

*Single
Shots*



Fortune's Favor
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A solitary wail of a siren, a single flash of blue light, and Hayden Garrett pulled over to the side of the road in his new, red Alfa Romeo Spider, the sound of the engine the softest of purrs.

He placed his hands, encased in black leather driving gloves, at two and ten o'clock on the steering wheel, and waited, a little thrill of anticipation uncurling in his stomach and heading for all parts south.

He watched in the rearview mirror as the driver's door to the black Ford Explorer opened, and a prime hunk of manhood uncurled itself from the seat.

The man reached back into the SUV, retrieved a tan colored hat, and perched it on his head, covering dark hair shorn in a military fashion.

Eyes riveted on the mirror, Hayden watched the man come towards him, all long, powerful legs, narrow hips, and wide shoulders; he even managed to make that nasty tan polyester uniform look good.

He stopped beside the car, groin right at eye level, and Hayden felt his cock twitch in appreciation of the pretty sweet bulge right there, within touching distance. If only...

"Mr. Garrett," he said, in a deep, dark chocolate voice.

Hayden took his time raising his head, raking his eyes up the long, hard body until he reached the sheriff's face: strong chin, sculpted lips, and the slightest crook in his nose that suggested that it had been broken at some point in his life, finally resting on dark glasses that he knew hid disconcertingly blue eyes.

"Sheriff." He gave him a small nod. "Something I can do for you?" Hayden felt one corner of his mouth lift minutely and dropped his eyes briefly to the front of the sheriff's pants, before raising them to his face again.

Sheriff Cal Hunter cleared his throat with a sharp bark of a cough, and Hayden bit back a grin.

"This is quite a car, Mr. Garrett," Cal said, all coolly professional. "Tell me, does it come with a speedometer as standard, or is that an optional extra?"

Hayden felt a flush touch his cheeks. "Yeah, sorry about that. But you know how it is: new car, quiet road ... It won't happen again," he promised in a quiet voice, feeling like he was up in front of the principal.

"That would be appreciated, Mr. Garrett. I'd hate to have to watch as they scraped you off the blacktop."

A movement at the corner of his eye caught Hayden's attention, and he turned to find that Cal Hunter had been joined by a younger man dressed in a similar uniform, his hat sitting low enough on his head to make him look a little goofy.

"Arlo Bennett, is that you?" Hayden asked.

The young man hooked his thumbs into the belt holding his gun holster and all the other cop paraphernalia, and straightened his shoulders, throwing his chest out as if to draw attention to the seven pointed deputy badge pinned proudly to his shirt.

"Sure is," he said in a voice at least an octave deeper than Hayden remembered. "How you doing, Hayden?"

"I'm good, thanks. Aren't you a bit young to be a gun-toting law man? What are you ... eighteen?"

Twin dots of color appeared on Arlo's cheeks, and he drew himself up to his full height, just a couple of inches shorter than Cal. "Actually, I'm twenty-three. Got done with college and decided to come on home and sign on with the Sheriff's Department."

Hayden bit the inside of his lip in an effort not to smile. Until Arlo, the Glencrest Sheriff's Department had consisted of Cal Hunter, his old stock-dog, Bo, and Rebecca Turner, Cal's rather tightly wound civilian aide.

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask the young man if there had been some kind of crime wave, but he just looked so damn proud and upright in his uniform that Hayden didn't have the heart to tease him.

"Well, good for you, Arlo. You say hello to your mama for me, won't you?"

Arlo smiled. "Will do, Hayden."

Hayden turned his head back in Cal's direction. "You gonna run me in, Sheriff? Slap on the cuffs?"

A tiny smile played around Cal's lips. "I think we'll let it go at a warning this time, Mr. Garrett. But you mind how you go now, y'hear?"

"Gotcha. From here on in, I'll drive like an old lady on her way to church. How's that sound?"

Cal smiled slowly, little lines appearing around the edges of his dark glasses. Hayden felt his stomach tighten and his skin tingle.

"Like an out-and-out lie," Cal said. "But I'll give you the benefit of the doubt." He took a step back, and was motioning for Hayden to move on, when Hayden heard an indignant yip and looked down to see Bo sitting by Cal. He'd never seen a dog scowl before.

"Hey, boy, I didn't see you sitting there." He took his hand from the wheel, peeled off his driving glove, and reached town to scratch Bo's ear.

Bo's back leg started to tremble and he whined with pleasure, which made Hayden grin.

"I think you're forgiven," Cal said, shaking his head. Cal's hand scrubbed through the fur at Bo's neck, and the double attention had the dog's tail thumping happily.

When their fingers bumped together, Cal pulled back, and Hayden wondered if Cal had felt the same electric charge that had chased along his arm.

Hayden started the car. "Well, I'll just be getting along now, if you're not going to arrest me." He didn't *think* his disappointment showed. "I'm sure I'll be seeing you around, Sheriff. Deputy Bennett, you be safe now. Bye, Bo. Next time I see you donuts are on me." He snickered at Bo's woof of agreement, tossed off a little salute and took off down the road at a more sedate pace.

* * * *

A familiar pang squeezed at Hayden's heart as he moved around his childhood home.

The house was eerily silent, and smelled a little musty through disuse; the furniture was covered by sheets.

His mother had died six months before, just a few months after his dad. As much as it hurt to lose them both so close together, watching his mom's pain at the loss of the only man she had ever loved had been worse. As fanciful as it sounded, Hayden liked to think of them being together again.

But in spite of the fact that the house was now empty more often than not, it seemed to have retained some of the warmth that had once filled it, as if it had soaked into the very walls ... Okay, definitely fanciful. Hayden smiled sheepishly to himself as he walked through the open-plan living room and dining room, past the kitchen, and out onto the glass-paneled sun porch.

The view out over four acres of grounds and the glassy lake beyond was spectacular, especially at that time of day, with the sun sinking slowly behind the trees, and the hint of pink in the sky pointing to another fine day.

He tucked his hands into the pockets of his pants and smiled. He was pretty sure that his parents would approve of his plans for the house.

He was turning away to go back into the house, when a scratching sound halted his footsteps. For a minute, he thought that maybe some kind of critter had gotten into the house, but the sound came again from the direction of the door at the end of the porch.

Frowning, puzzled, he went to the door, and opened it, to find Bo sitting on the grass, looking up at him expectantly.

Hayden crouched down in front of him, and dug his fingers into the thick fur at Bo's neck. "Hey, boy. I hope you're not looking for that donut, 'cause I don't have so much as a slice

of stale bread in the house. What say I take you home and see if there's anything on offer there?"

Bo yipped and licked his face.

"Eww, Bo, that is so nasty!" Hayden laughed. "C'mon, let's go."

He straightened up, and they walked down toward the lake and took the narrow path along the edge of the water. There was a nice breeze coming in off the lake, and Hayden caught the scent of fall in the air.

A few minutes later, they turned onto a path leading up to a neat gray house with white trim.

Hayden's heart stopped for a beat, and his step faltered, as his gaze fell on Cal Hunter, leaning casually against a post on the small porch at the back of his house.

He was dressed in dark jeans that hugged his narrow hips, and emphasized the power of his legs, and a tight black T-shirt stretched over chiseled pecs and bulging biceps.

Walking got just a little bit harder ... uh, more difficult.

Hayden stopped at the bottom of the steps, and Bo passed him, brushing Cal's legs on his way into the house. Cal gave his friend a pat as he passed. "Good boy, Bo."

A full-fledged grin took up residence on Hayden's face. "I don't believe this. You sent him to *fetch* me?"

Cal's mouth turned up, and he looked spectacularly pleased with himself. "Well, now that you're here, want to come in for a bit?"

Hayden felt his balls tighten, and heat invaded his body. "A bit?" His voice sounded husky.

Cal just raised one eyebrow, pushed away from the post, and turned toward the door.

Hayden paused for a moment to admire the way Cal's butt looked in those jeans, before following him up the steps and into the house.

He got two paces into the kitchen, caught a quick glimpse of Bo chowing down on a muffin, then found himself manhandled up against the wall beside the door, with a big, hard body pressed close.

"You didn't tell me you were coming," Cal said, standing so close that Hayden could smell the coffee on his breath, feel the warmth emanating from his body.

"I thought I'd surprise you," Hayden said, his breathing becoming a little labored.

Cal leaned closer, and rested his arms on the wall on either side of Hayden's head. "You surprised me all right. When I saw you ... hell, I never knew driving gloves could be so damn hot."

Cal was at least five inches taller than Hayden, so Hayden had to crane his neck to look up at him. "I thought I saw a bit of interest in your ... pants." He smiled, inhaling Cal's scent. He'd obviously had a shower recently; Hayden could smell soap overlaying pure man.

"Just me?" Cal asked, lowering his head to nuzzle lightly at Hayden's hair.

Hayden pressed his hips into Cal, and smiled at his sharply indrawn breath. "Does that answer your question?"

"Bed. Now," Cal said roughly. He grabbed hold of the waistband of Hayden's pants, and tugged, walking backward out of the kitchen and down the hallway to the bedroom.

Standing at the bottom of the bed, Cal pulled Hayden's jacket down his arms and let it fall to the floor, then started on the buttons of his shirt.

Never one to be passive, Hayden busied himself pushing Cal's T-shirt far enough up his chest to allow him access to smooth skin and flat, brown nipples. The minute his fingers touched the little nubs, they sprang to attention, and Cal gasped his pleasure.

Letting his shirt fall the way of his jacket, Hayden leaned forward and closed his lips around one of Cal's nipples, flicking the tip of his tongue over it, then flattening his tongue and rasping it roughly over the eager little point.

He could feel Cal's hips pressing into his stomach, feel the ridge of his dick through the heavy material of his jeans, and heard a moan escape his own lips.

A year they had been doing this, on and off, and it never lost its heat.

Still licking at Cal's straining nipple, Hayden ran his hands down Cal's chest and then unbuckled Cal's belt before unbuttoning and unzipping his own pants.

A sound like a yelp exploded from Hayden when he felt Cal's big, warm hand slide in and cup his cock through his boxers. He squeezed and massaged until Hayden's hands shook as he tried to unbutton the fly on Cal's jeans. He finally got enough of the buttons undone to push his hand inside,

and when he curved his hand around Cal's thick, pulsing cock, Hayden sighed raggedly with anticipation.

Hayden had never considered himself to be a size queen before he met Cal Hunter, but the first time he laid eyes on Cal's erect cock, all long and thick and cut, he almost came in his pants.

When he discovered that Cal kept himself shaved smooth, Hayden actually did come. In his pants.

Cal had explained that he had been in the Marine Corp for nearly fifteen years and had seen a fair amount of action in that time. Sometimes it would be days—on one memorable occasion, weeks—between showers. Shaving had helped him feel clean, so whenever he was afforded the luxury of proper bathing facilities, he had taken the time to carry out the small personal ritual, and it became a habit that he had never broken.

Hayden was eternally thankful for it. Until that moment, it was the hottest thing he had ever seen.

"Want you in me," Hayden breathed, as his head fell back, and his eyelids suddenly felt too heavy to stay open.

Cal moved his other hand around and smoothed it over Hayden's ass. He laid a trail of kisses along the skin that had been exposed when Hayden's head fell back: from his jaw, down the column of his neck, and up to his ear, where he whispered, "Long and slow, or hard and fast?" The warmth of Cal's voice in his ear sent a ripple of desire through Hayden's whole body.

"Oh ... fuck..." Hayden's chest felt tight, and he pushed up onto his toes, so that their dicks were level, ground them together until they were both moaning.

"Now ... just ... *now*," Hayden demanded.

Cal turned Hayden so that his back was to the bed, then pushed gently until he fell over with a soft huff of surprised laughter. Hayden lay there: legs parted, feet still on the floor, arms stretched over his head, looking up at Cal.

Cal's erection was pushing almost lewdly at the material of his boxers, visible at the V of his open fly.

He leaned over, bracing his upper body on his arms at either side of Hayden's torso, and licked a line right down the center of his body, from his sternum to the waistband of his boxers, where he nuzzled, and caught a few hairs between his strong white teeth, then tugged.

Cal moved on, mouthing at Hayden's cock until the material of Hayden's shorts was warm and moist.

He dragged his teeth gently around the head of Hayden's cock, and Hayden arched under him, cursing, desperately trying to keep his eyes opened, to watch every ripple of muscle in Cal's shoulders, the frown of concentration on his forehead, and to meet his eyes as they looked up at him from under impossibly long, dark lashes.

Cal's hands took hold of the waist of both Hayden's pants and shorts, and he pulled them off at the same time, making short work of Hayden's shoes and socks as he went.

When Cal just stood and looked at him for an interminably long time, Hayden felt his body flush at the heat in Cal's eyes.

Cal locked his eyes on Hayden's, his almost black with just a circle of blue iris, and lowered his hands to his own jeans. Without breaking eye contact, he slid the jeans down his legs and kicked them and his boxers to the side.

Hayden raised his feet and rested them flat on the bed, then let his legs fall open in shameless invitation.

Cal's nostrils flared and color touched his cheekbones. "So hot," he whispered. "So fuckin' beautiful."

Hayden's smile might have been a little misty. Cal wasn't big on words; he was more a man of action, but every once in a while he would say just the right thing to turn Hayden to mush.

Cal left Hayden for a moment and returned carrying a bottle of lube. They hadn't used condoms in months. The first time without hadn't exactly been planned; they'd just been so damned horny that stopping for even a second had been unthinkable. After that, nothing but skin on skin felt good enough, felt right.

Cal popped the top on the bottle and squirted some on his fingers and then rubbed them together for a minute to warm the slick, before pressing one finger, then two into Hayden's hole.

Hayden gasped and arched into the touch, pushing down so that Cal's fingers slipped through the ring of muscle.

Cal slid his fingers in as deep as they would go and the burn was wonderful. Hayden gripped the comforter tightly in his hands and undulated his hips, humping against Cal's fingers.

A third finger soon joined the first two, and while he fucked in and out of Hayden, Cal rolled Hayden's balls in his other hand, until Hayden's cock was almost painfully hard and leaking fluid freely.

"I can't wait much longer," Hayden said, a plea in his tone. "I want you inside me when I come."

Cal removed his fingers from Hayden's body, squirted more lube onto them, and smoothed it over his rigid shaft. He leaned one knee on the end of the bed, hooked Hayden's right leg over his arm, and used that arm to brace himself over Hayden. He pushed Hayden's other leg further back, until he was completely open to him.

With his free hand, Cal took hold of his dick, lined it up with Hayden's opening, and pushed forward.

As always, Hayden's body protested the incursion of such a huge intruder. But Cal went slowly, and Hayden gradually relaxed. When he felt his ass settle into the cradle of Cal's pelvis, Hayden knew that Cal was all the way in, and he sighed with pleasure.

"Okay?" Cal asked softly, stroking his hand in soothing circles over Hayden's contracting stomach muscles.

The knowledge that Cal would not move until he gave the word, filled Hayden with warmth. Hayden nodded. "Extremely okay. Fuck me now. Hard."

Cal's eyes glittered, and he put more of his weight on Hayden's lower body. He pulled out slowly and thrust back in with a sharp snap of his hips.

Hayden's toes curled and his back arched. "*Again.*" The word was ripped from his throat.

Cal obeyed, and before long, he was pounding Hayden, cock thrusting in and out of him, hips crashing against his ass. Hayden felt raw and bruised, but it wasn't enough.

"More ... *please* ... oh, God, Cal ... more."

"Oh, yeah, babe, so good, wanna come in you, wanna feel you all hot and tight around me as I shoot into you."

Cal's words burned Hayden's brain, the way Cal's dick burned his ass as he continued to pump with increasing power. Hayden felt sweat roll down from his hairline into his ears, and his heart beat alarmingly fast in his chest.

He yelled out his delight when Cal wrapped one big, calloused hand around his cock and began to pull, his hips grinding into Hayden's ass, sweat running down his broad, smooth chest.

Hayden could feel his orgasm begin at the base of his spine, and knew from the shortness of his breath, and the tightening of his muscles, that Cal was close, too.

Cal tightened his hand around Hayden's cock, stroked twice more, and Hayden emitted a long, low moan. Come shot out of the end of Hayden's dick, coating Cal's hand and his own stomach.

Hayden's ass muscles convulsed around Cal, and he came with a growl, pouring load after load of his seed into Hayden's welcoming body.

"*Fuck!* Oh, yeah, so fuckin' good," Hayden gasped.

Cal's body gradually stilled, and they both hissed softly as he slipped from Hayden's body.

Legs apparently refusing to hold him up any longer, Cal collapsed beside Hayden. From somewhere, they found the

energy to scoot up the bed so that they could relax back against the pillows.

Hayden had always been a cuddler, and Cal never seemed to mind, so he snuggled in to Cal's side and laid his hand on Cal's chest, fingers idly tracing the tattoo over his heart: an American flag with USMC above it and Semper Fi under.

"I like the way you surprise a guy," Cal said quietly, carding his fingers through Hayden's hair. "I wasn't expecting to see you for a while."

Hayden smiled as joy bubbled up inside him. "Yeah, well, you're going to be seeing a whole lot more of me."

Cal looked down the length of their entwined, naked bodies, and smiled lazily. "Is that possible?"

Hayden smacked him lightly on the chest and snickered. "I have another surprise."

Hayden leaned up on one elbow and looked down at Cal's beloved face. He wasn't handsome in a Brad Pitt way; his face was a little harder, but there was beauty in the lines at the corners of his eyes, in the grooves that bracketed his mouth, and in the wealth of experience that haunted his eyes.

Hayden raised his hand and traced his fingers along Cal's cheekbones, and across his full lower lip.

"I'm not going back, Cal," Hayden said. The words came out quietly, his throat tight with excitement. "I decided not to renew my contract. I'm staying in Glencrest."

Hayden awaited Cal's reaction with eager expectation, waited for the happiness to light up his eyes, waited for his arms to close around him in a tight hug, waited for Cal to tell him how thrilled he was with his news.

He waited.

Cal just stared at him blankly.

"It means we can be together now, *really* together," Hayden explained. Maybe Cal was just too stunned with pleased surprise at his announcement?

Or not.

"Together?" Cal asked, sounding stunned, but not in a good way. "We, uh, we never talked about that ... being together full-time."

Hayden's joy was rapidly turning to confusion, with a little side of dread. "Well, no, but isn't that what we both want?"

Cal just looked at Hayden blankly again, then slid his arm out from under him and pushed up from the bed.

"That's a pretty big assumption, Hayden," he said. Cal grabbed his jeans up from the floor and shoved his legs into them. "I don't remember even hinting that I wanted more than this." His eyebrows had drawn together in a frown.

"I know we never made any plans, but..." That side of dread? It was fast becoming the main course.

"But what?" Cal asked, retrieving his T-shirt and pulling it over his head.

Hayden suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable. He got up from the bed and found his own clothes, pulled on pants and shirt, and stuck his feet into his shoes, without bothering with shorts or socks.

For nearly two years, Hayden had been of the belief that the only reason he and Cal weren't walking down Lafayette Drive holding hands, was because Hayden's job kept him in the city. He had thought that now that he was free to return

for good, they would finally be able to make a commitment and go public with their relationship.

It came as something of a shock to him to realize that he was clearly alone in his belief.

"I never made you any promises, Hayden," Cal said, scrubbing a hand over his close-cropped hair. "I was never looking for forever."

"No, you were looking for a fuck buddy," Hayden retorted. He knew that he really had no right to be angry with Cal. Cal was right; he'd never made promises or talked of the future.

But Hayden was hurt and humiliated, a situation completely of his own making, perhaps, but hurt nonetheless.

"It was never just that," Cal said. "We're friends, aren't we?" He sounded genuinely unsure.

Hayden thought about the way Cal had supported him emotionally through the deaths of his parents. Not the act of a man in love, as he had believed, but definitely the act of a friend.

"Yeah, we're friends." Hayden's reply was sincere, even if his voice sounded a little hollow. "Friends with benefits!" He laughed without humor. His heart was twisting with misery, and he wanted to cry like a baby as all his visions of a life with Cal disappeared like smoke on the wind.

Hayden picked his jacket up from the floor. "I should go."

Cal simply nodded, and made no attempt to persuade him to stay.

Hayden hurt just a little bit more.

* * * *

Cal stood at the bedroom window and watched Hayden walk along the lake path toward his house, jacket hanging over one slumped shoulder.

He felt like a complete prick.

He turned away from the window, so that he didn't have to watch the way the evening breeze ruffled Hayden's dark curls, and sat on the edge of the rumped bed.

The room smelled heavily of musk, and in spite of it all, Cal felt his cock stir in response. Without making a conscious decision, he reached over and opened the drawer in the nightstand. His eyes fell instantly on the dog tags wrapped up in a clear plastic bag.

Cal was eighteen when he joined the Corp, and fresh out of high school. It was all he had ever wanted, and for fifteen years, it was the most important thing in his life.

He had always known that he was gay, and knew when he joined up that he was going to have to hide that side of his nature, but it never really bothered him; he had refused to let the fact that he preferred to share a bed with a man rather than a woman stop him from doing what he'd always wanted.

He was always really discreet about his personal life, but somehow his CO still managed to find out the truth.

He had risen to the rank of Master Sergeant by then, and his record was spotless, so he was allowed an honorable discharge—although he'd always suspected that this was more to do with his CO's wish to avoid any kind of embarrassment than his record.

It would be melodramatic to say that he'd lost everything when he lost his career in the Marines. He still had his folks.

They never really got him, never really understood the whole gay thing, but they were good people, and they had never condemned him.

It still hurt like hell, though, to suddenly be treated like a pariah by the people he had fought beside in some of the world's darkest hell holes.

When he'd arrived in Glencrest three years ago, Cal had been looking for a place to hole up and lick his wounds. He was angry and bitter, and just wanted to wallow in the mire of his own self-pity.

The residents of the little town allowed that for about a month, before they barged their way into his life and dragged him kicking and screaming back into society.

A year later, when the Sheriff retired, Cal put up a token protest before allowing himself to be nominated for election to the position.

Somewhere in there, Hayden had come along, with his smile and his warmth and his playful brown eyes.

Cal had heard about him, of course: Glencrest's famous son, top celebrity TV chef, with the big city, jet-set life. But Hayden was around so rarely and somehow their paths hadn't crossed.

Cal hadn't expected him to be so damn nice. Hayden had a way about him; down-to-earth and easygoing, there was nothing of the 'star' about him.

He wanted Hayden the minute he saw him, and just two weeks later, in spite of his reservations about getting involved with another man in such a small town, he had Hayden in his bed.

That first time? Hell, they went at each other like starving men at a feast. Cal thought his heart might actually explode from his chest with the sheer desperation of it.

He had missed Hayden a little bit more every time he left for the city, but he had never allowed himself to want more. He loved his life in Glencrest: the people, the location, and his job.

But as good and decent as the people of Glencrest were, it was, at the end of the day, still a small town.

Cal didn't know how they would react to the idea of a gay sheriff, and he had no intention of finding out, not even for Hayden. He wasn't about to risk another career, another life.

He slammed the drawer closed and watched as the lamp wobbled and threatened to topple over before righting itself.

Feeling suddenly listless, he left the bedroom and wandered along to the kitchen.

Bo was sitting by the back door, looking at him accusingly.

"Don't *you* start on me," Cal muttered, but couldn't quite meet his dog's eyes.

* * * *

Guilt and self-loathing didn't really make for good bed mates, and when Cal arrived at the office the next morning, he felt like day four of a three-day pass.

He had spent most of the night tossing and turning, cursing Hayden for changing the rules on him, and searching his memory for anything he might have said, or done, to lead Hayden to believe that they had a future together.

Bo was still snubbing him. He went to the office with Cal as usual, but the minute they stepped through the door, he went and sat beside Rebecca instead of going into Cal's office.

Cal shook his head and sighed, hung up his jacket and hat, and went over to fill a tall mug with strong, black coffee from the urn in the small kitchen at the back of the main office.

"Anything I should know, Rebecca?" he asked the young woman seated at the desk near the door.

Rebecca Turner's hands paused over the keyboard of her computer. "Deputy Arlo has gone out to see Cyrus Tolliver. Tom, at Flannigan's pub, was complaining that he got quite drunk and rowdy last night." She wrinkled her nose delicately.

Cal felt a smile tug at one corner of his mouth. Cyrus Tolliver was a seventy-year old ex-soldier who, once a month, when his pension arrived, came into town, got bombed, and sang rude songs at the top of his lungs, before taking a whiz in one of the planters that lined the street.

Cal usually paid him a visit, asked him not to do it again, and pretended not to see the still in the corner of the kitchen.

He could only hope that Arlo, in all his shiny newness, would not get overzealous, and haul the old codger in.

Rebecca tucked a stray lock of shiny blonde hair behind her ear. Every movement was dainty and precise.

"Principal Sheppard called to say that he had found a marijuana cigarette behind the gym at the high school, and asked if you would come in and give the students a talk on the folly of drug use."

'The folly of drug use'. Cal had absolutely no doubt that those were Rebecca's words. Jim Sheppard had probably said

something more along the lines of 'Put the shitters up the little bastards!' Jim had been counting down the days to retirement for the last five years.

He bit back a smile. "I'll give him a call, and set something up. Anything else?"

Rebecca shook her head. "No, nothing of any importance."

"Okay, I'll be in my office, catching up on paperwork." He looked down at Bo, and arched an eyebrow at him. "Are you coming?"

Bo's response was to curl up in front of the desk, and rest his head on his paws.

Cal sighed again. "Fine. When you're ready to start talking to me, you know where you can find me." He crossed the room, and went into his office, but instead of closing the door, he left it slightly ajar. Just in case.

* * * *

Cal managed to spin out the paperwork until mid-afternoon, at which time he finally admitted to himself that he was hiding; he was reluctant to set foot outside the office, knowing that, sooner or later, he was bound to bump into Hayden.

He was trying not to even think about him, but his mind insisted on conjuring up images of the expression on Hayden's face the night before: the pain in his eyes and the flush of embarrassment on his cheeks.

A part of him wanted to seek Hayden out, to stand in the middle of Lafayette Drive, and kiss the life out of him. But the greater part of him recoiled from the very idea.

And as if that wasn't enough, Bo still wasn't talking to him.

Nearly three years before, the old black and white stock-dog had shown up on Cal's doorstep, and decided to stay. Cal spent nearly a month trying to find Bo's real owners, but it was like he had dropped out of the sky. So he stayed.

In the intervening time, they'd had their disagreements, but nothing that hadn't been healed by the offer of a donut.

Today, however, Bo just turned his nose up at the donut, and resumed his sulking by Rebecca's desk. Guess he didn't like the fact that Hayden was hurt anymore than Cal did.

Very close to banging his head on the desk in frustration, Cal decided that if he couldn't do anything about Hayden, then at least he could sort things out with Bo.

He pushed up from his chair tiredly, and headed out of the office.

"Rebecca," he said, as he took his hat and jacket from the coat stand, "I'm just going up to the Armstrong place; I shouldn't be gone too long."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Bo's head pop up, his eyes suddenly alert, ears standing up.

Cal looked at him. "Would you like to accompany me?"

Bo was on his feet in an instant, and out the door, the second Cal opened it. Cal smiled when Bo bumped his leg on the way by; the old dog's way of telling Cal that he was almost forgiven. Cal decided to stop and buy him a donut, to seal the deal.

They walked along the street to Hyper, a nice little coffee shop with artfully mismatched tables and chairs and natural brick walls.

Bo waited patiently outside while Cal went in to buy him his favorite glazed donut.

He passed the time of day with the owner, Tilda Lucas, a pretty redhead who had returned to town recently, after several years in the city. Cal had found that most people who left Glencrest came back sooner or later.

Tilda bagged up Bo's treat, and Cal paid, glancing around while he waited for his change.

His stomach clenched when his eyes came to rest on Hayden, seated at a table near the back. It then plummeted with sickening rapidity, when he caught sight of the man sitting opposite Hayden.

The man was perhaps in his late twenties, early thirties, with stylishly mussed blond hair, and a handsome face. He was smiling brightly at Hayden, his hands moving expressively as he talked, and Hayden seemed quite caught up in the conversation.

Something uncomfortably like jealousy hit Cal with the force of a truck and took his breath away.

"Here you go, Cal," Tilda said, handing him his change.

Cal took it with numb fingers and turned to leave. But his treacherous eyes insisted on one more look over his shoulder, only to find himself looking right into Hayden's eyes.

Without permission from their owner, Cal's eyes flicked to the man opposite Hayden, narrowed, and flicked back.

Cal tore his gaze away, yanked open the door, and strode from the coffee shop.

"Come on, Bo, time to go," he said, in a voice sharper than was necessary.

Bo followed along behind him, a little miffed that Cal was making him wait for the donut.

They were almost at the SUV, when Cal heard Hayden calling his name.

Cal would have pretended not to hear him, but at the sound of Hayden's voice, Bo turned and bounded back down the street.

Cal also turned, reluctantly, and watched his dog run in happy circles around Hayden.

Hayden patted Bo absently, maneuvered his way around the dog, and headed directly for Cal, scowling.

"What the hell was that?" Hayden asked. His voice was quiet, but no less intense for it.

"What was what?" Cal asked, fingers tightening around the paper bag in his hand.

Sensing that his treat was about to be mangled, Bo yipped. Cal handed the bag over, and Bo took it in his teeth, dropped it to the ground, and tore the paper back with surprising delicacy.

"That ... that *look*," Hayden said, fire in his eyes.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Cal retorted. "Shouldn't you be getting back to your friend?" There was just a hint of spite in his voice.

Hayden's head snapped back as though Cal had struck him.

"Are you *jealous*?" he asked, eyes narrowing angrily. Before Cal could respond, Hayden took a step forward. "You fuckin' prick!" His voice was still quiet. "After all that bullshit last night, you act like the fuckin' wronged husband? Well,

fuck you. If you want me, then do something about it. Otherwise, stay the fuck out of my business and my life." He turned on his heel, strode off back down the street, and disappeared into Hyper.

For a minute, Cal just stood there, more than a little stunned. He knew that Hayden could be fiery; he'd almost set the sheets alight a few times. But *shit*.

He couldn't help wondering if it was totally inappropriate to be more than a little turned on right then.

He finally pulled himself together enough to look down at Bo, and was positive that Bo actually shook his head at him.

Cal shook his own head, picked up the now empty donut bag, balled it up, and threw it in the trash, then hustled Bo into the car.

* * * *

Cal was kind of surprised when the Armstrong farm came into view, having driven in something of a daze. Bo's tail started thumping on the seat, and he stared out of the window, his breath misting up the glass.

Cal pulled the Explorer up in front of the farmhouse, painted sunny yellow, with pots and planters of blooms on every available surface. He opened the door, and got out, stepping quickly to the side as Bo pushed impatiently past him, and bounded up the steps to the porch.

The front door was opened by Martha Armstrong, a matronly woman in her late fifties, with graying dark hair, and a comfortably padded figure. Martha smiled warmly when she saw Bo. "Hello, boy, come to see the kids?"

Bo yipped his response, and Martha laughed. She opened the door further to let Bo run past her.

"Afternoon, Martha," Cal said as he removed his hat and followed his companion up onto the porch.

"Hey there, Cal. C'mon in, I just put on a pot of coffee and took a batch of biscuits from the oven." She pulled the door wide, and ushered him inside.

Cal followed her through to the big kitchen at the back of the house, the smells of fresh coffee and baking making his mouth water. He took his jacket off, and sat in a chair at the big table in the middle of the room, smiling at Bo, who was over in the corner with his lady love, Martha's brown and white Border collie, Juno, and their five little balls of fluff.

Martha placed a mug of coffee and a plate of biscuits in front of Cal. "Help yourself to jam and butter, hon."

"Thanks, Martha. Everything okay with the brood?"

"Oh, they're just dandy. Eatin' us outta house 'n home!" She laughed, and turned to the oven to put another batch of biscuits in to bake.

Cal knew better than to offer to help out financially with the pups—they were his randy mutt's responsibility after all—because the last time he'd offered, Martha had all but chased him from the house with her broom. In the end, they compromised, and Cal had helped repair some fences on the farm.

Cal cut open a still-warm biscuit, and spread on some of Martha's homemade strawberry jam. He took a bite and moaned with pleasure.

"So, how's young Arlo Bennett working out? He shoot anyone yet?" Martha asked.

Cal grinned, and washed the biscuit down with a swallow of coffee. "I sure hope not, Martha, but he's been out on his own all day, so who knows?"

Martha shook her head. "I don't know, Deputy Sheriff. Wasn't that long ago he was throwing cherry bombs down the toilet at town meetings."

"He's a friend of your boys, isn't he?" Cal couldn't resist asking.

Martha looked at him, one eyebrow raised. "And your point would be?"

Cal snickered. "No point, Martha, just an innocent question."

"Hmm," was all she replied, but it said so much more. That and the little twinkle in her eye.

Cal got up and wandered over to the corner to admire Bo's offspring, smoothing his hand gently over the soft fur.

"You did real good, boy," he said to his dog, and Bo nudged his leg in the friendliest gesture of the day. Cal scrubbed his hand through his fur as a thank you.

"Got homes for nearly all of them now," Martha said. "Sean Craven over at the newspaper's gonna take one, so are the Matthews, and Dan Gilman at the barbershop. We're keeping one ourselves, so that just leaves one..."

Cal bit back a smile. Not exactly subtle.

He looked at Bo. "What do you think, boy, wanna take one of the kids home with us?"

Bo's enthusiastic agreement almost knocked Cal on his ass. He nuzzled into Cal, and licked his face until Cal was laughing so hard he couldn't breathe.

Martha grinned. "I think that might be a yes."

"Yeah, it might be!"

They stayed for another half hour or so, Bo spending time with his family, and Cal catching up on all the Armstrong gossip, then headed back into town. Bo was in the back seat, curled protectively around his son, a sleepy little thing with black fur and one brown ear.

* * * *

"I don't think we're going to have to do a lot of work in the main area," Luke Moore said, his eyes surveying the open-plan living room/dining room at Hayden's house.

"We'll need to make the place disabled-friendly, and of course, there will need to be bathrooms—that and refitting the kitchen will be the biggest jobs..."

Hayden listened to the young architect with only half an ear. His mind was on the little confrontation with Cal, outside Hyper. Anger was still simmering in his belly, and it wasn't made any better by the fact that a tiny part of him was actually pleased that Cal was jealous at the prospect of him with another man. He could have explained that the 'other man' was his architect, hired to convert his parents' home into a restaurant, but he was just so damn annoyed with Cal, that it had taken all his self-control not to haul back and slug the prick.

He desperately tried to hang onto his anger, knowing that it would keep at bay the hurt that was lying under the surface, just waiting to overwhelm him, given the slightest opportunity.

A lot of his anger was directed at himself. How could he have let this get so out of hand? Why hadn't he paid closer attention? Cal must have given him signals that it was nothing more to him than a casual thing. But instead, Hayden had allowed himself to believe that just because he loved Cal, that the other man must feel the same way about him. Was he really that naïve?

Hayden sighed and tried to focus his attention on Luke.

The architect was enthusing about a carpenter he knew, who made stunning furniture from naturally felled trees, and how they should consider commissioning him to make the tables for the restaurant.

Hayden just nodded. He really didn't care about tables.

They went out onto the sun porch, and Hayden watched Luke's eyes light up with pleasure.

"This is a really great space," Luke said, busily scratching notes in the book in his hand. "When the snow comes, the view must be spectacular."

Hayden wandered over to the window. "Yeah, it really is," he said, trying to sound interested.

He looked out over the neat lawn, and, of its own volition, his gaze went to Cal's house, partially hidden from view by a box hedge.

How the hell was he going to do this? How was he going to live next door to Cal, knowing that they would never be more

than friends? And could they really be just friends, with everything that had happened between them?

"Right," Luke said, and snapped the notebook closed. "I think I have enough to go on, for now. I'll put something together, and hopefully, get back up in a couple of days, okay?"

"That'll be great, Luke, thanks." Hayden shook the man's hand, and walked him out to his car.

When Luke had gone, Hayden went inside, and headed for his father's office, where he spent the next few hours poring over catalogues of everything from cutlery and crockery, to cash registers and office supplies.

It was late evening when Hayden threw aside the notebook he had been using to scribble menu ideas, and got to his feet, stretching his back and legs.

He walked over to the window, and didn't even try to fight the instinct that took his gaze in the direction of Cal's house.

For about ten minutes, he watched the big man play tug-of-war with Bo, using a piece of old rope, and he smiled when Bo clearly became bored of the game, and decided to launch himself at Cal. They wrestled for a few minutes, before being joined by a pup, that was little more than a ball of fluff.

Hayden turned away from the window, unable to watch any longer, and left the house. Feeling the need to be somewhere else, he got in the car, and drove. He had no destination in mind, just the urge to get away.

When he reached the outskirts of town, he put his foot down, and let the wind whip at his face and hair.

* * * *

Winter, when it came to Glencrest, came early and harsh. So, on the last weekend of every August, the townsfolk held a huge picnic at the lake.

Families started arriving at just after ten in the morning, setting up tables and chairs, unpacking mountains of food and drink, and putting small boats in the lake.

Cal arrived around lunchtime, a cooler of beer and food in one hand, Pup tucked into his other arm, and Bo trotting happily alongside, clearly pleased at the promise of so many treats.

Cal joined Martha and Jack, their sons Ethan and James, and Ethan's very pregnant wife, Kellie.

It was a warm afternoon, with a light breeze coming in off the lake, and the sounds of laughter and a boisterous game of football filled the air.

When Bo had had his fill of sandwiches, he took off in the direction of some kids playing with a Frisbee. Pup lay on Cal's lap, enjoying the attention he was getting from adults and kids alike, who couldn't resist giving him a pet.

Cal, for his part, tried to focus on the conversations going on around him, but he had little to contribute; he found his gaze constantly moving over the crowds, looking for familiar dark curls, and feeling acutely disappointed when he didn't see them.

He hadn't seen Hayden in nearly a week. There had been no movement, or even any lights in the house, and no sign of the other man in town.

He wondered if Hayden had given up on the idea of staying, and returned to his other life, and the thought of it filled him with dread even as he ridiculed his own arrogance for thinking Hayden would change his plans just because of *him*.

But still, there had been a feeling of unease in his stomach all week, and he knew that he was verging on antisocial, snapping at Arlo and Rebecca, and virtually going into hiding at home, when he wasn't on duty—he wouldn't have turned up at the picnic, if he hadn't been certain that Martha would come looking for him.

He stayed until nearly five, then told Martha and Jack that he was going in to relieve Arlo, so that he could come and enjoy the evening with his friends.

Martha would have put up a fight, but she must have seen the determined look in Cal's eyes, so she simply hugged him, and told him to take care.

* * * *

Hayden stood at the tall window of his apartment in the city, looking down at the busy street below: people out on the town, enjoying themselves after a week at work.

When he'd left Glencrest, Hayden had driven aimlessly for hours, before deciding that the more distance he put between himself and Cal, the better.

He hadn't yet sold the apartment, so he had spent the week there, trying to find some distraction in plans for the restaurant. He had spent some time with Luke, fine-tuning his

blueprints, and giving the go-ahead for the architect to hire contractors to do the work on the house.

They had also visited the furniture maker, and Hayden had been truly impressed by the man's work—it had a flowing, organic feel to it, and when Hayden saw the way the man brought out the natural beauty in the wood, he decided that he would never need any tablecloths, because it would be criminal to hide such workmanship under linen.

But as much as he tried to immerse his thoughts and energies elsewhere, Hayden's mind always came back to Cal. Particularly in the long, empty hours of the night.

Standing at the window, he sighed with frustration. Was this to be his life? Working himself to exhaustion, so that he didn't have the energy to lament what he couldn't have?

"Like hell!" Hayden said, his voice loud in the otherwise quiet apartment.

Pushing away from the window, he walked purposefully through to the bedroom, and rummaged through the closet, until he found a pair of expensively tailored black pants and a tight black T-shirt.

After a quick shower, he dressed, slipped his sock-clad feet into black loafers, grabbed his wallet and car keys, and left the apartment.

* * * *

Hayden hadn't been in Juice since he started the whole *thing* with Cal. The club was busy, as it always had been on a Saturday night, the dance floor a mass of bodies, pressed close through choice and necessity.

The music was loud; it could be felt as well as heard, and the colored lights flashed, picking out brief glimpses of men twisting and grinding together on the dance floor.

Hayden wove his way through the masses to the bar, where he ordered a Seven and Seven, and turned to lean on the bar and look out over the club.

He rebuffed a few advances, and ordered a couple more drinks.

He was nursing his fourth drink when he caught the eye of a good-looking redhead at the other end of the bar.

The guy jerked his head in the direction of the dance floor, and Hayden shrugged and nodded.

They made their way toward each other, then moved out among the throng of dancers.

Pushed close by the guys around them, their hips came into contact, and they moved together, touching from knee to chest, hips grinding, hands clutching.

Hayden felt his body begin to respond to the contact; his eyelids became a little heavy and he felt his pulse start to pick up as arousal threaded its way through him. The press of an increasingly hard ridge against his stomach told him that he was not alone.

The buzz of the alcohol, the heat of the lights, and the feel of bodies pushing close around him, created a haze around Hayden, and he leaned closer to the guy who was now groping his ass.

"How about we move this somewhere a little more private?" he asked.

The guy licked a stripe along Hayden's neck. "The john?"

Hayden nodded, and they pushed their way free, heading in the direction of the restroom. When they'd entered and found a free stall, the door to the cubicle was slammed shut, and Hayden felt himself pushed back against it.

"What's your name?" the redhead asked.

"Does it matter?" Hayden asked, gasping when he felt the guy's hand cup his dick through the material of his pants.

"Good point!" He laughed, and sank to his knees on the tiled floor.

Hayden let his head fall back against the door and closed his eyes. He felt his pants being unzipped, and tangled his hands in the guy's hair when he nuzzled at his straining cock through his shorts.

"Oh, yeah, baby," the guy said, in a low, husky voice.

Hayden looked down, and felt a little ripple of shock run through his body when he saw thick, red hair, instead of close-cropped dark hair. He felt his erection begin to deflate rapidly, and it drew a curious look from the man on his knees.

The redhead smiled. "Don't worry, babe, I'll soon get you nice and hard."

Hayden suddenly felt oddly removed from the situation. He shook his head slowly, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet. "No, don't ... I don't want this."

Red was still smiling. "Sure you do, hon." He pulled down the waistband of Hayden's shorts and leaned forward to take him into his mouth.

Hayden pushed the man's head sharply away. "No!"

The guy looked a little stunned for a moment, then annoyance began to cloud his eyes. He got to his feet and glared at Hayden. "What's your fuckin' game, man?"

Hayden frantically zipped and buttoned his pants. "I'm sorry, I just ... I don't want this." He pulled open the cubicle door, and squeezed past the man.

He was pushing through the main door to the john, when he heard the guy call, "Fuckin' cock tease."

A feeling of near-panic clutched at Hayden as he fought his way through the crowds, and out of the club. Outside, he hailed a taxi, and only seemed able to breathe again when he was back at the apartment. He closed the door and slumped down behind it, cursing Cal Hunter for screwing with his heart, and his mind.

"No more," he said, firmly. He was going home, and he was going to make that big lump realize that what they had was too damn important to throw away. Even if he had to beat him into submission.

Mind made up, Hayden felt a little lighter—if a bit nervous. He got to his feet and went through to the bedroom, shed his clothes, and crawled into bed, wishing that he hadn't had anything to drink, or he could be on his way back to Glencrest that night.

* * * *

The rain started just after midnight, and by three in the morning, the thunder was rumbling and the wind was howling through the trees.

Cal eventually gave up trying to sleep somewhere around six a.m., by which time he had about three inches of the bed to himself. Pup, scared by the thunder, had whined until Cal lifted him up onto the bed, and soon afterward, Bo had decided to join them. Gradually, Cal had found himself eased farther and farther over, until he finally got up and left them to it.

Dressing in sweats, he went for a run, and picked up the newspaper and some fresh bread from the bakery.

When he returned home, showered, and went to make some breakfast, he found that he was out of pretty much everything, so he got in the Explorer and went up to the Armstrong farm, ostensibly to buy some milk and eggs, but secretly hoping that Martha would offer him a plate of breakfast.

Two hours later, he found himself up a ladder, helping Jack and the boys fix the shingles that had blown off the roof during the night, having already helped to repair the damage to the stables. Thankfully, the rain was letting up, and the wind was dying down.

Cal was finally about to sit down to breakfast—although it would have been more appropriate to call it lunch—when Arlo called to tell him that there had been an accident.

A tree had fallen during the night, and a car had skidded on the wet road trying to avoid it. The car had gone off the road and wound up in a ditch; the driver was on his way to the hospital.

It was Hayden.

For a long minute after disconnecting his cell phone, Cal stood and looked at it, a chill running through his body.

"Cal, are you all right?" Martha asked, concern in her voice.

Cal turned his head to look at the woman who was as dear to him as his mother. She was watching him with intent blue eyes. There was silence in the kitchen, all eyes on Cal.

"I have to go," he said in a hollow voice. He felt sudden panic rise in him, and grabbed his jacket from the back of the kitchen chair. He all but ran from the room, manners taking a back seat to fear.

He gripped the steering wheel tightly as he drove into town, lights flashing and siren wailing, desperately trying to keep his panic under control.

He parked the SUV in a space marked 'Dr. A Sutton', and ran the short distance to the emergency room.

A pleasant young woman smiled at him when he drew to a halt at the reception desk.

"Well, hello, Sheriff. What can I do for you?"

"Hayden Garrett; he was brought in, where is he?" Cal asked, with barely contained urgency.

"Oh, well..." The young woman looked in the direction of the double doors at the end of the hallway.

Before she could say anything further, Cal took off.

"Wait, Sheriff, he's with the doctors right now..."

Cal wasn't listening. He strode along the hallway, and pushed through the swing doors. His shoes squeaked on the polished floor as he walked along the hallway, pushing open doors, and pulling aside curtains as he went.

"Sir ... excuse me, sir?" The squeak of shoes on linoleum came toward Cal. "Sir?"

Cal spun around when a hand landed on his arm. "*What?*"

The nurse snatched her hand back, and jumped in surprise. "Oh! Sheriff, it's you. I-I didn't recognize you."

"Hayden Garrett. He was brought in—car crash."

The nurse's eyes widened at Cal's tone. "He's been taken down to surgery..."

Cal felt something cold clutch at him. "Surgery?"

"Yes, he ... he has a compound fracture of his left leg, and they're worried about internal bleeding."

"Fuck..." Cal felt the blood drain from his face.

The nurse put a gentle hand on his elbow. "Why don't you come with me, and I'll bring you some coffee while you wait?" Her voice was soft, but she was clearly confused by his reaction.

Cal nodded, feeling suddenly quite numb, and followed her to a lounge at the end of the hallway.

He stood by the window, looking out over a neatly tended garden, with unseeing eyes, barely noticing when the nurse returned with the coffee, and then disappeared again.

He waited. It could have been an hour, or it could have been five. Cal's mind had shut down to everything around him.

He stood, unmoving, at the window, refusing to give way to the fear and dread lying in wait, threatening to take over, arms folded across his chest, fingers biting into flesh and muscle.

He determinedly pushed away thoughts of what if, and if only, and focused every bit of his attention on the drops of rain hitting the window.

"Sheriff?"

Cal's head snapped around at the sound of the voice from the doorway. A doctor was standing just inside the door, dressed in scrubs and holding a surgical mask in his hands.

A cold, hard lump settled in Cal's stomach. "Doctor?" he asked, chest uncomfortably tight.

The doctor smiled in a way that Cal assumed was meant to be reassuring, but he felt anything but reassured.

"Mr. Garrett took quite a bump out there today. We had to re-set his left leg, and remove his spleen..."

"Jesus Christ!" Cal said, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Is he going to be all right?"

The doctor came further into the room and stood in front of Cal. "He's going to be fine, Sheriff. It sounds serious, but it's really quite a routine surgery; he'll be able to leave the hospital in just a few days—although, we will have to keep an eye on him for a while." He smiled again, and something in his smile told Cal that the doctor knew that his interest was more than professional. "He's in recovery now. Once we get him settled in a room you can go in and see him."

Cal nodded his thanks, and as he watched the doctor leave, he felt his legs grow oddly weak, and his stomach start to churn.

Breathing deeply, he moved as quickly as he could until he reached the men's room. He locked himself in a cubicle, bent

over, and threw up everything he'd had to eat for about a week.

When he finally had nothing left, he flushed the toilet, put down the lid, and sat, trembling all over. Unable to hold his head up, he dropped it into his hands, and felt silent sobs begin to rack his body, and tears soak his hands.

He sat there, desperately trying to pull himself together. When he finally felt able to stand unaided, he left the cubicle, and went to the sink, where he rinsed out his mouth and washed his face.

A glance in the mirror made him grimace; his eyes were red and puffy, his face blotchy. He leaned heavily on the cool porcelain of the sink, let his head fall, and took some deep breaths.

Gradually, he felt his equilibrium start to return, and was able to leave the bathroom.

He made his way back along to the waiting room, and was soon joined by the nurse, whom he now noticed was wearing a badge reading 'Julia'.

"How is he?" Cal asked, getting up from his seat.

Julia smiled. "We've moved him to a room. He's still out for the count, but the doctor said you could sit with him for a while, if you like?"

Cal nodded, but felt his stomach twist nervously. "I-I'd like that."

"Come on, I'll take you to his room."

Cal followed her down the hallway, and up to the second floor in the elevator.

Julia stopped, and held open a door. "Here you go. Don't expect too much," she warned. "He probably won't come round for a while, and even then, he won't be very lucid at first."

Cal nodded, and moved slowly into the dimly lit room. He heard the door close softly, but all his attention was focused on the man lying, frighteningly still, in the hospital bed, wires and tubes hooked up to his body from IVs and monitors.

Cal felt emotion well up in him again, but he refused to succumb.

He moved a chair quietly over to the side of the bed, and sat down. He looked at Hayden's right hand, lying pale against the blue blanket, unencumbered by monitoring equipment, and reached out hesitantly to cover it with his own hand.

Hayden was a few inches shorter than Cal, and his physique slighter, but he had never, until that moment, seemed small to Cal. It brought out every protective instinct in Cal. He picked up Hayden's hand, wrapped both his own around it, and brought it to his chest.

He leaned forward, rested his elbows on the side of the bed, and lowered his head until his mouth was by Hayden's ear.

"You scared the hell out of me, babe, I think my heart actually stopped there for a minute, when I took that call from Arlo. As wake up calls go, that was a doozy!" His voice was low, for Hayden alone, and he tried to keep the tone light, just in case Hayden could hear him, even though he was as twisted up inside as a pretzel.

"I've been an idiot and a coward," he continued. "I put my job first, when the truth of it is, losing you would hurt infinitely more than losing any damn job."

Cal moved one hand to Hayden's face, stroked his knuckles over his cheekbone.

"You probably think I'm still being a coward, telling you this while you're drugged out of your gourd, but I promise that, as soon as you wake up, I'll tell you to your face; hell, I'll stand on the steps of the town hall, and declare my undying love for you, if that's what you want!"

He pushed Hayden's hair back from his forehead. "Of course, when you wake up, you might want to tell me to go to hell, and I wouldn't blame you one bit, but, you should know this, here and now, I'll fight you. I refuse to accept that my actions—as utterly stupid as they were—could have destroyed all feeling you might have had for me."

He gently smoothed his hand over the front of the gown Hayden was wearing, careful to avoid the wires tucked inside, and attached to his chest.

"I missed you this week. There was the picnic at the lake; people were asking for you..." Cal carried on speaking in the same quiet voice, telling Hayden everything that had happened in his absence.

He talked until his voice was hoarse, and the light in the window was fading behind heavy clouds, pausing only when Nurse Julia came in periodically to check on Hayden, and to bring Cal the occasional cup of coffee

If she wondered at Cal's continued presence, and obvious concern, then she kept her curiosity to herself.

It was late evening, and Cal was running a cool cloth over Hayden's face, still chatting away, when he noticed a slight flicker of Hayden's lashes against his pale cheek. His hand froze.

"Hayden? Hayden, can you hear me?" he asked, trying to mask the urgency in his voice.

Hayden's lips moved; his tongue appeared, to moisten them, and he said, in a voice rough from disuse, "How could I *not* hear you? You haven't shut up for hours. And to think, I used to call you the strong, silent type!" One side of his mouth twisted in an attempt at a smile.

Cal felt his eyes moisten. "Yeah? Well, at least I can drive!"

A sound like a laugh escaped Hayden, and Cal leaned over to place a soft kiss on his forehead, before turning to go and let Nurse Julia know that Hayden was awake. But before he could get far, he felt Hayden's hand close around his wrist. Cal looked at him, questioningly.

"Did you mean it?" Hayden asked, his voice just above a whisper.

Cal turned back to the bed. "Every word." It was suddenly hard to breathe, as he waited for Hayden's reaction.

Hayden's smile deepened, but his eyes started to droop a little tiredly. "You'd really ... on the town hall steps?"

"If you'd let me," Cal answered.

Hayden nodded, and his hand squeezed lightly, before it slipped from Cal's wrist to the bed. "I'd let you." His eyes were drifting closed, and before long his breathing had evened out, and he was asleep.

Fortune's Favor
by Cassidy Ryan

Cal stood, and just looked at him for another few minutes, then left the room to find the nurse.

* * * *

Over the next week, two things became clear to Cal. Firstly, Hayden was not an easy patient. In fact, he was an extremely impatient patient. The day after surgery, he insisted that the catheter be removed so that he could go to the bathroom, then got out of bed too fast, misjudged the weight of the cast, and would have fallen on his face if Cal had not been there to catch him. He spent the next three days grumping that his leg itched under the cast, the dressing on his wound was too tight, and the hospital food wasn't fit for cattle feed.

Cal was just so damned glad that Hayden was okay, that he spent most of his time grinning like a loon.

The second thing that became clear to Cal was that the rumor mill had been hard at work. It had obviously escaped nobody's notice that every spare moment he had was spent at the hospital with Hayden. Nor could Hayden's visitors have missed the fact that, when Hayden was in full five-year-old mode, it was Cal who could bring him down; it was Cal, with just a touch of his hand, and a soft smile, who could calm him.

Cal didn't miss the looks he got when he walked down the street, or the curiosity on the faces of friends and colleagues. He offered up no information, but he would have answered honestly any questions that came his way.

On the day that he was released from the hospital, Hayden went home with Cal, rather than back to his own house.

"Are you sure you want this?" Hayden asked, as Cal helped him from the Explorer outside his house.

Cal wrapped his arm around Hayden's waist. "For the one hundredth time, I want this," he said, dropping a quick kiss onto Hayden's curls. "In fact..."

Hayden looked up at him. "In fact?"

Cal hesitated for a moment. "Let's go inside. We need to talk."

Hayden frowned and let Cal help him into the house. He put up a fight when Cal tried to get him to go and lie down on the bed, and they finally compromised by settling him in the chair by the fire, after Cal had removed his jacket.

Hayden sighed, and relaxed back against the cushions, smiling at Pup, who was watching him curiously and patting Bo's head when the old dog nudged at him.

When he was certain that Hayden was comfortable, Cal went through to the kitchen and began to heat up some of the soup that Martha had brought over the night before. His eyebrows were drawn together in a frown, and he had a nervous, fluttering sensation in his stomach.

He poured the soup into a bowl, put it on a tray, added some crusty bread, and took it through to Hayden, in the living room.

"This should taste better than the stuff they've been serving up at the hospital," Cal said with forced brightness. He laid the tray carefully on Hayden's lap.

"Smells good." Hayden picked up the spoon. He sounded as uneasy as Cal felt.

Cal sat on the edge of the sofa, but was soon on his feet again, pacing around the room, Bo's and Pup's eyes following his every step. He dug his hands into the pockets of his jeans, removed them and scrubbed them over his hair, then folded his arms over his chest, tucking his hands under his arms.

Hayden sighed, loudly, and dropped the spoon onto the tray with a clatter.

"Okay, let's have it," he demanded.

Cal looked at him. "Huh? What?"

Hayden lowered his eyes. "You've changed your mind, haven't you? About us?"

Cal's eyes widened. "What? No, *no!*" He moved quickly across the room, took the tray from Hayden, placed it out of the way on the coffee table, and crouched in front of him. "I haven't changed my mind ... *fuck!*" Cal bent his head so that he didn't have to see the confusion in Hayden's eyes, hating himself for giving Hayden cause to doubt him. He raised his head again, and looked right into Hayden's eyes. "I want you to stay, not just until you've recovered, but for good. I want you to move in with me..." At Bo's bark, Cal laughed softly. "With *us*."

A slow smile curled up the corners of Hayden's mouth. "Yeah?"

Cal nodded, his own mouth quirking up. "Yeah."

Hayden's smile became a grin. "Okay. Gimme a kiss to seal the deal."

Cal leaned forward. "I can do that." He brought their mouths together, and it was a taste of heaven. After a week of nothing but the lightest of pecks, to feel Hayden's warm mouth on his, to feel his lips part and his tongue seek out Cal's, was enough to send a shiver of intense arousal racing through Cal's body.

Cal dropped to his knees, cupped his hand around the back of Hayden's head, and opened his mouth wide, until they were almost devouring each other, tongues tangling, breathing labored.

When Cal became aware of his thick shaft pushing at the front of his jeans, he pulled back reluctantly. "We can't do this yet; you're in no condition..." He gasped when he felt Hayden's hand reach down and curl around his cloth-covered erection.

"I might not be completely fit, but I can still take care of you." His eyes twinkled playfully. "And maybe you could return the favor?"

It took every bit of Cal's self-discipline to take Hayden's hand from his body, when what he wanted to do was press closer, to unzip himself so that he could feel flesh on flesh.

"Not yet, Hayden. The way I feel right now, I might get a little carried away, and I don't want to hurt you."

He could see that Hayden wanted to argue, but he held his tongue, and just nodded. "Yeah, I suppose so. We've got plenty of time, anyway, right?"

Cal couldn't resist leaning forward to place one last, soft kiss on Hayden's lips. "All the time in the world," he confirmed.

Fortune's Favor
by Cassidy Ryan

* * * *

The warm fuzzies Hayden got at Cal's gentleness and consideration as he recovered lasted about four days.

He didn't argue—much—when, the first night he got home from the hospital, Cal insisted on sleeping in the guest bedroom, so that he wouldn't hurt him by accident during the night.

But on the fourth night, when Cal headed in the direction of the guest room, Hayden blocked his path by putting one of his crutches in front of the door, and giving Cal his best glare.

"I don't think it's a good idea, Hayden, I don't want to..."

"If you say that once more, *I'll* hurt *you!*"

Discretion being the better part of valor, Cal followed Hayden to their bedroom.

But he refused, point blank, to touch Hayden, and no amount of cajoling on Hayden's part would change his mind.

Disappointed and frustrated, Hayden had no choice but to accept Cal's decision; he had no doubt that, if he tried to instigate something, then Cal would head straight for the guest room, and nothing short of dynamite would get him out.

Three weeks later, however, Hayden was beginning to get desperate.

No matter how often he told Cal that he wouldn't hurt him, that they could take things slowly, Cal wouldn't do any more than kiss him, or, if feeling particularly daring, hold Hayden close as they drifted off to sleep.

Hayden was embarrassingly close to begging. So close, that he decided it was time to do something about it.

He thought about doing the whole romantic seduction thing: good food, fine wine, and lots of candles—maybe even a bubble bath. But since he couldn't get in the bath without first wrapping a plastic bag around his leg, couldn't drink wine because of the meds he would be on for a while, to protect his immune system, and since Cal had been eating like a king for the last two weeks, as Hayden used him as a guinea pig for his menu recipes, he decided to go for the direct approach.

So, when Cal came home, four weeks to the day after the accident, he entered the living room to find Hayden, sprawled in a chair, good leg thrown over the arm, stark naked, one hand stroking up and down the length of his erect shaft.

Cal froze in the doorway, eyes wide with surprise. His gaze raked over Hayden's body, and Hayden was thrilled to see the light of interest that entered his blue eyes.

"I-uh, I thought we had agreed that it was too soon..." Cal said, voice rough. Hayden let his eyes wander over Cal, and was pleased to notice a distinct stirring at the front of his uniform pants.

Hayden ran a lazy finger around the moist tip of his cock. "Actually, I don't remember agreeing to any such thing, nor do I remember asking you if you wanted to play—but feel free to watch, if you like." He smiled, and rolled his balls in his other hand, gasping with pleasure and letting his eyes droop.

He noticed the way Cal's breathing was becoming shallow, his irises smaller as his pupils dilated.

Hayden arched his hips up, and tightened his hand around his cock, biting down on his lower lip all the while, watching Cal through hooded eyes.

It was very satisfying to see the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and his hands clench and unclench at his sides, as though he were having difficulty not touching.

"So, how was your day?" Hayden asked, as conversationally as possible.

"Not as good as yours, by the look of things!" Cal said, taking a step forward, almost as if he couldn't stop himself.

Hayden smiled. "Yeah, mine was pretty good." It wasn't easy sounding so casual, when he felt like he might blow at any second, just from the heat in Cal's eyes. "The contractors are almost finished on the kitchen, and the furniture will be arriving next week. So, yeah, all in all, a good day. I thought I'd just, you know, round it off with a little fun."

"You look kinda cramped up there," Cal said, stopping a few feet in front of him. "You might be more comfortable in the bedroom."

"You think?" Hayden asked, trying for his best innocent voice.

Cal just nodded, and swallowed again.

"Well, you know, I'm still a little unsteady on my feet. I don't suppose you could give me a ... hand?" It was as far from subtle as it was possible to be, but it caused the corners of Cal's mouth to twitch.

"I think I could manage that," Cal said and reached out his hands to Hayden.

Hayden freed up his own hands, swung his good leg back over the arm of the chair, and allowed Cal to pull him to his feet.

Momentum brought them together, and through the material of his uniform, Hayden could feel the heat of Cal's body, and the thick ridge of his shaft.

"You are an incorrigible tease, you know that, right?" Cal asked, laugh lines crinkling at the corners of his eyes.

Hayden dragged the tip of his tongue over the bump of Cal's Adam's apple, just to watch it jump. "Who said I was teasing?" he asked. "I'm yours, baby, do with me what you will."

"I ought to put you over my knee," Cal threatened.

Hayden grinned. "Ooh, I *like* that idea."

"Yeah, you would." With only the slightest effort on his part, Cal swung Hayden up into his arms, and set off in the direction of the bedroom.

Hayden laughed and linked his arms around Cal's neck. "Why, suh, I do declare!"

In the bedroom, Cal let Hayden slide slowly down his body, until he was standing on the floor, immediately wound his arms around Hayden's waist, and brought their mouths together. Their tongues tangled together, tasting, savoring.

Hayden ran his hand over Cal's bristly, short hair and pressed closer. His uniform shirt felt rough against Hayden's bare chest, and he felt his nipples respond to the friction. A moan escaped Hayden's throat, and it morphed into a long, low groan when he felt one of Cal's big, warm hands cup his ass, one finger running oh, so lightly along the crease

between his buttocks. Hayden's body hardened further, and he ground his hips against Cal and felt an answering twitch in the bigger man's pants.

"I want you so badly, Hayden," Cal rasped. "It's been so long. I want to make love with you."

"Yes." It came out as a hiss, and his hands went to the buttons at the front of Cal's shirt.

Cal stood quietly and let Hayden remove his clothes, slowly, caressing every inch of skin as it was revealed.

When Cal was finally, gloriously naked before him, Hayden slid unhurriedly to his knees in front of Cal, grateful that the full leg cast had, just days before, been replaced by one that stopped below his knee. He ran his hands along Cal's thickly muscled thighs and felt him shiver, felt goose bumps break out on his smooth skin.

Leaning forward, Hayden touched his lips to Cal's firm stomach, and worked his way down until he could stroke the tip of his tongue over the warm skin at Cal's groin. Hayden felt his dick pulse insistently. Why did he find it so damn hot that Cal was smooth down there?

Cal was making lustful sounds in the back of his throat and running his hands lightly over Hayden's hair. Hayden could feel the leashed power humming through his big body.

Hayden trailed his lips along the length of Cal's straining cock, opened his mouth, and took in the very tip of him, then teased him with his tongue until Cal's fingers were digging into his scalp.

Without warning, Hayden opened his mouth wide, relaxed his throat, and took Cal in to the hilt, felt his smooth balls hit his chin.

Cal yelped and bucked his hips reflexively. Hayden managed to grab onto his hips before he choked.

"Oh, oh, yeah, baby, so good. Fuck, I love your mouth," Cal groaned hotly.

Hayden swallowed around the head of Cal's cock, then did it again to feel him tremble.

Hayden moved his hands around to Cal's tight ass, squeezed his cheeks, and dipped his fingers into his crack; he touched the tip of his thumb to the little pucker at Cal's center.

"Uh, oh, God, yes, yes!" Cal pushed back onto Hayden's fingers, then forward into his mouth, the muscles in his thighs twitching as if electrical charges had been applied.

Hayden let Cal slide part-way out of his mouth so that he could taste him on his tongue, that heady, musky flavor that set his taste buds alight.

"Hay ... Hayden, I'm gonna come, baby ... too much."

Hayden picked up the pace, tightened his mouth around Cal, and bobbed his head up and down, until Cal was gasping for breath, buttocks clenching and stomach tightening.

Hayden looked up the length of Cal's body, and the minute their eyes met, Cal's cock erupted, and he was pouring all that goodness down Hayden's throat. Hayden swallowed and swallowed, determined to have it all.

Hayden held Cal in his mouth until he was completely spent, before letting him slip, lax, from between his lips.

Hayden sat back on his heels, as much as the cast would allow, and looked up at Cal. The big man was flushed and damp with sweat, and hotter than hell to Hayden's eyes and his body.

His own unsatisfied need prodded at him, and he got unsteadily to his feet. He took Cal's face between his hands, and brought their mouths together in a deep, penetrating kiss, letting Cal share the unique taste of his own seed on Hayden's tongue.

Cal's hands moved to Hayden's waist, slid down over his ass. Hayden pushed closer to Cal, urgently.

"How do you want me?" Cal asked, and Hayden almost shot at the deep resonance in his voice.

Trembling with need, Hayden urged Cal over to the bed, turning him, so that he was bent over, weight resting on his elbows.

Hayden shivered at the vision of that tight ass, tilted up, waiting for him. He retrieved the lube from the table by the bed, and slicked up two fingers, then teased the little furl of Cal's hole, and pushed gently in.

Cal hissed and circled his hips, helping Hayden to stretch and prepare him.

Hayden went as slowly as he could, took care to cause as little discomfort as possible. But he was starting to get a little desperate. His dick was leaking copiously; aching.

"I need to be in you now, hon, I can't hold out much longer. Are you ready for me?" he asked gruffly, rubbing his erection against the cleft of Cal's ass.

"Whenever you want, baby, do me now, do me hard."

Hayden slathered lube onto his cock, and shivered with desire. He lined up, and pressed forward, moaning when Cal's tight heat sucked him in. He rested against Cal for a minute, but his hips took on a will of their own, and started to move back and forth.

Cal pushed back, taking in even more, and any control Hayden had left, shattered. One hand on Cal's tense shoulder, the other resting in the center of his back, Hayden slammed repeatedly into Cal.

"Oh, God, Cal, you feel so fucking good; so hot, so tight."

"Oh, yeah, baby. C'mon, harder, faster!"

"Yes, yes!" Hips snapping, sweat trickled into Hayden's eyes, poured down his back.

Hayden slid his hand around Cal, and took his renewed erection in a tight fist, jerking in rhythm with his deepening thrusts.

When Hayden came, it was long and hard, his head falling back, practically howling with the intensity of it. His hand clenched convulsively around Cal as Cal blew all over his fingers.

Hayden collapsed over Cal's back, and Cal in turn, fell onto the bed. It took every last bit of energy Hayden had left to drag air into his lungs, and judging by the sounds coming from Cal, he wasn't having it any easier.

After a few minutes, they heaved themselves further up the bed, and lay, tangled together.

"Promise me this will never get old," Cal said, when they had calmed down some.

Hayden grinned happily, running his hand over Cal's sweat slick chest. "You can have it in writing if you want."

"Notarized?"

"In blood!"

Cal laughed a little breathily.

They lay in silence for a while, just wallowing in the afterglow, watching the sun go down.

"You all right, hon?" Cal asked, carding his fingers through Hayden's hair.

Hayden smiled sleepily, and snuggled closer. "I'll tell you when my brain starts working again."

Cal laughed softly and pulled the comforter over them.

* * * *

When Hayden got back from a meeting with Luke the following afternoon, he was surprised to see Cal home early, seated at the kitchen table, with a mug of coffee in front of him.

Hayden smiled with pleasure, but his smile faded when he saw the frown that drew Cal's eyebrows together.

"Hey, hon, this is a surprise," he said, leaning down to place a kiss on the top of Cal's head.

When Cal just nodded, Hayden sat opposite him after propping his crutch against the kitchen counter. He waited for a few minutes, but when Cal remained silent, Hayden reached across the table and laid a hand on his lover's. "Bad day?"

Cal raised his eyes to Hayden's, and sighed. He turned his hand over and linked his fingers with Hayden's.

"Rebecca quit today. She finally got up the courage to ask if we were living together as a couple, and when I told her yes, she said that she couldn't continue to work for me; that what we were doing went against everything she believed in."

It wasn't an unexpected reaction, but it still annoyed Hayden. "What about Arlo?" he asked, afraid of the answer.

Cal surprised him by emitting a small huff of laughter. "Arlo? He said he was a little envious."

"Envious?" Hayden asked, puzzled.

Cal smiled. "He said he'd never met a guy who wasn't up for sex at the drop of a hat, and how much easier it must be than having to do the whole wooing thing."

Hayden snorted. "Wooing? So, he didn't quit then?"

"No, he didn't quit." Cal was clearly pleased at this, but there was something a little off about him, preoccupation in his eyes.

Hayden squeezed his hand. "Tell me," he coaxed.

Cal stroked his thumb absently over the back of Hayden's hand.

"Pastor Whitworth stopped by the office this morning," he said after a long pause. "He came to tell me that he's called a town meeting tomorrow night."

Hayden felt his stomach begin to churn with apprehension. "Anything particular on the agenda?"

Cal smiled at the sarcasm in his voice. "He's concerned that my 'lifestyle choices' make me unsuitable to hold the position of sheriff."

"*What?*" Hayden exploded. He automatically shot to his feet, and Cal had to grab him before he tipped over; his balance was still a little off.

Cal settled him back in his chair and turned to the counter to fill another mug of coffee.

"That sanctimonious hypocrite," Hayden seethed. "Everybody knows he was knocking boots with Eleanor Banks while her husband was in hospital last year. Who the fuck is he to decide who is and isn't suitable?" He thumped his hand on the table top. "Well, he's not going to get away with it; we're going to that meeting, and we're going to show him, and everyone else in this town, that we are neither ashamed of who we are, nor afraid of their small minds..."

Cal abandoned the coffee pot, and came to kneel beside Hayden. He put a hand on Hayden's face and turned his head until they were looking right at each other.

"This is not your fault," he said quietly and ran his thumb over Hayden's eyebrow soothingly.

Hayden opened his mouth to argue, but the words didn't come. With his rant curtailed, he felt guilt unfurl in him, and spread through his body.

Cal continued to caress him gently, and when he spoke, his voice was still quiet, but firm. "I meant every word I said to you when you were lying in that hospital bed. No job in the world could mean as much to me as you do. Yes, we will go to that meeting; we'll listen to what Pastor Whitworth and his cabal have to say, and we'll have our say. There are a lot of good people in this town; we have to trust that they can see beyond the gay thing. Whatever they decide to do is beyond

our control, but know this, Hayden; if they demand my badge, they can have it, and I'll have no regrets."

Hayden looked deep into his lover's eyes and saw only sincerity. He felt his own eyes start to sting and leaned forward to rest his forehead against Cal's.

"I promise you will never have cause to regret choosing me."

Cal wrapped his arms around Hayden, and pulled him close. "How could I ever regret choosing the man who taught me how to live?"

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