



# Cowboy Up

A Torquere Press Anthology

## Table of Contents

**StartQcd Pg26**

Foreword by Rob Knight Pg 2

Storm Clouds by Dallas Coleman Pg 3

Above Snakes by AM Riley Pg 25

Added Money by Chris Owen Pg109

Dry Bones by Parhelion Pg 151

The Good Life by Sean Michael Pg 207

Male Order Bride by Eumenides Pg 244

Surrender by Jourdan Lane Pg 295

The Gaucho Code by Julia Talbot Pg 334

Legacy in My Hands by Vic Winter Pg 377

Barn Dance by BA Tortuga Pg 395

## Foreword by Rob Knight

What is it about the cowboy that captures the imagination? Nearly every culture in the new world has them, from Canada and the United States, down through Mexico and South America. Even Australia has its own cowboy legends. They're rustic, they're sometimes rude, they rope and ride and spit. And we love them.

There's something about a man who works the land and cattle, something that fascinates us, keeps us reading about them and dreaming about their lives and yes, writing about them. Whether strong and silent or squat and loquacious, we crave reading about how the cowboy lives, loves and yes, dies.

The Cowboy Up anthology explores the day-to-day life of the cowboy, not just out on the open plain, but at the hearth, the campfire, or the bedroll. Modern or old Wild West, these tales take on how strong, stubborn men come to terms with needing someone, with asking for help and receiving it, and with falling in love.

From the pampas of Argentina, to the classic cattle trails of Texas and New Mexico, all the way up to Canada for the modern day Calgary Stampede, Cowboy Up takes us on a wild ride of humor, heat and drama. So saddle up and come along.

Rob Knight, 2005



# Stormclouds

By Dallas Coleman

From The Anthology Cowboy Up

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It was fixing to storm; he could tell because that knee of his always ached so the morning before it blew up outside. He ought to get himself moving, get himself on the ball and round up the pasture horses.

Damned things would panic if things got nasty outside and they weren't put up high and dry.

The cattle would come easy. Well, they would assuming Ray Baker's old stallion hadn't caught wind of Peg and Candy being

in season and trampled the fence down.

Not that Peanut wasn't a fine bit of horseflesh, but Trace was wanting a pureblood to put on 'em both, get him a couple colts worth selling. Of course, if Peanut hit that old fence hard enough, the herd could eat on Ray's good rye grass and leave his for haying. Maybe that wouldn't be all bad after all...

Trace looked over his near-empty coffee cup across the old table at the fisted hands sitting on the scarred pine. Almost made him smile, too, those gnarled fingers sitting on the gnarled wood, both dark, familiar. Almost made him smile because Dwayne was saying goodbye now, wasn't he?

Not that Trace was listening, not even a little bit. No sir. He was looking at the faded blue suitcase – they'd got that in Shreveport years ago, to bring home the horse blankets they'd bought from a flea market -- packed full of blue jeans and shirts and Stetson cologne and God knew his UT cap was probably in there 'cause Dwayne'd been coveting it for damn near ever.

Asshole. Ten years. Ten whole goddamned years of sweat and tears and sex and what? What now after loving and building a house and a ranch and a... a... a them? Dwayne was bored. Tired of working dust to make hay.

Wanting to make real money, see the sights. Get the Hell out of Dodge. Find some young fella who wasn't looking at the near edge of forty through wire-rimmed glasses.

Folks'd say – if folks did say, because they were all good at pretending that him and Dwayne weren't what they were – that he was a damned fool, trying to bring a fine little moneyed piece of Savannah gentry over to Odessa. Taking on with someone five years younger that he'd met in a truck stop, of all things, back when him and Jenn were still pretending that they were married and happy and in love.

Shit.

Dwayne'd turned his eye right off the bat, blond and tanned and broad shouldered in that football and fresh-out-of-the-Marine corps sorta way. The man had been something else, then, girls swooning and shit. Been bold as brass, too, coming up and sitting down, giving him a once over. All balls and want and pride – Tracy'd been hooked and good.

They'd looked good together, then. They were of a height – Dwayne a little bulkier, him a little leggier. Dwayne'd liked his freckles, his bright red curls, his green eyes. The first thing the man had ever said to him was, "Tell me now, do you have a temper, Irish?"

He'd laughed – partially because he did and partially because... Oh, hell.

Trace hid his smile. Lord, he'd fallen like a lead balloon at the first sound of that voice, that drawl like sweet tea would sound, calling to you from the icebox. Still worked, too, even when that same voice was saying that he was gone old and stodgy, that a man couldn't live on sunshine and love.

That maybe Dwayne'd been hasty, giving up his daddy's money for a ratty-assed cowpoke from Nowhere, Texas. Tracy couldn't really argue that, although Dwayne'd proved himself to be a fine damned cowboy. Lord, that boy could work, sun up to sun down, right beside him.

Shame, too, that Dwayne didn't get from it what he did.

They hadn't done anything that first night. Lord, no. They'd sat and talked and talked until he was damn near raspy and for sure late and gonna be exhausted on his way to Raleigh. Still, he'd had a good time and he'd given up his phone number, told Dwayne to call when he'd be coming through again.

Of course, the next time through hadn't come for a few weeks – okay, a few months, but who counted days anymore? Him and Dwayne, they'd spent a little longer, talked a little more. Tracy'd mentioned he was stopping by Tucson on his way to Yuma, signing the papers for his divorce.

Jenn'd gotten herself in the family way with that damned dentist down the street and he was having a hard time pretending to be scarred and hurt, so he settled for satisfied combined with a little bitterness sprinkled on top.

Dwayne'd offered to take the ride with him, keep him company and he'd said yes straight up, hadn't even thought on it hard. They'd made it to Mobile before the talk turned to sex, El Paso before talking'd turned to doing.

It'd been good, listening to his name in that voice, ringing through the sleeper bed of the cab. He'd decided then and there what he'd wanted and just how to get it. Too bad he'd not managed the keeping of it.

Trace'd seen this coming, like a stampede on the far end of a dry creek. The dust started coming and you just squinted a little at first, trying to see if those dark shapes in the clouds were danger or dust devils. Then you heard it, the stamping of hooves like slamming doors.

Now he had to decide whether to jump for safety or lie down and get his ass trampled.

"...not even hearing me, Tracy."

He looked up into eyes as blue as summer skies and shook his head. "What is it you need heard, baby? You don't want to be us anymore. I hear you. I been hearing. "

"This isn't just about you, Trace. I'm unhappy. There's a whole world out there and you're missing it."

Missing it?

Hell, he'd driven it for long enough.

California to Florida. Louisiana to Michigan. New York to Arizona. He'd seen all he'd needed. This place? This was their home. Hell, there wasn't a square inch they hadn't fixed, sanded, painted, spackled. Hell, they'd damn near blown the whole place up putting in space heaters. And the whole miswiring of the ceiling fans? Christ. Between the smell and the laughing and the sparks?

Lord have mercy.

"You know where the door is, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do." Dwayne sighed, looked over at him, eyes suddenly sparkling and serious. "Come with me. Tell me you'll sell the house, the critters. We can go find a place in Atlanta. New Orleans. Tampa Bay. We'll get a rig, see the country. Be free."

Tracy shook his head, the action making the white curtains on the kitchen windows blur in his eyes. "Baby, I've had that life. This is where I live, where our home is."

"You've gotten old, Irish."

"It's what happens to most of us." He resisted the urge to straighten his shirt, puff up. He wasn't that old. He still looked like a man, cut a figure.

"Yeah, but... Shit, Tracy, you know how I feel about you, it's just..." There was a far away look about Dwayne, sort of like a dog got right before it bit, when things changed from pet to animal, and he braced himself for the bruises that were coming. "It's not enough for me anymore, playing house and pretending we're no different than the Fergusons or the Van Eatons."

He watched Dwayne's mouth moving.

He did love the way the top lip had that 'v' in it, defined and sharp-angled. He'd licked at it a hundred thousand times. Wasn't the thing he'd miss most, but it was up there along with the way Dwayne sang with the radio and the way the man ate popcorn. Fucked up and weird, but true.

Dwayne wound down, finished with a long series of things Trace reckoned he should care about but didn't. He wasn't going to beg for it, simple as that.

"You don't have a single thing to say, do you?"

"I reckon you've said it all, baby. You always had enough words for the both of us." He stood up, rinsed out his coffee cup. It looked odd, sitting all by itself in the sink. Looked like there might be a crack in it too, right there at the bottom where most people'd never see.

Damn, those clouds were moving in fast.

"You... I loved you, you son of a bitch. I lost my whole life for you, for this piece of land..."

He turned, feeling growly as a bear with a sore paw.

How much trash did Dwayne think he was interested in hearing?

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've heard it all. You're withering like a grape on the vine. You was made for better things. I'm an old fuck with no money and nothing but a strong back. You've said. I've heard. Just take your unhappy self and go. I got critters to feed."

"Oh, fuck you and those scrawny beasts out there. I'm so tired of hearing about your cattle and your house and your life. What about me? What about mine?"

"What about it?" Trace felt himself slip-sliding from peeved into true-blue pissed, his hands going to fists. "You think I ain't done this for you?"

Those blue eyes rolled and it was all he could do not to knock Dwayne plumb into next month. "Right. Come on, Trace. All this? Is your fucking dream. You never once asked me if I wanted. Hell, you've never asked me at all, not from the first. All this – this whole thing's been yours from the beginning."

He took a step forward, shaking his head. "It's only been a year or so since you started going on about skipping town. Only been since that kid interning with Doc Turney left to go back to vet school."

It was the sheer shock in Dwayne's eyes that sent him over the edge, hands wrapped around Dwayne's arms, shaking good and hard. "What? You think I'm stupid, baby? You think people weren't eager as all fuck to let me know you'd been seen panting?"

"I didn't ever... Shit, Trace. I wouldn't've. He was a kid. I was just..." He could smell Dwayne now, cologne and soap and them and he hated it, hated that Dwayne was fixin' to take it all away down the highway for something as stupid as being bored.

"Shut up. Shut up, now. I don't want to know. I don't want to hear your mouth going on and on and on about what all I ain't and what I haven't and what you want."

He shook again, Dwayne strong and solid in his hands, the working man's muscles so much finer to him than the ones that Dwayne'd bought from a gym.

"You do care." Trace wasn't sure if he was more pissed that Dwayne mentioned it or that Dwayne was right. He pushed back again, growling, just muscling them back until Dwayne hit the Frigidaire with a dull thump, the beer bottles rattling inside.

"You bastard. You sorry son of a bitch. Of course I care. There ain't been a day, not a single fucking day since I met you I ain't cared."

Their lips crashed together, the kiss wild and hungry, Dwayne tasting so good, a mixture of heat and honey and that pricy damned toothpaste Dwayne insisted on. Dwayne's hands pushed against him, but he didn't let up because the choice was kissing or hitting the bastard so hard they'd meet up against next week and by the time he thought Dwayne really would rather have the punch those hands curled around his shoulders and tugged him close.



"This doesn't change anything." Those eyes were fierce, hard.

"Shut the fuck up, baby." He kissed again, just wanting to remember, to have something to keep with him when his everything up and walked away. He got his thigh between Dwayne's, got his hand on the zipper. Dwayne wasn't hard for him yet, but the interest was there, greeting his hand, pushing up.

It didn't take him much, just a few rubs and a squeeze just so.

No matter what Dwayne said about him not listening and not caring, he knew where to touch, where to stroke to make it right, to make that sorry, stuck up, unhappy man want him. Dwayne moaned low, the sound mingling with the sound of the wind in the live oaks, making the heavy branches creak.

He worked, tongue and hand together, trying his damndest to make Dwayne see. It wasn't all his. It was theirs. Their life. Their love. Their home and damned if he wanted to lose it all.

Hell, he didn't even want to lose a little.

Dwayne fit fine in the curve of his palm, hot and good and all silk. He knew how his calluses felt, slick and smooth with just the oddest rough bits around the edges. Those he used to his advantage, rubbing the crown, spreading the wet proof of wanting all around the tip.

Wasn't ever gonna forget this.

Not even for a second.

Not even a bit.

He could see the trees moving in Dwayne's eyes, see himself, too. Right on in there. He breathed in each and every sound Dwayne made for him, breathed in the smell of wanting and then held his breath.

When Dwayne closed his eyes, started humping, Trace kept his own fool eyes open, heart cracking in his chest.

When Dwayne came for him, painting his wrist with heat, it didn't feel like a victory, like he'd won. When Dwayne slid from between him and the fridge, heading to the sink to clean up, Tracy knew it hadn't been.

Dwayne was right.

It hadn't changed anything.

He wiped his arm off on the dishrag on the counter, throwing it in the trash as he headed for the back door. He had cattle to feed.

The first wave of storms came around dinnertime, late enough that Trace'd convinced himself it was gonna miss them and hit closer to San Angelo. He was mending the south-most chicken coop, tacking up some old feedsacks to patch the holes the damned coyotes made when he noticed the birds acting funny, fluttering and bobbing about, roosting down plumb early, given he hadn't done the evening feed yet. That old Leghorn rooster puffed up, beak open like it was drinking of the air, comb flushed deep red.

Made him right uneasy, got his nerves to jangling.

He stepped outside into what ought to be sunshine, but wasn't, tugged off his straw hat for a minute to take a look and what he saw sent a shot of pure bottled fear through him. Wasn't a farmer worth his salt didn't fear the sky when she was the color of dull opals, the threat of a heavenly steam engine just on the edge of hearing, clouds rolling in a boil.

Sweet Jesus.

If he'd had the minute to spare, he'd have wished for Dwayne to be home, because the horses and the chickens and the goats needed in and the windows in the house needed opening and someone needed to draw water up for drinking and...

Good thing he didn't have the time.

Dust swirled around his boots as he ran, whistling high and shrill to call the critters into safety. Peg and Candy and Sweetness with her little twin foals came right easy, as did the goats, but the Morgan geldings in the back were a far piece down in the pasture, balking at making the trip across the open grass. The cattle

weren't budging, either, just circling the wagons and getting ready to stand against the wind. Shit. Shit.

He didn't like it, the way his arm hairs stood up on end and the back of his neck was tingling. He didn't like it one bit. The rain was on its way, too, black and so thick in the late spring heat it looked oily, pushing hard at the field grass, making the red heads of the Indian paintbrush bob and weave. Trace got the door shut on the barn and took off running to put the Chevy in the garage and tarp the tractor before the hail came.

It started in with a vengeance, just a little at first, enough to ping off the bedliner as he pulled in, but by the time he got the blue tarp to the John Deere, it was the size of dimes, big enough to sting where they slammed into him, big enough to hurt. Peter, Joe and Paul were sitting in a row on the back porch like an omen, looking at him through sad old eyes, howling out.

"Hush up you hounds. I gotta get this..."

The next round of hail broke through the brim of his hat, one slamming into his shoulder hard enough that his arm and hand went plumb dead for a second before waking up with a pure-D scream. He watched the tarp rip free, spinning in a circle, edges snapping before it was yanked away. Oh. Oh, sweet Jesus. Fuck the tractor.

He headed for the house like the hounds of Hell were on his heels, nipping and barking, driving him away from the long black train heading for him.

He stumbled up the groaning stairs, pushed like the wind and rain had honest-to-God hands and were shoving good and hard.

The pups scattered, whining and scratching at the door and wanting in. He fumbled at the latch, got it open long enough to scoot them all in before just standing there a second. Panting. Dripping on the carpet. Breathing hard. Fuck, he was soaked to the skin, shoulder thrumming like a son of a bitch.

"Lord, lord. That's one Hell of a storm."

He stripped off his shirt, leaving it on the little patch of linoleum they'd put down for muddy boots, and reached for the TV remote so he could see what KVUE said about the weather. The tube had just flickered on, the hazy picture of that blond newscaster that looked like his sister Mary Joe starting to clear up into something watchable when the lightning slammed into the ground, the crack and light loud enough that it was like everything went perfectly still and stayed there for a long minute, the crape myrtle outside split and bent and suddenly black against the white of the shock.

It was the smell that got him moving. Ozone. Pure and simple. The lights were dead, the television gone grey and sending a little shot of smoke up along the wallpaper. He needed to redo in here anyway.

"Come on, dogs. In the tub. Come on. Move." They stumbled along with him and he grabbed the couch cushions on the way. The flashlight and little battery-powered radio were already waiting in the linen closet, right beside the bottled water and the plastic bottle of whiskey.

He grabbed a couple three blankets and got all four of them settled, cushioned and covered, his still wet and shaking fingers trying to dial something up on the fucking radio. If Dwayne'd been here, the lousy son of a bitch would be laughing, taking the damned radio from him and helping.

Course, Dwayne would be outside the danger zone by now.

The man had driven off seven, maybe eight hours ago, just disappearing while he was in the barn. Bastard. Leaving a man over what? A little boredom? A little wanderlust? A little...

His brain stopped.

Hell, his heart, his blood, his whole fucking world stopped as the house started shaking, rattling like a rabbit caught in a dog's jaws. Tracy fought his urge to whimper, to make some sound against that howl him and his kin had been dreading since the first Irishman stepped foot in tornado alley and decided harsh living was better than the filth of a city any day.

The dogs went still, panting, shaking and he heard the sound of something breaking, of something tearing right apart. Trace half stood before his better sense took hold of him and before he got the cushions over them all, he got a glimpse of sky as the roof came off.

He'd never forget it – the sight of shingles and wood and the chair from the front room and leaves and stones and his bathroom sink rising up into the air like God himself was choosing and taking all He needed.

The wind was a pure scream, so loud that Tracy didn't even hear it, really, just felt it deep in his bones like sitting too near an amp at a rock 'n roll show. Something landed on the cushions, slamming them down into the curve of the tub with a dull, heavy thump, turning grey to black.

Sweet Jesus.

He leaned his face on a hound's shoulder and started praying – praying that the horses were safe, praying that old Miss Jenny down the road was in town playing bingo at the Senior Center, giving thanks that Dwayne had gone, was on the highway singing with the radio.

Begging that, if it was his time, please Lord, have Momma and Grampa Jim waiting on him, because he sure hated finding his way without a good map.

It was the silence that got him moving again, got him free from the scared and the stunned and the awe that had wrapped around his heart like spider silk. He pushed up, wincing at the heavy, at the way something hard and sharp was threatening to tear through the couch cushion.

One of the pups started whining, scratching at the fabric and Trace didn't stop him. One of the dogs got out, the other two would and he'd have a little more room to try and get himself loose. Lord. No that he was scared, 'cause he wasn't.

He'd lived through the storm; he wasn't going to just be trapped forever.

Hell, someone'd come to see, to check.

This wasn't the middle of nowhere, damnit.

Just the bare edge of it.

"Come on, guys. Out. Let's go out."

His voice was raw and hurting, his throat just burning, but the dogs heard him, one of them at his feet digging and whining. Inside the slick smooth fabric of the cushion was some sort of foam, all coming apart. Whatever was on him was heavy, held up only by the edges on the claw-foot tub. Trace worked his hand up along the side of one of the cushions, fingers finding something rough, bumpy, uneven. It had a little give as he pushed, the creaking and groaning sending the dogs to barking.

Christ, his head hurt. "Y'all shut it. Now. I'm right here."

Okay. Okay.

First things.

Light. He needed to get this thing up and off so he could...

His laugh surprised him a little, the sound not the one he was used to.

"Flashlight, asshole. You got a damned flashlight."

That took a minute or two, to wriggle and grab the maglite rolling down by the drain. Thank God the batteries were working – not strong or nothing, because fuck knows that would be easy and it was obviously not Tracy McBride's day, no sir. Man, he got his happy ass out of this mess and he was going to find that emergency motherfucking bottle of Jack and just drink.

Either that or go get some chicken fried steak.

Maybe both.

He tugged the cushion out of the way, frowning at what he saw. Now what on earth was bumpy enough to...

Fuck him raw.

The ceiling.

The fucking ceiling.

His ceiling.

On the bathtub and somehow, someway that made things worse, made him make this horrible low sound and start slamming his fist into the plaster over and over until the little falling bits made him gag and choke, bits of ceiling beams starting to press against his thigh, his hip. He stopped, closing his eyes and shaking a little, mind just going and going. God, what if nobody thought to look for him. What if they'd all seen Dwayne going off, thought they were heading for a day in Abilene, over to the auction in Ranger, gone to see Daddy and his new wife over at the Stockyards. What if there wasn't no one going to come. What if...

No. No, this was his home, goddamnit.

He was not going to just sit here under all this mess, waiting for the rain – because it was still fucking raining, wasn't it? – to keep leaking in where him and the dogs pushed out. He was going to get the hell out and...

And...

And do something. Find his horses. Check his tractor. Something.

Anything.

He scrabbled and pulled chunks from the crap covering him, him and the pups making the same sounds, singing the same horrible thing over and over. Out.

They needed out because he wasn't gonna be buried by his own ceiling, he just wasn't. There was no way. No motherfucking way. "You hear me? I ain't gonna be trapped here. I ain't!"

Paul got himself out first, the moonlight not brightening things up near enough.

Peter went next, following his littermate in this as in all things. He cheered for them, clapped with fingers gone slick and bloody. It was hearing the scrape and scratch of the pups' claws by his head, fighting to get to him that made him sob a little. Joe stayed with him, the old boy pushing and tearing at the cushions for him. "Good boys. Good, good boys. That's right. Come on. We won't let it get us, will we? No sir. We ain't quitters. We're made of strong stuff. Steel. Good stock."

He didn't know how long he worked, how many songs he sang to keep himself company. Finally, though, finally he managed leverage and a solid place to land the heel of his hand. Trace pushed hard, roaring in triumph as the ceiling plaster crashed around him. Something landed hard on his thigh, scratching and tearing at his jeans, but he could breathe, damnit. Breathe and try to figure in the dark.

See the moonlight coming through clouds and feel the wind and rain because that all that he'd been witness to? It hadn't been a vision or a dream. The roof and the back wall was just... just gone, nothing but ragged edges of drywall and bits of broken shit scattered all about. He could see his dresser, tumped over on his bed like a passed-out drunk, leaves plastered to the back of it.

His legs gave out on him, just like they'd been cut out from under and he slumped into the tub, naked back squeaking and stuttering along the just damp ceramic. His eyes bounced from one little thing to another, the red on the can of shaving cream from the linen closet gone deep grey in the night. Four record albums – one of them Daddy's old Charlie Rich album, he imagined, that one right on the end with the yellow middle – were vibrating, dug into the wall like saw blades. Where the commode had been was just water, pouring up like a fountain, the white ceramic like jaggedy teeth and damn, wasn't he glad he'd done the brush and swirl thing the night before because there it was, all his secrets cracked up and spread out under the rain and wind and God's own eyes.

It took a bit of swallowing to get his gorge back down, to make himself take one breath and then another and one more.

"Irish. Tracy. Tracy. Oh, fuck. You're hurt. I turned back when I heard, Trace. I was near to Stanton and I heard it on the radio in the coffee shop and came back. I had to park back at the Wilkerson's and walk, the roads are closed. Tracy? Come on. Come on, you need to get in the truck. The tornado missed it. We'll sit there and I'll call the sheriff and we'll take you to the hospital. You gotta move, Trace."

He watched Dwayne's mouth moving, the man standing on top of the turned over dining table, soaked to the bone, good hat ruined. It didn't make a bit of sense, none of it. The dining table didn't belong in the guest room, after all, and neither did that old tree.

Hell, neither did Dwayne. Dwayne looked around, eyes wide as saucers, head just shaking like one of them stupid dolls.



"Lord. It could've been you. I could see from up on the hill and I thought..." Those lips pursed, Dwayne shaking himself some.

"Come on, Irish. Come in out of the rain."

It was like watching a movie, Trace swore it, or a dream where you know you aren't awake, but you can't quite make yourself believe it.

Dwayne picked his way down the hallway, stepping careful, almost like he was dancing, two-stepping with the leftovers of their house. The rain kept on coming, but it felt warmer now than it had been, softer, just coating the whole world.

Dwayne made it to him, kneeling down by the tub, hands sliding a little in the mud. "Hey, Tracy."

"Hey." He blinked, meeting those eyes.

"You've had a hell of a day."

Yeah. Yeah, a true blue shitty one. "You didn't get caught in it?"

"No. No, I just saw it off in the distance." One hand brushed over his hair, the sound of something clinking and falling around him. "We need to find your hat. You've lost it."

"The hail broke it." It was so dark out here, so quiet.

"Yeah, it was one hell of a storm. You hurt bad?"

"I don't think so, no. Just... having a sit, baby."

Dwayne nodded, pushed one of the damp blankets aside and reached for the radio. It took a bit, but those fingers found "Amarillo By Morning", a little scratchy, a little static-y, but all George. Then Dwayne just slid in beside him, one arm warm over his shoulders. "We'll just sit then. You and me and... hey Joe."

Joe shifted, woofed once, then put his chin back down, staying under the bit of rubble that was keeping the ole boy dry.

Dwayne was sopping wet and smelled like mud and rain and crushed up grass, but it felt okay, felt like he could close his eyes. That one hand kept moving, petting his hair some, running down his back.

They sat through one song after another, then the batteries started to fade. He could see the emergency crews working to clear the road up on the hill, knew that people were coming. "Guess I oughta get up, huh?"

"We should, yeah. At least get over to the Chevy, huh? Looks like we can drive back into town, get a room at the Sunrise motel. Get a shower."

He nodded, looking all around, something deep inside him plumb grateful it was dark, that the moon was hiding her face a little. "Is the barn standing?"

Dwayne shrugged. "I didn't look, Trace. All I could see was the house and that your truck was here."

"I need a shirt. I don't want no one seeing me like this."

"kay." Dwayne helped him up and they tiptoed through to his dresser, grabbing handfuls of jeans and t-shirts and briefs and socks that were pretty dry. A whinny caught his attention and he stepped out from where the wreckage shadowed him, one of the Morgans – Charlie, he thought, though it could've been George – tossing his head and stomping.

It took all he had in the world to lift his chin, look over to the pasture. The barn was there, praise God, roof flapping lazy in the wind, door standing ajar, but there and whole. He couldn't say the same for the chicken coops. He thought he could make out one bit of chicken wire and wood way on back there, but he wasn't sure. Wasn't sure at all.

"Hey, boy. You made it through the storm, did you?" He walked right up to the fence, hands reaching for Charlie -- it was Charlie whose lips nibbled at his bare shoulder. Charlie's bridle was gone, but he didn't see any sores, anything broke.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's gonna be okay. It will."

Dwayne brought a shirt over and stripped off the wet one that had left with him that morning to change. "Let's go to the barn. The girls are bound to be scared and neither of us'll sleep 'til we know the damage."

He nodded, moving toward the gate at the speed of a weighted-down turtle. Shit. Dwayne just hopped the fence, whistling hard, calling. "Come on, now! You come and there'll be sweet feed! George! Cows! Come on now!"

Peg and a couple of the goats came out of the barn, Miss Candy stepping like a princess, hating to get her hooves wet. A couple three heifers came around the side, too, mooning and lowing, wanting their supper.

They both stopped together at the mouth of the barn, pushing at the cows and patting the critters that came up.

Dwayne was quiet now, eyes looking in the barn and then away. When he finally took a deep breath and started inside, Tracy followed – partially out of shame and partially because this was what a man did. A man faced shit, straight-up.

He'd expected that the barn would smell of fear or death or something -- not that he could have said what those smells were, just that he'd know what they meant if he smelled them -- but it just smelled like hay and horses. Sweetness' foals were alone in a stall together, little legs just shaking, skittish as all fuck. "Well, babies? Where's your momma? Where'd old Sweetness go?"

He eased himself into the stall, murmuring low and soft, hands smoothing over the pretty twins -- one with a star on her forehead, the other with a white sock, pretty girls -- hoping to calm them.

"You see Sweetness, baby? She ain't in here. Or George?" Trace could hear Dwayne opening doors, the hinges squeaking like old women.

"No, Tracy. Everybody's empty here."

Thank God the twins weren't still sucking teat. "So, we need Sweetness and George to come home."

"Yeah, and about fifty head of cattle, the chickens, the goats and that evil damned pair of mules." Dwayne walked over to the mouth of the barn, waving as lights

shone down the drive. "Gonna go talk with the folks, Tracy. See if we can't get you to a hotel overnight."

He sorta nodded, he thought. Really, the barn was pretty dry, pretty solid. He could just sleep here -- him and the dogs and the horses in the hay. Then tomorrow he'd go hunting George and Sweetness and that pretty white-faced momma cow and that temperamental longhorn bull that he'd shoot if it didn't give such healthy babies.

He might have dozed off, dreaming about riding fence in the early spring, when the wildflowers were just starting and the sun was a blessing. The smells then were all about growing and living and coming back and always put him in mind of devilled eggs and coconut cake and country ham.

Lord, he remembered hunting colored eggs over to Granny's -- always seven or eight of them with those straw baskets she'd pull down from the attic, running hard to find the special, store-bought ones. The ones with nickels in 'em or a little rubber ball or a paratrooper with a handkerchief parachute.

Man, him and Benny'd loved those, one of them in the dormer window in Aunt Patty's room, the other on the ground to catch.

"Tracy? Come on, now. You can't sleep here. The road's clear and Sheriff said he'd watch things 'til morning." Dwayne's hands got him upright, moving, that sweet Southern gentry voice just talking and talking as they slogged through the mud.

"I was thinking about Granny's house."

"The one out off Harrison's? It's a neat old place. Your Cousin Ben's widow wants to sell, I hear. Move back to Tempe." It was funny, wasn't it? How Dwayne could move him, direct him past all the people and make it to where he didn't have to be sociable.

No, Dwayne just slid him right into the truck, grabbed the spare keys, and started her up. Trace closed his eyes, let Dwayne drive.

The ride was quiet, if slow, Dwayne having to work around little roadblocks and fallen trees. When they got to the Sunrise, the main office door was waiting, welcoming. Little Jack Denney took one look at them from under that shock of

black hair he'd got from his daddy and handed over keys to Cabin C. "On the house, Tracy. The Kramer boys called on over, let me know... things. So, as long as y'all need it. Hannah says y'all can come up and have waffles and coffee in the morning. Oh, and if you'll bring your clothes and all up? We'll toss them in the wash."

He opened his mouth to say something -- thank you, you don't have to, you're good people -- but nothing much came out. Jack, who'd spent more than one evening over on the back porch while his Hannah was pregnant and snarly, reached up under the desk and came up with a mostly full bottle of whiskey.

"There's glasses in the cabin, Dwayne. Think on it as medicinal."

"Thanks, Jack. You're a lifesaver." Dwayne's hand landed on the small of his back, directing his poor old boots out the door and toward one of the old cabins. The lights were already on in the room, a pile of old sweatpants and socks and t-shirts and such on the little table, the white sheets clean, the quilt turned down.

Christ.

Christ.

The simple normalcy of it made him shake, made him realize that he was filthy and smelly and bloody. Made him realize he hurt.

"Okay, now. Shower. Then we'll have a drink." Dwayne worked his buckle open, talking low and careful like he was a horse fixin' to bolt. "Just let me get this mess off you."

"I ain't broke-dick, baby."

"No. No, you aren't. I just need to, okay? Just let me do." Those eyes -- Lord save him, he loved them, even red and swole up -- just looked into him. "I almost lost you."

"You left."

"Yeah, well. No one ever told me that grand gestures were completely lost on you, stubborn old bastard. Hell, next time I want to throw a hissyfit, I'll check the

weather first." Dwayne got them both stripped down to skin, then got them moving toward the bathroom.

The water was good and hot, scalding his skin, the spray driving the mud and gunk off his skin, leaving it to pool at his feet, swirling around and around before the drain took it away. He could see a dozen cuts and scratches on his belly, his thigh, little nicks like a razor had gotten after him. His fingers were the worst, nails bloodied, fingertips just on fire with the water and the soap. Lord.

Dwayne got a handful of shampoo and started washing his hair, fingers massaging his scalp, pushing through his curls and scrubbing them clean. "You don't have to..."

"Tracy McBride, shut your mouth." Fingers brushed his lips, soap bubbles popping on them. "I need to."

Every inch of him was cleaned and soaped, washed and rinsed until he couldn't feel a bit of grit, until the only thing floating around his toes was soap bubbles.

They shared a towel, left it to dry over the curtain rod.

Dwayne grabbed the glasses and he walked over to the table, grabbing the bottle and leaving the clothes. The bedclothes were plenty warm enough.

The whiskey poured plumb easy, looked like a summer sun in the tumbler and, oh Lord, hit his stomach in a burning rush, making him cough and sputter like a teenager with a bottle of granddaddy's shine. Dwayne threw his own back, hands shaking like autumn leaves as they poured another round.

Trace put his glass down on the low bedside table, covering Dwayne's hand with his own. He wasn't sure what all it meant -- probably thank you and I'm sorry and Hell and love -- but he wasn't sure and he wasn't about to think on it.

Dwayne sobbed once, the sound raw as butchered meat.

"Thought I'd... Oh, shit, Trace. What if..."

He squeezed Dwayne's hand, shook his head. "Didn't. What ifs ain't for folks like us."

They sat there for a good long time, breathing together, eyes looking right at each other. Trace could feel the burn of the whiskey, moving through his veins, just warming him right on up. Just setting him on fire.

Later, if anyone'd asked, which they wouldn't, Tracy couldn't have told you who moved first, whose mouth hit whose hardest. Didn't matter then. Hell, it wouldn't matter later. What mattered was that Dwayne was right there and so was he and they were breathing and whole and... Yeah. Yeah, that was what mattered.

Dwayne tugged him down, both of them crashing onto their sides like old trees, all caught up together and clinging. They rubbed together like they were two live wires loose on the hard scrabble and, if there'd been sparks, he wouldn't've been a bit surprised. Christ, it hadn't been like this in years – hard and raw with something besides anger and hurting.

His hands pulled Dwayne in for a kiss, tongue pushing and licking until he couldn't taste the whiskey anymore. Dwayne's hands were as busy as his tongue was, scraping and scratching on his spine, on the small of his back, on his ribs, adding another shitload of marks to the ones that the tornado'd left. Made his skin burn, made even the old, soft sheets catch on him as he rubbed and rocked.

It took a little shifting before their cocks were sliding against each other, balls pushed together hard enough it almost hurt. They found a rhythm, Dwayne's fingers digging into his ass, his fingers tangled in Dwayne's short hair. The tip of his cock pushed and bumped against the flat of Dwayne's stomach, each time it happened, pure lightning hit him, made him toss his head and buck.

He saw Dwayne's grin, wild and a little scared and a lot happy in the light the lamp cast. He smiled back, not sure what all his baby was seeing in his own.

"Come on. Come on, Trace. You're so fine to me. So fine." Dwayne shifted a little, lips right beside his ear, drawling deep and low. "Never giving this up. Gonna fuck you when you're old and grouchy. Gonna love on you forever."

"Shit, baby." His hips snapped and rolled, balls tight as a boar's backside as all his good sense shot out the end of his prick, spraying between them. His heart just pounded, and for a second it felt so good it made his belly convulse, made him think he might upchuck, which would be a waste of good whiskey and probably misunderstood.

"Uh-huh." Dwayne must've come on too, because the man stopped moving, started to get a towel and clean them up. Then the light went out and that heavy old bedspread landed over the both of them. Dwayne just pushed close, their bodies knowing where they both belonged.

"This... does this change anything, baby?" God knows he didn't need to bringing this old shit up again, but there'd always been more than a little Devil in him, thanks to Daddy.

Dwayne shook his head. "No, Trace. This don't change a thing. The changing happened hours ago. You just missed it again. Stubborn cowboy."

He chuckled, then laughed, good and hard, Dwayne's laughter cuddled up right alongside. Dwayne held him close as the laughter pushed up and up into something not funny.

And if that something not funny lasted for a while, Dwayne didn't comment on it and rode it out with him, still holding him in the morning when it had faded into sleeping and back out into dealing with shit like a man again.

They didn't get back out to the ranch until noon.

They had to sit and hash shit over with Jack's woman and her momma. Then wait on the clothes to dry. Then Dwayne had him sit and call Ken over at the insurance agency and call the pastor and leave a message on Daddy's answering machine and let Benny's widow know he was still living while Dwayne took the truck to the Wal-Mart and bought shovels and working gloves and a cooler for water and shit.

Trace was fixin' to kill him.

The day was bright, warm, the way it was after a tornado came through, sorta like Mother Nature had herself a bad burrito and spent a day wailing and pouring herself out and then woke up the next morning all cleaned out and perky. Dwayne drove them over to the Wilkerson's to fetch the other truck and then Trace got behind the wheel. He took the drive right slow, eyes noting every fence that was down, every broken tree. Lord.



He turned the corner to the hill and started up it, coffee and pancakes turning lazy circles in his belly. He didn't want to crest the hill and see what used to be his house. See the week's worth of cleaning and throwing away just shining and obscene in the sunshine.

He didn't want to, but he did, Dwayne's pickup right behind him, pushing him, keeping him from just turning back. It was doable too, until he saw it for the first time. Then he had to pull over and just stare. T

he house was more than half gone, the roof set down over on the feed barn, papers and bits of garbage just everywhere. The big old tree that had stood by the stockpond was gone -- not knocked over, not broken, not splintered -- gone.

He could see the skeleton of the sofa in the backyard, see the old smoker standing cockeyed beside it, his broke straw hat dangling on the chimney.

Somehow there were still the irises Momma'd planted the year before she passed, blue and purple and yellow, right there beside the front porch. The rap on the truck window startled him, Dwayne right there. "Come on, now. Breathe. Look at all the help you got."

He looked again, saw Jenny Weir and Greta Hendleson and her trio of girls carrying bag after bag of quilts and linens and clothes to be washed.

Keith and Kerry Widauf were in the pasture on their dirt bikes, bringing the stock in. Frank and Lou and Sarge from down at the Legion were talking to the fire chief and Deputy Sonny near a big assed dumpster, helping to move the rubble.

Even little Casey Trimble was helping, dragging the dog food in a wheelbarrow, the hounds following that little boy like he was the fucking Pied Piper.

"Oh. Oh, shit. I... I can't go down there. I just can't."

Dwayne snorted.

"Sure you can. Your daddy's on his way with Suellen and that travel trailer and a load of lumber. Jeff's having a ball in Midland talking to the reporters, telling them how his baby brother survived the big one. We gotta go down. That's our

house, Trace. We gotta figure out what's not broke and how we're gonna rebuild. Hell, we've talked for years about a log cabin."

"Yeah?" He reached out, holding onto Dwayne's fingers.

Dwayne nodded. "Yes. And we need to find Sweetness, if we can. And get those chickens in something before the hawks come." He got a wry grin, Dwayne pulling his -- his, the asshole -- UT cap down over his eyes some. "Course, I promise you right here and now. I am never, ever getting bored again. Your momma was right. God listens."

Tracy chuckled, nodded his head, eyes catching sight of that damned evil longhorn chasing after one of the Widauf boys, hooves throwing up mud. Lord, that mean motherfucker would beat a tornado, wouldn't he?

"Yeah. Yeah, I reckon he does. Although, honest? Next time we fight, we'd best make sure we ain't in Florida. Them folks get enough trouble on their own."

Dwayne cackled and slapped the truck door. "Bitch. Get down there and get to work."

"Yeah, baby. I'm getting." He took himself a deep breath and nodded and started the Chevy back up, eyes focused on Momma's irises and the way the sun made the dew on them kinda sparkle.

The End



# Above Snakes

By AM Riley

From The Anthology Cowboy Up

Published By Torquere Press

Texas seeps into a man slowly, and then stays with him pretty much forever. Like a jug of sun tea left on a south facing porch, the air and the free grass and the redolent clay mud just get thicker and sweeter in a man's blood the longer he sets there.

Until when he sweats, he tastes like Texas.

Jacob turned under the blankets, only his nose poking out into the frigid air. They'd

been just a week out of Fort Worth.

A few days more and the herd would be crossing into Chickasaw country and out of Texas proper. It'd be another four months, maybe, before he was back.

He wanted to get a good snort of her stored in his memory to keep him till he returned. It was hours before sunrise and colder than a witches tit, but once that sun came blazing across the horizon he had over a thousand head of ornery long horns and more 'n a dozen cowboys on the prod and needing him to wrangle 'em and keep 'em in line. Men and beasts. He could use every minute of sleep he could muscle out of this tired old body.

"Mr. Cole?" The whisper came from the darkness beyond his banked fire. Men had learnt a while back to give him plenty of warning before they crept up on him. Jacob considered playing dead, but he knew that voice and the man it belonged to. He sat upright.

"I'm here."

His visitor came forward into the firelight, holding his hat in his hands like he was entering a home.

He walked with the bow-legged lanky gait of a skinny kid practically straight from his mother's house and set to ride the range sixteen hours a day. Which was what Samuel Lenkins really was, Jacob thought wryly. Just a kid. Or a twister sent from the devil. It really did depend on your point of view.

"What's the problem, Lenkins?"

"Sir," said Samuel. He rotated the brim of his hat under his fingers. "I wanted to apologize for the trouble today..."

Jacob sighed, threw off his blankets and sat up, yawning, and cracking his spine with a long stretch. "Sit, kid," he said.

Samuel still had that gimpy leg from where he'd hit the dirt and been stomped the other day. He favored it as he got himself down onto the ground near the fire, and carefully settled his hat back on his head. "I'm mighty sorry, sir. I'm afeard Mister Collins ain't gonna want me on the rest of the ride."

"Well, that's a possibility, kid. This is the second time I've had to throw water over you 'n another waddy."

"He was goadin' me, sir," said Samuel.

"Seems ta be a might too easy to do, son."

"Yes, sir," said Samuel. He looked miserably at the fire. Jacob frowned at him and rubbed his chin reflectively. Truth was, Samuel was looking to be a fine cowboy. Mr. Cole had brought him on as an extra wrangler and he seemed to have what it takes. Stamina, ability and just enough dumb courage to take a mess of beef up the long northern trail to the stockyards. A man'd have to be insane to think he could do such a thing. Jacob figured he was short a hat size, himself, and it seemed Samuel had a bit of that craziness as well.

Problem with Samuel was, he'd fight with the wind just for blowing in his face and it was a fact that on a long ride with nothing between you and a million ugly deaths, a man who blew at the slightest provocation could be a severe liability.

"What gets into you?"

Samuel shrugged a shoulder and stretched his bad leg out in the dirt. Even cowed and apologetic the kid was twitchy as a dog with fleas. And harder 'n iron, from what Jacob could see across the low fire.

He sighed and lowered his hat over his face a bit, just to block out the provocation of that view. He'd seen this a hundred times. Kids fresh from the cradle, taught all manner of righteousness, afraid to just touch themselves in the dark. Sooner or later it came to no good. A man like Samuel, healthy, young and raw with life, couldn't be a preacher now could he? So, his own face hot with embarrassment, Jacob barreled on.

"You know why we geld a stallion, kid?"

"Yes sir," said Lenkins dutifully. "Cuzzin' if we don't they gets so ornery we hafta shoot 'em."

"Tearin' up the herd, fightin' with the other males over nothin' ..." Jacob reminded him.

Samuel was quickish. He gave Jacob a nervous look and shifted on the ground a bit.

"You hafta take yourself in hand."

"I mean to every day, sir," said Samuel. "But..."

Jacob looked off into the soft, gray twilight. "And, I mean, if you hafta take yourself in hand..."

He could almost hear the kid blushing. "You know what I'm saying, Lenkins?" he said, keeping his voice easy.

"Sir," said Samuel, sounding strangled.

"Now, I've gotta get a few hours of shut eye before y'all drive me and my cattle loco tomorrow, so what say you just climb up in that there chuck wagon and get yourself settled?" Jacob lay down, rolling himself back in his blanket, cheek on his hand and back to the kid.

He heard Samuel scratchin' around a bit. Probably trying to think of some sort of objection. But really what could he say? After a few minutes, Jacob heard Samuel climb into the wagon, water jugs and pans and the iron cook stove at the back swaying and banging as he did so. The wagon's metal springs squeaking as the kid climbed across the floor and just as Samuel apparently got himself bunked down, Jacob realized the pots and gear and bed of the wagon were all

going to keep time to the kids every move and he got that hot twist of something deep in his gut.

There was a blissful silence during which, unfortunately, Jacob could just imagine the kid lying there under the rough homespun at the back, unbuttoning his trousers and wrapping those long callused fingers around his organ, the expression on his face almost one of pain at the sensation.

Jacob rolled to his other side and cushioned his ear against his hand but he still heard the gentle creaking, as the wagon set to swaying gently back and forth while someone inside it was doing something rhythmic and fast.

Goldangit, thought Jacob. The hard lead of need was on fire in his groin and his own organ filled up and was throbbing in a second. His hand snaked down to stroke it but he knew he couldn't do it here, not in the clear light, the kid five feet away. Jacob crawled up out of his bedroll, and checked his Colt to be sure there was a shot in it. He slid his knife into the sheath on his thigh and, settling the dark hat firmly on his head, trudged toward the area he'd already patrolled for passing water in the night.

No snakes, clear vision all three directions, nice wide squat oak tree at his back. Jacob leaned against the tree and released himself into the cold night air. And didn't that chill just take the edge off right away? He grinned, passed his water, shook it off a bit and waited for his blood to heat up again, because he knew it would.

Yep, there she blew, as his old navy buddy used to say, and Jacob spat into his palm a few times and set to stroking himself long, slow and firm, humming a little Dixie as he went.

Jacob figured that he and the Lord weren't on the best of terms every day of the week. But judging by what he'd seen and lived through in all of his twenty-four years, he figured the Lord was a mite more understanding than folks made him out to be. So Jacob didn't feel even a tad bit guilty himself as he worked to relieve the tension and the adrenaline that had been building in his body all day. And as the images flitted across his mind that came with the need, hot, naked bodies, on beds, in lakes, he hoped the Lord didn't mind if for a minute he saw a lanky bow-legged kid spread out on the floor of his chuck wagon stroking himself, and that that image was what pushed Jacob over the edge.

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Jacob'd swear that the sun rose not two seconds after he'd closed his eyes, but when he staggered across the way to the wagon, he found a kettle of coffee heating on the stove and Lenkins already gone.

The morning was cool but simmering with a promise of heat, the sky clear and blue and filled with bird song and the early crickets just starting up. He threw beans and potatoes on the big griddle, poured more water in the kettle and banged away at the bell on the wagon to call the men. While they ate and after he set a cleanup crew to work, he went down to the creek and threw some water over his head and face. He looked up and down the bank but didn't see Samuel. He shook his head, saddened at himself for even looking and went back to roll up his blankets and stow 'em.

He was culling his string when he heard some of the boys whistling and calling and he turned around to see a small crowd of cowboys gathering. He pulled his mount in tight and trotted over.



Old Tom was at the back of the pack, looping his lariat carefully through his work gloves, letting his pony graze at the sparse prairie grass. Jacob sidled up next to him.

“What’s goin’ on?”

Tom spat and grinned with tobacco stained teeth. “It’s that Lenkins kid again. Him’n Coop made a wager he couldn’t stay on Ol’ Yeller Jacket there.”

Yellow Jacket was a new broomtail. Green-broke, but just barely. Smarter and meaner than a cornered polecat and twice as dangerous. Nobody’d ride him unless they’d gone through every pony in their string and their partner’s besides. And even then they might consider walkin’.

Lenkins and Coop had been entertaining a friendly rivalry since Samuel had signed on with Collins’ outfit. They were the men primarily in charge of breaking horses and keeping the mounts work-ready. Both wild, wiry and high-tempered. Jacob figured they’d either end up best of friends or killing one another dead one day.

Jacob strained his neck up, but couldn’t see, so he nudged his horse’s head between the others, who, looking back and seeing the bossman, let him through. The cowboys were all grinning and looking bright eyed, the way a man will when he’s about to see something purely entertaining.

A rough circle of men and their beasts encircled a level area where Samuel sat astride the blindfolded pony. The flank strap cinched nice and tight, a wide

halter and his own long thighs were all that Samuel had to hold on to a shivering, snorting Yellow Jacket. The pony shook his head hard and stomped with his right foot in a warning sort of way. Lenkins, his hat pulled down and his eyes in shadow, just leaned forward and caught the blindfold between his fingers.

Yellow Jacket's back rippled; he tossed his head.

Samuel sat atop him, easy as pie and peaceful as a priest. As one, the men around Jacob moved forward in their saddles in anticipation. A flick of Samuel's arm and the blindfold was off.

The next bit went by so fast even Jacob's sharp eye couldn't catch it. One minute, man and beast stood in the center of a peaceful bit of prairie grass in the early morning dew, the bit of cloth fluttering down from the pony's eyes, and then Yellow Jacket was in the air, forelegs straight below him, hind legs pointed to the sky, back bowed, head down and mean mouth pulling those reigns as far as they could go.

Samuel's legs seemed to just stretch and bend with Yellow Jacket's back. His hands barely moved, his back ramrod straight. Yellow Jacket twisted, sharp and fast, and landed hard, his rear feet kicked out and his shoulders pitched and rolled forward. Samuel rode it, easy and graceful, his back swaying and giving with the movement. He seemed to feel the pony's mind set just before Yellow Jacket and pulled his shoulders back, twisting the other way and anticipating the pony's sudden reverse turn with a tightening of the reigns on that side.

Jacob had never seen a man stick to a horse the way Samuel Lenkins did. Not a speck of air showed between the horse's hide and the man's tight little butt. His legs gripped the horse's flanks so tight, they seemed melted there, like he was

just another extension of that critter, his face impassive, that hat sitting tightly on his head, keeping a shadow over his eyes.

Yellow Jacket performed a series of predictable hops. Samuel made it look easy enough, like a kid skipping rope, but Jacob knew from experience the jolt that shot through a man's spine when a horse did that trick. Then Yellow Jacket seemed to take a breath, he sidestepped a ways, slowing down. Like he was thinking maybe it wasn't worth trying to buck this man off on this particular morning.

Then Jacob saw it. He couldn't believe it, but he saw it. Samuel turned his boot heel in slightly, the flash of metal, a quick jab of his heel.

The men whooped as the pony screamed and whipped around, kicking with all four legs and jerking the reigns hard.

"He's spurred him," screamed a man near Jacob, pounding on his shoulder in his excitement. "If that boy ain't plumb crazy!"

Now the horse was madder 'n the hornet he was named after and it had gone personal. Jacob could see it clear as day that pony had made up his mind that the man atop his back was going to be eatin' dust afore he was through with him. He heaved and jumped, he bolted and lunged against the reins and then turned his head round quick, teeth snapping.

Lenkins just sat atop him, calm and smilin' a bit, jerking his leg back from the pony's mouth and slapping his muzzle with the reigns. Yellow Jacket bunched and jumped, twisting mid-air. It was such a hard stunt to pull, that Samuel

probably hadn't been expecting it, and Jacob felt something catch in his throat as he saw Samuel lose his seat a bit, coming forward in the saddle.

Yellow Jacket felt his rider going off balance and took advantage, twisting the other way as he landed, almost fouling his own leg in the process, then immediately rearing back.

Samuel almost lost it, probably sheer muscle pulled him upright, legs clamping around the horse's heaving, sweating sides. Jacob saw his gloved hand grabbing a handful of mane, the first sign of trouble on Samuel's part. But those legs and that ass just clamped down again, like they'd been glued on tight and Yellow Jacket only had a few more good bucks in him before he was spent, standing head bowed and breathing and foaming in the center of the tore up clearing.

Samuel, dang his hide, grinned and took off his hat.

There was a moment of silence and then the men went crazy, yelling and cheering and exclaiming to each other. Samuel just sat there grinning. Jacob saw Coop come up and say something, holding out a hand. Samuel accepted the handshake graciously enough. Coop said something else then, and Samuel's skin flushed scarlet. As Coop wheeled his horse and trotted off, Jacob could see Samuel still just settin' there, his face red and struck looking.

What the heck?

Jacob watched as Samuel rode to the place where the string pony's were tethered and slid off Yellow Jacket, barely paying heed to the admiring congratulations

around him. He merely hopped aboard one of his string and cantered off at a hard pace.

Jacob figured he was going to have another talk with Samuel. Maybe get the kid to tell him what was going on between him and Coop. Rivalry was one thing; some kind of grudge was another altogether.

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Samuel'd not been around for the evening victuals, but then Jacob hadn't expected him to be. It was quite common for a man who rode the line at night to make camp out there , with nothing but some jerky, a bedroll and maybe a little piece of tanned hide to keep the wind off him.

So, after he'd cleared the mess, Jacob had himself another cup of coffee, rolled some hot bread up in a towel and took his mount up around the far north end of the herd. It was a crest of the hill, where a man could see the beef moving below him, and he figured it was the place a man who wanted to be left alone would go for.

He remembered. Him 'n Al had spent many a night at the far end of the herd. Away from the others, just themselves and the stars and the cows mooing. Off in the distance the boys who rode the herd, singing back and forth betwixt them. Weren't nothing like it to make a man feel like the maker himself was gently rocking him in his hand.

"Remember it, Al?" said Jacob quietly to himself, letting his pony find its way up the hill. He turned a bit in the saddle and for just a minute he expected to hear his old friend coming up behind him.

Sometimes Jacob liked to pretend that Al was still there, just falling a little behind on the trail, maybe. He'd let himself believe it for only a minute, though. Cold, hard reality was something a man had to pay attention to out here, 'lessin he wanted to end up snake bit or shot through the middle by cold lead, like Al had.

There were some days when Jacob got so sick with the loneliness and with missing that happy laugh and his pardner's quick arm around him, that he was half-wishing he could follow Al wherever the heck he'd gone. Just let his guard down for a minute, maybe, when some ornery longhorn was fixin' to teach him a thing or two. But whenever he had one of those thoughts he just brought himself up hard and told himself first thing Al would do if Jacob ever pulled some fool stunt like that was lay him out on the ground of the hereafter with a good sock to the jaw.

Jacob came 'round a crop of trees and saw the glow of a little campfire off to one side. He steered his mount off that way, letting the clop of hooves announce his coming. When they were close enough, he saw the kid, hunched over the campfire, kind of resting that stubborn chin on his arms. Samuel straightened up and looked toward him. Jacob knew the kid'd recognize him just by his shape. You came to know how a man sat a horse real quick out here, so he didn't bother with a greeting. Just road over to the tie-up, dismounted.

"You mind company?"

Samuel shook his head. Poked the fire. He looked sulky in the red and orange light. "What I'd do now?"

"Nothin'. Just came to have a talk."

That suspicious look the kid shot him told Jacob a helluva lot about how many friends the kid had had in his lifetime. But Samuel just nodded his head and drew the wool blanket tighter around his shoulders, moving over slightly to give Jacob some of the empty ground near the fire.

Jacob sat, unrolled the bread and offered it to the kid. Samuel took a piece and they sat there chewing and contemplating.

The wind came curling up over the knoll. Smelling like new grass and wild rose and beef and cow chips. It was a brown and hairy odor. It made a man feel like the world was alive and growing right under his feet. Above, the stars so thick they carpeted the sky in a swath and the land so far and wide without stopping, he could almost see the edge of the world turning under the blackened sky.

"Nice night."

Samuel looked up and around like he'd just noticed it. "Yeah." He went back to frowning at the fire.

"Saw that little bronco bustin' this morning."

Kid wasn't mad enough at whatever it was to keep a cheeky grin from his face.

"You set a horse like no cowboy I ever seen," said Jacob honestly. Truth was, it'd made him half hard to watch it. "That Yellow Jacket is as mean as they come. And smarter than a lotta men. You wanna be watchin' yerself around him from now on, Lenkins."

Samuel shrugged, as if some ornery beast weren't gonna scare him none.

"Seems you might hafta be watching yerself around Coop, too."

Ah, there it was, like thunderclouds climbing the sky; the kid's whole face went dark.

"He been complainin' about me, Mister Cole? Cuz, whatever he said, I ain't done nothing..."

Jacob was surprised. "No, he ain't complained to me."

The kid just sat there. Face all stormy and body as tight as a hide over an Indian's tomtom.



"He got something to complain about?" asked Jacob.

"No sir."

"What's going on between you two fellers, Samuel? I don't mind telling you I do not like the looks of it."

"Nothin's going on. Coop just don't like me."

"Well..." Jacob was hornswaggled and he didn't mind admitting it. Cowboys didn't take to hating a man for no reason. "You musta done something."

"I told you," said Samuel, low and growling. "I didn't do nothin'. Coop just thinks..." he swallowed and looked off into the night.

Something was pricking at the hairs at the back of Jacob's neck. Something reminding him of something. It was a nervy, displaced feeling. A feeling like he got when he was looking into a dark copse of trees and just maybe there was something in there he didn't want to face. He backed off.

"Best to work it out, son," he said.

"I want to sir. I...I'm afeard Ol' Coop's just set to hate me and there's nothin' I can do about it."

"Well that's a shame. A man needs a friend, 'specially out here."

That sharp set little chin rose up a notch. "I'm doing fine on my own, sir."

An ache set itself up right under Jacob's rib cage. Something about that fierce profile in the firelight, the clenched jaw, the proud neck brought it on. "You don't have to Samuel," he found himself saying. "You got me as a friend, if you want it."

The kid turned his surprised face toward him and Jacob just sort of barreled on, more embarrassed than he'd even been the other night. "An a' course there's other waddies out here what'd make fine friends too, you give 'em a chance."

Samuel nodded, a look of wonderment on his face.

Jacob turned away from that look, sort of dazed and confused himself. "Just you think on it," he said, nodding at the fire.

"Yes sir."

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Lenkins just seemed to trail in Jacobs's footsteps after that night.

Jacob couldn't think what had made him offer his friendship to Samuel in that manner. All the men knew about Jacob. Knew he was a loner. That Jacob just didn't seem easy sharing his space with another cowboy. It itched him, made him twitch and growl, having someone else around him too much. It seemed that no man could fit into the shape left in the air where Al had sat. The worn niche in Jacob's soul that had belonged to Al. When another man sought him out, tried to find some conversation with him, it was like they'd picked up one of old Al's gloves and just put in on. It didn't fit. It weren't right. It aggravated him.

He couldn't say why Samuel's presence didn't set his teeth on edge. Samuel was so loose and easy, though, it was like he just slid in there, sort of, next to Al's ghost. Not trying to fill the void, but living in an agreeable harmony with it.

If Al had had a say, Jacob figured he would have liked the kid.

Samuel was still assigned to the night watch and when his shift was over he'd taken to coming by the kitchen and starting up the stove before Jacob woke. Sitting by the fire and handing the man his coffee when he rose and just quietly sharing those sweet pre-dawn minutes with him.

Samuel wasn't much of a talker, which suited Jacob just fine. Man didn't spend his life in the free grass if he didn't like the peace and quiet. One morning,

though, while Samuel was fixing the coffee... clearing out a little of the old grounds, adding some new, swilling the water around in the pot to catch all the flavoring' and then instead of setting the pot back onto the stove, he just stood there, staring into it like some bug was floating in there or something.

"Something wrong, kid?"

"Not wrong, no. I was just thinkin'. You ever miss your wife when you're out here, Mr. Cole?"

Jacob was a little surprised. Everyone knew he wasn't married. "Got no wife," he said.

"You got a girl at home waiting for you then?"

Jacob frowned. "No, I don't. Don't figure I ever will, neither. Not much the marryin' kind, kid."

"Ah," said Samuel. "Well, I ain't never gonna marry, neither."

Jacob thought that was hardly likely. Kid was randier than a bull calf in season. "You'll meet some girl that'll change your mind about that, I expect."

Samuel set the kettle down thoughtfully. Adjusted the stove and lit the flint. "Don't like girls much," he said.

Jacob chuckled. "They grow on a man, I hear."

"Ain't never growed on me." Samuel gave Jacob a hot blue glance from under those dark eyebrows. "What about you?"

"Got nothin' 'gainst women," said Jacob, looking at his boots, around the camp, anywhere but at Samuel. He slapped his hands together. "Here now, let's roust these vaqueros up and get them moving." He strode over to the big barn bell mounted on the side of the wagon and set to slamming its clapper back and forth to call the men to breakfast.

Like maybe all the racket would cover up the sound of his heart beating and the wild bats in his belly.

Truth was, Jacob'd been letting himself look a bit. Watching that tight little butt swaying in those old worn breeches. Or when Samuel'd lean over picking up some tack or something, maybe Jacob'd let his gaze linger. But he figured he'd been discreet about it.

That Samuel might have seen those little looks, the want festering away in Jacob's heart, well, the idea just scared him worse than any varmint Jacob could imagine.

But the next minute Samuel seemed to forget the whole subject, jawing and joshing with one of the men what came up for breakfast, and that was that, thought Jacob. And a man'd have to be crazy not to take that as a warning. He was just going to have to be more careful from now on.

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They were three days up Chisholm and curving around the river that led past the Cheyenne holdings when Mister Collins called him up to the front.

"We'll be stopping to pow wow with Chief Black Kettle, Jackie," he said, slapping him on the shoulder in that friendly way of his. "Want you and a coupla boys to come with me."

"Yes, sir." Jacob let his pony dance a bit while he stewed over his next question. "We stayin' in their camp again, sir?"

"Think the Chief'll insist, Jackie," said Billy. "You don't mind, do you son?" The last was said soft and low.

Jacob shrugged. "No, sir." He spat on the ground, giving himself reason to turn his face from Billy's keen eye.

"Listen, Jackie, I don't want to insult the Chief." Billy scanned the plains around them, the beef milling to their right, the river to their left. No, it wouldn't be wise to insult a war chief of the Cheyenne nation, now, would it?

Jacob shook his head. Met Billy's eyes. "I don't mind, sir."

"You know the men respect you, Jackie. They don't think less of you for it."

"I know, sir. They's good men." He forced himself to grin and shrugged his shoulders. Saw Billy's worried brows relax as he returned the smile.

And didn't he feel a right boll weevil of a man lookin' in Billy's eyes and pretendin' like that? Jacob rode back to the line, a rancid feeling in his belly and a seriously scary expression for the men who watched him coming back. Because Jacob was a truthful man and he'd just lied to his old friend about minding visiting the Cheyenne. Mind? Hell, Jacob couldn't wait.

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"I've never seen a red Indian," said Samuel. He was helping Jacob roll up the goods they were taking as gifts to the tribe. Jacob had a little jerky, and some extra things stuffed in his own personal roll. He had reason, from his last visit, to know they'd be appreciated.

"Sure you have," said Jacob. He heaved the roll up on the mule's back and planted his foot in the beast's belly to force out the air it was holding before

giving the cinch strap a good hard yank. "That boy of Ol' Jimmie's, down the pawn shop is a red Indian."

Samuel's hand rested on his lasso, one thumb rubbing at the rawhide braiding. Kid was twitchy and hard as iron under those chaps and long breaches. Jacob tried hard not to notice these things, but Lord, it was a real chore not to. Samuel walked like a male tomcat with swollen balls, like he was in real pain half the time, despite the rattle and creak that came from the chuck wagon on regular occasions. Jacob spat and thanked the Lord he weren't seventeen again.

"Never been to Jimmie's," said Samuel. "My maw said it weren't decent."

Jacob chose not to comment. From the bits Samuel had let out, seemed his maw didn't think much was decent that a man had to do. Jacob kinda got the feeling that Samuel's maw didn't have much use for menfolk's ways in general. Samuel didn't mention his paw at all and Jacob had a cowboy's sense of a man's privacy not to ask about it.

"Well, Ol' Jimmie's just makin' a livin' like everybody else, I figure," said Jacob. And left it at that.

Samuel tied the mules' lead on and followed Jacob back to the tent, hauling the feedbag on one shoulder. Kid'd gone from being a right nuisance to being a truly helpful thing ever since he'd sort of snuggled up under Jacob's wing. Jacob'd decided to reward him by letting him come up to the tribe's camp with them. It was meant to be a treat, but Samuel was getting a little nervous.



"Now just keep yer mouth shut and yer eyes open, kid," said Jacob, grinning and stepping up into his saddle.

"Not a kid," replied Samuel, as he always did. He hopped onto his paint and took a minute to bring the ornery critter to hand. "I'm almost your age."

"Don't get uppity." Jacob grinned. "Kid." And he spurred his pony and took off at a gallop leaving Samuel to grumble and tow the mules behind him.

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Any concerns Jacob may have had about Samuel's demeanor were dispelled once they'd climbed the trail into Chief Black Kettle's camp and the kid was obviously stunned by the sight into utter docility.

The Cheyenne chief had an impressive band of warriors, and they were all fanned out for the ceremonial greeting, in full war paint, all feathers sprouting from their hair, beaded vests and loin clothes and proud carriages. Their mounts filled a makeshift corral. Fierce little beasts, all muscle and sharp eyes. Jacob saw Samuel appraising them with awestruck amazement.

Suddenly quiet as a little lamb, the boy went off to tie the horses, standing ready and watching the proceedings from a distance.

Jacob kept a close leg to Billy's right. He was the captain in charge, as the Cheyenne saw it and they figured that was his position.

The usual ritual went on. Much grand speaking and passing of compliments and gifts. Jacob figured the Cheyenne weren't much different in this way than the stuffed shirt big Chiefs in the city. All jabbering and posturing.

There was one standing to the side of Black Kettle, not in warrior garb though he stood in the place of honor at the chief's right side. His shining hair braided and decorated with beads and trinkets. Jacob schooled himself not to stare overmuch. Maybe later, if things fell out as they had last time. But here, in front of Billy and the crew, he dare not cast more than a passing glance that way.

Boy, if Samuel didn't notice the Hemaneh right away though.

"What the bull-jigger is that," squeaked the kid. He was currying out a mean burr from his pony's tail. Samuel swiveled his head and stared again at the redman in question.

Jacob shrugged casually, attending to his chew bag and pretending indifference. "That's what the Cheyenne call a Hemaneh, kid," he said. "It's a special position in the tribe."

"Looks like a man dressed like a woman!" protested Samuel, a bit too loudly. He completely gave up interest in his pony's tail and stared outright.

"Keep yer voice down, idjit," said Jacob quickly. "And quit yer starin'. You want to get a rise out of these people?"

Samuel turned away, but his shoulders were twitching and his voice was still squeaking with outrage. "Never seen nothin' like it is all."

"Well, you ain't seen all that much, kid, so's that's not sayin' anythin' is it?" Jacob knew he sounded snappish but he just couldn't help it. He raised his eyes slowly and carefully and met those of the redman across the way with a little click of knowing, then looked away quickly. "He's much revered in this tribe, just so you know kid."

Samuel grumbled something.

"What's that?"

"Saw him lookin' at you."

"Well, sure. 'Taint nothin' wrong with that. Me an' him met the other time. He knows me." Jacob figured it was best to let the kid have it now and with both barrels. "And I'll be stayin' at his teepee tonight. It's expected."

"What?" The kid whirled on him, looking ready to swing for the Lord's sake. "You can't! It ain't ... decent!"

Jacob felt himself rile at that. "Not fer you to say, I'm thinkin'," he said, slow and with a grumble of warning in his voice.

Samuel, unlike most men with a lick of sense, failed to heed that warning growl. "No!"

Jacob kept his eyes steady on Samuel. "What did you just say, kid?"

They stared each other down until Jacob saw the kid give it up, just like a dog made to let a rabbit fall from his mouth. Samuel turned away, every muscle in his back expressing his sorrow and disappointment. Jacob felt sorry for it, he truly did. He'd been growing attached to Samuel's esteem. But he was like an arrow loosed and heading for a target, now. Nothing but an act of God was keeping him from that teepee tonight.

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Sackeewanee, or at least that was as close to his name as Jacob reckoned he'd ever get, was just as gracious and gentle as he had been on their last visit.

They sat on the robes in the center of the tent, the little bowls of sweet juice at their sides, Jacob's gifts unrolled between them.

Sackeewanee smiled with really pretty teeth and his eyes glowed when he saw the clear blue beads and the little coral colored ones that Jacob had found down near the gulf on that trip.

He wasn't gonna give Sackeewanee some cheap trader's gimcrack now, was he? Indian or no, Jacob felt more gratitude towards Sackeewanee than he could ever express. Sackeewanee was the only man who had ever touched him. The only one Jacob had ever known to be like him. Until their first meeting, Jacob hadn't even known the pleasure one man could give another. All he'd known was aching and loneliness and an unquenchable need. And many a long winter night since then had been just him and a thick robe and his memories of Sackeewanee.

He drew out the leather tobacco pouch. It was the traditional sort, stitched in a heart with complicated beadwork. Sackeewanee's gift from their last trip and treasured. To Jacob it meant that he wasn't alone.

Sackeewanee smiled when he saw Jacob draw it out and offer him the pipe and baccky. But he gently pushed the offerings and the gifts aside. Putting his hands, instead on Jacob's shoulders.

It seemed a might rapid, and Jacob didn't want to appear to just be using the shaman like some girl in town, but Lord almighty it was good to feel those big hands caressing his belly and thighs.

He toppled under him like big oak tipping out of soggy ground, his eyes just fluttering closed. The soft robes under him, Sackeewanee's sweet mouth and wet tongue all over his chest and neck and traveling downward and it was as good as anything Jacob had ever known.

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The next morning he had trouble not grinnin' like a coyote and sitting aboard loose and happy, he greeted Samuel with a wide smile.

Samuel was looking a might grouchy, but then he'd probably not spent the night on a buffalo robe with a big-limbed redskin attending to his every need.

"What's got into you?" growled Samuel.

Jacob dragged his mind out of a certain teepee just in time to catch his pony trying some trick. He got control of the reins and tightened his legs around his mount. And didn't that just set the muscles there to rememberin'. He grinned again. "Fine mornin'," he said.

Samuel spat once, a long shoot of pure green tobacco into the dirt t'other side of his mount. "Told Cooper I'd be down to help bend the herd," he said, and he took off.

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Samuel seemed to keep away from Jacob after their Cheyenne visit. Jacob figured Samuel just didn't approve of Jacob no more. It made him truly sorry. The kid had sort of worn a groove into his side, he had to admit, and as little as Samuel talked, it was a speaking silence, and Jacob felt the lack of it.

"Well, Al, guess it's just you an' me again." It'd been a while since Jacob'd been free to just address Al out loud like that and he felt that Al had faded a bit. Or maybe he'd just forgotten how quiet a dead man could be.

They'd moved several days following Mr. Goodnight's trail, the beef picking their way easy and happy and Jacob fell into the routine of it. Up early mornings, the men calling and cattle mooing. Riding till he about fell from the saddle, and dreaming to the sound of cowboys singing in the dark.

He was on the morning ride, just coming down from his last circuit of the herd when he heard one of the men hollering his name from a distance.

The horse was kicking up a bowl of dust as the rider approached and Jacob had a sour feeling in his belly at the man's face. He spurred his mount and met him halfway.

"What's the trouble?"

The man brought his horse's head around hard, the beast's hooves dancing a fever across the dusty ground. "That kid Lenkins and Birdie and Coop," said the man.

Jacob growled and spat. "Dadburnit."

The man's mount wheeled again. "Looks like summit's gonna get himself keelt this time."

Jacob took off at a gallop, leaving the man to watch the cows in his stead.

The cowboys were a mess of blood and spit and muddied torn clothes when he got there. One of 'em, looked to be Coop, down in the dirt for good. The others, Samuel and the one they called Birdie were weavin' and wipin' at their bloody faces, other hands still in fists. Around them a ring of men who shoulda been workin' egg'in' them on.

"C'mon, Birdie, give him what for..." "Show that kid you can whomp him..." As a group the men heard him coming and sort of slunk off like the critters they were. In a few minutes it was just him and the wild ones.

Samuel cast him a mean stare and reeled 'round to take another swing at Birdie who was pretty much just standin' cuz his boots were too stiff to let him fall. He swung wide, thank Jesus, and Jacob leapt forward and caught his arm. Then grabbed him quick by the scruff of the neck and threw him down to his butt on the ground.

"What the heck has gotten into you kid?" he yelled.

Samuel drew his sleeve across his face, he seemed to be tryin' to rise, before falling back again to his elbows. "Ain't no kid," he said, blood and spittle spraying from his split lip.



"That's right you ain't! You're loco as a coyote and twice as useless. Now you've set two good men off their jobs for the day and... and look at you. Goldangit, kid, what the hell!"

Samuel looked slightly askance at the language. He paled a bit under the dirty and sunblackened skin. "Whatchya gonna do?"

"I don't know," said Jacob. "I'd sooner shoot you than look at you right now, kid."

Samuel squinted off to the side. He rolled up on his arm and rubbed his face with his sleeve. "I'll leave at the next watering hole."

"Jumpin' Jehosaphat, kid, I can't leave you on the trail like some carcass. Your family'd have my hide. We don't do that."

Samuel didn't respond. Didn't look up. "Don't care."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't care. Leave me here to rot!" Samuel seemed to be getting het up again, for sweet Jesus sake the kid was crazier than a heat sick wolf. He struggled to his feet, face red and white under the sweat and dirt and blood, staggerin' and swearin'. "I don't want nothin' to do with you, Mister Collins and your rottin' stinkin' cowflesh. And ... and nothin' to do with yer red Indian friends and yer..."

“What?”

Samuel was crying, dear Lord, thought Jacob. He didn't know what to make of it, half sorry and half so mad he couldn't think and maybe that was why he didn't see the kid's punch coming until it was too late and he was spread out in the dirt and staring up at Samuel.

It got pretty ugly after that.

Now, Jacob was a peaceable sort of man. His temper weren't hair-trigger like many cowboys, which was maybe why Billy Collins and he'd hit it off so fine and why they was still working together now. Jacob could always take a breath before he spoke, and speak a word before he fought. But he was no pale calf when it came to fighting as a few of the men thereabouts could attest to. And the audacity of the kid taking a swing at him, him being the voice for the boss and all... well that sort of thing couldn't go without a proper demonstration of its foolhardiness.

So he tromped him.

When the dust settled around them, mud and blood in the dirt, and a mess of happy vaqueros standing around hooting, and Samuel laid out, one eye swolled shut and the other sort of lolling in his head like he couldn't quite focus. Then Jacob leant over and grabbed the kid more or less by his collar and hauled him off and half shoved, half kicked his butt down to the little creek.

"If I turn around and see one waddy not aboard and workin' the band I'm gonna see one waddy not gettin' paid for the day!" Jacob hollered, loud as Heaven's trumpets. He didn't even turn to watch the men skittering away faster than lizards over rocks.

He shoved Samuel hard and the kid sort of ran and fell into the creek water.

Jacob just strode right in after him, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck like you would a puppy and pushed his face under the foot of water there. The kid struggled after a half a minute and Jacob let him up. Samuel was gaspin' and spittin' water and blinkin' that unswolled eye.

"What's gotten into you kid?"

"None of yer business."

Jacob used both hands, 'cause the kid was wiry and slippery as a fish and getting back his fight, but he held him down under the water a little longer this time, then let him up.

"Talk to me now, kid," he said. "Or I'm gonna be explaining to yer maw why I'm bringing back a waterlogged carcass instead of her sweet baby boy."

"Shut up," said Samuel, still struggling, but weakly, and half of it just to keep his face turned away from Jacob. Jacob let go and gave the kid a push.

“What’s got stuck in your craw, kid?”

Samuel’s back was to him, the shoulders just shakin’. Some weird noises coming out of him like Jacob’d maybe held him under a little too long. “Kid?” he said, and clapped him on the shoulder.

Samuel spun, elbow back, fisted hand ready to swing and Jacob just easily caught the arm before it flew. The kid was head to toe wet and his face was a mess of pain and bruises already rising. The swollen eye starting to bloody underneath and Jacob could see that the kid was fixin to cry again. That longish hair of his hung all over his face, Samuel blinking back tears and blindness from the shiner and the wet strands. Jacob handled him in that rough gentle way you do a roped calf. He pushed the hair back, “Here let’s jest ...”

Samuel pushed at him.

“Lord, kid...”

Samuel grabbed his shoulders. Jacob almost fell. “Hey...”

Samuel reared up and planted that bruised and split mouth against Jacob’s very own. Jacob was too stunned for a moment to even think. Those lips were hard, and tasting a little green like the river and a little coppery from the blood and then Samuel pressed closer, the man’s breath hot and his lips opening.

Jacob pushed him back. The sun blinked in white shapes off the surface of the water and from Samuel's eyes. Hot and sharp. Jacob could hear his own breath, Samuel's, the water dripping off them.

"What...?" Jacob sort of gasped.

Samuel's eyes seemed to tighten up a notch, going suddenly walleyed like a Mustang afore it's about to buck and he reared sideways, lookin' like he was about to make a run for it, but Jacob lurched forward, his thighs fighting the river and grabbed the man before he could escape.

It was obvious, suddenly, like the grass plain revealed by shafts of sunlight poking through a thunderhead. Samuel's wet clothing clung to the man's waist, his limbs shaking, those eyes burning. Jacob hadn't seen it; he didn't know why, maybe so wrapped up in keeping himself hid, he hadn't seen what was happening with Samuel.

"It's okay, kid." Samuel was shaking so hard under his hand, Jacob thought he might just bust a gut. "I understand."

"No you don't," Samuel said, and he started laughing kind of crazy, like maybe he'd been drinking Indian whiskey or something. "You don't."

"Yeah, I do." Jacob looked up at the creek bank, gave a quick look 'round the camp. All the good little vaqueros appeared to have hightailed it back to the herd. He grabbed the kid's wet head in his own and bent over, pressed a kiss to

his mouth. Let it linger long enough to make his point and was about to pull back, but Samuel latched onto him then like the bronc rider he was. His hands wrapped around Jacob's neck and his mouth opened, a wild moan coming out of him. He wrapped a leg around Jacob's hip, that need riding against Jacob's thigh and Jacob was struggling and trying to claw himself away with the thinking half of his brain while the other half was dying and going to Heaven.

Finally the thinking part won and he threw the kid off him, Samuel landing hard in the water again. Jacob grabbed him and hauled him up. But before Samuel could latch on and start chewing at him again, he said, "Watch yerself, kid, they'll be inviting us both to a hemp party."

Samuel stared. "But... but they all know about you and that red Indian."

Jacob blinked at him, his mind moving rapidly, the ivories clicking into place. "Nobody knows nothin'," he said. "They think it's all a blaze to flatter Chief Black Kettle."

Samuel looked away. He wrapped wet arms around his torso. "So something did happen," he said, flatly.

"Well..." Jacob figured it was all on the table now. "Sure."

Samuel began wading back to the creek shore. Jacob following. "You not talking to me again?"

Samuel climbed back up on the bank. He plucked his hat out of the mud and brushed it off. Then he set to wringing out his shirt and shaking his head around to shed the water. The air was like a bean oven and Jacob figured they'd both be bone dry within minutes. "I'm talkin'," said Samuel. "Just ain't nothin' left to say."

"Why?"

Samuel turned and looked at him. His eyes bright blue. "Cuz you was mine and that damned Indian stole you," he said, and he turned and marched off.

"What? Here now, Lenkins, what are you sayin'?"

But Samuel climbed back onto his mount, wheeled her around and trotted off to work the line, leaving Jacob standing there staring.

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"We need to talk." Jacob stood at the edge of the firelight and announced it to Samuel, hunched over his little campfire.

Samuel had out a page of bible and was carefully rolling tobacco in it. He sealed it off, lit it, puffed and blew out smoke before he answered. "Don't have much choice, do I, Mister Cole?"

Christ on a Cross. Jacob blew out his cheeks and sighed. "You have a choice, Samuel. I ain't here as your boss. I'm here as ... as a friend."

Samuel considered his fag, tilting his head, and Jacob could see the dark shine of his hair as he tossed it back. "Guess a man can't have too many friends."

Jacob took that as a 'yea' and shuffled on up to the fire. He sat down across it so he could see Samuel's face bent down and studying his hands from beneath that mop of hair. He took out his own tobacco pouch.

He tried to think where to begin.

"Sackeewanee," he said. "He's the only one what ever..." Jacob bit his lip and stopped. He couldn't think how to explain this. How to explain how much it had meant to find someone else in all this man's world. And then he looked at Samuel, all twisted around himself across the fire and thought how he might feel if he were in the kid's boots.

"It's a lonely life," he blurted out.

Samuel looked up at him. His eyes shone. "Well, yeah, the range does that to a man I'm guessin'."



"Not that," said Jacob. "Well, yeah that and, you know, the other ..."

"Yeah," sighed Samuel.

"I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy," he said.

Samuel was silent, watching him.

"A man wants a wife. Someone sweet to keep his place. Can't bach it forever, it ain't wholesome. And younguns, someone to leave behind something." Jacob played with his pouch but he didn't load the pipe. "I ain't ever gonna have none of that, kid. I know that. And one day I'll be too old to ride the free grass, or some ornery critter'll lame me, and I'll be livin' out of Miss Molly's roomin' house working the mines until the black lung takes me and that'll be that."

He pushed his hat back and looked the kid in the eye, dead on, across that little fire. "Figure I'm lucky if a Comanche arrow ends it all for me early."

Samuel shook his head. Jacob wasn't' sure what the man was denying but he kept on. "If you can make a life with a woman, kid, you surely oughta. Cuz there's nothing here but loneliness and sorrow. I can't offer you nothing kid."

Samuel looked at him, steady, across the fire. "I ain't a kid," he said.

Jacob almost laughed at that. Except he was afraid if he did he'd end up crying.

"I ain't a kid and I told you, I don't like girls. And it seems it don't have to be lonely. Not if a man has a friend and a good horse and all the free grass that's out there."

"I had a friend once. His name was Al." Jacob was surprised how rough his voice sounded. He hadn't said Al's name out loud ever in front of anybody. Just, there'd been no one to tell before now, had there? "And I thought like you do. Me 'n Al, best of pals, we was. We was gonna bach it just fine. See the world, you know. Blow some wild seed? Didn't need nothin' else. Then one day he was gone." Jacob swallowed, took a long breath that felt hot in his throat. "One minute yippin' like a Comanche, just charging up that Yankee line, next minute he's bleedin' out on the ground, lookin' at me..." his voice died.

He had to breathe a bit, staring at the campfire. He heard Samuel stand up and come 'round to his side. Just squatting down there beside him.

"I wouldn't wish it on nobody," said Jacob, again.

"I'm sorry," said Samuel. He put one hand on Jacob's shoulder and Jacob wondered if the kid could feel the shaking he had going on inside.

"But you don't have to be lonely no more," Samuel said, earnestly. "Not while I'm ..."

He didn't get to finish because Jacob had risen and grabbed his face and was just kissing him to beat the devil. After a minute he let Samuel's mouth go because the kid was kind of gaspin' and his hands were flailin'.

"C'mon," whispered Jacob against Samuel's lips, sweet and low. "Let's find someplace no one'll bother us."

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It was awe inspiring and kind of daunting how much Samuel didn't know. They'd climbed up in the cook wagon. Jacob taking the time to stuff the springs with grease and take down the pans and stuff the bell clapper. He'd brought out his roll and made a softer sort of bed for them both and then he and Samuel had just sort of casually stripped down to their long johns.

Then they looked across the little space at each other.

Jacob didn't spend a lot of time looking in mirrors. And the only person what'd ever said anything about his appearance, aside from his dear departed mama, had been Al. All joshing and slapping his arm sorta. Calling him 'bobcat' and teasing him about his veiny muscles and his yellow hair. Now he suddenly felt self-conscious and wondered what Samuel was thinking, looking at him with those big eyes.

"What do we do now?" whispered Samuel. He had his hands sort of crossed in front of him and Jacob realized it was to cover the huge swelling those thin long

johns were doing nothing to hide. He had a tent of his own he realized and saw the kid looking at it with a kind of wonder.

Made a man feel all strong and gentle to have another looking at him like that. "It's okay, Samuel. Jest lie down and I'll show you what to do."

"You know, then?" squeaked Samuel, staring down at the bedding as if it was a pit of Hell.

Jacob came up and took the man's arms gently in his hands, drew him closer. Leaned in and finally got a little kiss. Samuel exhaled against his mouth, a little puff of surprise.

"Sure, Samuel. Sackeewanee showed me."

Samuel's eyes got a pinched-up look. "That red Indian..."

"Hush." Jacob laid his mouth over Samuel's and pulled him in tight. "We's here now."

He got the kid to lie down, finally, just by kissing him so hard he was sort of brainless and giving him a good tilt over. Then Samuel lay under his hand, looking up at him wide eyed and shaking all over like a rabbit facing down a snake.

Jacob unbuttoned his long johns slowly. Letting the kid take it in. The pelt of yellow hair over his chest, trailing down to his organ. Jacob slipped the undergarment down his hips and let Samuel gape his fill.

"I ain't gonna hurt you," said Jacob

"I know that," whispered Samuel, his eyes all bright and watching. Jacob got down beside him and laid the flat of his palm on Samuel's stomach. The muscles under his hand were hard and tremored. Jacob petted softly for a while, until Samuel settled some, then he undid the buttons on the long johns, rapidlike, like you slip a halter over a skittish pony. Samuel was all set to jump, but Jacob slid Samuel's top down quickly and tumbled onto him. Instead of jumping, Samuel arched, his legs opening just naturally. Jacob wriggled the leggings down, setting their organs to bumping and rubbing and Samuel cried out softly at that, his head rolling.

"Hush," Jacob caught his head and kissed him. "You can't make no noise. Nobody can know, Samuel." He kissed Samuel again.

Samuel's hand came around his neck and drew their mouths together again; his other hand snaked down and seemed to find the contour of Jacobs butt. He squeezed and Jacob could feel him shivering underneath him. "Lord," whispered Samuel, "it's like nothing I ever imagined."

"Gets better," promised Jacob, rocking just a little to set their damp organs to sliding. He found Samuel's mouth, his chin. The man under him was so responsive, just opening up to him, little moans and gasps sounding, those narrow hips arching up against his, those lean legs clutching him between them.

Those thighs holding him just set up a whole well of imagery in Jacob's mind. Samuel setting a horse, his legs gripping hard. Samuel striding across a patch of ground in those high-heeled tight boots, his legs punching out the cowhide chaps as he strode. Those same legs now squeezed him rhythmically, Samuel's hot, hard balls pushing up into his own.

Jacob could feel something inside of him just letting go. Like a greased rope between his hands, something he held tight to all the time just slid free and he drank in Samuel, tasting tobacco and hungry man and sweat. He felt the skin smooth as a child's on Samuel's belly, callused and leathern in the places that met the sun. The contrast was like fine cloth over rough wood, and it set something up his back rippling and rocking and he wasn't the least surprised to hear little moans and whimpers coming out of his own throat.

They were wet and hard and jerking desperately against each other now. He reached between them and caught hold of Samuel's organ, stripping it rapidly, and the kid just wailed like a lonely old wolf out there on a ridge and Jacob had to silence him with his mouth as he pulled. Damp heat spilling into his hand, slicking his way, and he felt Samuel's hand come around his own organ, strong callused fingers pulling once, twice, and they cried out into each other's mouths and spent all over each other's bellies.

After a bit, he pulled away, studying Samuel's face. "You okay?" he whispered.

Samuel blinked and moisture seemed to release from the corner of one eye. "Yes. That was something else, Jacob."

Jacob grinned. He brought his wet hand up and wiped it carefully on the blanket nearby.

“Jacob?”

“What?”

“Do you...?”

Jacob kissed that mouth. How had he never noticed before how Samuel’s mouth curved in the middle? How it sort of swelled out underneath, like a hornet had stung it? “Do I what?”

“Do you care for me?”

Jacob settled himself back a bit and studied that face. “I told you, kid. I got nothing to offer you.”

“That’s not what I’m talkin’ about.”

Jacob sighed, a little exasperated. “Well, then, what are you talkin’ about?”

Something in Samuel's face tightened. "Nothin'," he said.

Jacob studied him. "You sure?"

"Yeah." Samuel struggled and rolled himself, straddling Jacob's hip with one leg and reaching round with a long arm and pulling Jacob close again. Their bellies bumped. Samuel's pretty mouth turned up in a truly evil smile and he bit playfully at Jacob's lip, his hand sort of searching out the skin of his back. "Wanna try it again?" he said.

Jacob bent into that smile and took it, ran his hands up and down the smooth hard flanks, let the pads of his fingers play over the tight little butt. "Yeah, I do."

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Samuel really settled in after that. Jacob saw how Coop and Birdie still tried to ride him, but the kid just laughed and waved them off now, like some old fella waving off a bunch of kids and it took all the fun out of it for Coop. Jacob could see that. Pretty soon, Samuel was just being a happy cowboy. Riding his ponies, riding the line, finding time whenever he could to rub up against Jacob in the dark.

"Jacob," groaned Samuel. They were out back of a wide tree, out in the chaparral beyond the fire, where nobody could hear them. Samuel had traded some favor to stay off the herd tonight and surprised Jacob while he was sleeping.



"What..." Jacob licked at the sandpaper of Samuel's chin. Nibbled a bit, his fingers clenching and feeling the muscle and flesh of Samuel's thighs, caressing that fine behind.

"I liked it when you... when you put your mouth on me," whispered Samuel, so hot up he couldn't stand still under Jacob's caresses. Jacob dropped immediately to his knees. He'd just introduced this trick to their repertoire and it was still his favorite thing. Samuel's cock tasted like nothing he'd ever known. Salty and hot and full on man. He unbuttoned Samuel's pants while the man stood there, leaning against the tree and just gasping and moaning, sort of dancing from foot to foot.

"Hold still." Jacob chuckled and tried to catch the bobbing organ. His lips closed around its tip and Samuel stilled completely. A low moan issued from his throat.

Jacob pulled off. "Hush, now," he said, laughing. "You sound like a bull calf wantin' his mamma."

"Jacob. Jacob," moaned Samuel. "You know what I'm wantin'. Please, Jacob."

So Jacob complied. He suckled the tip again, licking across its slit with his tongue. Liquid burbled out and he heard Samuel gasp again and then a muffled groan. He kept suckling, laying his tongue hard and moving against the vein that throbbed hot and good underneath. Looking up, he saw Samuel had his fist in his mouth. He was groaning around it.

Jacob reached down, needing urgently to release himself. He managed to swallow more of Samuel and reached up with his other hand to pet those heavy ball sacks as they tightened between Samuel's tight thighs.

Samuel's hips jerked into his mouth. Jacob gagged and grabbed at a hip to hold Samuel back. The kid's breath was harsh and loud around his fist and the muscles of his abdomen were tightening. Jacob pulled softly at the sacs and felt Samuel's whole body just draw in and suddenly sperm gushed into his mouth and Samuel was screaming around his fist, his other hand tangled in Jacob's hair. And then Samuel was shimmying down that tree as fast as anything, pushing Jacob back into the dirt and the dried grass and wrapping that pouty mouth around Jacob's organ and Jacob just saw stars.

It took a long while before he became aware of the sharp stones poking into his back.

"Help me up, Samuel."

Samuel got an arm around him and helped him get untangled from his legs all bent back and his pants half undone. Jacob chuckled at the state he was in and looked up at Samuel, grinning. The kid's face was wet and he was rubbing at his eyes.

"Hey, now, what's wrong?" Jacob fastened his pants and crouched next to Samuel.

"Nothin'," said Samuel, still blubbering.

"C'mon now, did I hurt you?" Jacob felt Samuel all over, wondering if he'd bit something off in his enthusiasm. There were a few seconds there he couldn't remember at all, now.

Samuel appeared to be regaining control. He just wrapped those long arms around himself and squeezed like he was cold. "I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"Course." Samuel pushed away from Jacob and stood. His shoulders had that stiff prickly look they got sometimes afterwards. Jacob knew enough to back off when Samuel got that look about him.

"You want some water? We got sweetwater, still, from that spring back yonder."

"Yes, please," said Samuel.

Jacob led the way back into the firelight. He drew water from the barrel into a little tin cup he kept for the purpose and turned to see Samuel wiping his face with the flannel of his sleeve.

"You ill, kid?" he said. "I can take you off the herd for the day if'n yer sick with something."

Samuel laughed, a pained expression on his face. "Don't think that'd help much."

"Your call," said Jacob. He sat by the fire. "Sit kid."

Samuel wavered, standing there, a kind of longing on his face. "Should go back," he said.

"You can sit for awhile."

"Okay."

They sat for a time in companionable silence. Jacob felt good. Whole for the first time since Al had died, really. "I'm mighty grateful you rode with us, Samuel," he said.

Samuel had his knees up, his chin resting on his arms in that way of his. "Are you?"

"Well, sure. You're good company, and a fine cowboy. I'm feelin' right lucky to have you as a friend."

"Suppose the sex ain't bad neither," said Samuel softly.

Jacob grimaced uncomfortably. "This ain't sex, exactly, Samuel. It's more like pardners on the range. Just... we's friends. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know that." Samuel sounded so wistful, so forlorn. Jacob frowned over at him and saw that melancholy on the kid's face again. That longing.

"You sure you ain't sick?"

Samuel looked at him, brows bent down like he was studying something. He frowned and looked at the ground for a minute, then back up, more determined. "There's something I gotta say, Jacob."

Jacob waited.

"I..." Samuel's eyes went wide and he suddenly looked like he had that day he'd come up to Jacob in Billy Collins coral and asked him for a job. "I love you, Jacob Cole," he said, all at once.

Jacob froze.

Samuel was just staring at him, breathing hard. He swallowed. "Well, ain't you gonna say something?"

Jacobs mind raced around in the white sleet it suddenly found itself in and tried to make words.

"No."

Samuel blinked. "What?"

"No. You can't. Don't... you don't say such things," said Jacob, wild with fear. "Ever."

"But." Samuel's whole face screwed up painful looking..

"Ever," said Jacob. "You hear me?"

Samuel turned away, drawing his whole body into a tight little clenched fist there on the ground. "Yes."

"I... this ain't right, Samuel. Yer... yer gonna find yourself a wife and ..." Jacob stopped, gasping for air.

Samuel just seemed to grow smaller. He nodded his head.

"I care about you kid. I do. Don't wanna see you get hurt. Couldn't...I couldn't take that."

"I know, Jacob."

"Good then."

They sat there a while longer and then Samuel got to his feet and stumbled off to find his own bedroll, leaving Jacob there feeling like he'd been riding an angry bull for a good ten minutes. Shook up and disoriented.

He had trouble sleeping that night. His gut was a mess of nerves and his mind shot all over the place. He even went off in the dark and had a little talk with Al, something he hadn't done much of since Samuel and he had taken up.

Al agreed with him. The kid was too young, too green. He was taking to Jacob cuz he'd never had a proper friend before. Come the end of this trail he'd likely take his cash and find himself a proper wife. Jacob'd be wrong to draw the kid away from that.

It didn't really help him sleep much. His belly was clenched tight, like he had the ague, and he couldn't relax enough to drop off. But come sunup he sought Samuel out with his eyes across the campsite, and the kid smiled and nodded and it seemed everything was back to normal.

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Things weren't normal, though. A week or so later, and Jacob had to admit it to himself. That clenched feeling he'd had in his belly seemed to have just grown to encompass the whole rig. Like men, beasts and dusty plain were held in a big fist that just kept closing tighter and tighter. Like a storm brewing, Jacob couldn't tell yet from which direction it was coming, but he could feel the air churning with it.

Part of it was the lack of sleep. This always became a problem after a couple of months on the trail. Didn't much matter if a man was tired, those little doggies kept on moving and a cowboy had to keep up. It got so Jacob was making coffee so thick it practically had to be chewed and still some men took to rubbing tobacco in their eyes to keep them open.

He was riding his circuit once and came across old Birdie dead asleep in his saddle. That's how bad it were.

He nudged Birdie and grabbed him quick before he ate dirt.

"Wha...?" Birdie jumped and squinted one red eye around quickly before he sorted out where he was and who stood next to him. "Ah, heck, Mr. Cole. I'm... sorry." He shook his head, sighing.



"Coop was set to relieve you, weren't he? It's hours after sunup, where'd that boy get off to?" It was a rhetorical question, but he saw a glint of something in Birdie's eye, like a penny flashing at the bottom of a stream.

"Where's Coop at, Birdie?"

Birdie were naturally an honest sort. His eyes shifted, lids coming down a bit so he wouldn't have to look straight at Jacob.

"A cowboy misses his shift on the herd, somethin' serious is goin' on," said Jacob sternly.

Birdie set to chewing at his lip. A cowboy don't just hand over another man easily. "I believe Coop might be feelin' a bit poorly this morning."

"He sick?"

Another lip-chawin' pause. "Hungover." Birdie admitted, frowning down at his hands resting on his saddle. He knew that one word could get his friend laid off for good. Mr. Collins didn't abide drinking on the trail.

Jacob sighed. "Where's he at?"

Birdie shrugged an unhappy shoulder off toward a little mound of rocks twenty yards away.

"How long this been goin' on, Bird?"

Lord but the man looked sorrowful. "Coops been fightin' it, Mr. Cole. He's got the bottle fever, that's for certain. But he needs this job, sir." Birdie gave him a pleading look and Jacob scanned his face with an appraising eye. Birdie was maybe twenty, but he looked to be near forty this morning. Big dark bags under his bloodshot brown eyes. Skin hanging from his face like he'd been sucked dry. All the men were looking rode hard these days, but Birdie was looking like death itself.

"You been coverin' for him." It wasn't a question.

Birdie turned his face away. Jacob tsked and wheeled his horse toward the rocks where Coop was probably still laid out. He trotted a couple steps, then had a thought.

"Think you'd better come with me, man."

Birdie looked back toward the herd. "But there's no one..."

Jacob set two fingers in his mouth and let loose a loud piercing whistle. After a moment, distantly, they heard an answering whistle. "Lenkins'll be here quick,"

said Jacob. "C'mon." He wheeled his pony, looking back, impatiently. Birdie seemed about to say something but then changed his mind.

Coop looked like something an animal had heaved up out of its stomach.

"Goddammit," said Jacob. He toed the bundle of blanket and filthy cowboy that sprawled there in the dirt. Coop's hat was over his face, but beneath there Jacob could see vomit stains on Coops shirt, bits of grass seed, and something that looked suspiciously like cow manure. A cowboy had to sink mighty low to not brush off the cow chips.

Coop stirred under his foot and groaned, "Gotohell." Jacob swore he saw the prairie grass near Coops mouth just shrivel and die of the stench.

"Poor yer canteen over him," Jacob instructed Birdie, keeping his eye on the man at his feet.

Birdie obliged, the thin stream of clear water just brought out all the colors and texture of whatever was all over Coops body. The wetness loosened up the odors a might also, and both Jacob and Birdie simultaneously covered their noses.

Still the water seemed to do the trick. Coop groaned louder and sat up suddenly. His hat tumbled off. The bright sunlight hit his eyes and he howled.

"Goddammit Birdie, what's wrong with..." he saw Jacob then, wove around where he sat and covered his eyes with his hand. "Oh."

"Got half a mind to kick you up side the head," said Jacob calmly.

"Go ahead, can't hurt no worse than it do." Coop growled and struggled to rise but was somehow unable.

"Yer still drunk."

"No I ain't. Just. Need to find my legs."

"Useless to me like this," said Jacob. "Just dead meat. And your pardner takin' up the slack. You should be ashamed, man..."

"Look who's talkin' 'bout shame," spat Coop. He struggled a bit more and managed to get up on one knee. "You and yer perdy boy, there." Coop snatched up his hat and settled it back on his head.

Jacob had once seen a bolt of lightening hit a dead tree. Big, white, and sudden, like a fist from God, it'd splintered the tree into just so much kindling. That's how he felt now. Only the bolt that socked him was cold as ice.

"Just get yerself up and cleaned off and back on the line," he said, his voice a mere reedy stream of cold air. "We'll talk about this later."

"Perdy Lenkins. That's what we'uns call him." Coop probably figured his ass was fired and he just wanted to get his licks in. "Bossman's favorite cowboy. Within those big perdy blue eyes and that long hair."

"Shut yer yap," spat Jacob, that ice turning to heat just like that inside him. He forced his fisted hand to settle on his saddle instead of letting it swing through the air toward Coop's smart mouth. He got himself up in the saddle, saw Birdie looking at him sideways. "And you," he jabbed a thumb at Birdie, "get yourself to sleep." He wheeled his mount and trotted off, not even hearing his pony's hoofs over the blood beating in his ears.

Samuel was waiting there, looking out over the herd. He turned, easy and smiling, when he heard Jacob approach.

Pretty. All right, Samuel was pretty. He had big dark blue eyes, long black curling eyelashes. That little cupid-bow mouth. His beard came in light and slow and barely covered the poreless skin. Those expressive eyes gave Jacob a good, appreciative once over as he rode up and it struck Jacob suddenly how erotic that look was. How charged. Sweat started coming out all over his body. How often did they look at each other like that in front of the men?

The smile on Samuel's mouth died at the corners when he saw Jacob's face. "Trouble?"

"Nothing can't be handled," said Jacob. He stopped a distance off.

"I was just comin' off my shift. Lookin' for you." Samuel let the smile tip shyly at his lips again. "Thought you might be feelin' peckish."

"Stop that!" Jacob looked around quickly, back at where Birdie and Coop were still struggling to get themselves cleaned up. "Someone might hear you."

"Hear me invitin' you to share a meal?"

Jacob twitched in his saddle. He flipped his reins from one side to the other. "Have to head on back. Can you ride this end for a couple hours, till I get another waddy up here?"

"Sure, Jacob." Samuel sounded surprised and a little disappointed. "Maybe later, I'll come down to..."

"Don't think so. Probably be asleep later." And Jacob set a spur to his surprised mount and took off.

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Samuel paid no heed to what Jacob had said, of course. Damned rascal never did do as he was told, now did he?

"Hey." A warm hand on his face. A soft wet mouth on his cheek. "You asleep?" The whisper came so close to his face Jacob just turned and sighed and had his arms full of warm wiggly cowboy before he had time to think.

A hot mouth and a beard stubbly cheek rubbed against his face. Eyes not even open, Jacob opened his mouth and his legs and felt Samuel's heat melting into him. He was naked as a jay and that baby soft skin that only Samuel had ever seen slid under his hands, cool and smooth and silky.

"Mmmm," moaned Samuel appreciatively, his organ leaking already against Jacob's belly, his hands wandering everywhere.

Jacob thrust instinctively and felt his cock pushing into Samuel's balls. Felt the tight sacs draw up, the little cry Samuel let fall into their shared mouths. He did it again and felt the strong knees on either side of him draw up more, Samuel's tight little pucker rubbing against his cock head.

A kind of blind longing obliterated Jacob's every thought for a second and he grasped Samuel's hips and thrust toward that small indentation.

Samuel yelped and shied away, but Jacob kept hold and rubbed himself there again. He felt Samuel's body give in to him, his cock thrust against his belly. The yelp turned to a moan. "Jacob," said Samuel against his lips. "Whatever you're doin'... What are you doin'?"

What was he doing? Jacob froze and very carefully pulled his hips backwards. "Sorry."

"Why?" Samuel was tugging at him now, mouth traveling down his neck, hips thrusting rhythmically against his stomach.

"That ain't for you," said Jacob.

"What aint for me? Jacob, I'm fer anything you got. Don't you know that?" Samuel's hand was around Jacob's, wrapping the fingers around their cocks. Tugging slowly, agonizingly slowly.

"Not this," moaned Jacob.

Samuel let go. Stopped moving. Jacob prized open his eyes and looked up at his lover. It was pitch dark in the tent, the oil lamp hanging outside casting a swinging shadow across Samuel's face. The long hair flopped in his eyes as he gazed down at Jacob. "Tell me," Samuel said, looking stern..

Jacob felt pinned under that serious stare. "Sackeewanee showed me something."

Samuel's teeth showed a bit when he growled. It made the hairs stand up along Jacob's spine, same time as it made his organ throb. "That red Indian and you done summit you won't do with me?"



"Ain't right for a man like you, Samuel."

"You let me be the judge of that. Tell me."

Jacob was glad it was so dark in the tent. He could feel the heat of blood in his cheeks. "A man can put himself inside another man." He opened his mouth to continue and found he couldn't. He closed his mouth and stared unhappily up at Samuel.

Samuel's eyes were dark in the shadows. "How?"

Jacob slid his tremoring fingers down behind Jacob's balls and across the tiny opening. He felt it flinch under his fingertips. "There," he whispered reverently.

"Oh." In the dark, Samuel shifted. Then his hips moved up, rocked experimentally, rubbing himself just there at the root of Jacob's shaft. Both men shuddered and groaned. Then Samuel's mouth was at Jacob's ear, his hips rocking urgently, rubbing his opening along Jacob's organ. "Do it, Jacob," he whispered urgently. "Do it... do it."

"Samuel." Jacobs's brains were on fire. His brains and his balls and bits of his hands. Everything had gone over to the devil, it seemed, because he was flipping Samuel over, his hands kneading away at that tight tiny cowboy butt, his cock sliding up and down the crack.

The oil lamp swung so wide the entire tent was pitched into darkness and outside they heard a crash. Samuel didn't pay it no mind whatsoever, he was moaning and rutting into the blankets. But Jacob was already tight as fence wire at the thought of what he was about to do and the crash made him jump. "What was that?"

Samuel struggled to surface mentally. "Sounded like the lamp falling."

"That lamp can't fall. It's latched on. Might start a fire." Jacob was up and pulling up his long johns just like that. Samuel rolled and watched him as he crawled to the front of the wagon. "Wait here," said Jacob and, clutching the unbuttoned underwear around his waist, he threw his legs over the side and hopped down.

"Hey there, Mr. Cole." It was Coop and Birdie and Ol' Tom just standing there, soused to the gills he figured. The oil lamp had rolled to one side and sure enough, a lick of flame was climbing the wagon's wheels. Coop smirked, wove on his feet, and didn't move to do a thing about it. "We wuz lookin' for Lenkins," said Coop.

Jacob heard him but he was hurling dirt on the fire and not thinking. The fire just kept rising up the wagon wheel. "Help me out here you damned fools!" he yelled. And Tom and Birdie hopped to it, then. They were a bit slow, but they started leaning over and throwing dirt on the fire as well.

"Maybe you'd better empty out that there wagon, Mr. Cole," said Coop, grinning.

"Coop you are fired as of right this moment, you hear me? And lucky I don't haul your ass off for starting this." Jacob had a couple of buckets out and he tossed them hard at Ol' Tom. "Creek water. Hurry." Tom seemed to be sobering up right quick and he jogged away while Jacob whirled around looking for other means of putting out the fire that was now crawling towards the grease encrusted cook stove.

There was enough built up on that cook stove to feed an eternal flame, Jacob realized, and he started desperately hurling dirt across its grill.

"Be a shame to lose everything," said Coop. He gestured at the wagon.

"What are you jawing about, man?" screamed Jacob.

Tom came running up with two large buckets of water and hurled them at the wheel. Black billowing smoke rose all around them. Birdie grabbed up the buckets now and headed for the creek while Tom set to throwing dirt into the flames. Even Coop started to pitch in. The smoke was thick enough to choke a man, encircling the wagon and Jacob had to step back and take a gasping breath. And then he thought of Samuel inside the wagon where most of the smoke seemed to be traveling. And he daren't come out. There was absolutely no explanation for Samuel emerging now that these men had seen Jacob coming hurtling practically naked from his wagon.

Jacob was going to kill Coop. But first he was going to put out this fire before it killed Samuel. Spurred to action thusly, he ran to the creek himself, came back and threw yet more water on the fire that Tom and Birdie and Coop had now buried under a foot of clay and dusty earth. He grabbed a great canvas roll off the side of the wagon and set to beating at the fire feverishly while Birdie took a

turn running down to the creek and throwing yet more water on the muddy, ashen, stinking mess.

The fire gave up finally with a little hiss, melting into itself. Jacob rubbed a filthy arm across his forehead and looked at Coop. Coop blinked through his drunkenness, saw something in Jacob's face that a man did not argue with, and slunk off. Birdie and Ol' Tom got dogged looks on their faces as well.

"Sorry, Mr. Cole."

"We was just set to borrie the lamp, Mr. Cole."

"Get the hell away from me, all of you," said Jacob. Well. Breakfast was gonna be a cold thing. The coffee pot was a filthy mess and he figured it'd take all morning to clean that grill proper. But first things first.

He climbed into the reeking wagon bed. "Samuel?" His heart beat hard when he didn't get an immediate answer. There had been so much smoke, what if the man hadn't been able to breathe? "Samuel?"

"Here." A dark face popped up from the far corner.

Jacob crawled toward him fast. "Thank God." He held him tight, trying not to think about any of it, his heart beating so hard he thought it would choke him.

Samuel seemed remarkably calm for a man who'd almost burned up. "You think Coop set to do that on purpose?"

"Yeah, I think so." Jacob carefully pried his fingers loose from Samuel's arms and made himself hold the man at a distance. "This is gettin' too dangerous, Samuel. You could have been killed."

Samuel's eyes dropped away from his. He shrugged. "Better to burn than hang, I figured. And... and that way they wouldn't hang you."

Jacob couldn't breath. He stared. If he'd had enough room he would have punched Samuel in his stupid face. "You... think I'd want to live after that?"

Samuel's squinted painfully. He wrapped his arms around himself in that gesture Jacob had learned to understand as Samuel closing himself up.

"Samuel, I mean it. This was a sign. No. More. The men are gonna see something's up."

Samuel's chin dipped and his throat worked. "What am I supposed to do Jacob? I... I need you."

"Dadburnit, man." Jacob suddenly felt that thickness in his own throat. "We's just a few weeks from the end of the trail. We's tired and plumb crazy. Let's just get to the end. Let's just make our money and keep our hides in one piece."

Samuel nodded. Cleared his throat. "I can do that."

"Course you can." Jacob nodded. Dared to let himself thump his friend once on the shoulder. "Now help me clear away this mess."

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Billy Collins rested a big gloved hand on the apple of his saddle and surveyed the penned herd. "Well, we did it again, Jackie," he said.

Jacob heaved a great sigh. "That we did, sir."

Billy looked off toward the gate where their ranch name was penned. "I had an extra ten percent of the cut assigned to you, Jackie."

Jacob 'bout ate the dirt he was so surprised. "Thank you, sir."

"You earned it, man. I've never had a smoother ride."

"Well, maybe the Lord deserves a percent, then," said Jacob ruefully.

Billy cast him an amused smile. "You're a good man, Jacob Cole."

Jacob spat at the ground. "I'd hate to call you a liar, sir, but..."

"Then don't," said Billy. "Planning to have yourself a good time tonight?"

"Figured I'd stay on the kitchen, sir. Keep an eye on things."

Billy raised an eyebrow. "You'll be wearing black robes soon, we don't watch you."

Jacob laughed. "Somehow don't think that's likely sir. But the men earned this. Couldn't find it in me to make any one of them stay out of town tonight."

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Jacob settled in for the night with his Jack and his rifle and a good oil lantern with the wick trimmed high so he could see well out into the darkness not revealed by that big harvest moon hanging down over the trees.

No cattle rustlers or Indians of course, but a liquored up cowboy could just as easy take it into his mind to rob a chuck wagon and steal a few ponies and there was nothing in town that Jacob really wanted anyway.

He didn't gamble and the girls weren't for him so all he really needed was to get properly roostered under the big sky.

A horse came brazenly though a mess of bracken, making enough noise to wake the dead. Jacob sat up straight, one hand on his rifle as the shadow approached and was revealed by the fire.

"Evenin'," said a drunken Samuel. He was half off the saddle already. Feet out of the stirrups and hanging onto the apple, reins draggin'. The poor old mare he'd ridden looked half embarrassed to have him there and easily shook him off, trailing her leads as she clopped off happily without him.

Jacob set down his rifle and went to lift him up out of the dirt. "Golddangit, kid. You go and steal a horse?"

"Horse?" asked Samuel, grinning at him, pretty as you please. "That were my date, sir, and you best apologize to her." He guffawed at his own joke and reeled on his feet a bit. Fell onto Jacob and held on.



Jacob allowed him to hang off his shoulder, walking him back to the fire. "Thought you were all set to raise Hell in town."

"Missed you," said Samuel.

Something set a spur to Jacob's gut. He slipped Samuel to the ground. "I'd offer you a drink but I figure any more would kill you dead."

Samuel pouted at him. He struggled and managed to get on his feet again. "Missed you, Jacob. You're my man, and..." Samuel was walking like a pony with the staggers.

Jacob had to grab hold to keep the man from falling in the campfire. "Let's put you in the wagon, kid. You can sleep it off."

"Don' wanna sleep it off," said Samuel, like any drunken cowboy would. "Want you..." He tugged at Jacob's shirt and tried to kiss him.

That spur was setting hard in his belly and Jacob started thinking maybe he'd picked up benzene instead of good whiskey. "Let's get you in the wagon," he grumbled.

Finally settled, Samuel wouldn't let him go; he clung and fought and finally Jacob just gave up and let the kid maul him. Samuel kissed him all over, pawing at him like a great drunken lout and after awhile it started to feel kind of

amusing and still later Jacob found it was becoming arousing. When Samuel mouthed his crotch, all wet and slobbering, Jacob sort of groaned and reached to release himself and the kid was on him like a hungry bear.

Everything kind of went back over front after that.

They were naked and bucking on each other, all sweaty and rocking along nice and fierce and Samuel took it into his head to roll over and present his bottom to Jacobs's hands.

"Do me, Jacob," he moaned into the blankets.

Jacob pulled his hands off the man like he'd touched hot coals. "Samuel..."he said in a warning voice.

"I want you to, Jacob," whined Samuel, wiggling that butt enticingly. Jacob had to close his eyes.

"Yer drunk, Samuel," he said, digging the heels of his hands into his eyelids. "I won't..." He wouldn't do this to the kid. Somehow he just felt it would do the kid in final. Seal his fate, so to speak. Samuel shouldn't have to live like Jacob did. He could still find a woman, settle down...

Samuel was turning teary drunk now, he sniffled and caterwauled into the blankets. "You don't love me."

Lord. "Samuel," said Jacob, trying to turn the man around. His organ was stiff as petrified wood and distracting. "Stop acting like this, you're embarrassing yourself."

"I'm not," sniffled Samuel. He turned on his back, thank Jesus, and went suddenly quiet and gentle. Jacob shuffled back against him, taking the silly man into his arms and kissing him on those pretty lips. Samuel gazed up at him with those great blue eyes. "I love you, Jacob," he said.

Jacob flushed.

"I want it to be you."

"Samuel, you're talking crazy."

"I'm serious, Jacob. You're my one true thing. I want... But if you won't." Samuel sat up with the strength and determination of a man truly roostered. "I'll go back into town and find someone who will."

"What?"

"I said, if you won't do it I'll get someone who will and then... then you won't care about ruinin' my honor or whatever it is that..."

"Samuel," Jacob grabbed the man and literally threw him back to the floor of the wagon. Outside he heard pans hitting the dirt. "Do I have to hog tie you?"

"No," said Samuel. "Just do me."

Jacob bent his head to Samuel's, forehead to forehead. "You need to find a woman, kid. I can't take that from you."

"I did," said Samuel. "Tonight. Didn't take to it much."

"You..." Jacob felt that spur set hard and bright, right under his heart. Damn, that benziner was gonna pay tomorrow for selling him rot gut instead of honest whiskey. "What did you do?"

"Had a woman," pronounced Samuel carefully. "Little soft pink one with yeller hair." He fluttered his fingers in an idle loop near his head to demonstrate the ringlets. "She was nice enough I guess..."

Jacob was experiencing the oddest sensation. His belly tightened with the need to howl or hit something. And a wild lack of knowing which it was going to be.

"Thought maybe you was right, maybe I'd like it," said Samuel. "But the whole time I was thinking of you Jacob. I don't want a ...a... you okay, Jacob?"

"No."

"Hey," said Samuel, sitting up and helping Jacob who felt like he was taken with some kind of fit, all trembling, his face twisted up. "You need the bucket? You want I should fetch someone?"

Jacob shook his head, choking. He grabbed at Samuel. "Don't leave."

"Sure, pardner." Samuel settled next to him. Rocking. "I'm here."

"Samuel," gasped Jacob.

"Yer okay," said Samuel, petting and rocking.

Jacob struggled to take breath in around that pain in his chest. He wrapped both arms and legs around Samuel. "Don't..." and he looked up into those blue eyes, so dark and full of concern and he felt all hell break loose inside him. "Don't do that again, Samuel. Ever." He leaned up and kissed Samuel, suddenly fierce, his hands on his chin, holding him by the hair, moving down to press his shoulders to the blankets, mouth open and demanding entrance. He wriggled and forced his torso between Samuel's legs, humping him hard.

And Samuel just gave under him, opening up eagerly like he always did. Jacob could feel it, feel the willingness of the man to give it all to him. And then he

thought of her and how he'd pushed Samuel off to go spend himself away on some woman and then he was kissing him feverishly and holding on tighter than anything and telling him to never go and that he was his.

Samuel gasped and kissed him back and pretty soon they were rolling around the floor of the wagon, their clothes all over the place and Jacob's fingers were up Samuel's hole and he was telling him in no uncertain terms that this was his and nobody but nobody better be laying claim to it.

He got a pot of grease from up front and grabbing his leg like a roped calf, he just rolled Samuel over. Sitting on his legs and buttering him up like this year's Turkey, the way Sackeewanee had showed him.

"You're mine, Samuel," he said. "You gonna have my brand on you, you got that?"

Samuel just moaned and arched into his touch.

Jacob was so hard he thought he'd bust, but when he pushed against Samuel's hole the man sort of winced and yelped and that made Jacob go soft just a little.

"You okay?"

"You know what you're doin' right Jacob?" Samuel reached back and grasped his hand. Something inside of Jacob just melted.

"You just hang in there," he said. "I'll set you to rights." And he grabbed the grease pot and set to making Samuel relaxed and easy all over, from his feet to the middle of his back to his neck, massaging that entrance until it was soft and loose as well tanned leather and Samuel was moaning and mewling under his hands like a birthing cow.

Then he set himself there and just sort of gently pushed himself in.

They lay there for a minute, Samuel making little noises underneath him, hot and tight inside and quivering.

"I love you, Jacob," said Samuel and Jacob felt like he'd swallowed that whole yellow moon outside. Like he'd just die with it. He pulled back slightly and pushed in. They both groaned. He did it again.

"Do it," breathed Samuel. "Ride me, Jacob."

And Jacob did. Slow at first, getting the rhythm of it, like the first time he'd set a pony, feeling the give and buck of Samuel beneath him. Then learning his mount, he pulled those reins tight and reached under Samuel's pumping hips to find his hot, wet organ leaking under there and slid his fingers up and down it until he kind of went loco and just started pounding, full tilt down a rocky hillside, all hell bent for leather, finding a rhythm that 'bout took him to heaven before that lightening shot up his spine and Samuel tensed and shuddered all over and Jacob could feel it inside him and they both cried out and fell all over each other.

After a very long period of nothing but harsh breathing, Jacob heard Samuel chuckling. "Figure I'm saddle broke now," he said.

Oddly that statement sent tears to Jacob's eyes. He kissed the sweaty center of Samuel's back.

"I love you, Jacob," said Samuel. Jacob let the tears roll down his cheeks. He rested his head on Samuel's back and nodded.

Lord help them both.

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Jacob leaned against the rotten old wood of the breaking down fence and grinned like a cat who'd got the cream. He looked out over the hundred acres of flat, dried up and naked land and coulda just whooped for joy. Sure it didn't look like much. He figured a good wind could blow it away tomorrow. And its bit of water was just at the corner. There'd be some water rights to discuss and maybe some neighbors to come to an understanding with. But it was his. He'd taken his pay from the last roundup. Added it to his savings. Busted his butt all winter working for the ranches and farms around and when Old Man Miller'd decided to sell his spread, Jacob'd been right there at the head of the line, thank you. With his cash on the barrelhead and Billy Collins' guarantee in his pocket.

He was still smiling as he turned back to the leaky and draft-riddled house when he heard the horse coming from way off.



He knew it was Samuel straight away. That darned kid'd kill his beast one day, the way he rode it. Or break his damned neck. It twisted Jacob up a bit, to think how wild the kid was, how close he road to death, same time as it made the heat throb in his groin.

Jacob barely stopped until he was right on top of him, reining that pony in hard and leapin' from the saddle like he had wings on those high-heeled boots.

"Just came from town," he said, jumping into Jacob's arms, his mouth hot and eager and promising Heaven. "Heard you're lookin' for some hands," he said, breathlessly, smiling against Jacob's mouth. "Came to sign myself up." Then he pulled back and squinted at Jacob. "What?"

"You think that's such a good idea?"

"I'm the best damned wrangler in these parts," said Samuel, outraged. "And you know it."

"No, I mean..." Jacob pushed himself out of Samuel's arms. "What'll folks say?"

"Who cares what folks say?" Samuel had that high color in his face, his eyes bright and wild like they got and wasn't that just one of the things Jacob loved about the man? All that passion and fire just there for all the world to see.

But that's what Jacob feared as well. And not for himself, neither. Samuel let his heart just show right there in his face. Jacob figured if they lived here together. Shared a bed. Well, it would be a quick thing for the other hands to put two and two together and then it'd be the town lining up to see the hangin'. And maybe Jacob sometimes felt like that was the way it should all go down for him someday, but he couldn't do that to Samuel.

"I have to get the ranch on her feet," said Jacob. "And that takes people. Folks trustin' a man and takin' him at his word."

"And if they know you love me, they won't do that?"

"Never said I love you," said Jacob harshly. And he hadn't.

Samuel's face went wild and grief stricken. He reared back and threw his arm out so wide it startled his horse, who pranced back from him snorting. "You son of a bitch."

Jacob was shocked. "Now Samuel..."

"You just cut me loose, like that? Like I'm nothin'?"

"Samuel, you know you ain't nothin'." Jacob glanced around quick. They were ten miles from any human creature, but it still made him nervous. "You're my best friend, you know that. But..."

And then he saw him. He saw Al. Standing over there against the fence post large as life and not even transparent or nothing like you'd expect a ghost to be. Al, still all legs and elbows and really a kid. That big grin spread across his face, his favorite black hat pushed up so Jacob could see him just smiling and laughing at him.

And then, quick as that, he saw Al again. Lying on that Confederate field, the life flowing out of him and his eyes trying to tell Jacob so many things. No time now, and so many things to say.

And when could a man say things, if not now, when he had a chance? Al gave him a nod and Jacob looked back at Samuel. Those eyes big and blue and as clear and honest as the Texas sky.

"I love you," said Jacob.

And his face was in Samuel's tough hands, and his lips were being assaulted by tongue and teeth and warm mouth. His whole body got pushed and handled and shoved back toward the little shack. But Jacob pulled away. "Wait."

"Wait?" wailed Samuel, practically stamping his foot. "Why do you always want to wait?"

"Gotta do this right." And Jacob got down on one knee right there in the dirt. And he looked up at Samuel. "I love you, Samuel Lenkins, and I want to offer you a permanent position."

Samuel just stared. "Permanent?"

"Long as I'm livin'," said Jacob taking off his hat and laying it over his heart. From the corner of his eye he thought he saw Al there, just nodding and grinning his approval and somewhere deep in his heart some little bit of black coal just crumbled away into nothing. "Long as we's both above snakes."

And then he was ass over teakettle, hanging off Samuel's shoulders, just like a silly steer, Samuel jogging them both toward the house. Jacob looked down at that tight, pretty butt, up at his own sweet acres, and thought he'd never seen anything finer, far or near.

Samuel stopped dead at the doorway, almost banging Jacob's head against the jam. "Hey, there ain't no bed."

"You don't need no bed," chuckled Jacob, slapping at that little cowboy butt. "You's a hand. You's sleepin' with the critters."

"Like Hell I am. Lessen you're talkin' 'bout yourself, you old varmint."

"Old!" And Jacob shimmied off Samuel's shoulders, just like that, and backed the kid into a wall. "I'll show you old!"

And before he flung Samuel down to show him just how old he wasn't, he cast one more loving look back at his own land and thought he saw out there, against a ridge, one lone cowboy, riding off into the sun.



# Added Money

By Chris Owen

From The Anthology *Cowboy Up*

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Gideon closed his eyes and groaned as he heard his brother come into their trailer.

He'd hoped to be long gone before Justice got back, if only to avoid the millions of questions about where he was going.

No such luck, apparently. He looked into the tiny bathroom's equally tiny mirror and decided he was about as presentable as he was going to get, and took a deep breath.

He'd shaved close, used some new aftershave, and his hair had been trimmed a

few days earlier so he didn't look like a blond scarecrow anymore. It would be fine.

He could hear Justice singing to himself as he moved around; there wasn't any chance at all that he'd be able to sneak out or slip by him. He'd just have to be strong and take the questions - and the teasing. Damn him for sharing space with Justice, anyway. He left the bathroom and headed for the door, scooping up his keys on his way.

"See you later," he said, walking fast. "Don't wait up."

Justice blocked the door so fast Gideon was left sighing and blinking.

"You look nice," Justice said, leaning in. "Smell good, too." He took a long sniff and grinned, his eyes full of speculation. "What's her name?"

"Never you mind," Gideon said, trying to push past his brother. The last thing he wanted was an interrogation; lies always made him feel guilty and he just wanted to have a good time without stress and worry. "I'm going to be late, Jus."

Justice relented a little, backing away. "At least tell me what she looks like and what's got you spinning so bad. You look like you've gone to a fair amount of trouble. New jeans?"

"Just clean." Gideon reached for his hat and weighed how much to say against the trouble of not saying anything at all. "Tall," he offered. "Short dark curls, and an amazing ass."

"And you met her when, exactly? We've been in town less than two days and you have an actual real live date?" Justice grinned at him. "This wouldn't be an imaginary friend would it?"

Gideon snorted. "You were the one with imaginary friends."

"So? Where did you meet her?"

He knew he was stuck until he gave up some answers; Justice was like a dog with a bone about things he thought he had every right to know. "Montana," Gideon said finally. "We met in Montana. And again in Utah, then in Montana again."

Justice raised an eyebrow. "She follows the circuit?"

Gideon nodded and moved to the door again. "I'm going to be late, Jus."

Justice stepped back and grabbed Gideon's hat off its hook. "Hey," he said seriously as he set it on Gideon's head. "I need you in good shape tomorrow, little brother. Might be nice to win one this time."

There wasn't much chance of winning, but a decent showing would be welcome. "I'll be ready in the morning," he said, as seriously as Justice. "Promise."

Justice pulled the door open and swept his arm toward the opening. "Don't let me keep you, then. And don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Gideon rolled his eyes. He was pretty sure Justice would never even dream about what he was hoping to do to that amazing ass he'd been thinking about all day. "Right," he said, stepping out. "I'll keep that in mind."

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Nick DeShane looked around the restaurant after the hostess had seated him and smiled to himself. It was a far cry from the usual places he went; there were actual table linens. The tablecloth fell almost to the floor and the napkins looked to be natural fibers instead of synthetic crap. It was fancy to the point of being damn near ritzy.

It would have been intimidating except that this was Calgary, Alberta, during Stampede Week, and that meant there were a lot of cowboy hats on the coat rack and the staff didn't seem at all surprised to have their clientele wearing jeans and boots. He'd been wondering if they'd even let him in without a tie, and strongly suspected that any other week of the year they wouldn't.

All that was left to worry about, aside from the 'God, I better win tomorrow' prices, was if Gideon would actually show up. Nick wasn't terribly concerned about it, but you never really knew until it happened. His daddy had always told him not to count the herd until he knew the fence was finished, and that made sense to Nick.



It made more sense than sitting in an expensive Italian restaurant when beer and pool were more his speed, anyway. Gideon had suggested it, though, and Nick assumed he had his reasons. Plus, when Gideon had asked him out, Nick had been almost sure that he'd never seen a man so nervous before in his life. It had been cute, the way Gideon had blushed and stammered and finally met his eyes and asked him to dinner. Really formal and kind of sweet, which made the surprise of the invitation pale away into flattery.

He hadn't thought Gideon was into guys. Nick had Gideon neatly filed away with all the other cowboys he looked at on the circuit, save the rare few he knew to be out. Nice to watch, fun to fantasize about, but strictly no touching. He obviously didn't know Gideon well at all, but he was looking forward to knowing him better.

The waitress came by, filled his water glass and said hello, smiling sweetly when he said he was waiting for someone to arrive before he ordered a drink. She moved away smoothly and Nick glanced around the restaurant again, his breath almost catching in his chest when he saw the hostess leading Gideon to the table.

The man looked fine, better than fine. He looked amazing.

Nick stood up and smiled at Gideon, taking him in in one long look. New or almost new jeans, what had to be his best boots, and an obviously fresh shave. He'd gone all out, really, and Nick appreciated the effort.

"Hey, Gideon," he said, telling his cock to behave, at least until after they'd eaten. It might be Stampede, but he was sure that didn't mean the cowboys could act all redneck and throw each other down on the tables.

"Nick," Gideon said with a smile and a nod. He sounded genuinely pleased to see him, which made sense, since he'd asked Nick out.

Nick told all his inner voices to stop babbling and sat down. It was a date. He'd had them before, he could do this without fucking up and without over-analyzing everything Gideon said and did.

Gideon sat across from him and the waitress appeared out of nowhere with her water pitcher. They each ordered a beer and she vanished again when Nick was busy looking at Gideon.

Gideon smelled good.

"So, good day?" Gideon asked, one hand turning his water glass around and around. He shifted in his seat and cleared his throat, suddenly looking a little nervous, and Nick realized he'd been staring instead of just looking.

"Yeah. Yeah, good day," he said hastily. "Talked to a lot of people I haven't seen in a while. You?"

Gideon nodded and smiled a little. "Yeah, was alright. Watched a bit of the bareback riding, wandered a bit. Spent the morning with the horses."

"Practice?" Gideon's event was steer wrestling, something Nick had never had much luck with, but he knew how hard it was.

"A bit. Not much hope of winning - hell, no chance of winning, but hopefully we won't embarrass ourselves." Gideon grinned and ducked his head, looking at him through his eyelashes. "You?"

"Tomorrow. Saddle bronc event is the day after. And what are you talking about, you and Ty are a fine pair, you'll do well." Gideon and Ty always put on a good show, and had come second back in Montana a month or so before. Mind, that was a much smaller event, but they were a good team.

Gideon gave him a strange half-smile. "Not riding with Ty this time. He's not even here, went home to be with his wife. She's not feeling so good, the baby is due in a couple of months and she wanted him home."

Nick blinked. It made sense, now that he thought about it; he hadn't seen Ty anywhere since he got to town, and usually where one was, there would be the other. "Who are you paired with, then?" he asked, reaching for his glass and taking a sip.

"My brother," Gideon said, pulling a face. "His partner broke an arm, Ty couldn't make it... so I'm his hazer this go round. He'd paid all the entry fees and had everything sorted, didn't want to miss out on a spot, you know? Just here to have fun, pretty much."

Nick winced in sympathy for the broken arm, something he knew far too much about himself. "Wondered why you didn't mention you'd be here," he said, leaning back as the waitress arrived with their beer.

Gideon nodded and they both settled back with their menus, distracted by the thought of food for the moment. Once they'd ordered and the waitress left them again, Nick leaned forward and said, "I was never much for the team events, mostly 'cause I never found the right partner. Things like this must throw you off."

"Does," Gideon agreed, leaning forward as well. "It's not too bad, though. I mean, Ty and I have been doing this for years, and with Jus... well, he's my brother. Grew up doing this." He frowned slightly and then grinned. "Back then I was bigger than him though, got to do the wresting. It's gone to his head."

Nick laughed and they moved on, talking about events they wanted to see, people they knew in common. It was nice and easy, and when the food came they dug in, the topics of conversation more to the food and the restaurant itself.

"It's kind of... posh," Gideon said, looking around. He shrugged a shoulder and gave Nick a look that was almost embarrassed. "Didn't think it would be quite this..."

"Intimate?" Nick suggested, testing the waters a little. It was intimate; there were strategic potted plants everywhere, the lighting was almost dim, and there was soft music playing as background noise. They couldn't really hear the other patrons unless they thought to, the room filled with low voices and an air of privacy.

Gideon colored a little and nodded. "Intimate," he agreed. He looked around again and added, "At least no one will see us, I guess."

Ah. Well, that explained a lot. The nervousness, the choice of restaurant, the complete lack of hinting around before Gideon had asked him out. Nick wasn't one to really flaunt he was gay, but it was known, and Gideon wouldn't have had to worry about getting beaten up when he finally worked up his nerve to approach him.

"You're not out," Nick said, making it a statement instead of a question.

Gideon shook his head and looked at his plate, moved his ravioli around. "Nope. I'd apologize, but you know what it's like. Cowboys."

Nick nodded and stabbed a shrimp thoughtfully. He knew cowboys and knew that it wasn't easy to be a walking target. Still though, he'd found it a lot harder to be happy when he was hiding. "Does Ty know?" he asked, keeping his voice conversational and non-judgmental. Shame the man felt an apology was warranted for protecting his own ass, but that was the way things went sometimes.

"Don't really know for sure," Gideon told him. "Sometimes I think he has to. I mean, how can he not? But he's never let on, and while he's not a 'phobe, he doesn't take any special care around me. Think he would, if he knew. Not sure there are a lot of straight guys who'd just wander around hotel rooms naked if they knew the other guy was gay." He shrugged. "Probably not."

Nick finished off his pasta and nodded. "Makes it hard though, doesn't it?"

"Yep." Gideon looked around the restaurant again, avoiding his eyes. "I don't... well, I don't date much."

Which meant, Nick assumed, that Gideon was one for the quick fuck in a dark corner and a hasty retreat. Not that Nick didn't do that kind of thing himself every once in a while, but it didn't really fit in with the dinner date and the worried look in the man's eyes.

Nick smiled at him, trying to make them both feel better. "But you are now," he said firmly. "Dinner. Talking. Hanging out. Want to go somewhere when we're done here?"

Gideon grinned at him, his relief obvious. "I'd like that. What do you want to do?"

What Nick wanted to do was sliding more away from the 'throw the man on the table' and more to 'find out if this is going to go anywhere other than to bed'. For the first time in an age he found himself wanting to play with fire. Getting involved with a closet case who he'd only see a few times a year wasn't the brightest thing he could do.

But then... his mind kept harping on at him about the fact that Gideon had asked him out, taken the time to want to talk, to eat a meal in a public place, no matter how far out of the way. It made Gideon's intentions almost as plain as a fuck against some wall would have been, even though the direction of those intentions seemed to be as far away from a quick fuck as they could get.

Well, it wasn't a marriage proposal or anything, but it was more than a glance, a wink and a hand-job.

Gideon was looking at him with one eyebrow up, a trick Nick had never quite gotten the hang of, no matter how often he tried it.

"How about dancing?" Nick suggested. "I know a place. Be lots of guys around, and if we run into anyone you know, you can pretty much assume they're gay too and won't say anything." He hoped.

Gideon gave him a long look, and Nick could see him having an entire conversation in his head. Nothing he could do about that though, so he just sat back and waited for Gideon to decide. Gideon could always say he didn't dance; it was an easy out, and one Nick would just let slide. Of course, Gideon didn't know that, and the way his eyes were warming up, Nick figured he'd gotten around to imagining them dancing together, touching and swaying and...

"Okay."

Nick smiled and found he'd leaned over the table again, kind of lost in his own thoughts about dancing with Gideon. "Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Let's go dancing." Gideon gave him another look, his eyes moving past warm to hot. "It'll be nice to hold you," he said in a low voice. "I've been thinking about it a lot."

Nick felt his cock wake up and he grinned. "Have you, now?"

Gideon moved his plate to the side and leaned over the table as well, so their faces were damn close, considering the surface area between them. "Uh huh. Lot more than that, too. Thought about kissing you, getting real close." His voice was low and not quite smooth, his smile taking on the heat that was in his eyes.

"How close?" Nick asked quietly, possibly leaning forward a little more.

"Lot closer than we are right now."

They stayed that way for a long moment, until Nick started feeling like the table would melt or maybe just catch fire. "Ready to go?" he asked, his voice a little rougher than he would have liked.

"Uh huh. I'll get the check... you got wheels with you?"

Nick shook his head, not sitting back just yet. Gideon smelled really good. "Took a cab."

"I've got my truck." Gideon glanced around the restaurant, not moving away from him more than an inch, then leaned in and kissed him quickly. "Let's roll."



Nick nodded slowly, not sure if he was in a fit state to walk through a room of polite company, but willing to try. "Let's go," he said, finally moving back and standing. If he timed it right he could follow that fine ass right out the door.

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Nick was sitting in a booth, the music of the dance club washing over and pounding though him. He was grinning, anticipation making him move as much as the driving rhythm of the music, as he waited for Gideon to come back. He'd sort of expected Gideon to balk at going into what was so obviously a gay club, but the man was either made of sterner stuff or was letting his cock lead the way; either way, they were there, and Nick aimed to get his dance in and maybe a bit more.

"DeShane!" a happy voice yelled almost too near his ear, and a body slipped into the booth to sit across from him.

"Justice," Nick grinned. "What the flying fuck are you doing in here?" He knew Justice pretty much only to say hi to, but well enough to know he was as far from gay as it was possible to get. A classic zero on the good Dr. Kinsey's scale.

Justice grinned back and tilted the beer bottle he had in his hand at Nick. "Not my idea, and I expect the guys who dragged me in here will drag me back out in about two minutes. I tried to tell them, man, but you know how thick some cowboys can be. They'll go to the bar, turn around and see something they didn't expect, then run for it." He shook his head and winked. "Seriously, they wouldn't listen. So I thought it would be good for a laugh."

Nick shook his head, amused at the idea. "So long as they don't start trouble," he said.

Justice shook his head, suddenly looking more serious. "Wouldn't have let it happen if I thought that could happen," he told Nick. "Hell, wouldn't be out with them if I thought they were assholes that way." He smiled again and leaned across the table, looking down only long enough to watch where he put his arm. There was beer slopped all over the place. "You got a hot one tonight?"

Sitting back and trying not to look too smug, Nick winked. "Here's hoping." He had a sudden flash of the look on Gideon's face if he came back and saw someone he didn't know - or worse, did know - sitting there. "Look, it might actually be a good idea for you to shove off, Justice. No offence, but you're killing my chances of getting laid. He'll be back any second, just went to take a leak and grab a beer."

Justice nodded and leaned back. "Jealous type?" he asked, sliding back out of the booth.

"In the closet and on the circuit. Nervy and horny," Nick explained. "Don't spook the horses."

Justice laughed. "Good combination. Hope he's a stallion, even if you do walk funny already. Oh look, here come my panicked rednecks."

Nick looked at the three cowboys trying to get Justice's attention and snickered. Wide eyed, two with their hands shoved into their pockets, and all three of them edging to the door and looking ready to bolt. "Guess they got an eyeful," he said

with a grin. "Right then, off you go, go hunt for pussy so they can reaffirm their sexuality."

Justice snorted and drained his beer. "See you around, DeShane," he said, heading toward the exit. He turned and came back, his head tilted to the side as he gave Nick a long look. "You competing tomorrow?"

"Day after."

Justice nodded. "Come watch us, yeah? We'll show you why it's better with a partner."

Nick just grinned broadly and watched Justice start to blush as he realized what he'd said. "Oh, fuck off."

"Go away and I might get that far," Nick said, licking his lower lip.

Justice fled and Nick saw him shake his head again before the crowd closed in around him.

Nick was still grinning a few moments later when Gideon sat down beside him, bumping his hip and pressing against his thigh.

"Busy in here," Gideon said, pushing a beer bottle in front of Nick. He had his own, about a quarter of it gone, and he seemed fairly relaxed, his smile easy. "Seen anyone you know?"

Nick shrugged one shoulder and reached for the beer with one hand, the other landing oh so sweetly on Gideon's thigh. "Just one, but he left with his friends. Bunch of straight guys who wandered into the wrong bar."

Gideon laughed, but the leg under Nick's hand tensed. "Did he say anything?"

Nick nodded and swallowed a mouthful of beer. "He thought it was funny. He's an alright guy, knew what he was in for - it was the others that didn't. Still, I managed to get him tongue tied."

Gideon laughed and relaxed again, shifting a bit so his thigh rubbed against Nick's, the muscle flexing under Nick's hand. "Anyone else?"

Anyone who could know him, Nick translated. "Not that I saw." He gave Gideon's leg a squeeze. "Don't have to stay; we can go somewhere else." He smiled and winked, tipping his bottle back and licking the opening after he'd taken a drink, just in case Gideon didn't get his point.

Gideon grinned and mouthed the open neck of his own bottle. "Nope, I'm cool. Besides, you wanted to dance, and I'm looking forward to that."

Nick smiled slowly. "Well, then. Drink up, cowboy."

Gideon didn't say anything, but his beer was swallowed with flattering haste and then Gideon was sliding out of the booth and holding his hand out. "Come on," he said, his voice barely loud enough to be heard over the music.

Smiling to himself and nodding once, Nick abandoned his own beer in favor of a dance.

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It was just fine, Gideon thought. Better than fine. The music was almost incidental, providing only the tempo and rhythm he needed to move and sway with Nick in his arms. There wasn't anything wrong, not the press of the crowd around them, not even the outside chance that they'd be spotted out there on the dance floor, holding each other close with Nick's cheek resting on his shoulder.

When they were sitting in the booth it would have been easier to deal with someone he knew seeing them. Just two guys out for a drink and landing in the wrong bar. They could say they were just drinking up and moving on, like the guys Nick had mentioned. But now there wasn't any chance of that and Gideon knew it. There wasn't anything innocently straight about the way he had his arms looped around Nick's body, his fingers brushing Nick's ass. There was even less innocence in the gentle bump and press of their hips as they moved and the way they were both getting hard, rubbing so slowly against each other.

Gideon felt Nick make a low noise, the sound vibrating from Nick's chest to his own, and he smiled a little. He dropped his hands a little lower and nuzzled the soft curls next to his chin, pleased and unsurprised when the vibration was

repeated, Nick's hips pushing a little harder. He made a sound of his own when Nick turned his head and scattered a few kisses along his neck, just under his jaw.

"Time to go?" he said into Nick's ear.

Nick kissed him again, this time with a little bit of teeth scraping along the skin under his ear. "If you want. Could stay. This is nice."

Gideon almost purred. It was nice, Nick was right about that. He cupped Nick's ass and pulled him even closer as they danced, willing to wait a while longer. He wasn't really ready to get down and dirty right there on the dance floor, but he was happy to dance a bit longer. He wanted the night to last, to be good as long as possible.

Against his hip he could feel Nick's erection fill a little more, getting long and hard and thick. It didn't take anything more than that for his own cock to go from interested to wanting. He enjoyed the rush, the anticipation, and ignored the music as the song changed from the slow ballad they'd been dancing to into something faster. Around them, people began to two-step, but he didn't let go of Nick's ass. Nick didn't seem to mind.

They danced for another minute or so, Gideon smiling as he turned with Nick, and his eyes drifted closed. When he couldn't see the people around them it was so easy to imagine them alone and off somewhere where they could just get lost in the moment.

"Why me?" Nick said in his ear, following up on the question with a lick at his ear lobe.

Gideon opened his eyes but didn't stop swaying. "Why you what?" he asked. His brain was firmly lodged in his pants and his hands and it took him a moment to switch gears. Conversation wasn't what he'd been thinking about.

Nick's hand's swept over his back again, down to his waist where they stayed, his fingers slipping into Gideon's back pockets. "How come you asked me out on a real date, instead of just..."

"Suggesting we find a dark corner or an empty stall in one of the barns? Maybe ten minutes in the cab of your truck?" Gideon said, hoping he didn't sound as bitter and worn as he thought he did. God, he was so sick of that kind of thing. Not sick enough of it to give it up, and not fed up enough to finally just come out, but certainly tired of it. The weight of everything he was hiding started to come down on him again and he felt his back start to tense.

He thought Nick felt it too - how could he not, really? Nick made a soothing noise and kissed him again, not letting go and not pulling back. "Yeah, that. How come you're doing this? Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining." He emphasized the point by shifting his hips a little.

Gideon pushed back, losing the thread of the conversation for a moment. "Not saying let's get married," he said when he remembered to speak.

"I know that," Nick laughed. One of his hands went deeper into Gideon's back pocket. "And I'm not saying I don't want to fuck you stupid. I'm just saying... Well, I guess I'm saying thanks."

"Thanks?" Gideon said faintly, suddenly imagining Nick fucking him. His cock throbbed a little and his breathing sped up.

Nick pulled back a little and smiled at him. "Thanks," he said again, then he brought their mouths together, his tongue sliding along Gideon's lower lip.

"You're welcome," Gideon said, opening to the kiss and letting Nick in. As kisses went, it was long and sweet and got the warmth in his belly spreading fast, got his heart racing like he was doing more than dancing. His hands tightened on Nick's butt and they both moaned when the kiss ended, smiling at each other until Nick put his head back on Gideon's shoulder.

They stayed like that, moving slowly in the middle of the crowd, moving against each other, and Nick kept kissing his neck every now and again. Nick's hands wandered over Gideon's back, almost petting him, and it wasn't until they were repeatedly bumped into by other dancers that they broke apart.

Gideon wasn't used to feeling easy, hadn't expected to feel alright with doing something like dancing with a man in a busy club. He'd avoided really thinking about why he'd been willing to do this with Nick, when he hadn't been willing to take the risks with anyone else; after all, it wasn't like he really knew the man, wasn't like it was love or anything like it. No, it was just attraction, although he was honest enough to admit to himself that he was hoping for a lot more than just a one night stand. He liked Nick, thought he was charming and funny and hot. So he'd asked him out and there he was, in the middle of a gay club with Nick hard against his hip and his own cock rigid in his jeans.



Maybe they'd talk about it later. Right then, Gideon figured they'd had enough of the club and the crowd and it was time to move on before he did something embarrassing, like forgot they were in public.

"Want you," he said in Nick's ear as they began to move off the dance floor.

Nick nodded and grabbed his hand. "Oh yeah. That's going to happen." Nick tugged Gideon gently along by his hand as they wove through the mass of people and out into the cool air. As soon as they reached the outer door Nick let go of him with a wink. They were horny, not stupid.

The truck was only a couple of blocks away and as they threaded their way through the crowds of people on the sidewalk Gideon said, "Can't go back to where I'm staying. My brother walking in would kind of kill the mood."

Nick laughed, then gave him a searching look. "Does he know?"

Gideon shook his head. "He's not an asshole. I think he'd be okay with it if I wasn't his brother. Seems harder when it's family."

Nick tilted his head. "You think?"

"Yeah." Gideon shrugged and stepped up the pace a bit, reaching into his pocket for his keys. "At least, that's what I've seen. Guys who I know are okay with their friends being gay, or with random strangers being gay, seem to freak out when it's someone they're really close to. Besides, at this point he'd probably kick my ass for not telling him ten years ago."

That made Nick smile, and thankfully he dropped the subject as he avoided being walked into by a group of drunks. It was early in terms of the nightlife, and the streets seemed to be alive with people; it was almost a struggle to get to the truck without being shoved accidentally. By the time Gideon unlocked the door for Nick his erection had tamed itself into something a little more manageable, which meant he wouldn't hurt himself driving.

Nick copped a feel as he climbed into the truck and grinned but didn't say anything. He didn't have to, Gideon's blood starting to flow south again.

"Not nice," Gideon said with a wink.

"Just want to make sure you're inspired."

"Not a problem," Gideon said, blatantly eyeing Nick up before he closed the door and walked around to the driver's side. "So," he said, climbing in and doing up his seat belt. "Which way?"

Nick pointed and started giving him directions to the motel he was staying at, then slid over on the bench seat to sit right next to him. When Gideon gave him a stern look he got a flirty smile right back and Nick's hand on his thigh. It was going to be a tense drive.

They got about three blocks before Nick's hand started wandering up. "What do you like?" Nick asked, his tone the same as if he'd inquired about the weather.

Gideon shivered and looked at the road. "That."

Snickering, Nick slipped his hand between Gideon's legs. "Sucking?"

"Uh huh."

"Getting sucked..."

"Oh yeah."

"Touching."

"Kissing."

"Kissing?" Nick sounded intrigued and his hand slid a little higher, one finger brushing Gideon's balls.

With a sigh Gideon moved Nick's hand away. "Driving," he cautioned, sounding as regretful as he felt.

Nick chuckled and nodded. "So, kissing? I like kissing."

"I could tell." God, had he been able to tell. He resisted the urge to move Nick's hand back up and kept driving. "Top or bottom?" he asked, eyes still locked on the road and the traffic.

"Switch. You?"

"Same." But he knew what he wanted right then, knew he wanted Nick moving above him and in him. Saddle bronc riding was all about balance, strength in the legs and hips; the thought of what Nick could do to him made him moan. "Just tell me where I'm going."

"Right to bed, or maybe against the door."

Gideon glanced at Nick, who grinned and winked at him before relenting and giving the rest of the directions. Luckily for them both, they weren't really that far from the motel and Gideon managed to keep himself under tight control until he pulled into the parking lot and then into the spot next to Nick's truck, right in front of the room. He shut off the truck and all bets were off as he turned to face Nick as soon as he undid his seat belt.

Nick was in the same state, apparently. He plastered himself against Gideon's body and attacked his mouth with a deep kiss, one hand landing right on Gideon's cock and massaging him through his jeans. Before Gideon could notice the awkward press of the steering wheel against his arm he was moaning and rocking his hips up into the touch.

Nick pulled away, panting. "Too close to the room to lose it now," he said, hand still on Gideon and moving quickly to the belt buckle. "Come on. In. Then down and in and out and anything else we can think of."

Gideon nodded and grabbed Nick with one hand to pull him close again. He kissed him hard and fed him a loud groan. "Let's go," he said, finally letting Nick go. Nick's mouth was swollen already, his eyes dark in the half-light.

They climbed out of the truck in a rush, Gideon pausing to lock the doors and Nick fighting to find his room key. It was an old motel and the room key was made of metal and hung on a large keytag instead of being one of the keycards Gideon was used to seeing. When the door was opened and the light turned on in room nine, Gideon had time to see the neat, if dated, decorating and the fact that Nick's bed was made before he was tugged into Nick's arms and pressed up against the back of the door.

"Hey, Nick," he said with a grin before kissing Nick's mouth. His hands made their way to Nick's ass again and he moaned. A perfect ass, really, firm and round and made for his hands to cup and squeeze.

Nick was pushing hard against him, his slightly lankier body strong enough to take Gideon's breath away as they moved. They were both fighting with buckles and buttons and t-shirts, and Gideon got distracted by the smooth feel of Nick's stomach before he could get Nick's jeans undone. Nick was faster, though, or

more determined, and Gideon cried out as Nick's hands freed his cock and long fingers started stroking him.

"Nick," he said hoarsely as his head hit the back of the door. "Oh God."

"Oh yeah," Nick said, his fingers getting a little tighter. "Like that?"

"Uh huh." Anyone would. Gideon thrust through Nick's fist and rallied enough to reach for Nick again, only to be shaken off.

"Get your jeans down," Nick whispered against his neck just before licking him. "Just enough. I want to suck your cock, Gideon. Want you in my mouth. Now."

Gideon moaned and nodded, his breath coming even faster as he did what Nick asked. He shoved his jeans down below his hips and found himself staring at the ceiling as Nick slid down his body.

"Look at me," Nick said, and Gideon did, looking down to watch as Nick licked him and teased him and played with his cock. One hand tugged at Gideon's t-shirt and gathered the tail of his button down into a fist. "Get these off," Nick said, then opened his mouth and took Gideon's cock in deep.

"Oh, fuck," Gideon moaned. He tried to make his hands work, tried to peel off his shirts, but it took a lot more concentration than it should have and he couldn't quite manage it. He fumbled with the buttons on his cuffs as he watched his

cock push between Nick's lips and gave up on them entirely as Nick teased the head of his dick with the tip of his tongue. He moaned again and just watched.

Nick was on his knees, looking up at him with wide eyes, his lips wet and red. Gideon stared down and tried to control the shaking in his legs as Nick sucked harder and started to bob his head. To Gideon it felt like every nerve in his body was on his dick, like every sense he had was concentrated right there. He could feel nothing other than the wet heat, and he couldn't hear anything other than his breathing and the wet sounds of Nick licking and sucking him. He jumped and his cock stiffened even further when Nick's hand moved up the inside of his thighs to cup and roll his balls.

"God, yes," he whispered as Nick closed his eyes and sucked harder, taking him even deeper. Nick's free hand curled around his hip, both keeping him steady and digging in with enough force to let Gideon know that Nick was right there with him, wanting and needing.

He lost track of time, staring down in wonder. It might have been minutes, but he feared it was only moments, perhaps only a handful of seconds before his balls pulled up tight. "Nick," he warned.

Nick moaned around him, the hand on his hip pulling instead of pushing and then Gideon was moving. He fucked Nick's mouth and gasped, watching as Nick's eyes flew open again and their gazes met just as the tension inside him released and he started to come. A wave of euphoria swept him along as his cock throbbed and he shot into Nick's mouth, every swallow and pass of Nick's tongue over his dick drawing his orgasm out until he couldn't stand at all and his legs gave out.

Nick let him slide down the door and right into his arms, then kissed him and Gideon could taste his come in Nick's mouth. He was shaking and flying, and he wanted more.

"Bed," Nick said roughly, his hips rocking. "Please."

Gideon nodded and kissed him again. "Fuck me?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll take care of you."

Gideon didn't doubt it, not by the way Nick looked at him. He wasn't able to hold back a smile as they stood and fell on the bed together, already tearing clothes away. Gideon's shirts went first, then Nick's, Gideon's fingers finally starting to work right. He tugged one tight nipple and Nick bucked up, groaning.

"Hold on," Gideon said, working on Nick's jeans. The zipper worked and they paused only long enough to fight with boots, staring to laugh at the struggle to just get naked, and then it was done and they could roll on the bed, legs tangled as they moved.

Gideon made a hungry noise as Nick moved on him, Nick's cock hot and hard as it pushed on his hip. Nick's tongue was back in Gideon's mouth and the room was filling with the sounds of sex as they touched each other everywhere they could reach. Nick's ass felt even better in Gideon's hands without clothes in the way.



"Come on," he invited, rolling onto his back and pulling Nick with him. "Want."

Nick nodded, fitting himself easily between Gideon's spread thighs. "Can you reach the table?"

Gideon shook his head without even looking, not wanting to give up the touch and press of his hands on Nick's body.

Nick grinned at him and shook his head. "Not very helpful," he observed, lunging across Gideon's body to rummage in a bag by the bed.

"Don't care," Gideon said, wrapping his hand around Nick's cock and starting to stroke. "Hurry up."

Nick's body stiffened for a moment and he laughed. "You do that much more and there won't be anything to do but rest up and wait." He wiggled though, and settled himself down for another kiss before waving the tube of lube and a condom at Gideon. "How do you want it?"

"Soon." Gideon pulled his legs back and licked his lips as he watched Nick slick up his fingers. "Very soon."

Nick rolled his eyes, but Gideon could feel the way the man's cock throbbed and his own began to wake up. Nick pushed back, got to his knees, and bent his head to lick Gideon's belly as he pushed wet fingers into Gideon's ass.

"Oh," Gideon gasped, not meaning to. It had been a while since he'd had this, a few months since he'd wanted it so badly, and it felt amazing. "More?" he asked, rocking his hips a little.

Against his stomach, Nick laughed again. He pushed in a little faster though, a little harder, and Gideon had to moan again. Nick timed biting kisses with the thrust of his fingers and Gideon's skin began to tingle. His chest, his belly, his thighs, his cock... all got licked and nibbled and the entire time Nick was fingering him open until Gideon's cock was hard again and his hole was twitching, begging for more.

"Please," Gideon whispered, a light sweat suddenly coating him. "Nick."

Nodding, Nick sucked his cock one last time and got up, reaching for the rubber. Gideon tried not to look pitiful when Nick stopped stroking inside him, and tried to be patient while Nick rolled the condom on his dick, but it wasn't easy.

As Nick finally lined up and started to slide into him they both groaned, looking down and watching as Nick eased into him. Gideon's eyes shut as the thrust went on and on, Nick filling him, stretching him so sweetly, until he felt Nick's balls against his ass. "God."

"Uh huh," Nick agreed, breathless. "Don't move."

"Got to."

"Don't. Too close. Shit, you feel good."

Gideon lay there, aching, holding back. He wanted to move and rock and feel Nick's cock slide and push in and out of him, but he knew all about coming too soon; he wanted this to last. "Should have gotten you off first," he said, not really meaning it.

"It's okay," Nick said roughly. "Next time will be longer." He shifted a little and moaned. "Oh God."

"Do it," Gideon begged. "Do what you have to. If I don't shoot, I'll fuck you as soon as..." He stopped talking as Nick swore and pulled back, plunging in again immediately. "Yes!"

Nick grunted and did it again, his hips rolling as he fucked Gideon with hard, fast stabs. When he hit Gideon's prostate, Gideon cried out and arched, which only made Nick do it again, faster.

It was a hard fuck, just what Gideon wanted. He watched Nick's face, at first almost blank with concentration and then flushed with effort. When Nick's eyes glazed and his jaw went slack, Gideon rocked up harder and squeezed.

Nick yelled out Gideon's name and froze for a moment, then slammed into him twice more before finally arching and coming, his body tight with release before he eased himself down, panting.

Gideon grinned and gave him a gentle shove, pushing him out. He kissed Nick's mouth as Nick stripped off the used condom with one loose hand and said, "My turn," as he reaching for the lube.

"Oh lord," Nick sighed, grinning broadly. "Not going to sleep much are we?"

"Nope, but we'll sleep well."

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Nick whistled as he moved through the huge crowd, trying to find a place to watch the steer wrestling. He'd promised Gideon he'd be there, and he had every intention of screaming himself hoarse along with the rest of the crowd. The noise was already close to deafening, and he knew full well that it would only get louder.

He was halfway to hoarse already, his throat still sore from yelling and screaming the night before when Gideon was fucking him. He figured Gideon was probably the same, and spared a sympathetic thought for the man's ass. They hadn't exactly been gentle with each other, and Nick was happy he wasn't competing until the next day. He kind of hoped that the big suck mark on his shoulder faded a little by then, too.

Someone pressed a program flyer into his hand and he smiled his thanks. It wasn't until he found his seat and opened his water bottle that he glanced over it, going down the list of names until he found Gideon's.

"Oh hell," he breathed. His water bottle dropped and spilled over his boot, but his eyes were still fixed on the names.

Gideon Smith. Justice Smith.

He heard echoes of their conversation the previous night, at the restaurant.

"Who are you paired with then?"

"My brother... His partner broke an arm, Ty couldn't make it... so I'm his hazer this go round..." and "Jus... well, he's my brother."

He stared at the names a moment longer, blinking when the man next to him swore and bent down to pick up his water bottle, now empty. Stammering an apology, Nick got up and started walking, his mind racing as he tried to remember what he'd said to Justice at the club.

He knew very well that he hadn't used Gideon's name - he wouldn't do that if he was protecting someone who wasn't out - but the very thought that they'd

missed seeing each other by moments had his hands shaking. God, how could he have been so stupid?

Nick took a breath and reminded himself that it was up to Gideon what chances he took, how far he stepped out of the closet. He'd seemed relaxed at the club, most of the time, and he'd been willing enough to dance and kiss. It was his risk to take.

Still. Justice had been there, had actually walked into the club knowing what it was. He'd have to tell Gideon, warn him that his non-asshole brother wasn't averse to... to what, exactly? All that Justice's going into a gay club meant was that he was sure he could turn down a pass without too much fuss, and that was pretty much just going on what little Nick knew of the man. He wasn't a basher, didn't seem to be homophobic at all, but...

His mind was racing and he couldn't think in the din of the crowd. He wasn't able to sort out anything other than the fact that Gideon and Justice were brothers and that he knew them both. Justice knew he'd been out the night before trying to get laid; he had no idea where Gideon had said he'd been.

The only thing Nick could do was watch them compete, cheer them on, and hope to hell that he didn't run into them together anytime soon. He'd have to talk to Gideon first, let him know.

He hoped it wasn't going to throw a wrench into them getting together again.

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Gideon followed Justice out of the barn, still grinning. He thought maybe the only time he'd stop smiling since he woke up in Nick's bed was when he was actually competing; he'd even grinned his way through Justice's rant at him for staying up half the night.

It worked out in the end, though. He'd left Nick's bed reluctantly and made his way back to the trailer in plenty of time, despite what Justice said, and even had time to deflect any prying questions that would lead to unpleasant lies, and put up with his brother's teasing.

He'd really have to remind Nick that leaving marks on his neck wasn't a good idea. Possibly he'd remind himself too, but it had felt so damn good at the time that he hadn't been thinking.

Gideon and Justice had a couple of good practices, grabbed some lunch and settled themselves in to watch and keep an eye on the horses and steers. The competition was every bit as stiff as they'd expected, but by the time it was their turn they were focused and feeling up to the challenge.

It had been good. It had felt good, coming out of the chute and riding hard, keeping the line right for Justice. He'd watched his brother carefully, everything happening in slow motion before Justice leapt and took the steer, then speeding up to faster than normal. Just like always, just like it felt when everything came together.

They waited for their time and Gideon found himself scanning the crowd, wondering if Nick was there, watching. Justice poked him and he figured he'd been grinning again.

Now, though, he was happy and hungry and Justice was leading him to food, still crowing about their placing. They hadn't won, hadn't seriously hoped to, but they'd placed higher than they'd had any reason to expect and nothing was going to keep them from being as pleased as they wanted to be.

"Food," Justice said decisively. "Lots and lots of food. Then beer, and then maybe you can go find your date and take care of that little problem that keeps popping up."

Gideon snorted. "Ain't little and you keep your eyes off my pants. Pervert."

Justice laughed at him and punched him on the arm. "Was talking about the way you keep bouncing, asshole. You got wood, I don't want to hear about it. Ever."

Gideon felt his cheeks warm and hit his brother back. "Ass."

"That's you."

Shaking his head, Gideon sped up a bit, heading for the smell of meat cooking on a grill somewhere to the left. He side stepped a family, almost pushing Justice over and not really caring, and then he saw Nick walking in their general direction. With one hand he reached out and grabbed Justice's arm. "Go on ahead, I see someone I want to say hi to," he said, hoping his smile hadn't gotten noticeably bigger.



Justice merely nodded and veered off slightly as Gideon headed toward Nick. He hadn't taken more than a few steps before Nick spotted him and grinned, his face lighting up.

Gideon held tightly to the fact that they were out in public and nodded in greeting, stuffing his hands in his pocket for good measure. Just in case. "Hey, Nick," he said when they were close enough to speak. "Did you s..."

"Great job!" Nick interrupted. "Seriously, you two were great. Almost yelled myself into a fit." They'd stopped walking and Nick was talking with his hands, like he couldn't quite make himself be still. "Listen," he said, leaning in a little bit, his eyes getting serious. "We have to talk soon, okay? It's nothing bad, just something you should - "

"DeShane!" Justice more or less skidded to a stop beside them and Gideon felt his heartbeat skip. "Hey! Did you see?"

Nick nodded and grinned. "Yeah, Justice. I saw. Not bad at all."

Justice snorted and Gideon stood there, not sure what to say, what he could say. Nick knew not to say anything, he reminded himself, and a look at Nick confirmed that much. He was smiling, listening to Justice babble, and when he glanced at Gideon there was nothing to show that this was a surprise to him, and nothing about him that said he was panicking.

This was what Nick wanted to tell him. Would have been nice if he'd said something before they'd spent the night fucking each other's brains out.

Justice, damn him, seemed to be on the same vague and very dangerous wavelength. He nudged Nick with his elbow and grinned. "Hey, how did it go last night? Get lucky?"

Nick looked vaguely uncomfortable to Gideon, but Justice appeared not to notice. "Had a good time, yeah," Nick said cautiously, his smile a little fainter than it had been.

Justice's grin grew even wider. "Stallion, huh? Hope you got more sleep than Gideon did; he dragged himself home this morning looking like he'd fucked his way through three girls instead of one. He was walking like his dick was chafed, for fuck's sake."

Gideon made a sound that was more gurgle than vocalization and slapped Justice's arm.

Nick's cheeks colored a little and he looked around, probably looking for escape. "Lucky Gideon," Nick said, his gaze flicking to meet Gideon's for a moment. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and looked away quickly.

"You're telling me," Justice said. He snorted again and added, "Guess I'm the only one who wound up alone last night. Hey, I didn't know you two knew each other." He looked at Gideon and raised an eyebrow. "Where did y'all meet?"

Gideon fought down rising panic. "Montana, I think. Through Ty."

Nick nodded but said nothing.

"We should all hang out tonight," Justice said, like he'd just had the best idea in the world. "Have a few beers, catch up."

Nick met Gideon's gaze and shifted uncomfortably again. "I'm... well, I'm hoping I have plans later, to tell the truth."

"Hoping for more?" Justice laughed. "Christ, that must be some kind of record for you, two nights in a row."

Gideon flushed and looked at the ground. He told himself it didn't matter what Nick did - hell, it wasn't like he'd really be able to be with the man, not if Justice knew him. And it was in the past, whatever kind of track record Nick had.

"It's not like that," Nick said in a low voice. "He's a nice guy."

"Uh huh," Justice teased, oblivious. "Nice enough for another go. You're a dog, DeShane."

"I'm serious," Nick said, his tone getting desperate. "I want to see him again and then again. I like this one, Justice. He's a hell of a guy, and - "

Gideon looked up and shook his head. "I gotta go," he said, taking a step back. He couldn't stand there and listen to them, listen to Nick say he cared. It didn't matter if it was the truth or not, there were too many things against it ever working out.

"Gideon - " Nick said, clearly not done talking.

Gideon held up a hand and backed away again. "See you around, Nick." He turned and started walking, not really caring where he was going. He didn't slow down when he heard Justice call his name, either, his feet moving deeper into the crowd.

God, he was such an idiot.

Eventually he remembered he was hungry and circled back, looking for food, trying not to think. That didn't work too well, and he gave up, heading home to the trailer instead. With any luck at all Justice would be out meeting up with people, talking his damn head off, and wouldn't be back until Gideon could pretend to be asleep for the night.

Of course, Gideon's luck was running about par, and when he opened the door to the trailer there was Justice, sitting at their little table and going through a magazine. He didn't look up as Gideon came in and hung up his hat, just lifted the beer bottle beside the magazine and asked, "You going back out tonight? With your girl from last night?"

"Don't think so, no," Gideon said warily, hunting up a beer for himself. "Why?"

Justice turned a page. "No reason. Just been thinking."

That didn't sound good. "About what?" Gideon tossed the bottle cap toward the sink and missed. "Damn."

"Pick that up. About the way you took off after spending the day smiling like a fucking fool. About how suddenly you're as pissy as Uncle Mel when he was trying to quit smoking."

"I'm fine."

"Sure." Justice turned another page, and Gideon knew there was no way in hell Jus was actually reading the damn thing. "DeShane's a nice guy, don't you think?"

Gideon looked at his brother's bent head and pondered his options for a quick get away. "Yeah," he finally said. "Nick's alright."

"Too bad this guy he's all hot for is in the closet," Justice said too loudly. "Wonder why he doesn't just... open the door a bit."

The bottle in Gideon's hand started to shake. He set it down and said as evenly as he could, "I'm sure he's got his reasons. Like a bunch of cowboys around who'd be happy to kick his ass."

Justice snorted and looked up at him. "DeShane does fine. Doesn't get into fights, doesn't make himself a target. I'm just saying... there's got to be someone this guy he likes can tell. Like family."

Gideon actually felt the blood drain from his face as Justice looked up at him, waiting. "What do you want me to say about it?" he asked.

"Nothing. Something. The fucking truth, Gideon. I'm not an idiot and I ain't blind."

"Fooled me, the way you pushed and teased and wouldn't shut the hell up," Gideon yelled, suddenly furious.

"Didn't know until you left and even then DeShane wouldn't say anything. The look on his face, though, Gideon... Christ, he deserves better than you walking away because you're too full of shame to face him."

Gideon slammed his bottle down on the table, unable to hold onto it any longer, and Justice stood up. "I'm not ashamed," Gideon said, crossing his arms over his chest, even as he realized he wasn't even denying that Justice was right about him and Nick.

"No? So you lie about where you go, who you're with, and stand there while DeShane drowns? That's not shame?"

"No." Gideon shook his head, refusing to admit to it even if it was true. He didn't want to look at it that way.

"What is it then?" Justice demanded, stepping closer. "What do you think I'm going to do? Do you seriously think I'm such an asshole I'd throw you out of here? That I'd turn my back on you? You're my brother. Thanks a lot, Gideon. I'd hoped you thought better of me than that."

"I don't - " Gideon took a breath. "I can't think."

"Tell me the fucking truth," Justice ordered, grabbing him by the arms. "Tell me."

"Why?"

"Because you don't have to hide from me. Not this. Never from me."

Gideon stared, looking hard into his brother's face. Justice's eyes were troubled and serious, his brow creased and his mouth a thin, tense line. He was vibrating with tension and his fingers on Gideon's arms were starting to hurt.

"So long," Gideon whispered. "Hard to let it go."

Justice nodded slowly. "Tell me anyway."

Gideon shook his head no, but he whispered, "I was with Nick last night."

"I know." Justice let go only to pull Gideon to his chest. "I know."

Gideon stood and shook in his brother's arms, trying not to breathe. "I - "

"Shut up. It's okay."

"Okay."

\*\*\*

Nick was flipping channels on the ancient TV in his motel room when there was a knock on the door. He ignored it, assuming it was for someone else since he wasn't expecting anyone. Certainly not Gideon - he had a feeling he'd seen about the last of that man, and he wasn't too happy about it. He was actually pretty much on his way to drunk about it, if he was honest with himself.



He turned the sound up on the news and the knock turned into a bang. He hit the mute button and stared at the door for a moment before climbing off the bed and going to open it.

Gideon stood there, his hat in his hand, looking incredibly nervous. He also looked clean, freshly shaven, and still a little damp from his shower. He smelled good.

"Come on in," Nick said, pulling the door open wider. "And I didn't know he was your brother until I saw the event. I swear to God, I would have told you, or at least panicked more when he turned up at the bar last night." He had to explain, and the words were sort of tumbling out of his mouth. He wished he'd made the bed.

Gideon nodded and stood just inside the door, still clutching his hat. "Doesn't matter."

"Does," Nick countered, wondering what the hell was going on. "I didn't mean to - "

"He knows. I'd like to say I told him, but he guessed and now he knows."

Nick sat down hard on the edge of the bed. "Oh."

Gideon nodded again, just once. "I'd like to apologize for taking off earlier."

"That's okay," Nick said absently. "Understandable." He looked up at Gideon and tilted his head. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Gideon said, suddenly smiling. "Really." He sat down on the bed next to Nick and tossed his hat onto a chair.

"He took it okay," Nick said, assuming he was right by the mere fact that Gideon was there and seemed calm. Gideon was there, hat in hand. Gideon smelled good.



Nick looked at Gideon and smiled. "Would you like to go dancing?"

# Dry Bones

## By Parhelion

From The Anthology Cowboy Up  
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# I

Joss got them the job rather than Ox, even though Ox was the one with book-learning about giant lizards.

But what Joss didn't know about giant lizards or books, he did know about reading a man from what he wore.

Under their dirt the Easterner's boots had a high and polished gloss that meant he had money to spare, more than enough to pay Joss and Ox to guard some bones.

And the two of them needed money. They were out of work, which was a sorry place for any cowboy to be.

Their last boss, Mr. Aloysius Norton, had taken a notion to run off a family of farmers at the eastern edge of his acreage, but neither Joss nor Ox held with that kind of fuss. Besides, in this year of 1896 most of the Mexicano farmers had been around New Mexico Territory a lot longer than any of the Anglo ranchers, even if their land-titles weren't always right to hand.

Joss had explained this with soft words to the foreman, and then Joss had explained this with hard words to Mr. Norton himself, since speaking soft didn't seem to be working. That final exchange ended up with Joss and Ox riding out from the ranch with their horses and belongings early on a moonless night beneath a clouded-up sky. When the faint light from the ranch buildings fell away behind them, they'd had to swing down and lead the horses. Riding cross-country, the local arroyos sort of leapt out in front of a man in the dark.

"Couldn't do much else but quit, I'm afraid," he'd said to Ox.

"Yup," said Ox. The big fellow never said much, which was kind of funny because he sure had a lot of words stored up inside his head.

But Joss had always reckoned that he could jaw enough for the two of them. "I still don't see how not wanting to monkey around with some granger and his womenfolk makes a man yellow."

Ox had grunted, which he did do quite a bit. Joss could tell the sound was one of agreement, and that had made him feel better. Although he might have been elected the speaker of the two, Joss liked to believe that he fronted a republic. So he did get worried when Ox made it known that he disagreed with whatever notion Joss had in mind.

A long night of walking had taken them into Chamilla just before dawn, where they'd rested a few hours. Then a longer day of riding alongside the railroad ties of the Denver & Rio Grande had taken them on to the burg of Bacaville, which was beyond the stretch of Mr. Norton's shadow. By the time they topped the final ridge, drew reins, and looked down at the cluster of adobe buildings and the larger rows of wooden structures, all tinted red by the last sunlight, they were played out. More important, their horses had been flagging for the last ten miles.

Joss laid a hand on Taffy's neck. Back in Chamilla, before the bit went in, the critter hadn't even had the spunk left to try and get his tongue petted, an annoying habit that had lowered his price to where Joss could afford him, years back. "We have enough in the stake for the livery stable?"

"Yup." There was a long pause, and then, "Baths, too." After a longer pause, Ox added, "And a woman."

"A lady," Joss corrected, out of habit. He had memories of his Ma, back before they moved out west and she'd become a laundrywoman, that made him careful about his language.

Ox considered, and then nodded agreement with his eyes narrowed against the sunset. "A lady."

"All right, then." He eyed Ox. "Will that leave enough money for a couple of days' room and board, and a newspaper for you?"

"Yup."

Which was about all he'd get out of Ox on the topic, Joss knew. So he turned his mind to the evening ahead.

They'd been out on the Blackrock Ranch for two seasons pretty much without a break and – as matters had turned out – without any pay. But Ox, who kept their stake, had silently showed Joss a month back that they still had money left from the previous year. Part of that was luck, and part of that was the knack Joss had of fixing both clothing and tack so they'd go farther than anyone else would reckon possible. But part of that was because Joss had changed his go-to-town routine these last two years since he'd gotten a partner.

Used to be Joss would scratch his itches until he was just about bled white. He'd buy the company of all the girls he could afford over his few days of flush freedom, along with a lot of over-priced rotgut with which to lubricate the grittiness of their company. Even so, there always came a time when he'd catch a glimpse of an expression as he posted over his current mount that made him

recollect his mother examining some miner's cast-aside shirt trampled across by muddy boots. And after he was all done, he'd be flat and stony busted.

These days he stuck to Miss Fifi, or Miss Lola, the gal in every house that the men never treated well but requested more than any other, the one who'd do the French. Joss would "ma'am" and "please" and "thank you" just like he always did, and make sure to leave her a gift. He'd only spend a little of the money he had spent before, enough to pay for a time or three with that single lady. Then, while she knelt before him, mouth busy, he'd shut his eyes while she worked and think that at least he'd been mannerly, and think about how the rest of his pay was firmly held in Ox's big, strong hands. That was a better easing than all the ones he'd once gotten, a heck of a lot better.

In fact he was whistling early the next afternoon as he scrubbed and then buttoned up at the washstand. After he'd thanked his current partner with his Stetson clutched in both hands, and then strolled down the wooden stairs and out through the front door of the whorehouse, he whistled some more. Such were his good feelings that he didn't leave the Easterner to his natural fate at the hands of the mill workers, too broke to drink, who were loitering on the porch of the King Saloon.

"That's an awful nancy suit you have there, Mister," the oldest was saying to the Easterner. The worker had to be all of twenty-one or two, around Joss's age. The Easterner was in his early thirties, probably part of what was riling up the fellows from the timber mill. They didn't get many chances to sass older men who were obviously richer and higher class than they were.

"I like his watch. It's pretty." Those words came from the biggest one, a rangy fellow in waist overalls who had a weak chin and a bad attitude. He was looming over the slim, yellow-haired dude like a thundercloud over a mesa.

Joss sauntered up the stairs and paused on the porch, tapping one boot on the top step to catch their attention. He said, "Now, boys. You should be hospitable." He made sure his tone was tolerant and that his hands were resting easy on his belt close to the high-slung slim-Jim holsters. Truth to tell, he hadn't laid a man out in the street since he was young and rowdy and hoped he would never have to do so again. But the workers couldn't be sure of what Joss would do, and they were too sober to be stupid.

"Aw, we were only funning," the biggest said with a grin.

"I know, I know, but this gentleman here was coming to have a drink with me. Have to speak with him about a job, so I hope you will excuse us." Half-praying that the dude would have some sense, Joss nodded his head to the man in an "after you" kind of way.

The fellow wasn't a fuss-loving fool. He bowed slightly to the workers, which made them laugh, and preceded Joss through the swinging doors and into the saloon. Inside he turned and said, in that nasal, northeastern drawl, "Thank you. May I, in fact, buy you a drink?"

Joss thought for a few seconds. Ox liked some time alone when he could get it, so there was no reason to hurry on over to the boardinghouse. "If you please. I'm Josiah Lewis. Folks call me Joss."

"A pleasure, sir, as I'm certain you know." There was a little drop of irony diluting the words that made Joss think better of the fellow. "My name is Nathan Wycliffe Parr." He offered a soft, strong hand, which Joss regarded and then shook.

"How do you do, Mr. Parr. Let's get those drinks."

Like most Territory bars, the Adobe stocked the full range of decent drinkables, if at twice or three times the price that a man would pay in St. Louis. Noticing Mr. Parr's overcoat, with its eastern cut and fine tailoring, the barkeep started to reach for the trade whisky, enthroned in glory for the admiration of foolish travelers on the center-most of the shelves that stretched across the big mirror. At Joss's level stare, the barkeep stopped and handed down the bourbon instead.

Joss could understand the barkeep's temptation. The Easterner just about wore a sign around his neck with fancy lettering that read "loot now available here." His suit was of some lumpy brown material, but his gold watch and chain were matched by a nice pair of gold cuff-links and by the discreet gold stick-pin in the tie. His boots were of finely-worked leather that wouldn't last a day in the badlands. And his looks went with the clothes: his sleek blond hair was neatly cut, his brown eyes weren't bloodshot, and his smooth, pale skin was unmarred. The fellow had never had a cheek sliced up like Joss or had his nose broken like Ox. He'd sure never spent much time out under the summer sun or riding through winter blizzards.

Mr. Parr drank deep and then said, "I'm hoping that your story to those men sprang from some real and urgent need."

Shrugging, Joss worked to lower the level in his own shot glass. "We're looking for work, me and Ox, yup."

"I need a few men to help me pick up a parcel at the Spirit River Ranch, to the northwest of Abeque. My father-in-law is a great collector of fossils - "



He paused politely to check for understanding, and Joss said, "Bones."

"Yes, roughly. Some local ranch hands apparently found a skull and other bits of a creature never reported in the scholarly literature before, an entirely new kind of giant lizard. After viewing a sketch that made its way to Massachusetts, my father-in-law telegraphed and purchased the lot. Now he has sent me to escort the fossils back east."

"It seems a fair bit of trouble for some bones."

"There've been incidents of fossil poaching in the past, sometimes violent ones. Both amateur and professional...bone collectors can be very passionate, Mr. Lewis. As well, I've been here in New Mexico Territory less than a day and I can already tell that I'm the proverbial fish out of water. So I'd like to hire you and - your partner? - to escort me to the Spirit River Ranch and back."

Joss raised his eyebrows. "Are you always so quick to trust a stranger, Mr. Parr?"

The fellow smiled. His teeth were handsome, too. "A stranger who will go out of his way to help a damn-fool Easterner and then warn him against strangers?"

"I could be penning you for later."

"Then at least you mean to wait, Mr. Lewis. Everyone else seems to want to butcher me right now before someone else can claim a chunk of the meat. But if it will make you feel better, I'll pay half your fee up front and half when we return to town with the bones."

Joss grinned. "A wise precaution, sir. All right, we'll talk to my partner. That'll give you both a chance to see each other before any gold changes hands."

"You have a place to stay?"

"We're with Mrs. Hackler, over behind the general store. She takes in boarders."

"You provide yet another example of my ignorance. I've been searching for a hotel without success. If you don't mind a pause at the station while I retrieve my suitcases?"

"Nope," Joss said, and then downed the last of his drink. Good liquor. Nice to think he might be able to afford another shot or two during the days before he and Ox found places on a new ranch.

Then he got up and walked along with Parr down to the train station. He waited with interest to see if the man would expect Joss to haul his luggage, but Parr carried his own leather cases without complaint. This job really might work out.

They talked a little as they went down Bacaville's main street, bustling with business from the timber mill and the railroad, and Joss somehow ended up taking one of the suitcases. Then he guided them onto the cross street where Mrs. Hackler made her home. There didn't seem to be a Mr. Hackler, but Mrs. Hackler took in boarders, as well as running a millinery shop and ladies' tailoring service from her front parlor, and she and her two daughters did fine. Joss and Ox had stayed with her once before, so they'd known enough to visit the bathhouse before they came over to ask for a room. Joss figured she'd purely love Mr. Parr.

He was right. When Mr. Parr said, "I am terribly sorry to impose upon you without having notified you of my impending arrival," all in those soft-soap tones some men used on women, Mrs. Parr drew herself up like the Queen of England before she went all gracious. Then she called for both Alice and Sarah, not to mention Juanita the maid, to get the best room ready for the gentleman.

Joss smiled as he sauntered up the stairs. Nice manners and nicer looks could get a fellow quite a ways with a lady. Although Ma had warned him to watch a man's eyes before he made his judgment. But Parr's eyes didn't seem bad, either, only kind of dreamy. Reaching their bedroom, Joss reached for the knob, which resisted a little. Frowning, Joss gave the knob a stronger twist, opened the door, and went in. He should have knocked first.

Usually you went into a room and Ox would be reading. But not this time. The Bacaville newspaper was still folded up on the wickerwork chair seat by the window. Ox's big, worn pair of boots was set neatly on the plank floor nearby, next to the small rucksack holding both Joss's tools and Ox's books. Ox himself was sprawled out on one of the two beds, his legs slightly spread, his eyes closed, with one arm resting behind his head on the pillow. He wasn't napping, though. His other hand was busy down below, where he had his trousers undone. That massive hand stroked back and forth with brisk strength along a cock big enough not to be dwarfed by the paw that held it.

Joss felt himself gape. For a moment all he could think was that the other hands at their first ranch together had been wrong, that Ox wasn't such a good nickname for his partner after all. But then Ox's lids opened at the sound of the door. He saw Joss, his blue eyes widened, and he shuddered. Joss slammed his own lids shut. Behind him, towards the stairs, there was a sound of chattering as the girls came up to get the Easterner's room ready.

Most times, Joss had good reflexes. They'd failed him briefly, but now they went back to work. He stepped the rest of the way into the room, turned around, and quietly shut the door. And there he stood, eyes open again, examining the varnished pine planks. But now his mouth was working, too.

"Hell-fire. Sorry I came busting in on you, Ox. You need me to go back downstairs? I got this fellow penned up in the parlor who wants us to work for him, but I can keep him there until you're ready to talk. Or I can tell him we'll meet tomorrow, which I don't think will be a problem because he's pretty desperate-sounding. Seems as if he's feeling lost and he don't have anyone to help him pick up the packages he wants from some ranch up by Spirit River, so he's going to rent a wagon and would like to hire us for escorts. If you want me to, though, I can - "

"Joss." The familiar, deep voice was much huskier than usual, but it was also calm.

Joss felt his shoulders slump in relief. "What?"

"I'm all done."

"Oh." Joss swallowed. But his voice kept right on going, the way it would sometimes when he was tense. "Well, all right, then. I'll just - " Joss waved his hand around for a moment before he thought to go open a window. He leaned out and took a deep breath of hot and dusty late summer air, acrid with the smell of livestock in the pens by the station, smoke from the timber mill, and grit. Below him, sitting in the dirt in the middle of the street, a skinny dog was flailing away with a hind paw at his ear. Joss shook his head. Then, suddenly, he grinned. "There's a mongrel down there working on a flea. This sure does seem to be the day for scratching itches."

Ox grunted, amused. So that was all right, too.

The dog also seemed to be finished, and he settled down to sleep in the sun-warmed dirt. Behind him, Joss heard the sound of pouring water, a little splashing around over by the washstand, and then the sound of clothes being rearranged.

"Finished."

Joss turned around, still grinning a little, and saw Ox looking like he never had a thought in his head of how to spend the afternoon outside of reading the local newspaper and his battered old copy of Mr. Shakespeare's plays. Joss puffed out a breath of pure relief and sat back on the windowsill while Ox stamped his boots on.

"Maybe you should lock the door next time, Ox."

"I did," Ox said. "Guess it's busted."

"Doesn't that just figure in a house full of women? I'll take a look at the lock later. But meantime, you want to talk with this Easterner?"

"Yup."

Getting up, Joss examined his friend with a critical eye. Nope, you couldn't tell what he'd been up to.

"Give me a minute and then come on down. We can talk out on the porch, maybe catch a breeze."

"Okay," Ox said, and smiled at Joss a touch warmer than usual.

Joss smiled back. Awkward events did happen when you knew a fellow long enough. He should have anticipated that, the fellow in question being Ox, there wouldn't be much fuss to endure.

Back down in the front parlor, Mr. Parr was sipping a cup of tea. Perhaps it was just Joss's imagination that he looked a little relieved when Joss asked, "If you'd care to come along to the porch, sir, and tell us about the job you have in mind?"

"Ah, of course." He said to Mrs. Hackler, "If you'll excuse me? Best to make arrangements now, so that we can obtain any necessary supplies before the stores close today."

Mrs. Hackler seemed disappointed to lose her fancy company, but she was gracious. "I'll send out some cool water from the icebox in a bit, Joss."

"Thank you, ma'am," Joss said. "I know Ox will appreciate that."

As they headed for the stairs, he told Parr, "I spoke with Ox and he seems inclined to accept your offer."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that your partner - " Mr. Parr interrupted his words to gape up at the head of the stairs.

Joss thought later that there were a lot of things he might have expected to hear next, like "Good heavens, you certainly are large," or maybe, "Are you sure he can handle my precious fossils without breaking them?"

What he sure didn't expect to hear was, "Robert. Robert Henry Montague. My God, man, where have you been?"

II

For a moment, Joss wanted to do some gaping himself. But then Ox flinched and Joss's wits came galloping back. He grabbed Parr's elbow and practically dragged him upstairs past Ox before shoving him through the doorway into their room. Then he turned back to see if Ox was going to follow, or if Joss needed to barricade the Easterner in and set the house on fire, or what.

Ox squared his shoulders. He'd gone pale, real pale.

At least Joss's mouth was still working, not too much of a surprise he reckoned. "Montague's a nice name."

Something stirred behind Ox's blue eyes and he said, "I like Ox better."

"Okay, then."

Ox headed for the doorway and Joss stepped out of the way. Then he followed Ox into the room, glad that the door wasn't slammed in his face like he'd half-expected.

Parr was striding up and down the small room, across floor planks and rag rug, his hands joined behind his coat the way some fancy townsmen did when they were upset. Joss almost expected Parr to whip out the pocket watch and complain about Wells Fargo being late with his payroll. Instead, he turned to Ox and said, "Most of us thought you must have gone to the Continent when you could. No one would ever have expected to find you here." He made a sweeping gesture of amazement with both arms like Bacaville was someplace to the far side of Nippon.



With a shrug, Ox pulled out a chair and sat down on it. "You have a job for us, Nathan?"

Joss ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip. He'd been wondering if he should be in this room. But by the way Ox had his back turned toward the corner Joss was in, he knew Ox sensed him there and felt guarded. So now the question was what Joss was guarding him from.

"You're a, a cowhand?"

"Yup. The job?"

"But your being a cowhand, an agricultural laborer, seems so - " Parr trailed off, not finding what he was looking for.

"Ironic." Ox knew the word, but then he usually did. "We're keeping Joss waiting."

From his start, Parr hadn't even noticed Joss was in the room. Somehow that told Joss why he was here; to stop Parr from blurting out something he shouldn't in the shock of seeing Ox again.

That task, Joss could surely do. "All right, Mr. Parr. There's about two days worth of riding out to the Ghost River, three if we go easy, which I recommend

we do. The way I figure it, we'll need to rent a buckboard wagon down at the livery stable - "

Half an hour later, he and Ox were headed for the livery stable while Parr talked to Mr. Burton at the General Store. Joss had glanced at Ox before they abandoned Parr between the pickle barrel and the cracker boxes, and Ox had nodded minutely. Most often Easterners were sharp as needles when they knew what they were doing, and Parr must have known something about supplies and money. Which made sense, Joss reckoned, if Parr and Ox came from the same place. Ox was good with money.

As he stepped over a cow chip, Joss said, "We don't have to take this job. We can still veer off."

Ox grunted. This was the one that meant something about spilt milk or maybe water over dams.

"Fine. Anything you want to tell me first in case he blurts something out?"

A pause, and then, "I was in jail."

"That's where you got all them scars, then. I'd wondered."

"Those."

"Sorry, Ox. Those scars." Ox helped Joss with his speaking sometimes, the same way he'd helped Joss to finish learning to read and Joss had taught him in return to sew a decent seam and neaten up barbed-wire splices. Joss knew Ox's correction was only meant as a distraction. Still, he decided to let Ox be.

As they went into the stable, Joss waved at the hostler's youngest boy forking manure outside. Ox ignored the youngster. When Joss got over to the end stall on the right, Taffy was looking all full of himself. The critter spotted Joss, nickered, moved up tight to the stall's door, and sure-enough lolled out his tongue. Joss glanced around. Although he could hear the sounds of someone shifting fodder in the hay-loft above, no one else was in the stable but Ox, and he was already busy inspecting the hooves on his big old gelding Webster. So Joss gave Taffy a surreptitious pat or two. You weren't supposed to indulge cow horses in such behavior, but Joss was used to Taffy and the critter did love his pats so.

Then, while he double-checked Taffy's hide and hooves, he picked up the conversation with Ox, over in the next stall. By now Joss had figured out what he wanted to say, so he did. "That's all right, too, your being in jail. Lots of folks have been there once. I was for a couple of months; I told you."

"Yup," said Ox.

Joss snorted. "Now, that 'Yup' was what you call ironic although I don't know why. I can't imagine your doing anything a man couldn't write off doing a single time."

Ox only grunted again. Joss didn't know the meaning of this one. He glared at Ox for a moment. Ox jabbed a thumb up toward the loft and whoever might be working overhead. Joss gave up. You could wear Ox down, but it took a while. Joss had found that out back on the Bar H in Colorado, when it'd taken him three, maybe four months to pry open the big fellow he'd decided to be curious about after he'd caught Ox petting Taffy one day. It sure had been a lot of work, if well worth the effort.

Some part of him resented this Mr. Nathan Parr, who must have known Ox when he'd either talked more or talked sooner. It wasn't a big resentment, though. Sooner or later Ox would come around, and Joss would be ready when he did. In the meantime, they had a wagon to rent and dinner waiting back at the boardinghouse.

Mrs. Hackler kept her attention on Parr that whole evening, which was fine by Joss. His Ma had taught him table manners, and Joss was using them. But he employed fancy manners rarely enough to have to concentrate, the first day or two, if he was going to be polite and still snare some of the grub before the other boarders scooped it up and consumed the lot. Parr, who obviously wasn't used to the boardinghouse table game, ended up eating pretty light. Manners or not, Ox got filled, but then he always did. Those long arms of his gave him an advantage.

After dinner, Ox went up the stairs looking neither right nor left, paying no attention to Parr's tentative "Robert - " just before the Misses Hacklers got Mr. Parr each by an arm and dragged him off to the front parlor to look at stereoscopic views of the Grand Canyon, Paris, France, and what-not. Joss, on the other hand, followed Ox.

Ox was back laying on his bed again, reading poetry this time, Tennyson's Idylls of the King.

Joss sat down to work his own boots off, and then said, "Ox?"

Ox grunted, sounding wary.

"You ever notice any hair growing on your palms?"

Closing his book, Ox considered Joss. "No," he said. Seems whatever he'd expected wasn't this. Joss didn't know why; a lot of sawbones said a man's shaking himself was worse than fornication. They'd have held that Joss had failed his partner by leaving Ox to his own resources rather than insisting Ox take the natural release to be found with prostitutes. But Joss didn't care much about doctors. He was more worried about what Ox was thinking.

"No insanity, no urge to carve yourself up with a buck-knife? No drooling idiocy? Blurred vision? Got the Spanish pox? Heck, have you been feeling at all poorly today?"

"Nope."

Joss nodded. He'd thought not. "Then all those doctors are pulling a flim-flam about the inevitable results of, of - "

"Self-abuse."

"Thank you." Joss wasn't surprised there was a snide, fancy eastern term for it. "I thought that was the case, what with me still being fine after all these years, but I could just be odd."

Ox suddenly chuckled. "You are. Not about that."

"Which is also what I thought." Going over to his own bed, Joss sprawled out on the coverlet. "You going to read tonight?"

After a long pause, Ox said, "Yup." He picked up the book again. And when he read again, he read out loud.

That was something they'd never talked about, the fact that Ox would speak at length in this single circumstance. Ox read with the grace and the skill of an actor, with the voice, Joss now knew, of a high-born and educated Easterner. Joss enjoyed his entertainment too much to make any sort of a fuss and risk losing all the beautiful words. Aside from the landscape and the occasional perils, a cowboy's life could be deadly dull. So even Joss would keep his trap shut when the alternative was never finding out what the heck Lancelot thought he was up to with Guinevere. Joss was still wondering about that last question when he dozed off.

Habit woke him before dawn to find his belt unbuckled and his collar off, and with a blanket thrown over him. Joss got up and shook out his boots, a ground-in habit to check for scorpions. Then he stripped to the waist, unbuttoning his combinations to let them hang, and shaved in the cold water, which demanded a steady hand with the straight-razor. Next he woke Ox and went down to the

necessary so that Ox could have some privacy. Ox hated showing his bare back to anyone, even Joss.

On the way back to their room he rapped on Parr's door and was pleasantly surprised to find the Easterner already awake. They all three managed to be riding back north out of Bacaville just as the first sunlight was pouring over the mesa east of the river.

Joss was driving the wagon with Taffy tied up behind and Parr in the seat next to him. The Easterner was carrying a gun. It was some fancy hunting shotgun with engraved barrels, but a gun was a gun after all. Quiet as ever, Ox rode slightly ahead, scouting their path. Joss missed being in the saddle, having all of Taffy's reactions to add to his own, and he wasn't enjoying the wagon's jolts, but he also wasn't going to trust someone he didn't know to play teamster in this country when there might be difficulties ahead.

"Are you expecting trouble today?" Joss asked Parr. Business before private matters.

"No. Perhaps at the ranch, after we pick up the fossils. My father-in-law, Colonel Masters, does have a business rival who I've heard has connections in this area. I suppose Mr. van Reisler might take an interest merely out of a desire to confound. But I don't anticipate difficulties until then."

"You should enjoy the trip, then. We're traveling through nice country."

"Yes, I am looking forward to this trip." Parr's tone was thoughtful. Joss noted with a prickling sense of unease, though, that Parr was watching Ox as he spoke.

The first hours, as they followed the road back to Chamilla, Parr didn't talk much. But he did spend a lot of his time twisting his neck around to look at the mesas and the river.

Finally, Joss asked, "Is something worrying you, Mr. Parr?"

"Is this area prone to Indian attacks?"

Joss bit his lips for a moment to make sure he wouldn't grin, and then said, "Nope, most of the local Indians farm and are a heck of a lot more interested in their corn than in travelers. Sometimes we get Apaches wandering down off the reservation, but these days they mostly want grub, trade, or drink."

Parr considered, and then shook his head. "None of what I'm seeing is what I expected. The land may be bleak, but the people are so settled."

Joss shrugged. "The Mexicanos have been here about two hundred fifty years, the farmer-Indians longer. Any place gets like home after that long, I guess. If you want wild and empty, you have to ride up into the High Rockies, and no one stays there long without any people around. This Territory is only dry and sparse. Good looking, though, what with all the red rock and blue skies. The pines are pretty, too, where they haven't been lumbered out. Handsome country, I think."



"I suppose it is. But for me - " Parr looked ahead to where Ox was riding, started to say something more, and then stopped.

"Not what you're used to."

"No," Parr said, and closed back up.

Maybe Joss should have been grateful the man could be discreet, but somehow he wasn't.

That night they holed up in an abandoned half-roofed adobe a ways outside of Chamilla proper. They could have pushed on but Joss was glad they hadn't, given the sort of ride a fellow got from an unsprung wagon. Joss had to stretch out before he felt fit for walking, and Parr looked downright played out. But at least he hadn't bellyached.

Using his few words of Mex and the farm family's many words of English, Joss had managed to make their needs known at the small farm about a quarter of a mile in toward the river. He returned to the adobe with some eggs and tortillas he'd paid too much for, but that was a wise investment in neighborliness. When he approached the fire of juniper branches, Parr broke off what he was saying to Ox, got up, and strolled toward the small cluster of piñon pines growing around what had been a well before it dried. Joss reminded himself again to mind his own business.

"They said we were free to stay the night here."

Ox grunted, pleased.

“Although we should still keep watch, just in case someone out there gets ideas. The Mrs. warned me to keep an eye out for brujas, the ones that dried up the well, I guess.”

Nodding, Ox said, “You first.”

“Seeing as how I’m so attractive to scary creatures of the night? You just want a quiet watch, you coyote.”

It always made Joss’s insides warm, to see Ox smile.

They had eggs, salt beef, and beans all wrapped up in tortillas for dinner. Once they’d sand-scrubbed the pan and utensils, and Joss and Ox had tended and hobbled the horses, they rejoined Parr at the fire.

After a few minutes of silence, Parr asked, “What is it like, being a rancher?”

He was looking toward Ox, but Joss was the one who replied, “I think you mean a ranch hand.”

Now Parr was staring at the fancy boots. The fire brought up his handsome features, as neat as the profile on an unworn coin. "I suppose I do, yes."

Joss glanced at Ox, whose face gave nothing away. So, with a shrug, he started to talk.

By the time they banked the fire down, Parr had probably heard more than he ever wanted to know about cows and the ten thousand ways that they could get into trouble. He seemed to lap it all up and be thirsty for more, though.

Joss had seen such interest before, and he had no illusions. In the end, being a cowboy was like being a whaler, a lumberjack, or a miner: a hard, dirty job that mostly killed you young with consumption or crippled you up with arthritis and old injuries. But the men who didn't have to do the work, who didn't live close enough to see and smell the reality, sometimes viewed the cowboy's life as romantic and free. Oh, well. Joss himself probably had some funny notions about life in New York City.

At least all the chatter served to pass some time before Ox and Parr bedded down for the night. There was still an air of tension around the fire that made Joss want to tense up too. Maybe there was trouble out in the night, after all. He kept a careful watch, but didn't hear anything livelier than a coyote off in the distance.

A few hours later, Joss went and gently shook Ox where he was rolled up in his blankets. A huge hand shot out and grabbed Joss's wrist, and then Ox said quietly, "Joss."

"No, it's William Jennings Bryan carrying his cross of gold. Your watch, Ox."

But as Joss got warm in his own blanket roll, he couldn't help wondering if Ox had expected the person shaking him awake to be Parr. For some reason the notion made him uneasy again, if not enough to keep him awake.

The next day they turned up Chamilla Creek and started following the canyon it had cut through the eastern mesa towards Abeque.

If Parr had been quiet during yesterday's ride, today he was a Navajo. He didn't say more than twenty or thirty words all told before they made camp that evening. At night over the fire, though, Parr decided to talk. Without prodding, he told Joss all about his life back east, about his fancy job, his fine friends, and their big houses. Mostly, though, he told tales about his old schools. Joss was curious - Joss was always curious - but there was also an urgency to Parr's near-monologue that kept Joss making interested noises and encouraging comments. Ox just sat there looking offish.

Why didn't Ox either shut Parr up or add some grunts? Finally, Joss got annoyed enough to prod him. He asked Parr, "So, you and Ox were pals, Mr. Parr?"

Parr stopped dead, took a deep breath, and said, "Yes, we were. We went through both our preparatory academy and college together, as part of a small group of friends. Many of our fathers served in the same regiment during the war, and we modeled our relations after their dear comradeship."

Ox still didn't say anything. The way his head was tilted, you couldn't even see his eyes in the firelight.

"Robert and I were very close for many years. In fact, in the end, I married his cousin."

Ox got up and walked away.

Parr's eyes followed him, and he fell silent. Joss wanted to kick him, tell him to stand up and get going after Ox. Or he wanted to go after Ox himself, one or the other. He didn't act on either impulse, though. He only reached over and put more wood on the fire.

They bedded down as soon as Ox got back from what might have been a sanitary stroll, although Joss sure doubted that. This night Ox took first watch and was the one to wake Joss hours later. When he was abruptly shaken, Joss blinked up at the bulk blocking the stars before smiling without thinking. He'd been dreaming something sweet and the mood kind of clung.

Standing back upright, Ox reached out a hand and pulled Joss up onto his feet. "Been quiet," was all he said, deep voice pitched low.

"Good," Joss replied.

As Ox turned away to seek his own bedroll, Joss meditatively scratched the rasping whiskers that bordered his scars. Married his cousin. Huh. Was that why Ox didn't show much interest in women?

He thought about that, and he listened to the night. Then he spent some time letting his mind drift around while trying to rope in what he'd been dreaming about. All he got from the wandering was reason to be glad that Parr was paying them so well. Seemingly, their time in town had been interrupted before Joss had worked all the sauce out of his blood. He'd need to visit the whorehouse again. Meditatively, Joss rubbed a hand up and down the fall of his trousers. Then, realizing where that was headed, he stopped. If Ox had been the only one in camp he might have kept going, but darned if he was taking the chance of being interrupted by some stuffy Easterner.

The next morning, they were only about three hours' ride out from the Spirit River boundaries when they left their camp. Two hours on, Joss spotted the horse skull that marked the turn-off from the main trail and asked Parr, "Do you want to overnight at the ranch, Mr. Parr?"

Parr, who'd been acting sullen all morning, asked, "Must we?"

"Nope. We can victual the horses, turn around, and start back this afternoon. It would cut a day off our trip." Joss examined the team in front of him critically and then craned around briefly to check Taffy. "The trip's been slow enough that they're looking pretty good."

"The early return sounds like a wise idea."

Joss nodded. "I think so, too. There's still something prickling between my shoulder blades, and I don't know quite what. The sooner we're back to Bacaville, the happier I'll be."

"And the sooner the Colonel has his fossils, the happier he'll be," Parr said, and sighed. "Yes, I'd say we were in agreement, Mr. Lewis." Neither of them mentioned discussing the decision with Ox.

Of course by the time they'd ridden up to the main buildings, Mr. Hewitt, the owner of the Spirit River ranch, knew they were coming, informed by his hands. He was already standing outside, waiting by the three large wooden crates his men had pulled out from a shed near the main ranch house.

"Business," Parr half-muttered, and climbed down from the buckboard rather stiffly. He walked over to Hewitt, and Joss and Ox concerned themselves with seeing to the horses. As Joss talked about feed and water with the old man who'd come out of the big barn to help him, he was aware that Ox had drifted toward the folks by the shed. So he also vaguely noticed when Parr had a low rough-hewn table carried out from a workroom and set down near some locust trees, and then had the hands pry the three waist-high wooden crates open. Parr plucked out most of the contents of the crates, leaving behind the straw, and unwrapped packages to spread bones across the table. By the time Joss was finished with his own business and went to see what was happening, Parr was done but Ox was behind the table brooding over the bones the way he'd ponder a book-peddler's boxes.

Parr was professing himself satisfied. "They certainly seem to be in order, Mr. Hewitt. Now, if one of your men could pack these back up - "

"I'll do that," Ox said abruptly, startling both Joss and, seemingly, himself.

Parr started his reply with "But - " and then said instead, "Of course, Robert." Visibly turning his attention elsewhere, he said to Mr. Hewitt. "And now, if you'd like to take care of the commercial details?"

They went off together and Ox began packing the bones back into their crates with a great deal more care than Parr had used in removing them. Fascinated, Joss shifted in closer to the table for a better view of what had caused all this fuss. Sitting there grinning at him was some lizard-like critter's skull. It was huge, almost as big as his own head. He tried to imagine a lizard that big with teeth that sharp coming at him, and blinked. "Heck, Ox, could these bones live?"

Ox paused, cradling a thigh bone, and eyed Joss. "Dead now. Dead lives still have stories, though." With practiced skill, he rewrapped the bone in its cloth, checked that the inked-on number was showing, and carefully wedged the padded bone back into the last bit of unoccupied straw lining the crate. Then he stepped away and gestured for a ranch hand to nail the lid back on, watching the entire procedure with critical attention.

Moving to stand next to Ox, Joss said, voice low but certain, "You've done this before."

Without looking, Ox said, "Yup." He picked up another bone, some sort of rib or something. His hands seemed to caress it for a moment. "But no more. That life's dead."

For once, it was Joss's turn to grunt. He wished it didn't sound so much like he'd been punched in the belly. It was like hearing about Guinevere, Arthur, and



Lancelot, and suddenly suspecting the ending meant something altogether different than what you'd thought it did, suspecting that what really mattered was what happened between the king and his knight.

As Ox started packing the second crate, Joss went to work. Ox looked sideways, but he'd spent enough time watching how well Joss did with his hands to let him help. The remaining packing went much faster with them both working, and they were done by the time Parr reemerged from the ranch house and from luncheon with Mr. Hewitt and his wife. While the hands loaded the three crates into the buckboard, Joss intercepted Parr. "Mr. Parr. Did you ask Mr. Hewitt if he told anyone local about who bought those bones of yours?"

Parr, who'd looked preoccupied, shifted expressions to startled. "No. Should I have?"

"That might tell us if anyone dangerous knows to take an interest."

"I'll ask." Parr strode over to where Mrs. Hewitt was seeing a wicker picnic basket added to the load in the wagon bed, and drew Mr. Hewitt away from her by the elbow. Joss drifted a little closer, to be within earshot. He noticed that Ox shifted in close too, while pretending that one of his stirrups had to be adjusted.

"I'm terribly sorry to take you away from your lady wife, but I forgot to inquire about one bit of information. Did you, by any chance, speak of Colonel Masters' purchasing your fossils to anyone in this region?"

Mr. Hewitt stared for a moment, then deliberately tilted back his hat and scratched his forehead. Joss suppressed a grimace. The way he was dillydallying meant -

"Well," Mr. Hewitt finally said, with obvious reluctance, "I might have mentioned something at the Upper River Ranch Owner's Association meeting a month or so back."

"To whom?" Parr sounded edgy but there was also a note in his voice that made a man not want to cross him. Joss wasn't surprised that Hewitt answered with less hesitation this time.

"As I recollect, I was speaking with Mr. Aloysius Norton from up Blackrock way. He was the one who first mentioned that the bones might be of some interest. There was this book he'd come across on the subject."

Gossip was valuable currency in a small group. Hewitt had probably been currying favor with the biggest landowner in four counties by blating on about his rich Easterner customer. And if anyone in this county would have some business patron back east - Joss looked over at Ox; Ox looked at Joss. Then, with a gusty sigh, Ox swung up and into his saddle. Reaching back, he pulled his rifle from its holster, and slung it across his lap. Parr saw this, and turned to raise eyebrows in inquiry at Joss, who nodded glumly back at him. The prospects for the trip back to Bacaville had suddenly gotten a whole hell of a lot more exciting.

### III

That night Joss couldn't settle. Maybe everything would have turned out different if he could have slept, but he couldn't. He was restless with fears of a fight to come and itches that he couldn't scratch until they returned to Bacaville. But long experience had taught Joss that stirring around wouldn't do any good, so he made himself lie quiet and breathe even. As he'd hoped, soon he was walking along the edge of dozing, if still not slipping over into slumber. But he was aware enough to hear when the low voices said what would awaken any man.

"I forgive you." Those were the first words that punched through Joss's near doze. Or Joss might have patched together Parr's sentence from what Ox asked next.

"So now you've chosen to forgive me?" Ox's deep voice was weary.

"Of course." Silence followed, and then small noises, very familiar noises. Incredulous, Joss opened his eyes to see what was all too clear in a fire built higher than it should have been. Parr was leant over - kissing Ox. Kissing him.

Not kissing like a man kissed his son, or like some Mex fellow kissed some other Mex fellow. No, this was the way a man kissed his wife or some youngster kissed his best girl. Parr was tender but as passionate as if big Ox, solid as the Rocky Mountains, was a tow-headed beauty in gingham and ribbons.

Joss's stomach muscles clenched. He wanted to explode out of his blankets and demand to know just what was going on. He wanted to mill Parr down into the dirt. How could he? Ox was a man, not a schoolmarm, not a nance. How did Parr dare to kiss Ox like that, do what Joss had never quite imagined could be done - And that was when Joss realized he was jealous, feeling as green as new spring grass. What in heck?

All his raging emotions seemed to sum up into paralysis. Joss felt his teeth grit hard and the cords of his neck stand out, but otherwise he didn't move. He only watched, eyes narrowed, as Ox broke away, got up onto his feet, and stared down at Parr. "Don't be a fool. You're not Plato's Socrates, Nathan." The complete sentences seemed to creak and rattle like a long train of rusty boxcars. "Or do you think you're immune, somehow above this fleshly temptation? I thought so, too, until my young fisherman taught me otherwise."

Parr said, voice low with shock, "I was given to understand that he was an agricultural laborer from van Reisler's Hudson valley estate. I'm sure that without van Reisler's influence at the trial - "

Ox interrupted with a laugh as bitter as bristlebush. "The first one was a fisherman. The farmhand I actually got caught with, he was my fifth. Or was he my sixth? I'm sure I can't remember."

That was a lie. Ox wasn't one to forget such a detail.

"Prison will do that, especially when you know you have nothing to remember that's still awaiting your release. No reputation. No work. No family. No place to call home. Certainly no friends."

"I'm your friend."

"Ah. That's why you never visited me."

There was silence. Then, "You still have money, Robert. Everyone knows that you withdrew the funds from your trust account before you disappeared. You don't have to live like this."

"Did any of you actually think that a respectable firm would continue to handle the investments of a man who'd been convicted of my offense? Never mind. Merely be amazed I'm living at all. It would've been easier. Not to. Live." Ox's words had been coming out more and more slowly, like the train was running out of steam. Suddenly he made a gagging noise, hawked, and spat. "Insolence." That last word was Ox's usual curt near-grunt.

"What?" Parr asked, sounding bewildered.

Joss wasn't bewildered, though. Even during the three months he spent in prison for his part in a range war, he'd taken a lash or two for back-talk. He imagined that both cops and guards would hear a lot of insolence in those highfalutin eastern tones, especially coming from a prisoner who'd done what Ox obviously had. Joss wondered how long it had taken Ox to learn not to speak.

Maybe Joss was kept still by the memory of all the scars, shiny and interlaced, that he'd seen one time when he'd had to guard Ox as his partner bathed in a Colorado mountain stream. Marring that broad, powerful back, they'd been like burn marks on the hide of a fine mustang stallion. Or maybe it was only his two years of riding with Ox, day in, day out, that silenced Joss. But whatever the bit was, something made Joss hold his tongue when Ox went off into the night again, when Parr started to follow and then changed his mind. Or maybe Joss was afraid. He'd sleep deep sometimes when he was fearful, stampeding away into slumber the way he did now.

He woke with Ox's hand on his shoulder. Joss blinked up, and as he should have expected, his mouth moved before his mind awoke. "Gonna shoot him, I swear," he half-muttered.

Ox removed his hand like Joss was a rattler. Then, after a pause, he said, "Wouldn't solve anything."

"It would surely make me feel better," Joss retorted. "Right now I just feel sick." Without saying anything else, he got up, pulled his guns out from under the pack that was serving as his pillow, dumped out and donned his boots, and went into the dark a ways to relieve his bladder. When he got back to the fire, Ox was pretending to be asleep.

Joss didn't argue the matter with him. Instead he sat with his back to the fire and waited for the dawn, still feeling offish. He tried to think. Unlike most times, thinking hurt. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't put together Ox and Parr in any way that made sense. A man fornicated with women. If he was desperate or a rip, a man could fornicate with one of those odd cusses with a woman's nature or take the risk of servicing himself. If a man was wicked, Joss knew, there were still other targets. But men didn't fornicate with men, and they sure didn't romance each other. Joss might as well be jealous of moon-bats for eating moon-cheese.

Only problem was, now that Joss had seen critters with wings chowing on cheddar, he wanted some for himself. That was a fearful wanting, and maybe a wicked one, too.

That morning was Joss's turn to be sullen and stare past the wagon team at the trail in silence. Ox didn't grunt, speak his single words, or even look Joss in the eye. Instead he rode too far ahead and then let Webster drift too close back beside the wagon wherever the trail was wide enough. Neither of them was worth the money they were being paid as guards. But Joss didn't feel as guilty as he should, perhaps because Parr seemed somehow responsible for all this ruckus. Maybe his reasoning wasn't fair, but maybe Joss didn't care.

Joss should have expected the trouble they ran into and Ox should have, too. Most likely somewhere deep down they both did. But sometimes stupid things, like nursing a mad, could seem more important than things that really mattered, like a chance to get shot dead over some dry bones.

They emerged out of the tight canyon, at the top of the slope the trail would descend down from the mesa-apron towards the valley and Chamilla. Ahead of them, blocking the trail, were three horsemen. Joss realized he wasn't surprised; this was where he would have waited in ambush, too. As he pulled back on the reins, he kicked Parr's ankle and spoke, keeping his voice as low as he could over the noise of the wagon rattling to a stop. "Don't get the whim-whams. Ox and I know these boys, so let's try some jawing before we consider shooting."

Parr lowered his shotgun, but he didn't let it go. That was about the best that could be expected, Joss decided. Even so. Five years ago Joss would have yearned for a fight, given the mood he was nursing. Since then he'd learned better. He plastered calm onto his face as he waited for the three horsemen to ride within earshot, hoping all the time that an Easterner with a shotgun wouldn't unnerve any of them enough to set off the violence Joss wanted to avoid.

After the three men reined in, there were a few seconds of silence broken only by the noises horses make when they've sensed their rider's nerves are tight-strung. The Blackrock men were fronted by one of the senior hands, Charlie. He was

riding with Jeremiah and Frank, which meant Burton was probably around somewhere with a rifle. At least there hadn't been bad blood between any of them and Ox or Joss. So maybe, just maybe, they would all live through the next ten minutes.

The two groups were close enough together for Joss to see Charlie grimace. Charlie didn't seem to be much looking forward to this talk, either. "Hello, Joss."

Parr started to respond, but Ox waved one big hand to silence him. Joss ignored both of them. Negotiation was his task, he knew.

"Charlie. I reckon Mr. Norton sent you out to get these crates away from us."

"Yup."

"Did he tell you what's in them?"

"Some fossil bones. Now, if you'll just - "

"Wish we could, but we can't. A job's a job." Joss made sure his tone was mournful. He didn't want to display any more challenge than he had to.

Without much visible movement both Jeremiah and Frank seemed to lean forward a little, but Charlie just scowled. "Ah, Joss, show some sense, would



you? We left Burton halfway up the mesa and he can pick you off 'fore you can so much as twitch a finger."

But Joss was well enough acquainted with Charlie to hear the lack of enthusiasm. So Joss said, careful to keep it mild, "Now, Charlie, you know that we can't let these bones go without a struggle. We been paid, after all. And killing the three of us would be way more trouble than it's worth. Mr. Parr here," he jerked his head sideways, "is close kin to Colonel Masters, one of the Standard Oil Trust sachems. The Colonel would have the Army out." He sensed, rather than saw, Parr's start. Did the man think Joss never read the newspapers, not to recognize his father-in-law's name? Well, to tell truth, Joss didn't read them much, but Ox read them to Joss all the time. And this was drifting. "If there's a ruction, you boys know who will end up paying the price."

There was a long pause before Jeremiah's dark brown face scowled. He said, "Shit." Then his stream of tobacco juice, closely followed by Charlie's, hit dirt, putting the period after a shared sentiment.

Charlie shook his head. "I hear your talking, Joss." He thought for a while. One of those big flies that seem to appear from nowhere to bother any human in a desert, no matter how isolated, buzzed around Joss's face, but he didn't bat an eyelash. Neither did Ox. Neither, to Joss's distant surprise, did Parr.

After what seemed eons, Charlie cleared his throat. "I guess the best thing would be if we never found you. Mr. Norton will probably settle for being able to write back east that he tried. We have enough trouble to keep us all busy right now."

"The grangers," Ox said.

"Yup. You was right about that. We ran them off the very day after you rode out, and what do you think? Two days later we found cattle tanks busted open and cut fence all to hell over yonder. Of course that whole family had a mess of third and fourth cousins who could swear they were over in some village up in the Taos Mountains when everything went wrong. And all the cousins had cousins, too. God knows what's been going on since we rode down here." Charlie spat again into the dust. "Dang it, I wish Mr. Norton had listened to you."

Ox made a noise of disdain. Worries about revenge wasn't the reason he'd been upset about moving on the Mex farmers in the first place, but Joss knew that Charlie would never get that notion through his head. So he said, "Well, we thought that's how matters might work out."

Charlie's face went tired. "Things aren't the way they used to be in this Territory."

Joss bit down on an urge to retort, "Good," and shook his head, making it look sympathetic. "Given what you may be riding back toward, we'd best not keep you. You boys have water and chuck for the return trip?"

"Yup," Charlie said, and, "Sorry to rile you up for nothing, Joss, Ox." And that was that.

As the Blackrock hands rode off, Parr asked, his tone quizzical, "This is how our danger ends, not with a battle but with words?"

Before Joss could say anything, Ox said, "Yup." Then he added, his own words enunciated in a way that usually happened only when he read out loud, "And thank God for that. I've lived through a dramatic denunciation once before and I don't ever want to do it again." Then he kicked Webster more briskly than usual and rode on ahead.

Joss snorted, clucked his tongue, and shook the reins to get the wagon team going. Parr didn't say a word.

Dinner that night was purely awful. They ate their trail rations before the light was gone from the sky and then stared at the fire like someone was dancing in it naked. Joss didn't know about his company, but he was, in fact, feeling that same confusion of hunger and shamed discomfort that he'd felt the times he'd seen fancy-house shows. But after a while those feelings made him mad all over again. He hadn't been raised to be prissy: given his bad childhood, church-elder modesty didn't even make sense. Joss couldn't always afford to subscribe to the common wisdom about what was wicked.

What he wanted was to ask Ox to explain exactly what had happened between him and Parr, and between him and those laborers. But that was none of Joss's business. If he couldn't get those questions answered, he wished he could ask Ox about the giant lizard bones. Even if Ox wouldn't have been comfortable talking, he could have found some book on the subject and read it out. Ox seemed able to find reading about most matters. They were always toting some new title around in the rucksack as Ox swapped book for book.

Funny that Ox hadn't let on the entire trip that he'd still read out loud. Somehow, for some reason, the hidden confidence mattered, mattered in a way that pleased Joss as much as the hidden kisses made him feel ill.

So instead of sitting silent, Joss asked, "Mr. Parr?"

The rich brown eyes looked at him, and Parr said cautiously, "Yes?"

"What's the story of these giant lizards, here, if you don't mind my asking?"

"No," Parr said, sounding a bit astonished. "Not at all, Mr. Lewis. Do you know much about the primeval fauna of America?"

"Nope."

"Ah. Charles Darwin?" The name was offered as delicately as if Parr was proposing something much spicier than kisses.

"Yup, I—heard a little about him." Ox had read him some of *On the Origin of Species*. The notions had been interesting, and Joss wouldn't have minded seeing several of the critters Mr. Darwin described.

"Good." Parr seemed to settle down some, the way a man did before telling an old Indian tale or yarning about some long past cattle drive. "Millions of years ago, this country was - "

The giant lizard histories were interesting, but what was more interesting was Ox. Very soon he sat up from his slump and started listening. After a while, he began putting in a word here or there, or some punctuation with a grunt, that made clear to Joss, at least, that Ox knew more about the subject than Parr did. Joss felt the same mix of wonder and dismay creep across him that he'd felt upon seeing his first forest fire back in Colorado and after he'd listened to Macbeth. Not wanting to make a show, he turned the topic to how a man would get those bones out of the ground properly.

After Joss made some comment about the careful pick-work that would be needed to loosen the finest bones from their rocky matrix, Parr surveyed him with approval. "Your grasp of such matters is swift and sure, Mr. Lewis. And I've noticed that your craftsmanship is very fine. Did your high school emphasize the technical arts?"

"Thank you for your compliment, sir, but I never finished high school." Joss grinned. "Never finished any schooling, for that matter."

"But surely there are public schools in this Territory. We've ridden past at least one."

"I started out back east with my Ma. She came from down south, herself."

"Your father died." Parr shook his head and said to Ox, "By the way, you were certainly correct about scholarships for promising youths, and I've never once doubted your motives. I'm beginning to agree with your ideas about the wastefulness of child labor, as well." He turned back to Joss. "Did you work in a factory to supplement your family's income?"

Aw, Jerusalem. "No, I sold papers and did chores at the fancy-house where Ma worked."

Even in the firelight he could see Parr blanch. "My God. How unspeakable - " Didn't the man ever listen to himself?

Ox made a noise. You couldn't call it a grunt and you couldn't call it a growl, but it was a little like both. Parr, hearing, stopped what he was about to say. Instead, he looked at Ox, his face rueful. "I understand, Robert." Then he looked at Joss. "My apologies, Mr. Lewis."

Joss had also heard the noise. "That's fine. You didn't get to anything at which I had to take offense." And Parr hadn't said anything last night that Joss should have heard to be offended by. Joss had been eavesdropping. So now Joss would be sensible. Instead of asking any of the questions he really wanted to ask, he asked Parr about life in New York City.

That night Joss took the first watch, and he spent it sitting next to Ox. After a while, he spent it considering Ox in the light of the banked-down fire, which was foolish but not anything that Joss seemed to be able to help. Ox was producing the odd snore that Joss had never told him about, so he was really sleeping. He thrashed some. Joss wouldn't be surprised if he was having bad dreams.

Everything Joss had learned and figured, and Ox still seemed the same. How large Ox was. How very big. And tougher than a granite cliff: nothing had turned up from Ox's past to shift that judgment.

When Joss went to shake Ox, his hand hovered before it settled. Then Joss took a deep breath and told himself things hadn't changed between them. But that was a lie. It was a lie when Ox's awakening expressions went from sleepy pleasure to wariness, it was a lie as Joss turned in for his own restless sleep, and it was a lie all through the entire cheerful ride back to Bacaville the next day.

Joss wasn't used to lying. Eavesdropping or not, long sentences or not, wicked wants or not, he and Ox were going to have to talk.

#### IV

The westbound Denver & Rio Grande dropped off in Bacaville mid-day. The eastbound Denver & Rio Grande picked up at Bacaville mid-evening. If he was brisk, Mr. Parr could catch the eastbound train, and Joss was determined to see that Parr hurried.

Joss took the wagon over to the depot and saw the three crates unloaded onto a freight cart. Then he returned the wagon and headed back to the boardinghouse. He'd opened the front door to gallop upstairs when he hesitated. Then, slowly, he closed the door again. As much as Joss might want to take a hand, this was Ox's game, and his friend had a right to his own life. Joss would have to wait his turn.

Feeling like each step took him ten minutes, Joss walked over to a straight-backed chair some boarder had left for sitting out on the front porch after dinner. He sat. This time there was a single mosquito whining around, maybe spawned in the water barrel out back. After a few seconds, Joss leaned the chair against the side of the house, and propped his boots on the nearest stretch of railing. A bit later he pulled his Stetson down to needlessly shade his eyes from the long-

ago-set sun. He was not going back into that house, but no one was going to watch Joss struggle, either.

In any case, like he'd known they would eventually, Ox and Parr came to him. The front door opened and Ox emerged, carrying one of Parr's fancy suitcases. Joss heard the creak of the porch under Ox's heavy tread and the thump when he set the bag down.

Parr was still adding words to a discussion that had obviously been going for a while. "You know I would do anything I can for you."

"Anything except what I need, Nathan," said Ox. His deep voice was sad, and Joss felt bad for him. "I'm no Alfred Lord Tennyson, no John Henry Cardinal Newman, to love my special friend in yearning chastity. I proved that the hard way."

"Robert - " There was a pause. Joss felt his mouth dry. "I'm so very sorry."

There was a creak of leather as Ox shrugged. But Joss could tell by all the talking that Ox was about to the end of his tether. Besides, Joss had been patient long enough. So he let the front legs of the chair hit the floor and moved his Stetson back atop his head where it belonged. "'Bout time to go, Mr. Parr, if you're going to make that train."

The man flinched like Joss had jabbed an old Navy Colt into his ribs. Sure enough, once again he hadn't noticed Joss was present. "Mr. Lewis." Parr cleared his throat. "Yes. Thank you. I'll get my other bag and be right back."



Parr went clattering into the boarding house, leaving Ox and Joss behind to feed the mosquito. Joss said, "Nice fellow in his way. Too darn bad."

"Yup," said Ox. Then he heaved a sigh that could have blown out the Great Chicago Fire, and said, "You're meddling."

"Am not," Joss said, tone hot. "Anyhow, you're not fit to live back east these days. For one thing, you don't like to talk and talk and talk anymore, the way those folks he told stories about all do."

"Unlike you?"

Joss ignored him. "For another, you got that prison record."

Ox just blinked, making like he didn't care. Joss snorted. "Also, what the hell would I do back east?" This time the blink was different, surprised. Joss scowled. "Join some Wild West Exhibition in New York City? Sure, I can just see myself riding around in parade chaps and a red shirt, straddling some saddle with more silver conchos than leather on it. Oh, that'd be just fine. Every time I passed by the fancy seats during the grand stampede and saw those folks you grew up with, I'd be getting madder." Dang it, Ox had him wandering off-trail. "I didn't mean too bad you can't head home with Mr. Parr. I meant, too bad he turned out to be prissy, is all."

Of course that was when Parr came out with his nice suitcase, having his turn to interrupt a conversation with Ox. Ox got up, but Joss waved him away. "I'll take care of this."

Ox considered him, and then nodded and sat back down on the porch swing.

Joss started down the front steps, but Parr hesitated. "Robert - "

Like most times, Ox was silent. When Parr gave up and raised his hand in farewell, Ox's face, in the light spilling out from the front windows, looked like stone. He did raise a hand in return, though.

Twice on the way to the train station Joss thought Parr was going to turn back. The third time, when Parr was standing on the planks of the platform looking east down the railroad tracks, his face got so agonized that Joss was moved to take pity. "Don't fuss yourself."

Parr looked over at Joss. Then, nervous, he pressed his lips tight shut.

Keeping his own expression flat, Joss said, "I'll take care of him. I meant to anyhow."

Parr hesitated, drew in a deep breath, and talked. Joss would always wonder if he spoke through a sense of duty or because, in the end, he was also feeling green-eyed. "Are you sure, Mr. Lewis? You do realize he was convicted and served a penal term for the offense of - "

With an abrupt gesture, Joss interrupted before Parr could finish the sentence. "I don't care. Don't bother with the details, Mr. Parr, because, unlike you, I just don't care." He picked up Parr's two bags and carried them over to the baggage cart, already half-filled with the three wooden crates of fossils. Parr had to hurry to keep up, and he'd barely stopped when Joss turned back from depositing his burden. "Here you go; right next to your nice, clean, dry bones. Enjoy their stories." Joss felt his jaw try to jut and stopped it. "Goodbye to you, sir. Give our best to your lady wife."

Parr's mouth opened for a moment, and then the good sense Joss had noticed seemed to take his reins again. "I will. Goodbye, Mr. Lewis. Good luck."

Joss nodded brusquely and, without another word, strode off back toward the boarding house.

Parr could keep worrying about his own handsome self. Joss had Ox on his mind and touchy questions that needed answers. That was trouble enough for any one man.

Sure enough, when Joss went back to their room, the door handle resisted for a moment before it turned. Joss narrowed his eyes. Good thing he hadn't fixed that lock before they left town with Parr. Or maybe not, depending on how matters went. Joss would have to see.

He went into the room, closed the door, and moved the bureau in front of it. Then he went over, closed the windows and yanked the curtains on both windows shut.

Ox watched all of this from where he lounged back on his bed. Finally he asked, "Indians attacking?"

"That's what I get for being lazy about the lock. And these walls are thinner than the trouser seat of my go-to-town suit. I guess I'll have to keep my voice down."

"Guess so." Ox folded his huge hands over his chest and regarded Joss silently, expression interested.

The conversation ahead frankly scared Joss. Not knowing what else to do, he did what he usually did and let his mouth do his thinking. "How come you said you don't yearn chastely? You sure been trying for that, sitting around reading Mr. Shakespeare and self-abusing whenever we get to town with some money in our pockets."

Ox sat up and then said, "Didn't want women after my cousin married." The words weren't exactly a lie, more like a diversion, and Joss couldn't blame him for trying on a tall tale since Joss might not have been paying attention and doing his sums. Too bad for Ox that Joss had been listening.

"Ah, Jerusalem, Ox. You think I'm deaf or something? Mr. Parr wasn't blunt, but I know what natural-born nances do, and I heard when you read the papers about that English writer-fellow last year." Joss went over to his own bed and sat down facing Ox, with his feet in the narrow moat between the bedsteads. "Or maybe you weren't listening when I told you before and then told Parr yesterday about my mother working in a fancy-house before we came out west. You want to guess what made her quit?"

Ox examined him. "Customer."

"Yup."

"You scarred up, back then?"

"Nope, that was a gift from a barbed-wire fence up by Wyoming Territory when I was fifteen."

"A rich customer after you."

"An influential and rich customer, that's right. Hard thinking of you being like him." Joss pondered. "He was a man, too, not a nance. But he was a wicked man, not a good man. Maybe that's what was different." He shrugged.

"Anyhow, he's why Madam staked Ma the money for our train tickets. I was way too young for the game, years younger than the girls, even." Realizing he was still wearing his hat, Joss took it off and threw it toward the room's one chair. "So then we got out here, and Ma saw a chance to do something different. Even if scrubbing was hard and nasty work, she thought I'd like her doing laundry better than my doing chores around a whore-house. Although I really only wanted her to be happy, but that's lung-fever for you. It doesn't care about what anyone wants. She was a good woman, my Ma."

"Lady," Ox corrected, voice very soft.

"Lady." They eyed each other for a minute like they were two knife fighters circling, waiting for the split-second of opportunity. "But I know the fancy, eastern terms for sodomy, Ox."

Those words had been a good jab past Ox's guard. "Wasn't that, exactly." Then Ox blinked like he'd surprised himself.

"Huh? Oh, just what you did?" Joss told himself to quiet down now, but himself didn't seem to be listening. "So you got caught with your hand on some farmhand's cock?"

"No," Ox said, and then bit his lips.

Joss's mind seemed to leap forward. The conclusion it galloped up to made his mouth go dry. "Oh," he said. And then, "The French."

"Yup."

They eyed each other some more. The room was getting real hot with the windows closed.

"I like the French," Joss said finally.

"You told me."

"Guess I did a few times, didn't I?" Joss was not going to ask. But his mouth kept going. "You were the one doing the French. On some farmhand." Wasn't that backwards? Shouldn't the farmhand have - ? Still, it sounded so -

"Yup." There was another, longer pause, and then Ox let out a grunt that somehow seemed to split the difference between a laugh and a groan. "You envious?"

"Yup."

"Well." Ox moved slow enough that Joss could have stopped him. "All right, then." He got down on his knees in the narrow space between the beds, putting him maybe a foot away from where Joss was sitting.

Maybe this had been inevitable since the first time Joss saw Ox gently stroke Taffy's tongue: wrong to do, but the pinto loved it so. Joss, he loved the feeling of the big hands stroking his thighs through the twilled cotton of his trousers. Joss swallowed, and Ox tilted his head in inquiry. Joss pushed out his chin a little and nodded.

Ox ran one hand along Joss's fall in the same way Joss himself had two nights back. This wasn't a mild pleasure, though, but a hot passion. Ox said, meditatively, "Been a while. Might not be much good."

He was unbuttoning Joss's fly while he spoke, so Joss confined himself to asking, "You're joshing me, right?" He spread his legs wider and watched with urgent interest while Ox went prospecting in Joss's trousers.

When he'd found his strike, Ox let out a grunt at what he had in his hand, one of his surprised ones. "Not circumcised."

Joss blinked, bemused. "Heck, you must have been real good about not peeking these last two years. Whorehouse, remember? Ma's doctor was a patron, so he wasn't real worried about saving me from later self-abuse with free surgery."

This time the grunt was amused. Ox toyed with him for a bit, working his big paw up and down Joss, examining the way the skin slid over Joss's cock with real interest. Joss was interested, too, if not in any abstract way. Then Ox gave him a considering look before he ducked his head down a bit lower. That mouth was surely male but it still seemed beautiful.

Ox's mouth was big, too, and warm, and his tongue worked like when he read, not like when he spoke. He licked his way up Joss and he licked his way back down, he suckled for a good, long while, and then he stroked with his hand all around the base of the shaft. Ox's enthusiasm was way better than any whore's weary desire to get the job done. And Joss was having a lot more fun than he'd ever had for pay.



He didn't have to be polite with Ox, either. Joss thrust his hips some, and was pleased to realize, when Ox seized both legs and held him still, that his partner could teach him, work with him. Ox's hands slid to Joss's ass and he kneaded through the trouser cloth. Ox pulled his head back and rubbed his tongue delicately around just below the head of Joss's cock. At that, Joss grabbed the arms wrapped around his hips.

When Joss tensed, Ox got more insistent. Joss realized that Ox was going to take everything Joss had to give, which was enough to send him right over. The sight of what Ox was doing wrung him dry in a way he rarely remembered feeling. Given the thin walls he couldn't holler, but his gasps were harsh and loud in the hot bedroom air. Then after he was done Ox held him close, his hands now on Joss's waist, his head resting against Joss's belly. Joss closed his eyes for a few seconds, and breathed deep the mingled smells of spunk, dust, fresh linens, and sweat.

Joss opened his eyes to see Ox looking up with an expression that was impossible to read. But Joss could guess. He grinned and briefly squeezed Ox on the upper arm. "Now, that was good."

Visibly relaxing, Ox got back up onto his feet and sat down on his own bed. For a fugitive second Joss wondered if Ox knew he was running a considering tongue around his lips. Joss said, "In fact, that was real good, and thank you for it. Dang, Ox, you're fine as all get-out."

Ox grunted, now sounding both placid and a bit smug.

Hah. Joss knew how to fetch him. "So, you going to teach me to do that?" It took all his courage to get those words out, but both the fancy-house and the

ranges had taught Joss how not to show his nerves when he needed to get a job done.

As Joss had expected, there was a pause. Then the smile worked across Ox's features slowly, but it sure was nice once it arrived. "Yup."

"Okay."

It was Joss's turn to get down on his knees, and he had to shove to get Ox to spread his legs properly. "Any advice?"

Ox thought. "Don't rush. First time out, don't try to swallow." He smiled some more. "Watch your teeth."

Boy, Ox was sure a mouthful. And the taste was odd, but the cool, smooth skin felt nice and the scent of Ox was comfortably familiar even under the tang of sex. Joss knew he was awkward, but you couldn't have proven that by Ox. His friend watched Joss the entire time Joss worked away, and the expression on his face would be enough to give a fellow a high hat impression of himself if he didn't know better. Those intent blue eyes got Joss interested in moving his hands around some. Ox's marred hide beneath the shirt, his tense muscles shifting, even his tight balls under their puckered skin felt surprisingly good, and Ox's response was even better. Joss was almost disappointed when Ox pushed him off, shuddering, and he moved fast to make sure his hands were in place when Ox spent. Ox came hard, which was interesting, too. Joss's curiosity wasn't half-satisfied. They'd just have to do this again.

Getting up from his own knees and looking down at Ox, who was now sprawled out on his bed as relaxed as Joss had ever seen him, Joss realized that they could do this again. In fact, they would. Okay.

He was whistling as he went over to the washstand to clean up his hands and his groin. He didn't rinse his mouth out, though. That didn't seem needful. The lingering taste was somehow pleasant. And Joss felt fine, not sick at all.

Well, Joss had seen too much at too young an age, seen too many preachers and politicians climbing the wrong stairs, to swallow everything he heard about fornication without measuring those words against his own experience. And if the gospel sharps were correct about sodomy? All right, then, he'd go to hell. He'd sure have lots of company once he got there, including Ox and his Ma. Which kind of made hell the place to be, in Joss's opinion.

He paused to examine his reflection in the mirror over the washstand. Come to find out, Joss didn't look any more like a gal now that he'd sucked cock, either. So the docs were flim-flaming about the nances, too. How about that? "Ox, you know any books about this stuff?"

"Few," Ox said, still sounding contented. "Mostly ignorant."

"They'll be interesting even so. What do you want to do about getting jobs?"

That made Ox sit up. "Best leave this town. Nathan talks."

"You don't want all those fancy friends and relations knowing where you fetched up? I can understand that." Joss pondered, picking up his hat. "All right. Let me speak with Mrs. Hackler and get over to the livery stable again. We're going to have to leave the Territory, so best to be moving before we run through any more money. And we might as well start traveling tonight, just in case Mr. Norton takes issue with Charlie."

Ox smiled. "Yup, we'll travel." The smile widened into a grin. "Have to move the bureau drawers first, though. And button up."

Joss whacked Ox with his Stetson.

So everything ended like it began: with Joss and Ox journeying through the New Mexican night. Although this time there was a moon overhead, big and white, turning the sky deep indigo and silvering the clouds as they sailed silently towards the horizon. They could see well enough to ride, making good time up the road into the Taos Mountains. They'd decided to cut across the loop of the Denver & Rio Grande before rejoining the tracks at Pinyones and shipping themselves and the horses by train. About half-way to Dos Caride, they dismounted and paused to water some pines before stretching out their legs for a minute or two.

Joss rubbed a little sand across his palms and brushed it back off. "Where are you thinking about our traveling to?"

"California."

"I always wanted to see California. Where in California? Why?"

"San Francisco. My money's in a bank there."

"The Barbary Coast." Joss found he was liking this idea more and more. "And we can use what I don't have to spend on girls any more to see Celestial Town. I bet they have interesting houses. You ever eat Chinaman food, Ox? I always wanted to try some. My Ma said they make soup out of bird's nests. I wonder how that tastes."

"Then maybe the Sandwich Islands."

"Well, now." Joss smiled. Then he frowned. "They need cowboys in the Sandwich Islands?"

Ox reached out one big hand and cradled Joss's chin for a minute. "Yup." Then, with the slow inevitability of a landslide, he leaned in for a kiss. It was nothing like the kiss he'd swapped with Parr. His lips were searching, strong, and his tongue came calling like Joss was a fancy girl. But Joss didn't kiss back like a girl and Ox didn't seem to mind that at all. When Ox pulled away, he said, "On the biggest island."

"What?" Joss shook his head, which helped to settle his brains. "Oh, where we can work."

"For a bit. We'll travel, look around. Get our own ranch."

"Your own ranch."

Folding his arms over his chest, Ox gave Joss a stern look. "Our."

"You shouldn't say that, Ox. You may be sick of me by then, or find someone nicer, smarter - shit!"

Joss didn't swear much, but he wasn't used to being plucked straight up off the ground, either. Ox shook him a single time, gently, and then said, "Hard enough finding one partner."

"All right, all right!" Ox set him back down and Joss yanked his shirt and coat back into place. "You sure are stubborn."

"Yup. And right, too. You'll see. We'll do fine. We can live."

Joss found he was smiling. Ox had always been a pretty good prophet, and he'd probably be right this time, too. "Okay, partner. Let's live, then."



# The Good Life

By Sean Michael

From The Anthology Cowboy Up

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Jack Henneson hung up the phone and made a notation on the papers in front of him. He almost had all his ducks in a row and would be able to list the property soon.

Maybe even as early as next week.

He shook his head and pushed his chair away from the heavy old desk, stretching the kinks out of his back.

Almost eight months since Uncle Billy had died and he was only just getting everything together. It hadn't helped that he wasn't familiar with what paperwork was needed on livestock and crops, so he'd been

scrambling from the start.

It also didn't help that Pacer Williams, Uncle Billy's main ranch hand (and gift from God to listen to people around here talk) was a full-sized asshole. The man had been rude, unhelpful, growly...

Jack appreciated all the man had done, keeping the place running between Uncle Billy's death and his being able to deal with all the paperwork of putting the place on the market, but Pacer had been unhappy to see him from the get go.

He walked out to the veranda, pulling off his glasses and putting them in his pocket to look out over the ranch. He still couldn't believe he'd managed to inherit the place.

What the hell was he going to do with a ranch?

He was a finance officer for God's sake. He sat at a desk and pushed paper. And he was damned good at it, too. Which was exactly why he was selling the place as soon as he had all the paperwork together. He headed back for his desk.

"Where the fuck is the green John Deere?" His office door slammed open, followed by tall, dark and dusty. "Jim Anderson rented it last week and it's fucking gone out of the barn."

"The what? You lost me after green." He looked Pacer up and down. He was a good looking man, with the most amazing green eyes in a deeply tanned face. Too bad he was such a jerk.

"The. Green. John. Deere. Tractor." Those green eyes flashed. "You know? The one I rebuilt from scratch? The one that we lease out for haying? Where the fuck is it?"

"Oh, that'll be the tractor I sold to the dealership. They gave me a great price for it." Not that that was any of Pacer's business.

"You did what?" Pacer's voice went deadly quiet, the set of that lean jaw almost frightening.

"I sold it." He tilted his own chin up.



Pacer held his gaze, just lifted the walkie talkie up without dropping his eyes. "Cooter? Tell Mr. Anderson that the tractor's gone and give him his money back."

"What?" The answer was confused, scratchy.

"Tell him the brainless jackass that's trying to destroy everything Billy worked for his entire goddamn life sold it."

He sputtered. "Tell him the owner sold it."

The only reason he hadn't fired Pacer yet was because he didn't know a thing about running a ranch and he wanted it in working order while it was on the market.

Pacer just watched him, put the radio back on his belt. "The owner of this place is turning in his grave."

"You are such an asshole, you know that? Look, I know Uncle Billy was your friend as well as your boss, but yeah, he's dead now and I'm the new owner. Deal with it." He glared. He could do angry and intimidating, too.

"Bill was more than my boss and if he'd lived another month you wouldn't be the boss of dick and you fucking know it." Pacer growled, not backing off a bit. "This whole damn town knew Bill and me had an agreement."

Jack snorted. "You were ripping him off, buying the land far under value. All I want is a fair price."

"Fuck you, you money-grubbing little prick. I was doing no such thing." Pacer shook his head, dust flying. "You know I've offered you all I got."

"All you've got is not enough. I told you I was willing to sell to you at fair value rather than putting it on the market -- where I could make a killing if I was a money-grubbing little prick."

Damn, those eyes were green when the man was angry. Which it seemed he always was.

"You didn't work for this land, didn't spend your life making it what it is."

"And I didn't ask for it, but it's mine now. Look, I'm sorry Uncle Billy didn't change his will or make his deal with you before he died, but I've got land taxes to deal with, inheritance taxes. I can't just turn around and give it to you. You can't pay me fair value. Ergo, I'm selling it."

"So you sell off the fucking equipment we need? The things that make this place work?" One hand slammed into his desk, actually shaking it. "I spent months rebuilding that tractor for Bill."

"You were renting it out! I needed to make payments. I needed the money or the only one getting this place was going to be the bank! Not that it's any of your fucking business!"

Damn it, he was out of his league here -- he knew he was -- but given the attitude he'd been getting from this man from the start, he'd be damned if he was going to ask Pacer for help.

"The payments come from renting out the tractor and selling the fucking hay that's going to go to seed now in the east pasture. This place has been a working

ranch for forty years and in six goddamn months you've driven it into the goddamned ground."

"You're supposed to be running the place! I'm the fucking city-boy, remember?"

Pacer had glared at him at the funeral and he was glaring now and Jack was pretty tired of it. He'd not asked to inherit the ranch; it had only been the fluke accident taking his mother along with Uncle Bill that had seen it land in his hands. Bill had left the ranch to his mother, who'd left everything to him.

"Excuse me? Running the place?" Pacer stood, the laugh humorless and bitter as ashes. "You took my purchasing power away. You took the books from me. You fucking ask me to move out of the rooms that have been my home for fifteen years. You tied my hands and are a royal dipshit with the rest. Now you're selling my equipment, and I'm supposed to run things? Christ, boy. God Himself couldn't fix the mess you've made."

"Look, a condition of the will might have been to keep you on here, but I don't have to like it. And if you don't? I can accept your resignation at any time!"

Damn that fucking codicil guaranteeing Pacer his job at the ranch.

"Fuck you. Whether or not you're man enough to admit it, this land is mine and I will wait your motherfucking ass out." Pacer glared and pushed the phone over to him. "Now you get on the phone and find us a goddamned tractor so that we have feed for the winter or I will stomp a mudhole in your ass and walk the son of a bitch dry."

"It was an extra fucking tractor! You were renting it out!" He was not going to let this man walk all over him, damnit. He might not be some goddamned high and mighty cowboy, but that didn't mean he didn't have his pride.

"Yes. And we'll be renting out the main tractor now. Those men depend on us, damn it. Jim's cattle don't eat, he doesn't rent a tractor. Old Harry and Lou? They count on that tractor. And I tell you what, George Benton? When the fucking septic went over two years ago? Let us pay out for months through the lean season. This isn't the goddamn Metroplex, asshole. This is real fucking life."

God, he just wanted this all to go away, which was why he'd started selling stuff. Well that and the taxes were about to kill him. It had been sell stuff off here or sell his condo back home. "Fine. You find something to rent and I'll approve the payment. But only as much as it's needed, I know you think I'm made of money, but I sold that tractor because I had to."

"You find it. You caused the problem; you fix it."

"You're the fucking manager of the place -- you find it." Not to mention he wouldn't know where to start, aside from calling up the damned dealership and renting the fucking thing back off them.

Maybe he should have asked Pacer what to sell for the cash needed. Of course one look at the man's face had him rethinking that.

Pacer shook his head. "How the fuck did one of Billy's kin end up so friggin' pointless? Let me tell you what, you ask someone who knows his ass from a hole in the ground before you go selling the shit we need. Doesn't fucking have to be me, but ask before you take everything Bill made and destroy it before a fucking year is out."

"It'll be sold before a fucking year is out!" Either that or he and Pacer were going to kill each other, he was pretty sure of that.

"Yeah. You'll have your cash and I'll lose everything I've worked for for twenty years. You're a helluva man, there. A real honor to know." Pacer turned and headed for the door, just dismissing him.

"I don't need approval from an asshole like you!"

Pacer turned, gave him a long, slow look, lip curling in distaste. "Good thing. The only fucking thing you got going for you is that you were related to a real man."

"Just go away, Pacer. Preferably to hell." Because he was not going to cry in front of this man, oh, no he wasn't.

"Shit, it's been that for eight fucking months, since they come to tell us about Bill." Pacer turned and left, the door shaking on its hinges as it was slammed.

Jack sighed and closed his eyes, trying, unsuccessfully, not to think for a few minutes.

He was pissed off. He was really pissed off. And he hurt. His mother had died in that accident, too. This wasn't a picnic for him; he wasn't enjoying himself or even trying to make anyone's life a hell.

He picked up a little vase that had been sitting on the corner of the desk since he'd arrived and he threw it at the door. The sound as it shattered felt fitting.

"Damn you, Bill Warren, why the fuck didn't you change your goddamned will and leave all this crap to Pacer?"

And now he was talking to a dead man. He had to get rid of this place before he totally lost it.

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Oh, sweet fuck, he was drunk.

Him and Will and Cooter'd gone out to the back forty with a half dozen bottles and the horses, looking to dull the ache a little. Everything was fucking broke dick around here -- from the fact that the little fuck in the big house had kicked him out to bunk with the boys to the fact that Jack wouldn't honor Billy's wishes.

Billy.

Fuck.

Pacer took another deep, deep drink, wandering out a ways from where the others were snoozing. He'd been Billy's right hand man for damn near seventeen years. They'd eaten two meals a day together, spent evenings fighting over the TV. Hell, he'd been the one to carry the man to the hospital for the first heart attack and every fucking doctor's appointment after.

The little prick in the main house thought they were worried on the money, the land. Shit. This was Billy's life and then his life and if some fucking stranger got it then Billy'd be gone, damn it. Forever fucking gone.

Just thinking on Jack made his blood boil. Pacer had hated him from the first time he'd opened his mouth and there hadn't been a single thing to help it.

"You promised me, Chief. You fucking promised me I could stay on this land, work it. What the fuck do I do now? I ain't got family, home, everything I saved for twenty years went into the last two years of buckin' bulls. I ain't got a dime."

He finished off one bottle and went to search for another. He'd heard once a man could drink himself sober. He reckoned there might never be a better time to try.

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Jack climbed out of George Benton's truck. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

He headed slowly up the lane, hands in his pockets. He was so fucked.

He'd found a safety deposit box key and had gone to open the box today. Only to discover yet another codicil to the will, this one stipulating that whoever inherited the place couldn't sell it for at least five years. Why Bill had made that fucking stipulation and not ever gotten around to leaving the fucking place to Pacer Williams in the first place was beyond him.

Not only that, he had another bunch of taxes to pay and no cash to pay them -- the ranch wasn't exactly running in the black.

So he'd left his car at the dealership, called in to tell his boss he was going to have to turn that sympathy leave into an indefinite leave of absence, made another call to see about getting his condo on the market and now he was back.

There was a bottle of whiskey in the cabinet and he was going to drink until he passed out because he was pretty sure if he thought about this too hard right now he was going to go and lie down in front of the damned tractor and let it roll right over him.

And the way his luck was running at the moment, it wouldn't kill him, just put him in the hospital indefinitely and leave him with a lifetime of medical bills he couldn't pay off.

A loud whoop came from outside, then another and another, the ruckus just blowing his mind. He looked out the window to see all the hands around Pacer's tall, too-skinny frame, clapping the man on the back and hooting.

He wished again Bill had thought to change his will just in case something happened to him. If he had, Jack would be happily ensconced in his little condo back home, working and living and blissfully unaware of anything about ranching.

He watched, wondering idly what all the fuss was about. They looked thrilled, the tense lines around Pacer's eyes easing up for the first time, the cowboy actually smiling, talking on the phone and relaying information.

He headed out there, drawn to the little cluster of happiness. Not that they'd want him there, but he supposed he needed to tell them he wasn't selling after all. That would probably be icing on whatever cake they had going.

Then he could get drunk.

"We got sixteenth, twenty-fifth and fourth, boys! Fucking fourth!" Pacer hooted, hat flinging in the air. "Hell, yeah!"

"Win a few bets?" Jack asked, leaning against the white picket fence.

Those green-green eyes flashed over at him, proud, shining. "No. Just took fourth in the futurity with High Roller. Daddy's Clipper and Smoked Glass placed, too. All three." Oh, the bulls Pacer raised.

"Hey, good for you. Congratulations!" He tried to sound pleased for Pacer. Looked like fate or God or something was picking sides and Jack was coming up losing.

"Don't worry. You'll get your cut of the money from the breeding and the riding. I keep my word, whether it was to you or Billy."



"Good, it'll come in handy." Because this place? Sucked money in an amazing way.

Cooter looked over, tipped his hat back. "He ain't got no idea, Pace."

Pacer grinned, nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I know."

And now they were laughing at him. Again. "Yeah, yeah, laugh at the city-boy." He rolled his eyes and turned to go. He should have stayed where he was and started drinking.

And who the fuck knew Pacer could look so good with a smile on his face?

"Shit, man. At least stop pouting long enough to hear the news." Pacer's drawl was infuriating. "Roller's sperm'll sell for right at eight grand a shot now. He does good on the circuit? We'll get fifteen K a shot."

He stopped in his tracks and turned, mouth hanging open. "Eight thousand dollars just for bull spunk?"

Well hell, Pacer was going to be able to pay fair value for the land in no time at all. Of course he still wasn't allowed to sell for another four years, three months and two and a half weeks.

Pacer laughed. "Yeah. Eight thousand smackers for jacking off a bull. Not to mention Georgia and Lady's Honor're both having his calves."

Cooter nodded. "Half of it's Pace's, quarter's yours, quarter's ours."

"No, quarter goes back into the business, man."

He just blinked, more than a little floored. "So how come you can't just get a loan to buy this place with the bulls as collateral?"

"Use your brain, man. One accident? One virus? One broken bone? He goes from on the top to sunk. No bank's gonna back that."

"Yeah, I can see that. It's a moot point anyway now, isn't it?"

Pacer went white, all the cowboys still and silent. "So who bought it?"

Jack snorted. "You can go back to laughing at the city-boy again, because the joke's on me. I just found a codicil to the will saying I can't sell the place for five years." He was stuck on a piece of land he didn't want with ranch hands who thought he was an idiot and one that not only could he not fire, but who hated his guts.

Pacer closed his eyes and swayed. "Thank God."

"Oh, shit, Pace. Five years, man. Won't be nothing stopping you in five years!" Cooter hooted, just bouncing.

"If the bank doesn't foreclose," Jack noted dryly before turning again and heading toward that drink. He didn't mind the prospect of having to wait five years to see any sort of money from this place, he just didn't see how he was going to keep the bank off his back. Well, the proceeds from the condo were going to help. And he supposed, grudgingly, if he let Pacer have total access and control, the man would keep the place solvent enough.

The sound of celebration followed him all the way in.

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Pacer looked over at the main house, dark and quiet, and sighed. Fucking day before Christmas and no lights, no tree, nothing.

He pulled out a photo album and went to sit, settling on the porch of the hands' house in a rocker, wrapped up in a quilt.

Everyone had gone home for the holidays, except him and Jack. In the three months since the bulls had hit and the man had given him his ranch back? Things had settled again. He saw the man once a week to deliver the books and that was it. It worked. Three years, eight months and four days and this land was his.

The truck turned up into the lane and bounced up, Jack parking and jumping out. The man's fancy car had disappeared awhile back, Jack using the truck now. Jack pulled a couple grocery bags and a case of beer out of the truck and headed in.

Man, last year? Him and Billy were throwing a Christmas Eve party. Decorating. Cooking. Laughing.

Christmassing.

Jack looked like he didn't even know what Christmas was. Mr. Scrooge. There wouldn't be any Christmas cheer this year, no bonuses for the boys.

Well, least the boys got the time off paid; he'd fought the little bastard tooth and nail for it. He'd get all the work done on his own; he was good for it. Still, the

whole thing made for a dull fucking holiday. Pacer sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. He just needed to go into town, get some company, maybe have supper with some people.

The front door of the house slammed closed behind Jack and the lights didn't come on, followed by swearing.

"Goddamnit!" Jack came back out, cursing.

He arched an eyebrow. Someone must've forgot to pay the light bill. He got up and wandered over. "You got a problem, man?" Never let anyone say he wasn't neighborly.

"Fucking lights." Jack groaned and sat down heavily. "Fuck. I don't suppose you've got candles?"

"Yeah. You got breaker problems?" Man looked like shit. Shame, 'cause the man hadn't looked horrible at the start.

"Something like that."

Jack opened the front door and reached in, coming up with a beer and popping the top.

"Let me go get my tool box and my flashlight and I'll fix it." He didn't even bother to sigh. The man was worthless as tits on a boar hog.

"Don't bother. I didn't pay the bill." Jack tipped his beer back, downing a good half of it.

Now, he knew they weren't rolling in dough, but they were in the black. Hell, he'd sold calves himself not a week ago. "Why not?"

"Because it was your paychecks or the electricity, okay? Don't worry. It was just the house account. I figured they wouldn't turn it off over the holidays." Jack laughed humorlessly. "I figured wrong."

"What the fuck are you doing, man? Where's the goddamn money going?" He just didn't fucking get it.

"Do you have any clue how much the inheritance tax there is on this place? I haven't been able to sell the fucking condo. My mother's assets just about covered her debts, mind you it still cost me more than she left me to pay the tax on that. None of the retailers are willing to honor any of Bill's account. Pay up in full and then pay as I go." Jack shook his head.

"You ain't from here and, God knows you piss people off just by breathing." He sighed. "I'll make some calls in town. Vouch for you. You'd best come over to the house. Won't be anyone out 'til Monday. How much is the bill?" Goddamnit.

"I piss people off just by breathing? Fuck, that's rich coming from you." Jack shook his head. "I just need some candles. I'll manage."

He shrugged, "Suit yourself, son. You ought to be able to drink just as well in the dark as you do in the light. I'll take care of the bill Monday morning. The food in the fridge ought to keep 'til then." He'd made the offer. Fuck the man, if he wouldn't take it.

"Damnit, Pacer, I don't need your charity. I'll pay the fucking bill when I've got the money to pay it."

"We take care of our own, Jack." Whether or not they wanted it.

Jack gave him a look. "Since when am I one of your own?"

"Since you walked in this door with Billy's blood in your veins."

"Well thank god I wasn't a total stranger then, you would have killed me outright and hidden the body in the back fields or something."

"A total fucking stranger might not have deserved it." He turned, stared at Jack. "I gave your Uncle my whole life -- my sweat, my care, my savings, everything. Shit, man. You turned me out of my home."

"From where I was sitting it looked like you were taking advantage of him, Pacer. Look, I wish he'd updated his fucking will and left the place to you, I really do. But he didn't." Jack finished off his beer. "You guys should have had stuff in place showing you as a partner or something on this place. I mean, his will was ten years old. Why the hell didn't he have a new one drawn up as soon as you guys became partners?"

"Because we're fucking busy around here, or hadn't you noticed? Billy wasn't a sit-down owner, the man worked eighteen hours a day right along with the rest of us."

Taking advantage of Billy, shit. The man was amazing. Strong. Smart as a whip.

"Is that a shot? Because I have a feeling you don't want me anywhere near working right along with the rest of you."

"No. No. Shit, can't I just miss the man?" He turned, cheeks burning. Man, the little fuck burned his ass.

"Sorry. I didn't realize you guys were... that close."

He looked back, eyes wide. "Jesus Christ. We lived together for seventeen years. I can count the number of suppers we didn't have together on one hand. He was my best friend."

"Well I wasn't here then, okay? I'm not a fucking mind reader." Jack clambered up and glared at him. "It doesn't matter what I say or do it's the wrong thing with you."

"You didn't bother to ask, either, did you?" He glared right back, getting in Jack's face.

Jack's chin went up. "No, I didn't. I knew I was unwelcome the moment I stepped on the property, you all out and giving me the evil eye. I sure as hell wasn't going to ask you anything I didn't have to."

"Because you just showed up looking to make friends."

"No, I showed up looking to unload this money sink before it took me down with it. I mean hell, we should have gotten along like a house afire as we're in perfect agreement -- I don't want to be here, you don't want me here!"

"Then go." He shrugged. "Go back to wherever you're from and let us work." Money sink? This place was home.

"Yeah, that would be my first choice, too." Jack shrugged. "The condo's on the market though. This is all I've got. Things'll ease up once I've got the proceeds from that." Jack nodded, almost looked like he was talking to himself.

Pacer closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Come back to the bunkhouse. Everyone's gone. You can sleep where it's warm."

Jack bit his lip and looked like he was about to refuse, but a cold wind blew and the man shivered. "All right," came the grudging reply.

"You got groceries that need to come over?"

Jack nodded. "Milk. And a turkey TV dinner for tomorrow. And the beer. Definitely need a working fridge for that if we're going to be under the same roof."

"I promise to leave you be, man. It's Christmas. I'm not looking to fight." He went in, found odds and ends in the dark. Christ, the man didn't eat worth a damn.

"All right then." Jack put the beers under one arm and headed toward the bunkhouse.

Lord save him from minutes when he was fucking feeling generous. It was gonna be the longest fucking few days in history.

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Jack wasn't sure what to make of Pacer's invitation to spend the holiday with the man. All right, it was more an invitation to stay at the bunkhouse until the lights were back on so he was comfortable and the holiday happened to fall on the time he'd be there. Still. He'd have sworn Pacer would have shrugged and said something along the lines of making beds and lying in them.

Looked like knowing all he had to do was bide his time had mellowed Pacer out. Some.



They'd pretty much avoided each other all evening, Jack being just sleepy enough after his beer that he'd felt justified in heading for a bed early.

He actually slept hard, waking up with the sun well-up and something that smelled good in the air. Something that smelled a whole lot like maybe turkey.

He sat up and pulled on his jeans, running a hand through his hair. Man, he needed a cut in the worst way; it was tickling inside his ears and the back of his neck.

He took a piss and splashed some water on his face in the bathroom and then wandered out to the kitchen, hoping there was coffee on and ready to offer a friendly "Merry Christmas".

There was a plate with a tea towel covering it, filled with bacon and eggs and toast, an empty coffee cup. On the other side of the table there was a photo album. Pacer was nowhere to be found. The food wasn't hot, but it wasn't cold either, so he filled up the coffee cup, adding some milk when it poured out looking thick as tar, and sat to eat.

He made short work of the food. He hadn't had more than coffee and toast for breakfast in weeks -- not since he'd destroyed a frying pan trying to make sausages and scrambled eggs -- and contemplated the photo album.

Once his breakfast was done -- and it had been good, too -- he pushed aside his plate and tugged over the book. It had been left out on purpose, he was sure, and while he his knee-jerk reaction was to push it away because he wasn't going to do something just because Pacer wanted him to, he was curious enough to actually open it up and look through it.

Lord. Pages and pages of Uncle Bill, some with Pacer, some not. There were pictures of Christmasses with the house lit up, pictures of the men riding, a few of the men at the rodeo, standing side-by-side. It was obvious Pacer was more family than he or his mother had ever been. Hell, he'd only seen Bill once or twice maybe in the last ten years and his mother had always insisted he wasn't allowed on the ranch in case he got hurt when he'd been a boy.

"You should have willed the place to him, old man." He shook his head. That would have saved everyone a whole bunch of headaches and heartache.

He stood up, walked to the window. Pacer was out in the rain, hauling hay from one barn to another, the cattle swarming around him. The ground must have been slick, because Pacer seemed off-balance, boots sliding on the mud. As he watched, one of the bulls came up, pushing to get to the hay and Pacer went down, sort of disappearing under hooves and bodies and not popping back up again.

Fuck!

He tossed on one of the coats by the door and pushed on his shoes, heading out into the rain. "Pacer?"

His shoes weren't meant for the muck and he was slip-sliding himself, cursing the rain.

The cattle were milling, the gate locked and damnit, he couldn't see if Pacer was moving. He tried the gate again and then realized there wasn't much else for it but climbing the fence.

He did, managing to lose one shoe and catch the borrowed jacket on a nail or something. Shrugging out of the jacket and kicking off his other shoe, he swallowed as he hit the ground on the other side of the fence. Shit, those cows were big.

They shied away from him, heads tossing. It let him see Pacer, a line of blood coming from his nose.

"Oh, fuck." He'd been hoping, really honestly hoping that this was some kind of gag on him. A stunt to get him in with the cattle and then laugh at him.

"Come on, Pacer, man. Wake up now." He made his way over there, shivering as the rain was blown against his bare skin by the wind, his bare feet squelching in the mud.

He kept half an eye on the cattle until he was next to Pacer and then he got down on his knees, bending over the man to shield his face from the rain. "Pacer?" He shook one shoulder gently. "Come on, man. This isn't funny at all."

Pacer's eyes fluttered a little, rolling. "Bill? Chief? Fuck, man. My friggin' head hurts."

Pacer was just a little disoriented from bumping his head, he'd be fine in a few minutes. That's what Jack told himself.

"It's Jack, Pacer. You took a fall. Do you think you can stand up? We'll go inside where it's dry and warm, okay?"

"Oh. Jack. Shit. Sorry. Damn critter caught me."

"Yeah, I saw. You hit your head when you went down I guess. I didn't see you land. Come on, I can't lift you." He could steady Pacer though and that's what he did, making a face as his foot landed in shit on the first step they took back toward the fence.

"Yeah. Okay. Fuck, it's getting cold out here." Pacer shivered, shook his head. "Oh, man. I'm gonna hurl."

"Right now or can you wait until we're inside?" And yeah, Jack knew it was getting cold, he couldn't feel his nipples.

Pacer stumbled away, landing on hands and knees and retching. Oh. Okay. That would be right now.

Jack felt his own stomach rise some at the site and he swallowed it back down, turning away so he wouldn't have to watch. Fuck, this bit. He wondered if he ought to be heading Pacer over to the truck when he was done ralping, get the man to the hospital.

Pacer stood, swaying a little. "Sorry. Come on, I'll unlock the gate."

He put his shoulder under Pacer's arm, and wrapped one arm around the man's waist. "Okay. No more falling. No way I can carry you."

"I ain't gonna fall. I swear." Yeah. Right. Shit, there was nothing -- nothing but skin and bones and a bare covering of lean muscles -- to the man. If Pacer hadn't been so badly off it would have made him self-conscious about his own softness, his lack of muscle, but now was not the time.

They got to the gate without further incident. "Why do you keep them locked?" Far as he knew, the cattle did not have opposable thumbs.

"Habit. Better always locked than to need it locked and have forgot, you know?"

He nodded. "Is there trouble with livestock stealing? Um...cattle rustling?"

"Oh, Hell yes. Some of these bulls are worth ten, fifteen thousand dollars. The calves bring us eight, nine. Really though, I just don't want them getting out, getting hurt."

He was half tempted to suggest the hospital, given Pacer was carrying on a conversation with him without looking at him like he was an idiot or yelling at him. It made him chuckle, but the sound cut off when Pacer had trouble with the key in the lock on the gate and Jack had to help.

"Thanks." Pacer made it to the porch and sat, the rain just soaking him through. "I'll be in in a minute."

Jack shook his head, shivering. "I don't think this rain is good for you. I think if you can't make it inside I should take you to the hospital."

"I can't afford it. I'm good. I just need a glass of water and some aspirin."

"Well then up and inside. You can't afford to get your head checked out, you can't afford pneumonia either." He stood over Pacer, waiting for the man to do as he'd been told.

Pacer rolled his eyes and stood, heading into the house. "Logic, logic, logic."

"Yep. You might try using it now and then," he suggested.

Once Pacer was in and sitting at the kitchen table, Jack tugged at his shirt. "Come on, get this off. I'll get some towels."

He looked down at his feet, making a face. "I'm gonna leave footprints."

"There's a mop." Pacer worked his shirt open, off, exposing leathered skin, a long back.

Jack let himself take a look and then went for the towels and opened the medicine cabinet to find the aspirin.

Wasn't long before he was back putting the towel around Pacer's shoulders and handing him the pill bottle. He pulled down a glass and filled it with water and that was the extent of his nursing skills. "I'm going to grab a shower first, okay? I figure you need some time to get your legs steady."

"Yeah. Thanks." Pacer took the pills, leaning hard against the table.

Jack frowned. He could feel his teeth trying to start chattering and he ground them together so they wouldn't. "You sure you're going to be okay? Maybe..." he sighed and just suggested it. "Maybe I should help you? You know, just sit on the toilet or something while you shower, just in case."

"Go on and get warm, man. You're white as a ghost." Those eyes met his, almost laughing. "We? Got to get you a pair of boots."

"It would beat stepping in cow shit with my bare feet." Another shiver caught him and he headed for the bathroom. "Just don't pass out on me while I'm in there."

"I'll manage." Pacer's voice followed him, stronger now.

He nodded, but left the bathroom door open a crack, just in case.

He stripped out of his soaking jeans as quickly as he could and just left them in a sodden pile where they dropped, moaning as he stepped into the heat of the shower. Fuck, he'd been cold. Just freezing.

He didn't want to use up all the hot water, so he cut his shower short, getting out long before he was ready. He was clean though, and no longer shivering, so out he came.

He dried off quickly and wrapped his towel around his waist. "Your turn," he noted as he came out.

Pacer was in nothing but wet, tissue-thin jeans, face already starting to bruise. "Thanks."

Christ, there were dozens of random scars, all shapes and sizes, covering the dark skin.

"This kind of thing happen a lot?" he asked, eyes drawn to all that skin and its scars again and again.

"Oh, yeah. It's part and parcel of working with critters ten, twenty times your size. Most of 'em ain't mean, they just don't know they're hurting." Pacer touched a long, brutal looking scar on the flat belly. "Course some are just mean."

"You mean one of them did that to you on purpose?" Maybe his mom hadn't been so out of line after all, keeping him away from the ranch all those years.

"Yeah, that was Stinger. He was a vicious son of a bitch. Billy finally had him butchered after he trampled four calves."

"I guess animals are like people. Some are just bad news."

"Yeah. Tasted damn good, though."

Jack laughed. "Sounds like good revenge." Wow, they were having a conversation without taking each other's heads off. He figured Pacer had to be feeling pretty wretched for that to be happening.

"You want me to turn the taps on in the shower for you or anything?"

"Nah. I'm good. I don't suppose you peel potatoes?"

"Sure." How hard could peeling potatoes be?

"Cool. Do six or eight, yeah? We'll have leftovers."

"So that is turkey I smell?" A Christmas dinner. Him and Pacer. Who'd have thought. And the man had started that before the fall at that.

"Well, it's Christmas, ain't it? Even if we didn't do up the place, it don't seem right to go without on Christmas."

He nodded and gave Pacer a wry smile. "That's why I picked up the turkey and dressing frozen dinners."

"Yeah, well, we're having pecan pie and shit. Go peel the potatoes and I'll get cleaned up."

"Sure; have at it."



He smiled and waited until Pacer shut the door to the bathroom and then went to the bedroom and put on his underwear and his shirt. He hadn't brought any extra clothes and his jeans were soaked, so he put his socks on and left it at that.

Then he started looking for the potatoes, trying the fridge first.

He was starting to worry he wasn't even going to have found the fucking potatoes when he found the pantry, a wooden bin in the back proving to contain potatoes. He rolled his eyes. He should have just asked, but he didn't want to give Pacer anymore ammunition in thinking he was a useless brat.

He brought eight over to the counter and opened drawers until he found some steak knives.

Then he started peeling.

And cutting his fingers.

Fuck.

He was a useless brat.

"You want the potato peeler, man?" Pacer dug around in a drawer, pulled one out, handed it over.

A potato peeler. "You're kidding me." He took the thing and ran the blade over his third potato. "Whoa, this thing works."

"Well, yeah." Pacer grinned at him and it didn't feel mean.

"I don't peel a lot of potatoes." Or cook them. Hell, he didn't have money in the bank because he ate out most of the time. Or at least he had before. No dependents, no worries, just him and his lifestyle.

"I didn't either, but Billy liked mashed ones and paid me in peach cobbler."

"I don't make cobbler either." He gave Pacer a grin, trying not to notice all that skin with only the little towel to cover things up. "Not much of a cook, really."

"Well, let me get some pants on and I'll boil water."

"Sure. Just ignore my own pantless state, okay? I didn't bring down another pair and the ones I had... well you probably tripped over them in there."

"Well, I'd offer you mine, but you'd be singing soprano."

"Hey, it can be a new tradition -- no pants Christmas dinner." He had the potatoes peeled now and he rinsed them under the water. "So what do we do with these now?"

Pacer looked at him, started chuckling. "No... no pants Christmas. Oh. Oh, shit. That's fucking funny."

He watched Pacer laughing for a moment, not entirely sure the man wasn't making fun of him. Deciding Pacer wasn't, deciding to just take this easiness between them as a Christmas gift, he grinned. "You think it'll catch on?"

"It certain circles, I reckon it just might."

"Those sound like fun circles."

That set Pacer off again, the laughter real and amused and honest. It felt good, sharing the laughter with Pacer instead of anger and harsh words.

"How's the head?" he asked as their laughter died down.

"Not deadly. Look, how about I rustle up some sweats. Those'll be comfortable and you won't burn your willie cooking."

He snorted, or maybe giggled a little. "That'd be great, thanks."

"Gimme five minutes." Pacer turned, giving him another look at that ass.

"K." Five minutes. That gave him 300 seconds to get his cock under control because he was pretty sure the last thing Pacer wanted for Christmas was him, sporting wood and half naked at the kitchen table.

He heard Pacer rustling, the man coming back with a black pair of sweatpants, some socks and a grey sweater. The cowboy was in jeans and a green flannel shirt, looking casual and easy and... well, sort of terrifying, the way those eyes were going black.

"The guys are going to think I finally hauled off and decked you," he said, pulling on the sweats.

Pacer nodded. "There ain't been one of 'em hasn't tried once or twice, man."

He chuckled. "You have that effect on people."

"I do." A pot was pulled out, filled with water. "I'm good at my job though."

"Better than me, that's for sure." He grinned. "Not that that's much of a compliment."

"Did you like what all you did before?"

He shrugged. "I was good at it."

"That's not what I asked, man." The pot got popped on the stove.

He passed over the potatoes. "Yeah, sure, I liked it."

"What did you do?"

"Accounting." Most people glazed over about then and started tuning him out. It wasn't exactly an exciting career.

"Yeah? Then what's the problem with the books here -- and before you get all het up, I ain't hunting trouble. I'm just wonderin' what's so different."

"I didn't realize what was yours and what was Bill's to start with. None of the acronyms are familiar. And it's less that there's problems as that I kept getting hit with inheritance tax here and land tax there. And not just from this stuff -- Mom died at the same time Bill did and it all just kind of came down on me, Pacer." He sighed as the potatoes went in. "Then there's the fact that there's no income I can count on, you know? Everything's up to random stuff, it feels like."

This wasn't exactly the conversation he'd been expecting to have on Christmas. Of course maybe they should have had it months ago, but Pacer had taken a dislike to him from the start and he'd given back as good as he got.

To his utter shock, Pacer just nodded. "It's not as much random as... yearly? Different shit happens at different times, you know?"

"Well having your cattle come down with a disease feels pretty random to me. And if you were counting on that money to pay for feed and it falls through... I have to be honest, the fact that I could go totally broke and lose everything at fate's whim? It... worries me." Scared the shit out of him, really.

"Shit, it ain't no different than that damn stock market. Guys go from millionaires to broke-broke overnight, yeah? And we all know how to pull together in hard times."

Jack gave Pacer a wry smile. "I've never exactly gotten the feeling there'd be any pulling together for me. More like celebration as I went under."

"You didn't make the best impression, man. Everybody knew Billy's plans and you treated me like a damned carpetbagger from the get-go."

"I didn't know Billy's plans. I didn't know you from a hole in the wall! My last living relatives had just died, including my mother. I had debt collectors coming out of my ears..." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It would make a pretty fucking miserable Christmas if they fought now and he had to go back to his electricity turned off home.

One hand landed on his shoulder, squeezed a little. "Yeah. I am sorry that your momma was all caught up in it. Bill had always spoke kindly of her. That's a hard row to hoe."

"Thanks. I know now too that you and Bill were close, I didn't know it then, you know? Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." The hand slipped away, Pacer going to make another pot of coffee. "Ask away."

"It's personal," he warned. He really didn't want to get his ass kicked.

"There prob'ly ain't a thing you don't know -- I ain't complicated -- but sure."

He took a deep breath and just asked the question. "Were you and Bill lovers?"

The coffee pot hit the counter and crashed to the floor, shattering. "Oh, fuck. Shit. Damn. Watch your feet."

Damn. His escape route was now covered in coffee and glass. He bit his lip and took a peek at Pacer, trying to gauge if the man was just shocked or pissed off.

Shaken more than anything, pale with hot red spots on the leathered cheeks. "Could you grab me the broom, man? It's right behind you. Damn. That bastard just exploded."

He leaned back in his chair and got the broom, handing it over to Pacer without a word.

"Thanks." Pacer started sweeping. "Guess I know what I'm getting the guys for Christmas, huh?"

"I should have made sure you weren't holding anything first. Heck, I probably should have made sure you were sitting first."

Pacer laughed and nodded. "Hand me the dustpan? I'll go get the wet-dry vac from the hall and get the water and little bits."

He got up and bent for the dustbin, but didn't hand it over immediately. "You avoiding answering my question?"

"Yeah. I am." Pacer met his look, face serious, quiet, a lifetime of pain in those eyes.

"Why?"

"Because if I was, if Billy'd wanted you to know, he'd've told you. And if I wasn't, then it don't matter and there ain't any need to answer."

"True enough." Except that he wanted to know. He'd been wondering about it, more idle curiosity than anything else, but now, for some reason, he wanted to know.

And it wasn't because Pacer was a damned good looking man. Or that Jack was desperate for a touch that wasn't his own hand. No it wasn't. At all. Nope. He was not attracted to this man. He wasn't. Pacer had black eyes coming up for pete's sake...

Jack rolled his eyes at himself, but that didn't stop the next words from coming out of his mouth. "You are gay though, right?"

Pacer stopped, met his eyes again, chin lifted. "Jack, I'm gonna say this once and once only. I live here. This is my home and I wouldn't do anything to hurt the standings of this ranch in the eyes of my neighbors. I'm a rancher. I'm a buckin' bull breeder. I'm damned thankful to the good Lord for what he's given me.

That's how it is. That's how it's always gonna be. You either got to understand that or you gotta move on."

Pacer's eyes lit on the photo album on the table for the barest second. "Someone real important told me that once, and I lived it ever since. I reckon I always will."

Lovers or not, it was obvious Pacer had loved Bill. Jack sighed. "He should have willed you the place." He really should have.

Pacer grinned. "Yeah. Chief really screwed the pooch on that one. Asshole. It'll work, though, son. You watch. This place is meant to be."

"Yeah, only what? Three years and eight months and I'm out of your hair for good." He wasn't sure why that thought made him feel morose, but it did.

"Oh, by then? I'll have convinced you that you're a cowboy, want to buy into the breeding business and we'll be gazillionaires. Come on, man. Help me get this shit cleaned up and we'll cook supper."

"Okay, it's a deal. As long as I don't have to peel anymore potatoes."

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"Goddamnit straight to Hell! J.J.! J.J.? Where the Hell are you, now?" Pacer came through the office doors, sales slip in his hands, mad as a wet hen. "The new kid says you told him to buy twenty beefmaster! We don't run beef steers! What are you thinking?"

Jack looked up over his wire-framed glasses and then took them off, chin going up. "I'm thinking we need to diversify."



"Diversify? Why? We got a good thing going, J.J..." A good enough thing that they'd built onto the main house over a year ago -- two nice offices, a conference room. Hell, they got them a little girl answering phones and shit. The only thing there was only one of now was the kitchen. Family needed to eat together.

"Because if disease comes in and wipes out the stock we're screwed, Pacer. I've been going over the books and we can afford to do this. It makes sense to do this." Jack got up from behind the desk and walked around it, right into his space, looking belligerent. "It's a good idea."

Pacer fought back his grin. Goddamn, he did enjoy fighting with the little banty rooster. Little shit might even be right. "It's a good idea until Ballistic or Mr. President decides to trample 'em to the ground, then you've got hamburger on the hoof. You gonna run them on the west pasture?"

"I was thinking the back forty, actually. Unless I've got my facts wrong, it's not like they're going to need to see the barn before summer's over."

"You'll need to get one of the boys to ride fence. I ain't been out there since February."

"February? You're falling down on the job, Pacer." The corner of Jack's mouth twitched. "Of course you've been telling me I need to know how to ride fence for months now, we could always ride out there together this afternoon." That twitch pulled harder. "The steers show up tomorrow."

"Don't you laugh, you sorry son of a bitch. That new boy's right outside this door and we're supposed to be fighting." He grinned, shook his head. Beef cattle. Christ. Just what they needed. "Those steers lose money and I'm gonna make you eat bologna while the rest of us feast."

"Oh, they're not going to lose money. All we need to do is let them graze out there and then bring 'em in and sell them. Money in our pockets. Have a little faith." Jack looked smug. And happy.

"A little faith. You just spent a good chunk on faith." He pushed his hat back. "Oh, speaking of. The preacher down to the Baptist church called and Miss Callahan fell and broke her hip. I'm gonna send the boys down to cut and bale her hay."

"You'd better send them with a few of those pies of yours out of the freezer then. And a couple of casseroles. She have someone in to look out for her?" Jack was putting his glasses back on, little wire rims fitting behind his ears. His hair needed cutting. Again. Or maybe even still.

"The ladies are, yeah. They mainly need some boys to help with the critters and the haying. I reckon Cooter'll send Vic and Les. They're least likely to cause troubles." Pacer rubbed the back of his neck, his own buzz-cut tickling. "You'd best call down to Chance's, get enough stuff to make sure the new calves are tagged and doctored up. You wantin' 'em cut?"

Jack winced and a hand went down to cover the front of his jeans. "That's up to you."

"Oh, ho! No way, J.J. Them critters? Yours. You make the call." He just hooted.

"Asshole." Jack shook his head. "I don't like the thought of unmanning anything, Pacer, but I don't want them tearing each other up, either. Or jumping the fence and getting into the show cattle."

"You want my advice?" At Jack's nod, he sat at the end of the desk. "Keep your best bull whole, cut the rest, and run your bull with your cows for a season, then see if the calves are solid. If so? Keep him breeding. If not, cut him, too."

"And how do I know which one's the best? Take 'em for a test run?"

Pacer blinked, then started laughing hard enough it hurt, bent over his desk just cackling to beat the band.

Jack chuckled and shook his head. "Come on, Pacer. Let's ride the fence and you can tell me how best to play with my new stock. I'll even let you growl at me until the new boy's out of earshot."

"You're good to me, J.J." He winked, stood and headed for the door. "Kid? Yeah, you. Go get Tumbler and Kia saddled. I'm gonna take Mr. Jack out and beat him."

The new kid swallowed and nodded, damn near tripping over his own feet as he headed for the door. Oh, he did love his life.

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The paperwork was fucking complicated, designed to keep as much of the money in the ranch and as little in the taxman's pocket as possible, but it was all signed now. Every i dotted, every t crossed. He and Pacer were partners, one hundred percent, straight down the line.

Jack leaned against the veranda fence, watching the boys party it up in the bunkhouse yard, grill smoking steaks, beer flowing freely.

Five years ago he'd come here wanting nothing more than to sell this place for as much money as he could get and now here he was, hands-on partner of a flourishing ranch. Who'd have thought home would be a patch of dirt with ornery beasts and an even more ornery partner?

"You want a beer, JJ?" Pacer tossed one over, not ever waiting for his answer. "Boys are real pleased it's all official, yeah? All settled?"

"I hope so -- those are our best steaks they're grilling up." He grinned and popped the top.

"You know it. I hate to admit it, but your little steers are going good." Little? Christ, the beasts were monstrous.

"Praise? For one of my ideas? You must be in a good mood."

Pacer popped his ass, chuckling. "I? Am in a fine fucking mood, partner."

He rubbed his ass for show and grinned. Damn, happiness looked good on Pacer. "You sure?" he teased.

"Yeah, JJ. Yeah. This is... This works just fine."

He nodded. It did. "Sure does, Partner." He knocked his beer against Pacer's.

Pacer settled beside him, the lines beside those bright eyes from laughter these days. "Man, I never thought we'd make you a cowboy, but damn. You're sure home."

Oh. Oh, that was high praise. And he couldn't help but hold his head up a little higher at it, too. "Yeah, fate and Uncle Bill work in mysterious ways." He smiled over at Pacer, just enjoying the man's company more than he'd ever let on.

"Yeah. Yeah. Billy took good care of things. You'd make him real proud."

"Thanks, Pacer. I appreciate your saying so."

The silence grew between them for a moment and he just stayed in it, enjoying the company, the surroundings.

"I've been thinking; we should make Cooter foreman. He's been here, been doing the job, and I'm too busy. I know you're fond of Jeff, but Cooter's got seniority."

Jack laughed. "You want me to argue with you about it for old time's sake?"

Pacer seemed to consider. "Nah... you should just nod and say, 'anything you want, you brilliant cowboy'."

He put his head back and laughed. "Anything you want, you brilliant cowboy," he murmured, just grinning right over. "Anything at all."

"Hell, yeah. That's what I'm talking about."

He chuckled. "Don't get too used to hearing it, Pacer. I'm feeling mellow tonight."

"Well, then I'd best go down the list of shit I want." Pacer winked, bumped their shoulders together.

He bumped back, nodding. "Maybe you should at that."

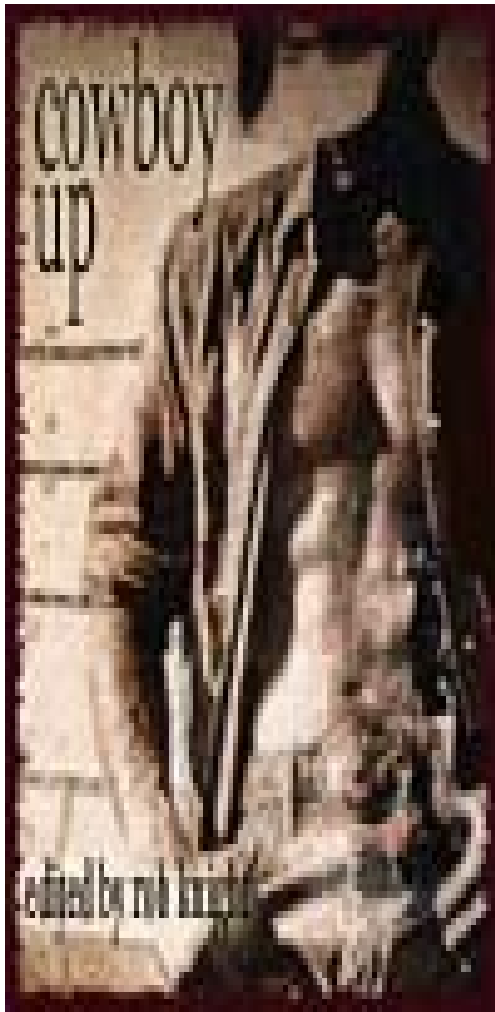
Pacer just laughed, bright green eyes so warm. "Come on, JJ. Let's go eat. Them steaks smell good."

"That's a fine offer topping a great day." A just about perfect day. There'd been a lot of those in the last few years.

"You know it, partner. Just a fine day."

He nodded, looking out around at the ranch. Just fine. Not perfect. Not everything he wanted, but he was thankful for what he had.

"Come on, Pacer. That meat has our name on it."



## Male Order Bride

### By Eumenides

From The Anthology Cowboy Up  
Published By Torquere Press

"Angelina, settle down! I swear that girl can't stay still to save her life." Brand Keith watched his daughter with fondness, making no real attempt to stop her from running up and down the platform of the newly-built train station.

Latimer was hardly a spur on the new railway; it was a wonder they weren't still dependent on the stage to connect to the rest of the country.

"Expect the new wife is going to have her hands full with that one."

Joe Tucker, Brand's foreman, spit sideways off the edge of the platform.

An old lady sitting nearby looked at him with a stare that would have dropped a rampaging steer, but Joe just tipped his hat and grinned. "You ain't had control of that child since she learned to outrun you."

Brand raised the crutch that supported him and balanced awkwardly for a moment on his one good leg. "Not too hard to outrun me, Joe. I'm like the tortoise in the old fable, though. I get there in the end."

It was one of those oven hot days where the air feels like it's about to melt, with not a hint of moisture anywhere so the slightest movement kicked up dust. Angelina was already filthy and they had only been out of the wagon for ten minutes or so. In the distance, a mournful wail heralded the approaching train.

"Sounds like that's them. Expect you're a mite nervous."

Nervous.

That was one way to put it. Brandon Keith had been a widower since Magdalena had died of the ague that had swept through the area back when Angelina was only two. That had been four years ago, and Brand was ashamed to say he could barely remember what his wife had looked like. He could no longer see her snapping dark eyes and midnight hair in his mind; had to look on their daughter to revisit the woman he'd tried to love. Magdalena had been a good wife, it hadn't been her fault he'd been such an indifferent husband. Oh, he'd taken care of her – she'd never lacked for any material thing that was in his province to provide, and he'd genuinely come to care about her.

And she'd never reproached him for his lack of attention to her more intimate needs, though with six sisters all married, surely she knew a proper man would seek his wife's bed more than once every several months. It was a good thing she'd been loyal, hadn't gone running to her sisters with tales of his inadequacies, or they, more worldly-wise than Magdalena, might have figured out just how very wrong he was at heart.

He wondered what Pat would make of his lackluster interest in bed sport. Pat. Pat Forrester. Soon to be Pat Keith, if all went well. He'd picked her mostly by the name, and by the commonsensical tone of her letter. It was a down to earth sort of name, Pat. The kind of woman who'd get the job done and not shilly-shally around expecting what he couldn't nor wouldn't give. And yet, Pat was also Patricia, and that was an elegant sort of name. The kind of true lady that might calm his hoyden of a daughter down.

"Papa, Papa, I see the train! I see it, I see it!" Angelina barreled out of nowhere, slamming into his good side. She was careful about that, he had to admit.

"Easy, Lina, you'll knock me down!" He ruffled her hair and she clung on to his remaining leg.

"You know, Brand, I've heard they make some mighty good wooden legs now. And you're only lame below the knee. You might consider-"

"No." He wouldn't pretend to something he wasn't. And besides, in his mind, his leg was whole. He woke up every single morning a whole man, as though the mini ball had never ripped through his leg at Gettysburg. He'd lie in bed in the haze of the morning and he could feel the leg, all the way down to his toes. And then fully awake, he'd remember it all. No, there wouldn't be any pretending.



Magdalena hadn't minded the leg; chances are Pat wouldn't either. So many men who'd come back were maimed, after all.

"Suit yourself. You always do. And that reminds me, last night I run into some of those boys of Nathan Caruthers, and they're not too pleased with how you're using that bottom land." The train was rounding the bend and slowing, puffs of smoke hanging in the air. The small crowd waiting at the station began to stir.

"I don't arrange my life or my land to suit them." Caruthers was all talk, there wouldn't be trouble. And today wasn't the day to think about that, anyway.

"Didn't figure you'd care, but figured you ought to know. I'll leave you and Lina to greet the future Missus Keith in private. Send the child when you need me to get her bags."

The train had stopped and folk were getting off, an older couple, two men who he took to be marshals or Rangers – they got a look about them, an old woman. He nodded to Pete Farber, a neighboring rancher who was back from business over in Abilene. A few young men and some his own age, starting life over in the west. But no women traveling alone.

"Where is she, Papa?" Lina tugged at his shirt sleeve.

"I don't know. You wait here while I speak to the conductor." The uniformed conductor had come off the train and was talking to Jefferson Potts, the station master.

"Afternoon, Potts." Then he turned to the conductor. "My name's Brandon Keith. I'm expecting my future bride on this train, coming out from Massachusetts. Her name's Patricia Forrester."

The conductor paused. "Sorry, Mr. Keith. We didn't have any women alone on this train. Could be she missed a connection somewhere up the line. You might head over to the telegraph office, see if she sent you a message."

That was reasonable. Train schedules out here weren't exactly Holy Writ carved out of stone, and things went wrong all the time. He sent the disappointed Angelina off to the wagon, and was about to head to the telegraph office, which was housed out of the train station, when a slight, dark haired young man, Brand would peg him in his early thirties, a bit younger than he himself was, approached him, slow and cautious like as if Brand was a rattler.

"Would you be Mr. Brandon Keith?" He had a northern accent, a Yankee voice. Maybe he had word of Patricia.

"Yes. I'm Keith."

The man took a deep breath and looked Brand straight in the eye. "I'm Pat Forrester. It's nice to meet you."

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"You're not a woman," Brand blurted out.

"No sir, I'm not." He'd have made a striking woman, though, Brand thought, those green eyes with a slight tilt to them over sculpted cheekbones, and that hair, dark, but more chestnut than Magdalena's had been, would have been gorgeous long. Brand shook his head. Where on earth was his head? He'd been deceived. Lied to.

"You said you were a woman." Brand wasn't a big man, just average height and using the crutch took some of the height he did have, but he could be mighty intimidating when he had a mind to.

"No sir, I didn't. If you read my letter, you'll see that nowhere did I say I was a woman." Forrester stared back at him, meeting his eye, but flushing slightly.

Brand fumbled with the letter which he'd put in his vest pocket. Very interested in your proposition... Raised in Massachusetts... Eager to see the West... Not afraid of hard work... Have some experience with children. "No," he admitted reluctantly. "You don't. But you had to know I was wanting a wife, not a hired hand. Hell, the ad had the word 'wife' big as life and clear as day!" He'd been swindled, robbed out of the cost of passage, which wasn't pocket change.

"Yes. I'm sorry about that. I'll work to pay off what I owe you. What I said was true – I'm not afraid of hard work, and I've been a tutor, would be glad to teach your daughter or help on the farm till my debt is paid." The man Forrester looked so distressed Brand almost wished he was a woman so he could give him some comfort. "Though I didn't outright lie, I took advantage of you and deceived you, and I'm sorry. I needed to get out of Boston in something of a hurry, and was short of funds."

The cut of the young man's clothing spoke of fine tailoring, but in these times fortunes could rise and fall overnight. "You in trouble with the law?" The last thing he needed was to be harboring a fugitive.

"Not for anything they're going to come after me about, and nothing that would bring risk or harm to you and yours. I swear it."

Brand was about to ask why on earth he should take the word of a liar and swindler, but something in the way the man carried himself pulled him up short. He was in earnest, Brand was sure of it. And the man hadn't once stared at his missing limb, and that was rare indeed. "Were you in the war?"

Forrester nodded. "Joined up in 1862, though my father wanted to pay a substitute. Union side," he added, somewhat unnecessarily considering the broad vowels and clipped accent.

"Well, the war's over, and unlike some, I've got no hard feelings. You owe me twenty-five dollars and I collect my debts, so get your bags and let's get going." He watched Patrick Forrester turn and walk over to the train where he'd left two smallish carpetbags. Forrester bent over and his suit jacket lifted and trousers outlined long limbs and the curve of his ass, so different from the rounded curves of women, and something stirred in Brand making him glad he wasn't bringing home a wife after all.

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Joe Tucker raised an eyebrow and made a wisecrack about the future Missus Keith having some fine stubble on her pretty face, but Angelina was delighted with Patrick Forrester.

"I bet I'm the only girl in all Texas with a man Mama! You ain't going to make me learn to sew, are you?" She jumped up into Forrester's lap, and Brand saw with some amusement that he seemed at a total loss as to what to do.

"I thought little girls liked to sew. My sisters always did."

Angelina stuck out her bottom lip. "I hate it. I want to learn to shoot, but Papa won't teach me."

Forrester smiled at her. "Well, I suspect he's right. A gun's not a plaything for a child."

Brand remembered his unit's drummer at Gettysburg. Boy hadn't hardly been older than Angelina, and the gun that had blown his face away hadn't been a toy, not by a long shot. "Mr. Forrester's right, Angelina. And he's going to teach you letters and numbers and geography, book learning."

"I can already read!" she protested, but she settled back into Forrester's arms as Joe drove them along the dusty roads, winding their way out of town and across the long miles to Brand's ranch. Forrester was looking around, taking in all the sights that to Brand were nothing special, the scrub pines and patchy grasses, the hawks sweeping the sky. It wasn't much, not compared to the glories of the great eastern cities, Brand supposed, but it was home, and there was nothing like the open sky to make a man feel free. He'd been raised in hill country and hadn't

ever understood why it made him feel so trapped till he'd come out here and learned what a sky truly was.

They didn't talk, and Lina fell into a deep sleep, lulled by the heat of the day and the movement of the wagon, till they came up on the gate to his place. "Joe, you leave the gate open?"

"Nope," Joe muttered, and felt below the board seat for his rifle. "I surely didn't."

"Didn't figure you had." It was likely nothing, a loose latch, or one of the hired men being careless, but there was no point in taking chances. Hadn't been any Indian trouble in this area for some years, but there were all manner of outlaws, especially now as times were hard.

"Is there a problem?" Patrick Forrester eased the sleeping little girl onto the floor of the wagon, nice and gentle, Brand noted with approval.

"Could be. Don't suppose you have a pistol in one of those bags?" His own pistol was lying on his bedside table, doing him no damn good at all.

Forrester rummaged in the smaller of the bags and pulled out a holstered gun and handed it to Brand. He took it out and whistled low. It was a fine piece, one of the new Colt Peacemakers and beautifully done with tracery on the barrel and ivory grips. He checked the magazine; fully loaded. His own sidearm was his army issued Le Mat, a good gun, but nothing so fine as this. "You want to take this? I never fired one before, wouldn't necessarily sight it accurately."

Forrester shook his head. "No. I'm a fair shot, but I won't shoot at people. I had enough of that to last a lifetime."

Nice to have the luxury of scruples, Brand thought, as he took the pistol and climbed awkwardly out of the wagon, balancing on one leg till he got hold of his crutch. "Stay with Lina, then. If things go bad, drive her back to town and get the sheriff, you think you can do that?"

Forrester nodded and clambered over to the front of the wagon and took the reins. The horse knew something was wrong, shifting restlessly in its harness.

There wasn't any cover to speak of, and if there were men in the house, they'd have heard the wagon, so heart pounding, he stumped forward. "Anybody there?"

A big old crow cawed raucously. "Pete? Jose?" The hired men should be out on the range, shouldn't be anybody at all around the house, as Mrs. Manuel had gone to visit her grown son, giving him time to get acquainted with his 'wife'.

Unencumbered by a crutch, Joe Tucker had moved up onto the wide wooden porch. "Come on up, Brand, there's nobody - oh for the love of Pete!"

He tucked Forrester's fancy revolver in his belt and made his way up onto the porch. Everything looked normal, couple of benches sitting on a clean swept wooden porch, two windows with paned glass, shut tight, and a good stout door. And in the center of the door was a bloody red handprint.

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"What is it?" Forrester had driven the wagon up at Joe Tucker's signal and stood staring at the mark. "Was someone attacked here?"

"No, but if they step one foot on my property again, they damn well will be. Goddamn Knights of the Fucking Red Hand!" Brand growled.

"Knights of the - "

"Kluxers. You heard of the Ku Klux Klan back east?" Joe Tucker had already got a pail of soapy water and was trying to scrub the mark off the wood, without much success.

"Yes, I've read about them in the papers, but I thought all that died out; didn't General Forrest disband the Klan back in 1869?"

"Well this lot didn't get the message." Brand handed back the pistol. "Would surely love to see how that shoots sometime."

Forrester stroked the gleaming barrel. "She fires fine, sighted accurate to twenty-five yards or so, though I can do quite a bit better on my own. You're welcome to use her anytime."



"Must have set you back a pretty penny."

"It was a gift from a friend."

Mighty extravagant gift, Brand thought, but that was Yankees for you. "Mr. Forrester, thank you for keeping watch over Lina. If I could trouble you to carry her into the house?"

"No trouble at all. And you might as well call me Patrick. Seeing as we're getting married and all."

Brand laughed and so did Patrick, who had a contagious laugh, like water flowing over a rocky stream back in his native North Carolina. "And I'm Brand."

Patrick held out his hand, and Brand took it, and something sparked between them, something warm and familiar, a longing he'd not felt since before he'd lost his leg, and he held the contact longer than politeness would dictate, but Patrick didn't seem to mind.

"I'll lay out some dinner in the kitchen. Won't be much. I was expecting - "

"That I'd cook. Well, I can, if I have to."

Joe Tucker disappeared back to the bunkhouse, probably in search of more vandalism.

"Nah, it's your first day here. I won't start you working til tomorrow."

Patrick easily balanced Angelina and his two bags, taking his strength and wholeness seemingly for granted. It was good he wasn't a woman. What business did he have, advertising for a wife? A woman needed a whole man, someone like Patrick. Whole in body and mind; able and willing to love her proper. He suspected Patrick's trouble in Boston was probably related to a woman. Most men's troubles seemed to be. Normal men, leastwise.

He laid out cold chicken and bread on the scarred wooden table. Not much of a feast, but it was what he had to give, and he figured no veteran of the war on either side would turn up his nose at meat without maggots and bread that didn't crack a tooth. And he'd been right, for Patrick Forrester was eating hungrily as though it was a long time since his last good meal.

"So if it isn't too impertinent of me to ask, what did you do to anger these Knights of the Red Hand? You did fight on the rebel side, didn't you?"

"Yes, I fought for the South." Brand poured himself a shot of whiskey. It had been a long day with more tension than he was used to, and his left arm ached from the crutch. You'd think after all this time he'd be used to it. "But the war's over. We lost. I don't care to dwell on it nor live in a past that never even existed, shining cavaliers of the Confederacy with their loyal darkies close to hand and all that horse shit."

"So you didn't own slaves?" Well, Brand supposed that was the Yankee image of the South, Simon Legree and all that.

He laughed harshly. "Slaves? We barely owned the land we lived on. I was what you might euphemistically call 'poor white trash'. Brought up in a two room shotgun house on the worst patch of farmland in the whole state of North Carolina."

"But it sounds like you've had some education?" Forrester had finished eating and was watching him curiously. The young man had fine hands, Brand noticed, as they set the fork and knife down carefully, undoubtedly like he'd been taught by his mother in some great Yankee house. Fine hands, with long fingers and clean, manicured nails. But not a woman's hands. Strong.

He shook himself. "Yes. My Ma set great store by book learning, made sure I was schooled and taught to talk proper English. It used to confuse the officers something awful. So obviously poor white, yet I could speak like a planter's son when it suited me. They tried to make me an officer straight off, simply because I could read and write and figure, but the men would have none of it – they knew I wasn't a proper gentleman." He tossed back his whiskey and poured another one. He'd not been in the presence of someone who affected him like this since the war. All those men, living together day in, day out, sharing every kind of intimacy known. It had been the beginning of the end for him, when he'd first known he wasn't as other men.

But Patrick couldn't ever know that. Nobody could, not ever. Brand took a chicken leg and started peeling the flesh from it slowly, not really hungry, but needing something to do to keep him from staring at the man across the table from him. That whiskey had been a mistake.

"So why did you join up? Why fight to protect something you gained no profit from?" The kitchen was lit by lamps, and by a ring of candles hung high, and the golden glow turned Patrick's chestnut hair to flame.

Flame. Tongues of flame were flickering over his body, and Brand downed another whiskey, feeling the warmth spread through his limbs, even to the phantom one he lacked. "I had no use for slavery, would have been just as pleased to see it die away." He forced his voice casual. "But I wasn't about to sit at home while foreign armies marched all over my home. What kind of man would stand for that?" He held the bottle out to Forrester, who took it, splashed some of the whiskey into his glass and sipped.

"Well," he said, eyes watering. "That's...um...interesting whiskey you've got here, Mr. Keith...Brand."

Interesting wasn't the word for it, but it was the best they could get in these parts without paying more than Brand was willing to lay out. "Best not to sip it, it's not one of those fancy Scottish drinks. Take it quick, like medicine."

"Tastes like it was brewed out of old socks. Not meaning to be insulting, mind."

Brand laughed. It was good to laugh again, good to be in the presence of a young man again. If he could just control his unholy desires, might be that he could have a friend here, something he'd sadly lacked since his convalescence. "No, no insult taken. And I wouldn't lay money on it not having socks involved somehow." He put the bottle aside. The stuff had a kick that would knock him out half the next day if he overindulged. "But you were asking about the Knights of the Red Hand."

"Yes. Just seems odd that someone who fought for the Confederacy, even lost a limb in battle like you did would raise their ire so much." Holding his breath, Patrick downed his shot and sweat broke out on his forehead. "Sweet Mother Mary!"

"Stings a bit, don't it? Like it stings the Knights that I don't bear any grudges to some of our neighbors who fought on the other side, nor that I have no truck with their cross burning and terrorizing. What capped it, though, I think, is that I'm selling eighty acres of my bottomland to a group of freedmen come over from Louisiana way. They're setting up a little community with a church and a school, trying to make a decent life for themselves."

"Sounds reasonable to me. Surely these Knights don't expect them to starve?"

"No. They expect them to be tenants on somebody's farm, working for a pittance. Slavery without obligation on the part of the masters. Nice racket for them." His father'd been no better than a tenant farmer, really, and he'd be damned if he'd ever treat any man, white, black, red or green as his father had been treated by the planters. Thinking back on past insults wasn't something he normally indulged in, but it eased the tightness in his chest that Patrick's presence was causing.

"I had no idea. You hear things, up north, but I never thought – I guess it was naïve to think a constitutional amendment would make everything right."

"What burns them most is the school, I think. Can't have the darkies getting themselves edy-cated," Brand mimicked. "Might give them ideas, make them

think they're good as regular folk. Of course, there were plenty back home said the same about educating a cracker like me."

"Do you think you'll have any real trouble? I've heard the Klan can be quite violent."

"Only to those they think won't put up a fight. They're cowards. And I ain't." His speech always suffered when he was drinking; somehow alcohol took him back to his childhood, with his father and uncles standing around the still, telling tales and passing the jug from one to the other while he sat on an old tree stump and watched and listened. All dead now, his uncles and father. That world was dead.

"No, you're not, that's obvious." Patrick's voice was hardly more than a husky whisper and there was something in the way he spoke that made Brand look up from the bottle he'd been turning over and over in his hands. Eyes met eyes, green to blue, and something in the intensity of Patrick's gaze jolted Brand straight to his groin, stirring his prick in a way he'd rarely felt with his wife. Wrong, so wrong, he thought, trying to keep the desperation and despair from showing in his face.

"From this?" he gestured to where his leg should have been. "You better than anybody should know what a sham battlefield courage is."

"No, not from that." Patrick stood up, slim and wiry in his fancy store bought shirt, which was plastered to his body with sweat. Brand could smell him as he came near, a man's smell; sweat and whiskey and horse and mint. He looked up, holding his breath at the nearness of the other man, wanting him closer, but knowing, knowing at the heart of him that such a thing was wrong.

Patrick bent down to him, like he was going to whisper something in his ear, and Brand rose part way to meet him, propping himself on the table, then lips met lips, just the gentlest brush of a kiss, no more than two woman friends might exchange, but it left Brand dizzy, clinging to the table as he watched Patrick walk away.

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The next day and the day after and the day after that passed and the kiss wasn't mentioned, not by either of them, so Brand started to think the whole thing might have been a whiskey induced fantasy. In all his life, he'd only met one other man who shared his perversion; what were the odds that the one person who answered his ad turned out to be the same? No, it hadn't happened, or if it had, had been a mistake brought on by overindulgence in Jebediah Brackett's homebrew. Patrick was pleasant enough, treating Brand with a friendly courtesy in public, having little to do with him in private, seeking his own room as soon as the day's work was done.

And he was a good hard worker; there was no question about that. Patient as a saint with Angelina, and despite his slender body, a strong hand on the ranch. You wouldn't have thought, seeing those fine hands, that they'd ever done a day's work under the sun, but it seemed they must have, as Patrick Forrester knew how to handle a horse and a hammer and didn't shy away from even the most grueling and unpleasant tasks.

He knew how to handle that Colt, too, as Brand soon discovered. It was hotter than he could remember it being in years, and he and Joe and Patrick had been working on a section of fence that had fallen in, splitting logs and heaving them into place, digging out post holes, and considering that he himself was hardly able to do the work of a twelve year old boy, he was mighty grateful for Patrick's

presence. They'd all stripped down to trousers only, and it was all Brand could do to stop himself from staring at Patrick's smooth chest, watching his compact muscles flex and stretch as he worked. But finally the fence had been repaired and Joe Tucker had gone off to check on some of the hired men who were supposed to be doing the same thing on the opposite end of the spread.

Patrick had collapsed onto the sweet grass. "This climate's about to do me in. I don't know how you stand it."

"It's not near so bad as back in North Carolina – at least the air is dry." But it was powerful hot. It would have been a perfect day for a swim back home. "Wish we could go for a swim."

"I'm embarrassed to say it, considering I grew up within spitting distance of the Atlantic, but I can't swim."

He thought about teaching Patrick to swim, holding that lithe body up in the cool water, slick hands over chest and arms and legs. It was probably just as well they didn't have any streams or watering holes suitable for swimming on the spread. "Well, we haven't got water fit for swimming anyway, so no harm done. Still, you've worked hard, nothing says we can't take some time off and do something without purpose."

Patrick rolled over onto his belly and grinned up at Brand, a wicked, mischievous sort of smile. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, if you've no objection to it, I'd really like to fire that Colt of yours."



Patrick agreed and they rode back to the house, Patrick leading. Brand loved to watch Patrick ride. He sat his horse different than the men in these parts or those he'd grown up with, something specially Yankee, he supposed. He supposed some of the other men out here might find it sissified, but he didn't. Patrick was all man, nothing he did could ever be womanish.

He set up some targets on a fence near the house, and Patrick fetched the revolver. It shot like a dream, firing true down the sight and it fit his hand like it was made for it. Patrick watched him from a perch on a nearby fence, still shirtless and plenty distracting.

"It suits you," he said. "You can have it, if you want."

"Are you crazy? This is worth way more than what you owe me." He stroked the silver barrel, so smooth and fine.

"I wasn't thinking about that." Patrick hopped down from the fence. "Just as a gift. I doubt I'll ever use it."

"You said you could shoot a pistol, though?" It wasn't a stupid question even for a war veteran. Quite possibly Patrick hadn't fired anything save for the Springfield rifle he'd have been issued.

"Yes." He took the pistol, seeking out something to fire at. Brand had set up a row of old bottles on the fence, but all but one of those, the one farthest away,

had been knocked down. Patrick took aim and squeezed off a round and the bottle exploded into glass shards.

"I'd say you can shoot." Brand shook his head. That kind of accuracy at such a distance was a gift. "You could likely make a good living doing trick shots and the like with a bit of practice. Or get on as a marshal or ranger without much trouble."

"Thank you." He handed the gun, now empty, back to Brand. "I've always been good with guns, probably just how my eyesight is. But I'll never shoot at a human being again."

Blood and viscera and carnage on the field at Shiloh; dying men crying out for their mothers. "I understand. If I didn't have this place, and Angelina to protect, I might be inclined to feel the same way."

"It's easy to be a pacifist when you have nobody to care about, nobody who cares about you."

The tone, so cold and bitter, sent chills through Brand, and he wanted to protest that he cared, more than he wanted to care, in fact, but just shrugged. "That's a harsh way to live, Patrick."

"It's a harsh world." His shirt had been drying on the fence post, and he pulled it on. "I expect Angelina's up from her nap and ready for her arithmetic."

It was a welcome change of subject. "Ready, but I'd say not willing."

Patrick laughed, and it was as if the cloud that had overtaken him had never been. "But able. Very able. She's a smart girl, Brand, just a bit lazy."

Brand mounted his horse, pulling the crutch up behind him to its customary place. He felt whole on horseback; the only place anymore where he felt truly a man. "Takes after her papa, I'd say then."

"You? Lazy? I've seen the work you do on this place, how you do more than a man's work with..." Patrick flushed. "Less than a whole body. You never let up on yourself, though I know it has to be damn near impossible some days. You've got no wife, nobody your equal on the place to help you out, give you some release for - " He broke off and turned away. "I've spoken out of turn. I tend to do that, I'm sorry. It's not my business."

"No. It's fine. You're not...you're not wrong." Release. He surely needed release from the painful hardness in his prick that wouldn't go away no matter how hard he worked or how long he rode. But not a wife. Not a woman, all soft and round. Flat planes and hardness and green smiling eyes...No. He had to turn his mind away from such things. "Always speak your mind with me." His voice came out harsher than he'd intended, but maybe that was for the best.

Patrick nodded, still facing away, and Brand turned his horse and rode away.

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All through that day, something wasn't sitting right with Brand; it was like the feeling he got when a storm was moving in. He rode the fences, not because it needed doing, but because it took his mind from Patrick. Patrick's face and chest and tight ass bending over to lift the logs; his legs, long and strong and whole. If Brand himself had been whole, he'd have gone for a long walk, or just run, doing the work himself instead of putting most of it on his poor horse. He got back to the house to find Lina doing sums while Patrick was in the kitchen, bringing in firewood for the stove, so he helped his daughter for a while, just enjoying her presence which always brought him back to what truly mattered

He wouldn't have wanted to live like Patrick seemed to – not caring for nobody. Oh, Lina could be a heap of trouble and a lot of work too, but she was his, and he couldn't imagine his life without her, or without Joe Tucker running the ranch and Mrs. Manuel taking care of the kitchen. They mattered to him, and Patrick was coming to matter too, was coming to be family.

"These are fine, Lina. Well done, it looks like you got them all exactly right."

She beamed. "Mister Patrick's a good teacher – he don't yell at me like Mrs. Manuel does when I get them wrong."

"Well, Mrs. Manuel has other things to worry on than whether you can add and subtract, sweetheart."

A sharp rapping at the door brought him up short. He wasn't expecting any visitors. He heaved himself up on his crutch and stumped heavily to the door.

A grizzled old black man stood on his porch, one of the Freedman he was selling the bottomland to, looking angry.

"John, isn't it? This is a surprise. Come on in out of the heat. I'll have my housekeeper bring you something to drink." He heard steps behind him and felt the presence of Patrick, supporting him at his right hand.

"Oh, no sir, I ain't here to stay, don't want to leave my family for long, but we thought you ought to know them Knights of the Red Hand come out to the settlement last night."

Brand saw red, swaying on his crutch. Enough was enough. "Was anybody hurt?"

"No, sir. But they set fire to the little building we'd set up for a school, burned all the books the Northern ladies had donated clean to ash."

"Damn!" Patrick cursed and disappeared down the hall toward his room.

"He said it," Brand agreed grimly. "I'll send a couple of my men down to help you rebuild. Don't suppose there's any point to calling the sheriff."

"Don't see how it would do no good. They was masked, and even if they wasn't, it would be our word against a bunch of white men, and - "

"Right." He clapped the man on the shoulder. "We'll rebuild, make it better than ever."

Patrick had returned, carrying a stack of books. "These were mine when I was at school, a few readers, a geography text. Not much, but you're welcome to them."

The old man took the books like they were each the Holy Bible. "Thank you, sir. We'll do our best to keep them safe."

"And we'll order you some more, don't you worry about it," Brand assured him, trying to keep calm, saying goodbye, shutting the door deliberately, but inside he was seething. How dare they come onto his land? Burn a school? Burn books?

"I'm riding over to Caruthers' place right now." Angelina had come out of the study, looking curious, so he kept his tone low. "You stay here and keep an eye on her, okay?"

Patrick shook his head. "Mrs. Manuel can watch her. And Joe Tucker's near if there's any trouble. You're not going to face this alone."

He wanted to protest, but the truth was, he wanted someone with him. Patrick handed him the Colt. "And wear this, it's a better gun. I'll take your Le Mat."

"Thought you wouldn't shoot at a person?"

"Caruthers doesn't know that, now, does he?"

Brand kissed Lina on the top of her head and told her to mind Mrs. Manuel, then followed Patrick out of the house. "So if someone was shooting at you, you wouldn't shoot back?"

"I honestly don't know. I suspect instinct would take over at that point, but I'd like to think my principles mean something."

Brand tried to swing himself into the saddle, but his good leg almost collapsed beneath him. Patrick was there, firm hands on his waist, boosting him up.

"Thanks for that. It's been a day. Well, I have principles too, and my principles say a man don't let other men ride all over him or prey on the innocent. Those folks in the bottomland just want to raise their families in peace, they're not hurting anyone."

Patrick didn't try to talk all the long way along south to where his land bordered on Caruthers', turning to follow the border fence up to the Triple Crescent Ranch's main gate, hung with a sign showing the three C's arranged in a crescent that was Caruthers' brand. The gate was open, almost like they were expecting him, so he rode straight up to the house, Patrick behind, in almost military fashion, Brand realized.

"Caruthers!" The hot wind was kicking up dust something awful, and Caruthers' place was buttoned up tight as a drum, windows shut, door latched. "I know you're in there!"

"There." Patrick reined in beside him and pointed to an upstairs window. Caruthers' place was much grander than his own, no question of that. Crime and cattle stealing always did pay better than honest work. "Something moved up there. I think we'd better be careful."

"He's not going to shoot us in cold blood." Pitching his voice to carry, Brand shouted, "I'm giving you warning that if you or any of your boys set foot on one inch of my land without my leave, I'll shoot first and ask questions later. What I do with what's mine is for me to say!"

He wheeled his horse about and galloped out of the yard, Patrick behind him, damn glad that on horseback, he was every inch the man he'd always been.

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But he cursed his missing limb more than once over the next couple of days. He'd pushed himself too hard, and knew it, and found out right quick that Patrick had been with him long enough to know it too and wouldn't hear of him riding anywhere. So he was stuck around the place while Patrick and Joe and the hired men ran the farm while he wasted his days listening to Angelina read and Mrs. Manuel complain about her sons. He did some work on the books for the ranch, something he'd been thinking about giving to Patrick to do, as he was surely better educated.



But that brought up another question altogether, that of when Patrick would be moving on. Already he'd worked hard enough to more than repay the debt he'd owed for the ticket out, and Brand suspected that Patrick knew it and was staying now, what, out of pity? Out of choice? They'd have to talk about it. Tonight, he decided. For his part, despite the unsettling feelings the younger man caused in him, he would be more than happy to have him on for as long as he'd be willing, but there was a whole world out west, and there wasn't any reason for someone as able as Patrick Forrester to stay locked up in Latimer, the ass-end of the west.

"Where's Patrick?" Lina asked, and he noted she'd dropped the 'Mister' from the front of his name.

"He rode into town to pick up some supplies for Mrs. Manuel, sweetie. Should be back any time."

That seemed to satisfy her, so she went back toward the kitchen, probably in search of food. The girl was like a bottomless pit, and Mrs. Manuel spoiled her something awful. She really did need a mother, but the coming of Patrick had reawakened a part of himself that he'd tried not merely to ignore, but to kill and bury, and he knew now he wasn't ever going to be able take a wife, not even for his Angelina's sake.

He was half listening for the sound of Patrick's horse – he should have been back over an hour ago, and Brand was starting to fret. "Like an old man stuck in a chair," he growled to himself. Likely Patrick had got to talking with someone, or maybe there was news from back east. Any number of reasons, most of them perfectly harmless, why a man should be late coming home.

Jose, Mrs. Manuel's youngest was working out front with Joe Tucker, doing some work on the water troughs, and the sound of English and Spanish and the hammering of nails and splashing of water came wafting in through the windows. Brand closed his eyes. Home. His home, his own home. He knew and loved every square inch of the place, and he could tell that Patrick was coming to feel the same way, like he'd hoped his wife would have done. If only a man could...But no. A man couldn't. Not and still be a man.

The light voices outside his window turned suddenly sharp, and he heard cursing, and then his own name, but he'd already grabbed for his crutch and was out onto the porch before Joe could get in to fetch him.

Patrick's horse had come through the gate, moving at a slow walk, not controlled by his rider, who was lolling in the saddle, blood crusting his head and face, seemingly unconscious.

"Get him into the house," Brand ordered. "Joe, you ride for town, get the doctor!"

Jose was a big man, easily able to carry Patrick's slight body into his bedroom and lay him out there. "Ah, sweet Jesus," Brand gasped as he saw the cuts, one fairly deep, on the pale face, the blooming of bruises on eye and cheekbone. Not wanting to look, but knowing he had to, he undid the buttons of Patrick's shirt to see the unmistakable signs of a bad beating. Dark patches stained his trousers, there might be more blood, and Brand had no choice but to unbutton those as well.

Patrick stirred at that, so he stopped. "Pat? Patrick? Can you hear me?"

His eyes fluttered open, but they were unfocussed and blinking. "Brand...met your friend Caruthers, I think. Or some of his boys, at least."

"Why? Why did they do this?" Though he knew why. He clenched his fists, forcing himself to stay put when every instinct in him was screaming at him to ride for Caruthers' place and kill them all.

"Wanted to send you a...message." Patrick coughed and Brand helped him to sit up a bit. "Wish he'd just use the Western Union like everybody else."

"I've sent for the doctor." Helpless. Caruthers had done this to Patrick, not because of who Patrick was, but because of who Brand was. He'd brought this on his friend, and he was helpless to do a thing about it.

"I'm pretty sure the doctor won't be able to do anything but tell me to rest and give me a bill, but I appreciate the thought."

"Bill? Don't you worry about that one bit. I take care of my own."

Through the blood that had streaked his face, Patrick smiled. "Yours, am I? I like the sound of that."

"Me too," Brand whispered, and kissed the stained forehead. Likely Patrick wouldn't remember any of this anyway. "I like it an awful lot."

He went off to the kitchen where Mrs. Manuel had already heated up some water and got some rags, then returned to clean the blood off Patrick, who'd fainted again. He eased the young man out of his trousers and pants, noting with dismay that his belly looked like it had been pummeled hard with something, possibly a rifle stock, and then fascinated and reluctant at the same time, turned his attention lower. Patrick's prick lay quiescent on its bed of hair, a lighter red than on his head, Brand noted, and it and his balls were undamaged, thankfully.

It was a good sized organ, in proper proportion to the man, and holding his breath, Brand couldn't resist reaching out to stroke along its length, root to tip. It quivered and began to thicken slightly, and Patrick stirred. As though he'd been burned, Brand snatched his hand away and covered Patrick's abused body with a sheet. It was the first time he'd touched another man like that.

"It's all right," Patrick said, with eyes still closed. "That's nice, too."

Brand froze, unable to comprehend what he was hearing, but before he could even think to reply, he heard hooves and voices and the doctor was there, and in the bustle of activity that followed, he was able to push aside his hopes and fears that maybe, just maybe, Patrick wanted exactly what he did.

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Brand spent most of the next three days watching Patrick sleep fitfully while his bruises bloomed from blue to purple to black. Fortunately, it didn't appear that there was any lasting damage, no broken bones or bleeding inside, but that didn't change the fact that Patrick was in pain and it was Brand's fault, completely and utterly. Joe and Mrs. Manuel tried to get him to come away, to

eat a decent meal or sleep in his own bed, but he couldn't go, couldn't be anywhere but at Patrick's side. The doctor was a fraud, nothing more than a jumped up sawbones from the war, and he could be mistaken. If something went wrong, Brand was going to be there.

So he had a lot of time to think, replaying in his mind again and again the way Patrick's cock had stirred at his touch. Nice, he had said, as though he knew what was happening; knew and approved. And remembering how his heart had stopped dead when he saw the injured man, a feeling he had not experienced since the death of his wife, who despite everything, he had loved. And he loved Patrick. He had to face that, admit it to himself at least, and the consequences be damned. He tried to expiate his guilt by nursing Patrick, forcing himself to bathe him, clean his wounds, take care of his personal needs without allowing his ungodly lusts to intrude, but it was hard. Even hurt and broken, he was a beautiful man.

And on the fourth day, as Brand lay dozing in a chair, he heard a voice say his name, a voice that creaked like an old gate, rusted and disused. "Brand?"

He came alert instantly, taking Patrick's hand. "Thank God. I was so worried."

"How long have I been out?" Patrick tried to sit up, but failed, falling back onto the pillows.

"Three days."

"Three...no wonder I feel like a wrung out rag." Brand helped him to sip a bit of water. "And you've been here all this time, haven't you?"

He nodded. "It was my fault. I had to know you were all right."

Patrick still had hold of his hand, and he couldn't have made himself take it away even if it meant his death. "Guilt then, is that all that kept you here?" He sounded disappointed.

"I don't know what you mean." But he did.

"You never asked me what it was I did in Boston that got me in trouble with the law." Now Patrick pulled his hand free, turning away slightly to stare out the window.

"I don't care, really. Not now that I've come to know you."

"But I want you to know. And I want you to know now." Patrick swallowed hard. "You've probably figured out that my family has some money."

Brand nodded. It was obvious from his clothes and speech.

"Most of that money's old, made back before the Revolution through trade. Specifically, trade in what you Southerners referred to as your 'peculiar institution'."

"They were slavers." He hadn't expected that. But what did this all have to do with his reasons for being at Patrick's side?

"Yes. The fancy tailored clothes I wear come from the hides of men, women and children, ripped from their families, crammed into stinking ships and brought to this country to be worked to death. My family is every bit as culpable for the wrongs of slavery as any plantation owner. That was why I had to fight, you see."

"Guilt." Powerful motivator, guilt. Could make a man do any number of things.

"Yes. And after the war, it was worse, if you can imagine it. We'd destroyed the south, put down the slave owners and everyone who'd profited from slavery. Except of course our own people. A lot of soldiers were discharged after Appomattox. I wasn't. I was sent south, to Atlanta. It ate at me every single day that my family, as guilty as any of those I saw starving and suffering around me, was dining on china and crystal with five sets of silver surrounded by servants who were as good as slaves. So I deserted."

Brand had been part of a company that had hanged some deserters once. It hadn't been uncommon for young men to realize they'd made a mistake joining up or to go home for a season to help with their farms, but if they were caught...

"You must think me an utter coward, but I swear, I never ran away while we were under fire. I fought the whole bloody thing, never wavered, never looked back."

"I don't think you're a coward. Takes more courage to stand up and say something is wrong than it does to keep your mouth shut and your head down. So you're wanted as a deserter? Hard to believe they'd still be after you this long after the war."

"They're not, at least I don't imagine they are. But after I deserted, I had to make a living somehow. I might have been able to manage it in the south. So many men were dead, and young men with no skills and no references could do all right there, but I had no stomach to stay on as one of the conquerors, so I went back north. And you wouldn't believe what it's like in the northern cities right now – the immigrants are pouring in, and work's impossible to find. And not to be vain, but I am...well, I was," he gestured down his battered body. "Fairly attractive."

"Still are," Brand said quietly. "So you became, what do they call it, a rent boy? Kept man?" He could see it, some rich society lady, diverting money from her husband to keep Patrick on the side. And if the husband found out, well, that explained it all.

Patrick laughed, and it must have hurt, as it turned into a stifled cry of pain. "No, nothing so mundane. You've been so kind to me, and I need to be honest. You're half right. I did start selling myself, my body, but not to women. To men."

The thought of that should have been sickening and horrifying, and it was clear that Patrick was ready for him to react that way, but it wasn't. It was arousing beyond anything he'd ever considered. He hadn't known that such things existed. He realized that Patrick was waiting for him to respond.



"I suppose you want me out of your house, away from your daughter. I understand. I should be back on my feet in a week or so, but if you want, I'll go now."

Brand took his hand again, feeling how still the other man was. "You're not going anywhere unless you choose. This is your home." He was breathing hard, not sure he could say what he wanted, what he needed to say. "I've only once before in my life met someone like me. Someone who...wanted another man. The way I want you." There, it was out there, spoken and never to be taken back.

Patrick looked up into his eyes, uncertain. "I thought...on the first night I was here, there were signals, so I kissed you - "

"I thought I'd dreamed that." So it had been real, that feather touch of lips on lips.

"No, but I've been dreaming about it, ever since."

Brand got up and shut and locked the door to Patrick's room, something he probably should have done earlier. "So've I. God, I haven't been able to sleep, can hardly think of anything else. What do we do?"

Wincing slightly, Patrick pulled himself back up and gestured for Brand to come and join him on the bed. Reluctance and concern for Patrick's injuries warred with his desire and lost. Patrick's hands caressed either side of Brand's face, fingers tangling in his short cut hair. "We do this," he whispered, and then his lips closed over Brand's own.

He'd kissed his daughter and his mother, kissed his wife with a semblance of passion, but those kisses were as far from this as it was possible to be. He'd kissed Magdalena gently, with restraint, as from duty. But this was a fearsome spiral of need and passion that coiled up from deep in his groin, exploding through his body. Without volition, tongue sought tongue, hands grasping, holding, pulling him down onto the old bed, bodies stretched out against each other. His prick was harder than he could ever remember it being, thrusting and rubbing against Patrick's leg with fierce desperation.

Patrick's lips pulled away, trailing their way across his stubbly cheek to blow warm puffs of air into his ear. "And we do this," he said, and his hand slid down between their bodies, into the waistband of Brand's trousers to close over the iron length of his cock. Brand's world exploded as deft fingers stroked and squeezed in just the right places to leave him gasping, clawing at Patrick's back, retaining just enough awareness to avoid the worst of the bruises, until Patrick's thumb moved somehow sideways over his tip, catching the moisture there and slicking his organ with it, and oh, sweet Jesus, yes, yes, he was coming, never like this, oh God, beyond speech or thought, just the sensation overtaking him as he flooded Patrick's hand with his seed.

As though he was the injured one, Patrick eased him down onto the bed, kissing him lightly, sweetly now, not demanding or wanting, though Brand could feel Patrick's own cock swollen and aching, pressed against his thigh. "I never knew," he said, shaking his head. "How could I have lived so long on this earth and never known?"

"So you liked that?" But the question wasn't serious, Brand could tell by the slow smile on Patrick's face.

"Yeah. A lot. Now tell me what to do for you." Such pleasure as he'd experienced begged to be shared.

"Do what you want to do, what you'd like someone to do to you. That's what's so beautiful about men together – we know what feels right."

Brand considered the matter. Back during the war, some of the men used to talk about the fancy whores they'd visited back home; mostly lies, Brand thought, but like most tall tales, there were grains of truth to be found if you dug deep enough. And one of the planter's sons from Raleigh had talked about one of the women using her mouth, down there, the young man had said, blushing in such a way that Brand figured it must be true.

So Brand raised up the nightshirt Patrick had been dressed in, and lowered his underthings so that his gorgeous prick was freed. Not quiescent this time, but rigid and erect and proud. Brand reached out, tentative and a bit nervous still, and grasped hold of the shaft. Patrick gave a sharp intake of breath, trembling a bit as though holding himself back. He moaned softly as Brand pulled back his foreskin to reveal his purple head, already leaking.

"Wonder what that tastes like?" he asked, and then lowered his mouth over the straining prick. Salt and bitter and musk, not unpleasant, especially not when Patrick cried out, thrusting with abandon into Brand's welcoming mouth. It was awkward at first, but it was like Patrick had said, he simply had to think of how he'd want it himself, teeth pulled back, firm strokes of hand and mouth working together to draw Patrick's climax from deep in his balls.

"I'm going to...I'm going to... Oh God, pull off, Brand, pull off..." But it was too late, he could feel Patrick's cock convulsing into his mouth and taste the bitter

fluid, and he swallowed it, gladly, as though it was the finest wine in Europe, for the pleasure it was bringing, he was bringing, to this remarkable man.

Afterward, he crawled up beside Patrick, lying carefully at his side, and it occurred to Brand that at no time during what had transpired between them did he feel the loss of his leg, or any less of a man than Patrick. So it wasn't just on horseback that he was whole.

He wanted nothing more than to stay just like that, warm and content, like a cat in a sunny spot, but he knew it wasn't ever going to be that simple. "So what happens now?"

"I guess that's up to you. You could go from this room and forget any of this ever happened. I'd never mention it again, if that was what you wanted, would work off the rest of my passage and go on west."

"How could I forget? What's done is done, and I've no wish to have it undone. If you want to move on, I won't stop you," Brand said, but the words were a lie, and he knew it. "But I want you to stay. Want us to be together."

"The world isn't ever going to accept that, Brand. We'd have to hide who we truly are, not let anyone see us as anything other than friends."

"I thought coming west we made our own world," Brand replied bitterly. "Leaving behind all the old rules, the old hatreds."

"Look at what happened to me." Patrick was very still, and Brand felt such inexorable regret that he couldn't have protected his friend...his lover. "The old hatreds are alive and well, and I can guarantee you that neither of us will live to see a day when two men can love openly."

True enough. Sin in the eyes of God, crime in the eyes of the law. But after tasting this forbidden fruit, Brand knew he couldn't stop, couldn't ever get enough. "We'll be discreet. Though I don't know how I'm going to keep my hands off you, not after today."

"Mmm. Hope you don't keep your hands completely off me," Patrick murmured, and Brand realized he must be tired, was still recovering and it was damned insensitive of him to have pushed him so hard.

"I'll let you sleep, all right?" He slipped out of the bed, taking care not to jostle or disturb Patrick, pulled his clothes back in order and covered him with a light cotton sheet. "Rest well." As he would have with Lina, he brushed a light kiss over Patrick's forehead.

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Patrick was young and strong and it seemed like their one and thus far only encounter had been better medicine than anything the old sawbones had prescribed, so it was only a matter of days before he was up and about the place, reading with Lina, doing odd jobs in the kitchen for Mrs. Manuel, starting to take on part of the bookkeeping. Brand had determined that Patrick was going to be more than a hired hand; he would make him a partner in the ranch, which was more than he could have been if he had been a wife, really.

So that night, he and Patrick sat at the table with papers spread out and lamps burning, going over expenses and income and the log that tracked all the cattle, every single cow and steer and bull. Patrick was smart, picked up his system almost without him having to explain it, reading through the papers with a look of studied concentration on his face. It was exactly how Brand had hoped it would be, the two of them working on their ranch, making a go of it. Together.

Patrick had been marking totals on a column of numbers, passing his work silently to Brand for approval, then moving on to the next page of the ledger, when without a word passing between them they looked up as one, met each other's eyes, and the air grew heavy, like a storm was moving in. Mrs. Manuel had retired to her little cottage behind the main house, Lina was asleep, the men were bunked down, though Joe Tucker had been known to come into the house at night if something was needed – it just wasn't safe.

But Brand didn't give a damn about that, not when the cyclone overtook him as chairs flew backwards and they were on each other, Brand clinging to Patrick for support, hands tearing at clothing, while hungry mouths sought each other after so many days absence, days spent in each others' presence, but always with others, or with Patrick still too weak.

He surely wasn't weak now. Brand felt himself pushed back against the kitchen door, both of them bare naked, though he knew it was wrong, too risky, too much, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was Patrick's cock rubbing against his own, then parting his thighs to thrust between them while Patrick's hand worked its magic.

He came sobbing Patrick's name, both of them collapsing onto the rough wood floor. A stirring from the direction of Lina's room broke the silence, and they froze, again meeting each others' eyes, but this time in fear and guilt. "Sorry,"

Brand said, reaching for his trousers. "I don't know what got into me, it was just..."

"I know." Patrick's lithe body was so beautiful as he dressed in the shadow-light of the kitchen, the remnants of his livid bruises and cuts invisible. "I felt it too. And the sad thing is, Brand, I can't say I'm sorry. Can't say it won't happen again, not even if Mrs. Manuel and Lina were sitting right here with us."

It was like Adam and Eve must have felt, expelled from paradise. He knew if Patrick had really been Patricia, well then, he could have had him six times a day, showered him with kisses and affection and the world would have stood and applauded. But this? This would drive them both crazy. Patrick reached down to help Brand to his feet, righted a chair, then eased him into it and handed him his shirt.

"Brand, I think I'm going to go down to the bottomland, help with some of the construction on the school, if that's all right with you."

It wasn't, not really, but it seemed like the best thing; give them some distance, and physical work, building the school for Patrick, working around the ranch for him, would be a blessing for both of them. "Yes. I suppose that's best. But don't stay away long."

Patrick set his crutch, which had flown away with the chairs, gently against the table. "I won't. I promise. I couldn't." His hand gripped Brand's shoulder, then released and he was alone.

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Nate Caruthers had been quiet since Patrick's beating, it seemed that even he must have known that was going too far, Brand thought, thrashing a white man who could call the law and expect the law to answer. Though Patrick hadn't wanted him to call the sheriff as the men who'd hurt him had been masked, and he'd said, pragmatically, that even if he'd been able to identify them, they'd have all had marvelously ironclad alibis anyway. But Caruthers must not have known that, for he and his boys had steered clear of anyone connected to the Keith Ranch, and there had been no further activity by the Red Hand.

Brand had hopes that maybe, just maybe things had calmed down, for it was mighty hard for him to sort out his feelings for Patrick, figure out what kind of lie he could live with the constant threat of violence from mask-wearing idiots hanging over his head. But as day followed upon day and there was no renewed violence, no sign of any protest against the Freedmen's school, Brand relaxed.

Five uneventful days passed, then six, and then it was seven days since Patrick had rode out with Jose to help with the construction, and though Jose had come back three times for supplies, there had been no sign of Patrick, only messages passed through Jose. It seemed Patrick was working hard and recovering his strength, and, from hints he dropped in the messages, missing Brand terribly.

The feeling was mutual. He'd be home that evening, and Brand's nerves were on edge, waiting for the reunion. He'd sent Mrs. Manuel into town to see her son again, and Joe Tucker was taking the other two hands out to start rounding up the cattle to drive them to market, so with the exception of Lina, they'd be alone. Brand could hear the sounds of their preparations from the yard, though it was hard to hear anything with Angelina on the porch, playing some pretend game at the top of her lungs. Still, it was easy to ignore it all, thinking on what was waiting for him. All night, the two of them alone in Brand's big bed, exploring the wonder that was Patrick Forrester. Even thinking on it made him hard as rock.



He'd gone out back for a cup of water, was working the cold iron pump, up and down, its rhythmic creaking working on his mind, bringing Patrick to him, while the frigid water overran the clay cup and covered his hand when he heard the shots cracking. Shots upon shots and screaming, Lina's screaming. The cup dropped from his hand and shattered into pieces against the base of the pump as he hobbled fast as he could manage toward the house, through the back door into the kitchen then, stopping only long enough to grab his pistol from his bed, out the front door.

The scene that greeted him was surely straight from hell. The three horses that Joe and the boys had saddled to take were dead, fallen to the ground around the water trough in a perverted mockery of sleep; four men lay on the ground – Joe and his two hired men and a stranger wearing the red mask of the Knights. And Angelina was nowhere to be seen.

"ANGELINA!" He stumped out into the middle of his yard, calling her name to the four winds, in hopes she was hiding, scared to come out. "LINA!"

The empty sky echoed it back at him. Lina, lina, lina...

Joe was dead, so was Pete and the new man Joe had hired, Brand closed his dead eyes, not even remembering his name. But the Knight was alive, blood pouring from a wound in his shoulder. Brand ripped the mask from his face, but didn't know him by name either. One of the nameless, faceless brigands that Caruthers employed. "Where's my daughter?"

The man just grinned up at Brand, so he took his crutch and shoved it into the man's wounded shoulder till he screamed in agony. "Where's my daughter, you son of a bitch?"

The man coughed and blood flecked his beard. "Wouldn't you like to know? You'll get her back when those niggers are off white man's land and this town's set right again."

Brand backed away, not wanting to soil his hands by touching the man. "Only one way to set this town right, you fucking piece of shit." He pointed the Le Mat straight at the man's face and fired. There was only one place Caruthers would have taken Lina; he didn't need the man. But he surely needed Patrick, more than he needed food or water or air. He couldn't face this alone, couldn't save his baby girl by himself.

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They'd shot the horses to make it harder to follow, that much was clear. Stilling his mind, forcing himself to think about each painful step, one after the other, crutch and leg working in tandem to take him across the yard, he made the long trek back to the stable. It had been years since he'd had to saddle his own horse; Joe had always done it for him. Joe, he thought, thinking of his oldest friend lying dead in front of his house. No time for grief now, Joe would understand, wouldn't want him to waste time in grieving when he should be saving Lina and getting the bastards that had done this.

He wrestled with the heavy saddle, heaving it into place while balancing on one leg, cinching the girth securely, then struggling into the saddle. By the time it was done, he lay against the neck of the horse, marshalling his strength. They'd taken his baby girl. They'd taken his baby girl!

And the promise that if he'd remove the Freedmen from his land she would be returned wasn't worth two hoots. They couldn't let Lina live, couldn't let him live either, not and ever rest easy in their beds at night. As he turned his horse south toward the bottomlands and Patrick, he considered just for a moment going the other way, to town and the sheriff. But there wasn't any point. The sheriff was Caruthers' man; he'd hem and haw and investigate till Lina was in the ground. And besides, the law was too good for the kind of men who'd do this. You didn't bring a rattlesnake to justice. You put it down.

His horse ate up the ground, knowing from his rider's state that it was an emergency, galloping hell for leather over the flat land of his spread, taking fences with ease, for Brand had no time to fool with gates, or to take the long way along the river bottom. The day was a scorcher, and sweat was pouring from him, but that didn't matter, nothing mattered but getting to Patrick, and then to Lina.

He came upon the small settlement quicker than he'd figured, and saw that they'd halted work on the schoolhouse for the afternoon, taking a tip from their neighbors to the south and resting in the heat of the afternoon. Patrick was seated with one of the Freedmen, playing checkers, and Jose was napping under the shade of a small cottonwood tree.

Patrick saw him first, must have seen by the expression on his face that there was trouble, for he rose swiftly, knocking the table with the checkers board over, scattering pieces over the dry, dusty ground. The other men and a few women came out of the cool of their houses, the sound of a rapid horse meaning nothing good to them.

"Brand," Patrick caught the reins, led the exhausted stallion to water. "What's the matter?"

"Joe's dead, so's the other hands, Caruthers and his Red Hand have taken Lina," he gasped out, gladly taking the tin cup of water someone put in his hand. "They want you all gone," he gestured to the settlement. "That's their price for returning her."

Old John stepped forward. "You want us to leave, Mister Brand? We love this land, but it ain't worth the life of your child."

"No. You're not going anywhere. It wouldn't make any difference; she's seen them, can identify them. There's only two ways she's coming home to me. Either she's dead or they are." Patrick had his hand on Brand's good leg, and he could feel the reassurance and support coming off the man. It buoyed him up, gave him strength.

"Then we'll come along. I ain't much good with a gun, but my boys have been practicing, 'spect they could watch your back at least." The old man gestured to two men about Brand's own age, who stood ready to follow him.

"No. Don't take offense, but this has to be white man against white man. If one of your sons shoots any white man, your whole community will be massacred without a second thought." What the men of Latimer would do to Negroes with the temerity to attack a white man would make the Indian Wars look like child's play. "Jose, I want you to go back to the ranch, take some of the men here with you and make a start at setting things to rights. I don't want to bring Lina home to a yard full of rotting corpses."

"What do you want me to do?" Patrick was chewing on his bottom lip like a nervous girl going courting.

"I need you with me. At my side, watching my back." Then he remembered Patrick's unwillingness to shoot at men. "But only if I can count on you to shoot when you have to."

"You think it will come to that? Surely they'll realize what a mistake they've made, let her go without bloodshed?"

"Don't be naïve. You heard me before. It's her life or theirs, and if you won't shoot to kill, you're no use to me, Patrick, and I'll take Jose, who's so damn nearsighted he can't hit the broad side of a barn if he's three feet in front of it. So what's it going to be?"

Nobody was near them. Jose had already begun to organize some of the men to head back to the ranch, the others were retreating into their houses, undoubtedly to load their own guns in case the Knights took it come after them. Patrick's hand reached up to clasp his. "I'm with you. All the way."

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Nobody in their right mind, having murdered three men in cold blood and kidnapped a little girl, would be so stupid as to take her to their own home, but Brand figured Caruthers was just arrogant enough to do exactly that. So once more, Brand found himself riding through the gates of the Triple Crescent, Patrick again at his side. He'd puzzled it out best he could, tried to think of a

way they could sneak up, get the drop on Caruthers, but there was just no way. The ranch stood out in the middle of a big old field, no trees, no bluffs or hills or anything to provide cover, and it was a sure bet that Caruthers had every single Red Hand inside the place backing him up. That's what cowards did, stacked the odds.

The place looked utterly deserted, just as it had before. For being such a rich man, Caruthers didn't take much care with his place. The sign was loose, swinging in the breeze that had sprung up, and the squeaking of the sign along with their horses' sounds of unease were the only things that broke the silence. Then thunder rumbled in the distance, a low gravely muttering. Rain. It was always needed, but not yet, not now.

"What are you going to do?" Patrick had been quiet through the entire ride, as though he didn't know what to say.

"I don't know. Got no plan, just figure I'll play it by ear." They were both going to die here, and Angelina with them, he knew it. And Caruthers would dance on their graves.

A slight movement from the porch caught his eye and his revolver was in his hand. Caruthers stepped off the porch, Lina caught in his arms in a cruel grip. "Put your gun down and get down off that horse."

The Le Mat slid back into his holster, slowly. If Lina hadn't been in the way, he'd have taken the shot. If he could kill Caruthers, might be that the rest of the Knights would scatter like ants. Cut off the head and the serpent dies. Of course, he remembered an old story that had been in his Third Reader, about a monster where if you cut off one head, three more sprung up to take its place.

No time to think on that now. Awkwardly, he swung out of the saddle, reaching behind it for the crutch that was always there.

"Put her down." He made his voice like ice, forcing the fear for his child away. "This ain't about her. You got a problem with me, you deal with me. Not with my hired hands or my friends or my daughter."

Caruthers was a handsome man, much more so than Brand, slender like Patrick, though taller, with chiseled features and piercing blue eyes. "Why should I? You get an advantage on an enemy, you don't let it go for nothing. You know what I want."

"You want a bullet in your filthy black heart. You ever been shot, Caruthers?" He looked not at Caruthers, but at Angelina. She was so good, being so quiet and calm, but he could see her trembling, noticed the tracks of tears on her face. Stay calm, honey. "No, guess not. While I spent three years slogging through the muck, leaving my leg on a Pennsylvania field, you were sitting pretty on this ranch, paying other men to do your fighting for you. You're a coward, pure and simple, else you'd settle this with me, man to man."

Another man emerged from the shadows of the porch to take Angelina as Caruthers stepped further into the yard. "Ain't that a bit of a stretch? Man to half-man, more like."

Brand stumped forward. "You want me to run those Freedmen off my land. I'm not going to do that. What kind of lesson would that teach my girl? You don't give in to threats, not and call yourself any kind of man."

"Touching," he sneered. "Trouble with that philosophy, Keith, is that it don't matter what you teach a corpse. Now I'm holding all the cards here, and there's nothing you can say that will change that."

"If you're so sure you're superior, then fight me fair. If you win, well, I'll be dead, and you can do what you like. If I win, your boys will let us ride out of here and never bother me nor mine again."

The thunder rolled again, louder and longer. "Or are you going to stand here in front of all your Knights and admit you're no match for half a man?"

Patrick started to speak, but Brand shook his head sharply. There wasn't anything to be said. The Knights of the Red Hand pretended to a code of chivalry, a connection to a mythical age of duels and honor. Brand was gambling that kidnapping a little girl didn't sit well with some of them, those that were true believers, not just in it as a means to make it easier for them to brawl and carouse.

"Fine," Caruthers growled, and a wind out of the west whirled the dirt up between them. "Your funeral. And your girl's. And your hired man's." He nodded towards Patrick, and Brand took in a deep breath, knowing what was riding on this fight.

Patrick dismounted and grabbed him by the shoulder. "What the hell are you doing? He's going to kill you!"

"Maybe. But I couldn't think of what else to do. At least this gives us a chance." He checked his bullets, making sure the Le Mat was fully loaded.



"Take the Colt, then." Patrick looked like he was about to cry, and Brand forced himself to look away. He couldn't face that, not now.

"No. You keep it. If he kills me, get Lina out of here if you can, warn the Freedmen to run and take her far away from here – Caruthers can have the land. I won't break my word."

"Brand..." Patrick clasped his shoulder, then ignoring Caruthers standing there waiting, pulled him into a tight embrace. So sweet, so strong. To lose this when he'd just found it, the thought made his heart ache, but he forced it clear. It wasn't over. Not yet.

"No. Don't say anything." He took a deep breath. "I love you, Patrick."

He walked away from Patrick, not looking back, not looking at Angelina, who surely didn't understand a bit of what was going on, but seemed to know it was serious and that her papa didn't need distracting right now.

"Count of three?" Caruthers said. He holstered his gun and Brand did the same, balancing awkwardly on his crutch.

"One," they said together. "Two." Lightning forked across the sky the way it only did in this empty country, flaring sideways to illuminate miles and miles of country. "Three." He drew and started to squeeze the trigger and the thunder

cracked sharp and sudden. A searing pain hit his shoulder and he dropped his unfired gun, but not before he saw Caruthers crumble to the ground.

Through the haze of oh-so-familiar pain, he wondered how he'd killed a man without firing, but then it didn't matter – Patrick was holding him, tying a handkerchief onto the wound to slow the bleeding, and Angelina had broken free from the man who'd been holding her, and was running to him, crying and covering his face with kisses.

The ranch door burst open and three more men came pouring out, two going immediately to the side of their fallen boss, the other joining the one on the porch, drawing their own guns, Brand saw, though his sight was dimming like he was looking into a tunnel or well.

He felt Patrick leave his side, felt Lina's tiny hands putting pressure on his wound. "You heard your boss. Mr. Keith won fair and square, you have no claim on any of us."

But I didn't win, Brand tried to say, I didn't shoot him. But the men were arguing in sharp voices, first Patrick's voice and then the strangers, and Lina was still crying like she'd never stop and the iron smell of blood and rain in the air clogged his nose and mouth like he was drowning. Warm droplets of rain were hitting his face, or were those Lina's tears, and then the world went black.

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He'd supposed, if he'd have given it much thought, that if there was a hell, he was destined for it. He'd done such sins as made God condemn Sodom, and

couldn't repent, wouldn't ever repent of loving Patrick. But as Brand came to himself, he felt cool sheets covering him and a familiar hand holding his own, and when he opened his eyes, he saw Patrick's green eyes, smiling worriedly down at him.

"Are we dead? Is this heaven?" It would have to be heaven, if he was with Patrick.

"No, love. Not heaven. Just Texas." Patrick helped him sit.

"Close enough if you're here with me." Then he remembered. "Lina!" He struggled to get out of bed, but his shoulder ached something awful.

"She's fine. We're all fine. Well, except for you, and the doctor says you should recover the use of the arm completely. And we're safe. After you shot Caruthers, the other Knights fell to fighting amongst themselves. But they'd all heard him give his word, and you killed him fair and square, so they let us go. I don't think we'll have any more trouble on that front."

After I shot..."Patrick, I didn't even get off one round. I couldn't have killed him."

Patrick looked away. "I couldn't take the chance that he would kill you. I know it was wrong; we'd all have been slaughtered if Caruthers' men found out, but I love you, and I just had no choice. Please don't be angry."

"You killed for me?"

"I'd die for you. You said it to me, there at the Triple Crescent, but I realized I'd never said it to you. I love you, Brand."

Brand nodded, the knot in his throat closing off all possibility of speech, and then he was covering Patrick's face in fierce kisses. Ignoring the pain in his shoulder, Brand twined his about his lover's neck. His lover. Despite the pain, his need for Patrick was almost overwhelming, and he reached his hand downward to seek Patrick's prick, which was bulging under his cotton trousers.

"Patience. We've got time. I'm not going anywhere." But Patrick was thrusting up into his hand and his eyes were mirrors for Brand's own desire.

"Nope," Brand growled, biting Patrick lightly on the neck. "We're stuck with each other. For better or for worse."

Patrick started to laugh, and the sound of it was bird song and music and every good thing he could think of. "I'd say we've had the worse. Only better from here on out, love."

Brand knew that wasn't likely. They had a ranch to rebuild and a stubborn girl to raise, and he wasn't convinced the Red Hand Knights were just going to vanish into the mist, but it didn't matter. He'd spent over ten years running from who he was, hiding from the truth about himself. No more. Whatever came, he knew he wouldn't face it alone.

The End



# Surrender

## By Jourdan Lane

From The Anthology **Cowboy Up**  
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I dropped the saddle onto the rack and took a deep breath, trying to let my anger recede.

It wasn't exactly working. I'd been out all day working my ass off; loading hay onto the trailers, fixing fence, and dealing with idiot hands while Brandt, the ranch manager, was working with contractors to get the new silo ready for feed.

When I should have been out at the silo with Brandt, most of my afternoon had been spent rounding up stray cows and calves resulting from a botched attempt at herding them into the grazing pasture.

It should have only taken an hour and it should have been the easiest thing to do.

David, who was somewhat new to the ranch, was an idiot. I was convinced he that he wouldn't know his ass from a hole in the ground and had told him so.

Problem was; I'd told him that in front of all of the other hands - and Brandt. As usual, Brandt hadn't wasted any time in making some reference to me and how I knew all about asses. I'd swung before I'd heard it all and punched Brandt right in the jaw. It caught him off-guard and he stumbled, but he was quick at righting himself and a few moments later we were rolling in the dirt, fists flying.

The more we fought, the more pissed I got; not at Brandt, as I should have been, but at myself. I hadn't got a hard-on from the feel of some guy's body against mine in the last fight I'd been in. I couldn't believe it was happening now, especially in front of all of the hands. The only thing I could do to retain some of my dignity was fight back. Most of my punches landed where they were aimed, but all of Brandt's had made contact. I was going to be sore as hell.

The other hands finally pulled us apart when they heard the owner's diesel truck coming up the drive and I grabbed Blaze and brought her back to the barn. I was still pissed as hell. Brandt could be such an asshole. He knew what kind of problems got started when everyone was reminded that I liked dick instead of pussy.

I spit the blood that was pooling in my mouth, dabbing at it with the back of my hand. Son of a bitch had split my damned lip. I sighed and grabbed the brush from the top shelf and turned and entered the stall. Blaze looked at me with wild eyes, twitching her ears, and snorting. I knew she could sense that I was pissed, but I certainly didn't need her getting worked up now. The last time she'd gotten worked up because of my mood, she'd broken two of my ribs. "Easy now girl," I whispered, extending my hand out toward her as I approached.

She nudged at my hand and then at my shirt, nibbling and pulling at the fabric as I got closer. She nosed her way down my belly and then snorted, shaking her head, as if she didn't like the way I smelled. "You don't smell so hot yourself," I said as I started brushing her down.

But the horse was right; I reeked of sweat. In fact, I could feel it running in long lines down my back, from my hair-line to my ass. It was, after all, Texas in July. The heat index had been above a hundred for a couple of days now with no sign of relief in sight. I turned and set the brush on the railing and unbuttoned my shirt. I pulled the shirt from my jeans and wadded it up, wiping my face and chest, and giving a quick swipe - as far as I could reach - across the top of my back. I then picked up the brush to continue what I'd started.

Eventually, some of the hands made their way into the barn, putting up gear, storing saddles and brushing down their own horses. I could hear the whispers, the ones that always came at times like these, but I just kept on brushing, pretending like I couldn't hear them. No one stayed around to talk much. It was a Friday night and the hands that didn't have weekend duty were quick in wanting to shower and get to the bars.

By choice, I always had weekend duty. There weren't any bars that suited my tastes in the small town of Rock Creek. No need for me to have weekends off. Sure, we were close to Dallas, but not close enough to brave that shit on my own. I had a feeling I wasn't going to find what I was looking for away from the ranch anyway.

"Don't you think you've brushed 'er down long enough?" A deep, rumbling voice sounded a few feet behind me. Brandt.

"Go away," I grumbled, working the brush down the horse's flanks.

"Dale, come on man," he started.

I wanted to stay pissed, but every time I thought of the fight, I thought of the way Brandt's body had felt against mine. Fuck! Maybe it'd just been too damned long since I'd gotten laid. Maybe it was just Brandt. Either way, there was no way I was facing him until I could be sure that anger was the only thing I felt.

Brandt scuffed his boot in the dirt and I caught a glimpse of him as I stepped around to the other side of the horse. He had one hand shoved into the pocket of his tight Wranglers and had his hat in the other. Just as he looked up, I looked back to the horse.

"Aw hell!" He cursed and turned on his heel, walking out of the stall.

I waited, listening as he slammed the door to the barn behind him. When I couldn't hear his angry footsteps over the gravel any longer, I put everything away and grabbed my pack of cigarettes from the shelf before I slumped down on the footstool.

I lit it up my second cigarette of the day and leaned my head back against the beam, enjoying the rush of nicotine. I'd just about given up on the prospect of quitting. The door to the barn opened and Carl, one of the part-time hands, walked in and gave me a smile.

"What's up, Carl?"

"Not much, Dale," he said as he put his saddle up on the rack, "Heard you and Brandt had a roll in the dirt a little while ago."

I nodded. "Word seems to travel fast around here."

"You're still coming to the bar tonight though, right? Not gonna let some scuffle come between friends, are ya?"

"Carl, you know me, I'm not fond of the bars here in town." I reached down and put the cigarette out on the heel of my boot. "I've got a date tonight anyway."

Carl raised his brow. "A date?"

"Yep," I chuckled. "Rodeo's on TV tonight. A little beer, some popcorn, and relative peace and quiet - that's all I want."

His crossed his arms over his chest. "You ought to at least come to the bar for a little while; long enough to wish him happy birthday at least."

"Who?" I asked. The wheels in my brain started turning slowly, giving me that sinking feeling that there was something I was forgetting - something I'd been forgetting all day long.

"Brandt?" he shook his head. "I know you knew about it, you pitched fifty bucks into the pot for beer."



I stood, grabbing my shirt before I locked Blaze's stall. "Son of a bitch! I completely forgot that today was his fucking birthday."

Carl laughed. "Guess that means you're not getting that date tonight."

"Shut up, Carl," I growled as I walked out of the barn. I headed for the house, grumbling and cursing the entire way. Brandt walked out onto the porch, dressed in a pair of tight black Wranglers and a green, short-sleeved button-down shirt. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of him. He tossed a look at me, sliding his black cowboy hat over his short, dark hair and went down the steps, heading for his truck. He looked at me again as he reached for the door and I held his gaze for a moment, trying my damndest to keep my glare in place. He growled and muttered something under his breath as he climbed into his truck and started it up.

I jogged toward Brandt's truck, thinking I could get to him before he backed out. No such luck. He backed up and I could have sworn that he was aiming right for me. "Brandt, wait!" I yelled.

He put the truck in gear and his rear tires gave a few good spins, throwing a mix of dirt and gravel up into the air. "You stubborn son of a bitch!"

And just as though he'd heard me over the roar of his truck, his arm came out the window and he flipped me off. I stood there in the driveway, watching until his truck disappeared into the long line of road. Damn it! If only I'd remembered it was his birthday. I might not have...oh hell, who was I kidding; I'd have still knocked the shit out of that bastard for what he'd said.

The slamming of the screen door brought my attention back to the house. No one should have been there. The only people that lived full-time on the ranch were Brandt and me. Everyone else had wives and girlfriends or families that they lived with, or they worked part-time. Glenn, another hand, was walking down the steps, a beer in each hand and a duffle bag slung over one shoulder. He walked up and handed me one of the open beers.

"Figured you could use a drink, boss," he half-chuckled, trying like hell to hide it.

I took a long swig of my beer. "He can be such a fucking prick sometimes."

"If you don't mind me being direct, Dale," Glenn started. "I think today you were both being pricks. I swear, sometimes neither one of you knows how to just let things go."

I didn't answer. We stood in silence until I finally looked over at Glenn. "Why were you in the house?"

"Brandt told me to go shower since I reeked of cow shit. Some calves and I had a falling out today."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Let me guess; the chute came unlocked again?"

"Fucking piece of shit.. One of the little bastards caught me off-guard and kicked me right into a steaming pile of cow-patties. Took me and Bobby forever to catch that little fucker."

I reached over and gave him a hard punch to the shoulder. "Well what would you have done if you were the one about to be castrated?"

Glenn groaned. "I'm just glad I never have to find out." He sighed and cleared his throat. "You need a ride to the bar later? I'd be glad to pick you up."

I looked over at my truck, eyeing the drive-shaft that lay on the ground beneath it. "I guess," I sighed.

"You need me to come early so you can pick something up for him?"

I shook my head. "Nah, I've had his gift for a while now."

"Is that so?" Glenn asked; a knowing smile plastered across his face.

"No big deal Glenn; I just knew his birthday was close and I saw something a while back I thought he'd like. It wasn't like I went out shopping for it."

"Uh-huh," he teased.

"Oh fuck off and come back in an hour," I huffed and walked toward the house, thinking of how much trouble...and money...I'd gone to just to get that gift for Brandt. He had a small collection of carved wooden sculptures as well as a

couple of bronze sculptures; all different sorts of cowboys, horses, and other animals. I'd watched him eye one particular piece in a catalog.

One day he put the catalog aside and walked out of the room. I went behind him and picked it up to see what he was looking at. It was beautiful, but it was also a five-hundred-dollar piece of beautiful. Brandt would never spend that kind of money on something for himself, much less on a sculpture. I'd called the catalog company later that day, only to find out that they were sold out. The woman on the phone informed me, however, that they had some stores that might possibly still have one in stock.

I'd called each and every store in Texas and finally found one down in San Antonio that had that piece left. The clerk informed me that he could only hold it for the rest of the afternoon and I was soon in the truck, headed that way. When I finally got there and held the piece in my hands, it was clear to me why Brandt had been so enthralled by it. It was nice in the catalog, but up close and personal it was absolutely breathtaking. It depicted a cowboy and his horse. The cowboy sat back against a saddle on the ground and the horse rested his head over the cowboy's shoulder. I'd never in my life been able to sit like that with a horse, but I couldn't count the number of times I'd come upon Brandt in that same position.

I went into the house and made my way to the closet, digging all the way to the back to get Brandt's gift. I set the box, already wrapped, carefully onto the bed and headed for the shower. As I stripped off, I noticed Brandt's pile of dirty clothes. He must've come right in and had a shower before he left. My dick throbbed at the sudden memory I had of rolling on the ground with him, of his strong male scent flooding my senses. I was so tempted to pick his shirt up and hold it to my face, breathing in the scent of him, behind a nice, safe closed door; but I left it where it was. Doing shit like that was only going to make things worse.

I stepped into the shower, letting the warm water soothe my body. I was already a little sore and I just knew that I was going to hurt like hell in the morning. Hell, even through all that had happened I was still half-hard from the feel of Brandt's body rolling against mine. Fuck it, I thought. It'd been so long since my poor cock had had any attention at all it'd serve Brandt right to be the main-liner in my jack-off fantasy...yet again. I pressed one hand to the tiled wall, slid the other down to my shaft, and seven or eight strokes later I was shooting my load down the drain.

I stood beneath the spray of water until it began to turn cold. I reluctantly got out and found my clothes. It was too damned hot for a long-sleeved shirt, so I settled on a short-sleeved button down and my Wranglers. Of course, those were the only jeans I had. There was only one problem with that. When a man is long and hard in Wranglers, there ain't no hidin' it. The last thing I needed was to be lusting after some damned cowboy - or even worse - a straight damned cowboy.

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Glenn picked me up a little over an hour later. We'd driven to the bar in silence and just as we pulled into the parking lot, he looked over at me. "Let me know when you want to go home and I'll run you back out there."

I nodded. "Thanks, Glenn. I appreciate that."

"Just trying to avoid a fight," he chuckled. "You know how Jack hates that."

I growled and grabbed Brandt's gift as I opened the door. "You'll know where to find me."

"Hugging the bar, I presume," He sighed.

I shut the door on his truck and headed into the bar. There was a small table set up in the corner with a few gifts on it and a ton of envelopes. I put the gift down toward the middle of the table, where there wasn't a risk of it being knocked over, and looked around. A few hands had showed up already, but I didn't see Brandt anywhere. I hadn't even thought to look around the parking lot as I walked in to see if he was actually here.

Jack, the bartender, caught my eye and smiled. "Well, I'll be damned. Look what the cat dragged in. How you doin,' Dale?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I said, attempting to be polite. "You?"

He grinned. "Doing better since I've got a bunch of rowdy hands coming in looking to get drunk."

"Speaking of that," I smiled, "how about a shot of Cuervo and a longneck?"

"Coming right up."

I watched for a moment while he got my shot and my beer and then finally looked around. Glenn was talking animatedly to Bobby in what I presumed was a recount of the wonderful time they'd had castrating earlier in the day. I looked back to find the shot and beer in front of me and pulled out my wallet.

"I'll put it on a tab for you and you can pay before you leave," Jack said, pointing to my wallet.

I opened my wallet anyway and took out my bank card. "Well, I'm hoping to get very drunk. I might not remember to pay before I leave, so just charge my card if I disappear."

Jack nodded and took the card and put it into the register. I heard laughter coming from one of the side rooms and decided to go investigate. I tossed down my shot, feeling the fiery trail it left as it went down, and grabbed my beer. Sliding off of the stool, I made my way to the side room. As I got closer, I realized that Jack had added a few pool tables since the last time I'd been in. But I was not prepared for what I saw as I stepped into the room.

The most beautiful ass I'd ever seen was positioned at the pool table, bent so its owner could take a shot. My eyes traveled down that familiar, tight, round butt and down his jeans-encased, muscular thighs. He took his shot and stood and I groaned inwardly, turning to leave the room before he saw me. Just as I did, he turned and reached for his beer. Our eyes met for a few seconds, but just as I thought he was going to say something, I turned on my heel and walked out. I wasn't so sure I wanted to hear what he had to say.

An hour later, I'd downed more shots than I could count and was nursing my fifth beer as I snacked on chips and salsa, waiting on a fresh batch of chicken strips. It was never good for me to drink on an empty stomach. That always promised getting drunk fast, which meant the hangover came on just that much more quickly. I glanced at my watch. It wasn't even nine o'clock yet.

Jack pushed my food across the counter. "There was a shit-load of sandwiches in the back room, Dale. What's the matter with you this evening? You got some beef with one of the boys?"

I shook my head. "It's just been a bad day. I'm not sure I should've even come down here tonight."

Someone called Jack's name from across the room, but he kept his eyes trained on me for a few moments longer. "Well, if you feel a fight coming on, do me a favor - take it outside."

"Don't worry Jack," I chuckled. "I won't be fightin' tonight."

"Famous last words of Dale Marshall." Jack laughed as he walked off.

The last time I'd been in Jack's Place, I'd gotten drunk off my ass and started a fight with some prick who'd said something about my hat. I sighed, knowing that I'd said something close to the same thing to Jack about not fighting the night I put a chair through one of his plate glass windows. Now, I remembered why I didn't come here anymore.

I downed my food and was just about to go find Glenn when someone slid onto the stool beside me. I tried like hell to ignore him, at first, but when he kept glancing my way, I got curious - which ultimately led to me giving him a good once-over. He was definitely my type as far as age and height, late twenties to early thirties; he was even my type in his build, with broad shoulders, lean hips, muscular thighs and arms. But where I preferred dark hair, he was blonde; and where I preferred eyes that were chocolate and honey-swirled - like Brandt's - his were blue. Oh, he was handsome enough alright, could even qualify in my book of hot young studs, but he'd never equal Brandt's rugged beauty. He smiled, tipping his hat at me. "How you doin'?"

"Good," I said, suddenly finding the need for another beer. The young stud beside me was only going to lead to trouble when I eventually got hard and he got offended. I tapped my bottle on the counter, drawing Jack's attention. "Hey Jack? Can I get a fresh one?"

Jack nodded and reached down, grabbing me another beer. As he slid it over the counter, the man beside me spoke up. "That one's on me."

The man turned toward me on his stool, before I could lodge a protest, leaning an elbow on the bar and letting his knees brush against the side of my leg. "It's just a beer," He said quietly.

I cleared my throat, giving him a smile. "Thanks."

"You from around here?" He asked.

I shrugged. "Might as well be; I've been here about eight, nine years now. You?"

"Born and raised," he chuckled, "Just getting back into town after an extended absence. Haven't decided whether or not I'm stickin' around yet."

"It's not a bad place, really," I turned and looked up at him, meeting his eyes. I was getting a heavy vibe from him, but wanted to clear the air and stop this pussy-footing around. "They say Round Up in Dallas is hopping on the weekends."

A grin spread across his face. "It sure as hell was last weekend." He extended his hand toward me. "Name's Evan."

I took his hand, gripping it firmly, "Dale."

He held my hand for a few moments longer than the normal friendly gesture should allow, letting his middle finger brush against my palm as he slowly pulled his hand away. I shivered a bit and my dick twitched. Yep, it'd been way too long since I'd gotten laid. He chuckled at my reaction. "I'm always leery about trying to pick up guys in regular bars. Last time I tried it, the guy was straight."

"Ouch!"

"Yeah," He said thoughtfully. "It wasn't good...at all. Swore I wouldn't do that shit again, but damn, when I saw you sittin' up here, I was willing to take a punch over it. You here alone?"

I shook my head and looked over to the set of tables a few feet away where Brandt and the other hands were sitting. Brandt was starting to open up his gifts, talking and laughing with everyone at the table. "Hell, I don't know. I'm here for my friend's birthday, but we sorta had a disagreement earlier this afternoon. I don't think he gives a shit one way or another if I'm here."

I watched as Brandt opened all of the cards, passing them around so everyone could read the stupid jokes and sayings. He then got started on the gifts. There

weren't too many, but he got some really nice stuff, including a cerulean blue long-sleeved shirt that I'd have done just about anything to see him in. I didn't realize how long I'd been watching Brandt, until Evan slid off of his stool and leaned in a bit closer.

"Straight, huh?" He asked, gesturing toward Brandt.

I took a long swig of my beer before nodding. "Unfortunately."

It wasn't until a few moments later that I realized what I'd said and how it had sounded. I looked over at Evan. "Sorry, that was..."

"It's ok," he cut in. "I know how it is. We can still share a beer."

I looked back to Brandt just as Glenn handed him my gift. Some of the guys were making a big deal about how much it weighed and that it served Brandt right that someone would give him a box of bricks for his birthday. Brandt laughed right along with them as he tore the paper off, but as he opened the box, his laughter abruptly stopped. Brandt slowly reached in and pulled out the large sculpture, setting it carefully onto the table. The laughter from the guys around the table soon stopped as they saw the piece and tried to get closer for a better look.

"Damn, somebody sure does like you," David, the idiot I'd worked with earlier in the day, said. "Who gave you that?"

Brandt shook his head, still staring at the sculpture. "I don't know."

The guys around the table soon started talking again, pointing out things on the sculpture and carrying on about it. Glenn shot a sympathetic glance my way and then looked back to Brandt, who was admiring the sculpture. Brandt soon raised his head, giving me a heated look. I had to fight not to look away from him. For the first time ever, I couldn't read his expression...and it scared the hell out of me.

I turned on the stool and caught Jack's attention. "Shot of Cuervo...please?"

Evan, who I'd forgotten about for a few minutes, brushed his hand over my back. I leaned into his touch without thinking and he rested his chin on my shoulder. "It was a beautiful gift, Dale."



I turned my head slightly and sighed and in the next moment, he placed a gentle kiss against my lips. I groaned and turned into him a bit more, thinking that any kind of touch I got that was comforting would do a world of good. But then I remembered that we were in a regular bar and pulled away. "I've got a room," He whispered, "If you're interested."

"He's not interested," Brandt growled as he stepped up to my other side.

"Well now I don't believe that's for you to decide," Evan said, straightening himself up.

I could feel the tension escalating between the two men on either side of me and sighed. "Can you give us a minute, Evan?"

Evan glared at Brandt for a moment, but finally grabbed his beer and moved away from the bar. I shot an unhappy glance at Brandt before shaking my head. "Just because it's your birthday doesn't mean I won't whip your ass."

"Heh, you tried that earlier and failed. You drunk?"

"Working on it," I growled. "What do you want?"

"We need to talk."

"Look, if it's about the gift..."

"It's not about the fucking gift, Dale," he said through clenched teeth.

I sighed and slid off the stool. "Fine, let's talk."

Brandt turned and headed toward the back of the bar and I followed. We walked into the bathroom and as soon as the door closed, he turned abruptly, pushing me back against the door. It knocked my hat off and I caught it with one hand while I pushed at Brandt's chest with the other. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"You mean you don't know?" He growled. "I can't believe it; the all-knowing Dale Marshall doesn't know it all after all."

"You're drunk, Brandt," I snapped, trying to push him away from me. "Or at least damned close to it."

"You're here picking up some stray fuck - on my fucking birthday?"

I rolled my eyes. "Well, what the hell am I supposed to do? Go home with the birthday boy?"

I didn't have time to even blink before he had me pinned to the door, kissing me so hard I knew that he'd split my lip again. I wanted to ask what he was doing, what he was thinking, but it was like a dam, holding all of the pent-up emotions and desires over the last eight years, had burst, setting me on edge and clouding my thoughts. He lightened the kiss a little, his tongue probing against my lips. I opened to him instantly, hearing the lock slide closed as my hat fell to the floor.

My arms went around him, pulling him close as I tried to climb up his body. I was so damned afraid to say anything for fear that he'd pull away, or God forbid, stop. I'd wanted this for too damned long to give it up now.

I could feel him hard against my belly and slid a hand down, rubbing his cock through his jeans. He moaned against my lips, pushing his hips against my hand. His knees sagged and he lost the rhythm of his kiss as I unbuckled his belt and opened his jeans. Seconds later I had his cock in my hand as he rested his head on my shoulder, letting me stroke him.

"Ungh...Dale," he whispered. "Don't stop."

"Not gonna stop, baby," I assured him, loving the feel of him in my hand, precome leaking in a steady stream to provide a nice, slick stroke. I'd never had any problems getting laid, but I hadn't been fucked by another man in so many years that I wasn't so sure I could do it.

Brandt grunted; fumbling and trying to get my belt and jeans open. He finally worked them open and I hissed as he tried to push them down my hips and the belt slapped against my dick. He slid his hands over my ass, cupping and squeezing my ass cheeks. I moaned, my head dropping back against the door. He finally worked one hand around, giving my cock a few tentative strokes before grunting and turning me around, pushing me face-first against the wall.

No matter how romantic it sounded, I knew it was going to be awkward if he fucked me against the wall. I caught his hands as they rested on my hips and moved us over to the sink, that way, I could not only have something to give me some leverage, but I could still see his face. He pushed at my shirt and I reached down, pulling it up over my head and draping it over the sink.

I shivered as Brandt's lips touched against my shoulder, flinching at first as he nipped my skin, then melting into him as his tongue soothed the sting. I reached behind me, taking his shaft into my hand, stroking again. He growled, pushing hard against me.

"Want you," I whispered.

He hissed as I closed my fist over the head of his cock, squeezing it hard. Precome pooled in the palm of my hand and I slicked it down his shaft, pushing my ass toward him. He grabbed my hips and bent me over the sink as he ran his cock up and down the cleft of my ass, squeezing my ass cheeks to trap his cock between them. Brandt soon leaned in, pressing his face against my neck...his cock at my hole. "Tell me it's ok," he whispered shakily. "Please, tell me its ok."

Of course it was fucking ok! I nodded quickly. "Yes, Brandt, it's ok."

He made this odd noise that sounded somewhere between a grunt and a whimper and shoved into me in one swift, hard movement. I clenched my teeth, suppressing the scream that was trying to tear out of my throat. Spots danced in my field of vision and I tried to blink them away as I struggled for breath. But Brandt didn't stop moving. He wasn't rough, just ignorant as fucking hell. I held onto the sink, the knuckles of both hands white, as I struggled to keep my legs from buckling.

I raised my head up, looking into the mirror. I didn't know what I expected to see, but it certainly wasn't the lost expression on Brandt's face. My heart broke for him, not knowing what he needed. I took a deep breath, gritted my teeth, and reached back toward his hips, holding him still as I began fucking myself slowly on his cock. I relaxed enough that the pain became nothing more than a lingering burn. I let him go and braced myself against the sink.

Brandt's movements became more even and practiced and he soon had a rhythm going. Someone pounded against the bathroom door and Brandt growled. His fingers bruised into my hip and my shoulder, but I longed for more. He shifted

the way he stood and the angle finally lent to him hitting directly against my prostate. I moaned and keened, feeling my balls drawing up against my body. I looked up into the mirror again, watching Brandt.

He looked up but when he met my eyes, he quickly looked away. He fucked me harder, his movements growing shaky. There was someone pounding on the door and Brandt growled again, but this time yelled out a response.

"It's out of order!"

He looked back toward me, panting, but still wouldn't meet my eyes. "Look at me Brandt," I said softly, feeling my orgasm quickly building. Suddenly this felt wrong, felt dirty, felt like this was going to change everything between us - and not for the better. Tears burned at my eyes, but with my orgasm so close, I came....sobbing, clutching at the sink for dear life.

Brandt quickly followed, groaning out his pleasure, before resting his forehead against the middle of my back. Neither one of us moved for a few seconds, though it seemed like an eternity. I finally lifted my head again, looking into the mirror at the top of Brandt's head. "Look at me Brandt. Please, just fucking look at me," I begged.

He shook his head slightly, rising up slowly. He walked to the other sink and braced himself against it, hanging his head. "Just get cleaned up and get out," he said..

"What do you...?"

"Just get out," he growled, giving me a sideways glance. It was then that I wished he hadn't looked at me at all. It hurt to see that disgusted expression on his face.

With my heart in my throat, I grabbed a handful of towels, cleaning myself up. Brandt cleaned himself up quickly as well, and was done before I was. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, staring at the wall. I got myself all tucked back in and picked my hat up from the floor, turning to tell him that we could talk about it at home. "We can talk..."

"Get out!" He said through clenched teeth. "And don't even think about coming home."

I stared at him for a moment, stared at the side of his fucking head, biting my lip, then finally turned and walked out the door. I felt like everyone in the entire bar was looking at me, like they knew what happened; I'd been fucked by my best friend and then tossed away like yesterday's garbage. I made my way the door, knowing that Jack had my card and I could get it back later. I felt like I was suffocating as I walked through the crowd, like the very ground I was standing on was falling away from me.

As I reached the door, I tripped on the rug at the entry way and fell right into Evan. I tried to pull away from him, but he held tight, ushering me out the front door. "What happened, Dale?"

I shook my head, pushing him away, "Just have to go...have to go...somewhere."

Brandt's words echoed over and over through my head and my stomach turned. I tried to convince myself that he didn't mean forever...just tonight. Brandt's disgusted expression flashed in my mind and the tears that had burned at my eyes before suddenly began to fall. I stumbled away from Evan, not wanting him to see me lose it, just barely making it to the grass before I lost the contents of my stomach.

I dry-heaved for the longest time, before I felt a hand slide gently across my back. "Come on Dale, let me take you home," Evan said..

I shook my head. "Can't go home."

"I've got a room," He said. "You can sleep it off there."

"How d'you sleep off nine fucking years?" I cried, then realized who I was talking to; Evan was the man who'd been trying to pick me up. "I'm sorry, I'm a lousy drunk," I lied. I'd have given anything at that point to just be drunk and not feel a damned thing.

"Aren't we all?" He smiled. "Look, I'll take you back to my room and you can get some rest. Things will look better in the morning."

I shrugged. "As long as you're not looking to get laid."

"I have a feeling you're not looking for that either," he said. "If you're looking for a friend though, I'm game."

I nodded, "Can never have too many friends."

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I woke up to the alarm on my watch. Every morning at five-thirty it went off. Today was no different. I had to get up and be on my way. There was a half a day's work waiting for me back at the ranch. Evan nuzzled into my chest and sighed. I tried to extricate my body from his carefully so that I didn't wake him up, but with his legs twined with mine and him using me for a pillow, that was going to prove difficult. I did manage it, but Evan soon cuddled up with my pillow. If I'd known Evan was such a snuggler and that he wouldn't be able to stay on his side of the bed, I'd have gone home and slept in the barn.

I placed a quiet call to the only taxi company in town and was told that it'd be fifteen minutes before the driver was there. I hung up and got dressed and as I sat down on the edge of the bed to put my boots on, Evan reached out and slid his hand up the middle of my back.

"You leavin' already?"

"As much as I would love to spend the day in bed, I can't. I've got to get to work."

"You need a ride?"

I tied the lace on my second boot and fixed my jeans before answering. "It's ok, I'll manage. You just sleep."

"You ok this morning, Dale?"

"I'm better." That was a lie.. Actually, had last night ended up with me able to go home, with Brandt, I'd have been floating on cloud nine instead of in a stranger's bed, letting him think I was sick so I could be have a place to lay my head.

"Maybe we could..."

"Listen, Evan," I started. "I really don't..."

"Hey," he said, laying a hand on my back. "I meant what I said last night. If a friend is all you're lookin' for, I'm ok with that."

I swallowed hard. "I think that's all I'm looking for."

"You need to move on with your feelings for him though," Evan offered gently. "Being in love with a straight man's going to bring you nothing but heartache; I've been there - I know."

I turned and leaned over, kissing him on the cheek. "Just gonna take time, I reckon."

Evan yawned and smiled, "You know where to find me if you want to talk."

"I know. See you later Evan; get some rest."

He yawned again and pulled the blankets up around his shoulders. I shut the door and stepped into the parking lot, stretching as I waited for the cab. A few minutes later David, a guy who'd delivered me safely home after many a night of drunken debauchery over the years, pulled up. As I slid into the car, he gave me a lopsided grin. "Good morning, Dale."

"David," I smiled and shut the door.

"Headed home?"

I just nodded, not wanting to start up a conversation, and David pulled out of the parking lot. It was a quiet ride home and as David pulled into our driveway about twenty minutes later I noticed that Brandt's truck wasn't there and there wasn't a single light on in the house. Not even the porch light. I wondered if Brandt had even gone home last night. After digging some cash out of my wallet to pay David, I headed for the house. When I put the key in the lock, I realized that the door was unlocked. Brandt had been home at some point.

There wasn't any sign of him as I walked through the house. I couldn't tell by the fresh pot of coffee in the kitchen either. The coffee maker had a timer on it and we always set it for the next day after finishing off a pot. Brandt's bedroom door was closed for the first time in years. The only times our bedroom doors had been closed was when one or the other of us was sick and needed the quiet

time, or whenever I was playing with my toys. Hell, Brandt was even comfortable enough to jerk off with his own door wide-open.

I headed off to my bedroom and changed clothes, foregoing a shower, knowing that I was just going to get dirty loading the hay trailer anyway. I poured some coffee into a travel mug and lit up a cigarette as I headed out to the barn. The sun had come up, but it was so overcast that it was still pretty dark. Rain was a pretty sure thing. I needed to hurry.

As I neared the barn, I could hear grunting coming from inside. I quieted my steps and peered around the frame of the large door opening. Both Brandt's truck and the hay trailer were pulled up inside of the barn and a shirtless Brandt was angrily stacking bales of hay onto the trailer. I stood silent, watching for just a few moments as he moved. The muscles in his back and arms jumped as he worked and sweat covered his naked back. He turned slightly and I could see the dark hair of his chest wet and matted. Not only did it make me want to go over and bury my face in it, but I realized then that he'd been at this for a while. I ground the cigarette out with the heel of my boot and set my mug of coffee on one of the shelves.

"What are you doing out here Brandt?"

He turned in surprise at the sound of my voice and then glared. "I'm working. What the fuck does it look like I'm doing?"

"It's not your day to be working. Go back to the house."

"It's got to get done," he growled. "It's gonna rain soon and I want this hay put down in the other barn before it starts. We sure as hell don't have the room to let it stay here, so help or fuck off."

"There ain't no one here to stop it now," I said, my temper quickly rising. "You want to pick up where we left off yesterday?"

Brandt grunted. "As I recall I was kickin' your ass."

"Why the fuck are you being such an asshole?"

"Because I can be," he grumbled, grabbing another bale of hay and stacking it with what he'd already loaded.



"That's not an answer," I said. "What the hell have I done to you to piss you off so much?"

"You exist! That's what the fuck you've done! Now, get the fuck out of here!"

I stumbled back at his words, my heart breaking just a little more than it had the night before. This was the man who I'd lived and worked with, side by side through some of the shittiest of times, for nearly nine years; the man who was not only my boss, at times, but my best friend. Sure, we'd had words and plenty of fights over the years, but nothing – nothing - like this. This...was different. I turned and headed for the door, grabbing my coffee from the shelf as I walked by.

"Why'd you do it, Dale?"

His voice was so unsteady, I didn't dare turn around, but I did stop. What'd I do? Fuck, all I'd done was be a willing damned participant. If there was something else besides the fight the day before and what happened last night, I didn't have a clue as to what it was. "Do what Brandt? What did I do?"

He didn't answer, but I heard him grab another bale of hay, throwing it onto the growing stack. My temper was hanging by a thread and I knew that if I stuck around, it was going to snap. "You know what? Fuck this and fuck you! You want to talk and tell me what crawled up your ass - you know where to find me." I took off for the house, but didn't make it ten feet when I heard steps running up behind me.

Just as I turned, Brandt's fist connected with my jaw and I fell back, my coffee dropping to the ground. I cursed, straightening myself up, moving toward Brandt. "You chicken-shit bastard! Can't deal with it face to face, you got to hit me from behind?"

We circled each other, each waiting for the other to strike, when I finally realized that what I'd thought was a bead of sweat on his cheek wasn't that at all; it was a tear. I swallowed hard, finding it difficult to maintain my anger. "Talk to me Brandt," I begged. "We got too many years invested to..."

"To fuck up a friendship?" he asked suddenly.

I furrowed my brow, worried over the way he'd asked that, but agreed with him all the same. "Yes."

He looked up at me, shaking his head as he took a few steps back, raking a leather-gloved hand over his bare chest. My eyes inadvertently followed the movement of his hand but at his pained sigh, I looked up, meeting a heated gaze like the one I'd seen last night. My breath caught and I froze, unable to speak, unable to move.

"I've tried so hard." He hesitated. "I can't tell you how...how it felt."

"How what felt?" I asked cautiously. "What's going on Brandt?"

A sad look passed over his face and he sighed. "I saw you leave - with him."

"That's funny," I snorted. "I believe I was told not to come home last night. Just what the fuck was I supposed to do?"

"I didn't think you take me so goddamned literally."

"Yeah? Well it's not every day that your best friend - who's straight, mind you - shoves his cock up your ass, fucks you like there's no tomorrow, then tells you not to come home, all the while, not able to even look you in the eye. That kind of fucks with a person's head."

"I should have never said that," he said quietly.

"You're damned right you shouldn't have," I snapped, eyeing the clouds that were quickly forming off to the east. "Look, I know you've got some shit to work out. I can understand that. But don't treat me as if I'm some stranger you just met."

He hung his head, looking at my feet. "I'm sorry for what I said in front of the guys."

Not an apology for the night before, but it was something. It was enough...for now. "Brandt,, I can't even begin to tell you what I go through each and every day just to maintain the respect that I do around here. Have you never heard the whispers from the hands when they're reminded that I'm gay?"

"They respect you anyway, Dale."

"Some of them do," I said. "Others, they just wait and watch, steering clear of me in fear that my gayness might rub off on them."

"Guess it wouldn't do to let 'em know you turned me gay, huh?" He looked up at me finally, unshed tears pooling in his eyes.

I heard the humor in his words and cracked a smile. "Well, I never thought it'd work, but I sure wished pretty damned hard for it over the years."

"I don't know what I was thinking last night," he said cautiously. "I've been trying to deal with all of this shit, not understanding any of it, and last night, all I could see was that asshole - some stranger - taking you home. I just wanted you to know that...that I needed you; that I wanted you."

"That wasn't exactly what came across," I grumbled.

"I apologize for what I said." He slid a gloved hand up to cup my neck and I leaned into his touch, sighing. He studied me for a few moments and I finally looked away. "You ok?" He asked; his voice thick with worry. "Did I - did I hurt you?"

I nodded. "A little. And if I didn't have such an extensive toy collection that I like to play with on a regular basis, it would have been a lot more than a little. Got to take it slow, especially without lube."

A haunted look passed across his eyes and I reached up, giving him a tap on the chin with my knuckles. "But it was good, Brandt. Damned good."

He dropped his hand away from me, sighing heavily. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I don't know either. But I'm here if you want to talk about it." I held my hand out, hoping he'd take it. When he bypassed shaking my hand and pulled me to him, hugging me tightly, I couldn't help wrapping my arms around him in return. I tried to ignore the way my cock responded to him - the way he smelled of alfalfa, sweat, leather...and Brandt - hugging him back.

He nodded, face pressed against my neck, then pulled back slightly. "Wouldn't blame you if you wanted to kick my ass," he said. "I'd even stand here and let you."

"Let me?"

He gave a sheepish grin. "Well, being that you're all sore from the beating I gave you yesterday..."

"Whatever," I pushed him away. "Let's get that hay loaded before it starts raining. Billy's welding the ramps back onto the big flatbed so all I have is this trailer and I've still got six round-bales to take over to old-man Hudson's place after this."

"That's all he wanted? Six bales?"

I shrugged and bent over to pick up my now-empty coffee cup before heading toward the barn. "It's all he's got room for apparently; over half his barn is still missing since the storm."

Brandt followed behind me silently for a few moments then cleared his throat. "Hey, Dale?"

"Hmm?"

"Something I've been meaning to tell you for a while now."

"What's that?"

"Like the way those Wranglers make your ass look."

"Quit lookin' at my ass," I said, trying not to let on that his flirting meant the world to me. Even if nothing else happened between us, it'd be ok. Having Brandt as a lover would be a dream come true, but having him as a friend was something I couldn't live without. "If you think you're getting near it any time soon, you're severely mistaken."

"I was just sayin..."

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Delivering the hay to old-man Hudson had been quick and easy, especially with him having a tractor with a hay-fork attachment to unload it with. As I drove along the road toward the entrance to the ranch, I noticed a section of fencing was down and there were two calves out in the ditch. I pulled off onto the side of the road, grabbed my buggy whip from the bed of the truck, and set off to herd them back in.

I walked along the fence-line after getting them in, shaking my head. Damn near every one of the fence-posts was rotted at ground-level. My patch-job would keep the cows in over the weekend, but it wasn't going to hold much longer than that. What had initially seemed to be a small patch job turned into tacking together a fifty-foot section.

I headed back to the truck, keeping an eye on the sky, hoping like hell there was still that roll of wire and fencing pliers in the tool box. Luckily there was and I slipped on a pair of leather gloves, going to work. Twenty minutes later, I gave the fence once last test and set off to the house. I'd have to be sure to get a couple of hands out first thing Monday morning though to start tearing the whole line of fence down.

As soon as I turned into the drive, the storm blew in. One moment there were a few sprinkles and in the next, I couldn't see, even with the wipers set on high. Damn it, it was going to be muddy as hell in the morning. Sure, we needed rain, but not all at fucking once. The rain was soon coming down in heavy sheets, thunder rolling, and the lightning flashing so close that it made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. To hell with unhooking the trailer.

I parked the truck in front of the house and got out, running toward the front door. By the time I reached the door, I was completely soaked. Brandt opened the door just as my hand hit the knob, handing me a towel. I gratefully accepted, shucking my boots and clothes, right there in the entry-way, trying to get warm.

No matter how hot it was, being soaking wet in the air-conditioned house made me shiver. Brandt cleared his throat and I suddenly grew self-conscious, wrapping the towel around my waist before I gathered my clothes. "Thanks for the towel," I said, giving him a brief smile.

He nodded. "I was afraid you weren't going to make it back before it hit."

"Would have been back sooner," I said. "But I had to stop and patch a section of fence. You know that section along the highway on the north side?"

Brandt raised a brow. "The one we've been putting off replacing for over a year?"

I nodded. "That would be the one."

"Shit!"

"Have to have a few guys out there Monday morning to get it started," I said as I headed into the laundry room and put my clothes into the washer.

When I turned to walk out Brandt was leaning against the door frame, watching me intently. "I put some stew on for dinner, that ok with you?"

"Yeah, that actually sounds really good right now."

His eyes swept over me, burning an invisible trail over my body. My dick twitched, brushing against the towel and I suppressed a groan. I didn't want him to see what he did to me. I cleared my throat and started past him, but he blocked the doorway enough that I'd have to brush against him to get by. He reached out, placing his palm in the middle of my chest.

I looked down at his hand and then up at him. "Brandt?"

He slid his hand away slowly, holding my gaze. "I know I have no right to know - or to even ask - but, did you...did you sleep with him?"

I nodded. "Slept with him...yes, but..."

A defeated look passed over his face. I stepped in closer, ignoring the fact that I was only wearing a towel and just being near him was causing a very obvious reaction. "Brandt," I said gently, being sure to keep my eyes locked with his. "I didn't fuck him. That's not what I went there for."

"Really?" He asked hopefully. "So you..." He broke off, letting out a sigh of relief before clearing his throat. "I'd like to talk, if that's ok, maybe when you get out of the shower?"

"We can talk. I won't be but a minute."

Brandt pushed himself away from the door frame. "I'll make some coffee."

I practically ran to the bathroom and ten minutes later I was walking into the kitchen wearing an old t-shirt and a baggy pair of sweats. Brandt immediately placed a cup of coffee into my hands and turned, heading toward the living room. I followed, admiring his ass and his hairy, muscular legs, suddenly realizing he was wearing a pair of my cotton shorts; and not just any pair of my shorts either. He was wearing the only pair I had that said, "Let's Fuck" across the ass.

I just couldn't help commenting on it. "Hey Brandt?"

"Hum?" He looked up at me as he started to sit down on the couch.

"Your ass looks hot in those shorts."

He blushed, sitting down and placing his cup on the coffee table. "You don't mind, do you?"

I shook my head. "Share and share alike; that's always been our motto around here."

Brandt gestured toward the empty spot on the couch beside him. "Sit down, Dale," he said. "This is important."

"I gathered that." I put my cup beside his and sat down, pulling my legs up against my chest.

"Thank you for the sculpture," he said, looking genuinely grateful. "It was way too expensive and you should've saved your money, but it really is beautiful. Even more beautiful than it was in the catalog."

I smiled. "I'd seen you looking at it for a while, but that's not the only reason I bought it."

"Yeah?"

"I can't tell you how many times I've come across you sitting just like that with Basco. You've got a way with horses Brandt, like no one else I've ever seen."

He shrugged. "Been 'round 'em my whole life...just like you have."

"Love watching you work with them though."

He swallowed hard. "Quit looking at me like that, Dale."

"Like what?"

"The way you are now," he whispered. "If you don't, I'm not gonna get any of this said...and it needs to be said."

I bent my head, resting my forehead against my knees, letting out a long exhale before looking up again. "Sorry," I said, not sure I meant it.

"Do you remember the crash?" he asked.

I frowned at him, narrowed my brow at him, wondering why he was bringing that up now. It'd been a little over a year since it'd happened, but he generally avoided the subject at all costs. We used to use a small helicopter to herd the cattle. One afternoon, however, I'd been riding along, doing a bit of surveying from the air. Long story short, the pilot clipped the top of a tree with the tail-rotor and we went down. He didn't make it. I'd managed to drag my ass out of the wreckage seconds before it exploded. I now had a foot-long scar on my thigh as well as a few scars on my arm and chest.

"It's not something I'm likely to forget any time soon," I finally answered. "What about it?"

"That was the day I knew for sure," he said, his voice growing unsteady. "That was when I knew that I loved you more than anything or anyone else in this world."

"Brandt..."

He shifted on the couch, moving so that my legs rested against his chest as he leaned toward me. "I remember screaming, crying, trying to get the bleeding on your leg to stop. I was losing it Dale, so afraid I was losing you before I could tell



you what you meant to me. But you'd had enough. You took my face in your hands and, in an unbelievably calm and rational voice for someone in so much pain, told me to cowboy-the-fuck up and get you to the hospital - that you weren't checkin' out any time soon."

I couldn't help smiling. "Well, you were losing it...just a little."

"I been trying to cowboy-up ever since," he said, tears rolling slowly down his cheeks. "Been trying to figure out how to get these thoughts and feelings to go away, but the harder I tried, the more miserable I felt. I'm tired of fightin' it, Dale...of fightin' myself. Last night...I just snapped."

"You wouldn't even look at me."

"I wanted to," he said resolutely. "God, I wanted to look at you...to see your face...to know it was real."

I studied him for a few moments, trying to get my words together. "Last night hurt, Brandt," I finally said, holding his gaze. "And I'm not only talking about the physical hurt either. I've wanted you for so long; loved you and watched you from the sidelines for so many years. Never, in my wildest dreams, would I have thought I might have had a chance. But last night..."

"I'm so sorry Dale," he bent his head, kissing my knee that was still between us. "I wish I'd been able to tell you all this long before now. And if I could change what happened last night, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

"I wouldn't want to change it all," I said softly, "just how it ended."

He swallowed hard, moving toward me. I met him half-way, pressing my lips to his, and in a matter of seconds I was lying beneath him on the couch. Damn, but that man could kiss. I slid my hands around, cupping his ass, but Brandt's body suddenly stiffened. I immediately pulled them away, breaking the kiss to whisper into his ear. "It's ok, nothing you don't want to do."

"I want to," he whispered in return, "Just nervous as hell. Haven't ever had the real thing up there, you know?"

I chuckled at his words, sliding a hand down the front of his shorts, taking him in my hand. "As opposed to the fake thing?"

"Mmm...God you're gonna be so pissed at me." He moaned.

"Yeah? What'd you do?"

"Borrowed some of your toys," he said, lips pressed to my ear. "Had to know what it felt like. Saw the way those guys got off in the videos and..."

He broke off as I let him go, sliding my fingers back to press against his hole. If he'd had any of my toys, he could certainly take my fingers exploring. "So you thought you'd give it a shot, huh?"

He whimpered, nodding quickly. "Pretended it was you, Dale. Wondered what it'd be like to have you fuck me like that."

Oh. Shit.

I quickly got my hands free and pushed his shorts down his hips, struggling beneath him to get my sweats down just enough to free my cock. I wanted to feel him pressed against me, skin to skin. His cock pressed into my belly, slicking it with precome. I ran my fingers through the sticky fluid and my hand went straight back down to his hole. He tightened as my finger pressed against him, but after a few moments, he opened and my finger slid into him.

He stiffened again, but I slid my free hand between us, pushing up his shirt and pulling at one nipple, then the other. He melted against me and I bent my finger inside of him, looking for his gland. Brandt practically screamed as I found it and began pumping his hips against me. Oh fuck, did that feel good. My cock was pressed between us and every time he moved, it was like he was jacking me off with his body.

"That feel good?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but the only thing that came out was a long, loud moan. I kept working at his tits, working his prostate. "Fuck. Was never like this."

I looked up into those chocolate and honey-swirled eyes and smiled. "Nothing in this world comes close to the Dale Marshall experience."

His eyes grew wide and he suddenly pushed at my chest. "Wait! Stop! I've gotta...it feels like I'm gonna piss!"

I slid my hand up to cup his neck, bringing him down for a kiss. "Not gonna piss, baby, just go with the feeling."

He moaned into my mouth as I added another finger, and slid his hand between us, taking my cock. He was so damned gentle with it I wanted to laugh, but I didn't dare. He'd learn...soon enough. But still, it felt damned good to have him reciprocate. "Love you touching me," I sighed against his lips.

"Oh fuck." He panted. "Gonna...oh shit...fuck me!"

"Want me to fuck you, yeah? Fuck that ass 'til you explode?"

He moaned and keened, bucking his hips wildly against my belly as I thrust my fingers into him. "That's it, Brandt, baby, let it go."

He looked down at me wild-eyed, holding my gaze as he cried out, shooting his load between us. The feel of his come on my belly and cock sent me over the edge and I soon followed, adding my come to his. I slowly withdrew my fingers from his ass and slid my hand between us, rubbing the hot, sticky fluids against Brandt's hairy chest.

I searched his face for any sign of regret - or worse, disgust - but it wasn't there. He looked happy, sated and relieved. He licked at his lips. "I think you've fried the circuit from my brain to my mouth."

"And that was just my hand," I chuckled. "Just imagine what my dick could do."

He shuddered and leaned in, giving me a tender kiss. "I love you Dale."

"Me too, Brandt," I said softly, "Always have, reckon I always will."

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"Shit!" Brandt cursed, hopping around the bedroom, trying to get his boots on. "Get on the phone while I unhook the truck and get some of the guys out here to help. Fucking idiot drivers!"

The fence that I'd patched just before the storm began had just been taken down by an idiot in a half-ton pickup truck that apparently didn't know how to drive in the rain. Elias Sampson, the owner of the feed-store and distant neighbor, had called to let us know that we had nearly two hundred head of cattle lining the side-ditches and the main highway. Sure, we had a lot more cows than that on the ranch, but two hundred of those little shits were enough to 'cause a pretty big ruckus. I hoped like hell the driver of that truck was gone before Brandt and I got up to the road.

"It'll be ok, Brandt."

"What if someone else had come barreling down the road instead of Elias? What if they'd run head-on into the herd?"

"But they didn't. And now we just got to clean it up." He was right, of course, but that was typical Brandt; full of what-ifs and buts. I started dialing numbers for each of the hands as I slipped my clothes and boots on and by the time Brandt had walked out the front door, I had four guys coming and promising to pick up four more on their way over.

I put on my hat and grabbed my duster, as well as Brandt's that was hanging beside it, and headed out the front door. Brandt finished unhooking the trailer and I tossed the duster in his direction. He plucked it out of the air with a knowing smile. "Thank you Dale."

"You're welcome," I said as I turned to get in the truck. He always forgot his duster when it was raining out then bitched about how wet he got. Brandt got in and started the truck up and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I finally put the seat back and unzipped. There was patch of hair, dried come clumping it all together, caught right in the teeth of my zipper. I was quite sure that bit of come was from when Brandt was experimenting, trying find my prostate with his fingers. Oh yeah, he'd found it alright. Fuck, had he found it! My dick twitched at the memory and I let out a happy sigh.

Brandt looked over at me and then his eyes went to my dick. "Christ Dale, put that thing away."

"What's the matter? Dick-shy already?"

He slammed the truck in gear as we reached the barn and leaned over the seat. He slid his hand over my bare dick, sucking the lobe of my ear between his lips. "No, not shy - hungry. Now get out and let's get this done so we can get back to what we were doing."

"Brandt." I shivered as he nipped my ear and pulled away.

He got out and I struggled to zip my jeans back up before following him. Brandt was already saddling Basco as I headed for Blaze's stall. He looked up at me out of the corner of his eye, huge grin on his face. "You look sexy as hell all flushed like that, Dale."

"Shut up," I grumbled.

Five minutes later we were riding out toward the highway. A few hands passed us in their trucks as we neared the gated entrance. They called out that they'd be right back after saddling their horses. Glenn and Carl were parked on the side of the road, unloading their horses from their respective trailers. Unfortunately, the idiot who'd run down the fence-line was still there talking to a sheriff's deputy. Brandt saw him just after I did and scowled. "Ride out and get the gates for the grazing pasture opened up. I'll wait for you to get back before we start herding them in. Just gonna make sure they don't stray off any farther than they already have."

"No trouble, Brandt," I warned him. "You kick his ass and you'll spend the weekend in jail. You might get dick in there, but it won't be mine."

He studied me for a moment then walked his horse up next to mine. "Always so logical," He grinned then leaned over and kissed me - in front of about twenty people. "Hurry back, babe."

"You know what you just did?" I asked, trying to whisper against the falling rain.

"Why Dale, I think that was a kiss, baby," he grinned then tipped his hat at me. "I know damned well what I just did. Not gonna hide away and pretend I don't feel the way I do."

He turned his horse and headed off toward the deputy's patrol car and the few neighbors that had gathered to form a road-block with their vehicles. I watched him for a few seconds, looking to the surprised faces that'd seen the kiss, daring

them to give me contemptuous looks. A few of them waved and smiled, some of the others still looked shocked, but nothing else. I exhaled with relief as I turned Blaze around and headed off for the pasture.

Would suck to get back and find out that Brandt had kicked everyone-who-was-supposed-to-be-helping's ass just because they got a little flustered and offended at a kiss. I rode out toward the gates and the rain, which had slowed a bit while we'd been saddling up, was now coming down heavily.

I took it easy as I guided Blaze along, not wanting her to slip on the wet, muddy ground and go down. Thirty minutes later I was opening up the gates, tying them back to the main posts. Blaze snorted as I climbed back on and turned her back toward the highway. Lightning flashed and she picked up her pace. An hour after leaving Brandt at the highway, I was riding back up beside him as he barked orders to the guys, telling them exactly what he wanted to do.

Brandt and I really weren't needed, but in cases like this he always wanted to hang around to make sure things got done right. Plus, it looked good on him as the ranch manager when all the other people were watching from the road, too. With a quick nod of his head, he motioned for me to ride along-side him.

We rode along in a comfortable silence, watching as the hands herded the cows through the pasture. Every once in a while a calf would stray and I'd take off to round it up, putting it back in with the herd. The rain slowed as we neared the gates and by the time the cows had all been locked safely into the next pasture, it'd stopped completely.

"I sure could use a shower about now," Brandt grinned.

"I hear ya on that one." I chuckled. "What say we double up and conserve water?"

"Oh, I think we can double up, but I'm not so sure we'll conserve anything."

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It'd taken a lot longer to get everything finished and the horses back in their stalls than we thought it would. Deputy Grant had wanted to do a complete report and we'd just about finished that when Neil, the owner of the ranch, pulled up. After all of the reports and paperwork, Neil wanted to stick around

and talk. Poor Brandt, I could see him getting more and more frustrated as the minutes ticked by. We'd have been stuck there forever, if Linda, Neil's wife, hadn't called on his cell phone to remind him of the dinner plans they had.

I waited in the truck while Brandt closed up the barn. All of the hands had gone home and I was fairly certain that he'd asked Carl to come in for me in the morning. Shit, I wouldn't know what to do with myself with an entire day off. Brandt opened the door and climbed into the truck and I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face. Oh yeah, I had a few ideas.

Brandt didn't waste any time when we got back to the house. He opened the front door and walked in, shucking his clothes right in the entry-way, just as I had done earlier in the day. I followed suit and headed for the shower as Brandt threw the clothes into the laundry room. After a quick trip to my bedroom closet, I headed for the bathroom. I was bent over, adjusting the water temperature, when he came in and wrapped his arms around me.

"Miss me?"

I chuckled and pushed the shower curtain back so that we could get in. "Always, now get your ass in here. I've got something to show you."

"Yeah?" he asked as he stepped under the spray of water.

I nodded and turned him to face away from me. "Put your hands on the wall and keep 'em there."

He did as I said and I dropped to my knees behind him, spreading his cheeks to reveal that tight, pink little hole. "Damn, that's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I said just before licking a long line up the cleft of his ass.

Brandt groaned and shoved his ass further into my face. He moaned and panted as my tongue worked him, eventually trying to fuck himself on my tongue. I pulled away after a while, moving the shower curtain aside a bit to find the little surprise I had for him.

He looked back over his shoulder. "Damn, Dale, don't stop."

I gave him a playful smack on the ass. "You just turn around and let me worry about what's going on back here." I found the towel that I'd wrapped the object

in and unrolled it. I quickly picked up the small, black butt plug and the bottle of lube. I wanted the plug nice and warm when I put it in his ass.

I squirted lube on my fingers and stood, pressing myself against his back as I began massaging his hole. He pushed his ass toward me after only a few minutes and said, "More, Dale."

"Yeah?" I asked. "You want more?"

He nodded. "Just do it."

I bent down and picked up the plug, satisfied that it was nice and warm, and covered it with lube. When I pressed it to his hole, he jumped. "Shh," I whispered into his ear. "It's ok Brandt, just relax."

He relaxed a little and I kept the pressure steady against him, slowly moving the plug. After some slow, steady moving, the tip of the plug finally slid inside. He gasped and I stopped, holding him and the plug still. "You ok?"

"It just...it burns," he said, sounding uneasy.

I leaned in close enough to tongue at his ear lobe. "It'll pass," I said. "Gonna get a little more intense then you're gonna be just fine. You ready for it?"

He took one of my hands, rubbing it across his chest. "Ready," he mumbled.

I massaged his chest, and then began pulling at his nipples, all the while, licking and kissing along his neck. The plug was over half-way in and was at its widest part when he gasped. "Push down baby, push down right now," I ordered, pulling at his tit and seating the plug.

Brandt's knees buckled and I wrapped both of my arms around his chest, steadying him. He instantly turned to face me and I kissed him tenderly. He let out an unexpected sob and I suddenly second-guessed my little surprise. "I can take it out, Brandt."

"God no!" He shook his head quickly, resting his forehead against mine. "It's just that...it's just a little overwhelming, I guess."



"Too much, too soon?"

He shook his head again. "I want it all Dale, want you so much it hurts."

I hooked my fingers beneath his chin, tilting his head until our eyes met. "It turns me on like fucking crazy to know you've got that in that tight little ass of yours. All I want to do is take it out and slide my cock into you instead, but I want you to wear the plug for a while 'cause it'll help loosen you up. Big difference between my fingers and my cock, baby."

He grinned and slid his hand down my belly, wrapping his hand around my shaft, stroking me lazily. "Yeah, big, big difference."

"Now that, just earned you brownie points."

He winked at me and reached up, grabbing a cloth and the bar of soap. We kissed and explored, washing each other, kissing some more; Brandt went to his knees and sucked me off so expertly that I nearly passed out. The things that man could do with his mouth were just sinful. Eventually the water started to turn cold and we got out, drying each other off. He started to walk out of the bathroom and paused, shifting his hips a bit.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he shrugged. "Just feels like I've got something shoved up my ass."

I grinned. "Play your cards right and you'll have something else shoved up there. But first, I'm hungry for actual food. Grab a pair of shorts and let's eat."

"You want me to sit and eat with this thing...?" he broke off, looking at me incredulously. "That's just mean."

I turned and walked into my bedroom to find some clothes before he could see the grin on my face.

I sat down in my place at the kitchen table and waited in anticipation for him to sit across from me. When he grabbed his bowl of stew and leaned against the kitchen counter instead of sitting down, I glared at him.

"You, sir, are quickly losing your brownie points."

"But I..."

"Sit."

He reluctantly walked over to the table and pulled out the chair. I'd never seen someone sit down so carefully in my life. He grunted as he picked up his spoon to eat. I observed him out of the corner of my eye as I ate, loving the way he shifted and moaned as he struggled to eat.

He finally pushed his bowl away and stood, walking over to the sink. He braced his hands against the counter, sighing. I pushed my bowl away and went over to him, sliding my hands over his hips and pressing my cock against his ass. He whimpered. "I can't take it anymore, Dale."

I licked a long line up his neck toward his ear, savoring the taste of clean sweat against his skin. "Come on then, I'll take care of you."

Brandt turned and grabbed my hand, leading me off toward my bedroom. I stopped him as he tried to climb onto the bed. "Wait," I said, reaching for his shirt. "Want it all off."

He smiled and pulled the shirt over his head then kicked off his shorts. I slid my shirt over my head and his hands instantly went to my nipples. I moaned, sliding my hand along his hard, leaking shaft. I bent my head, burying my face in his warm, hairy chest, breathing in the scent of him. "Damn, Brandt, love the way you feel."

His hands rested on my head and I moved over, tonguing an erect nipple. Fingers tangled in and pulled at my hair and he hissed. "Oh fuck, Dale, that's so good."

Yeah? He hadn't seen anything yet. I sucked the nipple into my mouth, biting, sucking; licking at the erect little nub until he began to whimper. I pushed him down onto the bed and climbed over him, moving to the other nipple. He writhed beneath me as I licked down his belly, exploring every line of hair-covered muscle. I hadn't even touched his cock and he had his hands fisted into the sheets.

I held his cock off to the side and buried my face against his balls. He strained up against me as I let my tongue explore those soft, hairy sacs; moaning and grunting as I rolled them in my mouth, one at a time. I worked my way down a little farther, licking until I came to the plug. I pressed against the end of the plug as I licked around his stretched hole.

"Dale," he panted, "need you so much."

I rolled off to the side of the bed and grabbed the lube, squirting a little into my hand and slicking it down my cock. He moaned as I moved up, kissing him as I grasped at the plug. "Gonna get rid of this now baby," I whispered. "Just a little push."

A few moments later, the plug discarded, I was pushing into him. He locked his eyes with mine as I slowly, gently slid into him. The plug had helped, but he was still so fucking tight. He hissed suddenly and pushed a hand against my belly. "Wait!"

"Just breathe, nice and easy."

He swallowed hard, his breath coming in short ragged bursts. I waited, watching him closely and when his ass relaxed around me, I buried myself completely in him.

His eyes rolled back into his head and he purred. "Ooh..."

Oh. Yeah.

I fucked him slowly and gently, at first, letting him get used to the feeling; letting him explore the new-found sensations. But when he started pushing his ass against me, moving with me instead of just feeling me move, I knew he wanted more. I just prayed like hell that I wouldn't come before he did. The tight heat of his ass and his moans - not to mention that beautiful hard cock of his poking against my belly, slicking it with precome - was enough to set me so close to the edge, it took most of my concentration to keep from coming.

"Oh fuck," he panted. "Don't fucking stop."

"Not gonna stop. Gonna make you come on my cock."

"So close...so fucking close! Harder, Dale, please, just fuck me..."

When he started begging my concentration was blown all to hell. I slammed into him, my cock aching for release, but I needed him to come first. I wrapped my hand around that long, thick cock of his and began jerking him off to the same rhythm I was fucking him to. His eyes went wide and he clutched at my arms, fingers digging into the muscle.

The moans and cries that filled the room as he came will forever be etched into my mind as the most beautiful sounds in the world. His ass tightened like a vice around my cock and he shot, five, six, seven times up over his belly and chest. The sound of his voice, the tight heat of his ass, and the musky scent of his come sent me over the edge and I came harder than I ever had before. This...this was what I'd been looking for, for so many years, but had never been able to find.

Not in the bars, the clubs, or in the infinite number of one-night stands I'd had so many years ago. I'd spent my entire life searching for that one person that would fill the void in my heart; the one person who could make me feel raw and vulnerable, for the one person who'd love me just for me.

Brandt pulled me down into his arms, placing a kiss against my temple before I buried my face into his warm, sweaty chest. I listened to his heart-beat and as it slowed, my eyelids grew heavy.

\*\*\*

We still argued, we still fought, but we never went to bed angry. We had a few sleepless nights in the first few weeks as we tried to work our relationship out, as he came out to the rest of the hands, and as he tried to come to terms with himself. It hadn't been too bad, but it was nerve-racking at times.

His father, who'd disowned him sixteen years before, when Brandt was only twenty, died about three months after Brandt's birthday. Brandt drank himself into a stupor for nearly a week before he broke down and cried, telling me that his father had left him the family ranch...and a shit-load of money. Apparently, even in all his hatred and disowning, his father had never thought to change his will.

Stupid Man.

Three months later, Brandt still hadn't come to a decision about his father's ranch. Our relationship was good, but I always felt like there was something he was holding back, something he either didn't want or was afraid to tell me. If I asked, he'd shrug it off and change the subject. Most always, the subject changed to sex. Good, hot, mind-blowing, totally fulfilling sex.

I awoke with a start, knowing that I was in bed alone. I'd gotten to where I couldn't sleep unless Brandt was in bed beside me. I stretched, sitting up a bit and the first thing I saw was the naked figure standing at the window, staring out into the night. I slid out of bed and walked up behind him, wrapping my arms around his chest.

"Sorry babe," he whispered.

"It's ok," I said, placing a kiss to his shoulder. "Wanna talk about it?"

He sighed heavily, leaning against me. "In bed," he chuckled. "You're covered in goose-bumps."

"It's cold as hell," I said as pulled him back to the bed.

Once we were all snuggled back in, he wrapped his arms around me and cleared his throat. "If I decided to keep the ranch, would you come with me?"

I bit at my lip. I'd considered this place home for so damned long that leaving never seemed like an option. But, I also knew that Brandt was the only reason I'd stayed for as long as I had. "This place wouldn't be home without you. Just how big is this ranch again?"

"A hundred and twenty thousand acres that backs right up to the San Juan National Forest." He sighed. "I just can't force myself to sell it."

"We'd have a reason to build a fire in the fireplace."

He nodded again, sliding a warm hand against my belly. "We'd own it and have hands to work it. We wouldn't have to get up at the crack of dawn to feed, or bale hay, or herd cattle."

I chuckled. "No more horse-back riding while wearing a butt plug."

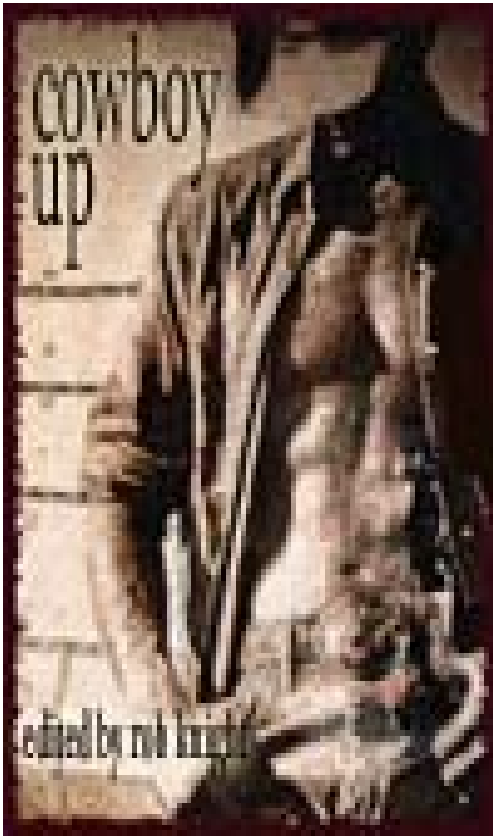
"Oh no, there'd still be that."

I shuddered at the memory of riding with him as we inspected fence-lines, the butt-plug in my ass and a knowing look in his eye. I'd come four times in two miles that day, all while in the saddle. We'd stopped at the little stream that went through the property and he'd fucked me 'til I came a fifth time then licked me clean. Damn, what a day that'd been.

He rolled us over a bit and slid his hand down the inside of my thigh. "Home, for me, is wherever you are. If you want to stay here, we'll stay here."

I shook my head, knowing that he wouldn't ask if it was something he didn't really want. And actually, a little change of scenery didn't sound half bad. "As long as I've got you, everything else will fall into place. Just promise to keep me warm on those cold nights."

"Oh yeah," he whispered, nuzzling into my neck. "I can promise you that."



## The Gaucho Code

### By Julia Talbot

From The Anthology *Cowboy Up*  
Published By Torquere Press

#### Prologue

The second time Peter Schrader felt a noose around his neck, he figured maybe it was his fate to die by hanging.

He'd've thought he'd get the firing squad here. That's what you read in the penny dreadfuls anyway, that you got yourself shot in South America, not strung up. But no, this was a hanging, good and proper.

The rough nap of the rope already had him itching, raw and prickly and probably red.

Sweat ran from his hairline, down into his eyes, and Pete blinked it away, thinking how it was good it was hot. Even he couldn't tell if he was crying. He didn't want to die. A soft snort escaped him as the British missionary fella read the twenty-third Psalm. They called that irony, he supposed.

When he'd left Texas with a bullet between two of his ribs he hadn't cared whether he lived or died. When his brother Carl had come down with the shaking fever in Mexico and passed on so fast they didn't even have time to say a prayer or two, he hadn't cared.

Damn Jorge anyway, for making him care.

Blinking, Pete looked at his judge and executioner.

The stone cold old bastard stared right back, eyes burning like the lake of fire that surely awaited a man like Pete.

And he knew that whether he wanted to or not, he would die here today, dancing at the end of a rope.

The Pampas of Argentina, 1881

Jorge got a miserly fire going, the wind whipping across his back like a lash. Most days he loved what he did. Some nights, though. Oh, some nights he thought he was loco for doing what amounted to rounding up other men's cattle and selling them back. He knew he was a good gaucho. He could have lived at one of the big haciendas, maybe even been a jefe.

The life he led suited him too well to do that, though. No one expected a gaucho to get married. They all had mujeres, yes, but only to have children to carry on their work. So no one questioned Jorge's lack of a wife, not like they had in the village where he was born, the village he had left in shame when he was fourteen years old, caught with his hand around his prick as he watched the other boys bathe.

The fire finally burned hot enough to heat his water, and Jorge carefully lifted his little pot to sit on the flame. A cramp in his hand made him wince, and he cursed the stubborn vaca that had dislocated his thumb. Stupid, that was what he had been, and now it threatened to come back to haunt him as he almost spilled what was left of his Yerba Mate into the fire.

The herb fell into the traditional gourd cup instead, and Jorge nodded to the wind. "Si, si. I need to go to town. I will leave tomorrow. I promise."



Too bad the wind never answered back.

\*\*\*

Dead. That's what the village looked like at this time of night, the little windows of the little houses looking like the sunken eyes of old men. Pete's mare had collapsed maybe a mile back, and he'd not even had a bullet to use on her. No, he'd had to slit her throat as she kicked and squealed and finally calmed, just looking at him with those velvet eyes as they glazed over.

Goddamnit all, anyway.

Everything in the world was dead.

He soon would be too, if he didn't get some water and a place to wait out this fever. Too damned bad it wasn't the same fever Carl'd come down with. He knew it wasn't because he was still walking, still moving, even if his hand did look like a skeleton's before his eyes. His feet continued to move.

No, this was the fever of a man who had been through too much. The damned grasslands here just went on and on, and while water was plentiful in some places, it was putrid in others, and as the fever'd gotten worse, Pete had gotten confused, just not able to follow the animal trails to the fresh stuff.

He'd found the village by the smell of their fires, wafting to him on the breeze. To begin with he'd thought maybe he was on the way to Hell, the gates open and waiting for him, brimstone just going to town on the other side. Then he'd heard the singing, sweet and fine, the sound of voices raised in joy, and he'd known no Hell could have a sound like that.

So Pete had waited until dark fell, then stumbled into the very outskirts of the little town. Wasn't much to it, just a handful of houses with a little central square. Quaint, his momma would have called it. Lord, he missed his momma.

The night opened up, one of the dead houses growling at him as the door opened and bright firelight spilled out. Caught right in the glare, Pete swayed, his knees just giving out as he tumbled right to the ground like his mare had a few hours before. A high-pitched laugh escaped him. Unlike Masha, he hadn't fallen on anyone and nearly snapped their leg in two.

Soft words that sounded like curses fell around him, and Pete moved again, only this time he figured he was dead, because he was being carried just like someone would carry a pine box.

Surely he had to be dead.

Just like everything else.

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"Do you think he is going to live?"

Jorge looked at his mother, smiling at her curious expression. The villagers called her La Italiana Extraña, and even he found her ways odd sometimes. Perhaps it was the blood of her English mother.

Her Italian passions extended only to his father, and to cooking.

"I think he is very sick."

The gringo looked sunken, shriveled. He could be no older than Jorge, but a heavy blonde beard covered the man from collarbones to hollow cheekbones, and his hair was a lank, dull yellow. Jorge had nearly tripped over his inert form as he left his mother's home, under the cover of dark as always, so as not to cause trouble.

They both pondered the man, neither of them at all sure what in the name of God they should do.

"Does he have money?"

"Mama!"

"Well, if we must bury him he might as well pay for it."

"He may not be dying." The man might yet live, and Jorge could not say why, but it was important to him that he did. "Agua, mama."

Grumbling, she brought him water, and Jorge sponged the fever sweat from the gringo's forehead, hoping the man would wake soon and tell his story.

It was one Jorge wanted to hear.

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The smell of a hearty soup woke Pete, his nose twitching and his mouth watering. God, that smelled good. Nothing like his momma's chicken soup, mind, but good. Beefy. Beef. Argentina.

Pete tried to sit up, tried to and failed, his arms just not wanting to hold his weight. He groaned, and like magic a pretty lady appeared, her face lined but handsome, graying black hair pulled back with a red flower.

"You are feeling better, hmm?"

Well. He must be dreaming. Because he spoke enough Spanish to get by, and that wasn't it. In fact, the lady had an accent like that British writer fella who'd wanted to do a story on him and Carl once.

Carl had gut shot the man for stealing his girl.

"I." Pete stopped. Cleared his throat. "Are you a missionary?"

She laughed, and he'd heard of laughs that tinkled like a waterfall, but had never met anyone that sounded that way. She was like one of them romantic poems come to life.

"No, I am not. Are you?"

Him? Lord. He laughed too, then set to coughing as it made his chest hurt. "No, ma'am. I'm a bank robber and a horse thief."

Her brow drew up for a minute, then she laughed again, patting his shoulder. "Of course you are. I made you stew. If you can keep that down I will make you gnocchi."

What in Hell gnocchi was he didn't know, and he didn't think he wanted to. Stew sounded good, though. Pete just nodded.

"Yes, ma'am."

She bustled off, her black skirt twitching like his momma's mourning taffeta petticoat always had, and just as soon as she was out of sight, someone else drifted in. A man. Dark eyes. Hell, almost black. Curly black hair, well-shaped mouth, and a glint that would make a priest run for cover.

He had to ask. "Are you the Devil?"

The lashes around those dark eyes were insanely long. He knew 'cause they blinked about a thousand times.

"No. I am Jorge."

"Jorge. Pleased to meet you, Jorge."

Jorge didn't sound English. In fact, his English was rough as a cob.

"It is good to meet you, as well. Now that you are awake."

"How long was I out?" He could barely recall collapsing, could hardly remember his... Oh. His mare. Damn. "My horse died."

"I know. She was found yesterday. You have been sick for four days."

Four. Well, damn. No wonder he was weak as a kitten. "Did your wife say something about stew?"

"I did." She was back with a bowl made out of a gourd and a wooden spoon. "And I am not his wife. I am his mama. Now eat."

He ate. Halfway through the bowl he was just exhausted, and he slept. Those oddly glinting eyes followed him right down into his dreams, and he saw Jorge in them. They were the worst kind of fever imaginings, where Jorge did devilish things, leading him right along to the path of temptation, making him want the impossible.

God help him if the man ever offered him an apple.

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"Are you sure you are well enough to go?"

Jorge studied the gringo as he put his boots on, noting the tremor in his hands, the pallor of his face. He still looked quite ill, even if the fever had gone. Still, he seemed determined to leave.

"Sure enough that I've overstayed my welcome with your momma, Jorge. I do appreciate it, though."

He nodded. "She is used to living alone." So was Jorge, but some urge made him ask, "Would you like to ride out with me? I could use help with the cattle."

Pete's eyes were blue as the summer sky above the pampas. Now they went wide and surprised.

"I don't have a horse. And I ain't no drover. I'd probably hinder more than I'd help."

"Oh. Well, it would not be hard to get you a horse. I can trade some skins..."

How odd, his trying to get this gringo to stay. Maybe... Maybe it was because Pete did not know him.

"I. I ain't much good."

"You have not been. Now is your chance to be different."

His chance, too. To be something to someone that did not know his past, only his future. Perhaps to be friends.



"Then I'll go." One square, scarred hand thrust out at him, and Jorge took it, letting Pete pump his arm up and down. "And be grateful. Gracias, Jorge."

"De nada."

It took a matter of a half hour for his mama to trade some of his Geoffrey's cat and pampas deer skins for a new pony for Pete, and he would swear mama picked out the most fractious animal possible. It rolled its eyes and put its ears back, but Pete just thumped it on its soft nose and spoke to it softly, and the horse quieted right down.

"You have a way with them."

Surprise flashed on Pete's face again, and the horse shied.

"Nah. I just understand 'em, I guess. I been fenced in, too."

"Well, there are no fences where we go." Checking his pack one last time, Jorge went to the door of his mama's home. "Tell Papa I missed seeing him this time."

"I will, of course. Be careful, carito."

"Si."

They kissed on both cheeks and then he and Pete were off, the open grassland stretching out in front of him pulling at his heart, and he grinned, pulling his hat down. He was a gaucho. This was his home.

And for the first time in his adult life, he had someone to show it to.

\*\*\*

The grass went on and on. Oh, it wasn't dry, not like some places in Texas and Kansas and all. No, there were reeds and stuff, and mesquite and the air held a sticky wetness that reminded him of his one trip back East, when his momma had tried to run off with him and Carl, tried to get them back to civilization, as she called it.

Pete could still remember the smell of smoke coming from the train engine, and how after a day and a half everything they owned had been covered with a fine layer of black soot. The side-to-side of the train and the clickety-clackety of the wheels had been soothing, though, and his momma had sung to them, hymns and lullabies and bawdy saloon girl ditties that she wouldn't have known but for his pa.

The light plop of the horses' hooves on the prairie lulled him just the same, made his head nod and bob like a newborn's. So tired. He was still so weak, so washed out by that damned fever. He didn't even notice he was sliding right out of the saddle until Jorge caught him by the arm, near jerking it out of the socket.

"We should stop. Make camp."

Pete squinted at the sun. Hell, it couldn't be later than three. "Don't want to slow you down."

"You will slow me down more if your collapse, gringo."

A flush crawled up his cheeks at the derogatory name, but Jorge grinned at him, those laughing-devil eyes waiting for his reaction, and Pete only nodded.

"All right then, beaner. So be it."

"Beaner?"

"Well, hell. I keep forgettin' you ain't Mexican." In fact, Jorge's momma had said she was Italian. And her momma had been from England, so the man was probably as much gringo as he was.

"No, I am not. Now, how about that stand of scrub over there?"

The man was good, Pete had to give him that. Those little stubby bushes all twisted the same way, right away from them, leaning like they hung over water.

Pete would bet there was a stream on the other side, and that was what decided him. Well, that and the fact that his thighs shook like a willow in a thunderstorm.

"All righty then. Let's make camp."

Not a word of I told you so came; Jorge just turned his sturdy gelding toward their agreed campsite, heading off at a slow walk. The man had the air of someone who'd gotten used to his own company, and could live in his own skin.

Damned if it wasn't at once comforting and a little bothersome.

Camp consisted of hobbling the horses and building a little fire by digging out all the grass in a small area and making a pit.

"It keeps the brush fires away," Jorge explained, and he guessed that was how you did it when you didn't have rocks to make a circle. They laid their bedrolls out and Pete sat, trying not to nod off in the late afternoon sun. Jorge though? He didn't even try, just pulled his poncho around his shoulders and yanked his hat down and started snoring.

Maybe he'd have a wee siesta himself.

Wasn't like he had anything else to do.

\*\*\*

The wind talked to him. It made him laugh, because the wind never talked back but tonight it did. Jorge turned on his side, his poncho sliding up around his neck, and listened to what it had to tell him.

"Carl. No. Come on. Don't you die. Carl!"

Ah. The gringo. Pete. The light came just bright enough in the time before morning to see the outline of Pete's face, lips moving as he spoke to some phantom of his past. Rolling up, Jorge padded over, walking on his toes, leaning to shake Pete's shoulder.

Pete sat up so fast that Jorge could not move, and their foreheads cracked together, scaring the birds nesting in the mesquite above them.

"Ow! Jesus, Carl! What in blue blazes are you doin'?"

"Who is Carl?" He meant to say 'are you all right' or 'I am sorry'. Instead he sat back on his heels, rubbing his abused skin, waiting far more eagerly than he should for the answer.

"My brother. He's dead."

His teeth had left a cut on Pete's face, the blood seeping out, like melted chocolate and chile in the pre-dawn. Without thinking, he rubbed it away, his thumb pressing just below Pete's cheekbone, lingering.

"I am sorry." There. Now he'd said it.

"Me too." Eyes closing, Pete turned away, rolling to his other side, back stiff and straight. Stifling a sigh, Jorge got up and went to start the fire up again. He never banked it. Not on the pampas. He needed his little ritual, his Yerba Mate. Something to distract him from the man who would not talk.

Eventually, Pete sat up, his woolen serape scraping across the ground, the sound rubbing Jorge's nerves.

"Maybe I ought to just go."

He watched his hands pause in the act of measuring out tea, the bombilla, the little metal tube with its screen on one end falling with a tiny ping on his foot. "Perhaps. If you dislike me so."

"Hell, Jorge. I don't know you well enough to know if I like you or not. But I ain't no good for you, waking you up and cracking your skull. And you. Well, I think you're not used to company."

"I will not trouble you, you know." How Pete knew, Jorge could not tell, but he did. Jorge heard it in his voice, in the cautious timbre. Maybe that small touch

had carried in it all of his longing, shown Pete the need of a lifetime of being alone with desires no man should have, "I swear it."

"I know that, ya fool." Pete came over and squatted next to him, looking comically sour, spitting into the fire. "But I."

"No. If that does not worry you, we will not talk anymore about you going." Why, when Pete would not talk about what Jorge wanted to, did he speak at length about silly things like how bad he was?

"All right."

They just sat there for the longest time, the water boiling away, until Jorge shook himself and poured water on the herbs, stirring gently. "If you will get your cup, I will make you some."

"Sure."

Again, Jorge measured and poured and stirred, the movement good and familiar. Soothing.

"He died in Mexico. Of the fever. Not like I had. Something that made him shake and scream, turned his skin like jaundice."

Fever knew no boundaries. That much Jorge knew. It could take you in a heartbeat, or leave you lingering for days, weeks. Or it could pass like a thunderstorm, spending its fury in a matter of one day.

"He was your only family?"

"Yeah. My momma died some years back, and my daddy, well, I hope that sorry bastard is burning in the pit."

Jorge crossed himself. His own father was a typical gaucho. Coming and going as he pleased, staying only long enough with his common law wife to eat and sleep, and to take a little pleasure. His pride that Jorge followed in his boots was darkened by Jorge's leanings, but since they saw each other rarely, it never came up.

Still, he could not imagine wishing his papa to Hell.

"He was a bad man?"

Pete nodded, sipped the mate. And made a face. "What is this?"

"Tea. From a local herb. I have dried meat. Would you like some?"

"Yeah, please."



They did not talk again for some time, but Jorge's heart felt lighter in his chest. Because he had a feeling that now that the stream trickled, the flood would soon come.

\*\*\*

The work he did over the next few days left Pete's hands raw. Jorge had tried to show him how to use the boleadora, a set of stones bound in braided leather, used to catch the cows by tangling around their feet when Jorge threw them. He hadn't mastered that, had started using a length of rope instead, making a loop out of it and tossing it at horns.

Every time he made the damned loop his neck throbbed. Goddamn, he hated rope.

The cows weren't so bad, though, and Jorge fascinated him.

Pete figured he ought to be worried. Somehow he'd fallen to the idea that Jorge wasn't natural, and Jorge himself had confirmed it, just like that. Wasn't like Pete hadn't leaned that way himself when the trail got long and the saloon girls ugly, but he'd never really acted on it, and now he wondered... Well, he just wondered.

"We will kill one tomorrow night. There is a good camp not quite a day's ride."

"Kill one?"

They had a herd of strays, ten or twenty head, and were moving them toward some big estate Jorge'd told him about, where the patron would pay them for finding them. Apparently Jorge had fought with this guy during some War of the Desert something or other, and knew he would be fair.

According to Jorge they'd get a bath out of it, too. With real soap.

That was worth any number of nicks and cuts on his hands.

"Asada. We will cook what we can carry over the fire. It takes a few days, but it will hold us until we get to Eduardo's."

"And he won't mind us slaughtering his cash on the hoof?"

"It is part of the pay. It is expected."

"Oh." Well, then. The cows lowed and his horse sidestepped, almost sending him ass over teakettle. Lord. He soothed, petting her neck. "Hush now, girl. Hush."

"You will like it. I promise." He got a glimpse of come get me eyes before Jorge was off, chasing down a lagger, spurring back toward the herd. Lord, that man

could ride. He kicked his own nag into a trot, heading off to do the work he was becoming accustomed to.

Hell, his ass didn't even hurt anymore.

\*\*\*

Unlike most wealthy landowners, Eduardo Castillo did not dislike guachos. Too many of the patrons treated Jorge like a criminal, and their ladies would lift their skirts as they passed him, like he might infect them with his filth. Eduardo, though, had fought with him under Roca in the war only two years before, and he supported many of his former soldiers by generously rewarding them for rounding up his cattle.

"So. This gringo, Jorge. Is he your lover?"

Nearly choking on his empanada, Jorge blinked at Eduardo, thankful that Pete could not hear from where he sat on the other side of the room.

"No. Why?"

"You look at him like he is. He has been sick?"

"Yes." The sun and work had done wonders for Pete's skin, and his hair had taken on a golden gloss, but his cheeks and ribs still stood out sharply, and Eduardo was nothing if not observant. "A fever. My mama took him in to recover."

"And you gave him work."

He tried for a negligent shrug. "He had nowhere else to go."

"He watches you as well, you know."

"Si. Like a wary dog. He is not for me, Eduardo. I know this. But if I can help him..." He didn't understand it, but there it was. "I need to help him."

"Mi amigo. I am sorry you are so alone." Eduardo's warm hand closed over his, and Jorge blinked again, this time to keep the wetness away that tried to rise in his eyes. His good friend understood more than he had ever wanted anyone to.

"So am I. Tell me, how is Maria?"

Deflected by talk of his daughter, Eduardo caught him up on everything, finally winding down as Jorge began to nod off.

"Go, amigo. Sleep."

"I would rather have the bath you promised me, Eduardo."

Nodding, smiling, Eduardo clapped him on the back. "I will have water heated for you and your friend. Tomorrow we will have asada. Jose will cook in the parilla, yes?"

Traditional barbeque sounded wonderful, not at all like the meat he and Pete had cooked out on the pampas.

"Si. Gracias, Eduardo. Good night."

Pete followed him to the guest house, not the bunk house for a compatriot, Eduardo had said, and already the big copper tub sat in the middle of the floor, near the fire. Two buckets of steaming water sat next to the hearth, and there would be more where that came from soon.

"Would you like to bathe first?"

Giving him a sideways kind of look, Pete nodded and worked the buttons on his homespun shirt. "It sure will feel fine to get clean."

Oh. Jorge swallowed as Pete's chest came bare, for even though Pete was too thin. Well. He turned his back, slowly, so Pete might not think the worst. Even though he should.

"Yes. It will."

His boots caused him a struggle, the baggy bombachas less of one, even though his prick had risen hard and proud. The water sloshed in the tub, and Jorge imagined it lapping at Pete's calves, covering the pale parts of Pete's body as he sank down in.

It would be unseemly to look.

"You said there'd be soap, Jorge. I ain't seeing it."

"No? It must be there somewhere."

"Well I don't want to be gettin' water everywhere."

"Of course."

The rough piece of toweling cloth he wrapped around his waist helped not at all, so Jorge put his thumb and forefinger together and thumped himself brutally, making his prick go down before turning to Pete to find the soap.

His imaginings did not do Pete justice. He had seen the bare chest, the ridged belly, but now he saw the long legs, thin but muscled, the quiescent cock lying on Pete's thigh under the water. His breath came fast. All of his thumping would do no good if he did not hurry and find that blessed soap.

There. A small pot of the soap Maria -- Eduardo's aunt, not his daughter -- made. They would smell like women, but it was good to the skin. Not like the harsh tallow soap his mama made.

"Here."

Thrusting the soap pot at Pete, Jorge turned his back again, only to be stopped by Pete's plaintive, "You ain't gonna wash my back? Carl used to all the time."

"You are not my hermano, Pete. I do not feel... brotherly to you."

"Well, Hell, Jorge. You been real obvious about that."

His cheeks went hot, and his ears. "I have said I would not trouble you."

"Well, maybe you ought to."

No, he could not have heard. "What?"

"Get your ass over here, Jorge. This tub is big enough for the two of us."

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What the Hell he was thinking Pete didn't know. Maybe he wasn't thinking. Jorge. Well, Jorge needed him, and that was about the most attractive thing the man could do right about then. That wasn't all there was, though, if he was honest.

There was also the sight of Jorge's tight brown ass, muscled and round, a dimple in one cheek.

There'd been a Mexican girl that Carl had taken up with just outside of Mesilla. She'd had a bottom like that, boyish and firm, not lush and white like Pete was used to, and Carl said it drove him crazy, just so tight you could bounce a half dollar off it.

Pete wanted to see of Jorge's was that tight.

Jorge moved slow, looked at him from beneath lowered brows. "Do not play with me, Peter. Please. I. I would be nothing more than I am if you do not mean it."



Did he? He liked Jorge. He'd been thinking on it ever since the night he'd known. Well. Yeah.

"I'm sure."

A long look came his way, Jorge quiet, considering. Then Jorge nodded and slipped into the tub, pulling the rough cloth away from his waist as he sank into the water.

Pete almost ran. Jorge's prick stood up hard and red, thick dark hair hiding the base. He'd not seen another man hard except Carl, and then it wasn't like this. Then it was something to tease about, to find a girl for Carl to stick it in.

This man was hard over him.

Instead of hightailing it out, though, he grabbed the soap and got it open, watching it foam between his palms like it was the second coming. That way he didn't have to look at, well, that.

"Would you still like me to wash your back?"

He jumped, dropping the little pot with a splash. Lord, he didn't want to rummage around down there. He just didn't. Pete looked up, met those dark eyes.

"Yeah. I, I lost the soap."

"I will find it."

Jorge found the soap. He found a lot more, too, his hand closing right around Pete's cock like it had been invited. Pete stared, eyes wide, mouth falling open. His cock knew what to do, though, rising right up, the water its own kind of touch around him, just like. Fuck, just like a woman.

"Have you ever?"

"You mean with a man?" Jorge asked. When Pete nodded, Jorge nodded back, the movement jerky and stiff, not a bit like the stroke of Jorge's fingers on his cock. "There was a man. A soldier. I had thought about it, dreamed about it before. But this man showed me."

"Was it Eduardo?"

That made Jorge really look at him, just as surprised as he'd been when those rough fingers pulled at him.

"Eduardo? No. He loves his wife. His daughters. It was. He is dead. Killed by Indians."

Well, Hell. Maybe Jorge knew. Knew what it was to miss someone so you were empty inside. Pete gave up on the thinking and just felt, pushing into Jorge's palm, reaching out tentatively to touch Jorge's chest.

"I'm sorry, Jorge," he said, his palm flattening over Jorge's heart. It beat wildly, just like his did, and Pete sighed, leaning right close, pressing his mouth to Jorge's in a kiss.

Pete liked kissing. He'd always loved the play of lips over his, the warmth of it. The closeness. He'd not kissed too many folks, mind, because the kind of girls he had time for weren't much on it.

Jorge kissed different, like he meant it, maybe. They moved, water sloshing around their thighs, and the sudden change of pressure in Jorge's touch made him groan. The sound rang through the room, echoing, and Pete blinked. He'd never heard anything or anyone sound so needy in his life, and that was him doing it.

Felling brave as hell, Pete moved his hand on down Jorge's chest and belly, right down beneath the water until he touched Jorge the way the man held him. Their eyes met, Jorge's stunned and wondering. Did he look like that? Lord.

Maybe he did, because the feel of Jorge's thumb scraping over the head of his cock made him grunt, made the water move around them as he arched up. He rose up on his knees, pretty well mounting Jorge like a fractious horse, and Jorge took Pete right into his arms, kissing him, letting Pete rub up on him like he needed it just as bad.

The feeling rose up Pete's spine, like a thunderstorm in the desert brought the hair up on the back of his neck, and before he could even blink or say Jorge's name he shot, his whole body jerking, a wild cry coming from deep in his chest.

Jorge could blink, and he did, long eyelashes falling then rising, and Jorge made not a sound as he arrived, just the swishswash of his hips through the water as his cock pushed into Pete's fist, pumping out Jorge's seed.

They just stared at each other for the longest while before moving without even talking on it, rinsing off and stepping out of the tub. Pete was terrible afraid Jorge would walk right out, go on up to the big house and leave him be. But Jorge didn't leave him. Instead Jorge crawled right into bed, looking at him, just waiting.

And Pete went right on over and joined him there.

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The light came bright into the bunkhouse as the door opened and a small, white blur came running in, jumping right on him.

"Jorge!"

It was Selena, Eduardo's youngest daughter, laughing her spring rain laugh as she bounced upon the bed. He did not remember Pete until the man himself sat up, reaching for a firearm that was not there, eyes wild. Nude as the sheet slid away.

"Selena!" Jorge kissed her forehead before setting her back down on the floor. "Go outside and wait for me like a good sobrina, and I will give you regalos."

He pushed her, and Selena ran out, giggling all the while. Jorge looked at Pete, his cheeks still hot as could be.

"She is young, and she knows I have gifts."

"You call her niece? You and Eduardo family?"

"Not by blood, no."

How he wanted to kiss that mouth, still slightly swollen from their night, but he did not, knowing Selena would not be put off for long. Instead he rolled out of the bed and went to look for his clothing, trying not to let his cock rise as Pete watched him.

"Por favor, Peter. Your clothes. The other children will be here... we have a barbeque to go to."

"Sure. Sure, Jorge." Moving slowly, Pete rose and dressed, and Jorge could not stand to see the sadness that hovered about Pete's eyes, had to try to ease it by going and giving a kiss, one of peace.

"Later, Pete. Later we talk."

"Talk."

"Si. And... and perhaps other things."

The other things made him blush, and Pete too, and soon enough they had dressed and gone outside.

The children came, demanding gifts, and he gave them each a trinket he had carried in his bag. Animals carved of wood, jewelry made of bits of bone and pretty stones. For Maria he had a pair of combs he had made by hand.

Pete watched him the whole time, the look warm instead of wary. He found himself smiling more, talking more, not retreating like he would when faced with Eduardo's family and friends.

"Something happened."

He started, looking up at Eduardo, who stood beside him, holding a plate. "What do you mean?"

"Between you. Last night. Serena told me how you shared the bed."

His cheeks burned, but he did not look away in shame. He would not. "I am sorry she saw. But yes, something good happened."

"I hope you find happiness, my friend." Eduardo touched his shoulder, eyes serious.

Jorge nodded. "So do I, amigo. So do I."

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The open pampas came as a big old relief to Pete. He liked Eduardo and all, but it was time to get away, just be him and Jorge again, riding down strays and sitting in front of the fire.

Jorge felt like home in a way even Carl never had, and it scared him spitless.

Someone, somewhere, was breathing down his neck. Probably someone he thought should've stopped looking by now. He could feel it like the rope Carl'd saved it from that time in La Junta, when he'd got caught after they'd robbed the

tiny bank, a piece of lead in his leg. They'd had him strung up right enough, noose on his neck, his feet on a stool, and Carl and the boys had rode into town, guns blazing, cutting the rope right in two and taking him off.

But not before he'd lost his balance and hung there for endless seconds, waiting to choke to death.

"Are you well, Pete? The fever has not returned, has it?"

"Huh? No." Well, he guessed he had shivered like it might be, his hand rubbing his throat. "Just remembering. And I got a bad feeling, Jorge. Like... I dunno. Like somethin's coming."

Jorge got up from poking the fire and came to squat next to him, elbows on his knees. "Is this because of me?"

"No! I'm just sayin' I feel like." Hell, like his past was catching up. "C'mere and kiss me, Jorge."

Something flashed in Jorge's sloe eyes, something he just couldn't read, but he got no argument, just need and heat as Jorge pushed right up against him and kissed him, lips hard on his. Pete gave up on thinking, just wrapping his arms around Jorge to hold him close, happy as a pig in shit.

They moved as one to their bedrolls, which they'd laid out together earlier without even talking on it. Their clothes just seemed to melt away, and Jorge was



on top of him before he knew it, knees on either side of his thighs as Jorge bent to kiss his skin.

Jesus that felt good, his cock pushing up against Jorge's balls, his ass. Pete had never even thought on such things, hadn't even known a man could...

"Jorge?"

Jorge looked up at him, lips swollen and eyes cloudy. "Mmm?"

"Can I. Well. I want to. Lord. Is there a way we can? Like a man and a woman?"

Understanding dawned on Jorge's face, and his cheeks flushed a deep red, Jorge's tongue coming out to lick at those soft, soft lips.

"I think. Yes. If we prepare properly."

"Show me how?"

"I need your wetness." Jorge put two fingers up to Pete's lips, rubbing against them until he opened, then pushed into his mouth.

He got it. It took a moment, but Pete got it. He sucked and licked, getting Jorge's fingers good and wet, the salt and sweet of Jorge's skin making his mouth water. He closed his eyes and drew on Jorge's fingers like it was, well. Somethin' else, and that was something he'd not ever thought on either, wasn't it?

Moaning, Jorge pulled his fingers free and reached around and just. Oh, God above. Heaven help him, Pete just watched Jorge's face, watched his arm muscles move, and finally looked at Jorge's prick, all red and quivering. Touching it with one finger made Jorge jump.

"Are you ready, Pete? Shall I try?"

"Yeah. Yeah, Jorge."

Jorge spit into his palm and rubbed it over Pete's cock, making Pete gasp and jerk. Then he rose up and pressed the head of Pete's prick against his secret place, and damned if it didn't slide in a little, Jorge's body opening for him.

It was like nothing else, ever.

Tight, hot, almost too hot, Jorge closed around him, sliding down with him inside. His eyes rolled in his head, his hands reaching blindly for Jorge's skin, needing to feel it under his fingertips. The little hairs on Jorge's arms caught on his rough hands, the softer hair underneath feeling silky. His thumbs brushed Jorge's nipples, and the moans he got for that made Pete go back for more.

"Pete."

Hoarse, the accent heavier than Pete had ever heard, Jorge's voice spurred him on, arching his back and tingling in his balls. He nodded, instinctively reaching for Jorge's cock again, wanting the man to feel like he did, like he might just die right soon, and die happy. Jorge squeezed down on him and Pete cried out, hips rolling.

They moved together for the longest and shortest minutes of Pete's life, until finally Jorge grunted, eyes going wide, and spent right into Pete's hand, wet and hot. His own sight went cloudy and Pete shot inside Jorge's body, unable to even make a sound, his whole body locking up.

He had no idea how long he lay there, just breathing Jorge in, but Jorge was the one to move them finally, tucking him under the blanket and kissing his cheek.

"Goodnight, Pete."

Pete stroked Jorge's back, staring up at the stars that looked so damned bright they hurt. "Night, Jorge. See you in the morning."

He'd never looked forward more to anything in his life.

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They had been on the pampas again for a fortnight when Jorge awoke one morning to find Eduardo's head gaucho Jose squatting next to his bedroll, sitting easily on his heels and smoking a cheroot. The sight surprised him so that he started violently, his elbow digging into Pete's barriga, pushing Pete's breath out in a whoosh.

"Jesus Christ, Jorge. Why're you hittin' me in the breadbasket?" Pete sat up, looking about wildly, and Jorge put a hand out to hold him back.

"¿Què es, Jose?"

Jose looked grave. "Lo siento, amigo. I do not want to be here, doing this. But I must ask for you and the gringo to return to the hacienda."

"What? Why?"

Jose would not quite meet his eyes, and it took him some time to realize it was because the sun shone brightly on his naked skin, and that Pete was also nude. His face went hot, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Let me dress, Jose. And we will talk."

"No. No tenemos el tiempo para hablar. No time. We must go. The men the gringo sent after this one. They wait over the next rise. They gave Eduardo that much, at least."

"They who?" He did not, could not understand it. Jorge reached for his bombachas, putting the pants on, then his boots. Pete too struggled into his clothing. And was silent. Jorge looked at him, closing Jose out by speaking English.

"Who is chasing you, Pete?"

"I told you I wasn't no good, Jorge. I'm sorry. I'll go with them. You'd best stay out here and do your work. Don't even think on it."

"No! Whatever it is I will come with you."

Pete gave him a long look before spitting into the grass. "They're gonna hang me, Jorge. You want to see that?"

"Hang you!" His heart began to race, and he glanced at Jose, who looked on, stoic and silent. "We could run."

"They'd catch up. I reckon if old man Carter is here he's got a regular posse. And I can't imagine no one else following me to Argentina. So maybe ten, twenty men."

"What do they want of you?"

Pete just shook his head, lips twisting. "You can't even ask me what I did. God, you're a sap, Jorge."

"No. You did not do it, whatever it is. You are a better man than you think, Pete." He knew it. He had to believe it.

Stumbling to his feet, Pete went to round up their hobbled ponies, and Jorge began to break down camp, avoiding Jose's eyes. He could not take it in. Pete could not have done something worth hanging a man for. Whatever he had been, he had not been bad to the soul. Jorge knew it.

"It was Carl." Low and strained, Pete's words had him looking up, had his eyes resting on Pete's bent head as he saddled his always fractious mount. "He had a temper, Jorge. Always so bad. He killed the man's son. Over a girl. He was always gut shooting someone or stabbing someone or... Jesus, Jorge."

"Then we will tell this Carter that you did not do it! He will let you go."

"No he won't." Turning, Pete gestured helplessly, tear tracks plain on his cheeks. "Carl told him. Before he died. Carl told him I did it, Jorge."

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So Pete sat there on the pony Jorge'd given him with that damned noose around his neck, just knowing there was no out this time. Carter was there, with his cane and his fancy boiled wool bowler hat, tapping the ground impatiently.

Pete still remembered when Carl had come back to him, telling him they had to leave town, that Abel was dead and old man Carter knew he'd done it. Him. Pete, who'd never even been close enough to the rich man's son to spit on his shoes.

"I went to the big house," Carl'd said. "I done told him it was you, Pete."

He'd cleaned Carl's clock that night, beating him within an inch of his life, for the first time unwilling to take on Carl's guilt. The very first time in his life. "You got to tell him the truth, Carl. I'm not taking this. Not for you."

"Didn't I save your neck in La Junta?" Carl asked. "I can do it again."

And rather than fight anymore they'd packed up quiet and left town.

It was only after Carter's posse caught up with them four times that they'd run down to Mexico.

Looked like his running days were over. Had he damned Jorge already? Because that was the one thing Pete would be sorry to leave behind. He looked out at the small crowd of gauchos and lawmen and hired henchmen, searching for that dear face.

There was Eduardo. And Carter's posse, stone-faced and waiting. Carter's little girl stood there too, all blonde curls and white ruffles, and it near let the bile that rose in this throat out as the preacher man finished up. He burned.

Oh. There was Jorge, looking fresh as a daisy in a stark white shirt and black worsted trousers. Looking like a gentleman, with his hair combed back behind his ears. Pete tried to burn that image in his mind to take with him to Hell.

"Well? Come along then." Carter's cultured voice snapped out, making him flinch, but the men looked to Eduardo, who leaned down to listen to Jorge, a frown on his face.

God, Pete wished they would just get it over with.

Eduardo nodded, and the rope creaked as the man behind his horse got ready to smack, but then Eduardo's voice rang out.

"¡Pare!"

The horse snorted and jerked, and Pete almost prayed as the rope pulled him back and up, but he settled soon enough, and sure enough, the whole damned proceeding stopped.



Carter turned on Eduardo. "What do you think you are doing, sir?"

Eduardo drew himself up and spoke in heavily accented English. "My man, Jorge. He says this man did not do it. He says this man's hermano did it."

Now he knew those were tears. Goddamn if Jorge wasn't laying it all on the line for him. Carl'd never done that, not without a gun in his hand.

"I talked to mister Schrader's brother the night of the murder. He said this brother did the deed. At any rate, it matters not to me. Someone will pay for my son's death."

"No." The frown on Eduardo's face deepened, and men started shifting from foot to foot, murmurs starting up. "It matters. If this man did not kill your son, I cannot let you hang him."

Sweet Jesus. Please. Oh, Lord God above, please.

"And you would believe this man over me?"

If Pete hadn't been tied on a horse with his hands behind his back he'd have strangled Carter for the contemptuous look the man gave Jorge, for the utter dismissal.

"I would believe this man over the brother you say spoke to you. Even your men say he was a bad man, and they do not remember this one at all."

"He's a drover, Sir. He cannot be trusted."

"I would trust Jorge with my life." Lord, Eduardo could make chills run up a man's spine with that voice. "He is gaucho. There is no greater loyalty for him than to his jefe. If he says this man is not guilty, he is not. Cut him down."

"No!" Carter turned to his men, waving his hands. "Shoot him. Shoot him!"

For a split second Pete thought sure there was gonna be a shootout, guns slipping out of holsters, Eduardo's men bringing rifles to bear. The saddle under his butt creaked, the rope strained, and Pete closed his eyes, not wanting to see the end.

And then it was over. The rope around his neck went slack, and rough hands pulled him down out of the saddle, setting him on his feet.

Pete blinked, his legs purely giving out so he slumped to the ground. Lord have mercy on a sinner like him. He couldn't take anymore.

He had no idea how much time passed, but Carter and his men were gone when he blinked up at Jorge, who squatted down in front of him, handing him a dipper of water.

"It's over, querido."

His hands shook as he drank the cool stuff down. He croaked when he asked, "Over?"

"He has gone, Pete. Gone. For good."

The ground came right on up to meet his head as his eyes rolled back, and Pete could only think maybe he was just gonna die anyway. From pure shock.

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Jorge looked down at Pete as he slept, a smile on his face. He had made yerba mate, and held his own cup in his hand. Pete's was by the fire.

Pete blinked, coming out of his siesta, looking up at Jorge and smiling just enough to crinkle up his eyes.

"Are you the Devil?"

Laughing out loud, Jorge answered just as he had more than a year ago when Pete first asked him that coming out of a fever dream.

"No. I am Jorge."

Pete sat up, one hand rising to his cheek, the other taking his mate and setting it aside. Moving close, Pete put an arm around him, the smile widening. And just before he kissed that smile Pete told him, "Yes. My Jorge. And I thank God for you every day."

The kiss went deep, Pete pushing him back on the blankets, his carefully made mate spilling and running into the dirt.

For his own part? Jorge just thanked the pampas winds for blowing Pete his way. And he thanked the pampas earth for keeping Pete with him.

It was all the reward a gaucho could ever ask.



# This Legacy in My Hands

By Vic Winter

From The Anthology Cowboy Up

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I walk into the room and I can feel it become quiet. I'm not surprised. I'm a stranger here now even though the grey and used to be white worn checkered floor is familiar to me. I used to know it well enough.

I feel them staring as I walk past the chairs set out in four motley rows. Card table chairs. Easy storage, easy to set up. I remember a dance or two, sitting in those chairs all night because I couldn't ask my sweetheart to dance with me.

Damned uncomfortable and cold, those chairs. The vinyl on the seats had been old enough back then that they had cracks that pinched your skin if you sat on them with shorts. I'm not here to sit today.

I walk past those chairs, past all the people in their Sunday best, men with their hats removed, women with them on, fancy and obscenely bright. I don't really look at them, don't try to pick out the people I used to know. I'm not here to talk today, either.

I move straight to the box up against the army surplus green wall.

Because that's what it is, no matter how ornate they make it or what they call it - it's a box. Wood and silk and metal all neatly carved and put together. Fancy yet somber. The lid's open. I knew it would be, it's how they do it here. I take a breath and steel myself to look down on a face I haven't seen in too many years.

And I still don't see it, because that waxy painted face isn't his.

The skin is too pale, sallow, the cheeks overbright with rouge. Rouge. And is that mascara on his eyelashes? He'd have hated that. To be lying there all covered in make-up with the whole community coming out to look at him.

My eyes drop away from this mask of a face that doesn't belong, down along the plain navy tie that matches the suit jacket he's wearing. It had only ever been worn a couple times that I knew of. Both funerals. My eyes follow the crisp line of the tie down and suddenly I'm looking at his hands.

Ah, now these hands I recognize. I know them.

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His hands are what I noticed first. Large and tanned, solid and weathered by wind and rain and sun. A working man's hands, but there's a gracefulness to them as they move, picking the beer up off the bar, passing some money to the bartender.

I was thinking all sorts of things about those hands that I probably shouldn't have been. Not in this bar in this little Alberta town, and not about a man's man.

For that's what he was. Tall and tanned and lean muscles. He looked hard working and straight shooting and my eyes met his and my breath caught at the stormy blue color of them. I've seen the sky that color. Right before a thunderstorm hits, loud and noisy and angry and full of power.

The look in those eyes hit me about the same way and I swallowed and he smiled and oh wow, that's... I fell in lust over the first beer. In love over the second.

I can't remember what we talked about, though I imagine I told him about my cross-Canada travels and he told me about his bulls and the new strain of wheat he was growing. And it was perfect - it was why I was driving across the country, a prissy Toronto boy finding out what the rest of the country was like.

"You got a place to stay?" he eventually asked me and I shook my head. I'd slept in my car before and this little town had a bar, but I'd not noticed anything resembling a motel.

"I could use a hand bringing in the hay. It's a three day job with two."

And that was how I learned what kind of work made a man's hands look like that, all tanned and weathered, like good, soft leather.

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I'd seen the wheat fields that went on forever before, hell I'd been driving past them for what felt like days, the promise of the Rockies so far unfulfilled. And I'd seen the farms that dotted the landscape, the two storey houses and three storey high barns seeming to loom over the flatness around them. But I'd not had a chance to get up close and personal with any of the farms, I had no idea if the red brick houses and red and green painted barns looked just like pictures up close the way they did from the road.

It turned out they did. Wade's barns were kept lovingly painted, the old house kept in excellent repair. A large metal garage housed a couple of tractors, a truck and a beat up navy Oldsmobile along with an assortment of tools and parts. A rancher had to know how to do a mechanic's job, a cook's, a vet's, and a myriad more. No wonder he needed help.

It took us a few days to get it right, to do the dance and go from accidental brushes of those hands over mine, against my shoulders, to more. Courtship Wade-style. When he was convinced I wasn't going to slug him or take off or tell anyone -- hell who would I tell? -- he took hold of my hips, one in each hand, and tugged me to him.

The kiss was soft, his lips pressing on mine; it was his breath that pushed into my mouth first and then his tongue. As soon as I opened up, the kiss deepened, became almost desperate and I realized that maybe he needed me more here for this than he did helping out with ranch work.



His tongue filled my mouth with heat, with the taste of him. He tasted like the place where the sky and the earth meet, like the wheat filled horizon.

And his hands... those hands that worked that earth, that grew the wheat and raised the cattle, they touched me, held me. Those hands knew what they were doing, exploring my body and making my skin sing. I'd never felt like how I did when he touched me. Never have since either.

He was thorough, in his bedroom with the blue curtains closed, undressing me slowly, touching me everywhere, laying me down on the red and white quilt. His fingers were callused, rough as they scrapped across my nipples and stroked down my sides. He held my balls in a firm hold and tugged them so I knew he was there.

I knew he was there when he pushed behind them, too, those fingers knowing as they entered me, all slick and sure, stretching me, getting me ready for his cock. He'd ride me all night long it felt like sometimes, taking his time, just drilling me into the mattress, his eyes looking into mine.

I can remember more than one day working beside him, hard just from watching his hands as they worked, ass twinging and aching with every movement I made. I was his.

We never did anything though, unless it was dark out and we were hidden away in his room with the curtains drawn. And it wasn't that he was trying to hide, because God knows there was nobody around for miles and miles if we'd wanted to drop and go at it anywhere in the house or barn or the great outdoors. But the bedroom was where you made love and so that's where we did it.

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I lived for the nights. And for the little things that brought us together during the day. Passing the salt, washing and drying dishes, mucking out stalls or feeding the stock, working together on repairs.

He never meant any of it to be sexy, but it was. Just the movement of his body made mine take notice. There were days when it was hot and we were working hard, and he'd pull off his shirt and work topless. He thought the heat made me clumsy, the truth was that his bare chest distracted me, the way the lean muscles flexed, clenched and released, the way the sweat would slide down over ridges and bumps, drop by drop.

A rancher's work is never done and there were days when I didn't know how he'd managed without me, some days I wasn't sure even the two of us could manage. It all needed to be done though and so we'd do it, pushing and pushing until I could barely move, though he always seemed to have just a little bit more in him to get that last task done.

Nights on days like that we'd fall into bed and just hold each other. I was surprised the first few times it happened. I guess because in my head it wasn't something cowboys did and he fit enough of the stereotypes that I expected him to fit them all.

Of course the reality was that it was something cowboys didn't talk about, just like they didn't talk about making love or their feelings much. But Wade sure cuddled. He'd pull me close and hold me. Sometimes he'd rub my muscles if he knew I was sore and I'd fall asleep melted and warm and held close to his warmth.

One night when we were both really tired, but I was horny, too, I wriggled down his body and took him in my mouth. I can still hear the noise he made when I did it, kind of surprise and oh, damn, that's good all at once.

His cock was long and soon hard and I knew its shape well enough inside me, but I had never taken him in my mouth before. I explored him as thoroughly as his hands had ever explored me, learned every bump and ridge and vein with my tongue. Learning the amazing heat that the fine silk-like skin held, the hardness beneath that soft, soft covering.

When he came I drank him down and he tasted like the earth we'd spent the day working so hard.

He held me after that, a sated, happy look on his face and if I hadn't already loved him with all I was, that would have done it.

He didn't give me a blow-job in return, in fact I don't think I came at all that night, but that didn't matter, it wasn't why I had done it. We didn't keep score in the bedroom, we just loved each other as best we both knew how.

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I was scared of the cattle the first few times I got into the field with them. They were just so big, far bigger than I was expecting, than I'd imagined.

I tentatively followed Wade up over the fence and he didn't laugh at me, but his eyes were bright and I swear his mouth twitched.

"They're more scared of you than you are of them," he told me. "Except for the bulls -- they're territorial and they know they're bigger'n you." He nodded toward the fields where the bulls lived, three of them, each in his own fenced off area. They were bigger than the steers and hadn't been castrated. It was hard to miss that they were bulls, which was good, it made them easy to avoid.

And Wade was right about the cattle. Any sudden movement had them jumping and stepping away and once you looked into their eyes... they had gentle eyes, usually brown, occasionally blue.

Soon I was used to them, used to walking among them when they were in the barn, used to slapping them on the side to get them moving, their low moos like a vibration more than a sound.

Wade did laugh at me the first time I stepped into a cow patty. God, that stunk, though not as badly as pig or sheep shit according to Wade. He didn't have either so I didn't get to smell for myself until the time we went over to Widow Barstrow's place and got a snootful of her sheep's manure spread out over her fields.

I scrubbed myself with soap every night, but I could still smell the earth and sun and manure and wheat scent of the ranch on me, on Wade. It was a part of us and after time I didn't even notice it unless it wasn't there for some reason. Like the first few weeks after I'd left.

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There were a lot of quiet evenings spent together. I can remember an old Parcheesi board. Maybe from when Parker Brothers first brought the game out, still in its blue box, two little black plastic cups included. And Wade's deck of cards might have been older than he was, thick with age, the shiny black backs worn dull and smooth by countless rubbing fingers. Some evenings we played, other evenings we talked or read, me one of my crazy books as he called them, him the paper or one of his ranch magazines.

He didn't have a television and at first I was shocked and amazed that anyone could survive without one.

"How do you get the news? The weather? What do you do for entertainment?"

"That's what the radio's for." And it was. The news came on at noon and we listened to it while eating our meal, usually beef of some sort, one of Wade's own, and potatoes and carrots, good hearty food to keep us going the rest of the day. We'd do dessert to the obituaries and be done with the dishes by the time they were giving the weather.

He was right. We didn't need a television.

My favorite thing to do though was the dancing. We didn't do it every night, but we did it often enough. I'd never really danced before, well not real dancing, just

the stand and shake your stuff kind of dancing to a pulsating beat and inane lyrics, and that wasn't really dancing. At least not here it wasn't.

Wade showed me how, two stepping me around the kitchen as we listened to K105 Country Canada. At first it made me think of leaning to waltz with my mother, but not for long. She never showed me the things Wade did while dancing.

The way Wade danced it was a prelude to fucking. Foreplay cowboy style. And one of my favorite forms of it, too.

Those big hands I loved so much would hold me - there never was a question of who would lead - and we'd moved around the room. All I had to do was hold on and follow. Just like with everything else.

Some nights we'd dance for hours, polishing belt-buckles, he'd call it whenever the music got slow. We'd rub together, feet still following the steps, eyes locked. The longer we danced, the more the anticipation built. There was a time or two I was sure he'd make me come just from the dancing, from the way he moved me around the room with such confidence, hands strong and sure and firm on my body.

He'd dance me right into the bedroom, waltz me out of my clothes and two-step me into bed where we'd polish a lot more than belt-buckles. Sometimes we'd turn off the radio before going into the bedroom, sometimes we wouldn't and those nights we'd make love to the sound of some deep-voiced cowboy singing about his dog or his truck or drowning his sorrows in beer because a pretty girl left him.

George Strait's voice still makes me hard.

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I can hear them talking. The hall always did have strange acoustics. And I know some of them are talking about me. The ones whispering instead of just talking in a low voice. What is it about funerals and viewings and such that have people talking quietly? It's not like the dead can hear you. I guess it's done to keep the living from hearing what you have to say about the dead.

I can hear the whispers, the low voices and I wonder what they're saying, why there's such a big turn out. Wade was a loner. Oh, he didn't hate people or dislike his far flung neighbors or anything, but he was good with his own company. A self-contained and quiet man. I don't expect he went to more than one or two community dances and the auction every year, just like we used to when I was still here. He always kept to himself then, nodding his hat at the men, touching his finger to it for the ladies, always polite, but apart unless it was to talk about ranching and then by God, he was in the thick of things.

He'd have hated this. I've said it before, but it bears repeating. Of course that made up face and the fancy silk lining of his coffin proves that no one here really knew him. This whole set up is for show and Wade never did anything for show. The closest he came was hiding that he was gay and that was less hiding and more believing it wasn't anybody's business but his.

I doubt anybody would have known about us even if I'd been a woman. He was that discreet.

I go back to staring at his hands because they're the only part of him in this whole thing that seem real, that are his.

Tanned dark, the skin's well-worn. I know there's a scar on the palm from when he grabbed the barb wire fence to keep it from hitting me and he wound up grabbing where one of the barbs were.

His fingers are long without being delicate, solid on top of a big palm. There's all sorts of calluses from all sorts of hard physical work on them. No other hands feel like a working man's hands on your skin...

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His calluses would change depending on the time of year it was. In the winter, most of them were softer, aside from the ones at the base of his fingers where the rope on the hay he fed the cattle dug in. But in the spring and summer and fall, the pads of his fingers would go hard, or the sides of his knuckles. I could tell the time of year just by how his hand felt around my cock as he stroked me.

I made love to his hands one night. Just spent ages touching them, kissing them, sucking on his fingers and licking his palms. They were salty, earthy and smelled of the ranch. Before the night was over they smelled of me. Of my saliva and my spunk and my ass.

He didn't always understand my obsessions in bed, but he always indulged them, let me make love to his hands or his cock with my mouth, let me blow raspberries onto his abdomen. He'd laugh then. He had a great laugh, deep and



low and the skin around his eyes would crinkle and I'd have to kiss them and that would make him laugh some more.

The lines on his face were from hard work and hours and hours of his life being in the sunshine and while I was there they were from smiling and laughing. He wasn't dour, had a great sense of humor and loved to tease once he knew you. He was a good friend and a good lover. A good man.

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It didn't matter how old I got, or that Wade wasn't actually much older than me. I was always the kid. It didn't matter how many years I worked at his side, working myself to the bone just like he did, when there were crops to go in or pull off the fields, cattle to birth or round up. All the busy times I worked by him and all the hurry up and wait times I waited right there next to him. It didn't matter - none of it did - I was still the greenhorn.

I bought a hat for my head and boots for my feet and I was still the city boy Wade had taken on to help out at the ranch.

In the end that was what drove us apart, well... what drove me away. It never mattered how hard I tried, Wade just never saw me as his equal; I was never going to belong. I knew it wasn't malicious or deliberate. Wade didn't think he was better than me, not in some stuck up hoity-toity way, but he didn't ever see me as his equal here in this place that Wade called home, this place where he lived, where he belonged. He never ever said that I didn't belong here, but I could feel it, could hear the words pushing at the back of his throat whenever I did something he didn't understand.

He'd get sick and I'd never even hear about it. I'd find out by accident, find him leaning over a fence and puking his guts up. When I was sick I whined. I complained. I stayed in bed and slept off the headache or the muscle pull or the flu or whatever it was that was wrong. I didn't understand his way of doing it anymore than he understood mine.

I worked hard though, worked until I was exhausted right along next to him. I never shirked, never said I couldn't do something, even though there were times when I didn't think I could. I guess it doesn't count if you complain while doing it though.

I never quit on him, but there were times when I fell behind, when I just wasn't getting the job done and he had to finish his own and come back and help me. Which he always did and never complained. He was bigger than me, and stronger, and would have been able to do more in any physical arena and it always niggled me a little that I couldn't keep up with him and I was always waiting for the day he threw it in my face. For some argument when the reality of my not being the man he was would come up.

It never did though. Wade wasn't one to argue much. Like his feelings of love, he kept his negative emotions bottled up as well. He didn't yell at me or pick fights. He'd just work harder.

He'd work harder and really push himself and that night he'd explore my body with hands and mouth and make me feel like the center of his universe. He'd pound into me until I came and then he'd keep pounding into me until he came too and I'd know that he'd worked off whatever mad he was and I was forgiven.

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He never said I love you. It was another reason why I left. I didn't think he could give me what I needed. The truth was I didn't know what I needed, or what I really had.

I've heard the words since then. I've heard them a hundred times from a couple of different guys. Funny how I never believed them like I believed the look in Wade's eyes, the strength of those hands against my skin.

What I didn't know until it was too late was that he didn't have to say the words with his mouth. He said them with his hands all the time. With his eyes. With his cock. He showed me all the time, I just couldn't see it until I was two thousand miles away in a place as different from the flat plains as I was different from him.

I broke my arm once. Fell off the loft when the floorboards gave way. He was there before I'd even cried out, hands moving over me with a new gentleness, but that same thoroughness. He wrapped my arm tight against my chest with his shirt and carried me out to the truck, managed somehow to keep touching me all the way to the hospital so I wouldn't pass out.

They sent me home in a cast the same day and that I night I stared sightlessly at the ceiling, trying not to move my arm as he started to explore my cock with his mouth.

Much as I loved that blowjob, that he would put aside his likes and dislikes to pleasure me like that, I reveled in the hard fucking I got a few days later when the pain had subsided from my arm. We were back to normal, back to how we fit best together.

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I reach out and touch Wade's hand, unable to stop myself. It's cold. Not freezing cold, but cold and sort of... waxy or like a balloon filled with water. Not Wade. He's not here anymore. Not even his hands are real.

It's funny because I always thought that I'd come back. I thought that I'd leave Vancouver's bright lights and its glittery party boys who didn't understand anything that went deeper than the bright surface. I thought that we'd kiss and make up and spend our golden years together on that damned ranch of his.

He wasn't supposed to get thrown by a spooked horse and hit his head on a rock. It wasn't in the plans. A freak accident. Knowing Wade as I did though, I bet he was glad that was how it had happened. Working, doing the things he loved best in the place he loved best. He'd have hated the slow fading away more than he would have hated this macabre party with the deviled eggs and the cabbage floating in Jell-o mold on the sideboard in his honor.

There're people right behind me now. I can feel their eyes, more intense than the general curiosity of most of the other mourners; they're waiting their turn to visit the body in the coffin. Like Wade was going to sit up and have a beer with them. I step back and remind myself where I am before I can start chortling. The sobering thought is that if Wade were alive and I'd whispered the comment to him at someone else's funeral he'd have started laughing silently. He isn't though. He's the one in that damned box.

I head back up the aisle, ignoring the looks, ignoring the Jell-o. I'm not staying. I don't want to run into anyone brave enough to stop me. I've changed some, my hair is long now, and I don't look like a kid anymore, my face finally catching up to my age. Still, I'm not ready to walk down memory lane with people who never knew Wade like I did. Who never cared like I did.

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When I said I fell in love over our second beer, I mean I fell in love with my idea of who Wade was. The real thing took longer. It took months and years of learning this quiet, deep man to really love him.

It wasn't because he was good looking or because he fucked like a dream. It wasn't because he owned all this land or because he was a cowboy. It was because... it was because he was Wade.

All the things that made him up, even the ones that drove me crazy like the way he'd put ketchup on his egg yolks and mix them up or the way he'd always spit when he got out of the barn, face turned to the side, hork and spit. All those annoying things and the normal things and the things that made me swoon, they all made him Wade and I loved him for it.

I never loved anyone else the way I loved Wade, but then I never stayed with anyone as long as I'd stayed with Wade. There was never any place that welcomed me, challenged me, the way the land did, the way that cowboy did.

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I'm out of the community hall, almost at my car when someone nabs me. An older man with short, graying hair. I don't recognize him, but he looks like a lawyer, like he works in that suit and isn't just wearing his Sunday best. I'm not surprised when he hands me his card and I'm proven right.

"Mr. Sams? Ben Sams?" He even sounds like a lawyer, genteel and educated.

"Yeah. Can I help you, Mr..." I look down at the card in my hand. "Watson."

"I was hoping you'd be here today. Mr. Cotton named you in his will. If you could come with me - I'm his executor."

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. I never expected Wade to leave me anything. I never wanted anything from him but his love.

I spent the time walking to Mr. Watson's office on the one sidewalk the town boasted, speculating as to what Wade might have left me. Maybe he'd written a letter to me. Or some pictures - I'd always had admired his collection of photo albums. They went back for decades and he was the last of his kin.

It would mean a lot to me to have something of Wade to hold onto and I'm not sure if I'm surprised or not that he knew that. When I left, I would have been, but now... with time and experience, I'm seeing things differently. I'm seeing that maybe I left because I wasn't ready to be here yet.

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Four hours later and I'm back on the Lucky W. I haven't seen this place in eight years and now it's mine. Lock, stock and barrel. The last few hours went by in a daze. He'd left everything to me. Absolutely everything. And there was a letter, too, clutched in my hand and as yet unopened.

Everything that needed to be signed was signed. It was really mine. From the road to the railway tracks back two hundred acres, bound on one side by the Weston spread and by Gordon Turner's on the other. Eight hundred acres of land, most of it in wheat, the rest fields for cattle.

Here I sit on the veranda, in Wade's old rocking chair, in my good shoes to go with the dark suit I'd worn for the funeral, with a lump in my throat and a feeling of fierce gladness that Wade had trusted me with the ranch. I know what he wanted for the place, I know how important it was to him that it stay out of the hands of one of the big corporations that were swallowing up farmland left, right and center.

I don't have a cowboy hat or boots. Hell, I don't think I even have a pair of jeans in the small overnight bag I've brought -- I wasn't planning on staying long. And yet... I belong here. I'm not the greenhorn anymore, the outsider. Maybe I never was except in my own mind. I'm Wade's partner, the one left behind to carry on the business, the dream. The one left behind to work the land until it takes me, too.

I sigh, feeling pride as well as sadness inside me. I'm not going to let him down. My hands still hold the hint of the man I was becoming while I worked here, I know they'll look like Wade's did soon enough.

I open my letter.

The first thing I see is the signature in Wade's bold pen:

Love Wade.



# Barn Dance

By BA Tortuga

From The Anthology Cowboy Up

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It was the music that drew him in.

Normally the sheer crush of folks would keep him well away from the lights, the barn all lit up like Christmas. Still, there was something about a fiddle singing that tugged on a man's soul, pulled him where good sense told him not to go.



"Well, Red Farr. I'll be. I never reckoned to see you in decent company."

Terrance Wickers and his woman Jess were standing by the door, Jess dressed much like them -- lawn shirt and homespun trousers.

Like any of them fine dressed farmers' daughters and prissy smooth handed boys would accept a one of them as decent.

He found Terry a smile though, and a nod for Jess. Lord knew Terry'd fought the good fight same as him and Jess had lost man and home, child and stock to the aggressors. "Music's fine."

Red peered in, looked up to the man calling square -- Old Pete, with his one last tooth and dead arm. Remy the Frenchie worked the banjo and his brother Michel was making the Jew's harp go. The fiddle player though?

That man wasn't from these parts, nor the trail, neither.

He was tall, square, his heavy coat making him seem thick, though the face and the hands told Red he was just the opposite. From the distance he couldn't see the man's eyes well, but they looked like holes burnt in a blanket under the wide brim of the man's hat. It was the hands that got him.

Long fingers, rough skin, two twisted silver wire rings glinting in the light, those hands played that fiddle like it was a lover, like it was the most important thing on earth.

It made him hot inside like that first sip of morning coffee and Red let himself spend a minute dreaming. Weren't no one that could hear his thoughts, that could know the sinful thoughts he had in the dark. Stood to reason he could put a stranger's hands in those thoughts and have them standing in the shadows.

The stomping and clapping and dancing came to a crescendo, and the music stopped, everyone whistling and hooting. Looked like he'd gotten there just in time for the food. He wondered if the fiddler would stay about to play after.

Red stepped back away from the crowds and the lights, heading out to pasture to check the horses, make sure things were settled for the night. All the crew was here; they deserved a little break, a little civilization, a little rest.

'Sides, from the pasture he could hear if the music started up again.

He hadn't been out there long when he saw the flare of a lucifer match, the tiny light of a cheroot being lit. And it was headed his way.

He eased back the holster of his six-shooter, keeping a sweet tempered strawberry roan between him and whoever was wandering. He didn't have reason to worry much 'round here, not with every person between Mexico and Comancheria come to dance. Still. Being cautious kept a man from waking up dead.

It was the damned pie eyed paint that gave him away, snorting and squashing him up against the roan, making him grunt. The man with the cheroot froze, outlined by the lights from the barn. "Somebody out here?"

"Nobody worth mentioning at Sunday supper, no." He nodded over, not sure if the man could see him or not. "Just old Red, checking things since the barn's occupied."

"Oh. Sorry. I was just having a smoke, needed to get out a bit." The voice was smooth, deep South, like molasses from an earthenware jug.

"I hear that. It's an anthill in that there barn." Red pulled his hat off, swatted that paint to move him. "It's quite a shindig."

"It is. Wasn't for the chance to play I'd be a far piece off, I can tell you."

"You make that fiddle rejoice, I swear." He moved out a little, let the fiddle player see him. Short as he was, the horses hid most of him.

That strong chin dipped, the hat covering even more of the man's face. "Thank you. It's the one thing... well. Ain't here nor there. You want a smoke?"

"That'd be a kindness, yessir." Was a shame, really, the way the war'd made some broke, some crooked, damn near everybody scarred and carrying secrets. Still, Lord gave a man what he could take and no more.

The worn tobacco pouch and a rolling paper got handed over, the stranger coming close enough Red could see his face. He had what folks back home would call a high class face, all sharp lines and elegant planes, eyes dark as pitch.

Course he looked just like what he was -- an old cowboy who'd tried soldiering and found himself less than apt to it. He rolled up easy, using his scarred hand to balance, his smart hand to roll. The hand had been shot clean through during the fall of New Orleans, the bullet passing through and ending in his shoulder where it still lived. "Thank you kindly."

"Surely." They smoked in silence for a bit, the smoke light against the dark night sky. Each draw on that cheroot lit up the feller's face, giving him a teasing glimpse. Something to go with the hands.

He drank the glimpses up, stored them for late night thinking.

The first few minutes the man shifted from foot to foot like a spooked horse, then he seemed to settle, grow easy. One smoke went sailing to the dirt, and another was rolled. "You're Red?"

"I am. Have we shook hands before?" He'd met lots of people, forgotten most of 'em. Didn't think he'd forget this man, though.

"Nossir. Just came this way. Been looking to settle somewhere. I'm Zeke." Zeke stepped forward, offered his hand.

Lord have mercy. That hand.

Red brushed his palm on his britches, shook good and firm. "Nice to meet you, Zeke. You staying at Miz Betty's boarding house?"

He got a glint of a smile, and Zeke rubbed his nose before answering. "Pitched a tent just out."

"Smart man. Miz Betty's got bed bugs something fierce."

"She had pretty foul breath. I figured her beds wouldn't be any better." Zeke nodded back toward the barn. "They seem decent enough folk."

Red nodded. "Most just want things to ease, want the wounded to heal and the cattle to graze again. Good folk."

Zeke just made a little noise and started smoking again, like that was settled. Which he guessed it was.

"You ride the trail with that fiddle? Or are you looking for a homestead?" Not that it was a bit of his business.

"Have been 'til now. I'm not sure what I'm lookin' for really. Just needed out of Mississippi."

Red winced, nodded. "Never made it that far east, myself."

New Orleans was far enough, Lord forgive him.

"You from around here?" The second smoke went the way of the first, a lot faster. Zeke stomped it out, made sure nothing was catching, just standing there with him.

"Texas, originally. Been here since... since the surrender."

"Well, I hear lots of folks here took up the cause, so I guess we're in company." Zeke straightened, looked back at the barn. "You coming in for the rest of the music?"

"It's why I came in, so I reckon. It's powerful fine, what you do with that fiddle."

He finished his smoke, crushed it out good.

The smile came again, longer lived, more real. "Thank you. I'll see you on in there then. Later."

"Yessir. I'll be watching." He tipped his hat, watched Zeke leave, watched that fiddle player move.

Lord. Lord.

Red chuckled at himself and patted the roan's flank. Yeah. Watching. Lord.

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Zeke closed his eyes and played, letting the jig run through him, playing faster and faster on each verse until he was challenging the others to keep up with him. He loved the feel of the strings under his fingers, loved the way the bow fit his hand.

And he liked the way the cowboy who lived up to his nickname looked at him as he played. That was why he had to close his eyes, because that look was so intent it had the power to make him drop notes. Zeke had once been accustomed to looks like that, back in the days before the war, when his friend Remy Marchand had made it quite clear he'd wanted more than friendship.

The last years had been barren though. Lonely. So he soaked up that look. Basked in it.

Oh, he knew it was for the music, not for him. Yet it still had the power to move him, to make his body feel heavy and tight.

The jig went into a reel, and from there to a slow, deep waltz before the old man calling the dances touched his shoulder lightly so that he opened his eyes. The man indicated a break was needed, and Zeke nodded. Dancing was thirsty work, and while he could play all night, folks had to sit and eat sometimes.

Those blue eyes watched, then a couple of cowboys came up, distracting the short, broad-shouldered man, making Red laugh, tip his hat. Red had a good laugh, deep and strong, just happy as could be. When was the last time he's heard a sound like that? It'd been a long time for sure, and Zeke found himself drifting over, listening to the man talk.

"...tell you what, Little Jimmy was riding to beat the band, them steer driving like a bad dream and all the while that little filly was drawing up sparks with her hooves."

Oh, Red told a good story. Zeke got himself a glass of punch, settling nearby while trying to be unobtrusive.

"Cookie looks up from the wagon, sees them sparks, starts banging pots together, screaming about how the demons were comin' for him, confessin' every sin he'd ever done, me and the boys scrambling to turn the stampede."

He just chuckled, listening to that. Sounded like a good life, if a hard riding one. He wasn't sure he could do that, or if he should try his hand at sod busting.

One of the well-dressed debutantes wandered over and the cowboys scrambled some, looking more than a little wild-eyed as she flirted.

Lord, some things never changed. He looked away as she eyed him, making sure he sent a clear no way, darlin' message. He wasn't much on flirting, even with someone like Red, who he *\*wanted\** to flirt with.

Red took a step toward him, or away from her, either way, gave him a nod and a smile.



Now that was worth a smile of his own, and Zeke did just that, feeling his ears heat. He held up his little silver flask, offering.

"Now, you shared your tobacco. I'll share my John Corn." A battered flask was dug up, offered over. "You and that fiddle were meant to be together."

The flask felt warm from Red's body, the whiskey in it strong enough to make his eyes water. That was good, though, took his mind off the compliment, which was making \*him\* warm. "I've been playing since I was in short britches. My daddy got it for me."

"You do him proud, yessir." Red smiled for him and oh, that smile just lit the man right up.

"I'm not sure about that. But I thank you again, anyway." He never deserted; he could say that. But he was sure his daddy wouldn't approve of how he'd taken a ball in the hip and just surrendered in return for medical help that he never would have gotten in his own unit.

Red leaned against the wall, getting out of the way of the passersby. "The whole county must have been drawn here tonight. I ain't seen such a crowd in forever."

"It's been a while since I could tolerate folks." His mouth snapped shut. That made him sound plumb crazy.

But Red didn't seem to think so, just nodded. "I hear that. A man needs space to hear himself think."

"A man does. So is there somewhere to find work hereabouts?"

"Depends on what you do. There's sharecropping, riding, Always someone needin' help with something."

"Well, I'm not much of a planter, but I could learn. I'm a decent hand with horses, though." He'd been in the cavalry after all.

"Well, there's always a group looking for another hand. My group's looking for two riders, Big Mack's looking for some."

"Yeah? I've not much experience, but if I can herd ragtag soldiers, I can herd cows I bet." He'd try that, at least until he decided what to do.

"Cattle ain't near so evil as people, Zeke." Red nodded. "Nowhere near."

"I hear you." They sat in silence for a bit, until Zeke worked up the courage to ask. "Would you be willing to point me toward your trail boss? I'll be needing work soon."

"I'd be the feller to talk at, I reckon. I ride for Missus Gentry and them, answer straight to her."

"Oh. Well, if you need someone, I can ride, I don't mind rough living, and I don't stir up trouble." That was about all he could say, but maybe it would be enough.

"I'd put up with a bit of trouble to hear that fiddle sing every now and again."

Zeke grinned, his load lifting a bit at the thought of steady employ. "You'd get all the fiddling you can stand and then some I'd bet."

"We'll have to see 'bout that. I'm thinking a man could bear a lot of that." Oh, there was that smile again, honest and warm and just fine.

"Well, if you'll have me then. Where do I sign up?"

Red held out one hand to shake, "We meet at the Gentry's gate on Monday morning."

Zeke shook, enjoying the warmth of Red's hand. Enjoying the touch of another human being for the first time in three years.

Red flushed dark, eyes watching their hands a half second, then the man smiled at him. "We camp over in the flats. There's two meals a day. You want, you can pitch with us."

"That'd be a real decent thing. Safety in numbers. Just not bed bugs." He felt the jolt of their touch too, savored it as he pulled his hand away.

Red chuckled, nodded. "I cain't speak for the skeeters, though. There might be some of them."

He laughed right along. "There always are." He heard the caller start hollering for everyone to come back and dance. "I ought to get on."

"Yeah. We all could use more of that music of yours."

"Do you have a favorite? I'll be sure to play it for you." His cheeks heated hard, but he wanted to do that little thing for Red, just one little thing.

"Green Grow the Lilacs, please sir, if you would." Red nodded. "I'd be obliged."

Oh, he liked that one. "I'll do it. Thank you. For everything."

"My pleasure, Zeke." And Red? Sounded like that was the God's honest truth.

He got back up to the front of the big barn, pulling his fiddle up to his chin, eyes on Red. The man was genuinely kind, and for that Zeke was grateful. He'd been looking for a place to light for a long time.

Maybe he'd found it here.

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The spring was getting warm and Red was getting itchy to move the herds before it got too far into June. They waited too long; they'd have to forge the river to make up time. They went too early; they'd be dropping calves all over Kansas.

He held out his plate to Cookie, got his ration of beans and bacon and some cornbread. They'd need to have a good meal before they headed out too, he'd need to speak to the Missus about it.

Their new man, Zeke, was sitting, joshing with the Chinaman they'd found two year ago, dying on the trail. Fella was an odd duck, but honest enough and strong as an ox. Red went on over, not near enough to interrupt, but close enough to look friendly.

"Well, I tell you, your scary old employer couldn't be any worse than that Yankee Captain at the prison, that's for sure. He was a mean man with too much power, that's for sure." Zeke was smiling, laughing, but there was an edge of seriousness to the talk that couldn't be missed.

"Thank God y'all are both working for finer folk now." He sat, nodded. "Evenin'."

"Hey, Red." Zeke smiled, and it just lit the man right up. It was a different sort of smile altogether than the Chinaman got.

"You gettin' all settled?" The boys liked Zeke fine, the man eager to learn, to work. His own smile grew, eyes wanting to take a long old look.

"Sure am. Gotta tell you, beans and bacon is a sight better than hard tack and jerky." Zeke took a sip of coffee. "So, you're restless. We about to make a run?"

He nodded, digging in. "Don't want to have to take the wet trail, yeah? Lost Buster's mount last year to the river and about thirty head."

"That's a damned shame. Glad I got some experience riding before we go." They ate in silence for a bit, the night still and quiet.

The food was good and solid, the weather fine. Yeah, another week and they'd be riding again, worrying about the Cheyenne and rattlesnakes and gullywashers. Eating beans and Cookie's cobbler, on a good day.

He couldn't wait.

"So, Chin here tells me you like being on the trail better'n just about anything. That so?"

He thought a second, then nodded. "It's in my blood. Been a cowboy all my life, 'cept for when I was soldierin'. That life didn't suit me one bit -- living right atop a thousand others, stiff clothes, people hollerin' and fussin' all the damn time. No, sir. Give me the trail and a handful of good'uns to travel it with? I'm just fine."

He could see Zeke chewing that over. The man often thought a while before he spoke. "I reckon that'd be a good life. Before the war I'd say I was a man of leisure. Didn't like it much, but my daddy didn't hold with me working."

"Lots of good folks ended the war without a thing. Makes for a hard life." He looked down at his hand, the scar from the bullet round and white. He had more than his share of those marks and he reckoned the good Lord had plans for him, because by all accounts he should've passed on.

"So they did." The by now familiar tobacco pouch was offered over. "Smoke?"

"I reckon, yeah. Thank you kindly." He rolled up, Chin wrinkling his nose and wandering away. Red chuckled. "Them Chinamen is an odd lot, but Chin puts in a good day."

"He does. Smart as a whip, too." Zeke rolled one for himself, lit it with an ember. "So tell me what to expect on the trail?"

"We all take turns watching and driving. We'll drive pretty hard up to Kansas City, spend a week or so there, resupplying, selling, gathering what the Missus wants, then head home. The Injuns have settled down."

Zeke just nodded, flipping his smoke into the fire when it burned down too low. "Sounds like a plan. It'll be good... riding with you I mean."

He offered over a smile. "There's a peace to it, that's for damn sure. Nothing like the open sky."

A smile came in return, but it was wry, a little twisted. "When I was a child I was afraid of being out. At night, mainly. Days now I find I crave it."

"I like seeing the range, knowing that the world's away." He blushed, shook his head. "Guess you can tell New Orleans seemed like Hell itself to this old cowpoke."

Zeke just gave him a slow, serious nod. "I can see why. I used to love the town. Now I don't think I could be so close to all them people and not get nervous."

He nodded. "Never saw it before the war. Folks say it was different."

Zeke nodded, eyes going far away. "It was. Now it's... broken. Like a lot of things."



Yeah. Yeah, a lot of things. The trail, though? It was still good. Still right. Still a place to heal a man's pains.

Zeke stretched, long legs sprawling. "Would it spook anyone if I played a bit?"

Oh, Hell. He didn't care a bit if it did. He did love him that fiddle music. "Play on, sir. Ain't none here that's gonna pitch a fit."

He liked that slow, happy smile about as much. Zeke grinned, got his case, which was just plumb fixed up for hard riding, and took out the fiddle and the bow, checking the tuning before sliding right into a slow waltz.

Red relaxed, just taken by the music, the sound pure beneath the darkening sky.

One by one the other drovers all came to sit, even Cookie, who was usually surly as anything. Zeke went from the waltz to a reel, tapping his foot in time, eyes closed. That got old Vic and Georgie to dancing, swinging around in the dust, making them all clap and laugh, all of them together in this. Zeke was smiling, eyes open, just dancing. He kept the men going for a bit before turning to something a little mournful, a little sad, slow and sweet.

Red relaxed, listened, humming along, lost in the sounds. It was something else, the way the music filled the air.

The sweet sound went on and on until the last note finally wavered off, holding longer than he would have thought it could. When he looked over, Zeke was shaking out his fret hand, grinning ruefully. "Played a bit too long."

"You need some salve?" He had some in his roll, spicy and good.

"That'd be a kindness. I think the roping and reins have stiffened me up and I didn't know it."

"Come on, then. I have some I bought off a Cherokee medicine man."

Carefully packing the violin away, Zeke followed him, leaving the men to smoke and talk and laugh behind him. He felt Zeke waiting behind him as he dug for his salve.

He found it, the jar wrapped in oilcloth and kept near the chit of looking glass and straight razor, opened the smelly concoction up and offered it over. "Can you manage or you need a pair of hands to work it in?"

Zeke ducked his head. "If you could, I'd be obliged. I just... I won't be able to get it in good, and my other hand's as bad."

Because the good Lord knew he hadn't been watching those hands since the very first moment...

"Be glad to help." He got a dollop out, took one of those amazing hands in his own blunt, gnarled fingers and started working it in.

"Oh." Zeke looked at him for a minute, eyes wide, then those eyes closed, eyelashes fluttering a bit. "That feels damned good, Red."

"Yeah. Can't risk your hands." Lord, no. Couldn't risk them, couldn't hardly stop touching them, even.

'Course Zeke didn't seemed to mind. Seemed to like it a lot, the way he was making those little noises, all unaware. And if he wrapped himself in a quiet little fantasy, thinking on those sounds, well that was just fine.

Zeke's hands were square, a man's hands, but they were finely shaped, fingers long and strong, almost too good for hard work. But the man did work, and work hard, and those hands were raw from it. Zeke had never complained once, neither.

"Gotta take care of these, now. They make that fiddle sing."

Blinking, Zeke looked at him, eyes a little glazed. "Thanks... I. Thanks, Red."

He took a deep breath, shivered, heat riding his bones. "Yeah."

They just stood there and stared at each other, Zeke's hand between both of his, fingers curled into his palm.

Tremors started deep inside him, slow and rippling, almost like the feel of a stampede, far off.

Zeke licked his lips, and the night was so quiet Red would swear he could hear the tiny, wet sound. Those fingers moved, just a little bit, in what felt like a caress. Red moaned, teeth sinking into his lip so he could swallow the sound.

"I appreciate it." Zeke's voice had taken on a deep tone, rough.

"Any... any time." He swallowed, easing the touch, but not pulling away.

He could feel the heat of Zeke's skin, hotter now with the salve, and as Zeke turned his hand a little more to grasp Red's, Red felt the pulse pounding in Zeke's wrist.

Red met Zeke's eyes, fingers stroking that little vessel, the rhythm quick and strong, addictive.

Those eyes bored into his, deep and serious, glinting a little in the night. Zeke's mouth opened again, that pink tongue touching Zeke's lower lip, and Zeke

opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again. It was like they were both afraid to break the spell.

The fire was crackling, people settling. Red squeezed Zeke's fingers, just a little, eyes shooting out toward the hay barns, all dark and quiet. Empty. It was an offer, but one that could be ignored as well as taken.

Zeke nodded, turned toward the barn and started walking, still just holding onto him.

His heart pounded loud enough he reckoned Zeke could hear it and his breath came light and quick, the stars bright.

They got just inside the barn door and stopped where there was still enough light for him to see Zeke's face. Finally the silence broke, Zeke giving a little hum. "You all right, Red? Sure 'bout this?"

"Been real sure." Red smiled up, nodded. "Been watching since the dance. Thinking thoughts."

Late night thoughts. Wanting thoughts.

Zeke nodded. "You been on my mind, too. I..." One of those hands he'd watched and dreamed over came up to touch his cheek, sliding on his rough beard. "I've been thinking too."

He leaned into that touch, breathing slow and easy, the touch settling him right down. His own hand landed on Zeke's hip, the feel as natural as anything.

A soft inhalation brushed his other cheek as Zeke leaned close, chest against his, lips resting at the corner of his mouth.

Oh. The kiss was slow, soft as he pressed into it, Zeke's lips softer than he had imagined, warmer.

They moved against his own, sweet and easy, Zeke moving a bit closer, their thighs brushing. It felt good, the two of them sliding hand in glove, bodies settling together right fine. It was plumb easy -- not raw or strange or uncomfortable like the few other times he'd had the chance to touch another man.

A low moan sounded, sweet, almost as musical as the sounds Zeke drew out of a fiddle. One of Zeke's arms came around him, settling just at his waist, holding him there, warm and right. They stood and breathed each other right in, the air warm and scented with smoke and hay and something else, something fine. Something just them.

Then those soft, soft lips started searching, started moving from his mouth to his cheek, even over the thin skin under his eyes.

Those lips drew quiet moans from him, deep and rumbling. His hand moved slowly, exploring ribs and chest, belly and waist.

Zeke crowded against him, mouth sliding to his throat, a soft sound pressed against his skin. It sounded like his name. Those hands, already so dear, slid from his waist, one up between his shoulder blades, one to cup the curve of his bottom.

The air seemed heavy, hot, flavored with Zeke and him. His hips tilted, pressing toward the touch easy as pie.

Zeke just held on tight and started moving, hips rolling so the hard ridge under Zeke's pants rubbed him, hot and solid. That hand opened and closed, squeezing his muscle and flesh.

They rocked like they were riding, sure and steady, the breath just huffing from Red, need like nothing he'd known before.

"Red." Oh. Oh, Zeke's voice was like the sound the man pulled from the fiddle. Sweet, sweet music against his ear, against the side of his neck. "Oh, Red."

"Yeah. So fine." His eyes rolled like a startled horse, belly going hard and tight.

"It is. I dreamed about you." Oh. Oh, that was an amazing thing to hear. Zeke moved a little faster against him, pushing them a bit, spurring them right on.

"Was you, brought me to the barn dance..." He went up on his toes, hips working.

"M'glad. So glad you came." Zeke looked at him, eyes going wide, hot, and suddenly Zeke was burrowing into his shoulder, a sharp cry muffled in the curve of his neck as Zeke shook and rocked against him.

He held on tight, pushing, finding his own pleasure, breathing Zeke's musk deep inside him as him tumbled right on over.

It was a long time before Zeke looked up at him, eyes dark as holes burnt in a blanket, lips swollen and damp. One of those hands touched his cheek again, just tracing his cheek and nose and mouth. "Thank you."

He didn't know what to say, so he kissed and nuzzled Zeke's fingers, thanking the man right back.

Finally Zeke sighed, straightened. "We ought to be gettin' back I reckon."

He nodded, sighing himself. He wasn't quite ready to let go, though he had to. "How's your hands feelin'?"

The hand on his cheek flexed, Zeke's fingers moving into a fist and back. "Better. You've a fine touch, Red. I might have to impose on you every night."



"I reckon I wouldn't think on that as imposing, Zeke." He turned, dared to kiss that palm. "Not at all."

Those clear eyes just looked right into him, and Zeke nodded, smiled. "Good. Then we'll meet over the salve at night. And I'll play for you in return, yeah?"

"Yeah." He nodded, stepped back a little, grabbing his pouch. "Think I'll stay for a minute, have a smoke."

Get things all settled in his memory.

"All right. Good night, Red." It looked like Zeke was reluctant to leave, but they both knew it was better if they went back separately. Zeke touched him one last time, one of those fine hands on his shoulder, just squeezing a little, and faded off into the night, barely making a sound as he walked.

Red cleaned himself up with a handkerchief, then went to sit on a hay bale, smoking slow and careful, watching the ashes. He sat and remembered and thought a good long time, looking down at his square rover's hands.

Salve wasn't ever gonna smell the same again.

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Riding the trail was a helluva lot of work.

Zeke liked it. He really did. Liked the freedom of it, and the open vistas that made every day new and different. But his ass was sore, and his back was hurting, and his hands were just raw. He really did have a rich man's hands, he reckoned, just like that one Yankee

Captain had said back at the prison.

The campfire stories didn't last as long on the trail as they had back at the camp, the men either going off on night watch or going to sleep right away, and Zeke had to admit he missed that. He'd not had the gumption to ask Red about the salve since they rode out, and he missed that as well.

More than anything else.

Lighting up a cheroot, Zeke looked out into the night, wondering at himself. Wasn't like him to be so damned hesitant. He just worried about... everything. Getting caught. Changing the way Red's crew looked at him. So he didn't do anything, just sat and smoked and wished hard.

He heard footsteps behind him, just barely audible. Then a jar of salve landed in his lap with a dull thud, Red's eyes looking over toward a little copse of trees a ways out. Then that short, square body just headed out that way without a word.

Oh. Zeke waited a bit, finished his smoke, not wanting to be obvious about it. Then he got up and followed, holding the salve in his hands to keep from wringing them or some shit.

Red was waiting for him, a couple blankets on the ground to sit on, red hair wild. "Evenin'. How's them hands of yours?"

He had the urge to hide them all of a sudden, the rope burn on one wrist lurid, the blisters on his fingers ugly. Not like he had time to play anyway, so what did it matter? Oh, he was a thoroughly pathetic case. Zeke just smiled, and handed the salve to Red.

"Not so good, I suppose. I haven't thought on it too much."

Liar.

"I have. Every night." Red took the salve from him, opening the jar and clucking softly over his hands, drawing him down onto the pallet to be tended to.

"You I've thought on, Red. All day for the last week. I just... I didn't want to make trouble for you."

A thrill went through him when Red touched him, his heart beating hard in his breast.

"No trouble here." Red's fingers massaged the salve in, head bent to the work. "Can't have these hands ruint. There's magic in them."

Zeke ducked his head, pleased beyond words each time Red said such. "I think there is in yours, Red."

Those gnarled, working man's hands made him feel positively cherished.

Red stroked and massaged, worked his hands until the dull ache was gone, turned to pure warmth. "I'm awful pleased to have your company around, Zeke."

All that warmth extended right down to the center of him, too, rising between his legs. "So am I, Red. Glad you're about, I mean. I never would've thought to do this for making a living, but I'd follow you..."

Hell, that was saying too much. He was sure of it.

Red's head lifted, lips turning up into a sweet, slow smile that liked to set a fire in his gut. "I reckon I'd rather roam side-by-side with you, yeah?"

Both of his hands closed around one of Red's, holding tight. "Suits me to the ground. You feel like home."

"Yeah." Red's mouth opened like the man was gonna keep on, and then he got a kiss, slow and sure, still-water deep. That kiss said everything and more, as far as Zeke was concerned, and he kissed right back, thanking whatever kind spirit it was that brought them together. He put one of his hands on the back of Red's neck, holding the man close.

Red's own hands were at his waist, hot and strong, a working man's hands.

Zeke pushed close with his body, too, needing to feel Red against him, something he'd not thought on until he met Red, needing someone like that. Someone specific. Red made a soft sound, pushing it into his lips as the hands on his waist pulled, then wrapped around him.

He put his arms around Red, holding the man tight, feeling that strong body all along his. Made him hurt, how good it felt. Made him ache. Zeke pressed forward, rubbing his hard shaft along Red's hip, letting the man know.

Another of those moans slipped into his mouth, Red pushing back against him, offering him that strong body, that steady heat.

He whispered Red's name, needing, wanting so bad. The smell of liniment mixed with the strong, heady scent of male arousal, and Zeke breathed deep, letting it push him higher 'til he thought he might just fly.

"Can I..." Red's cheek burned where it rested against his. "Uh... touch you?"

"Yes. Oh, please." He wanted to feel those hands on him, those hands that took such good care. "Please do."

"Oh.." Those strong hands slid around, petting the cloth of his shirt, making his belly jump and twitch.

"Feels good." He encouraged Red with words and hands, body moving with the touching. His skin was just on fire, no chance of him getting cold tonight.

The kisses continued, the heat of them second only to that hand on his belly, his hip, the curve of his shaft in his trousers.

He touched right back, his fingers searching out the bumps of Red's spine, the curve where his bottom met his back. He loved the taste of Red's mouth, the rough feel of his cheek. He was quickly realizing there wasn't much he *\*didn't\** like about this man.

They settled together on the rough blanket, managing to stretch out side-by-side, hidden by the trees and the tall grass, able just to feel and touch and taste. They burrowed under coats and shirts, Red's skin feeling so good and right under his hands. The man smelled like dust and horses and sweat, rich and deep, and Zeke breathed him in, loving it.

Red's lips mapped his throat, tongue slipping out to taste, to touch him. He moaned and Red moaned right along, reaching for him.

They rolled together, him putting Red beneath him and pushing down, needing more contact, more of everything. He kissed Red's cheeks, the spot just under Red's ear, the hollow in Red's throat where the pulse beat strong.

Red's hands were on the small of his back, encouraging him down against the strong, square body, both of them starting to rock, to rub, bodies knowing just what they needed.

His breath came fast and uneven, his eyes fluttering shut as Red tested the side of his throat with blunt teeth. He just rocked and rocked, his prick aching.

"Gonna..." Red groaned, gasped against his throat. "Zeke."

"Red. Please." Red's voice was like music to him, like a bow scraping strings.

"Yes..." There was a low groan, Red arching up against him, the scent of need heady.

He bucked, his whole body shaking, his prick jerking as he spent, his teeth clenched on a cry.

Red's lips brushed his ear, breath panting out. "Ain't nothing ever been so fine."

"Nothing, Red. I swear it." He leaned down, rested his head against the crook of Red's neck, hoping this night never had to end.

Rough fingers stroked his hair, smoothing him, petting. "Like magic."

"Like it's meant to be." He was probably being down right silly, but there was no fool like an old one, or one who just knew, somehow, that he was in love.

God help him.

\*\*\*

They'd been pushing horns for weeks, the summer sun baking them right onto their saddles. They'd beat the rains over the river, not losing head one. Course, Dougie'd been left behind with the Mexicans way before then, burning up with an ague, shaking like leaves in autumn. They'd all suffered through it, but Dougie? He just hadn't shook it free.

Red didn't reckon they'd be picking up more than boots on their way back through, if that. Was too bad for Katie, really. That baby'd be on its way come September and she was hoping Doug'd settle into a farm.

Still, they were moving okay, looked to be to market in damn good time. He watched the boys wander, the last touch of the sun making them look faded and worn through. Lost.



"Play a bit for us, Zeke?" Remind us of the good waiting at the end of the trail?

Zeke nodded, flexed his fingers, reaching for the beat up case that held the violin. How the man kept it tuned after banging about all day he didn't know, but he did, and as soon as Zeke fussed over the strings a little, he set the bow to them, and tucked it under his chin. Soon enough the evening was split by song, Zeke playing a sweet waltz.

Red nodded, leaned back and closed his eyes a minute. In his head he could see pretty farmer's daughters dancing, hear the low laughter of the men along the wall, the chatter of the womenfolk bustling back and forth with cakes and sweets and pitchers of lemonade, the windows in the old meeting hall thrown wide so the breeze could come through.

The waltz changed into an Irish lament, little Joe's high tenor rising to sing the words, a sound at once lonesome and hopeful. It called to him, it did, and he could hear the others humming along as well.

He was made for this world -- the dust and the dirt, the moon huge in the sky, turning the earth to silver. The cattle wandered easy, lowing around them, one horse nickering to another.

The men got up and did a little dosey-do when Zeke changed to a reel, the mood so improved, their faces no longer set and tired. Oh, it was good to have music, and Zeke, well that man looked like Heaven, eyes closed, a big old smile on his face.

Red's thoughts flew to the salve in his bedroll, the cream waiting there to work its way into those fine, long hands.

They got a few more songs before Zeke put his bow down, smiling all about. "That's it boys. My fingers are just a bit raw."

He stood without thinking, heading over to his bedroll, set away from the rest, to get the salve for those fingers, for Zeke's fingers.

It was a bit before Zeke joined him, and he could hear Zeke talking to the other drovers, just easy and low, the smell of smoke wafting over to him as Zeke tossed away a cheroot.

"I figured I ought to hold off a minute."

Yeah, there were them who'd look askance at what they were doing. He nodded. "Gave me time to warm the salve. How's your hands?"

"A little stiff, but nothing like they would be if it weren't for you. I'm grateful, Red." Zeke's eyes glinted in the moonlight, looking up at him from under stubby lashes.

"It's my pleasure." More than just pleasure. It set him plumb right inside, rubbing the healing salve into those fingers.

"And mine too." Oh, that was a cream-licking smile if he'd ever seen one, and Zeke moved a bit closer, close enough to feel his heat.

He smiled back, rubbed his hands together and reached for Zeke's fingers, starting to work the salve in. Red got a deep moan for his trouble, Zeke swaying, hand loosening right up in his grip.

"Oh, Red. What you do to me."

"Just touching you." Loving you. He smiled over, eyes eating up the heat and pleasure in Zeke's face.

"When we get to town..." Zeke stopped, cleared his throat. "When we get to town, would it be too untoward if we got us a room? Just you and me?"

Oh. Them and a bed, alone, behind a door. Oh. "I would like that."

"I would too." Zeke's fingers curled in his, the thumb stroking his palm. "I'd like it a lot."

He nodded, leaned close, cheeks burning as he whispered. "I have a need to look at you. See you as God made you."

"As I do you. And since we didn't get time to bathe together at the river..." Zeke turned just enough to kiss his lips, cheek and nose rubbing his. "I want."

He nodded, tongue sliding out to taste. That never changed. Never. He always needed, always wanted.

The massage ended even earlier than it usually did as Zeke slid right up on him, hands breaking free of his grip to settle on his waist so they could kiss until neither of them could see straight.

"Zeke..." Red found himself pressing close, rocking against Zeke thigh, wanton as a whore.

"Mmm." Zeke moved, fumbled at his buttons, and suddenly that slick hand was about him, fingers playing him just like they'd play a fiddle.

He pushed his cry into Zeke's lips, eyes wide as those hands gave him what he needed. Zeke watched, eyes open as he gave another kiss, then another, all the while working him, hand as hot as a brand.

It seemed only a handful of seconds before he spent, pouring himself into that hand, shaking like an autumn leaf clinging to its tree.

"Oh. Oh, Red." Zeke stared at him, panting, before reaching for his own buttons, opening them so Red could see Zeke's hard prick as it fell into Zeke's hand, could

see everything as Zeke brought himself off in a few furious strokes, his name on Zeke's lips over and over.

Red reached out, daring to stroke his fingers over the wet tip of Zeke's hardness, brought his fingers to his lips to taste. Oh. Bitter. Salt. Zeke. He would know that flavor forever.

Zeke made a startled sound. "Oh. Red..." Those eyes were stunned, happy, just full of joy.

His cheeks flared, but he nodded, brushed their lips together. Yes.

Zeke bent into him, kissing him back, body heavy against his. "Soon. We can be alone, with a bed."

"Yes. A bed and a door. Time to look." Time to touch and taste.

"Oh, Red." Zeke just smiled, nuzzling. "I ain't never met anyone like you."

"I'll take that to be a good thing."

"Hell yes that's a good thing. I like the look of you and the feel of you and how you make me feel." Those arms squeezed him tight, letting him know Zeke meant it.

"I hear that." He grinned wide, feeling good down to his toes. "Got a right thing for your hands, too."

Bright pink spots rose in Zeke's cheeks, but that smile was like sunshine in the mountains. Pure and bright. "I sure am glad, Red. I sure am."

And wasn't that look almost as good as the way Zeke could make that fiddle sing?

Maybe even better than almost.

\*\*\*

The end of the trail came faster than Zeke expected, and they drove their herd through the streets of town to the stock pens, little boys and demure looking ladies all coming out of shops and houses along the main street to watch them. He figured it must have been quite a show for the town folks, all those lowing cows and dirty, sweat-stained drovers.

He looked around, looking for the hotel. There had to be one, and there it was, looking nice and clean. He'd wait until Red worked out the sale, like he was supposed to, and until they stabled the horses, but he was gonna get him and Red a room there. He was looking forward to it more than anything in his life, but for getting out of that damned Yankee prison camp.

Red came around with the little packets of cash money, enough to get into trouble, not enough to stay there. "Y'all have five days to see the sites, then we're for home, y'hear?"

Zeke fell into step with Red after all of the boys had their pay, heading back out to help with the stable duty. He kept his eyes on his boots. "I see the barbershop has baths for a nickel. We could get cleaned up before we went to the hotel, look respectable and all."

"That's a right fine idea. I got trail dust in so deep my hiccups are smoky." He got a wicked grin and a wink and damned if that didn't make things easier.

Zeke grinned right back, wanting so bad to take Red's hand. Later. "Yeah. My hair's fixing to get up and walk off my head and find someplace new to roost."

"Oh, and I reckon we'll both be shocked to see it, full-color." God knew that they were both grey, toes to head.

His cheeks heated painfully. "I can't wait to see yours, Red."

Red's eyes cut over toward him. "I... Yeah. I want to see. Need to."

Suddenly he could barely walk. Lord, he'd have to thump himself in a minute. "Same here. Damn, Red. You make a man need."

"We got some time, Zeke. Time to look our fill." Red would say he was the musician, but Zeke loved the music in that rough voice.

"We do." They got to the livery and took care of their horses, Zeke giving his mare a little extra sweet feed. She'd been a good old girl. He hummed as he worked, happy in his bones to just be with Red.

The regular folks -- and wouldn't his father laugh now, to hear him calling drovers and stable hands regular -- all seemed to know Red, nodded and shared a bit of story or joke. Over and over he was offered a smile, a hand, drawn right in as belonging.

How odd it was to think he might have found a place to belong. He found the company of these rough men congenial. He cradled his violin case as they left the barn, still smiling to beat the band.

"A shave and a bath and a plate of steak and biscuit and I'll feel like a new man." Red winked over, playful, as relaxed as Zeke had ever seen him.

Oh. Food. Restaurant food, maybe. It had been a long while since Zeke had eaten at a real

restaurant. He nodded. "Yes. A bath, a meal. A bed."

"A bed behind a door." Red's eyes were hot, hungry.



"With a lock." They sounded like little children, eager and happy, though no child could anticipate what he was. They walked into the barber's and Zeke asked for baths, paying the dime for both of them.

The water was hot and passable clean, the soap pale and worth the nickel all on its lonesome. There was even a chip of mirror, if a man wanted to shave his own self.

Zeke sloughed off weeks of trail dust, soaping up and cleaning himself thoroughly. He opted to shave himself too, because he didn't think he'd have the patience to wait for the barber. Not the way Red was looking as he glanced out of the corner of his eye.

The late sun was catching in that red-red hair, on the tanned skin, water pouring and sparkling in the light.

Hellfire and damnation that man was something else. Maybe he shouldn't shave; he might cut his throat. His hands were just shaking like a calf caught in the river.

Red stood, let him see a hint of what he needed before it was plumb hidden away. "Gonna get that room, Zeke."

Sweet Jesus and all the saints, Red's eyes were those of a starving man and him the blessed banquet.

The lump in his throat made it right hard to speak, but he nodded, drying off as he stood, getting his clothes on and his boots too. Hell, he almost forgot his violin case in the rush.

"I'm ready."

"Yeah." Red was rumbling and they didn't say nothing as they headed across the way. Red paid for the room and the sheets, wet hair in tight-tight little curls.

His hands clenched, wanting to touch, and he breathed a sigh of relief as they got the door closed and latched behind them. He reached right for Red, setting his fiddle case aside and putting his hands on the man's shoulders. Zeke needed to taste Red's lips, needed to feel that fire-bright hair under his hands.

Red's hands wrapped hard around his waist, tugged him close, mouth crashing against his like a herd of Longhorns running against a fence.

A deep moan tore from his chest and Zeke started working Red's clothes. They were behind closed doors and Zeke could see all of the man at once and he would not waste another moment not having Red nude before him.

Red's hands unbuttoned his suspenders, tugging his damp and rumpled shirt the rest of the way out. The sounds they were sharing spoke of their raw need, coarse as desert sand and twice as heated. There were too many buttons, too many layers of cloth, but Zeke finally got them all off and there was Red for him

to look at and touch and taste and he just moaned, loud and long. God that man was beautiful, from his curly red hair to his lean, tall body, skin pale where the sun never touched it, burned where sun and wind had its way. All he could do for at least a full minute was to stare.

There were scars and marks -- Red had a working man's skin, a soldier's skin, a cowboy's skin -- and each one led to another, making a pattern, a fine series of decorations and lines that he'd touched and tasted and now he got to see.

Zeke traced every one with his hands, fingers sliding on them. They felt different somehow. "How did you get this one?" he asked, hovering over a bad one on Red's ribs.

"Cavalry sabre." The words were husky, but surprisingly peaceful, Red leaning into his touch, heart beating beneath his fingers.

"Oh, now. That was just too close." He didn't linger, knowing that would bring up memories, if only for him. Instead he moved on, fingers traveling up Red's chest, over the hard ridge of bone in the middle and across the swell of one lean muscle, his palm flattening over a small male nipple. "God, Red, you're just something else."

"Come to bed, Zeke. Need to see you, touch you too." Needy. Saints above, that voice was needy.

"Yes." He went easily, holding Red's hand until they reached the bed. Then he started to strip off, hoping Red liked what he saw.

"Oh, Lord save me." Red stared at him, eyes burning, hands reaching out for him, trailing over his skin.

That look made him proud, made him straighten up and show off, and he smiled, reaching out to Red again. They touched each other, but only lightly, more seeing what they'd been feeling all this time.

They settled down together, stretched out side-by-side, just looking and stroking. Red's lips were parted, the coppery mustache catching the light.

"Red. I swear, I've never seen anything so fine." Not the fancy houses of his childhood, not the first man he'd ever kissed. Not even the sight of the first bath he'd had after the war.

"Been waiting to see you as the good Lord intended for so long." Red gave him a smile, one of the ones he got for playing his fiddle, for making his music.

He hadn't looked his fill by a long shot, but the need was on him, and it was getting urgent. In fact, he was beginning to hurt a bit. Zeke moved, just until his prick brushed Red's thigh.

Red made a deep, needy noise, hand dropping to his backside, tugging him right in close until they were skin-to-skin, just burning together. Zeke gasped again, rubbing hard, feeling all that skin along his, glorying in being able to see Red's eyes as they moved together.

Such things he saw in those eyes.

The kisses made him want to close his eyes and feel, but he forced them open, watched the clear light in Red's eyes, saw himself, open lipped and panting, reflected inside.

"Red." That was all he said, just Red's name, hands dropping to Red's hip, his thigh, holding on tight. There would be time later for slow loving.

Red nodded, grunted, hips just rolling against him like they were dancing. Wouldn't that be fine, too? Zeke had loved dancing once, even though it was young ladies he had partnered then. The sweep and glide of a waltz was something a man never forgot, and he almost hummed to himself as he and Red picked up three-quarter time.

His cowboy just followed along, dancing sure as anything, little low groans a counterpoint to the melody his body was singing.

Red always heard his music just the way he meant it to be heard. Pushing back just the slightest bit, he reached between them, taking Red's prick in his hand, looking down to see his fingers slide over the wet tip. It looked decadent, thrilling.

A sweet moan filled the air, Red arching for him, whole body begging for more, for him.

The feeling was like flying. Powerful. Terrifying. Oh. He could taste too, now, couldn't he? Like Red had tasted him once, from his fingers, except he could taste right from the source. Zeke wiggled and slid, hesitating only a moment before touching the tip of his tongue to the dampness at the end of Red's prick.

"Oh..." That sound was... Sweet Lord in Heaven, nothing he'd ever done had made another person make that sound -- all awe and shock and pleasure and...

He licked again, just softly, and Red whimpered for him.

The taste was all brine, pure and addictive as opium. Zeke settled in, some impulse making him want to bury his face between Red's legs, those noises spurring him on. Surely anything that felt so fine had to be a sin, but if a man had to go to Hell, he ought to do it doing something he loved.

Low cries filled the air, the scent of Red heady and strong on the air, filling his nose like the spring flowers in the songs he played. Rough fingers slid over the homespun sheets, twisting and tangling in the cloth.

It was heady. Powerful, but not because he had power over Red. Zeke never wanted to have that over anyone. It was more the emotion he felt for this man, the tenderness. Zeke touched with his hands as well as his mouth, stroking Red's thighs, his hips.

"Zeke. Zeke, I... I can't hold on." Those bright eyes looked down at him, shocked and stunned and heated.

He just looked up and held Red's gaze, making an encouraging noise. Yes. Yes, indeed.

The sound Red made was low and raw, belly and thighs going flush and tight under him, heavy flesh swelling and jerking in his lips before a bitter salt flooded his mouth.

Oh. Oh, he'd never... Zeke took Red in, licking his lips when Red was done, rubbing his cheek gently against Red's thigh. That was something else. That was amazing.

Red panted for a moment, then drew him up along the square, heated body. Those eyes were wide and sated, the kiss he got wild as the west winds.

Zeke kissed right back, his own need hard on him now that he'd helped Red find his. He rubbed against Red, panting as his prick scraped against Red's thigh.

Red's rough hands settled on his backside, on his hip, encouraging his thrusts, increasing the friction between them.

He moved faster and faster, his breath coming hard, his prick just aching. Red's name on his lips was like the sweetest music he'd ever heard.

One of those hands shifted him, moved him until his need was sliding between Red's thighs, sawing over the hot, velvet-soft skin of sac and inner thigh as Red squeezed.

"Oh. Oh, Lord, Red." Zeke thrust, needing so badly, needing to just let go and let Red have him. It took no time, really, for his balls to draw up and empty, for him to spend against Red's thighs, hot and wet and urgent.

"I been wanting to see that forever." The rough whisper was as sweet as the hands that explored him, eased sweet pleasure from him.

Zeke all but purred, and he wondered if he could replicate that sound on his fiddle. "I have too."

Turning, he curled against Red's side, one leg over Red's thighs. "And looking forward to seeing more."

He got himself a slow smile. "I reckon we got time, you and me. Lord knows your poor hands would miss my doctoring."

"They surely would. And you'd not have my music to ease you if I didn't hang about." His heart was just too full for him to bear. Zeke kissed Red gently. "Guess I'll throw in with you."

Red nodded, cupped his jaw. "I'm thinking that we got ourselves a plan, sir."



"Then I say that's settled." He pulled Red close, pressing a kiss to that square jaw. "Now. About the rest of that seeing and touching."

"And tasting." Red blushed dark, eyes laughing. "After all, we got ourselves a door."

That blush was the sweetest thing he'd ever seen. Zeke just nodded and laughed, the sound full of a joy he thought he'd lost forever.

He'd look his fill and touch and taste, and be grateful for it. And pray that this happiness would last for the rest of his life.

## Contributors

### Dallas Coleman

Dallas Coleman grew up in Deep East Texas. She survived. She escaped. She has, thus far, resisted her daddy's attempts to reclaim her.

She writes because it's cheaper than therapy.  
[www.stemsandfeathers.org/dallascoleman/index.html](http://www.stemsandfeathers.org/dallascoleman/index.html)

### Eumenides

Eumenides is the pen name of a librarian who lives on the east coast of the United States, where she enjoys kayaking, camping and taking long walks on the beach with her three dogs. Her passions include history, music and dark haired men. She has previous sales to Torquere Press and Alyson Publications.

### Jourdan Lane

Jourdan Lane writes full-time, working out of her home in South Texas. She's had work published in Ultimate Gay Erotica 2005 and in the upcoming Ultimate Gay Erotica 2006 anthology. She's currently working on a novel called On The Edge. You can learn more about her and her works in progress at [www.jourdanlane.com](http://www.jourdanlane.com)

### Sean Michael

Often referred to as "Space Cowboy" and "Gangsta of Love" while still striving for the moniker of "Maurice," Sean Michael spends his days surfing, smutting, organizing his immense gourd collection and fantasizing about one day retiring on a small secluded island peopled entirely by horseshoe crabs. While collecting vast amounts of vintage gay pulp novels and mood rings, Sean whiles away the hours between dropping the f-bomb and perusing the kama sutra by channeling the long lost spirit of John Wayne and singing along with the soundtrack to "Chicago." <http://www.seanmichaelwrites.com>

Chris Owen

I live and write in eastern Canada, where the winds blow cool and calm on the good days, wicked and fast on the bad. There's rain and sun, and in the winter there's snow... a lot of snow. A nice fire to keep warm, a nice pen with good flow, and a decent notebook are all that I really require. Which is not to say that the PowerBook isn't the best thing ever. I went to a bunch of schools, learned a lot of things, and now make stuff up because not to do so is unthinkable.

I have various people, a dog, a tank of sea monkeys, an old Victorian house under constant upgrades, and an in ground pool which is filled with gravel. It's much more interesting that way, although it makes it tough to swim.

I like Star Gazer Lilies, micro-brewed beer, and Australian wines. Granny Smith apples and slice of sharp cheddar are the foods of the gods.

Parhelion

I live and dabble with my wife/civil partner/very, very close friend - feel free to select the appropriate phrase for your legal jurisdiction - in a New England small-town house full of pets and books. I have firmly vowed never to try and make a living writing.

A.M. Riley

A.M. Riley is a film editor and sometime poet with an interest in all things erotic. The mythic, the strange, the heroic and the fantastic are the subjects of Riley's

stories. Riley has published in Changeling Press and Torquere Press and can be found at <http://www.geocities.com/metaforgirl>.

### Julia Talbot

Julia Talbot resides in the Southwest of the United States with her dog and several houseplants, and has not quit her day job. She has a penchant for blank books, gay porn, and big, ugly hats. She can most often be found in coffee shops and restaurants, scribbling in her notebook and entertaining other diners with her mutterings. <http://thegates.net/juliatalbot/>

### BA Tortuga

B. A. Tortuga enjoys indulging in the shallow side of life, with hobbies that include collecting margarita recipes, hot tub dips, and ogling hot guys at the beach. A connoisseur of the perverse and esoteric, BA's days are spent among dusty tomes of ancient knowledge, or, conversely, surfing porn sites in the name of research. Mixing the natural born southern propensity for sarcasm and the environmental western straight-shooting sensibility, BA manages to produce mainstream fiction, literary erotica, and fine works of pure, unadulterated smut.

BA's latest projects include a romance about a dominatrix and her former 'pet', a serial fiction about a pair of Louisiana twins, a novel about two rodeo cowboys, and the ongoing work on a novel set in the old west. <http://www.batortuga.com>

## Vic Winter

Heat in real life is the bane of Vic's life, whose favorite season is winter. Vic's life is far more mundane than fiction, and when it comes to fiction, the hotter the better is Vic's motto. Make it romantic, make it sexy, make it erotic, but definitely make it hot.

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