

Single Shots



volume ten

Single Shot Vol. X
by SA Clements

Torquere Press

www.torquerepress.com

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First published in www.torquerepress.com, 2005

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Eyes Wide Open

by Willa Okati

Matt would be the first one to admit he didn't know much about dating. He knew not to bring flowers—too girly—and he knew not to leave his socks lying around—too sloppy. Outside of that, though, he was pretty clueless. Not without enthusiasm, though. He threw himself into his relationships, heart and soul, and loved with all his might.

Being that intense tended to have some drawbacks.

Like, for example, not having a clue when something was "over".

The double latte sized mug of cold water in his face as he peacefully slept at Ben's, though, was a good indicator that Ben wanted to talk. And as he sat up, scrubbing liquid dribbles out of his face, Matt figured this wouldn't be one of the *good* kinds of talks, which usually, in his opinion, included the words "can we fuck now?"

Ben stood above him, cup dangling from one hand, his face twisted into a scowl. "I have so had enough of you, Matty."

"Matt," he mumbled, blinking. "I hate nicknames. *Benny*."

"What? You think you can snap back at me?" Ben demanded. "Listen, Matt, you are completely the one at fault here, so don't you cop an attitude." Ben sat down on the edge of the futon, once faultlessly dressed in rich, navy blue sheets and comforter, now water-spotted, and sighed. He put his forehead in one hand and held the other out, palm facing

Matt. "I really can't take your drama queen antics this morning. Don't even go there."

"I wasn't..."

"Oh, you so were!" Ben flapped his hand in distress. "I was going to be genteel about this. Kind. But the fact is, Matt, it's over between us. All we ever had was mediocre sex, and not too much of that."

"That wasn't what you said when I had you on your back last week, with your legs over my shoulders. It was more like *ohgodohgodohgod*," Matt pointed out, struggling out of sleep into the state of Well and Truly Pissed Off. "We haven't fucked since then because you said you didn't want to. I figured you were sore or something, so I was being nice."

"Nice! You!" Ben rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Matt, nice doesn't enter into it. I need a strong man. One who'll sweep me up into his arms and carry me off to a bed that doesn't fold."

"You're six foot one."

"One who'll twirl me around, light as a feather, his muscles bulging."

"They'd fucking have to bulge. You weigh 165."

"Did I *ask* you for a breakdown of my body?" Ben snapped.

"Yeah, well, with a steroid queen like the one you're describing, arms would be the only thing that'd bulge." Matt sat up completely. He stared at Ben. Gorgeous Ben, with his sun-bleached hair and satin-smooth, heat-lamp-tanned skin. Ben, who had a thing for nail polish, and ... well, shit.

He made an unhappy sound. "So it's over?"

Ben stared at him. He stood, stalked to the sink, refilled the mug, and threw the water at Matt's head a second time. "God, Matt! Get your head out of the clouds and down to earth! Yes, it's over. Gather your things and leave." He folded his arms across his chest and looked up, chin trembling. "I'm afraid we were just never meant to be."

Okay. Nice clear clue that the good times were over.

Again.

Damn it.

* * * *

That was the injury. Insult was not even having enough for a cup of coffee to comfort himself as he trudged back to his own shitty, cramped little studio apartment, the one he shared with a roommate no less. Mmm, coffee. Hot, steaming, rich and black, or sweetened with sugar and cream until it turned a milky brown. Add a little chocolate syrup, and you had delicious mocha. God, he loved coffee. And fuck, even after the impromptu shower wake-up call, he needed a cup. Desperately.

But you can't make two fifty out of a pocket that holds only a small handful of pennies and three dimes.

Damn it.

Matt slumped as he passed his favorite café. God, he'd have loved to go in there. Okay, it was the perpetual student's version of a meat market, where all the cute, eligible doctoral graduate students hung out, including the gay ones, just cruising for a nice piece of meat, not caring if

he was on the rebound ... and where was the bad in that, again? Matt sighed unhappily.

Maybe if he sat on the corner with his baseball cap out and sang a few rounds of "Kumbaya" he could raise enough for a cup.

Or he could just go home, crank up the ancient yard sale coffeepot he and Ross shared, and drink his own Motorola brew. For someone who loved coffee the way he did, he couldn't make it worth a damn. Never had been able to figure that one out.

He checked his watch. Eight-thirty. Hot damn! Didn't Ross have that big drafting project due today? Dollars to doughnuts, he'd already be up and have a pot going. His java was at least a little better than Matt's.

And ooh, there could be doughnuts too. Nothing soothed the savage, overworked beast like sugary pastries, in his opinion.

Well, there was sex. But it'd been kind of a dry spell for Ross. Except for when he and Matt were both single and really bored and...

Hmm. Going home sounded better and better, come to think of it. He hurried up, almost starting to hum underneath his breath. So he'd been tossed out on his ass. Again. That didn't mean the day couldn't take a definite turn for the better, and soon.

* * * *

Ross glanced up from his mounds of drafting paper and stacks of books as Matt came through their front door.

Apparently taking in the sight of Matt's hair, still dripping wet underneath his hat, he asked: "You ended it with Ben?"

"I would have liked to get in Ben's end. Unfortunately, he had other plans." Matt hung his cap on a hook.

"Plans that don't include you?"

"Got it in one."

"I told you he was a Ken Doll drama queen bitch."

Matt sighed. "Yeah, you did."

"But did you listen?"

"Obviously not..."

"Nope. You just looked at those buns of steel and your tongue unfurled like the wolf's in a Friz Freeling cartoon. Little hearts and stars in your eyes. Honestly, Matt. When are you going to start looking past the surface to a man's insides?"

"When they develop X-ray vision?"

Ross threw his pencil down and glared. "Matt, I'm serious. If you want any sympathy from me, you get a dose of tough love with it."

"Better tough love than no love." Heaving a deep sigh, Matt worked his way around a leaning tower of Pisa modeled in papier-mache and sat at Ross' feet. He leaned his wet head up against one denim-clad knee. Mmm, nice knee. "Okay, so I can be a little blind to a guy's faults when he has the ass of an Adonis."

The pencil thumped his head. "A *little* blind?"

"Fine, a lot blind. But come on, Ross. You know that once I fall in love, I'll do anything for the object of my affections."

"Including turning an even blinder eye to his imperfections," Ross muttered. All the same, he ran his hand

through Matt's hair. "What you need is someone that'll be a different kind of challenge to you. Someone who's not all about how pretty they are. Someone with heart and soul."

Matt nuzzled into Ross' leg. "Yes, sir."

"Stop it. You know calling me 'sir' gets me horny."

Matt glanced up, eyes gleaming. "Yes, sir."

The pencil thumped him again. "Stop it! At least have some coffee and a doughnut before you jump my bones for a pity fuck."

"Does that mean you'll give me one?" Matt asked hopefully.

Ross let out a breath of air. "Does that mean you're interested? My dick thinks I've become a monk."

"Fold-out couch? Meet you there in five?"

"Coffee and doughnuts afterwards?"

"You're so on."

* * * *

Lying together in the afterglow, Matt's jeans still around his ankles and Ross' shirt undone, both sporting hickeys and light scratches, they caught their breath together with a little laugh. "It's a shame we don't do this more often," Ross said idly, plucking one of Matt's nipples.

"Yeah, but it's a friendly thing. At least I have my eyes wide open about that."

"Me too. We're both in search of that one great love." Ross sighed. "The one who'll knock us blind."

Pause.

"Is it just me, or are we both damned fools?" Ross asked.

"Damned fools, I think," Matt answered. He sat up, slipping his jeans back over his hips, tucking his cock in and to the left, and zipping up. Not an unsmooth maneuver, but he caught a hair and spent the next few second screeching. Ross laughed his ass off at Matt, or almost.

Matt turned back to his friend and roommate. "You're right, you know? I need to look at things in a different light. Not just cruise for the young, the gay and the gorgeous. Just because we happen to fall into that category—"

Ross shoved Matt's leg. "Prick."

"You like my prick. My prick and your hole have formed a good, friendly relationship. But I was saying, I should get out there and meet new people. Ones that aren't just looking to cruise for the best piece of ass they can find. And I need to do something besides meet men. Something in the community."

Ross patted Matt on the back. "Good boy."

"So ... you wanna join me on this quest?"

Ross yawned. "I would, if I didn't have this project to finish. But I tell you what. I know of something to take your mind off love and mush, besides getting you out and about. They're looking for help at the shelter, mentors at the gay student union, and last I heard, some subjects down at the art department. Live models."

"Live—? Doesn't that include, you know, baring it all?"

Ross clipped Matt across the ear. "It does, but not like that, dummy. It's for Art. The artists who draw you couldn't care less about the size of your dick. It'll be a good object lesson for you."

"Hmm." Matt sat with his legs crossed for a moment, deep in thought. Pose, huh? Show it all off, but not for any reason except providing a non-sexual service. Helping people out. Putting his body on display as a body, not a walking fuckable. Maybe improving his mind—God knew, from the grades on his last term papers, that he could use it.

He sniffed himself. "Should I shower first?"

Ross hit him with a pillow.

* * * *

"I'm sorry, but it's out of the question."

Matt kept the smile frozen on his face as he nodded. The Dean of Art Studies, sitting across from him, looked terribly earnest. "Word gets around every semester that we pay for life drawing models, and, well, the spaces fill up more quickly than you would believe."

Pay. It would have been double-plus-good. And he'd come too late.

Damn it.

Matt tried adding a hint of 'winsome' to his face. "Is there a waiting list? You know, in case someone drops out, or can't make it for the day?"

"I'm afraid that our waiting list is full, as well." The Dean shuffled some papers back into a folder. "There's really no point in even having you fill out an application. Besides, to be honest..." he leaned forward, eyes sharp and gray behind his glasses ... "you're not exactly the sort of model we're looking for. We prefer variety in our subjects, from the fat to the too-

thin, to the old to the racially diverse. You're simply a very handsome young man, and that isn't interesting enough."

Handsome? Matt added a hint of a twinkle to his eyes. "You old dog, you," he said roguishly. "So I look good in a pair of jeans?"

"Quite good," the Dean said almost absently, moving his papers around, eyes fixed on them. "But really, attractive a quality as that might be, I can't allow you to jump in line." He glanced up. "And before you get the wrong idea, I am most certainly not flirting with you. I do happen to be gay, but I am not looking, particularly among the student population here at this university."

"I'm gay!" Matt blurted. "Doesn't that make me appealing as a subject? I mean, an art subject?"

The Dean laughed. "I'm rather afraid you're in the majority there, rather than the minority." His look was kind. "Truly, thank you for stopping by, but I'm afraid that you've wasted your time."

Damn it.

Matt gave up. He and Ross would just have to go back, literally, to the drawing board. Maybe with Ross on his back in the middle of some papers. A buddy fuck soothed the soul when a person's ego had been so thoroughly deflated.

"Robert?" A strong, confident feminine voice accompanied a knock to the door. "Do you mind if I—"

"No, not at all." The Dean scooted his chair back, beckoning with one hand. "Come in, by all means. I'm just letting a student know about the ins and outs of our life studies program."

"I'm sure you are." The person, a woman, too thin by ten or twenty pounds, slipped in and stood with one hand on the back of Matt's chair. Without permission, she put a hand under his chin and tilted his face up to the light. "You know, Robert, unless you had plans for this one, I've got an idea."

The Dean cleared his throat. "Matt, this is Amaryllis. Amaryllis is faculty liaison to our artists in residence and a few others, those we've enticed from other universities."

Amaryllis didn't bother with a hello. Instead, she tilted Matt's face this way and that, her eyes narrowing as he went in and out of light and shadow. "Robert, he's perfect. Exactly what Julian wanted."

"Oh!" The Dean blinked. "Julian requested a new model?"

"Yep. I came to tell you. His last one objected to working such long hours. Said he had to study sometime." For the first time, Amaryllis smiled at Matt. "Some people just don't understand art. But I get the feeling that you do, don't you?"

Matt swallowed around a suddenly dry throat, the theme to "Jaws" playing in his mind. "I—I think I do," he said hoarsely.

Amaryllis turned her back on the Dean. "You see—Matt, was it?—Julian is a very special artist. One of the best I've ever met. His work's going to be in galleries and museums just as soon as he gets his name known, and I'm doing everything I can to get him there. All he needs is a few good men. Models, that is. You look like the very thing."

"Um ... I'm glad?"

"Good! You'll do it, then." Amaryllis turned to the Dean. "Don't bother with the application, Robert. I'll get his

paperwork expedited through Human Resources so that he can start right away."

"Right away?" Matt croaked.

Amaryllis gave a definite nod. "Tonight, I think. Julian's muse is paying an extended visit these days, and when you're in the mood to create, you don't want to waste time." Digging in the pocket of her elegantly tailored jacket, she pulled out a card and pushed it into Matt's numb fingers. "Here. This is one of Julian's. I'll tell him you'll be by at, say, eight o'clock tonight."

"Eight?" Matt frowned. He didn't know much about art, but he did know artists needed light. "Isn't that kind of late? Or does he use sunlamps? Is he a painter, a metalworker, what?"

"He's a sculptor," Amaryllis said, tipping Matt's head back for one last measuring look. "You'll be paid by the hour, but mind you, the session could go on for a while. But hey, more money, and that's always good, right?" She smiled the kind of smile that made Matt's balls want to crawl back up in his body and hide. "He'll be expecting you. Directions to his studio in the Department are on the back on the card."

"Amaryllis, really, this is very sudden—" the Dean protested.

"Rubbish, Robert. I know how to go after a good thing when I see one." Amaryllis finally let go of Matt's face and turned on her heel to head for the door. "Eight o'clock, Matt. Don't be late."

She paused, and glanced over her shoulder. "Oh, one more thing. Julian is blind. He'll have to use his hands to touch you

and get a sense of what you look like. That doesn't bother you, does it? Good!"

And with that, she sailed away, leaving both Matt and the Dean slumped, mouths slightly open. The Dean was the first to recover. "Well," he said a little feebly, tapping his papers yet again. "It looks like you have a job after all, young man."

Matt swallowed. He grasped the card tightly in his hand. A blind artist. Who'd need to feel him up in order to sculpt him. How the hell could he do that, anyway? Didn't you have to be able to see to shape clay? Unless he planned on feeling Matt up really, really well ... "I guess I do," he said, his voice wavering. "Eight o'clock."

He swallowed again. *Remember what Ross said. Do it for the team. Win one for the Gipper. Besides, money. Money good. Money our friend.* "I'll be there."

* * * *

Ross raised his head from the foldout couch bed, where he'd been lying half-asleep in an exhausted stupor. "You're shitting me."

"Nope." Matt took off his cap and twisted it in his hands. "No joke, man. This woman was like a combination of the Terminator and a T-Rex. She even smiled like a predator."

"Something is so rotten in the state of Denmark."

"Hey, I showered."

Ross threw a pillow at him. "If you try and tell me you haven't read Hamlet, I'll come over there and hit you with something harder," he muttered into the remaining cushion.

"I meant, this is fishy. Why would she just pounce on you like

that? She knows something she isn't telling you, that's for damn sure."

"Hey, you were the one encouraging me to get out there and do something!" Matt protested.

"Yeah, something like Meals on Wheels or helping stuff Pride letters. Not baring it all for some blind artist who's gonna feel you up like you're a silk shirt."

"Silk shirt. Oh, my God. What should I wear?"

"Like you've suddenly started caring about that?" Ross shrugged deeper into the bed. "Besides, it's not like it matters, Matt. You drop trous, shirt, and everything before you even meet the artist. They give you a robe, and then you toss that, too, when you're told to."

"Oh." Matt went pale. "Fuck. I'm really going to do this, aren't I?"

"Unless I can talk you out of it."

Matt frowned. He dug the card out of his pocket, and glanced at it. *Julian Ashton*, he read. *Artist in Residence*. Underneath the name, and a phone number was a small sketch of a male form, reclining on its side. He flipped it over to read the directions. "No..." he said slowly. "I don't think you can. Besides, if there's one thing I can do, it's follow through, when people let me."

"Point. Now would you shut up and angst quietly so that I can get some sleep?"

"You'll only wake up in a couple of hours Mr. Bitchypants because you napped in the middle of the day."

"Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up."

"Shutting, shutting." Matt raised his hands. The card caught a beam of light coming through their tightly drawn curtains. He gazed at it for a second. A blind artist, huh? Well ... one thing was for sure.

He wouldn't be bored that night.

* * * *

Bored, no.

Terrified, yes.

Amaryllis hadn't been there to meet him, but she'd left an envelope with his name thumb-tacked to the door that led to all the artists' studios, or at least those lucky bastards that had their own place in the university to "create". He hadn't realized it before, but he guessed that meant this Julian really was as special as she claimed.

It was a big, thick envelope. Inside were forms, all neatly typed up and just needing his signature, so he could get paid. Lots of forms. More than when he'd last done his taxes, but then again, he always got lazy and did the EZ version. Pausing—not procrastinating, no, really not—he'd scribbled his name by all the multiple X's on the various pages, stuffed the pages back in the envelope, and hung it on the door.

One piece of paper, he kept out. Directions to the models' changing room and a note saying that he should only wear a robe when he went in to meet Julian. Just like Ross had said.

So. This was good, and this was bad. On the one hand, he wasn't ashamed of showing off his body. On the other hand, he did tend to draw the line when it came to shaking his willie

at complete strangers. On yet another hand, the artist was blind, so he shouldn't react with anything but interest in his work, right? He'd be all about shape and form, not, well, Shape and Form. Wouldn't get distracted, either. On still one more hand—God, he needed more hands, really—whoa, what that would do for his sex life!—if he was going to be naked, and the artist was blind, that meant he'd get felt up. All over. Even in the places his lovers and doctor usually only got to check out. Thoroughly investigated by a stranger.

Yep, scared as hell, check.

But no, he could do this. He could. Squaring his shoulders, Matt opened the door and poked his head in. "Hello?" he called. "Anyone here?"

He heard a vague stirring from a room towards the back of a long hallway. "Hello!" a slightly accented voice—Russian?—called back. "Is that Matt Canner?"

"Yep!"

"Wonderful, this is wonderful! You're only a moment or two late. Come, come, change into your robe in the waiting room, and then down to the studio at the end. I will be waiting for you."

Ohhh-kayyyy ... the guy sounded a little too enthusiastic to Matt, but then again, what did he know? Maybe the guy got a mental hard-on from the thought of making something out of clay, and he was all fired up for a good fuck, so to speak.

It had better be only so to speak. Not that he'd mind if the guy turned out to be hot, but...

He shook himself. "Okay!" he called back. "Changing now!"

The small room, filled with lockers, had one with his name written on a piece of tape above it. Staring at the handwriting that matched Amaryllis', Matt stripped off his T-shirt, jeans, boxers, socks and shoes, then stood there shivering until he spotted a rack of freshly washed white terry robes. Snatching one, he dove into it and wrapped it around himself. A couple of sizes too big, but warm as the fire Satan toasted his toes at, it held him like a hug.

"Last studio down the hall?" he called out.

"The very last one! You are ready? Hurry, then!" the artist—*Julian*—insisted.

Matt swallowed. "Coming," he shouted back, stepping out of the room.

Oh, shit! Cold floor! Cold floor cold floor cold floor! Nearly squeaking, Matt hop-skipped his way down to the studio way faster than he'd intended, screeching to a halt when he hit the doorway. It stood a little ajar. The rich, earthy smell of clay floated out to greet him, along with the hint of something a little spicy, and definitely nice. Also ... well, hello, miss Mary. God, that guy must have really been something special if they let him get away with *that*.

"Come in, come in!" Julian encouraged. His voice held a little laughter. "I promise I do not bite."

Matt edged in the doorway. "How could you tell that I was..."

"I did not hear your footsteps approaching any closer, despite the chill of the floor," Julian replied. Matt glanced around, but couldn't see him. "You do know that I am blind, yes? Good! That saves time. Usually. Unfortunately, the

wretched student I let borrow my studio has gone and misplaced some of my tools, and I must find them before I can—"

"Oh, hey, can I help?"

"No!" Julian's voice was sharp. He softened it almost immediately in apology. "Forgive me, but I must do such things on my own. Do you understand me?"

Matt didn't, really, but he let it go. "Okay. Is there anywhere you want me, like sitting down in a chair or lying on that divan or *oh my holy God and Christ on a crutch*."

Julian—it could only be Julian—had stood up, triumphantly clutching a handful of chisels and bizarre implements. That wasn't what had caused Matt to take the Lord's name in severe vain, though. No, it was the fact that Julian, the blind artist, was the very picture of every wet dream that Matt had ever had, with a cherry on top.

Well, damn.

Tall, over six feet by an inch or so. Blond, but not bleached-blond, his natural golden locks tumbling to his shoulders in messy elf-knots. A face like the one piece of art Matt *did* recognize on sight, Michelangelo's *David*. Dressed in a canvas apron covered in smears and smudges of clay, yes, but underneath that—blue jeans that looked to be painted on, framing an ass well worth framing, a sizeable bulge in the front, and legs that went on for miles. Add to that a lean, lithely muscled chest covered only by the smock and a sleeveless "wifebeater" T-shirt, and that was a body that had Matt instantly weak in the knees.

Funny thing, though, the most arresting part about Julian was his eyes. Matt stared, fascinated, sure that he wouldn't be slammed for rudeness. He'd never seen eyes like that before. Blue, robin's egg blue, with no pupil at all. Azure gems set in the middle of a god's face.

Nice smile, too. Really nice smile. Even white teeth. He waved the tools in Matt's direction, grinning. "We will not need these at first, of course, but it is good to know where they are, yes?" he said happily. "As to where you should sit, I will pose you in a moment, but first, because of my special requirements, I need you to come here. Close to me, if you please. Again, do not be afraid." His smile broadened. "I promise, I truly do not bite."

Yeah, but would you, if I asked really, really nicely? Matt licked his dry lips and stepped forward slowly. Oh, hell. What if he popped a boner—

Well, damn. He'd already gone up like a balloon. Nearly at Julian's side, he skipped back a little. "Um, could we wait just a second? I've got an, um, cramp."

Frogs. Slimy little hoppy toads. My second-grade teacher in her granny panties. Amaryllis in a domme outfit with a riding crop. Ben throwing water in my face. Come on, damn you, go down! Down, I say! Matt scrambled through his mind for anything that would make his sudden, rampant erection deflate. *Um ... not being paid? Ross laughing at me when I tell him about this?*

Nada.

Well, damn.

"By all means, stretch out your muscles!" Julian exclaimed. "But first, I must touch—no, *shake* your hand. English, it is such a funny language, no? It is wonderful to meet you." The man put out his hand, and Matt took it automatically. *Ooh*. Long fingers and a good, strong, dry grip.

His heart started beating faster. Quickly, he yanked back before those sensitive fingers picked up on it. Julian might think the wrong thing. Just because Matt was straight as a Slinky didn't mean Julian was. Or that he'd be interested at all. Or that he'd do anything, even if Matt flung himself at the artist's feet like a crazy little part of his brain wanted to do and begged to suck his cock, and ... He shook his head, hard. His cock, like the Grinch's heart, had grown three times in size. *Some roads are best not traveled down*, he thought to himself.

But to his relief, Julian didn't seem to notice anything awry. "Please, take your time. I am sure you have been warned that I take mine. Have a look around, if you like." He gestured to the broad room, filled with all sorts of artists' tools—tubes and buckets of paint and oils, potter's wheels, stretched canvas on easels, lumps of solid-looking clay, and even a loom. Two stools sat in the middle of the casual mess, both smudged with dried clay.

Oh! Oh, sitting would be good. He could tuck himself between his legs, then, and the pain plus the position would surely help his monster-sized boner go back to being a teeny little soft weenie. "Can I sit down?"

"But of course." Julian smiled, and made his way unerringly to one of the stools. "Here, I will sit with you."

Well, damn. No teeny-weenie penis if Julian was going to be in such close proximity. Still, he'd already made the suggestion, so there was no help for it. Holding back a sigh, Matt picked his way through the clutter and over to the remaining stool. He sat down carefully, poking his cock between his tightly closed legs. Hurt like absolute hell, but much less embarrassing than a great big *hi, you're hot as hell, bet you'd never have guessed what I thought about you, would you?*

Julian smiled again as he sat down. God, the things that smile did for an already fabulous face. "Yes, that is perfect. I will explain a bit about what we must do while we sit, yes?"

"Yes?" No touchee, no feelee? That had potential.

Damn it.

"Sounds good to me," Matt said, adjusting himself a little. Ow, ow, and triple ow. Still better than the alternative.

"Good! First, you do understand that I will need to touch you—to feel your face, all the angles and planes, before I may begin?"

Oh! His face? Just his face? Oh.

"That's fine," Matt said absently, trying to sort out his tangle of emotions.

"I am doing a series of busts, you see. Beauty in America." Julian beamed. "Amaryllis tells me that there is something most unique in your face. She has a good eye. I am most eager to discover what it is she saw."

"Just ... just the face, then?"

"The face, the head, and the shoulders." Julian tilted his head to a side. "I do not understand your tone of voice, Matt."

"It's, uh, it's nothing. But one question? If you're just doing the top half, then why the robe? I could have worn my jeans, and been a lot less—" He stopped, almost cramming one fist in his mouth. Christ, what he'd been about to say!

Julian chuckled. "It is customary, for one, and for another, it may be necessary for me to examine the rest of you, to make certain that I have all proportions correct."

Well, damn. Matt winced. If his hard-on didn't go down soon...

"Proportions," he said weakly.

"It is all done with clinical interest, I assure you. I mean nothing personal by any of my touches." Julian leaned forward and put a hand on Matt's knee. "Well, with this I mean comfort. But when I am working with my art, there is nothing but business to consider. Are you quite comfortable with this?"

Fuck, no. "Sure," Matt said with a smile in his voice. "Go on ahead any time. Feel me up. I mean—oh, God—touch me—aw, shit—"

"Matt, Matt," Julian laughed. "Young American men, though beautiful, live with their—how do you say it?—foots in their mouths. Come, come here. Closer. Let me touch your face, so you will know what this feels like. It is painless, I promise."

That's what you think. Matt shifted again, nodded, then blushed and said "Sure," out loud. "Go for it, Magic Fingers."

"Magic Fingers. I believe I like the sound of that. You have quite a good hand. Perhaps I will do your bust with your chin resting on one palm, and call your piece by that name."

"I don't know if I'd do that. It's sort of an American culture reference."

Amusement colored Julian's voice. "Please rest assured I know what Magic Fingers are. I have enjoyed them from time to time. But surely, you have noticed that I have a sense of humor? I enjoy my little jokes so. Now, please be still. No talking, not until I have finished." He raised his hands, gently moving toward Matt's face. "I begin now."

Matt sat still as he possibly could, feeling his cock throb between his legs as Julian's long, sensitive hands touched his face. Fingers swept over his cheekbones and down the length of his jaw, across his eyebrows and forehead, under his chin, and one finger even slid down the angle of his nose, measuring it. A totally asexual touch, but hell if it didn't have Matt getting wet. Those fingers were amazing. What would they feel like on his nipples, his cock? Probing inside him, hitting that sweet spot? He'd be seeing stars for weeks. He'd—

He stopped himself. *No! Bad! Bad Matt!*

Julian let out a deep breath, sitting back. He looked immensely satisfied. "Yes, Amaryllis was right again. You have something so unique to your face, Matt. It is a handsome one, to be certain, but there is a sense of emotion behind there that I hope to capture in my poor clay representation. Something eager, almost boyish, yet grown and mature. You will be a wonderful addition to my showing."

"I'm—I'm glad," Matt said. He wasn't really paying attention. All he could think of was having those hands on him again, stroking down his face so butterfly soft, yet so firm and smooth. His chest and groin ached for an even better kind of touch. But God, he didn't even know if the man was gay. What if he made a sudden move, discovered Mr. Way Too Happy, and kicked Matt out in disgust? Matt didn't think he could bear that.

To his relief, although it was with some sadness, his erection began to deflate. Carefully, he eased his legs apart. Yes, yes, much better. Nothing to be ashamed of in the showers, but nice and soft, now, and—

Oh, damn!

One of Julian's hands landed in the middle of Matt's bare chest. "You have excellent muscles," he said thoughtfully. "You work out, do you not?"

God, that sounded like a line. If only—and hello, there went his anatomy again, boingy-boingy. Matt cursed his loins, rebellious little horn-dogs that they were, and squished his legs together again.

"You shift position so," Julian said with a frown. "Do I make you uncomfortable?"

Matt swallowed hard. "No," he said honestly—well, dishonestly, but what could he do. "This is fine." *It's more than fine, and it could be so much better.*

Julian's fingers slid across to one nipple, circling it. "I may go so far down, thus, in my sculpture. Does that bother you?"

Matt coughed. "No." he said. "It doesn't bother me." *Bother me some more. Please?*

As if he read Matt's thoughts, Julian circled the nipple with those really, superlatively wonderful fingers, drawing rings around it. Matt couldn't help his body's reaction as it peaked into a small, stiff brown nub. "Are you cold?" Julian asked. His voice had dropped a little, almost like a purr.

He was, but that wasn't why.... "No," Matt said. He needed some water in the worst way. Or a kiss. Yes, that would so be the ticket. But he didn't know if....

Julian put a second hand on his chest, kneading gently. "So good," he murmured, "so firm. Amaryllis was right; you are exactly what I wanted." He paused. "Matt, your muscles have gone tight. Does this bother you?"

Matt answered honestly: "No." *It doesn't bother me at all. That's the problem.*

Those elegant hands reached for his face again, sure and steady as if Julian could see, running lightly over his nose, his cheekbones, and his chin one more time. Moving on, hey delicately brushed his eyes with both thumbs. Not stopping, growing bolder in their touch, they carded through Matt's hair, Julian smiling as it flopped through his fingers. He stroked over Matt's lips, open in a smile that Matt couldn't help. "Good," Julian murmured, "so good."

Then, his hands were moving again, lower and lower still. Stroking Matt's neck, his jaw line. "You are doing so well," Julian said softly. "Not flinching at all. You do not mind my touch."

No. Not at all.

Unable to help himself, the rest of Matt's body began to react to the gentle, butterfly touches. His nipples ached and

tingled. His cock throbbed for want of some attention. He could feel it brushing his stomach, wet with pre-come at the tip.

And still, the hands moved on and on. Ever moving downward. Oh, God, Matt wanted that man. But he couldn't have him—or could he?

One of Julian's hands slipped down Matt's chest again, down the flatness of his belly. It couldn't have been an accident, because those fingers were far too sure, brushing across his stomach and toying with the thin trail of hair that led down to his cock. Twisting the fine hairs between his fingers, an odd smile on his face. "I cannot see you," Julian said, voice very low. "But I sense—I feel—that you do not mind my touch. What I felt in your face, I feel in your body, Matt. Beauty. Exuberance. Passion. Desire—desire for me, do I dare to hope?"

Matt breathed out, the air trembling as it left his lungs. "Julian, I—we barely know each other, but—"

Julian shook his head and placed a finger over Matt's lips. "Hush, hush. Some times, a thing is right, right away. Do you know how welcome that is? I have been lonely for a long time, Matt, with only my art to keep me company. Are you willing to change that? Would you, if I asked you, lie with me and kiss me?"

Leaning across the distance between them, Julian ghosted his mouth across Matt's in the lightest, airiest of kisses. His hand slid lower still, to the tumescence between Matt's legs, his cock slipped free, determined to be part of whatever magic was going on. Julian whispered in Matt's ear: "Stop me

if you want to, handsome Matt. But I beg of you, do not say no..."

Matt, caught by the feel of Julian's hands, the sparkling radiance in those soft touches, could not find it in himself to speak a word, except a silent: *Oh, damn!*

* * * *

As it turned out, Julian had a Chinese screen set up in his studio, made of fine rice paper painted himself in wild, fantastic designs that Matt could only marvel at—in passing, as they tumbled past it on their way to the futon that lay beyond. As Julian explained between kisses, sometimes he worked until he fell down from exhaustion, and it paid to have a soft place to lie for an hour or so of sleep.

"I have not used it for this purpose before," he said between hungry kisses, devouring Matt's mouth as if he would eat him alive. "There has been no one, not since I came to this town. I have tasted American men before, but no one—I swear to you, Matt, no one has been so open with their kisses as you. American men are so repressed, nothing like the hearty Russians I grew up with. I felt this openness in your expression, and I had to taste it."

Matt groaned, his fingers finally getting a chance to do the walking they'd been aching to do, sliding down Julian's hard back to caress the firm muscles of his ass, cupping them, then gripping them tightly. "Less talk," he managed, "More sex."

"Sex, yes, my God, Matt, it has been so long. Long and long and long..."

"And longer," Matt said, sliding one hand around to grasp the bulge in Julian's jeans. He stroked it through the denim, running his fingers up and down the length. Ooh, but Julian made pretty sounds when he did that! He tried it again—same result. A man could develop a taste for groans and soft, panting wails like that. "If you liked that," he said softly, giving back as good as he got with the kissing, "then you'll love this."

It was a dream come true, but who the hell was Matt to question the good fortune when it fell, literally on one occasion as they'd stumbled back there, into his lap? His mouth was far from dry, now. It watered for a taste of exotic meat. He wanted Julian's cock resting heavy and wet on his tongue, ripe for the suckling and finger-lickin' good to boot. Falling to his knees, he nuzzled his face into the artist's groin, laughing low in his throat at the desperate sound Julian made. He stropped his cheek against Julian's cock, pressing tight against his already obscenely tight zipper. "Get ready," he whispered. "As we say in America, heeere's Johnny."

Matt's eager fingers made quick work of undoing the top button on Julian's jeans. He drew the man's zipper down, click by click, and was surprised but *definitely* pleased when Julian's cock fell out, no underwear at all. You had to love those Europeans. Less to push out of the way. In fact, he could barely wait long enough to peel that sinful denim down off Julian's hips and far enough as his thighs before his mouth took over from his brain, granted, not the first time in his life that had happened, and he drew Julian's cock into his mouth.

First the tip, uncut but already so swollen that the foreskin had rolled back, bunched tight as a turtleneck around the thick length of Julian's organ. Matt suckled on that, lapping the sticky beads of pre-come as they bubbled out, savoring each one like caviar. Salty, musky, and just a little sweet, as if Julian ate a lot of fruit. He probed with his tongue, sweeping circles around the fat head, poking into the gaping slit for more of those juices. When Julian's hands came down hard on his shoulders, and his accented voice changed from babbling to pleas, Matt took pity on him.

If there was one thing Matt was good at, as a gay man, it was sucking cock. He'd practiced on every partner he'd had, and they'd been more than happy to let him play and learn like a good little student. He might be something of a slacker when it came to seminars and group discussions, but Matt had taken his lessons in pleasuring a dick very, very seriously, and he meant to give Julian the benefit of all his learning.

Grasping Julian's ass in his hands, he slid forward, taking the length of the artist's gorgeous, thick cock into his mouth. A little slimmer than his own, but with an inch to grow on, Matt knew he could handle this one. And oh, damn, he was so ready to do just that. Lapping with his tongue, sweeping patterns and sigils on the heavy, musky flesh, he sucked in and kept sucking, pulling Julian's cock deeper ... and deeper ... and deeper ... until finally, he felt the tip of it bump the back of his throat.

Time to show you what kind of art I can make, Matt thought. Relaxing the muscles of his throat, he let Julian's

cock slide even further down—and swallowed, working hard, squeezing that tip as if in a vice. Julian let out a loud, ululating cry and let go for a moment before gripping Matt's shoulders tighter, those gorgeous slim fingers working hard at his tendons, pushing him onward.

Sally forth and tally ho, Matt thought jubilantly. He worked his head back and forth, taking Julian's cock deep and letting it slide back out, slick with pre-come in the back of his throat, wet with saliva, tasting like something wild and exotic. Tasting of pure Julian.

"Stop," Julian gasped, pushing at Matt's shoulders. "Stop, or I will spend myself, Matt. I beg of you, stop!"

Matt almost whimpered, but he carefully drew off with a wet *pop* and let that delicious cock go. It hung heavy in front of his face, like a ripe fruit just out of reach. He looked up at Julian, his face woebegone, forgetting that the artist couldn't see him.

Those gorgeous lapis lazuli eyes, bereft of any pupil, still managed to convey regret and hot, burning hunger. Julian roughly raked a hand through Matt's hair, caressing him with a rough sort of affection that betrayed how close he was to the edge, to lose his finesse. "I would not waste myself down your throat, no matter how good it might feel," he whispered. "You must teach me, sometime, where you learned to suck cock like a—how do you say?—a Hoover."

Matt laughed out loud. "Let me do it some more," he coaxed. "I'll pull off before you come, I promise."

"I could let you." Julian drew in a shaky breath. "But Matt, I would far rather fuck you. Please, Matt. Come lie with me on

this bed that smells of me—of art. Henna and clay, herbs ... and sex. Let me fuck you."

Matt slowly got to his feet, stroking and caressing Julian's skin every inch of the way. He grabbed the edge of that wife-beater shirt, peeling it off, until just the bare skin remained, then decorated Julian from nipple to nipple with hard, biting kisses. "Fuck me until I can taste you in the back of *my* throat," he whispered. "Will you do that?"

"Ah, God, Matt!"

"Promise?"

"I promise, I do. Now lie down, quickly, before I die of wanting you."

On his back, then. Matt's favorite position when he bottomed. He could look up into his lover's face and read the naked emotions there, never more clearly seen as when a man was fucking him. You could find an entire book inscribed in one expression when someone's cock was plowing into you balls-deep, when all they could think about was Matt, and what he meant to them.

Granted, mostly before he'd read *Want to get off. Matt's body nice. Going to get off now*. With Julian, though, even though those eyes were such strange and foreign objects of beauty, he had a feeling he was going to see a world of caring and desire written on his expression.

Obedient, Matt lay down on his back, and drew his legs up, exposing himself, completely unashamed. Julian couldn't see it, but he sensed that the artist knew what he was doing from his sharp, indrawn breath of pleasure. Standing by the bed, Julian stripped his jeans completely off and kicked them

aside, knocking the rice-paper a little bit askew. Neither of them gave a damn. Matt just wanted Julian inside him. Like, right *then*.

Easing his way down between Matt's spread thighs, Julian balanced on his knees. Unerringly, he reached underneath a pillow next to Matt and withdrew a tube of lubricant. When it uncapped it, the smell of wild cherries hit them with a blast of fragrance. "I love," Julian said between sharp breaths, "beautiful things, Matt. Matthew? Matthias? Matty? Beautiful things are my passion, even though, perhaps though I cannot see them. The sound of a birdsong. The feel of clay through my fingertips. The scent of wild cherries when I lie here by myself and stroke my own cock until I burst. But oh, with you, you, I can put this to far better use."

Matt made a face. Reaching up, he dragged Julian down to his level and gave him a wild, hungry, devouring kiss that left no stone unturned and no question unanswered. "Think I said it before," he informed the artist. "Less talk, more sex."

Julian threw his head back and laughed. "Your wish, it is my command. We begin." Squeezing a generous dollop of lubricant out onto his fingers, those gorgeous long fingers, Julian worked his hands together, warming the slippery stuff so that it wouldn't be cold when it touched Matt's overheated flesh or his own pulsating cock. Again, just as if he could see, he made his way quick and sure to the exposed hole between Matt's ass cheeks, probing up with a slick glide until he hit the soft, spongy lump Matt knew lay just inside. He pressed down with one finger, and Matt howled. It hurt, a little, but God,

good sex always hurt just a bit, and Julian's fingers felt so fucking *good*—

A second finger, and then a third followed. Matt writhed on the digits, tossing his head on the pillow. His hair, damp with sweat, clung to his cheeks. "More," he muttered, frantic. "More, more, more, more, more!"

Julian, too, was slick with sweat, gleaming in the lamplight of the studio. "This?" he asked, reaching down to stroke the thick length of his cock. "Is this what you want, Matt? My cock, inside you? Plowing a furrow so deep that you will, as you say, taste me?"

"And how. And now." Matt arched his hips up, drawing Julian's fingers deeper inside him, rubbing against that spot like a cat in heat. "Please. Like *you* say, before I die."

"I would never let that happen," Julian said, withdrawing his fingers. He kissed Matt's mouth when Matt let out a moan, even though he knew what was coming, and leaned forward so that he braced himself on his arms above Matt. Lifting with one hand and then the other, Julian draped Matt's legs over his shoulders, grinning when Matt locked his ankles in place and hung on tight. "Never die, Matt. This is only the beginning, tonight. I will have you as my model time and again, and this is but the first of many fucks on this futon, on a better bed, wherever you please. Only now, now, now—"

He pressed forward. Matt felt the push of Julian's blunt cockhead against his hole, winking open to let him in, and then a long, smooth spear of heat and light shot from his balls to his brain as Julian thrust in to the hilt, deep and

steady and true. "Ohhhh," Matt moaned. "Again. Do that again. Now!"

"As you command it." Julian's voice was short, but still gentle. He drew back until only the tip of his cock remained inside Matt, and then pushed forward a second time, seating himself so deep that Matt would damned near swear he *could* taste Julian in the back of his throat. Again he moved, and once more, and more, setting up a rhythm that Matt soon matched, thrusting and pumping both sets of hips in a slick, smooth glide that felt like heaven, burned like hell, and set Matt's heart pumping faster than a deer's in the headlights.

"Gonna come," he panted, feeling his orgasm start to build, unable to restrain it. God! Julian hadn't even touched Matt's cock, but the way Julian moved, every thrust bumping against that good spot deep inside, sending shock waves of bliss to Matt's brain—he'd explode like a geyser.

"I have been," Julian gasped, "remiss. I should have taken you in hand, stroked you."

"Another time." Matt lunged up for another kiss. "And there's gonna be another time. But now, Julian, now! Hard, fast, now!"

Julian thrust forward, seating himself impossibly deeper than ever before. He ground against Matt's favorite place deep inside, and Matt cried out, raising the roof with a yell as he spasmed and jerked, coming in thick, creamy gouts of semen that splattered their chests. His internal muscles ground down hard, squeezing Julian's cock. The artist raised his voice in a cry to match Matt's, and Matt felt half a dozen heated pulses deep inside him as Julian, too, came, filling him

with come until it dripped back out of his hole along with lubricant that still smelled of ripe, rich cherries.

Gasping for air, Julian collapsed forward on Matt, resting his head on Matt's shoulder. Matt unlocked his ankles, although he wasn't sure at first if he'd be able to, and let Julian come down. He brought his arms up, hugging the artist close, holding him to his chest. God, he almost felt like humming and rocking the man in thanks for the most amazing fuck he'd had since—well, ever.

For a long moment they lay together in a weary, sated heap of men, sticky with sweat and come, smelling of cherries and musk and clay. Matt giggled suddenly.

Julian raised his head, gorgeous, strange eyes sweeping over Matt's face as if he could see the amusement there. "And what, may I ask, is so funny?"

"For one thing? The fact that you can talk like 'Masterpiece Theatre' after a session of bouncy-bouncy like that. But what I was laughing at was the fact that I sure as hell didn't expect this when I came here tonight."

"No, I suppose you would not have." Julian's beautiful fingers, trembling just a little, ran over Matt's face and brushed a damp lock of hair from his eyes. "What did you think would happen?"

"At best? I figured it would be like going to the doctor's. I guessed you'd be this very cold, impersonal guy who was All About Art. At worst, I thought I'd get groped by some pimply little lech who just did this to pick up hot guys."

Then, it was Julian's turn to choke with laughter. "Matt!"
"Well, you asked."

"Your honesty is refreshing as water drawn from a spring."

"Mmm," Matt murmured. "You sure do talk pretty."

"Shall I take that as a compliment?"

"I would." Matt leaned up and brushed a gentle kiss across Julian's already swollen lips. "Thank you."

Julian half-smiled. "For what, dear Matt?"

"For everything. You know. For just being you."

"Ah, Matt." Julian buried his face in Matt's shoulder again.

"And it is I who thanks you for being you," he said softly.

"You, too, were not what I expected. I have had many beautiful men in here to model for me, but none have touched me right away as you did. Your voice, your smell, the way you grew hard the instant you laid eyes on me—"

"You bastard!" Matt thumped Julian's back. "You knew! All that time I was trying my best to hide it, and you knew!"

"You were wiggling like a puppy who needed to be walked. How could I not know?" Julian chuckled. "Ah, but it was fun to sense you squirming. I so hoped it was for want of me. I hardly dared ask you, but my hands, these hands, they often do as they want without the permission of my mind, and so they went a-wandering."

"And I followed," Matt whispered.

"So you did." Julian kissed him, a little more hungrily. With a soft groan, he slipped out of Matt's channel. "I would have you again, and again, and yes, already I feel myself growing hard again..."

"I noticed," Matt said, shimmying up against him.

"You miss little. But before I have you again, Matt, I must know something."

"After what we shared?" Matt reached up to brush the back of his hand against Julian's cheek. "I think you can ask me just about anything."

Julian bent and nuzzled Matt, pressing his lips to Matt's collarbone. "Stay with me?" he whispered, his voice soft and unsteady. "Will you stay, and be a part of my life?"

Matt stared at the artist, stunned. "How can you ask—of course I'm going to stay. Look, I'll be honest with you, I don't know a damned thing about relationships, but when I love, I love with all my heart."

"Do you, then?" Julian wanted to know, voice still quiet. "It is early, yet, too early to say *love*, but do you think you could grow to care for me? Be with me, even though I am handicapped?"

Matt thumped Julian again.

"What was that for?"

"You are not handicapped, mister. You're, what do they call it, 'special'. And you're even more special to me. You think I'd turn down someone who sounds like you, smells like you, tastes like you, acts like you, has talents like you, and oh, yeah, let's not forget, looks like you? I'd have to be crazy or an idiot, and while there are a few who'd argue that point, I'd say I'm neither. So yes, I will stay with you, Julian. As long as you'll have me, I'm sticking around." He paused. "Well, not literally. We'd better get a cloth soon, or we will be glued together, though."

Julian laughed again. "I will never grow tired of your humor. I have never met another man so frank, and so witty as yourself."

"Witty," Matt murmured with a grin. "That's a lot better than I usually get. I'll take that, too."

"And this," Julian said, kissing him again. "I realize that you must have a life of your own. An apartment, perhaps a roommate. Not a lover, though, another man to compete with?"

"Nope. I have a friend that I used to, and after this just now I'm going to underline 'used to', share sympathy fucks with on occasion, but I can definitely say you're the only man in the picture for me now."

"Ah, but that gladdens my heart." Julian snuggled down against Matt with a small sigh. "Do I crush you? Am I too heavy?"

"No, lover. You're just right."

"Then we will be coupled, as you say it?"

"A couple, but yeah."

"Exclusive?"

"To the point of driving everyone else crazy, I'm guessing," Matt teased, drawing patterns on Julian's back with the tips of his fingers.

"Good!"

Matt hooted. "Not possessive, are you?"

"Me? How dare you ask?"

"Hey, I like a possessive man. It's good to belong to someone." Matt shifted a little, easing into the embrace of the bed, snuggling closer to Julian. "I belong to you now, right?"

"As I belong to you. We will go slow, after this fast start, but we will come together like this again and again despite

the rest of our courtship and growing to know one another, that I promise."

"Definite bonus." Matt sighed happily. "My roommate was the one I suggested I model, you know. Thought I was too obsessed with sex and finding Mr. Perfect. He'd bang his head against the wall if he realized what I'd gotten out of tonight's little exercise."

Julian lifted up. The expression on his face was devious. "Well," he said, his voice demure, but his eyes sparkling with wickedness, "why not call him and let him know?" He reached underneath the bed and unerringly whisked out a cell phone. "Share the love, I believe is the phrase."

"I'll share the news, but not the love." Matt wrestled Julian a little closer with one arm even as he grinned and started punching in the numbers on the phone's keypad. "The love is all mine. And yours."

"Good." Julian sighed in content. "Here, put it on speaker so that I can hear."

"Oh, you are a bad boy, aren't you?"

"Would you like me to be so?"

"And how." The phone began to ring on the other end. "Just be with me, though, and that'll be enough."

"Deal." The two shared a short, sweet kiss before Matt heard the line pick up, and Ross's voice, weary as the devil after a night of stealing souls, came on.

"Hello?"

"Ross, baby," Matt said with a grin. "You're never going to guess where I am, or what I've done tonight."

"Oh, yeah?" Suspicion colored Ross' voice. "What the hell have you done now?"

"A hell of a lot, buddy. I've got an entire story for you. But I'll tell you this much for sure—I have my eyes wide open, now..."

End.

A Place Like Home

A Torquere Press Single Shot by Cat Kane

Much as he prayed, dawn broke inevitably over the dark crags of the mountains. He stayed until the last sparkly pinprick of starshine had been burnt from the wide sky. Sunlight spilt through the peaks, flooded the valley much as whatever river had once carved out this water plain.

In Zack Sheridan's selective memory there weren't enough stars in the heavens as there had been times he'd ridden this valley, galloped over the lush green slopes of the meadows. On Monroe first, when he'd been so young his feet hadn't quite reached the stirrups. And later, after the elderly piebald mare had pined herself away after his daddy's death, the first horse that had been completely his. He and Rafferty had both grown up out on those hills, though to this day he suspected the stallion had grown up wiser.

They ought to have left the land to the horse. At least Rafferty wouldn't have screwed up this badly.

Last time he'd seen the bay stallion, Rafferty had been kicking the shit out of the local horse dealer's trailer. Stomping and snorting up a fuss, telling Zack in as plainly a way as the animal knew how that he didn't want to leave. He'd turned and walked away, the neighing and the kicking still ringing in his ears.

It came down to some kind of shit, he decided, when he was too ashamed to look his old horse in the eyes. Wherever he ended up, he hoped the stallion was somewhere he could

still run, still feel the sweet grass beneath his hooves and the glass-clear air running through his mane.

As for him, he had nowhere to go.

The auction for the sale of the house was scheduled for later that morning, but Zack declined the Realtor's invitation to attend. Everyone who had seen the property said the same thing; the house wasn't worth saving. Better bulldoze the lot and build something new, something fancier. That those walls had seen him right for twenty-five years didn't seem to hold much sway as far as they were concerned.

Maybe it shouldn't have. Couldn't be too right if he'd managed to lose it.

But with the money any prospective buyer needed to plough in to bring the place up to scratch, it wouldn't fetch as much as it could have. The land was a different story, even if it remained in the same book. No one wanted to buy it to keep cattle or raise horses; they wanted it to develop houses and vacation properties. One suit had even come to inspect the place armed with blueprints and schematics of a luxury spa resort.

It might have been different if the majority of the money wasn't going straight to banks and credit companies, and all the others to whom he was in debt over his ears. Some of the debts were old enough to have been his father's fault, but most of them were Zack's own, and he'd done little to lessen any of them.

The land didn't pay. It was a vacuum that sucked in twice the money he brought in. There was nothing here that broke even; not the livestock, not the horses, nothing. Zack knew

he'd been living a dying sort of life, but he would forever have to bear the knowledge that he was the one who'd driven in that final nail.

At least there'd be a little left over. Enough that he wouldn't be entirely homeless, enough that he wouldn't quite starve. At least not until he blew what little he did have. And then he didn't have the first idea what he'd do.

There was nothing he knew how to do, besides this.

And there was nothing he knew how to do in that moment, besides stand on the sloping hillside for the last few minutes that this beautiful wild land remained his, and watch as in the distance, expensive cars drove into the farmhouse's front yard.

* * * *

Evan Hunter wasn't a reckless man.

Last time he'd taken a blind chance had been eight years ago. Some backwoods breeder down in Texas had a chestnut mare of no-name blood for sale. Evan debated for two weeks before agreeing to the purchase, and he'd worried about the deal for the next three months before her first race.

When she'd won that race—and the subsequent five—he finally chalked it up as a good idea.

So far, he'd only seen the ranch's living room, but he doubted this chance was going to turn out as positively.

The place wasn't a wreck, but it was certainly vying for the deputy position. The wood floors betrayed the years of boots that had trodden a path around the discoloured patterns where furniture had once stood. The fixtures and fittings that

had come with the sale consisted of gingham and chintz that Evan hadn't believed existed in reality, except maybe in the dusty annals of the Waltons' prop room.

Someone had actually lived here. Until very recently, according to the Realtor. He couldn't imagine it, in this dark place, too much wood and stone, and a heaviness that wasn't all due to the low beamed ceiling. A glance out of almost every window showed the mountain ranges looming in the distance like ragged grey spikes. It might have looked like wide open spaces, but there was something claustrophobic at the thought of being hemmed in on all sides.

It was nothing like the place where he'd grown up, tinder dry flatlands and skies big enough to hang another moon. He supposed that might have been the allure.

His daddy was three times State Rodeo Champion, with enough buckles to melt down and rival Fort Knox, till his momma had dug her heels in when Evan had been about three. No one argued with that woman, and his daddy was no different, settling down on their Texas ranch to breed horses and do a little investing in the land on the side. Herb Hunter had always wanted his son to follow in his footsteps, but Evan wanted something more glamorous than chaps and dust and rope. He preferred the sleek lines of the thoroughbreds to the power of the mustangs and quarter horses.

At six one, he was never going to be a jockey. But the love of horses was in his blood, and the past fifteen years had seen him rise to the pinnacle of his profession, becoming one of the most successful trainers on the circuit. The last few

years he'd been in Europe, but the call of home had never been far away.

He couldn't go back to Texas. There were more ghosts there than in this old house, so he'd looked around for somewhere more remote. It didn't get much better than this empty corner of southwest Wyoming, somewhere no one knew him. Here the horse was just another part of the ranch staff, not something to watch through binoculars over a glass of chilled champagne.

So what if he was finally settling down and doing what his Daddy reckoned he ought to, four years after they'd quit speaking to each other by mutual consent? He wasn't doing this for anyone but himself.

The land was perfect. Dry sagebrush dotted with tiny oases of willows, poplars and cottonwoods, the majority of the ranch land was on the valley floor, only a few pastures sloping into the foothills. Still, he hadn't planned on a house that needed quite this much work.

He'd just had a hunch. He didn't get them often, and this just went to show he really shouldn't act on them.

"Is everything to your liking, Mr. Hunter?"

"Fine." Evan turned to the Realtor with a practised smile, bright as a west Texas summer sky. "I can already see how I'd like the renovations to go."

"That's wonderful." The Realtor smiled, pleased. "I'm sure you'll be very happy with your new acquisition, Mr. Hunter."

He followed the woman through the house, only half listening to her sales pitch and suggestions, idly thinking she was wasting her time. He'd already committed himself to this

place, and minute by minute, he was starting to think that 'committed' was an apt term.

The tour didn't show up anything too unexpected, just a few old items of furniture, and a couple of boxes of junk left in what seemed to have been a recently added garage. While the Realtor rambled on about the wonderful angle of light he'd get if he installed windows in the South facing walls, Evan walked over to the box, picking around in the old books and broken picture frames.

His momma always said he was too nosy for his own good. He couldn't help thinking of her as burrowing to the bottom of the second box yielded a faded, crumpled photo of the family that must have lived here. He wondered if they'd been happier than his own had become. Mom and Pop and their only son, he assumed. The mother smiled serenely at the camera, the father had one hand clapped onto his son's shoulder.

The boy looked to be around twenty, with dark hair and a serious expression. There seemed to be something self-conscious in the strangely stiff way he held himself, and Evan began making up a story about him in his head.

The kid preferred to be out on the plains, riding an old but faithful horse. That faintly deer-in-headlights look was the product of his preference for watching the world from beneath the brim of an old cowboy hat, and—

"Ah, I see you've met your predecessors."

"Were these the previous owners?" He looked up at the Realtor.

"Yes. That's an old photograph though," she said, scrutinising the image. "Mr. Sheridan's been gone, must be six years this past spring. It's sad when you stop and think on it, but Zack was only eighteen when the old man died. You can't expect a boy that young to want to make a go of a place like this."

Evan looked at the photo again, trying to imagine how Zack Sheridan might look now. Maybe those shoulders had broadened slightly, maybe there was more definition to a downright stubborn-looking jaw.

And he's not a stud stallion, Evan, he reminded himself wryly. *Quit staring like he's some piece of meat.*

"Where did he go?"

"Zack? That boy doesn't know *what* he's doing." She shrugged. "I was talking to him only yesterday and he seemed like an old man who'd given up already. Boy his age needs to snap right out of that ornery way of thinking."

So he was still living locally, Evan mused, staring at the photograph. Maybe he should look the kid up, see if they could work something out regarding this old place.

Two hunches in one day. It wasn't a good sign.

* * * *

When he'd been a boy, there had been a dozen working ranches dotted across the county. Zack remembered his father's dealings with them, buying and selling livestock and equipment. One winter the snow had closed in and the bewildered livestock had scattered across the borders of several neighbouring ranches. It had taken his father the best

part of a week to round them all up again and sort out who owned what.

Now, with the sale of his land, there were two. Neither of them used the entirety of their land. One had taken to offering dude ranch vacations for city dwellers, complete with newly built spa and some gourmet chef who came from Denver during tourist season, and neither had a scrap of work for him this season.

At least one of his ex-neighbors had offered him the use of an old trailer, so that he could save what money he had left 'til he knew what he was going to do.

He didn't know if they felt sorry for him, or if they just saw him as Bill Sheridan's kid and paid back their gratitude to his father vicariously. Zack didn't care. He was past caring about a lot of things tonight.

On the jukebox in the corner of the bar, Tritt and Stuart declared that the whiskey wasn't working anymore, but it seemed to be working just fine as far as Zack could tell. The music and the lazy chit-chat of the old regulars had faded to a pleasant background buzz. Zack had switched from beer to Jack Daniels a few drinks ago, and any reservations he'd had about it at the time had long been forgotten.

"You could always use a hand around the place, right?" He looked up, bleary eyed, at the bar's owner. Nora had been a fixture in this town as long as he could remember. "I can do anything, really."

"I wish I could, honey." Nora looked at him, a wry smile on ruby red lips. "Some weeks I'm lucky I can pay myself. But first thing I hear about, I'll letcha know."

That was the same story he got from everyone around town. Everyone was just scraping by. He supposed he should have been grateful that the tourists brought in some revenue to the area, kept some of the old ways going. But all he could remember was his father, sitting in the cab of their old truck, driving him back from a neighbor's place.

"Diversification..." Bill Sheridan had scoffed. "Just another word for giving in."

The heart attack might have forced his father to give in, but Zack had no excuse.

He didn't notice the silence that descended over the bar until he downed his drink, and tried to catch Nora's eye to order another. But she was at the other end of the bar, flirting with some guy Zack had never seen before.

Tourist, he sulked to himself, adding this negligence to his ever-growing list of woes. And he wasn't checking the guy out. He was just curious, that's all.

If his father had known about *that*, then his old man would have had the heart attack sooner, and he'd have both his parents on his conscience.

Small mercies.

When he eventually caught Nora's attention, the guy looked his way too. Zack's vision was just on the wrong side of fuzzy, but even so he could make out golden blond hair and bright blue eyes, the image fading and weaving like a cartoon. The man watched him for a second, before turning back to the glass before him when Zack sent him a glare.

He glanced at Nora, thinking he was whispering, and asked, "Who's that?"

"You don't know?" Nora looked surprised. "He's the guy who bought your old place."

His one—or make that 'few'—more for the road forgotten, Zack blinked, turning back to watch the blond man. This was the man who owned everything Zack once held dear? This stranger, with his fancy clothes and pretty hair, he was the one who now walked through the rooms in which Zack grew up?

The anger built like one of the spring storms that came in off the mountains, slow and insidious. By the time Zack noticed this stranger had become the living embodiment of everything that was wrong with his life, it was too late to put a lid on it.

When he finally summoned up the nerve to confront the man, he was greeted by an empty barstool. It took his groggy thoughts a second to follow the chain of events, looking up in time to see the door closing behind the blond.

Oh no, you're not walking away from me that easily...

Stumbling from the barstool, it took three attempts to put on his hat, his hand and his head never quite lining up right. But damned if he was going out there without it. It meant as much to him as a Roman gladiator putting on his shield and helmet.

Granted, Roman gladiators weren't usually three sheets to the wind and completely unable to walk in a straight line, but hell, he wasn't exactly fighting a tiger either. Just some pussy-whipped rich asshole who thought he could waltz in here and take over everything Bill Sheridan and all the Sheridans before him lived and died for.

"Hey!"

The blond turned around, from a brand new gleaming pick-up, Zack noticed with a derisive snort. For a second the man frowned at him, as though trying to place who this idiot was.

"I wanna talk to you!" Zack went on, proud that his words only slurred on every other syllable. "I'm—"

"Zack Sheridan," the man said, smiling as though he'd just remembered something important. "I know."

* * * *

One thing was for certain, that photograph really didn't do Zack any justice. In the flesh, albeit staggering and slurring, he was far more striking, as if he'd finally grown into the body that had seemed so awkward in that six-year-old picture.

Evan felt a little low for standing there appraising the kid while Zack stared at him like a dying goldfish, mouth opening and closing with no words coming out.

He considered telling Zack he'd seen his photo amid the old junk, but from that defiant look he doubted that was going to go down well.

"The Realtor told me who you were," he said instead, after introducing himself. Unfortunately, that explanation didn't fare much better, as Zack scowled at him.

"Ain't none of your business who I am. What d'you care anyway?"

"Zack—"

"That's *Mister* Sheridan to you." Zack almost lost his balance completely as he huffed. No doubt the show was

meant to intimidate him, but all Evan could think was that 'Mister Sheridan' made an endearing drunk.

Zack stared at him, frowned. "So?"

"So what?"

"Whatcha gonna do with the place now you got your goddamned rich paws on it?"

"Excuse me?"

"The ranch," Zack said slowly, as though trying to explain something to a three year old. "Y'know, my home?"

That part he got. Evan was a little more irritated at the 'goddamned rich paws' part, but he doubted Zack was in any state to understand his complaint. Zack didn't look like he understood English in his current condition. Zack's hat was a little askew, tufts of collar-length dark hair sticking out at odd angles beneath the brim. When they actually managed to focus, those eyes were as serious as they had been in the photograph.

The Realtor had told him a little about the Sheridans. He knew the property wasn't the only thing Zack had lost over the past few years. After everything Zack had been through, Evan figured he was allowed to drown his sorrows now and then. But the kid was as vicious and hard-headed as a pissed-off mustang, and Evan's sympathy didn't stretch to having his teeth knocked out.

He stepped back as Zack threw the first punch, moving slightly aside to avoid the second. The kid might have been too drunk to stand, but Evan still didn't much want to be on the receiving end of one of those blows. Even beneath the

scruffy T-shirt and denim jacket, Zack's frame looked wiry and fast, if not all that solid.

Or well-balanced. Evan blinked, stifling a smile as the momentum from another punch sent Zack into a wobbly spin. While Zack had his back to him, Evan stepped up, grasping the kid's upper arms firmly, forestalling any more fighting.

"It's really none of your business," he said quietly, close to Zack's ear, forcing him to lose concentration on the wriggling if he actually wanted to listen. "But, since you asked so nicely, I'm not going to do anything with the ranch."

The wriggling stopped altogether. The information took a while to filter through the whiskey haze that clung to Zack like a noxious cloud, and when it did all he could manage was; "Huh?"

Evan tried setting Zack back on his feet, but the kid seemed ready to topple over any second. Holding on seemed less complicated than letting Zack fall, and Evan would be lying if he said he didn't enjoy having a warm presence in his arms.

And while Zack's awareness was somewhere orbiting Planet Bourbon, he didn't have to worry about the niggling detail that he was as good as hugging a drunk redneck in the middle of a small town street. He might as well have put an ad in the paper.

Sighing, he hefted a slumping Zack upright again, wondering if the kid was falling asleep in that uncomfortable position. "Come on, I'll drive you home."

Zack mumbled something incoherent, words that Evan couldn't decipher even after asking Zack to repeat them three

times. Buckling the kid into the front seat of the truck, Evan stared at him for a moment. Zack's lips were slightly parted, eyes closed, head lolling a little to one side.

He looked young for twenty-four, Evan thought. Or maybe vulnerable would be more accurate. For all his bluster, Zack Sheridan looked as though one angry word would shatter him. Without thinking, Evan reached out, fingertips gently moving a lock of hair from Zack's forehead. Zack mumbled something again, making a face as though some invisible fly was tickling at his nose, but didn't open his eyes, didn't demand to know what Evan thought he was doing.

It only occurred to him then that Zack had lost his hat. It lay in the middle of the empty street, black against the dark grey asphalt. Smiling to himself, Evan retrieved it, brushing off any imaginary dust before placing it on Zack's lap and shutting the door.

Getting into the truck and firing up the engine, he glanced at the young man sleeping in the passenger seat, and realised wryly that the only place he could take Zack really was home.

But somehow he didn't think it was going to be a sweet homecoming.

* * * *

Zack woke up staring at his bedroom ceiling, with a head that felt like six dozen Brahma bulls were stampeding right through it. Whimpering, he closed his eyes, tried to bury himself back under the sheets. Maybe it was still early enough that he could convince his mother to make him some breakfast before the day's chores began...

It all came crashing back around the same time as he rolled over with a groan and opened his eyes to see the room completely empty save for the low camping cot on which he lay.

He might have been home, but it wasn't his home anymore.

Scenes replayed like a broken VCR. The bar. The rage. Yelling at Evan Hunter in the middle of the street like some screwed up harpy. He remembered throwing at least one punch, but a glance at his unbruised knuckles told him the blows hadn't connected with anything. Just as well.

He must have looked like an idiot. He was an idiot, if for nothing else than for showing a stranger how much this mess got to him.

Absurdly close to frustrated tears, he took out his mortification on the cot, pummeling the thin mattress with his fists like a child throwing a tantrum. Some fancy shrink on TV would have said he needed to express that inner turmoil or some such shit. They'd tell him he never got to show that when he'd been a kid, either for fear of his father whupping his ass, or, after the old man died, for fear of appearing out of control. He had the ranch. He had responsibilities. He had no time for tantrums.

Yeah, right. The shrinks had done a real bang-up job on his mother. If they'd never prescribed her those pills—

He kicked back the sheets angrily, trying to drown out the bitter thoughts with some kind of action. He needed to get out of here. He needed to make the most grudging apology possible to Evan Hunter, and he needed to leave.

He swore their ghosts were following him as he made his way to the kitchen. The hallways were lighter now, without all those old framed pictures lining the walls. Evan hadn't done much with the house, he noted. The discoloured flowered wallpaper still bore the brighter squares where the frames had once been.

The smell of cooking reached him before he even turned into the large kitchen. The crispy scent of bacon, eggs and toast was tempered by the tang of orange juice and the sweetness of coffee. Evan stood at the old range stove, dressed only in jeans and a half-open white shirt, and to his horror, Zack had no idea what had him salivating the most.

"Morning."

The blond glanced at him, and Zack blushed as though Evan had just read his thoughts. His gaze flickered desperately around the kitchen, looking for something else to stare at. His hat was sitting on the table. Zack recalled it falling off some time midst brawl last night, and now he couldn't take his eyes off the surreal image it made.

Hell, it beat staring at Hunter.

"I should go," he said, dumbly. Evan ignored him, setting a plate down on the table.

"Do you have anywhere to go to?" the blond asked, and Zack figured either it was a lucky guess or a direct hit. Either way, he couldn't refute it.

"Then sit down and eat." Evan walked back over to the coffee pot at Zack's slight shake of the head.

"I ain't taking charity from the likes of you."

"The likes of me?" Evan glanced at him, amused. "What, did you dream up some more crimes against humanity I'm guilty of while you were asleep? It's breakfast, kid. Not a marriage proposal."

Something about that suggestion made Zack blush down to his boots, and he sat down dutifully, if only to avoid more remarks. Besides, venting his anger would have been far more satisfying if the object of his misplaced temper deigned to react. "Quit calling me kid."

Evan looked at him pointedly. "Quit acting like one."

They ate in silence. He would have argued more, Zack told himself, if he wasn't so damn hungry after last night's binge, and if the scent of breakfast didn't remind him of the ones his mother used to make. Besides, it was the least Evan could do.

No, the least Evan could do was absolutely nothing, which by happy coincidence was exactly what he owed Zack. It was a little harder to hold onto the resentment now without the courage afforded him by Mr. Daniels.

Evan didn't so much as glance at him as he stood, clearing the plates. "How're you feeling this morning?" He dumped the plates in the sink with a loud clatter, and if Zack had been wearing his hat instead of staring at it, it would have felt fifty sizes too small. "There's aspirin around here someplace if you need some."

"I'm fine," he lied.

"Suit yourself. There's more coffee if you need any."

Zack glared at him suspiciously. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? Breakfast? Well, a guy has to eat y'know, and—"

"You know what I meant."

"Yeah." Evan sent him a lopsided grin over one shoulder, sounding utterly unrepentant. "Sorry."

Another steaming cup of coffee was set down on the table in front of him regardless, and Zack tried to convince himself the strong aroma wasn't playing its part in clearing his thoughts.

The rest ... well, the rest was just Evan Hunter, who on closer sober inspection, didn't seem to be quite the asshole Zack had branded him. He was still angry, but the anger was unfocused, sprawling out like weeds on the prairie, with no real target in mind. A little disconcerted, he found himself talking just to drown out his thoughts.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Were you that drunk last night?" One golden brow quirked, and a playful sparkle danced in blue eyes. "Damn." He stuck out a hand towards Zack. "I'm Evan Hunter."

"Yeah, I got that part." Zack eyed the outstretched hand as though it was the business end of a rattlesnake, before accepting the handshake. Evan's grasp was firm, cool fingers betraying years of physical labour that belied the polished appearance. "I meant why are you *here*."

Evan laughed out loud, a sound that vibrated around the kitchen and made Zack realise he didn't remember the last time he'd heard laughter in this house.

"Well, the free interrogation kinda swayed me."

"I'm just asking."

Something in Evan's gaze softened, and he watched Zack in silence for a moment before continuing. "I was a racehorse trainer. I needed a change of pace, so I looked around for somewhere like this." He explained tersely. "I'm not here to turn it into a theme park, if that's what you're worried about."

"So what are you gonna do with it?"

"I don't know." Evan turned to look out of the kitchen window. He'd taken down the pink patchwork curtains Zack remembered, the ones his mother bought one Christmas and had to cut about a foot of material from the bottom because she'd bought the wrong size. Driving all the way back to exchange them had been out of the question. The bare window-frame looked bigger than Zack recalled. "Horses, maybe some cattle. I need to have a proper evaluation done on land use. Most of the place needs re-fencing, and the stable-block needs rebuilding entirely if I ever set up a stud." He glanced at Zack, blue eyes crinkling into a smile. "A picket fence, a hunting hound, the usual."

"And a little lady wife to cook dinner and clean your boots," Zack added dryly.

"Well..." Evan laughed softly, gaze fixed back out of the window at the mountains cutting across the horizon. He didn't look amused anymore; he looked a little sad. "Something like that, I guess."

Zack watched him dubiously, thinking of the suit with the blueprints. "You're not gonna open a spa?"

This time Evan's chuckle sounded warmer, less forced. "No, I'm not. I came here for some peace and quiet. I'm not planning on inviting the world over any time soon."

He should have been reassured by that, but all it served was to give the resentment nowhere to go.

"Where are you living?"

Zack was halfway through explaining about the trailer, when Evan shook his head, interrupting him.

"That's crazy, there's all this room here I'm not using for anything. Besides, I'm gonna need someone to help out around here, and if it's someone who already knows their way around it'll make my life a lot easier. Plus I can make sure you show up for work on time if you're living in." He laughed a little. "Sound like a plan?"

Zack stared at him. It took a few disbelieving attempts before he could speak. "Are you feeling sorry for me?"

"Not really." Evan shook his head. "I just don't see how you're going to prove you can pick yourself up if no one's going to give you chances to do so." Evan sat across from Zack, leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. Zack schooled himself not to look at the narrow strip of bare skin that peeked between the edges of the blonde's shirt. "If I'm doing anything, I'm offering you a job."

"A job." Zack repeated.

"If you want it." Evan nodded. "Consider it this way, you can show me how you want this place run."

"I'm the reason you own it now."

"True." The blond nodded, and smiled. Something Zack couldn't define skittered across his eyes, then it was gone. "But you don't seem the kind of guy to make the same mistakes twice."

* * * *

He'd been working for Evan Hunter for three weeks before he stopped to think about it. Zack didn't know why the word "okay" slipped past his defences when Evan made the offer. He knew beggars couldn't be choosers, and there wasn't exactly an abundance of opportunities around here, but something about it made Zack a little grateful his father couldn't see him now. Couldn't see he'd sunk so low he had to be some rich guy's stableboy.

Well, it wasn't quite that bad. And currently there was no stable, just a pile of bricks and rubble while Evan looked around for contractors to build him a new block that met his surprisingly high standards. Zack had come to realise there was more to Evan's impeccable exterior than just flaunting money. The man just took an incredible level of pride in anything he did, be it breakfast or horses or repainting the living room. Or, as they'd been doing for the past four days to kill time till the stables were finished, mending fences.

There wasn't much else to do, miles from the ranch house with just the truck radio for company, but talk. Zack had only lost his temper once, when he'd been telling Evan about Rafferty, and the blond made a disparaging remark about "mongrel" horses. He'd gone to sulk in the truck for twenty minutes, revelling in the loud clap of the slamming door as it echoed across the plain.

The radio turned against him when it played Tim McGraw telling him it was all because of the cowboy in him. He slunk out of the truck like a chastised child, picking up his abandoned tools and resuming where he left off, attaching

new fence wire to the reinstalled posts. Evan had glanced at him, but hadn't said a word, for which Zack was grateful.

Sometimes the silences, broken only by the metallic ring of the nails and the wires, were as comforting as any deep meaningful conversation. But as the spring afternoons became unseasonably warm, the heat exacerbated by the physical labor, conversations became a welcome distraction. It kept him from dwelling on the uncomfortable way his vest clung to his skin, and the clamminess where his hat met his scalp.

They'd exhausted every small-talk topic from Evan's first rodeo to Zack's first beer, so someone had to bring up some more serious subjects.

"What's Europe like?"

"Honestly?" Evan looked up at him, and brushing sweat-damp gold bangs from his forehead with the back of his hand, and grinned. "It's fucking amazing. Rains a lot, and it's pretty cold sometimes, but it's beautiful over there."

Zack absorbed the information silently as they unrolled some more of the fence to the next post, before asking, "So why did you wanna come back?"

For a moment he didn't think Evan had heard him. The blonde strode over to the truck, busied himself choosing a better hammer. Eventually he glanced up at Zack, and shrugged.

"Sometimes amazing isn't enough."

That answer might have made sense to someone as well-travelled as Evan Hunter, but to Zack it just seemed like a lame excuse.

He remembered the only time he'd been away from town on his own, on a high school trip to Salt Lake City when he was sixteen. He couldn't even remember now the point of the trip, just that it had taken an eternity and a day to convince his parents to let him go. His father's objection hadn't even been the costs involved, just the ideas life in a big city might put in his son's head.

Zack had all but given up asking his father for anything after the sermon he received upon mentioning his interest in joining the rodeo club at high school. Bill Sheridan had told him rodeos were for clowns who didn't have the balls to be real cowboys, and that had been the end of the discussion.

But eventually, he'd been allowed to go on the trip. He was only gone five days, but they'd changed his life.

He'd been far too young, far too *terrified*, to sneak into the club he'd stumbled across while playing truant from the bland motel. But he hadn't been too young to hide in the shadows in a small park across the street and watch the men that came and went.

Lying in the motel bed that night, with class geek Chuck Glazer snoring in the other bed, every image that flashed across Zack's closed eyes had been of those men. Holding hands, kissing, laughing, all the things his classmates wanted to do—among other things—with homecoming queen Becky Allen. All Zack wanted to do to Becky was ask her where her older brother Petey got the new paint-job on his pick-up. Becky was a sweet girl, but the thought of being with her left Zack cold. Petey Allen on the other hand could still make him

want to excuse himself and go spend some quality alone time in the bathroom.

He'd known then that he could never live that sort of life. Not if he went home and did the responsible thing by his family and the land. People like him just didn't do that sort of thing.

At the time, that had been okay. It meant he didn't have to think about it.

Zack gazed around the pasture, the endless panorama bathed in hazy afternoon sunlight. He couldn't imagine leaving this; he couldn't imagine anything that would make him want to be anywhere else. When he said as much aloud, Evan just smiled ruefully.

"I used to think that way too. Now I couldn't be far enough away from that place."

"Texas?"

"Yeah." Evan nodded. "Home."

Zack almost winced at that one word. *Home*. Like it was the most loved, most hated, most missed place on earth.

"When's the last time you went back?"

He swore Evan started hammering the brads harder as he spoke, punctuating his words with loud violent blows. "Four years ago. I was back from Europe for a vacation, and..."

Zack waited clean through two more assaults on the fence wires for Evan to finish that trailed-off sentence before curiosity got the better of him. "Did you have fight with somebody or something?"

Evan raised his head, arching a brow. "Are you always this nosy, or are you making a special effort for me?"

A flush crept across Zack's cheeks that had nothing to do with the heat. "Sorry."

"Ah, it's okay." Evan paused, blue eyes squinting a little against the sun as he looked at Zack. Leaning against the fencepost, he wiped his hands on dirty jeans, and nodded slowly. "Yeah, I had a fight with somebody. With my dad and with my business partner."

"What happened? I mean..." Zack looked away sheepishly, and mumbled, "If you wanted to talk about it."

"Let's just say neither of them were awful happy with the directions I was taking in my life." Cutting the conversation short with a shrug, he levered himself away from the post, striding back towards the truck. "Come on, that's good enough for one day." He flashed Zack a grin as he pulled open the driver's side door. "Besides, if you're not careful, some day I'm gonna start asking you twenty questions."

Zack pulled the brim of his hat a fraction lower, trailing after Evan. Getting into the truck, he slammed the door and rested one arm on the rolled down window. "You can if you want."

Letting the powerful engine idle with a rumbled purr, Evan watched him with a curious expression. At Zack's scowl, he laughed softly. "Maybe I'll wait 'til you're ready to tell me."

Even if Zack had a response to that, he didn't get a chance to reply before Evan put the truck in gear and pulled away in a cloud of dust.

* * * *

After the heat of the pastures, the ranch house was a welcome relief. The cold seemed to seep out of the stones and the shadows, and Evan had to fight the urge to kick off his boots and stand barefoot on the kitchen tiles. He settled for snaffling two cold beers from the fridge instead, handing one to Zack as he sat at the table.

Taking a sip, he basked in the lazy contentment of the moment, so pleased that there was someone here to share the quiet calm with him that he spoke without thinking.

"I'm glad you're here."

Zack paused, his beer halfway to his lips, and stared at him. Evan could kick himself for his slip.

"Everything's progressing quicker than I reckoned." He shrugged, taking a nonchalant swig of beer. "I might be able to start looking at livestock in a couple of weeks, and I'd never have gotten things on track that quickly without your help."

It wasn't a total lie; Zack's effort and hard work had been invaluable. But Evan had spent twenty years perfecting the art of covering up hopelessly ill-thought remarks like that, and it was a hard habit to shake. Of course sometimes the cover was unnecessary; he'd met his last two lovers through badly timed comments.

Zack, though, was off limits, and Evan knew it.

"Yeah well," Zack muttered, as though he was speaking to his beer. "Wish I'd had the money to plow into it that you do."

"It's not about the money." Evan shook his head. "It's about getting to start over with this place, clean sheet and no baggage. You didn't have that."

Zack brooded over that for a moment. "Maybe."

"It wasn't your fault, you know."

Grey eyes snapped up to glare at him. "Who said it was?"

"No one. I'm just saying. With the best will in the world, no one was gonna be able to pick this place up from the mess it was in when you inherited it. I've seen the books, Zack. You were damn lucky to get as much back for this place as you did."

"Yeah. My dad's creditors were cock-a-hoop." Zack looked at him, tone bitter. "You happy to know that's who's enjoying your money right now? Some fuckers who took my dad and me for a ride way back when."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? That's what people deserve, right? If they make bad deals, stupid agreements just to keep a claw hold on something they're gonna lose anyway."

They sat out the silence for several minutes, before Zack stood abruptly, chair scraping back along the tiled floor. His abandoned beer bottle was still wobbling precariously on the tabletop when Evan heard Zack's door slam shut.

Draining his own beer, he threw both bottles in the trash. He'd be enjoying his own company for a while until Zack deemed himself fit for contact with the outside world again, and Evan figured he might as well do something useful with his time.

Just in case Zack thought he was waiting for him, or, God forbid, worried about him. He appreciated that Zack hadn't really been allowed to have an adolescence, but sometimes

he wished the kid wasn't trying to cram eight years into eight weeks.

He almost sighed with relief as he stepped into the bathroom. Turning on the shower, the steam began to fill the room while he stripped off every dusty, sweaty piece of clothing.

It hadn't been on his mind when he stepped under the massaging spray of water, but the moment he began thinking about Zack again, Evan's thoughts of the kid took a turn for the wicked. His cock rose to attention the moment his fingers touched it, though as his eyes fluttered closed, he imagined they belonged to someone else. In his mind, Zack was pinned between him and the tiled wall. Sliding one hand up his chest, he pretended it was his imaginary lover's touch, pretended Zack was softly teasing his nipples with one hand, stroking his growing erection with the other.

He'd watched the kid's hands plenty while they'd been working. The long-boned fingers looked as though they belonged on a fragile pianist, even though the pads of his fingers were callused from a lifetime in the saddle. The touch was soft though, he imagined, gentle and inquisitive.

Zack had never mentioned lovers, girlfriends or otherwise, and the sheer lack of information betrayed the kid's inexperience. So he'd be shy at first, Evan decided, hesitant until he gained some confidence from soft cajoling.

With confidence would come more curiosity. He imagined Zack exploring and experimenting, learning by the sounds Evan made where to touch, what pressure and friction yielded the desired effect. Even in the fantasy, though, something

kept Evan from returning the touch. He feared that if he pushed too soon, even make-believe Zack would turn and run. And with the imaginary touch stroking harder and faster, Evan really didn't want it ending abruptly.

The climax, when it came, caught him by surprise with its ferocity. Belatedly, he realised he had no idea whether he'd cried out or not. If he'd cried out the one name that had been looping in his head, then he was locking himself in the bathroom for eternity.

But there was no sound apart from the rush of the water. For a moment he stayed braced against the wall, catching his breath and watching the evidence of his fantasy wash away.

It wasn't the first time he'd thought about Zack like that, but it was the first time he'd acted on those thoughts. He never thought he'd feel quite this guilty for jerking off in the shower, even if the object of his arousal was only a few feet away across the hallway. He hadn't lusted surreptitiously over someone that unattainable since he was younger than Zack.

Come to think of it, he hadn't been so lost in fantasy for a long time either. Not since Clay. The thought of his ex was like another cold shower on the lingering desire, though he couldn't help wondering wryly how Clay would have reacted to being described as Evan's 'business partner'. Only if that business had been six years and some of the best sex and worst hurt of his life.

Turning the water off, he reached out past the curtain for the towel rail. In his eagerness to get into the shower, he hadn't given much thought to getting out, and the only thing

on the rail was one fluffy white hand-towel, barely enough to wrap around his hips.

Not that it mattered, he thought, towelling himself off roughly. His room was just next door, and it wasn't as though he'd see hide nor hair of Zack again until later. The towel wrapped around his hair to keep the water from dripping, he stepped out of the room, deciding that he really needed to add an en suite to this old place, maybe even sooner than a new stable block.

He was closing the bathroom door quietly behind him when Zack's door across the hall swung open.

Zack froze, and Evan could just stare at him. Images of his little indiscretion in the shower danced cruelly across his mind, and he felt his body twitch in response.

He willed it away, willed Zack's eyes not to travel south, but neither plea wanted to comply. Zack's eyes went wider than the moon, and his cheeks flushed crimson, and before turning to flee down the hall, he managed a choked little, "I'm sorry."

* * * *

"Zack, wait ... !"

I didn't do that. I didn't see that. I sure as hell didn't stand there staring at that...

The mantra wasn't doing much for the sheer mortification coursing through his veins. Somewhere along the line it had infused with the overwhelming lust he'd felt at seeing that perfect body exposed in front of him like a centrefold. He'd seen and quietly appreciated parts of Evan before, he tried to

reason. He'd seen that defined chest and those strong shoulders bared countless times, each image filed away for later perusal.

But never like that. Never gloriously naked, skin still glistening from the shower, half tumescent and looking as though he'd just been transported from a wet dream.

Evan caught up with him in the kitchen. Zack had actually been trying to find the front door, but every synapse was focused either on that naked body, or on trying to will down the arousal that stirred in his jeans like he was a horny kid.

"Zack, I'm sorry. There wasn't a towel, and I didn't know where you were so..."

Evan kept talking, but Zack couldn't hear him. The thump of his heartbeat was racing through his head like a freight train, and Evan's voice came from far away, as though he was underwater.

The dull pain of backing up into the kitchen counter brought with it a grain of lucidity, just enough to replace the thought of Evan with the thought of getting out of here. He could deal with this better without that concerned blue gaze trained on him like a laser.

Pushing away from the counter, he tried to shoulder past the blond, but somehow Evan's hands had come to rest on the chipped Formica worktop either side of his waist. He wasn't pinned or trapped badly enough that he couldn't get away if he tried. But with Evan that close, and rational thought melting away like summer rain, Zack couldn't summon the will to move.

When Evan kissed him, Zack bit back the whimper. It was just a chaste meeting of lips, the blond's mouth gentle against his own, but it was still more than Zack had ever done before. Panic threatened to overwhelm him, and he almost pulled back to apologize to Evan for not knowing what he was supposed to do.

Evan's hands slid up his arms, resting carefully on his shoulders. The kiss was still undemanding, nothing more than soft brushes and nibbles, stirring up an intoxication more potent in Zack's blood than anything he ever drank.

He'd never known anything so terrifying, and so exhilarating. Here in the familiar near-silence of his what had been his kitchen, the groove in the counter where he'd dropped one of his father's hammers while trying to fix a leaky pipe digging into his lower back, Evan's kisses felt right.

If there was anything in his mind past the sudden terror of that empty trailer, of going to sleep with nothing but the silence wrapped around him, then it was Evan Hunter. Even if Zack was only at the receiving end of some joke he hadn't quite gotten yet. If it meant a moment when he didn't have to be alone, he'd take that risk.

Evan seemed a little confused by the compliance, faltering in the kiss for a fraction of a second. Then his lips were moving against Zack's again, the tip of his tongue dragging slowly along his lower lip, begging entrance that, after a moment's hesitation, was granted.

His first real kiss. In his parents' old kitchen with another man. It didn't get much more mind-bendingly surreal than that.

The hands that had rested on his shoulders slid down his upper arms, snaked behind his back, locking there. Hungry for contact, Zack's arms wound around Evan's neck, one hand sliding into tousled blonde hair.

Silent suggestion made and equally wordlessly accepted, the heat of the kiss banked to full flame. Heat that licked along his nerves, teased at the very edges of what sanity he had left as the blond pressed a knee between his, nudging his thighs apart slightly before rubbing purposefully.

In retrospect, if common sense was going to beat him into submission, it could have chosen a better time. *Before* he was rubbing up against a naked Evan and moaning like a bitch in heat might have been an idea.

Evan was staring at him when Zack pulled away, breathing hard, one hand rising unbidden to swipe at his lips like he'd tasted something sour.

"Zack..." Evan began, reaching out for him half-heartedly. Zack took a step out of reach, shaking his head.

"That ... I'm sorry, I ... we shouldn't have." He backed away from the blond's touch, avoiding that intent blue stare.

"Wait, please..."

He got as far as the front door before Evan caught up with him, and by then confusion had a chance to fester and become something angrier, something that wanted to kick and lash out.

You did this to me! He wanted to scream. I'd been ignoring it all just damn fine before you showed up.

But the words that did spit from his lips like venom were even more vicious. "You might be able to buy the ranch, but

you cannot fucking buy me, okay? Take your job, take your pity, take your sick fucking fantasies and leave me the hell alone."

Evan just stared at him. The hand that had begun reaching for Zack again stilled, then slid back limply to his side like some puppet master had cut his strings. If he said anything else, Zack was too far away to hear him.

* * * *

Zack hadn't been back for five days. Day one, Evan hadn't expected him; he'd known Zack long enough to know how stubbornly he held grudges. Day two he'd decided to stay home instead of driving out on his own, in case Zack came by. Day three, if Zack had a phone wherever he was, Evan knew he'd have been calling since daybreak, just to hear his voice.

So when the phone finally rang—day five and counting—he almost broke an ankle clambering over the couch to pick it up.

"Zack?"

"No," an amused voice drawled on the other end of the line. "But if it gets you panting that way at me some more, I could be."

Evan slumped onto the couch with a sigh. "Sorry. I was expecting a call from someone else..."

"No shit. Since when are you answering your telephone like some sex-starved teenager?"

"Since I didn't think anyone down there had this number." He paused, frowning. "How do you have this number?"

Tommy Trevane chuckled, a sign Evan recognised from his high school days to mean he was getting no information out of his friend. Long time friend, and once business advisor. No one had been more surprised than Evan when his high school's star quarterback, who it was widely assumed had an IQ less than his shirt number, got into a top business school on a football scholarship. He got over the shock when Tommy came home, qualifications coming out the gills, and suggested he help with Evan's business and financial dealings, for a nominal administrative fee, of course.

For several years, Tommy Trevane had been Evan's *real* business partner. He remembered the casual lie he'd told when Zack asked about the reasons he didn't go home, and wondered again whether Zack would still be here now if he'd told the truth.

No. If he'd told Zack the truth, the kid wouldn't have stuck around long enough for that awkward, breathtaking kiss. His hand rose unconsciously to his lips at the memory.

Whoever said a little was better than nothing needed to be dragged out into the street and shot.

"Who's Zack?" Tommy asked in lieu of an answer. Tommy was as straight as a fence-post, but he'd been one of the few who'd never berated Evan for his own preferences. Live and let live, that was Tommy's motto, and if that person lived to pay him money, then all the better.

"My ranch-hand."

"Is that what they call it these days?"

With a half-hearted growl, Evan glared at the receiver as though Tommy could get a full Technicolor picture. "What do you want?"

"Fine, so don't tell me about your girlfriend." Tommy laughed. "Actually, I was calling because I came across a juicy bit of information on the vines." There was the sound of shuffling paper. "Seems there's a very lucrative little business proposition in the works."

From experience, this call could take a while. Getting up and making his way to the kitchen, Evan smiled wryly.

"I'm retired."

"Hell you are. No one retires at thirty four. Especially not someone at the peak of his game."

"Well, you know what they say about quitting at the top."

"Bullshit. You can't ever quit; it's branded too deep in you."

"Yeah, right." Evan laughed, the telephone receiver cradled between his jaw and shoulder as he scooped coffee into the machine. "Did you call for a free analysis, or are you ever planning on getting to the point?"

"Aren't I allowed to call to inquire about your well-being?"

"You are, but you wouldn't. So what is it?"

"How's things up there in the backwoods?"

Evan paused. Five days ago he would have said things were perfect.

Now those things were tainted with Zack's ugly words echoing in his head, bringing with it the sheer frustration of how he was meant to approach him again, if he was at all.

However stupid his actions had been, Zack's reaction was out of line...

Who are you trying to convince? What did you expect him to think?

"Could be better," he replied finally.

"Then listen up, buddy, cause you're not gonna be able to turn this down. How quick can you get rid of that podunk waste of time you bought up there and get your ass back to the real world?"

* * * *

When you stopped and thought about it, three weeks wasn't all that long. Twenty-one days, however many hundreds of hours. It didn't seem long enough to get so used to somebody's presence that you missed them when it was gone.

But Zack did. He missed the scent of breakfast, and the way Evan hummed off-key to the radio, even when he didn't know the songs. He missed the silence of the pastures as they worked, and he missed going to sleep knowing someone else was in the house, knowing everyone was safe and accounted for. He missed feeling as though, for the first time in years, the ranch was truly home.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt that way.

The trailer had been home again for the past five days and four miserable nights. The smell was of damp and old oil, not of frying bacon. The noises at night weren't Evan shuffling around in the kitchen for three in the morning coffee that the blond claimed helped him sleep.

Zack wondered if Evan was losing as much sleep as he was. Maybe the other man had just chalked him up to a loss and moved on. He didn't want to believe Evan was like that, but the more he dwelled upon it, the more it seemed as though he'd been set up from the beginning.

It didn't make it hurt less. It didn't drown out the taste of Evan's kisses, like sunshine and sweet grass. The memory of his lips lingered no matter how often Zack brushed his teeth, no matter how many cheap, bitter coffees he drank.

The musty silence had eventually become too hard to take, and he'd taken himself out for a walk. He had no destination in mind, not even two hours later when he found himself at the last place he wanted to be. Standing in front of Evan's door. He blamed his traitorous body for bringing him back here. Literally and figuratively.

But he was still raising a hand to knock, even while his brain screamed at him to turn and run.

Evan already looked a little shell-shocked when he answered the door. In the sleepless silence of the past four nights, Zack had prepared for a million things the blonde could say to him, but he hadn't expected a slightly stunned mumble.

"Why are you knocking when you have a key?"

"I..." Searching for anywhere else to look, Zack shrugged. "I didn't know if you'd wanna see me."

Evan breathed a soft laugh, and when Zack dared glance up at him, the expression in those blue eyes was a gentle affection. Zack ignored the flare of disappointment in the pit of his stomach. What had he expected, that the blond would

fling him down onto the front porch and ravish him then and there?

He must have made a squeaked noise as he tried stamping down that image. Evan blinked at him curiously, before shaking his head. "I want to see you. I've wanted to see you for five days."

Something warm tempered the disappointment at those words. "You did?"

"Yeah." Evan took a step back, allowing Zack room to walk through the door. "I missed you."

The warmth was joined by a grey blanket of guilt that had been spinning on the periphery of his awareness ever since he left. Staring at his boots, and blushing down to them too, he spoke softly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run out like that."

Evan watched him carefully. "It's okay. You were right, we probably shouldn't have done that."

Head snapping up, the words tumbled from Zack's lips before he could rein them back. "You didn't want to? But I thought ... I mean—" He stared helplessly at Evan, wishing to God he didn't have to put any of this into coherent words. He doubted he was capable of coherent breathing right now.

"Yeah," Evan said quietly. "I wanted to. That doesn't make it a good idea. It doesn't mean I had a right to do it without making sure you wanted it too."

It wasn't even a question, but it was an echo of precisely what Zack had been thinking for the past five days. And it was a damn sight easier to believe in the games when he wasn't staring into Evan's eyes, close enough that he could

feel the blond's breath, hear the soft shifting of his old work shirt as it moved with every exhale.

"I did."

Something seemed to melt away in Evan's expression at that, his posture seemed a little lighter, a little more confident.

"It's just..." Zack went on, suddenly wanting to drown out the silence. "There's just never been anyone else and..."

"No one?" Evan sounded surprised.

Zack shook his head, deciding the humiliation couldn't get much worse. "Never even been on a date." He forced a smile. "Always figured I'd have time for that when I went to college. But then my dad..." He trailed off with a shrug. "Anyway, I had to stay and take care of this place, so it never happened."

He didn't particularly want Evan's pity, so he averted his gaze. Truthfully, he had the overpowering need to be wrapped up in the blonde's arms again, but he wasn't going to ask. His battered pride had some limits.

"It's all right," Evan said after a moment, one hand coming to rest on Zack's shoulder, his thumb briefly brushing his cheek. "We'll just take all this real slow, okay?"

It was just the smallest of touches, but it almost made up for five days in one single second. Zack looked up, nodded slightly, feeling as though he'd been allowed to come home.

"Okay."

* * * *

"Come on man, there's nothing keeping you up there. Come back and live the damn dream!"

Funny, that out of everything Tommy had said, Evan latched onto those words the most.

It was a lucrative offer; that was the problem. And if it had come a month, two months ago, Evan doubted he'd have even thought of refusing.

The Delaney stud was one of the most successful in the Southwest. It had long been the premier establishment even when Evan started out. If a horse had Delaney blood anywhere within ten generations then it wasn't unheard of to slap another zero to the price. They had the best stock and the best staff in the business.

And when a controlling share of the business was reputed to be for sale, Evan should have been at the head of the queue, pleading on bended knee.

But he wasn't. He was moping around a rundown Wyoming ranch house, wondering whether he should turn down the chance for the sake of a stone-stubborn country boy, ten years his junior, who didn't seem to know his ass from his elbow when it came to deciding what he wanted.

Was Zack worth that much to him? When exactly had he come to feel so much for the younger man? The rambling conversations about nothing out in the fields? The comfortable silence of breakfasts? Long before he tasted those lips, that was for certain. The kiss hadn't felt like the beginning of something, it had felt like a stage reached.

Besides, it had to count for something that Zack came back, of his own free will. Apart from that mumbled apology,

they hadn't really spoken about it, but if Zack found the thought that abhorrent, surely he'd have hitched up his trailer to the first thing heading out of town? A guy didn't come back to someone who so clearly wanted him unless there was the smallest chance of reciprocation.

Right?

Each time Evan thought he knew for sure, each time he was certain he'd seen something in Zack's eyes, heard something in his voice, something else made him doubt. His preoccupation probably didn't help Zack's temperament either, but he didn't see how he could explain it calmly to the younger man.

Hadn't he thought from the beginning that Zack had lost enough already? He couldn't stand the thought of adding himself to that list, be it as employer, friend, or anything else that might come of this.

He needed to know where Zack stood, needed to know what the younger man wanted. And unless the answer to the latter was 'you', then he needed to rethink his priorities and what he wanted for himself.

Their days had settled back into an uneasy routine over the past couple of week. The silences didn't feel as comfortable anymore, and getting Zack to say anything to him that wasn't strained and polite felt like pulling hens' teeth with Jell-O pliers.

At least they still ate meals together. Evan had never asked, but he wondered if Zack had grown up, like he had, with the belief imprinted on him that the kitchen table was the nucleus of the household. It had certainly been where

Evan's family ate together, talked together, fought together. It had been where he sulked while his parents doled out punishment. It had been where he sat them down to tell them he was leaving for Europe.

It had been where he'd sat numbly, after his father told him not to bother setting foot in the house again until he snapped out of this unnatural, ungodly phase.

But where once Zack would have helped with the cooking, or at least sat down and joked with him after his culinary exploits ended up charred and in the garbage, now he sat in the living room until Evan told him the food was done.

And that's where he was, sitting tensely on the couch like he was a guest in his own home, while Evan kept an eye on that night's dinner.

His hands had been full when the phone rang, and after a colorful stream of curses, he yelled, "Zack, can you get that?"

There was no reply, but the phone stopped ringing abruptly, and above the clatter of plates and cutlery, Evan heard Zack's soft voice speaking to someone. He couldn't make out the words, but he was expecting calls both from a Pinedale horse dealer, and the building contractors.

It never even occurred to him that it could be someone else, until he walked back into the living room. The telephone receiver still hung limply in Zack's hands, as he stared at Evan with eyes like ice.

"When were you planning on telling me?"

"Telling you what?"

"This!" Zack waved the phone in front of him angrily. "Some guy just called wanting to know how the sale was going and when you reckoned you'd be back in Texas."

Tommy, I'm going to kill you...

"Zack—"

"Fuck you!" Flinging the telephone onto the couch, Zack stormed past him, shoulder barrelling into Evan's arm. "Fuck you, fuck your lies, fuck your bullshit!"

"Zack!" Reaching out, Evan grasped Zack's wrist, yanked him back around to face him. "I didn't tell you because it's not happening."

"Let go of me!" Zack growled, snatching his arm out of Evan's grip. "You're lying. Everything you've said has been a fucking lie. Well congratulations, you had me totally fucking fooled. Hope that makes you happy."

"You think seeing you hurt makes me happy?"

"It must, or you'd quit doing it!"

"Zack, I'm not leaving. I don't know what Tommy told you, but he's wrong. He's been trying to convince me to take up this business offer for weeks, and—"

"Weeks?" Zack barked out a humourless laugh. "You've known for weeks?"

"That's not the point. The point is I'm not going. Why would I want to? Everything I care about is here."

Zack stopped tearing the living room apart in a search for his jacket, and stared at him for an infinite moment, before turning away. "Yeah. Everything you care about, and me."

"I do care about you, don't you dare tell me you don't know that."

"Whatever." Zack glanced at him, finding his jacket and putting it on angrily, hands punching through the sleeves. "Fact is, I don't care. About any of it."

Evan followed him towards the door, his voice sounding desperate to his own ears. "You don't mean that."

He reached out again, determined not to let Zack leave like this. Even if he couldn't get Zack to admit his feelings, damned if he was letting the kid walk out not knowing where Evan stood.

He couldn't quite stifle the soft intake of breath when he turned Zack around. The glare was incensed, even through the tears, but all Evan could comprehend was the sheen of moisture in angry, red-rimmed eyes. He'd done that. He'd put that hurt there. He knew how fragile their tenuous relationship was, but he'd done it anyway.

"I'm sorry..." He pulled the resistant form close, speaking softly against Zack's hair. The man in his arms stayed unresponsive, but right now Evan didn't care. The comfort could be a one-way street, that was okay. Anything was okay if he could stop Zack from leaving, stop those tears.

It felt like forever before Zack's arms slid hesitantly around Evan's waist, hands balling into tight fists in the back of his shirt, mumbling brokenly against his chest.

"Everyone leaves. Everyone always fucking *leaves!*"

Holding Zack at arms' length, Evan looked at him stubbornly, willing the younger man to believe him, and shook his head. "I don't."

* * * *

Somehow the reassurance fell flat. The one thing Zack needed to hear Evan say, and he couldn't quite bring himself to believe it.

"Not this time, maybe. But next time, or the time after that."

Evan just smiled at him, one hand stroking his cheek. "So you're gonna throw this away just cause of something that might happen?"

"Throw what away?"

Zack tried to avoid that blue gaze, but the blond caught his chin gently. The other arm winding around his shoulders, Evan leaned closer, capturing his lips in the lightest of kisses.

"That."

"Evan, I—"

"No." The blonde watched him intently, one finger pressed to Zack's lips. "Don't say anything. Just trust me, please...?"

He shouldn't. He shouldn't be so foolish. But something in Evan's gaze just made him nod. Evan smiled at him, a dazzling expression that felt like sunshine. He kissed Zack softly again, before taking his hand, coaxing him down the hallway like he might a skittish colt.

His heart was up somewhere in his throat when Evan tugged him into his bedroom, shutting the door behind them. Hands on Zack's shoulders, the blonde pressed a kiss to his hair. "You draw the line, okay?"

Zack swallowed hard, and nodded. "Okay."

He didn't draw the line at the slow, sweet kiss Evan shared with him. He didn't draw the line at being sat on the edge of

the bed, or when Evan leaned a little more weight onto him, pressing him back onto the sheets.

He didn't want to draw the line *anywhere*. If anything was going to limit him, it was his sheer inexperience.

Zack might not have been the best student in the world, but he was a quick learner, and he hoped the passion with which he wanted this made up for his mistakes. Evan didn't seem to mind, just smiling softly at him every time Zack pulled back with a mumbled apology.

He remembered the guys at school who used to be so completely desperate to get past first base. Zack didn't understand their haste. He could have stayed kissing Evan forever, savouring the taste, the warmth, the whisper of the blond's breathing against his cheek.

But instead of sating the hunger, the kisses just stoked it to wilder heights.

The kiss became deeper in an attempt to keep up with the want. Evan's tongue stroked soft and slow against his own, one moment massaging, the next sucking. His head spinning with that strange intoxication that was just his proximity to this man, Zack tightened his arms around Evan's neck, legs wrapping around the blonde's waist. He moaned as his arousal was pressed firmly against Evan's abdomen, the metal of his belt buckle biting into Zack's skin in a way that wasn't quite pleasure, wasn't quite pain.

The heat of the blond's answering erection was like a fire beneath him, rubbing against the juncture of his legs. Evan's hands slid further down, under his ass, kneading a little as they lifted him, pressed him closer. Zack broke the kiss with a

moan, muffled only by biting down on Evan's shoulder. The blond groaned in inarticulate reply, betraying his need.

"Zack..!" Evan's head snapped back with a gasp as Zack ran his hands down his new lover's chest. The muscles quivered beneath soft skin, and the blond's moan was a low rumbled vibration when Zack shyly brushed his fingertips over the clothed erection straining at the front of Evan's pants.

"Sorry." He snatched his hand back when Evan breathed his name again, almost in warning.

"No..." The blond smiled down at him breathlessly. "This'll just be over too quick if you keep doing that."

One of Evan's hands found its way under the worn fabric of his shirt, deft exploring fingers meeting soft warm skin. Zack whimpered at the way Evan lingered over the task of unbuttoning his shirt. Fingers teased at the skin beneath the material, barely grazing, before eventually stroking, almost tickling. A flat-palmed caress ran back up Zack's chest, long elegant fingers catching the hardened nub of a nipple, scissoring across it, tweaking.

Evan chuckled softly when Zack tugged him close again, and kissed him. Every cry was swallowed up in the battle the kiss became, the delicious fight for control. Every lick or nip was met with a counterattack. Zack arched up into the touches like his skin was magnetized to Evan's fingers.

Then the hand had moved lower, trapped between their bodies, fingers curving around the length of the hardened shaft outlined against the front of his pants. Zack hadn't even noticed the kiss had broken, except that his cries were

suddenly louder. Evan drew back a little, watching him as he thrust slowly, pinning his hand firmly against Zack.

"Oh God...!" Granted, Zack didn't know much, but even he knew that creaming his pants before Evan had even taken them off was a big no-no. The blond had made him stop, but Zack didn't think he had the strength to return the favor. His body wanted appeasing, and wanted it now.

He whimpered when the hand drew away. Evan just grinned at him, looking pleased, kissing him before Zack could cuss.

Fingers tugged at the waist of his pants, unfastening them clumsily, as soft lips and warm breath whispered against his cheek, against the expanse of skin beneath his ear, murmuring heated words that may or may not have been incoherent. Zack was past listening. Past the point of being able to focus on anything except the fingers tugging his pants down, nails raking bluntly over the angles of his hipbone.

A sudden flare of embarrassment made him blush and turn his head away. What if Evan didn't like looking at him like this, what if—?

"You're beautiful." Evan kissed him gently, soothing away nerves with a touch. "Absolutely beautiful."

Those words swimming around his head, Zack didn't pay attention to where Evan's lips were straying until he felt a warm tongue circling his navel, cool breath against the wet skin, before sliding lower.

He'd never even had someone else's hand around his cock before. Now he had Evan Hunter's mouth wrapped around him. Each movement of lips and tongue left trails of electricity

in their wake, and there was nothing Zack could do or think of to keep the orgasm from flooding his senses.

Evan stayed where he was until Zack's body had stopped jerking and was just trembling faintly. He couldn't even look at the blond anymore, horrified at his own lack of control.

"I'm sorry—" he began, before Evan shushed him with a kiss. There was a foreign taste on his lips, and Zack shivered at the awareness that the taste was him.

"Don't be. Don't ever be sorry again."

The kisses resumed again, a little more relaxed now. But with Evan's knowing touches, it wasn't long before Zack was wriggling beneath him, demanding more. The blond chuckled at his pleas, sitting back slightly.

One leg braced against Evan's shoulder, Zack reached frantically for anything to hold onto under the perfectly synchronised dual assault of one finger sliding slowly into him, and fingers wrapping firmly around his arousal. Bucking under Evan's touch, he almost sobbed with want, the ache that seeped into his blood, made him thrash about on the sheets. Breathing fast and shallow, he clung to the blond's arms, fingers biting into the skin.

"Is that okay?" Evan's voice was far away again, muffled and disorientating.

Zack just nodded. Evan watched him for another concerned moment, before slowly beginning to slide the digit back and forth. The sensation was strange as hell, but not painful. At least not till the blond added a second finger, and Zack's body protested at being stretched in this unfamiliar way.

He tried to bite back the wince, but Evan noticed anyway. Stilling, he pressed a kiss to Zack's neck.

"Do you want me to stop? It's okay if—"

"No." Zack shook his head, eyes squeezed shut. "No."

"Okay." Evan nodded, voice soft. "Let me find something that's gonna help."

Blindly he sensed the blond groping frustratedly for something on the night stand just past his head. Zack just whimpered loudly at the loss of those fingers, feeling incredibly empty without them, pain forgotten.

When he opened his eyes, Evan was gazing at him. Those blue eyes didn't look calm or amused anymore, they looked ruthless. Like Evan knew what he wanted and wouldn't stop 'til he got it. Zack shivered at the thrill that look sent racing down his spine, gasping Evan's name loudly as two slick fingers returned to brush against his entrance, sliding in with little resistance this time, and began to thrust and stretch him in earnest.

He didn't feel himself tense as the blond finally positioned himself, hotter moisture pressing against the over sensitised opening, but he must have been, more than he realised. Those soft lips were against his again, kissing gently, Evan's free hand rubbing soothing strokes against his thigh.

"I'm not gonna hurt you, Zack..."

"I know." He nodded. "I'm okay."

And he was. Evan went slowly and carefully, and there was still a sharp flare of pain, but Zack kept reminding himself how perfect it would be when the stinging ebbed away. This

was what he wanted; this was what he'd always wanted. And he needed this man with a hunger he'd never known.

Evan made a throaty whimpered sound, noises that betrayed the frustration at wanting the teasing to go on longer. But half buried in Zack's body beneath him, teasing gave way to instinct and reflex, movements that required little conscious effort. It was just what their bodies demanded, settling into a rhythm they couldn't have broken any more than they could have stopped blinking, stopped breathing.

Zack's legs wrapped tightly around Evan's waist, riding the slow, powerful thrusts that made the bed frame bash against the wall. Evan's fingers tightened around his arousal, stroke firm but excruciatingly slow, fingertips tracing every ridge, experimenting with different pressure points, no doubt noting and filing away every whimpered or moaned reaction. A warm palm cupped the head of his cock, enveloping it completely, twisting slightly back and forth, before sliding back down. Zack bucked against the touch like an unbroken mustang, riding sensations that sent his world tilting when Evan's cock touched that place inside him that left him mindless, boneless, consumed by the heat.

The things the body above his was doing were the most tender ministrations he'd ever known, nothing like he'd ever imagined. Evan's lips were still against his skin, pressing butterfly kisses in between moans and gasps that sounded like Zack's name. It felt like a lightning storm gathered between the points where their lower bodies touched, every

movement of Evan's hand, every thrust of his hips making the pleasure spike a notch.

He let the pleasure carry him as though he was floating on it, feeling his muscles tense and tighten as the lightning sparked and flashed. Evan's thrusts became more urgent and erratic at the heat constricting around him. As the storm peaked, Zack's back arched off the bed, fingers gripping hard onto Evan's arms. Heat splashed across his belly, his chest, Evan continued to thrust for another moment, before the blond's body tensed, pulsed, and an answering heat pooled deep inside him, an answering cry echoed around the room.

Then there was silence. Once Zack could hear past the heartbeat thundering like remuda hooves in his head, he could hear Evan's breathing, feel the reassuring thud of the blond's pulse as he held Zack close. Shutting his eyes, Zack laid his head against Evan's chest, too spent for words but needing to hear the answer anyway.

"Promise me ... Promise me you're not gonna leave me."

"I promise." Evan kissed his hair, tucking Zack's head under his chin. "I'm not going anywhere."

* * * *

Mornings began with the same old routines. The horses in the stables needed to be fed and cleaned out, before one was selected for the day in the saddle, checking on the others. Evan always chose the same one, a sweet-tempered grey mare than put up with having to follow her own nose when her rider wanted to moon over his lover instead of pay attention. Zack, however, never settled on one. Like a picky

sutor, he rarely stuck with the same mount for more than two days running.

Hopefully, Evan's latest—and last, for a while at least—purchase would help fix that.

He watched as he saddled up the grey mare, as Zack peered around the stables trying to choose today's replacement for a horse that wasn't there anymore.

When Rafferty whinnied at his much-missed owner, Zack jerked up as though he'd been electrocuted. His stunned gaze, though, came to Evan first.

"How ... I mean—?"

Evan smiled. "I'd have made a lousy trainer if I couldn't track down the horse I wanted, wouldn't I?"

In reality it had taken the best part of the last two months, ever since one morning when Zack had woke up, cuddled him, and confessed how much he missed his old horse. When Evan eventually found him, at a dude ranch two counties over, the new owners had fleeced him for twice what the nag was worth.

But it was worth every cent for that look on Zack's face as he walked over to him, leaning up to kiss him softly. "Thank you. I'm glad he's home."

Evan watched him with a smile as his young lover went to greet his old friend, thinking that it wasn't just Rafferty who'd come home.

In the Rough

by Terry Hunter

The final one screamed as he shot him down. Not that it bothered Doc, except it'd have the local law on him quicker he could say lynch mob, and he was aiming for something higher than a small town sheriff this time.

Kicking the body over onto its front, he rifled through the man's clothing, pocketing his money belt and spare ammunition. The guns he left, after knocking out the firing pins. They were poor quality and dead weight he couldn't afford to carry.

Pollyanna stamped irritably, and he crooned to her as he transferred the contents of the men's saddlebags to his own and sent the spare horses off into the night with a slap to their rumps. The big-boned chestnut he hung on to, looping its reins through his saddle. It always paid to have a spare beast, just in case his went lame.

Behind him, down in the valley clustered round the juncture of two streams, lay the small hamlet he'd ridden through on his way to the ranch. He'd hoped no one had seen him, but the posse they'd sent out after him made that unlikely. Lights flickered out from the houses as the sun set, forming their own misplaced constellation. Doc stood for a moment, one arm draped around Polly's neck, staring at the sky, before he swung up into the saddle and chivvied her on with his heels. He had a way to go before daybreak.

* * * *

"Mowed 'em down in cold blood, 'e did, Marshall," the gap-toothed cowpoke said, finishing his statement with a virulent ejection of tobacco juice. "Sent 'em scurrying off to meet their maker without a second thought. Goddang butcher. Soonest that Doctor Death is hung high, the happier law-abiding folks is gonna be."

Mitchell sidestepped the brown mess and turned his attention to the other witness. Her husband was one of the men this outlaw had murdered and rumour had it she wasn't at all disappointed to see him gone. "You wanna add anything, Mrs. Kramer?" he asked.

The woman simpered at him, her fingers curling through her blonde ringlets. "Honest, Marshall, I don't know a single other thing. He seemed like a nice boy when he rode through. 'Cepting his eyes. He had a killer's eyes. Not like yours. Soft eyes, you got. Real pretty. Like a proper gentleman."

Mitchell ignored her overt flutterings and flipped open the warrant. Inside was the picture he'd drawn himself, painstakingly assembled from eyewitnesses who'd had the misfortune to run into Doctor Death during his yearlong rampage. The few who'd survived anyway.

"Would this be the man, Mrs Kramer?" he asked, holding up the picture.

Her attempts to flirt ignored, the woman's face hardened. "Course a proper gentleman would know to pass on condolences to a poor widow woman," she said. "And I can't rightly say if that was him. It was dark and I only ever saw him through the window."

Covering his disappointment, Mitchell returned the picture to its leather pouch, nodded his thanks to the cowpoke and raised his hat to Mrs Kramer. He'd hoped this time would be different, but it never was.

With the likes of Billy the Kid or Jesse James there was family, accounts from whores or saloons, people they'd met on the trail, a gang. Not with this one. Doc was a loner, through and through, and by rights should already be dead. Yet it was the ones who'd seen Doc close up or spoken to him who'd ended up shot, as if the outlaw had something to hide, something that would give him away if he let anyone get close.

Walking back towards the Sheriff's office and his tethered horse, Mitchell felt the eyes of the community on him, that odd combination of resentment at a stranger and hope that he'd get done what their men hadn't. Frankly Mitchell didn't care what they thought. This had turned into more than a simple manhunt. It was getting personal.

"You moving on then, Marshall?" the sheriff asked as Mitchell mounted up.

"That I am," Mitchell said, digging in his spurs and setting his horse to dancing. "No point in letting the boy get further ahead."

* * * *

He stopped off by the wagon road where the latest killings had happened and began quartering the ground for tracks. Thanks to the folks who'd come for the bodies, there were boot marks all over, but Mitchell worked his way out carefully,

searching for a telltale hoofprint or flattened patch of grass that would tell him this was the way the outlaw had gone.

He found a stone, chipped at one corner, and remembered the sheriff saying the hands' guns had been damaged. Mitchell'd lay good money this was the tool Doc had used. Holding it in his fist, he gazed towards the Big Horn mountains, wondering if that was where the outlaw was headed. It was obvious, but sometimes the most obvious routes worked best for a reason.

Finally he spotted it, half a print in the dust on the edge of some rocks. Clever. This one wouldn't be easy to track. Not that Mitchell was worried. He was good; there wasn't a trail so faint that he couldn't follow it. He'd already tracked this one across three territories.

* * * *

The boy was either the world's luckiest fool, or too damned clever for his own good, Mitchell reflected as he studied the small homestead. After five days, the trail hadn't wavered. Due west, running parallel to the wagon train routes but never coming close enough to risk contact. This was the first sign of habitation Mitchell had hit and the eerie silence about the place worried him. It wasn't a silence of the plains, where a man expected to have nothing but his own company for days at a time, but the silence of the abandoned. He'd seen similar after Indian raids, 'cepting there were usually buzzards drawn close by bodies laying out in the sun.

The sky was as quiet as the ground; devoid of life. The doors to the barn and house were both closed up tight. It

looked like the folks had packed up and left, except homesteaders didn't do that and the yard didn't have the feel of run-down hopelessness that made people give up. The fences were all in good repair and when Mitchell dismounted and climbed the front steps of the house, the boards didn't so much as squeak under his boots.

Five minutes later he was back in the saddle, mystery solved. What he'd found was too familiar to move him anymore, though the kids' eyes would haunt his dreams for a few nights to come. His quarry hadn't gotten the name Doctor Death for no good reason.

* * * *

Mules weren't of use to anyone, but the old boy's rifle would come in handy. Doc stuck it into Polly's saddle and went back to check the body one last time. Flies filled its empty mouth and the ground around it had already returned to blackened dust. High above, buzzards circled, riding the thermals, waiting for their portion of the spoils. Doc saw no point in denying them; the sun would soon be down and then coyotes would have what the buzzards couldn't reach. They'd scratch up shallow graves easy enough, so the loose dirt packed around the prospector's limbs shouldn't pose a problem. This time tomorrow most would ride by without seeing a thing.

Except for the Marshall. He'd notice, of course, and would come running, just as Doc planned.

Bluffs rose each side of the track, the sun burning between them straight into Doc's eyes as he rode. The scrub-covered

hills reflected the light back, orange and purple stripes glowing in the rock and, behind him, his shadow stretched out, telling tales of a twenty-foot giant loose in the wilderness.

* * * *

Another twenty-four hours found Mitchell picking his way through the lower reaches of a ravine, keeping a wary eye out for rattlers and anyone hunting him from the cliffs. The tracks told him Doc was a few days ahead, but this was a plum place for an ambush. Mitchell was vulnerable, and knew it, but couldn't risk keeping to cover in case he lost the trail. It still headed west, and anyone on route was fair game, Indian or white, made no difference. The body count was up to seven that he knew of, with several others that might have been accidents, might not.

When his horse went down squealing, its knee destroyed by a high calibre round, it was almost a relief. He snatched his rifle from the saddle and rolled clear of the thrashing animal. Another shot rang out and a spume of dirt kicked up between him and the horse. Someone was trying to drive him away from it.

Well, Mitchell may have a reputation for being a bit slow, but he wasn't stupid. Getting separated from his supplies out here was as good as death sentence.

Rolling onto his belly, he fired one shot and the horse went still. Now it was cover. Mitchell snake-bellied forwards, loosening his knife from his belt, and sliced through the leather straps of his saddlebags and bedroll. He reached for

his water canteen and cursed, ducking, when a bullet thumped into the carcass inches from his hand. There was a spare in his pack, so it wasn't worth taking the risk, but it was a good distraction. He made another grab for it, waited till a gunshot echoed around the ravine and then scrambled to his feet, bolting for the nearest cover, zigzagging to avoid being hit.

Inches from safety, the bullet smacked into his shoulder, bowling him to the ground. Pressing his palm to his neck, Mitchell staggered the final few feet and collapsed against a handy tree. Damn, but that stung. He ripped open his vest and shirt looking for an exit wound. Nothing. The warm trickle down his back told him the same as the tingles in his left hand; the bullet was lodged in his shoulder. Gritting his teeth, he banged his head gently against the tree. He was in some serious trouble. Trouble that would only get worse once Doc arrived.

His saddlebags offered up a fresh shirt, which Mitchell used to bind the wound as well as he could, given the angle. Not that it would do much good. He had to get the bullet out, impossible with a dead horse and the nearest surgeon several days ride away. Even now infection would be setting in. Give him a week and Mitchell knew he'd be lucky to still be alive.

"Hurts a bit, I'd wager?"

Mitchell started and grabbed for his rifle, swinging it up to rest awkwardly across his knee. He covered the resulting wince under a growl. "Take another step and I'll blow your brains out, son."

Doc stayed where he was, at the edge of the trees, back-lit by the sun streaming into the narrow valley, his face shadowed by his hat. He had no gun that Mitchell could see, but Mitchell wasn't foolish enough to relax his guard.

"Wasn't planning to kill you."

A cynical snort escaped before Mitchell could stop it. The outlaw bent his head further and the telltale scent of sulphur and burning tobacco suddenly competed with fresh pine and wet earth. When he'd tucked his matches back into his vest pocket, Doc dropped to his haunches, one hand resting on the ground in front of him as though he was coaxing a scared animal from its burrow.

Mitchell pressed further back against the tree. He'd seen this man's victims and didn't trust him as far as he could piss.

"See, I know about you, Marshall," Doc was saying, one finger tracing shapes in the pine needles. Mitchell tensed when Doc's other hand moved, but it only travelled to his hat, tipping it back so his face was finally visible. And there they were, the only features that consistently came up in witness reports, white hair like an old man's and killer's eyes. What no one had said was how darned pretty Doc was.

'Course the other thing that no one mentioned was the accent. The infamous Doctor Death was British, which, Mitchell guessed, explained the lack of records and his tendency to shoot anyone who got close enough to cotton on.

"Heard about you. Talk of the town back in the Federal city, you and your 'Deputy'."

Mitchell's heart twisted at the mention of Artie, his partner in all senses of the word, and the man who had taken a bullet

destined for Mitchell. His finger tightened on the trigger without conscious control, the shot spitting out and catching Doc in the thigh, sending him sprawling sideways.

"You don't get to say his name," Mitchell snarled, using the tree to push himself upright. Pain sliced through his shoulder and he panted to cover the wince. Stalking over to the downed man, he dropped his rifle and pulled his six-shooter, levelling it at Doc's head. "Murdering scum like you don't ever get to say his name."

Doc exploded up from the ground, slamming into Mitchell's gut and sending them both crashing into a tree. It didn't hold them for long and they ended up in the mud, rolling over and over, with first one and then the other gaining the upper hand. Mitchell was heavier, but his damaged shoulder prevented him from taking advantage of it. Every time he managed to pin Doc under him, the bastard went for that arm, causing Mitchell to lose his balance. Clashing spurs and the occasional grunt of pain kept them company, until finally Mitchell ended up flat on his back, his hands up protecting his face from the flurry of punches Doc was dealing.

"Never said his fucking name. Cocksucker," Doc rasped, bracing himself on Mitchell's chest.

Blood streamed from Mitchell's nose, filling his throat to choking point. He had to do something, and quick, before he drowned. Abandoning any attempt at fighting back, Mitchell went limp, letting his head drop as if he'd been knocked unconscious. The blows continued to fall, though neither as hard nor as accurate as before. At a guess, the boy was getting tired. Now if he'd just drop his guard. Hot wetness

soaked into Mitchell's heavy pants from the leg straddling his. It had to be painful, taking weight on an injured thigh, but Doc wasn't letting it slow him down.

Still feigning unconsciousness, Mitchell slowly stretched out his right hand, searching the ground for something to use as a weapon. His fingers closed around a rock and, with no further thought, he smashed it into Doc's head, catching him on the temple and knocking him cold.

For a few minutes, all Mitchell could do was lie there. His shoulder burned like fire, his left arm numb from the fingers up, but, despite the pain, rest wasn't an option. With a deep groan, he pushed Doc's inert body to one side and staggered to his feet. Somewhere, probably half-buried in pine needles, was his pack.

Using trees for support, Mitchell painfully backtracked to the point the fight started and hunted around. The pack turned up a few yards away in the hollow of some tree roots, split open and spilling its contents onto the ground. Mitchell sorted through them, taking a couple of hefty swigs from his flask and wishing it was something stronger than water. Still, it helped clear his head, and with renewed energy, he set about securing his prisoner.

It was only when he was cuffing Doc's hands that it struck Mitchell that the outlaw was clad only in a short jacket; not hardly suitable for the trek he'd had over the past few weeks.

"Where you holed up then, boy?" he mused as he propped the unconscious man against a tree. "Reckon I need to find your horse. See what clues you got hidden away."

He found Doc's mount hobbled the far side of another stand of pine, a friendly enough mare who wuffled at his approach. The beast looked in good condition, strong and broad-chested. Mitchell checked her feet and the pack and bedroll on the ground next to her. Only a basic set of supplies and no sign of any more gear. Doc had to have somewhere permanent nearby.

After saddling the mare up, Mitchell went back to discover the outlaw still apparently insensible. He considered leaving him that way, but getting him up on the horse would be impossible with only one arm, so he booted him, hard, in the ribs. "Get up."

Doc reacted fast and violently, kicking out and catching Mitchell in the crotch. By the time Mitchell had regained his feet, the outlaw was fifty yards away, limping clumsily with his cuffed hands held out in front. Cussing, Mitchell took off after him, tackling him mid-stride and bringing them both crashing down. Doc grunted, struggling to get free, his body writhing in ways that Mitchell found more familiar than disconcerting; it took him back to his first encounter with Artie. It was ... distracting.

Smacking Doc's head into the ground several times, Mitchell resisted the urge to grind his rapidly hardening length into that squirming backside and growled, "Now, damn well stay down!"

"Down. Up. Make your bloody mind up."

A distinct flush crept up Doc's neck, reddening his cheeks, and Mitchell could feel a racing heartbeat beneath his hands. It could be pain, but Mitchell was thinking that a wounded leg

was the last thing on Doc's mind right now. To grasp the significance of his relationship with Artie, Doc must have run in very specific circles in Washington, circles most decent men avoided at all costs.

Leaning forward and using one hand to pin the outlaw's head by the hair, Mitchell took a risk and breathed, "I wouldn't fuck you if you were the last man left on God's green earth."

Doc's blush deepened. "Sod off," he growled, yanking his head away. "Don't want to fuck you."

"That right? Yet somehow, boy, that ain't the message you're sending out. Slicing up enough folks in my territory that it's a sure thing I'm gonna be on your tail. Leading me 'cross half the state into outlaw country, then taking down my horse when you coulda saved yourself a lot of time and trouble by putting that bullet straight through my heart.

"See," Mitchell sat up, studying Doc's face, "that sounds to me like some half-assed plan. And if you weren't planning on killing me, then just what were you planning on?"

Silence. Doc's face screwed up in thought, his bottom lip pushed out into a pout. "Was gonna lock you up, send a missive to those cocksuckers in the capital." he answered finally. "Reckoned someone would be willing to spend a few quid getting you back all safe and sound like."

It was possible, Mitchell guessed. There'd been a couple of heists recently where the Marshall'd gotten taken hostage. 'Course, they'd ended up shot. Still, if there was one thing Mitchell liked to think he knew, it was killers. For more years than he liked to remember he'd tracked bank robbers and

cattle rustlers, and there was one rule they all held to. Profit. Even a hired gun wouldn't draw for anything less than good gold. What this boy did was different.

He took stuff from homesteads, but it weren't gold, it was supplies. Same with the folks he mowed down on the trail. Neither did he touch the ladies, or the little 'uns. All got the same treatment; a scalpel slash through the belly, followed by a shot to the head if they were lucky.

No, that wasn't the work of someone who'd take a Marshall hostage. It was the kind of thing that got folks locked up in the state asylum. And talking sense to a madman was like pissing into the wind.

With a final thump to the back of Doc's head, Mitchell levered himself up, dragging the outlaw after him. "Let's get something clear," he said, shoving Doc towards the saddled horse that was standing patiently back by the stand of pine. "The warrant I've got for you says dead or alive, but there's a whole mess of folks waiting see you swing for what you've done, so I'm fixing to take you in still breathing."

Doc slipped and fell, landing heavily on his injured leg. For a second he rested, head bowed, and then struggled upright. Not a sound passed his lips and Mitchell had to acknowledge a grudging respect for that. With neither bandage nor tourniquet, the blood staining the outlaw's trousers stretched from crotch to knee. That wound must hurt like a fucking bitch.

The mare greeted her master with a soft nicker, snuffling into his neck and puffing at his hair. Doc leaned against her,

caressing her nose with his cuffed hands and whispering quietly under his breath.

He was obviously fond of his horse, not unusual when the relationship between man and beast could make the difference between surviving and not. Still, it made Mitchell wonder how a man who carved up children for a hobby could show such emotion towards an animal.

Feeling like an intruder at a private reunion, Mitchell retrieved his saddlebags and bedroll, and slung them over the mare's back. "She take two?" he said to Doc.

Doc nodded, still immersed in communing with his horse. "Yeah, she's a strong one, is Polly. Long as it's not far."

"Only as far as your hideout," Mitchell said, and then ducked out of the way when a double handed punch headed for his injured shoulder. Grabbing Doc by the collar, he forced him to his knees and pushed his spur into the outlaw's wounded thigh until he finally cried out.

"Look, son," he said, "You can either tell me where we're headed or I'll follow your trail. Either way, we're gonna find it and get sorted."

* * * *

It was an overnight ride. Come sundown, Mitchell hauled out the leg irons and locked Doc to a tree. Less than impressed, the outlaw kept up a string of curses for a full hour before Mitchell shut his mouth with a plate of beans and bacon.

The following morning they both rose stiffer than boards, ignoring each other's groans as they eased muscles bruised during the fight.

"'Nother four, five hours," Doc offered sullenly in response to Mitchell's enquiry as to the remainder of their journey. And with nothing else said, they mounted up.

Mitchell was expecting a camp, with maybe a rough lean-to and a fire pit. Where Doc finally directed him was a well-hidden cabin, set high up a narrow trail and invisible from below. With its couple of outbuildings and a cold store pit secured against grizzlies, someone could stay up here for months. It had probably belonged to a trapper or prospector. How in hell the outlaw had stumbled over it was anyone's guess.

"Cozy," Mitchell commented, noting the well-stocked woodpile and recent repairs. "Where'd you bury the owner?"

In front of him, Doc snorted. "Dunno who the owner is. Was abandoned, half-wrecked, when I found it."

That was illuminating. And spoke of a real plan. If the infamous Doctor Death was capable of thinking things out so far ahead, why had he let Mitchell get the better of him at the last? It didn't make sense.

"You gonna let me down or what?" continued Doc.

Suddenly over-aware of the muscular body pressing back against his own, Mitchell swallowed heavily and slid down. The drop jarred his shoulder and he poked at it gingerly, feeling the telltale heat already forming. He had to get the bullet out. Somehow.

"Can do that, if you've a mind," Doc said still perched on Polly's back. The blood had dried on his trousers, Mitchell noticed, and his eyes were deeply circled.

Ignoring the offer, Mitchell unlocked the extra set of cuffs securing Doc to the saddle and held up his good arm to help Doc down.

"There's a stable, kinda, round the back," said Doc, dismounting the other way with only the slightest of grimaces indicating how much pain he was in. After a second he peered at Mitchell under the mare's neck and said, "Need to rub the old girl down 'fore we get too comfy," then limped off around the side of the cabin, hands still cuffed, with Polly following along like a well-trained mutt.

Mitchell shook his head, bemused yet again by this outlaw's strange behaviour. The boy was as stubborn as a mule and had the luck of the devil on his side.

And pretty, part of his mind pointed out. In the two years since Artie was killed, no man had attracted Mitchell's attention. But Doc? Doc was beautiful. Lean, yet strong. Masculine, and yet with features that verged on delicate.

He was also a cold-blooded killer. Not to mention wilier than a fox and probably halfway down the mountain by now.

Breaking into a trot, Mitchell headed for the back of the building, preparing to find the place deserted. It wasn't. Doc had managed to remove Polly's saddle and was doing his best to rub the mare down with a handful of straw, allowing the horse to take the majority of his weight. Until, that was, he saw Mitchell, when he stood defiantly tall on both legs.

Mitchell hid his amused grin by glancing around the tiny clearing. Hobbled in the trees nearby was a large chestnut gelding, raw-boned and half-starved looking. Mitchell guessed it was the extra horse Doc had picked up back in Trabing. At least they wouldn't have to double up for the journey out.

"Give Harry some corn, would ya," Doc called out, indicating a battered old feed bin in the corner of the lean-to stable. "Oughta leave it 'til winter really, but the old sod needs a bit of fattening up."

Feeling more like a farm hand than a law enforcement agent, Mitchell shovelled up a scoop of feed and threw it across the sparse grass next to the grazing horse. It glared at him warily, rolling its eyes, ears flipping forwards and back.

"Hey, lad," Mitchell said softly, extending his hand. The gelding blew on it suspiciously.

"Watch it!" Doc yelled.

Mitchell turned to look at him just as Harry's teeth snapped together far too close to his fingers. "Fuck!" he yelped, swinging a fist at the horse's nose. It reared back, showing the whites of its eyes.

"Yeah," Doc laughed. "He's a right bastard. Turned me black and blue 'til I found a decent snaffle. Wouldn't turn your back on him."

Taking Doc's advice, Mitchell backed away and returned to the stable where Doc appeared to have finished with Polly. By the looks of him, the extra exercise hadn't done him any favors.

"Inside," Mitchell ordered, reasserting his authority.

The outlaw's lips tightened and Mitchell waited for the punch. As predicated, Doc swung. Mitchell caught the cuffs and twisted, shoving Doc backward into the cabin wall.

"Had enough?" he asked conversationally, digging his fingers into the outlaw's windpipe.

Doc shook his head, sliding slowly down the wall, face turning purple as his hands clenched around Mitchell's wrists trying to force them away.

When he finally passed out, Mitchell let him go, dropping him to the ground.

* * * *

"Stubborn, stupid boy," Mitchell muttered bleakly to the cabin walls. He hauled Doc over to the cot in the corner and dumped him on top of it. The outlaw was showing signs of coming round and Mitchell wanted him secure before that happened. Frankly he'd had enough of this turn-on-a-dime attitude. He needed Doc to recognize who was in charge and stop behaving like a jerk. 'Course, Mitchell mused as he cuffed Doc's hands around the metal bars, that was probably too much to hope for.

Once that was done, Mitchell turned his attention to Doc's leg. It would be simpler to do this without the snide comments. He fetched water from the barrel outside and hunted through the surprisingly well-stocked stores until he found a roll of cotton. Having torn off a few lengths, he stripped off Doc's boots and blood-soaked pants, and tossed them into the corner.

He was just about to start on woollen undergarments when Doc stirred, opened one eye and said, "You know, there's lads in New York'll do this for a few bucks. Me, I'm more expensive."

Having expected something along these lines, Mitchell ignored him and carried on inspecting the wound. The bleeding had stopped, but it still needed to be cleaned and bandaged. Reminding himself of the healthy bonus that was set to be his if he brought Doc back alive, Mitchell resisted the temptation to simply shoot him, rolled the outlaw onto his side and checked the back.

Unlike himself, Doc had been lucky. The bullet had gone straight through his thigh, though the untidy wound in the back was still seeping. Under normal circumstances, Mitchell would have used his knife to cut away the bloodstained garment, but limited to one hand, he had no choice but to make do with what he had.

Muttering "Keep still," he bent forwards and gripped the cloth over one buttock in his teeth. Using his good hand, he ripped the underdrawers from fanny-flap to knee, then rolled Doc back over and did the same thing on the front, exposing his leg completely.

The rigid cockstand against his cheek didn't go unnoticed, nor did the heat of Doc's skin and rapid breaths. Mitchell hardened in response. It had been so long since he'd had any reaction that the temptation to give Doc exactly what he wanted was extreme. In self-defence, Mitchell conjured up the faces of the children Doc had murdered, telling himself that a man who could do that wasn't the type he wanted to

fuck. The trouble was, his body had other ideas. He wanted to taste this man, run his tongue up the length of him, suck the head of his cock and feel it pressing against his palate. He wanted to discover what other noises he could coax from those lips and whether Doc would cry his name when he spent. As Artie had, every time.

"You gonna do something or just look at it?"

It was such a brash question, so unlike anything Artie would have said, that it brought Mitchell back to himself. He jerked upright and snatched his hand back from where it was hovering, far too close to Doc's erection.

Fighting the blush that threatened to stain his cheeks the same colour as Doc's underthings, Mitchell snatched up the cloth, dipped it into the water and began wiping away the blood. He kept his mind firmly on the task and refused to allow his mind to wander. Even though his fingers kept brushing against wiry curls and hot solid flesh.

"Roll over," he said once the blood was gone, sitting up to ease both his back and his erection.

Doc raised a suggestive eyebrow but did as he was told.

The change in position, which should have made Mitchell's life easier, didn't. Now he had to contend with pale smooth buttocks that his hands itched to caress and the hidden line of spine that his tongue longed to trace.

"Y'know, a bloke could die of gangrene waiting for you to clean him up."

Damn the boy. Mitchell rubbed away the sweat gathering on his forehead and bent to his task. The sooner this was done, the quicker he could start on his own injury. Not that

he had a clue how he was going to deal with it, but the throb spreading slowly down his arm, in counterpoint to the throb in his groin, was a stiff reminder that he'd better be quick.

And at last Mitchell was finished. He tossed the cloth into the bowl of bloody water, cracked open the jar of raw spirits he'd found and liberally doused the back of Doc's leg.

"Bleeding hell!" Doc yelled, his body arching away from the burn.

Mitchell grabbed his hip, tugging him back down and sloshed a similar amount over the front, noting with a smirk that the outlaw's cock had given up the unequal struggle and now lay flaccid in its nest of curls.

"Could have fucking warned me."

It really was easier to ignore him, Mitchell decided as he strapped the wound as best he could with one hand. The bandage wasn't tight, but would at least keep it clean.

"S'only polite to warn a bloke when you're gonna chuck whiskey over him. Might of fancied a drop to drink instead."

Picking up the dirty cloth and bowl, Mitchell carried them outside and freshened the supplies for his own shoulder. When he returned, Doc had managed to wedge himself upright between the wall and the bedstead, and was now watching avidly as Mitchell started to strip off his shirt.

When a low, appreciative, whistle greeted the removal of his undershirt, Mitchell moved further away, closer to the rear of the cabin next to a small window. Grabbing a chair, he straddled it, all the while keeping his back turned on the outlaw. The comments persisted.

"Would ya look at the body on that. You, Marshall, have got muscles that a sodding stallion'd be proud of. Wonder if the rest of the package measures up."

Mitchell pressed at the wound cautiously, twisting his torso to try and see the damage. It was impossible. The bullet had entered high up, between his shoulder blade and neck.

"Said I'd do that for you. Have to uncuff me, mind. Not much good with me toes."

But the bullet couldn't stay where it was, so he'd have to at least try. Using the tip of his knife, Mitchell dug at the wound, flinching as the blade cut further into his flesh.

"Obstinate bugger, aren't you. Too bloody proud to let me have at it."

A thin line of yellowish blood tracked up the blade. As Mitchell had guessed, it was already infected.

"Guess I'll have to make do with watching. Pretty enough sight, I reckon."

Mitchell tried again, forcing the knife further into the wound and twisting it slightly. It was excruciating. Sweat stood out on his forehead, black dots danced in front of his eyes and his hand started to shake.

"Getting to you, am I? Can see you all of a tremble for me."

Finally metal grated on metal. With a last agonising effort, Mitchell managed to force the tip of the knife under the bullet and flick it out. It fell to the ground, landing with a quiet thud. Bile rose in the back of Mitchell's throat, blood sang in his ears, his hands shook. His skin, except for the wound, felt

clammy and cold. Breathing heavily, he leaned on the back of the chair, waiting for the room to stop going round.

A couple of minutes later, the quiet sound of flesh on flesh from the bed penetrated the silence. Mitchell heaved his head up, curious, only to discover Doc leering at him from the bed, his hands, though still cuffed, loosed from the frame. One was beneath him somewhere, its exact location obscured by the bandaged leg bent up slightly in front of him. The other hand, the one which drew Mitchell's attention, was wrapped firmly around his cock, tugging at it enthusiastically.

Conscious of the outlaw's gaze burning into him, Mitchell could do no more than watch, mesmerised by the rhythmic reveal-conceal of a moving fist. Some part of his mind continued to point out that this man was his prisoner, the killer he had spent months tracking down. Whose victims he'd buried in shallow graves across several states. But a larger part, a much louder part, was noticing the muscled belly flexing with every movement, the nipples standing starkly on a smooth chest. Long fingers tweaked them, pulled at them, making Mitchell's breath hitch in sympathy. He wanted to be there, wanted to be the one touching, the one stroking and playing and...

Three strides took him from one side of the room to the other, the chair crashing to the floor behind him. Without thinking he shoved Doc's hands away and replaced them with his own. His lips clamped around a nipple, sucking hard, tasting fresh sweat and leather. The outlaw arched, pushing up against him, words urging him on to more and harder. Hot flesh, slick with precome, leapt into his hand and Mitchell

tightened his fingers around it, relishing the sudden halt to words his actions brought.

Hands fumbled with his pants buckle, the leather slapping open letting cool air rush his skin. Then finally, after so fucking long, fingers that weren't his own closed around his shaft. Mitchell groaned, deep and heartfelt, his hips bucking up into the pressure, which was suddenly gone. Aching with frustration, he snarled and crawled further on to the bed, flattening Doc beneath him.

Cock slid alongside cock, hot and heavy. Breath mingled, whiskey and pain. Nails dug into Mitchell's shoulder and he buried his cry in the neck of another. Agony had no place here, unless it was the sweet agony building in his groin, threatening to tear away what sense he had left. Grinding down, Mitchell sobbed out his desire, nerve endings screaming for something he dared not take. His mouth sought out skin, teeth nipping and pinching, greedy for just that little bit more. A scorching spill flooded between them, slicking the final moments of Mitchell's passion. The words were back, urging him on. Nails gouged, thighs clamped around his own, hips arching and pressing fast and furious. Too much and never quite enough, until Doc called his name, "Mitchell, Christ, please!" tearing the climax from Mitchell's body. Shaking, he collapsed, jerking and coming in waves that he thought would never end.

Passion spent, pain and good sense returned together. The breath caressing Mitchell's sweat-dampened neck suddenly stank of old blood and death, corrupting him even as he

shared the same air. Because he, Federal Marshall, had just fucked his prisoner.

For ten years Mitchell had toed the line, kept his liaisons strictly amongst others who, like himself, had everything to lose. Even his partnership with Artie had been primarily that, a partnership, built on sound foundations of law enforcement. Now, thanks to his own gross stupidity, this outlaw—this killer—had enough blackmail material to ruin Mitchell for life. With a strangled cry, Mitchell staggered from the bed, heading blindly for the door.

Cold air slapped into his face, mountain-thin and filled with birdsong, things he didn't remember from the journey up here. Things that had been consumed by the lean body pressed against him, the horse's movement making them slide together mimicking actions he'd desired since Doc first tipped back his hat to look him in the eye.

Heart hammering, Mitchell sought out the water barrel and plunged his head into its icy depths, only coming up for air when the pressure on his lungs grew too much. He was fool, and knew it. He'd allowed himself to be seduced by a beautiful face and the promise of company. He'd forgotten to see the killer behind the pretty smile.

Stifling a groan, Mitchell forced himself to stand. There was winter in these trees, their leaves already turning gold, the grass beneath them sparse and yellowing. Mornings that had been crisp during his hunt would be lethally cold within the month it would take him to get back to civilisation on foot. Without supplies he was a dead man. And that was always supposing Doc let him walk away.

The snick of a safety catch releasing saw Mitchell swinging round, dropping automatically into a crouch. Doc leaned on the door jamb, Mitchell's own six-shooter levelled in strong unshaken hands.

"Gonna give you a choice," he said. "See, I've a yen for some company this winter. Maybe beyond. And I reckon a Marshall'd have some work in him and energy for extras later if I fancied. Or," Doc paused, his tongue darting out to lick his lips. "I could shoot you now.

"So what do you say, Mitchell?" The name came out as a sneer. "Either way you're gonna be my bitch."

Staring up into a killer's eyes, Mitchell knew he only had one chance. Years ago, when he was just starting out, he'd got caught in a blizzard and ended up facing down a hungry wolf. Unarmed and half-dead with cold, he'd accepted death but decided he wasn't going out alone. That same feeling, the power that comes from not giving a damn came rushing back.

He rose slowly to his feet and affected a casual stance. "You don't wanna be doing that, son," he said, pointing to the gun.

Doc's gaze flickered away from him, and in the split second Mitchell leapt, slamming shoulder first into the outlaw's belly. They spilled backward into the cabin, wrestling for control of the wildly waving gun. A shot rang out and Mitchell screamed as the bullet sliced through his side, leaving burning agony in its wake.

"Shit."

Rolling sideways Mitchell curled around the pain half-hearing Doc's words but in altogether too much agony to

care. Wet heat coated his fingers. Blood. Gushing. This was it. The end. True unconsciousness came as utter relief.

* * * *

The world was doing that strange in and out thing. Vague images plagued Mitchell's mind. Of being moved, of a hard mattress under his back, agony in his belly as something pushed against it.

He was hot, burning up, kicking away blankets that tangled around his legs, dragging him down into a place where every breath was pain. Then the shivers started, drenching him with sweat even as the weight of the covers increased.

Time jumped. Night followed day between one eye blink and the next. The candle burning next to the bed melted and regrew, forming grotesque shapes in his imagination. And through it all was a voice; calm, deep, soothing. A hand on his brow, a cup of foul liquid pressed to his lips, fingers stroking his throat until he swallowed a mouthful down. Then back to blissful nothingness.

* * * *

Early morning light, glowing in a way that Mitchell knew meant snow, poured through cracks in the shutters. A fire, banked for the night, pumped out heat from the grate, and next to it, slumped in a chair and snoring softly, was Doc.

Mitchell's immediate instinct was to reach for his gun. He groaned as the sudden movement tugged at his side, leaving him breathless. It was sore. The kind of itchy soreness that

goes hand in hand with healing. His shoulder was the same. On inspection, Mitchell found both wounds neatly bandaged and covered with what smelled like garlic poultices, though that could have been the stew over the fire. He was also as weak as a kitten, starving hungry and desperate to piss.

A grunt from the chair reminded Mitchell who was in the room with him. Returning his attention to the outlaw, Mitchell reflected that he should probably be angry; after all, Doc was the one who shot him in the first place. But he also had to be the one who'd treated the wounds and saved Mitchell's life.

"Hey," Mitchell said, and again, louder, when Doc didn't stir. "Hey!"

Still nothing. At this point, any Marshall worthy of the name would find a gun and shoot the outlaw as he slept but, despite the danger inherent in being around this man, there was a riddle here Mitchell wanted answered. He also needed to pee and was pretty damn sure he couldn't manage it alone.

A tin mug on the cupboard proved the perfect weapon. Mitchell launched it across the room, yelping as it tugged on his injuries, but still managing to catch Doc on the side of the head with unerring accuracy. The outlaw snorted and jerked awake, looking wildly around for whoever had assaulted him. When he realised Mitchell was awake, he smiled, the most genuine expression Mitchell had seen on his face since they'd first met.

It didn't last long. Within moments the closed-off look returned, along with the cold eyes. "You awake then?" Doc said as he stood up, stretching cat-like in front of the fire. "Thought you were a goner for a bit. Was even thinking of

digging a hole 'fore the ground got too hard to get a spade in."

Mitchell could only groan in reply, his hand pressed hard to his side.

Doc noticed and, frowning, came over to pull away the blankets and take a closer look. "Daft bugger," he muttered. "You should have just waited for me to wake up."

"Not and keep a dry bed," Mitchell said, grimacing as fingers pressed against the wound.

"Need a piss, do you?" Doc vanished outside, returning a few seconds later with an old whisky jar. Mitchell held out his hand, expecting the jar to be handed over so he could relieve himself in privacy. He'd reckoned without his doctor.

"I'll do the honors, mate. Don't want these to open up again," Doc said, pushing Mitchell back on the bed. "And it's not like I haven't been doing it all along. This and other things."

After considering complaint and deciding he could well find himself cuffed to the frame for his troubles, Mitchell allowed Doc to continue. By the time he was done, he was glad he had. Even taking a leak was exhausting. So much so, that when Doc brought him a bowl of stew, Mitchell's hands shook too much to hold it.

"How long?" he asked between the deliriously tasty mouthfuls Doc fed him. Meat and grain with a few vegetables, it was basic fare but the best thing Mitchell had tasted in months, or so it seemed.

The spoon paused while Doc gazed off into the middle distance, obviously counting in his head. "'Bout six weeks all

told. Didn't think the fever was ever gonna break." The spoon started moving again. Mitchell opened his mouth, accepting the food like a fledgling bird. "It did a couple of times but then came straight back, had you tossing and turning like a landed ruddy trout. Course, didn't help that I had to leave you for a bit, go get supplies before the snows came. Thought you were dead when I got back, found you on the floor. Bloody fire had gone out and you as cold as a corpse."

Doc appeared genuinely upset and all Mitchell could think was, why? Then the small bowl was empty and Doc was standing again, walking over to the fireplace, and that sense of intimacy was gone.

"Lucky you woke up when you did," Doc was saying. "Put the last of the meat in this, so unless you want gruel, I'm gonna have to take off for a couple of days, catch us something tasty." Having ladled some into the bowl for himself, he turned and asked, "You gonna be right with that? On your own, like?"

In truth, Mitchell was too tired to think straight, let alone consider the implications of being left while Doc went hunting. Still, he nodded and slid back under the covers, watching as Doc ate quickly and gathered his gear.

What felt like seconds later, a voice woke him.

"You want me to change the bandages?"

Mitchell pried his eyes open. Doc was standing in the middle of the room, saddlebags over his shoulder and a frown on his face.

"No," Mitchell replied. That would mean removing the blankets and he was so warm and comfortable.

"Right," Doc continued. "I've left the piss-pot next to the bed." He nudged the bucket with his foot. "There's biscuits and jerky next to the fire. Not much else 'til I get back, 'm afraid. Loaded rifle by the door, if anything tries to get in. Not that it should. 'S early yet, beasties won't be desperate."

* * * *

The time alone sped past. Mitchell spent most of it sleeping, only leaving his cozy cocoon to use the bucket, grab food and throw a few extra logs on the fire. His strength was returning. Slowly. The first time he ventured out, he had to crawl back to the bed when his legs refused to support him; a humiliation Mitchell was grateful Doc hadn't been around to witness. And when he wasn't asleep, the riddle that was Doc occupied his thoughts.

Having caught a glimpse of the outlaw's nurturing side in his relationship with his horse, Mitchell found himself wanting to know more. What makes a man kill some in cold blood and nurse others through the jaws of death? And there was no doubt in Mitchell's mind that Doc had done exactly that. Six weeks was a damned long time, and it showed in every wasted muscle and the palsy in Mitchell's hands.

But, try as he might, Mitchell could no more fathom Doc's motives than he could saddle a horse and escape. Time after time he returned to previous experiences; the rustlers, murderers and thieves he'd tracked and trapped in years gone by. Pretty much without exception, they'd all been after money. There was something about this vast country that turned some men into creatures of insatiable greed. Not Doc,

though. Whatever his reasons for killing those people—or for nursing Mitchell—money wasn't among them.

His mind refused to dwell on the threats Doc had levelled against him. It also balked at recalling the sex, although Mitchell was pretty sure there were clues there to be had if he could bring himself to examine everything. Instead he dwelt in the past, finding his thoughts turning more and more often to Artie and all that they'd shared.

Like Doc, Artie was British, a Scots immigrant set on exploring, he said, while there were still mysteries left to be solved. Beyond that, Mitchell knew little about his partner's background, though the odd detail Artie allowed to slip out suggested his childhood was a far cry from Mitchell's own, and there were dreams, sometimes, that left Artie wrung out and refusing to speak.

Whereas Mitchell felt at home in the wilderness, Artie was the one who guided their actions in the capital. He knew his way around dining tables and conversations that left Mitchell floundering. It was Artie who'd encouraged Mitchell to become more than a bounty hunter and to accept a salary from the federals. "You could be doing more to help the ordinary people," he'd told Mitchell. "The frontier is full of those who need it."

That was seven years ago. Since then Mitchell's career had gone from strength to strength. He'd brought in some of the most ruthless men, earning a reputation for fearlessness and honour that put him in good standing with his employers. Until last spring, that was.

Mitchell closed his eyes, determined not to allow any tears to fall. He was a man, and men did not cry, not even for those they'd loved. In determined fashion, Mitchell turned his mind to happier things.

* * * *

"Bastard fucking thing."

Freezing air and a flurry of snow brought Mitchell back to the here and now. Stretching, he sat up and saw Doc by the back door wrestling with a huge haunch of meat. Currently the meat was winning, hands down, and the mutinous expression on Doc's face was enough to make Mitchell snort with laughter.

Doc glanced up and grinned. "You're looking better," he said, dropping the meat and striding over. Icy water dripped from his coat, leaving a trail across the room, and when he reached out to press a hand to Mitchell's forehead Mitchell flinched back from the freezing flesh.

Doc's good mood evaporated immediately, his face closing off. "Right," he said, turning back to his task, his shoulders tense.

Mitchell studied him in silence, pondering their interaction and wondering what had happened. For a moment Doc had shown the man Mitchell found so intriguing. What had driven him away? It was the touch, it had to be. Or, more accurately, Mitchell's reaction to it, his rejection of it.

Was that the root of this strange riddle?

Intent on lending a hand, and maybe getting some answers, Mitchell shoved the covers back and stood up. The

wound in his side twinged slightly, but apart from that, he felt fine. The bed rest had done him the world of good. Still, he wasn't up to much more than adding wood to the fire and setting a pot of coffee boiling.

They worked in silence, moving around each other. Once or twice their hands would have brushed but at the last moment, Doc pulled away, only returning when he had space to get a stew boiling or biscuits baking.

In the end, Mitchell retreated to the bed and watched, questions bubbling in his mind. He didn't want to upset this man, not least because he was dangerously unpredictable, but the silence was becoming oppressive. The words that finally escaped had nothing whatsoever to do with what he wanted to ask, but it turned out to be pretty damned informative.

"You're good with horses."

"Goes with the territory," Doc replied. "Been around them since I was knee high to a toad. Don't ask a lot, your average beast. Just a bit of warmth, some grub and a kind word. Give you all of themselves if you give them that."

The room slowly filled with the scent of cooking meat. After a while, Doc speared a chunk and slapped it onto a plate. "I remember the first pony I had," he continued, his face taking on a far away expression as he handed over the food. The voice which was normally clipped and common became smoother, his accent more reminiscent of Artie's. "A grey mare. Lady's palfrey, in truth, but a good mount for all that. Mother gave her to me."

Doc shook his head, his eyes, and voice, returning to the present. "Not much of a one for the animals yourself, then?"

Mitchell thought about the horses he'd had over the years, from the single plough horse his pa had used for tilling their small acreage, to the deep chested beasts he'd ridden into the ground in pursuit of some criminal. He knew the basics, of course, but a horse was just that, an animal to use and dispose of, not to care about. Saying as much, Mitchell watched Doc's face darken.

Tossing aside his own plate, Doc returned to the fireplace, poking vigorously at the stew. "I'll have no truck with cruelty," he said. "There's no call for it."

"This from the man who tortures innocent people for fun." Damn! Of all the things that were likely to get Mitchell the same treatment that was undoubtedly it. Waiting for the outburst, Mitchell was surprised to hear a cynical laugh.

"No such thing as innocent, mate. Even you've got a fair share of sinning under your lawman's belt."

Fury rose in Mitchell's throat as the memory of the children Doc had murdered rose in his mind. "What about the kids? Were they sinners?" Was it religion that motivated this man? That didn't seem right, somehow.

Something bleak passed across Doc's face and he shrugged. "Kids ain't always what they seem. Seen some nasty things done by supposed innocents."

"Nasty enough to deserve killing them?"

Doc's lips hardened into a flat line. "Maybe," he said, and with that, stalked out of the cabin.

* * * *

It was dark and Doc still wasn't back. The wind had risen, tossing gobs of snow against the shutters. Mitchell had rescued the biscuits and moved the stew to one side so it didn't scald, then spent the rest of his time thinking about what Doc had said. And the way he had said it. That accent. Mitchell was no expert, but again his memories of Artie helped.

Despite his best efforts at mimicry, Doc was far from being the common type. His bond with animals presumably came from his mother, if he was telling the truth. But Mitchell was no further forward in answering his main question. What made Doc kill?

Again a drop in temperature heralded Doc's return, along with a cheery voice announcing that it was, "Bandage changing time."

Mitchell sat in bemused silence as Doc removed the old dressings and dumped them on the floor, all the while chatting about this and that. It was as if their conversation about the murders had never happened.

"Found some slippery elm," Doc was saying. "Add that to the garlic and this'll heal up right proper."

"Artie always reckoned comfrey was best for healing," Mitchell said, and then asked, "Where'd you learn herb lore?"

"Here and there," Doc answered, his fingers exploring gently along Mitchell's side.

"Your mother?"

Silence. The fingers stopped moving. Then, "'Fore they took her away, yeah," came quietly.

Mitchell glanced up, studying the features of his nurse. "Why-?" he began, only for Doc to break in, full of brisk enthusiasm.

"Tell us about your Artie, then. Bit of an herb man, was he? Comfrey's great when you can get it. Not a native though, so it's slippery elm in these parts."

Recalling Artie's long enthusiastic lectures about herb lore, Mitchell smiled. "It was important to him," he said. "He'd often end up getting strangers to tell him about new treatments or plants. He kept notes that he was going to get published. Books and books of them." That were now ashes in the wind. Mitchell had burned them rather than have a constant reminder of Artie's absence.

Doc grinned. "Reckon I woulda got on all right with that bloke of yours," he said.

"Except that you're a murderer."

This time Doc did explode. "It's not that fucking simple," he yelled, slamming the chair backwards.

Refusing to be intimidated, Mitchell yelled back, "So try explaining! There're corpses from here to Chicago that say different."

Doc paced, muttering incoherently, a caged animal trapped by the wind howling outside. His hands grasped at truths Mitchell couldn't begin to imagine, the flickering candlelight twisting his shadow into something huge and deformed against the wall.

Eventually the frantic activity ceased. Facing away from Mitchell, his shoulders hunched, Doc said, "She ... She tells me. About the bad ones. The ones that need to be hurt."

"She?"

"Mother."

"Your mother? Tells ... What?" Mitchell had heard some strange reasons for killing in his time, but never this one. Looking around the cabin as though expecting to find this sinister woman hidden somewhere, he said, "Where is she?"

"With God," Doc replied, his voice plaintive. "One of the angels now. Papa told me she was happy, but if she's happy, why does she talk to me?"

Dead. Doc's dead mother told him to kill people. That was ... crazy. Doc was obviously totally insane.

Mitchell jumped as suddenly Doc was next to him, on the bed, grabbing for his hands and holding them. "But not you," he was saying. "She likes you. The first time I saw you, she told me. She said that here was the man that would be mine, one day. I just had to convince you." Wide, wild eyes stared down at Mitchell. "Are you mine yet? Have I made you mine?"

Rather than answer, Mitchell tugged his hands free and said, "So all this. The people you killed."

"Those were for you. I—I didn't want to kill the kiddies but they would have known, see. They would have known it was me and you, and woulda told people. I didn't do kiddies before. Mother likes them."

Fuck! That meant there were more then the six or so bodies Mitchell had found on the trail. Doc must have been killing for years, and getting away with it, until he started this ... obsession.

"It didn't work, did it," Doc said, his voice and body language increasingly agitated. He sprang to his feet, pacing

again. Striding from one side of the cabin to the other, hands running through his hair again and again. "I knew it wouldn't. Stupid plan. Never do anything right. Now I've lost you and you hate me. Think I'm a bad man. Mother was wrong! You'll never be mine. Never!"

Struggling to get up, Mitchell had the horrible feeling that, unless he said something, he was going to end up personally acquainted with Doc's torture implement of choice. "Hey, now," he said, edging his feet to the floor. "Your mother's not been wrong before has she?"

Doc stopped pacing and fixed Mitchell with a curious stare. "There was one time," he said. "A bloke in Lancaster. Told me he was good'un, she did, but he screamed blue bloody murder when I kissed 'im."

That was hardly surprising. Mitchell tried to imagine any other reaction to a strange man kissing him, and failed.

"Papa told me they'd come take me away if I did it again, so I never have. Not 'til you. And you never kissed me. Don't you like kissing?"

There was something disturbingly childlike about Doc, his voice, his demeanour, everything was crying out for approval. With a flash of insight, Mitchell could suddenly see the past; a young man, already disturbed by his mother's death, seeking out comfort in bodies he was attracted to, only to be told that it was sick and wrong. But still there was more here that Mitchell couldn't see.

"Your mother. Why did they take her away?"

The regression completed itself. Doc sank to the floor, knees against his chest, rocking back and forth. A verse, one

of Artie's favourites, spilled from his lips, but rather than a lyrical sweep of words, this was sobbed.

"She cried 'Laura,' up the garden, 'Did you miss me? Come and kiss me. Never mind my bruises, Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices squeezed from goblin fruits for you, goblin pulp and goblin dew. Eat me, drink me, love me; Laura, make much of me.'"

Drawn by the familiarity of the words, if not by the way they were spoken, Mitchell dropped to his knees, automatically reaching for Doc, to hold him and comfort him as he had Artie when bad memories plagued him.

Doc shied away, shaking his head. "No, no touching. Papa says touching is bad. Burn for it, like she is. Like she would have. Burning 'cos she touched, she loved. 'Til they took her away and cured her. Stuck her in the water 'til she turned blue from it. Made her hurt 'til the bad thoughts went away."

Frustrated beyond the telling of it, Mitchell contented himself with sitting next to Doc and asking, "Who was it she loved?"

"Said," Doc mumbled, sniffing. "Loved Laura. Always loved Laura. 'Til Papa saw them. Then the people came and took her away. To make her better, he said. 'Cos hurting people makes them better. Makes them go to heaven. Least, that's what Mother always says."

Christ, what a mess. Mitchell swallowed heavily, rubbing his face. When he'd first set out after Doc, he'd half expected to find a madman, but now, having found one, Mitchell didn't know what to do. This was beyond him. This was probably beyond anybody. If he took Doc back, he'd either hang or end

up chained in a cage at the state asylum. If Mitchell could find someone to sign the papers.

Brought up short by his own thoughts, Mitchell frowned. If he took Doc back? Course he would take Doc back. That was his job. He was a lawman. There was no if.

Another wet snuffle came from beside him. Mitchell sighed, fished amongst the clean bandages and offered one over. A hand emerged, grabbed it, and retreated.

"Sorry," Doc whispered a few moments later. "Didn't mean to make a fool of myself. Must think I'm a complete idiot now."

Judging the worst was past, Mitchell ruffled Doc's hair and said, "Nah. Gonna wait and see on crazy though."

"Sometimes I think I am, y'know, crazy. But then if I am, and all those people I killed never went to heaven, then that makes me bad. And you couldn't love a bad man."

Mitchell wanted to ask what made Doc think he loved him anyway, but that would simply start him off about his mother again, and Mitchell doubted he could face that again tonight. Instead, he stood up and offered his hand. "What d'you say we sleep on it. Worry about this in the morning."

Doc cocked his head, looking from Mitchell's hand to his face. Mitchell waited patiently, hand extended, until Doc finally smiled shyly and took it, careful not to pull on Mitchell as he stood up.

"Need to put the clean bandages on," he said, indicating Mitchell's wound.

Mitchell glanced down. The itch was back and it was drying in the cabin air. "Guess that can wait too," he said.

* * * *

Waking alone, stiff and sore from all he'd done, Mitchell lay and listened to the world outside. The wind, quiet in the eaves, suggested the storm had blown itself out and Mitchell decided that, after weeks of being trapped, he was determined not use the piss-pot anymore.

There was no sign of Doc, but both Polly and Harry were tethered in the lean-to, so he couldn't have gone far. A path had been dug to the privy and Mitchell crunched his way over with a grin on his face. For some reason he felt free this morning, as though a huge weight had been lifted from his mind, though for the life of him, he couldn't fathom what it was.

Out past the grain store, he heard Doc singing in the woods below the cabin and, when he'd finished his morning ablutions, Mitchell headed down, curious to see what was happening. It was harder going than he'd thought, and by the time he reached the clearing, Mitchell was sweating heavily and shivering. He stumbled, reached out for a branch and yelped when the action pulled on his wound.

Doc was next to him immediately, putting a supporting arm under his shoulder and scolding Mitchell for being out of bed. "Bloody idiot. I dunno, been awake for three days and thinks he can rule the world. What is it with you yanks?"

"Not a Yankee," Mitchell muttered. "Born in Wyoming."

"Yeah, and you'll die in it too," Doc commented, using his spare hand to brush snow from a tree stump. "Now sit yerself

there and wait for me to finish up, then I'll help you back home."

Having got Mitchell tucked warmly inside a great coat and settled, Doc went back to chopping logs. All Mitchell had to do was watch, which was hardly a chore when there was an attractive man in front of him, even then that man was insane and wielding an axe.

Insane. Doc was totally and irrevocably, mad. Or was he?

Curled inside a coat that smelled of Doc and horses and damp wool, Mitchell allowed his mind to drift over the previous night's conversation. Could he believe that Doc's dead mother told him to kill people? It wasn't the strangest thing he'd heard. There were those who would see him swing alongside the outlaw for what they'd done in that bed a few weeks ago, believing him equally evil.

Was that the crux of this matter? If he upheld the law, then he should uphold all laws. Including those that condemned him. If he was above that, then how was he any better than Doc? Though there was no doubting that what he did brought no harm to anyone else.

So, what if Doc never harmed anyone else. Would that serve?

Mitchell knew that some of this was weakness talking; no man spent six weeks with a fever without being changed. But it was also about something else. Fairness, maybe? Honor? If Doc was truly insane, then what purpose was served by taking him back in chains? Revenge, that was all. And Washington was rife with people who would take delight in

extracting their pound of flesh from the boy before he hanged. The idea made Mitchell shudder.

"You still cold, mate?"

Shaking his head, Mitchell burrowed further into the warmth, sleepily content. As his eyes closed, an odd thought occurred to him. Could he stop Doc from killing just by asking?

* * * *

"Reckon you were at the back of the queue when God gave out brains."

Mitchell blinked. Doc was squatting next to him, breath clouding the air between them. His hair had broken free of whatever oil he'd used that morning and curled free over his forehead. To Mitchell's eyes he looked about twenty, though probably had at least six or seven years on that.

"Huh?"

"You. Snoring like an old dog when yer feet must be nothing but frozen bits of meat." As if to prove the point, Doc tapped Mitchell's boot with the axe haft.

Mitchell flexed his toes, or tried to. His expression must have given the game away, 'cause Doc heaved a long-suffering sigh and, with the axe over one shoulder, helped Mitchell up.

"You're a stupid ass, Marshall Franklin. Anyone ever told you that?" he said as Mitchell limped up the hill.

"Artie. Often," Mitchell replied.

"Knew what he was about, that fella of yours. Wish I coulda met him. 'Cept you wouldn't be here if he was still alive, would you now?"

The heat of the banked fire was scorching after being outside. Mitchell headed straight for it, rubbing his frozen hands against his thighs.

"You'll end up with chilblains."

Raising a quizzical eyebrow, Mitchell stayed where he was soaking up the warmth.

"Know what you need," Doc said and disappeared outside again.

A few minutes later Mitchell heard a horrific clanging noise, the door opened and Doc barged in dragging a small tin bath. "Bit of a swill in this and you'll feel like a new man," he said, plonking it down between Mitchell and the fire.

Mitchell peered out of the window and then back at the bath. The door opened and closed again. "But it's snowing," he protested when Doc reappeared.

"So?" Doc answered, heaving a large pot of water over the fire. "I'll have you know my father bathed every day, whatever the weather, and it never did him a smidgen of harm."

Too tired to argue, Mitchell went back to bed and did his best to create a nest of blankets to stay warm until the water heated. Within moments he was asleep.

* * * *

"Mitchell?" a quiet accented voice whispered in his ear as soft hands stroked down his neck and across his chest.

Mitchell pressed up into them, craving the touch even in his sleep. After a few moments they drifted lower, running repeated trails from his nipples to his navel.

"Artie," he whispered, reaching out for the man beside him. His hands met short, slightly curled hair and he tangled his fingers in it, using it to drag Artie closer so they could kiss. God, that was good. He'd missed this so much; the closeness that came from sharing breath and body, tongues caressing languidly, hands searching out the most sensitive places.

Mitchell shivered as nails scratched gently up under his shirt, along his sides, making his skin sing with pleasure.

"Artie," he whispered again.

"I'm here, love."

It wasn't Artie. The memory of the gunshot rang in Mitchell's brain louder than it had on the day, the force of it lifting Artie clear off his feet, tearing a hole the size of his fist in Artie's chest. He was dead before he hit the ground. They didn't even have a chance to say goodbye.

"No!" The cry came out strangled by grief. Shoving Doc away from him, Mitchell tumbled off the bed wanting—needing—to be away from anything that reminded him. The gentleness, the scent of fresh sweat, those quietly whispered words, were all too much. They took him to places he didn't want to go, places he'd thought never to go again.

"Hey, now, no need for that."

Doc's voice, pitched in the same tone he used to speak to Polly, broke through Mitchell's panic. Opening his eyes, Mitchell saw him crouching a few feet away, one hand

extended in a strange reversal of their roles the previous night. He should react, speak, move, acknowledge Doc's presence in some way, but his mind was whirling. Heat poured from him but he couldn't stop the shivers racking his body.

"You look awful, mate. How 'bout you come and get in this bath, yeah? Get yourself properly warmed through. Wash the stink off yourself."

It sounded ... good.

Rising slowly to his feet, and trying to still the tremor in his hands, Mitchell began fiddling with his buttons. His fingers felt like sausages, huge and numb.

"Let me do that?"

Doc gave him every chance to refuse and when Mitchell allowed him to approach, did the job briskly and competently, for once taking no liberties or making any comments. For that, Mitchell was grateful.

The water was hot. Mitchell sank into it with a sigh, his eyes closing, relaxing. Granted the water only came up to his waist and his knees were folded almost under his chin, but the blazing fire meant the room wasn't much cooler than the bath.

"May I?"

Mitchell cracked open his eyelids to see Doc holding a cloth, a questioning look on his face. Nodding, he sat forwards and sighed again as Doc began washing him with firm sure strokes. He was properly warm now, a healthy heat rather than the feverishness that had filled him when he woke.

"You should talk about him, that bloke of yours. Keep his memory alive and all that. Not respectful keeping him all to yourself."

"And you'd know all about respect."

The cloth on his back paused. After a couple of seconds, Mitchell glanced round. Doc's head was bowed so it was impossible to see his face, but Mitchell was willing to bet there were tears in those startling eyes. He was proved correct when Doc looked up. In the second before the mask returned, the scared young man Mitchell had seen the night before stared at him.

"Thought we were past all that," Doc said, starting to rub again. The gentleness was gone. Doc now handled him as if he were currying the filth off.

Hunching against the force of it, Mitchell shrugged. "I don't think we'll ever be past it," he said. "You've killed, will do it again, and that means you don't respect anyone." Least of all yourself.

The rubbing stopped again and when Mitchell looked round this time, Doc was sat back on his heels, a thoughtful expression on his face. As the water began to cool, Mitchell shifted uncomfortably. Still Doc showed no sign of moving.

"Give me the cloth," he said, eventually having to extract from Doc's inanimate fingers when the outlaw just sat there.

* * * *

Mitchell was drying in front of the fire by the time Doc shifted, blinked and looked around as though he wasn't sure for a second where he was.

"Welcome back." Damn, that sounded gruff. In an attempt to soften his tone, Mitchell offered a lopsided smile. Doc grinned back at him, a little sheepishly.

"Mother is ... eloquent, but somewhat loquacious," he said, in that cut glass accent. "She ... um, she wishes to speak with you." He paused, a blush steadily rising up his face. It was such a surprising sight, and request, that Mitchell found himself fishing for the chair as Doc continued, "She seems to think that me getting drunk would allow her to speak, using me as a go-between, as it were."

"She's..." Real? Not a figment of your imagination? Mitchell had come across mediums in Washington and had always written them off as charlatans, playing on people's loss to earn themselves a few bucks. "Sure it'll work?" he finished, not able to bring himself to doubt Doc's sincerity. Which was dumb considering who the man was.

"She is, though in all honesty this is the first time she has ever suggested such a thing."

Doc clambered up, his movements strangely jerky as he walked across the room to the small table where the whiskey jar stood. With shaking hands, he reached for it, fumbling with the stopper, until Mitchell took it from him and popped it open. Hardly pausing for breath, Doc drank, his throat convulsing as he swallowed. Mitchell reckoned it would take only moments for him to get drunk at that rate.

Sure enough, when the jar lowered, Doc's eyes were glazed. Mitchell took the container, swigged back the last mouthful, and then helped Doc over to the fire before he fell over his own feet. The chair complained loudly as Doc

dropped into it, squeezing the arms until his knuckles went white. Mitchell retreated across the room and dragged over another seat, wanting to be close to Doc in case he had another 'turn'.

For long minutes there was silence, just the spit of burning logs and the wail of the wind building outside. One candle sputtered and died, leaving only the one on the mantle burning brightly. The air still smelt of roasting meat and Mitchell suddenly felt hunger pangs seize his belly. It had to be well over twelve hours since he'd eaten, which probably accounted for his light-headedness.

"M-Mitchell?" Doc was groping for him, eyes closed, face a rictus of fear.

Shifting closer, Mitchell grabbed his hand, rubbing between his own when he felt the icy flesh. "Here," he said, not knowing how to offer comfort any other way.

"She's scared, Mitchell. She says ... she says," breath whistled into Doc's lungs as he gulped for air. His body arched, seizing violently, jaws grinding and froth building at the corners of his mouth. Then, just as suddenly, he slumped, eyes rolling back in his head. Passed out.

"Goddamn it." Mitchell muttered as he leapt to his feet, cursing himself for going along with this crazy scheme. With his luck the outlaw would die of apoplexy and Mitchell would be left ... alone. Again.

Until that moment, Mitchell hadn't really considered the implications of having Doc in his life. For years he'd believed Artie to be his one chance. There was, and had been, no one

else. And then Doc had appeared, turning everything Mitchell had ever believed upside down.

"Doc," he said, and then more urgently and accompanied by a harsh smack, "Doc! Open your eyes."

"I'd thank you not to assault me, young man," Doc said. But it wasn't his voice. It was higher, more feminine, than the outlaw's usual baritone.

"Mrs..." Mitchell began, only to realise he had no idea how to address Doc's ma. He sank back into his chair and tried to assemble his scattered wits.

"Swinton," Doc said again. "Mrs. Jonathan Swinton, and you are Marshall Franklin. Now that we've introduced ourselves, I have a few things I want to say to you."

Mitchell suspected he probably looked stupid sitting there with his mouth open. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, drunken rambling possibly, but it hadn't been this.

"Firstly I have a message for you, and doesn't that sound unbelievably trite. Honestly, Laura would be horrified if she could hear me saying such utter rubbish. But the fact remains that I have a message from a young man called Artie. Your lover, I believe?"

A nod was all Mitchell could manage, but he did it vigorously.

"He is very cross with you for carrying on the way you have. Several criminals went free while you were grieving for him. Apparently you are to remember that as a government agent you have responsibilities that go beyond worrying about him." There was a pause and an odd smile tugged at Doc's lips. "Golly, he's quite a determined boy, isn't he?"

Mitchell could only agree.

"Yes, well, he says to tell you that there is an herb that will help Jonathan. That's Doc, by the way. Such a ridiculous name for the lad. It's called ginkgo and you can find the tree in several states. He says to talk to Doctor Seymour in Elizabethtown, Illinois. He will be able to help you. It won't be a cure, but it will stop Jonathan hearing things that have nothing whatsoever to do with me."

"It's not you telling him to kill?"

"Of course not, my dear, although I can think of a goodly number I wouldn't mind seeing firmly planted under six feet of soil, including my disgusting pig of a husband. No, it's all in Jonathan's head, poor lamb. Something is quite broken inside him and has been since his father made him visit the asylum. Honestly, what sort of man takes his own son to witness such things, I ask you?"

"Things?"

"The cure for my deviancy, or so the surgeons would have it. Personally I would label it torture and be the more honest."

Thinking back over some of the treatments he heard whispered about, Mitchell blanched.

"Do you think the boy's hair was always that colour?" Mrs Swinton said. "I can assure you it was not. Such dark lovely locks he had when a child, until the day his father brought him in to see what awaited him if he kept up his behavior. As though that alone would be enough to turn the lad's inclination towards girls. And that leads me on to what I have to say, Marshall."

Mitchell sat upright, listening hard and trying to ignore the small voice inside his head that insisted he was as crazy as Doc.

"My Jonathan needs you, Marshall. I sent him to you, that much is true, because I saw a beautiful man wasting away for the want of love, and my boy has so much of that to give. Yes, he has killed people, but would you shoot a dog for biting the hand that beat him? The men he killed were all of the same ilk as his father. If you look into it further, you will see that I am not lying.

"And this latest disaster ... Marshall, I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen to me. His victims were innocents and there is no excuse. I don't know what else to say, except that he needs a firm hand to guide him and I believe you to be that hand. Make him promise and I can guarantee he will never take another life. My son is not a murderer, Marshall, despite everything you and everyone else believes.

"Now I must go. Jonathan is waking and I have no desire to hurt him further. Look after him, Marshall. Be good to my boy."

Doc stirred, a deep mumble underlying his mother's final words. His eyes flickered open and he sat up, weakly wiping at his mouth where a line of spittle had dried. "What happened?" he said. "Reckon I passed out or something. That whiskey off?"

Mitchell watched him blink against the dying light of the fire. Watched him stagger from the chair and scoop a cup of water from the jug in the corner. Watched him yawn and stretch, raised arms pulling up his shirt to reveal a sleekly

muscled back. Watched him as he grinned back over his shoulder, eyes flashing with boyish glee.

He was beautiful. But like a precious stone that had been cast aside, that beauty was splintered so the light it threw off had facets of darkness. A good jeweller could cut around the flaw, rendering the jewel perfect to any but the most experienced eye. Could he do the same? Could he cut away the sickness and heal this damaged soul?

"Doc..." he began, and then tried again. "No, Jonathan. If I ask you to promise me something, would you keep your word?"

Eyes the color of emeralds, open and honest, containing no trace of a killer's coldness turned towards him. "For you, Mitchell, anything."

Single Shot Vol. X
by SA Clements

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Edited by SA Clements

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ISBN: 1-933389-39-7

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Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press,
PO Box 4351, Grand Junction, CO 81502.

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