as Kit would have. Seamus was like him. They'd worked in the dark long enough to know that there was nothing there that they didn't see in the light.

"Whattaya think our odds are?"

Seamus didn't answer right away. Then Roy heard him take a long breath. "Not bad. That air comin' in is clean."

"And Kit knows his way pretty good." That was one thing the boy could do. Get out of the mine when the day was done.

"Yup."

They sat in silence after that. Roy counted his breaths and wiggled the toes of his bad leg to see if they'd still move. Pain shot all the way to his crotch, and fresh blood trickled out. He didn't get out of there soon he wasn't gonna, and that was a fact. Even a man as big as him only had so much blood, and Roy felt lightheaded and swimmy already. Not that he was ready to give up, no sir, but with cold stone under his ass and against his back, and with no light at all out there, he was ready to admit he was scared.

Seamus started to sing after a bit, low and rough, starting with naughty ditties and moving on to hymns. Roy joined in after the third hymn, singing along with Seamus unevenly, his voice fading in and out with his consciousness.

The last thing he heard right before he passed clean out was a shout from outside their little artificial cave, one that sounded like that damned Edward Clancy, calling his name.

## Chapter 9

This time when Roy awoke he figured he was in heaven. The bed under his back felt soft as a cloud, the pervading cold he'd endured in the mine no longer shook him, and his skin held no trace of sweat or grime.

Damned if it didn't make him afraid to open his eyes.

The touch of a soft, wet cloth just above his bare groin did the trick, his eyes flying open to see who his nursemaid might be. He sure hoped it wasn't Miss Lee.

"Well. It's about time you woke so you could thank me for my labors, Roy Marsh."

Lord, he might just be in hell. Nothing else could explain why he lay in a feather bed at the hotel down in Telluride with Edward Clancy washing him like a baby.

"I thought you left," he blurted.

"I tried," came the reply, Clancy staring right at him with those bright green eyes. "I was, in fact, waiting on the train when I heard about the cave in."

"But you're here." Didn't he sound stupid? Roy winced when he tried to sit up. Lord, his leg hurt. His leg. Rising up on his elbows, Roy glanced down at it, needing to see it still there.

"I am. As is your leg. The wound came clean remarkably well, and the sawbones says you have very little muscle damage. In short, you will not need a rise for your shoe."

Flopping back on the bed, Roy heaved a sigh of relief. Thank the good Lord and all the angels. A working man like him, if he'd lost that leg, would end up in the poor house someplace.

"So why did you stay?" he finally asked, opening his eyes again to take in Clancy's disheveled state.

Blond hair stuck up all over, and the man's face seemed a mask of grime and sweat and blood. The hands washing him had been scrubbed, but they were covered with nicks and cuts and deep red patches where they were rubbed raw.

"Your hands..."

"Yes, well." Clancy shrugged before wringing the cloth out again and sliding it higher on Roy's chest. "I may have done some digging."

"Digging." It dawned on him slowly, but when it did, Roy exclaimed, "At the mine?!"

"Indeed. I fear when your young man found us and led us back to you I tried to dig you out single handed. I made a rather unseemly display." Clancy stared down at his body instead of meeting his eyes now, and that skin had gone fiery red.

"Did you, now?" Roy chewed on that a minute, imagining Clancy as a wild man, scraping at rock and timber, calling his name. He thought he had heard Clancy calling his name. It was a pretty enough picture, but he had a hard time believing it.

"I did. In fact...Oh, Roy, I'm sorry, I fear I lost you your job."

"What?" Stunned, Roy grabbed Clancy's still moving hand and held it still. "Look at me. Tell me what you did."

"I. I have your last pay here, and the mine has paid for all of the medicines you'll need. Again, I didn't mean it." Clancy's hand moved under his like a trapped bird, just fluttering.

"What did you do?" he grated out, needing to know.

"I fear I threw myself upon your prostate body and kissed you."

Roy stared. He pondered that. He even imagined it. Then he about bust a gut, he laughed so hard. Tears streamed down his face and he thought he might piss himself, but Roy just laughed until he couldn't laugh no more. All he could do was gasp.

"You dramatic bastard," he finally choked out. "Did you really?"

"I did." Clancy peered at him from under lowered lashes, a smile tugging at the corners of the man's well shaped mouth. "Are you angry?"

"Am I? Well, I suppose that depends on what you figure on doing now. You gonna make me a kept man?"

The expression on Clancy's face made him roar again. It looked like the man had sucked a rotten plum.

"You are not at all amusing, Roy," Clancy said, plopping the cloth into the basin and standing, the picture of affronted dignity.

"Well, I ain't joking. I got a little stash, what with getting a week's..."

"A month's," Clancy interjected. "I bargained on your behalf."

"That's right generous. But after that what am I gonna do? You're gonna have to do for me until I can get me a job somewheres."

Clancy rose and came to put a hand on his forehead, expression going from chagrined to concerned. "You've damaged yourself, haven't you? Are you feeling feverish?"

"No, sir. Just tired." In fact, that was the God's honest. Roy yawned, his laughing spree having taken more out of him than he might have expected.

"Then sleep," Clancy told him, stroking his hair back off his face. "I shall remain when you wake."

Suddenly that became the very most important thing, which shoulda been laughable, since he'd resigned himself to Clancy leaving before. "Promise?"

"I promise." Clancy bent to press a kiss to his lips. "Now sleep."

So Roy let himself drift to sleep, that kiss following him like a vow. It would be enough, even if he woke up alone.

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Clancy watched Roy sleep. Even relaxed in slumber that face was not beautiful. Now, aside from the usual mashed nose and too strong chin it bore the evidence of Roy's recent brush with death. Scrapes and bruises abounded. One particularly nasty cut ran diagonally across Roy's throat, making him wince at how close something, some rock or wood, had come to ending the man's life.

The leg had been the most frightening part of it all. Thankfully Roy had slept the sleep of the wounded and exhausted, but when the sawbones had pulled the enormous shard of wood from Roy's leg the blood had pumped out like Roy might bleed to death, and Roy had moaned like a spirit trapped in Hell.

To his ever lasting surprise, Clancy had managed not to become violently ill until the makeshift surgery was complete.

Also surprising has been his reaction upon finding Roy. He had not lied. His display had been most unseemly. The sight of Roy brought low would stay with him the rest of his life.

A bruised and frightened young miner named Kit had found them late in the afternoon, appearing from the ether, it seemed, right before Clancy and the rough fellow he'd teamed with to haul debris. It hadn't mattered to the miners by the end of the day that Clancy wore a fine wool suit. He was just as filthy and raw as they.

Kit had said the magic name. Big Roy was trapped down on the next level. It was both gratifying and amazing how many men dropped everything and ran to Roy's aid.

Even more amazing was his own reaction when they dug through the last of the wall of rubble separating them from the trapped men and he saw Roy laid out as if in a tomb, seemingly dead to the world.

"Roy!" he'd cried, throwing himself down on the ground and grabbing Roy by the shoulders. "Roy!"

He had fairly peppered Roy's face with dramatic kisses, his heart beating so hard surely everyone heard it, and only realized that everyone was staring at him when it was too late.

The only one who did not appear surprised was the youngster, Kit.

His impassioned arguments in Roy's favor had fallen on deaf ears. Once the manager had heard all of the uproar, well, they had agreed to pay Roy's bills and send him down the mountain on a mule...

Clancy smiled as he stroked Roy's big, scarred hand. He should be appalled at himself. He was, however, quite pleased. Once Edward Clancy realized he was being a fool, he tried to mend his ways. And refusing to admit he loved Roy March seemed foolish in the extreme. The fact that Roy had lost his job meant that now Clancy could leave Telluride and take Roy with him. Certainly other mines might take Roy on, but word traveled fast.

Roy stirred, moaning a little, and Clancy moved to sit on the bed next to him rather than in the uncomfortable cane chair.

"It's all right, Roy. You're fine. I am here," he said, feeling foolish. The idea that his very presence might comfort Roy seemed absurd. Clancy had never been a comforting man.

Still, Roy blinked, staring at him a moment before smiling. "Well, now. You stayed."

"I told you I would." He bent to kiss Roy's mouth lightly. He still tasted of earth. "I cannot have a bath drawn for you, with your leg, but I could give you a more thorough washing now that you're awake."

"You don't have to play my nursemaid, Clancy," Roy said, that stubborn frown drawing his brows together over those odd-colored eyes. "Just lie with me a spell."

"I could hurt you," he protested as Roy drew him down.

"Nah. I'm all set. Got me propped up with pillows and whatnot. Stay."

Really, the silly man could convince him to do anything. How terribly disconcerting. "I'm not sure I like this, Roy."

"This what?" Roy asked, hand settling on his buttocks as he turned his side.

Well, he liked that well enough. "This. You and I. Me caring about aught besides myself."

"Your accent slips sometimes, you know?"

Clancy sighed, dealing Roy a rather vicious bite to the upper arm. "Yes, I am well aware."

Roy yelped and popped his behind. "Stop that. Anyways, you know right well I'm mad for you, so we're even."

"Yet you don't like me." That was the crux of it. He knew Roy desired him, perhaps even loved him. Still, with no respect or admiration, it would be difficult to live and work together.

"Yer growin' on me," Roy returned, smiling at him and giving him a good hard kiss. "Now hush up. I'm sleepy."

Clancy hushed. They had time to work out the details. For now he would relax and let it be. Later they could argue. It was part of the fun after all, arguing with Roy. How odd it all seemed, he thought as his own exhaustion overtook him and he drifted off. How very odd.

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The train ride had taken a lot out of him, Roy figured. He'd slept the last hour of it, snoring, if Clancy could be trusted.

He'd stayed awake while they left Telluride. Roy'd always thought of Telluride by its better nickname, the Town without a Bellyache. He really had. But after the cave in, and the way everybody in town'd looked at him the first time he went out with his hobbling and limping, well... To Hell You Ride was a heck of a lot more appropriate now.

The sawbones didn't think he should take a train trip with his leg still all splinted up. Even Clancy had argued with him.

Roy won.

The train arrived in Denver just about the time Roy woke up and decided his leg might explode. It throbbed like to make him crazy, and Roy shifted, grunting as Clancy's elbow dug into his side.

"Hmm?" Clancy said, straightening away. "Oh, are we there?"

"We are."

They'd sorta decided not to talk about leaving town after the argument. Hell, they hadn't talked on nothin' really, except whose trunk would fit in what compartment. Roy figured they'd stay in Denver a few days and move on, but who in Hell knew what Clancy might decide?

"A hotel then?" Clancy asked, and Roy nodded, levering himself up out of his seat.

"Yeah, I'd say so. Nothin' fancy, mind." Denver wasn't like Telluride. Them fancy hotels didn't come cheap.

"We ought to be able to get a room in the theatre district, love."

Clancy'd called him love. Outside of the bedroom. Now wasn't that something? They did find them a place, a little hotel run by a widow woman. Neat as a pin and not too expensive, and she served a hearty breakfast in the morning. Roy figured it was fair that he was surprised by Clancy's know how. The man did seem frivolous sometimes.

Maybe Roy ought to give him more credit. He eyed the small bed and pondered sleeping in the chair. It looked more comfortable. He could prop his leg up instead of sleeping sideways.

"What's wrong?" Clancy asked.

"Oh, that bed's small, is all. I'd have to turn cattywhompus."

"Oh." Clancy frowned, staring at it as well. "We've slept in beds almost as small."

"Well, that was without me having a gimp leg," he said, clapping Clancy on the shoulder. "I'll sleep in the chair."

"You'll do no such thing! You'll have the bed. I shall ask if there is a better accommodation for us. I have some money saved..." Clancy went on muttering until their trunks were delivered.

He would have gone on after that but Roy figured they were safe now no one would be knocking on the door, and he sat on the bed and beckoned for Clancy to come to him. "C'mere, Clancy."

"What?" Clancy came, though, reaching out to him. "Are you in pain? Do you need help?"

He snagged Clancy with one arm, reeling the man in. "No, I need this."

The kiss started out gentle, a little searching. It went hot faster than a cave in went bad, Clancy crowding close and wrapping both arms around Roy's neck. His leg gave a twinge as he spread it and the other to give Clancy room, but then it got comfortable enough that he could see himself settling for a long round of kissing.

He thought he'd lost this forever.

"Mmmm," Clancy said when they broke for air. "Want you, love."

"I'm not sure I can," he replied, laughing a little.

Reaching between them, Clancy found Roy's prick and squeezed. "It certainly feels like you can, Roy."

Well. That surely did feel like he was up for it. But his leg..."I dunno, Clancy. I'm afraid I'll hurt something, we get too busy."

"Then you sit back and let me do the doing, Roy." Clancy pushed him until he lay back on his elbows and went to get the little stool to prop his bad leg on. The gesture had him blinking, then grinning like a fool. Then Clancy came back and started undoing buttons and snaps.

"I vow, Roy, we need to go someplace warmer. This climate requires far too many clothes."

His heart kicked up a notch. "Are we going somewheres together, Clancy?"

"Well, of course we are. I made quite a fool out of myself over you, Roy Marsh. I intend to take my reward out of your hide."

Before Roy could even think to answer that Clancy's mouth came down on him, lips and tongue working the head of his prick. He shouted, his hips rocking up, and damn. Just damn. He couldn't even think of nothin' to say after that.

Clancy worked him over good, mouth so hot and wet Roy knew it had to be spawned in Hell, but not caring one way or the other. He thrust into the warmth, feeling Clancy's tongue stroke the underside, just along the vein, making him cry out.

Roy bit his fist, trying to keep quiet in case they had neighbors, but low, hoarse sounds still poured out of him as Clancy took him to the very edge of sanity. When one scraped up hand touched his balls, that was it. It was all over but the shoutin', and Roy did that too, his whole body clenching and releasing as he spent himself hard as anything.

Blinking and dazed, Roy watched Clancy stand, working his own prick free. The man put on a show for him, arm swinging as he stroked himself, cheeks flushed, green eyes hot as fire. When Clancy grunted and shot on Roy's good leg it was the prettiest thing Roy's ever seen. Even better than seeing Clancy onstage.

Damned if it didn't help ease the throbbing pain in his leg, too. He'd have to remember that.

Roy shrugged out of his shirt and let Clancy ease him out of his boots and pants. They got settled on the bed together, naked and warm and good, the quilt pulled over them, proving that bed was big enough after all.

"You're something else, Sir Edward Clancy. So where are we going together, then?"

"I think California would be lovely. I can get work at any number of theaters, and there's always something for a man of your strength, love."

"Uh huh. And what happens when your fancy friends disapprove of me, then?" He didn't think he could bear it if Clancy took to being ashamed of him again, not letting him meet the other players and all.

"Oh, Roy, you know very well the "Sir" in my name is false. And I have decided I much prefer the company of a rough miner."

He nodded, hoping with all of his heart he could believe that. "And I'm awfully fond of the fancy actor I've got," he said, stroking along the lean line of Clancy's back.

"Well, there we have it."

"We'll fight," he said, rubbing Clancy's buttocks.

"Of course we will. What fun is life if there is no spice?" Clancy asked, kissing his chest.

"Well, I can handle some spice, I suppose. For you."

"Good." Clancy glanced up at him, green eyes dark and serious. "I do love you, Roy Marsh, much as I resisted admitting it."

"Just like I do you, Clancy. I surely do."



Clancy grinned, mischief starting to make his eyes twinkle. "Then we shall rub along well enough, shall we not?"

Roy laughed. "All the way to Hell and back, if we have to."

"No, no," Clancy said, chuckling low and happy. "We've been there."

## Epilogue

Roy Marsh sat in a fancy little theatre in San Francisco, wearing his best suit of clothes and feeling as out of place in them as he always did. Still, Clancy liked him in a suit, and even though he felt like he was going to a funeral in them, Roy wore them for that very reason.

He'd had a bath, a haircut and a shave. The baths in the big city sure were different than the ones in Telluride, but the barber wasn't all that much different than old Geezer Harris, and the lady at the ticket window at the theatre reminded him a lot of Mrs. MacGruder.

He guessed folks was the same everywhere.

The heavy velvet curtain finally went up as the lights went down, and Clancy stepped out on the stage, making everything else go away. The man fascinated everyone, not just Roy. His voice came out strong and deep and good, and his mobile face changed with each emotion he put on, just moving like water in a stream.

Roy knew that face better than anyone, now, and he knew he liked it better when the emotion was real. He liked it best when Clancy's expressions were all for him, in their very own, very large bed.

They'd been in California a year, and while Clancy had trouble being good all the time, it was worth it. Roy had a job in a saloon, keeping the rowdies under control, and since the saloon was owned by the same gent what owned the theatre, Roy got nights that Clancy was onstage to himself. The work was better than mining, and people had gotten to know and respect him, and Roy figured he was doing all right for himself.

He'd do all right for Clancy when they got home, he figured, watching the man prance around in tights.

That Sir Edward Clancy still wasn't such a nice man, but he was trying, Roy thought. And that made it worth everything they'd been through and then some.

Roy was glad they didn't have a play all written out of their lives, as much as he loved to read. This way he'd be surprised.

He couldn't wait to see what happened next.

End