

Pasa Doble

The Green Horn
Line Squall

Connie Bailey



This book is dedicated to Bobby, my love, and to Jean, some time collaborator/full time friend. I would also like to acknowledge the inspiration of E. Annie Proulx; it's never too late.

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Chapter One

I ain't sayin' this here story is a true one, but it could be, and consarn it, it should be. Started one hot July day a few years back in the town a Whistlestop Corners, in northeast Arizona. Course the locals don't call it that, but I'm digressin', and here's old Clem now...

"Should be here any minute," said the owner of the general store.

From his tidy porch, the merchant peered down the two-lane road that ran through the center of tiny Whistlestop Corners. When nothing appeared, he turned to the man holding up the wall.

"Whatta ya think he'll be like, Jess?"

"Cain't rightly say, Clem," the cowboy answered, as he finished rolling a smoke.

The lanky man struck a match against his boot heel and lit up, using his habit as an excuse to avoid conversation. Words were not Jesse Haller's strong suit. He preferred critters to people for the simple fact that animals didn't feel the need to flap their gums all the time.

Old Clem had asked Jesse the same questions five times in the last half hour, even though Jesse'd already told Clem what little he knew about the new boss: his name and nationality.

Lysander Kells. Now there was a name, Jesse thought, glancing at the fidgeting shop owner. Taking pity, he repeated, "He's an Englishman," to give Clem something to jaw about.

"A Limey. I ever tell ya I knew a few a them boys in the Big War. They was dainty as girls, but I tell you what, I never saw a one a them sumbitches turn yella."

Jesse pushed the weather-beaten cowboy hat up on his head and glanced down the highway. "I doubt this Kells fella saw any action, Clem. He's barely into his twenties."

Clem snorted. "You'll soon wipe the milk off his upper lip," he predicted. "What's takin' the girl so long? She usually drives fit t' scare the daylights outta any sane person."

Jesse blew a series of smoke rings as a mental image of Clem's daughter flashed through his mind. Adele Pike, who up until a few years ago had been Adele Pike-Atchison.

Divorce from her local golden boy/land baron husband had occasioned the amputation of her hyphenate. Adele recovered quickly from the dissolution of her marriage by opening her own real estate business and

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entering the political arena of The Corners, as the locals called the town, becoming a bona fide pillar of the community.

But that's not how Jesse thought of her.

When they were growing up, Adele was Jesse's five feet of heaven in a ponytail and he just assumed they'd get married some day and raise cattle and kids. Somehow, they had drifted apart, she to college in Phoenix and he to the rodeo circuit. She was going to be a Broadway actress and he was going to get out of The Corners for good. Funny, they had both ended up back here, having learned a bit about the world and themselves.

"Think he'll sell, or try'n make a go of it?" Clem jarred Jesse from his reverie.

"Damned if I know. Why don't ya ask Addie? She'd be the one."

"Hell, you don't even care, do ya? Give all that land to those worthless mustangs, if ya had your way."

Jesse shrugged off of the wall and crushed his cigarette out, placing the remnant in his breast pocket, as a plume of dust heralded an approaching vehicle. Clem's dogs bestirred themselves from some important sleeping to stretch and deliver a volley of loud barks from under the porch, announcing what everybody already knew.

"Here she comes," Clem said unnecessarily, as the fast-moving speck expanded into a big blue pickup truck.

Jesse swallowed, resenting the dryness of his mouth. Why should he be nervous just because he was meeting his new boss for the first time? Because it meant the old one really was gone for good.

Jesse swallowed hard again, this time to dislodge the lump that had formed in his throat. Blinking rapidly, the tough-as-nails foreman suppressed his tears at the reminder of Pop Kelly's passing. But the memory wouldn't be dismissed so easily.

The old man had been Jesse's boss and surrogate father for two decades, ever since Jesse had run back with his tail between his legs, and now he was gone. Gone just like that, and for no better reason than a gopher's choice of homesteads. A hoof down a hole, a short flight from the saddle of a broken-legged horse, and a hard landing had ended Pop's life with a snap of his neck.

Jesse had been clear on the other side of the spread when he heard the helicopter blades clawing at the air. With cold certainty that had no rational basis, he had known something had happened to Pop. His stomach a ball of ice, he had ridden his cowpony into a lather, knowing he'd never get there in time, but trying anyway.

Pop was gone, Medivaced out as Jesse reined in his winded mount. He had gazed helplessly at the receding dot of the chopper for several long moments, before going to put Pop's horse out of its misery. With hard

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practicality, he stowed his grief and got on with what needed doing. No reason to let Pop down just because he wasn't there.

The next chore was a meeting with the lawyer.

Adrian Titus Kells, known as Pop Kelly to his extended family at the modest Silver Sage Ranch, had left instructions for his will to be read privately to Jesse, before the contents were revealed to anyone else. The head wrangler had been shocked to learn that the old man had family in England and that the ranch had been left to the surviving member.

Furthermore, Pop had asked Jesse to stay on and run the ranch for his heir. All of the employees were guaranteed their jobs unless this grandnephew decided to sell. In that case, everyone was to receive a share of the profit from the sale. That was just like the old man, tough as boot leather on the outside, soft as new grass on the inside.

'Some cowboy I am. I can't even keep my mind from straying today,' Jesse corralled his thoughts, as Adele's truck pulled up at the curb.

Adele hopped down from the driver's side of the blue behemoth, her auburn hair bouncing on her shoulders, as she stepped briskly around the front bumper. She flashed her brilliant smile at Jesse and her father, jerking her chin toward the truck.

The passenger door opened, and a foot shod in purple snakeskin alit on the asphalt. Jesse's eyebrows climbed into his sandy bangs and he was stopped dead for a minute by the figure that emerged from the cab of the pickup. Now he understood Adele's gritted teeth and devilishly twinkling eyes. She was trying not to bust out laughing.

Along with the boots, more Rodeo Drive than rodeo, Kells wore skin-tight embroidered jeans slung low across his narrow hips. At least two inches of fawn-colored skin showed between his waistband and the too small black t-shirt with silver letters reading, "If you have to ask, you can't afford it". A pair of big rock star shades covered half the young man's face under an artfully tousled mop of dark hair.

Jesse shot a glance at Clem as Adele took the delicately handsome Mr. Kells by the arm and brought him up the steps.

"I know it's rude, but I'm busting for a piss," the young man said before anyone could speak.

"Toilet's inside," Clem said automatically. "Walk straight back and through the swingin' door marked gents."

As soon as Kells was out sight, Adele burst out, "Lord have mercy, did you get a good look at him? And what you can see ain't even the half of it. He pulled up his shirt just outside of Flagstaff to show me his favorite piercing. The boy has a nipple ring."

"Bullshit!" Clem said succinctly.

"I'm crappin' you negative, Dad. I didn't even mention the tattoo."

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Clem shrugged. "Lotsa guys got tattoos," he said. "I got Semper Fi over my heart."

Adele's eyes sparkled. "It ain't on his chest, or his arm, Dad. It's a bit south of that."

"How'd ya happen to see it?" Jesse drawled.

"I was trying to climb into that bloody great truck and caught my belt loop on something," Kells said from behind them. "Pulled me strides halfway off and as I'm not wearing any knickers, I nearly gave the lovely Adele the full Monty. Anyway, here it is."

Jesse stared in disbelief when the young man yanked down the waistband of his jeans to reveal a tattoo on the smooth flesh of his lower belly. Twin cupids aimed arrows at one another over the barrier of a silky treasure trail.

Clem glared in disapproval and looked away from so much bare skin. Adele found herself enjoying every second with a kind of horrified delight. Jesse gauged her mood and played into it as though they were back in junior high school.

Bending down until he was eye level with the tattoo, the cowboy feigned keen interest. "Well, will you look at that," he said admiringly. "That's just about the cutest thing I ever did see. Clem, look at this. Ain't it the cutest thing?"

"Are you taking the piss with me, mate?" Kells asked in good-natured tones.

"I'm not rightly sure what that means," Jesse said. "Did you mean to say 'take a piss'? Thought ya already done that."

"What?" the Brit asked in confusion.

"Jesse Haller," Adele cut in, "meet Lysander Kells."

"Honcho! I'm so pleased to meet you at last. Great-uncle Adrian wrote me about you."

Jesse started at hearing his nickname spoken in the old man's soft accent. No one but Pop and the hands called him Honcho. It took Jesse off guard, leaving him speechless in the face of the other man's enthusiasm.

"Well, I'm sure you're anxious to see the spread, Andy," Adele said, filling the awkward silence. "I'm going to leave you in Jesse's more than capable hands. We can discuss our other business after you've settled in."

Lysander Kells pressed forward and hugged Adele exuberantly, kissing her loudly on the cheek. "Thank you so much," he said. "And I know you're right. I'm going to love it here."

Adele nodded, seeing Jesse's bemused look in her peripheral vision. "I'm sure The Corners is going to find you as charming as you find it," she said and got back in her big truck.

"She's brilliant," the Englishman said, as Adele drove away.

"That she is. This all your luggage?" Jesse asked, looking at the suitcase

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and overnight bag sitting on the wooden sidewalk.

“What? Oh, yeah. I’ll have to buy real cowboy clothes so why bring all my old stuff with me?”

Without comment, Jesse picked up the two bags and started walking toward the beat up Jeep Wagoneer with “Silver Sage Farms” painted on the side. Kells turned to Clem with an inquiring expression.

“Clemson Pike,” the old man said, holding out his hand. “Addie’s my little girl.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the young man said, shaking Clem’s hand. “Good show.”

Recognizing the compliment, Clem warmed to the stranger. “Would you like a drink for the road, Mr. Kells?” he asked.

Kell’s face lit up. “Mate, I’d love a beer.”

Clem smiled. “Come on in, and have a gander at the selection.”

“Love to and please call me Andy, Clemson. There’s a tradition of Shakespearean names in my family, but we don’t inflict them on everyone.”

“Aw, I’m Clem to everybody ‘round here. Come get yourself a cold one.”

When Jesse finished loading the bags in the wagon, his charge was nowhere to be seen. A moment later, Kells exited the general store laughing companionably with Clem. Both were holding sweating bottles of Modelo Negra.

“Ain’t it a bit early in the day, Clem?” Jesse said mildly.

“I can’t let Andy drink alone,” Clem said, and chuckled.

Jesse’s brows rose. He had rarely seen Clem take a drink during daylight hours, and never during business hours. Now the man was swilling cerveza in the middle of the afternoon and laughing like a hyena with this fruity-looking English boy.

“Care for a beer, Honcho?” Andy asked.

“I’m drivin’,” Jesse said flatly. “We oughta git goin’ if you wanna see much a the place before the sun goes down.”

“Oh, absolutely!” Andy exclaimed. “I can’t wait to see a real ranch with real cowboys.”

‘And just wait ‘til they git a look at you,’ Jesse thought as the Brit got in on the passenger side.

Andy waved cheerily to Clem, holding up the bottle of beer, as Jesse backed the big truck and pulled onto the road. The young man didn’t talk, but Jesse could feel his curious stare as warm as the sun through the windshield. The foreman ignored it for a while, but the continued scrutiny finally drove him to speak.

“What?”

“I’m not sure how to phrase this, but I want you to know how sorry I am about Uncle Adrian’s death. I never met him face to face, but he wrote me

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once a month like clockwork, never less than ten pages. His letters meant a lot to me. They described his daily life, and his observations on it. Without ever giving me advice, he gave me a good example.”

Jesse nodded, unsure how to respond.

“I just wanted to say that if you’d like to talk about Uncle Adrian, I’d...”

“Pop,” Jesse interrupted. “Round here, we called him Pop Kelly, or just Pop.”

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt your...”

“Forgit it. I druther talk ‘bout somethin’ else.”

There was a long silence from the passenger side before Andy spoke again. “You look just like a real cowboy,” he said.

Jesse gritted his teeth. “Reckon that’s ‘cause I am a real cowboy.”

“Brilliant! Will you teach me to be a cowboy?”

Jesse’s eyes slid toward his passenger. “Are ya serious?” he asked.

“Absolutely! It looks like such fun in the movies!”

“If I take you to raise,” Jesse said slowly. “You’ll just be one of the hands, a greenhorn. You’ll have to abide by my rules. Think hard before ya answer. The boys won’t go easy on ya and neither will I. Better see what you’re gittin’ into first.”

“No, I’m sure. I want to be a cowboy!”

“So don’t look before you leap, colt. Run right off that cliff,” Jesse thought before he answered. “You’re the boss.”

The folks that worked the Silver Sage were as flummoxed as Jesse when they got their first look at the new owner. After the shock wore off, reactions were as varied as the number of employees, running the gamut between amusement and disgust.

Whatever his or her opinion might be, each followed the foreman’s instructions to treat the boss with the same respect they’d given Pop until the kid gave them reason to treat him differently. Of course nothing, not even Honcho’s orders, could stop the gossip.

Joe Gomes, ramrod of the Silver Sage, rubbed his hair with a towel as he left the bunkhouse shower room. The new hand, Dolf Landry, was sitting on his bunk with his back to Joe. With a smirk, Joe wrapped the towel around his waist and tiptoed closer.

The ramrod could count the freckles on Dolf’s broad shoulders and still the cowboy was unaware of his presence. Craning his neck, Joe saw the reason for Dolf’s absorption. The big man had a hand down his drawers, furtively fondling himself.

Joe’s cock stirred, and he followed its lead. Sitting down on the bunk

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opposite Dolf, the ramrod cleared his throat. Dolf's eyes flew open, and he yanked his hand out of his underwear. Joe grinned disarmingly and let his towel fall open.

"Easy there," Joe said. "Ain't nothin' wrong with yankin' your crank once in a while. I'm partial to it myself."

Seeing the Joe wasn't mad, Dolf relaxed and soon regained his cocky manner. "Hope ya don't expect me to pull it for ya."

"Hell, no! But wouldn't mind watchin' ya while I wring it."

"I ain't queer or nothin'," Dolf said quickly.

"Never said ya was. Ain't like I wanna kiss ya."

"Fair enough," Dolf said, pushing his BVDs to his ankles.

Joe whistled at the length and girth of the shaft that curved from the tangle of red-gold hair. "That's some hogleg ya got there."

"This little thang? Had it since I was a boy," Dolf answered.

Grabbing the thick rod at the root, Dolf shuttled his fist lazily up and down the rosy length. He looked over, eyes hidden by strawberry blonde bangs, as Joe gripped his own arousal. The ramrod squeezed his rapidly stiffening shaft, rubbing his thumb over the tip, teasing the hood off. The maroon head gleamed appealingly, as though it had just felt the caress of an eager mouth.

"Fair to middlin' pecker," Dolf acknowledged grudgingly.

Joe smiled as he reached down to cup his heavy sack. "How 'bout these suckers?"

"Balls on ya like a bull."

These were Dolf's last words for a while. Having a spectator added an exciting new element to something that had become little more than habit. It wasn't long before his balls tightened and the fat vein pulsed on the underside of his quivering cock. With a harsh grunt, Dolf came, spurting thick fluid almost high enough to catch a few drops on his tongue.

Joe leaned back on one elbow and pumped his pecker faster. Waves of pleasure coiled tighter in his groin until the tension broke in a warm flood of bliss. As though competing with the other man, Joe's jerking shaft splattered his pecs in a glistening archipelago.

For a few seconds they lay in companionable silence as they caught their breath. Joe spoke first, as he wiped his chest with the towel and tossed it to Dolf.

"Hoo-ee! Damn near put my eye out."

Dolf chuckled. "That was a good'n, sure enough."

"Just don't go advertisin'."

"Ya think I want anybody t' know 'bout this?"

Joe shook his head. "Just makin' sure. Ain't no need for anybody to know. Might git the wrong idea."

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“Specially that faggoty new boss man,” Dolf grimaced. “He finds out; he’ll wanna join in.”

“He’s from England,” Joe said, as though it were an explanation.

“Yep,” Dolf concurred.

“Just give ‘im a chance, like Honcho told ya. If he does turn out t’ be queer... Well, no need t’ cross that bridge ‘til we come to it.”

“Reckon we’re too late for supper?” Dolf changed the subject as he pulled on his pants.

“Bound to be some beans and a few tortillas left,” Joe said. “Milagra won’t let a workin’ man go hungry, and I figger we’ll need all our strength tomorrow for the greenhorn’s first day.”

“I know I’m gonna need mine t’ keep from laughin’ ever’ time that dude opens his mouth.”

Joe clapped Dolf on the back and steered him toward the door. “Come on, now. Tomorrow ain’t here yet, and I’m hungry enough to eat the ass end of a dead mule.”

Dolf smiled, glad to be fitting in so quickly around here. Neither the foreman nor the ramrod had made a fuss over Dolf having a record, hadn’t even asked what he’d done time for. Maybe he’d be able to stick long enough to make some traveling money.

Throwing a friendly arm around Joe’s shoulders, Dolf walked out with him.

Chapter Two

“Senor Jesse?”

Jesse looked up from the account book with a welcoming smile for the lady in the doorway. He had told Milagra many times to call him by his first name, but she never got comfortable with the idea. The best she could manage was a compromise.

Milagra Vallenzuela was in her sixties; a woman raised in Mexico with a traditional Catholic upbringing, she had a vast amount of respect for men in positions of power. Jesse didn't always like it, but over the last twenty years he about gotten used to Milagra treating him like a benevolent dictator.

“Have a seat,” Jesse offered, knowing she wouldn't take it.

“I so sorry to bother you,” Milagra said in her soft accent. “I know you so busy.”

Jesse sighed. Once a week, he made himself available in this office precisely so that the other employees would know where to find him with their complaints or suggestions.

“What's on your mind, Senora?” he coaxed.

Milagra's dark face crumpled under the stress. She had to speak, but it was near impossible for her to criticize a superior. She'd tried many, many times in the past week to frame her problem in suitable words, but could think of no inoffensive way to phrase it.

“Just tell me what the trouble is,” Jesse said. “It cain't be all that bad.”

“Is Senor Andy!” the housekeeper burst out.

“I thought that might be it,” Jesse said. “Go ahead and tell me all about it. Nobody but you and me will ever know.”

“I trust you, Senor Jesse,” she said, and launched into a list of sins.

“Senor Andy, he no get up until lunchtime, and then he no want food. No coffee even. He want tea, always tea, and hot. And he want the girls to bring it into he bedroom. Always. He don't wear he clothes in he room. The girls giggling all the time over it, always.”

Milagra's expression clearly revealed her opinion of the sort of girls who giggled over naked men. Disapproval became distress with her next words.

“He don't like my food neither, Senor Jesse. He want salata always, only leaves and vegetables no cooked. He eat this way; he get sick.”

Jesse held up a hand. “I'll talk to 'im, Senora. I don't know what good it'll do either of us, but I've put it off long enough.”

“Gracias, gracias, Senor Jesse.” Milagra went to the door. “I know Mr. Andy he the boss, but he driving us loco in the kitchen.”

“I'll see what I can do,” Jesse reassured her.

Milagra shook her graying head, and touched the olivewood rosary

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around her neck. "He gonna listen to you. Everybody listen to you. Even the horses, they listen to Senor Jesse."

The housekeeper bustled away down the colonnade, her long skirt dusting the terracotta tiles. Jesse watched her go without really seeing her, the whitewashed walls or the small fountain in the courtyard. He'd been avoiding this moment since he'd escorted Silver Sage's new owner onto the ranch.

Closing the tedious ledger with a snap, Jesse rose and went to find Mr. Lysander Kells. It was time to start his cowboy lessons.

Jesse's eyes widened as he strode into the atrium. Andy Kells was stark naked among the potted plants, his glistening body contorted into a strange configuration. A boom box emitted tinkling Eastern music and the musky-sweet smell of incense teased Jesse's nose.

The foreman cleared his throat loudly, and Kells's eyes opened.

"Honcho!" Andy sprang up with a wide smile. "You're awfully fucking busy, mate. Every time I wanted to see you, you were out on the range punching fucking cows or something. When are you fucking going to teach me to be a cowboy? I want to ride, and rope, and chew tobacco and swear and..."

"Seems t' me ya got a head start on that last one," Jesse interrupted the spate of words.

"What? Oh, yeah," Andy laughed. "My language is just awful, I know, but fuck is such a versatile word, don't you think?"

"Never gave it a lot a thought," Jesse replied. "Why don't ya holster your tallywhacker and walk out to the stables with me? We'll pick ya out a horse."

"Really? Brilliant! Give me five minutes."

Jesse eyed the loose cotton pants Andy was pulling on, doing his best not to stare at the other man's handsome cock and failing miserably. After seeing Kells in the altogether, the cowboy had to admit that there was nothing soft about the Brit.

Andy's muscles were lean but well toned, standing out in hard relief when flexed. Even the one Jesse was pretending no interest in was looking a little pumped. Andy glanced up from tying the drawstring of his pants and smiled when he saw the direction of Jesse's gaze.

"Willie's a bit unruly," Andy said. "Mind of his own, that one. I never know who, or what, is going to make him stand up."

"I'm ain't here t' talk about your pecker," Jesse said.

"You're the one who brought up my tallywhacker," Andy replied archly.

"So I did. Now, I'm closin' the subject. Let's go, boss."

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Without another word, Jesse strode off, boot heels clocking on the terrazzo. Andy hurried after him, an impish gleam in his dark eyes.

After Andy had changed into jeans and boots, Jesse walked him down the line of saddle horses, introducing the enthusiastic young man to each in turn. The thought that the boy and the long-limbed, liquid-eyed animals had much in common went through Jesse's mind before he shooed it away like a biting fly. It was not the sort of thought he wanted to have about the silly, spoiled brat that signed the paychecks.

The foreman was surprised by the way the horses took to the foreigner, even Trey, the big chestnut that cordially resented all that went on two legs. Jesse watched in disbelief as the ornery gelding stretched his neck to lip at Andy's curls without trying to take a sly bite.

It was probably just some smell about the Englishman that the headstrong animals liked, but Jesse didn't scoff at it. Skill was valuable, but luck was priceless. Particularly if you were as clueless as Kells seemed to be.

"This one's pretty," Andy said, patting Trey's soft muzzle. "Can I ride him?"

"I don't know," Jesse said. "Can ya?"

"Well, I've never ridden before, so how would I know? You're the cowboy."

Jesse took a deep breath. "We'll start with the tack," he said. "Follow me."

Half an hour later, Andy knew the names of the various items of tack and how to put them on the horse. The horse in question was called Easter, and he'd never given anyone a bit of trouble in all his six years. The gelding stood patiently while the young Brit saddled and unsaddled him, put his bridle on and took it off again until Jesse was satisfied.

"Not bad," the foreman said. "Lead him outside, and I'll show you how to mount."

"I think you'll find I've a head start on that as well," Andy said with a grin.

Jesse didn't laugh. "Just take the horse over there and wait while I saddle Sirocco," he said in flat voice.

Andy sighed. This was not how he'd daydreamed it. He and Honcho should be best pals by now. One of them should have saved the other's life by shooting a rattlesnake or something. At the least, they should have gotten into a fistfight and bonded over whiskey afterward. That always happened in the Westerns; maybe he should give it a little more time.

"All right," Jesse said as they stopped in the stable yard. "Watch me."

Jesse put his left foot in the stirrup and swung agilely up into the saddle. He looked down at Andy and nodded. The young man did exactly as the

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foreman had done and found he was sitting astride the horse. He slipped his right foot into the stirrup and looked over at Jesse with a beaming smile.

"Okay, so you're on the animal," Jesse said. "We're just going to walk around the corral today until you get used to the reins."

It took even less time for the eager Englishman to learn to control his mount than it had taken to saddle the gelding. Jesse didn't want to be impressed by this prancing flake, but the boy was a natural. Shaking his head at what he considered a waste of talent, Jesse reluctantly admired the melding of rider and mount.

It was an undeniably appealing sight that made Jesse drop his eyes like a thief caught in the act. Attraction to other men had plagued him pretty much since puberty. It was a problem he'd struggled with for so long that the denial was automatic for him now. In the last few years, he'd reached a sort of peace with it. As long as he didn't act upon the depraved urges, he could live with himself.

Then this shameless foreigner came crashing into his life like a stampede, stirring long dead feelings in their cold tomb. Jesse knew it wasn't fair to resent Andy for something that the boy couldn't help, but he did anyway. The best Jesse could do was to try and keep his frustration from bleeding into his speech and manner. He didn't think he was doing a very good job of it, so far.

"That's good enough for today," the foreman called out in penance for his thoughts. "Tomorrow, I'll take ya for a short ride."

Andy's lips curved in a smile, but he bit back the words that sprang to his tongue. Honcho didn't seem to like being teased. It was a struggle for the young man to not say something along the lines of how much he'd enjoy a short ride from Jesse, but he managed to curb it.

Andy wasn't used to watching what he said. He generally blurted out whatever was on his mind, but he made the effort to consider Jesse's feelings. Andy's Uncle Adrian had written so admiringly of the foreman that Andy felt he owed Honcho a certain amount of respect.

Therefore, though Andy wanted to keep riding, he conceded that Jesse might have a good reason for stopping now. Obediently, he got down from the saddle and led the horse into the stable. Jesse was vaguely disappointed that he could see nothing to complain about as Andy unsaddled Easter.

After the tack was stowed, Andy held out his hand to Jesse. After a brief moment of hesitation, the foreman took it.

"Thank you," Andy said. "I know you're a very busy man, and I appreciate you taking the time to teach me."

Jesse's jaw dropped. Gratitude was the last thing he had expected. In truth, he hadn't expected anything, and felt a little ashamed of himself. Why was he hoping that the kid would fail?

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Another sensation impinged on Jesse's confusion. Andy's fingers were cool, but their touch generated a warm tingle that was moving up Jesse's arm at a rapid rate. An answering pulse in Jesse's groin sent a quiver through his manhood.

Andy's face registered his shock when Jesse snatched his hand back as though he'd touched a branding iron. He wondered what he'd done to offend the foreman, but wasn't given the chance to ask.

"Lesson's over for today," Jesse said brusquely.

The cowboy strode away, walking somewhat stiffly, and as soon as he was out of the boy's sight, he adjusted his straining hard-on.

Damn it to Hell! This was a fine state of affairs. He couldn't even touch the greenhorn's hand without getting hard? Grumbling under his breath, Jesse headed for the bunkhouse and a chilly shower.

Andy watched the wiry figure stalk away and wondered again why Honcho didn't like him. Everybody back home liked him; in fact, adored would be a more accurate term. What was wrong with Jesse? Andy got no immediate answer to this question.

Meanwhile, riding lessons continued, and though Andy and Jesse didn't do much talking, the daily excursions on horseback came to be the highlight of Andy's new life. However, others noticed the private lessons, and not everyone was happy about them.

Joe nudged Dolf's elbow. Dolf spit tobacco juice and looked in the direction of Joe's gaze. A sneer twisted Dolf's lips.

"The greenhorn," he said succinctly.

Joe snickered, pushing his hat back on his head as he adjusted his slouch against the railing. "Ya ever see such a dude in your life?"

Dolf shook his head. "He ain't gonna last here."

"Maybe you're right, and then again, maybe you ain't," Joe drawled, watching the Brit walk toward the stables. "Honcho seems to've taken a shine to 'im."

Dolf's eyes followed the sway of lean hips as he replied. "You ever see a pair a jeans like that before?"

Joe snorted. "Any tighter and ya could tell if he's cut or not."

"Think the boss needs any help?" Dolf asked slyly as Andy entered the stables.

"We could be neighborly and ask," Joe answered as he pushed away from the railing.

Andy turned from saddling his horse, as two shadows fell across the straw scattered floor. Easter nickered a greeting to the cowpokes, and Andy

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went on about his business.

"Can we give ya a hand, Mr. Kells?" Joe asked.

"No, thanks," Andy said. "Honcho showed me how to do it."

"I just bet he did," Dolf drawled. "He show ya ever'thin?"

Andy caught the odd note in the man's voice and his hackles rose. "I don't need any help," he said. "You can go."

"Aw but I insist, Mr. Kells," Joe said. "Sure wouldn't want Honcho mad at me 'cause ya broke a nail, or busted a seam on them fancy britches."

"I'm fine," Andy said as Dolf moved around behind him.

Lifting the saddle from Andy's arms, Dolf trapped the young man between his body and the gelding's side. Deliberately, the cowboy pressed his groin against the young man's buttocks as he set the saddle on Easter's withers.

Andy gritted his teeth and decided not to make an issue of it, as Dolf stepped back. He reached for the bellyband, only to have it taken from his hands. Quickly and competently, Joe tightened and buckled the girth, all the while grinning up at Andy.

"There ya go, darlin'," the ramrod said as he straightened up.

"Thank you," Andy said curtly, grasping at the reins.

He should have known better. Dolf snatched them up, and then offered them on his palm. Knowing it was another mistake, Andy reached for them. Dolf grabbed his wrist and looped the reins around it.

"Bet that feels real natural to ya, don't it," he said.

"You should know," Andy answered. "You look like the sort of KY cowboy who's into a little rough trade."

"What?" Dolf and Joe said simultaneously.

"Oh come on. Don't be coy," Andy said. "You're a rump wrangler, aren't you? Booty bandit, member of the butt posse? In fact, you look like the sheriff of the butt posse to me."

As his tormentors stared in surprise, Andy put his foot in the stirrup and swung easily into the saddle. Andy put his heels to Easter's flanks and the gelding took his cue, shouldering past the two men, leaving the hands muttering angrily.

Impressed that the hands hadn't backed the kid down by an inch, Jesse stepped out of the stall he'd been preparing for a brood mare. Dolf and Joe jumped about a foot when they saw him. They were tough, but Jesse was tougher and he didn't brook disrespect. Their nervousness grew when he did nothing but stare at them for several long moments.

"Saddle Sirocco for me, Dolf," Jesse said, breaking the heavy silence.

Dolf hurried to obey, while Joe awaited his sentence.

"I'll talk to ya some more later," Jesse said quietly. "I expect this sort a thing from Dolf, but not you. You're the ramrod, Joe. Set a better example,

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or I'll make one out a ya."

"I will, Honcho," Joe said. "Ya don't have to worry none about that."

"Good," Jesse said, raising his voice. "Where's my horse, Dolf?"

Dolf trotted up with Sirocco saddled and bridled in record time. The stallion had the bit between his teeth, chomping agitatedly in response to Dolf's mood. Jesse stretched out his hand and Sirocco calmed immediately, nuzzling the man's palm with his soft lips.

Jesse mounted up, and turned the horse's head toward the door. "Try t' stay outta trouble 'til I get back, boys, or I'll tan your hides."

Jesse clucked to the stallion and gave the animal its head. Sirocco trotted out of the stable, picking up speed with each long stride. By the time they passed the corral, the big horse was galloping. Leaning down from the saddle, Jesse spotted the most recent hoof prints and followed them.

Several miles from the ranch, Jesse drew rein near a stream lined with cottonwoods that marked one border of the ranch. Andy stood on the bank watching something on the plains, as Easter drank. His dirt smudged face and the grass stains on his clothes betrayed the fact that he'd been thrown.

Jesse rode up and saw the herd of mustangs that Pop Kelly allowed to roam his land. It occurred to the foreman that the new owner might feel differently about a bunch of worthless animals using up valuable pastureland, eating grass that could feed cattle. As Jesse watched the wild horses, he tried to come up with a way to broach the subject.

"Is it possible to get one moment of privacy?" Andy asked.

"Easy, Colt. I ain't here to get ya riled up."

"Then why are you here?"

"To make sure nothin' happens to that horse you're ridin'. You're a natural, but ya ain't exactly an expert yet."

The fire in Andy's eyes flickered out. "Oh. Of course. I'm sorry. I didn't think about that. I just wanted out of..."

Jesse slid down from Sirocco and the big horse ambled to the stream.

"Wanted to get out of what, boss?" the foreman asked.

"Never mind," Andy sighed. "Do you have to call me boss?"

"Just showin' a little respect."

"Then respect my wishes and call me Andy."

"Cain't. Had a dog called Andy once. Think I'll stick with Colt. How'd that be?"

Secretly thrilled, Andy answered off-handedly. "Suit yourself, cowboy."

"Will do. Now, ya wanna tell me why ya tore outta there so blamed fast?"

"I felt like a gallop."

"That's it?"

"Yeah. Guess I overestimated my ability to stay on a horse."

"You're doin' fine, Colt. Ready to head for the barn?"

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Jesse was surprised the kid hadn't taken the opportunity to tell him about Joe and Dolf's hazing. He'd expected prissy Brit to demand that the men be fired, and had come prepared to tell him why that wasn't possible just now, with the cows calving. He was relieved he didn't have to deal with it any further and grateful to Andy for not making his job harder.

"Do all of those horses belong to the Silver Sage?" Andy broke the easy silence.

"Much as they belong to anything 'sides themselves."

"Do you ever ride them?"

Jesse shook his head. "Pop adopted that herd from the gover'ment. S'pose ya could break 'em and make saddle horses outta 'em, but Pop liked the idea that they were out here runnin' free. They ain't got no earthly purpose, but he loved 'em."

"They're beautiful, but rather thin," Andy said. "Is there enough to eat out here? This grass looks a bit scrubby to me."

"Extra feed for the herd is part of the Silver Sage's budget," Jesse admitted, and tried to steer the subject away from finances. "'Bout the only thing they need is the one thing we cain't give 'em."

"What's that?"

"More room. Pop wanted the adjoining property, but the price was too steep." Jesse winced as the words came out of his mouth. Did everything lead back to money?

"A pity. One of the mustangs looked very pregnant."

"Yella Gal," Jesse said. "She'll be rounded up and brought in when she's about t' foal."

"You'd want a vet for that, I suppose."

Seeing that the conversation was going south in a hurry, Jesse fell back on a tried and true escape plan. Taking offense, he urged Sirocco to a trot and pulled ahead of Andy. His parting shot was delivered over his shoulder.

"I know it costs money, but Pop thought it was worth it."

Andy stared as the man moved farther and farther away. How could Honcho possibly have misinterpreted his words so badly? He'd only wanted to make sure the horses were cared for properly. Everything Andy said was taken the wrong way. Maybe he just didn't belong here. He couldn't even communicate with the natives.

"At least you understand me," Andy sighed, patting Easter's neck.

The gelding snorted and picked up the pace, eager to catch its stable-mate. Andy let the horse have its head and concentrated on staying in the saddle. That way, he didn't have time to brood about Mr. Jesse Haller.

Chapter Three

The real estate office was empty, even the most eager of the beavers fleeing to the relative coolness of the diner across the street, or the fast food joints out by the interstate. Only the boss had chosen to endure the hell that would reign until the air conditioner repairman deigned to show his face. Fanning herself with a sheaf of contracts, Addie listened to the impassive voice on the other end of the phone until it ground to a stop.

“Well, if you can’t do anything for me, then you can’t. It just surprises me, is all. A woman in your influential position. I’d imagine something like this would be a snap of your fingers, but don’t give it another thought, Claudine. I’ll just take you off my list of contacts.”

Addie held the squawking phone away from her ear while she counted to three and then spoke again. “Really? You can? You got no idea how much I appreciate that. You got my e-mail, don’t you, hon? Just shoot it on over and I’ll print it out myself. Thank you. You still partial to those chocolate covered macadamia nuts?”

Once again, Addie held the phone a few inches away, until Claudine stopped speaking, woman had no volume control. “You wouldn’t want to insult me by refusing my gift, would you? I don’t want to hear no more. You are getting a token of my thanks delivered to your office.”

Addie hung up and watched her inbox until the message from the county tax assessor’s office showed up. In seconds, she was holding all the information she needed on the old Peterson place. As she read, a slow smile curved her lips.

“Not this time, Larry,” she said.

The ranch hand looked up from mending fence as the sound of tires on gravel stopped behind him. An electric window whirled down.

“Howdy!”

The cowboy turned and squinted at the beefy blonde man behind the wheel of the cream colored Escalade. “Help ya?” he said.

“You know me, son?”

“Ever’body knows you. Little Larry Atchison. You own Atchison Real Estate, most a this here county, and you’re buyin’ up the rest fast as ya can, way I hear it.”

“You hear right. In fact, I come out here to look over that piece a land borderin’ the Silver Sage. Glad to see someone out here fixin’ that fence so’s those worthless nags don’t stray.”

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"A bullet between the eyes'd keep 'em from strayin'."

"You sound like a reasonable man," Larry said. "Would ya be interestin' in makin' a little extra cash? Nothin' illegal, just keep an eye out, like."

"I never say no t' cash on the barrelhead," the hand hinted, and Larry dove for his wallet.

A few twenties changed hands and Larry bought himself a spy at the Silver Sage, one in a perfect position to see what was going on with the adjoining property. No way in hell was his ex-wife going to snake this one out from under him.

"One last thing," the land baron said as he gave the cowboy his cell phone number. "Just 'cause my daddy was Big Larry don't mean I like bein' called Little Larry."

"I'll remember that," the man tipped his hat.

Pulling his gloves back on, the ranch hand took the pliers from his back pocket and went back to stretching wire. After a minute, Larry realized the meeting was over. Feeling a little foolish and not liking it, he assuaged his pride by slinging gravel as he drove away.

Milagra bustled from the kitchen to the patio and stopped beside the glass topped table.

"Buenos dias, senora," Andy said cheerfully.

"Why you no eat you breakfast?" she asked, though it was now one in the afternoon. "I make nice huevos with pico for you."

"I ate the tortillas, the avocados and the tomato chutney. Along with the melon, that's plenty of food for me."

"Chutney?"

"The chopped tomato with onion and bits of green stuff."

"Pico de gallo?"

"I'm sorry. What guy?"

"Ai, Dios mio!" Milagra said as she turned in exasperation.

"Wait, senora," Andy stood but his towel elected to stay on the chair.

Milagra's eyes dropped to his groin and she squeezed them shut, but not before she'd gotten an indelible impression of her employer's manhood. She said something under her breath of which Andy caught only one word that sounded like residual.

"What was that?" Andy asked as he wrapped the towel around his waist again.

"I say what a waste."

"The breakfast?"

Milagra blushed. "Si, the breakfast."

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“Why are you lying to me?”

“Lo siento,” Milagra said quickly. “I no say these things about you, senor, but some of the others...”

“What? What do they say?”

“They say you are maricon. You know this word? El picaflor.”

“I don’t understand,” Andy said, though he had a bad feeling he understood all too well.

“They say you gay,” Milagra mumbled.

Andy smiled at her. “It’s okay, Milagra,” he said. “I am gay, as it happens. It’s not like I can really hide it.”

Milagra looked scandalized and took the chair Andy pushed toward her. “You not a scared, or shamed, to say this?”

“Maybe I should be, but I can’t go through life hiding who I am. What kind of life would that be?”

“Pretty sad, I think. Better to be like you and take a chance.”

“Thank you. Gracias,” Andy said. “I’m glad to know you feel that way.”

Milagra smiled shyly. “I think I the only one, Senor Andy, but Jesus. He don’ care who you love. He just wan’ you to love.”

“That’s what I want too. I just haven’t found the right man.”

“No? You don’ think so?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“I see you look at Senor Jesse sometimes and you have a look on you face... I think you find you man, Senor Andy.”

“Milagra. Is Jesse... Sorry, I’ve no right to ask you that.”

“I tell you what I know about Senor Jesse. He is a good man, and a very lonely one.”

“Has he ever been married?”

“Why you don’ ask him?” Milagra said as she rose. “Give you something to talk about.”

Andy cocked his head. “It almost sounds as though you’re encouraging me to flirt with Honcho, senora.”

Milagra pursed her lips. “Would you like more tea, Senor Andy?”

“No, thank you. I think it’s time I got dressed, and I’ve been putting off a call back home.”

“Your family?”

Andy shook his head. “Uncle Adrian was my family. I planned to come and live him when I was through with school, but...” Andy sighed. “All those holidays when I could’ve visited and I chose to go skiing, or hiking, or...”

“Shhh,” Milagra whispered. “You couldn’ know.”

Andy looked up as she smoothed the stray curls back from his forehead. “You know why he left England to live in the middle of nowhere, don’t you?”

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Milagra nodded. "Papa Kelly was like you."

"Did anyone else know?"

"Maybe Senor Jesse, maybe no," she said, her tone becoming brisk. "I cannot answer you questions all day. I have work."

"Gracias, mucho gracias, senora."

"De nada," Milagra said as she moved off down the breezeway, chiding herself for meddling.

Jesse ducked out of sight until she passed by. Pop Kelly gay? Impossible. Jesse would have known. Pop would have told him.

Or would he? Being queer sure as hell didn't win you any popularity contests 'round these parts. Gay bashing was a leisure sport like horseshoes, or trout fishing. Why was it so hard to believe that the old man had kept his secret all those years? Hadn't Jesse been keeping one of his own for nearly as long?

Jesse tried not to think about how lonely Pop must have been, or the genuine sorrow in the kid's voice when he'd spoken of the old man. The urge to take Andy in his arms and comfort him was frightening in its intensity. It had got so bad, Jesse dreaded being around the greenhorn in public; unsure whether or not he could control it. It would only take one slip up to ruin him in this county.

Joe and Dolf met up to eat their lunch under a couple of scrubby trees. After a few minutes bitching about what a shitty, boring job it was mending fence, they wolfed down chicken wrapped in tortillas, sharing coffee from Joe's thermos. Dolf returned the favor, rolling two smokes and handing one to Joe.

"Sure like to have my own spread some day," Joe said, blowing smoke.

"And that right there is a purty piece a property."

Dolf picked a shred of tobacco off his lower lip before he answered.

"If ya say so. I ain't much for mountains. Like walls around the edge a the world. Make me antsy."

"Them mountains is miles and miles away," Joe said. "I happen t'know that piece a land's gonna be up for sale. Sure wish I had the cash."

"Who's it belong to now?"

"Family name a Peterson's had it for over a hundred years accordin' to my mama. They all died out though. Old Man Peterson rattled 'round that big ol' place all by himself for ten years after his wife died. None a the kids took t' ranchin'. They all moved off after high school. The granddaughter in Tucson's the one took him when he got so he couldn't do for hisself. Two weeks in a raisin ranch and he give up the ghost."

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“Fascinatin’,” Dolf said.

Joe flicked ashes at him. “Fuck you. That’s my dream, man.”

“Dyin’ in a old folk’s home?”

“Fuck you twice.”

Dolf grinned, as he cupped the crotch of his jeans. “Ooh, you’re gettin’ me hot.”

Joe ground out his cigarette, as he reached for the buttons of his fly with the other hand. There was no one around for miles, and his dick was getting harder by the second. He knew he wasn’t queer, but he couldn’t resist yanking it with Dolf. Pretty soon, there wouldn’t be a spot on the ranch they hadn’t christened.

Dolf tweaked the strawberry-shaped head that peeked over the waistband of his Levi’s, and Joe’s tongue circled his lips. Pulling his rigid shaft through the vent of his boxers, Joe stroked it slowly, unfolding the hood that protected the sensitive tip. Dolf let a glob of saliva fall from his lips to the head of his cock and took himself in hand.

Avoiding each other’s eyes, the two men followed the movements of scarred fingers pumping hard flesh. The harsh sun lancing through the leaves dappled their skin with light and shadow, winking off the rim of a watch, polishing a welling bead of pre-cum, casting straining muscles in stark relief. The only sounds were their panting breaths, the rustling of grasshoppers moving toward the shade, and the dry croak of a commuting crow.

Joe planted his boots and raised his ass from the ground, fucking his fist as Dolf got to his knees. Pumping his long shaft with one big hand, Dolf pinched his nipples with the other. Joe ruthlessly squashed the thought that the hard nubs would feel good between his teeth, and dropped his gaze back down.

Dolf groaned deep in his chest as he climaxed, spilling creaming liquid over his knuckles and flinging fat droplets to catch in his pubic thatch. Joe’s breath caught in his throat as his orgasm fell on him like an avalanche, leaving him stunned and breathless. Instead of buttoning up right away, he lay there staring up at the sky.

Seeing the ramrod was in no hurry to get back to work, Dolf twisted up another couple of smokes. Joe accepted with thanks and turned his dreamy gaze back to the piece of land on the other side of the fence.

“At least cover your pecker up,” Dolf said after a long companionable silence.

Joe smiled as he tucked himself in. “Feelin’ a little intimidated?”

Dolf snorted. “Hell no. It’s just that I ain’t queer, and got no interest in seein’ your limp noodle hangin’ out.”

“Betcha the new boss would, though.”

“You got that right. Tell ya what, Joe. Don’t know how long I can stand

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t' work for a queer."

"Ain't like he's askin' ya to suck his dick."

"Yeah, but ya see the way he parades around like his shit don't stink. Like it's okay to screw other guys and still walk around amongst decent folks. It ain't right."

"Come on, Dolf. The greenhorn ain't that bad. Didn't he let Honcho keep on runnin' things the way they was when Pop was here?"

Dolf shrugged. "S'pose so. Still sticks in my craw the way he sashays around bold as brass. Somebody oughta let him know he ain't in New York City anymore."

"He ain't from New York."

"Ya know what I mean."

"Yeah, reckon I do." Joe stood and gathered the remnants of their lunch. "Live and let live, I figger. Kells ain't hurtin' me and he signs my paycheck."

Dolf shrugged. "He's the boss, I guess. Don't mean I gotta like it."

"You don't seem t' like much a nothin'," Joe said, as he swung up into the saddle.

"I can think a one or two things," Dolf grinned, as he mounted up.

Joe laughed. "See ya at supertime," he said as he rode off.

Dolf waved and rode in the opposite direction.

"Watch it, greenhorn," Dolf said, as he brushed past Andy on his way out of the barn.

"Sorry, I wasn't looking."

"Keep your eyes up here, 'stead a on my crotch."

"I don't like your tone."

"And I don't like fags, so I guess we're even."

"Dolf," Honcho said, from behind Andy. "Ain't you got somewheres to be?"

Without a word, Dolf led his pony out and rode away. Andy turned angrily to Jesse.

"I can handle myself, you know."

"Nothin' t' handle," Jesse said. "The fellas just tease ya 'cause ya act a little fruity."

"Fruity? That's the word you choose?"

"All right, simmer down. Ya act kinda gay. That better?"

"There's nothing wrong with being gay, you know," Andy burst out. "My uncle was gay."

The bombshell didn't have quite the effect he intended.

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"I know," Jesse said calmly. "I overheard ya talkin' with Milagra."

"You do a lot of eavesdropping, don't you?"

Jesse smiled ruefully. "Reckon you're right. Never really thought about it. But we're talkin' 'bout Pop, not me."

Andy cursed silently and spun away from the foreman, as ready tears welled up. "Go away," he said in choked voice.

When Jesse didn't move, Andy turned back to him. "What are you looking at?" he spat.

"I'm lookin' at you, Colt," Jesse answered honestly.

"Why?"

Jesse thought about his answer. He'd been doing a lot of thinking lately: about Pop, about Andy, about himself and what he'd settled for. Did he really want to end up alone like the old man? Unable to make up his mind, he replied flippantly.

"Well, ya know how some folks say that smarts are inversely proportional to looks, meaning the purtier ya are--"

"The less intelligent you are," Andy finished for him. "Those are mighty big words, cowboy."

Jesse ignored the dig. "You're smart enough to know that you're right nice to look at. Kinda like a sunrise over the mountains, or them mustangs runnin' for the sheer hell of it."

Andy's jaw dropped. "Are you saying I'm beautiful?"

"I reckon I am," Jesse said. "It don't mean nothin'. You asked why I was lookin' at ya and I'm just statin' a fact."

"Well, that's all right, then. God forbid I should get the idea that you might like me."

Jesse heard the pain behind the sharp words and once again had to stifle the impulse to comfort the kid. What the hell had he been thinking: telling this vulnerable boy he was beautiful? Careful, Jesse, you're losin' what little grip ya still got on this bronc. Back off.

"Mind if I smoke?" Jesse said as he pulled his tobacco pouch from his breast pocket.

Andy looked around. "Let me think. We're outdoors. You're a grown man. I guess it's okay if you smoke."

"Didn't ask if I could smoke," Jesse drawled. "I asked if ya minded."

"You can smoke a whole plantation if you'll just leave me alone."

Jesse looked up at the young man as he ran his tongue across the cigarette paper and Andy felt a shock that traveled the length of his body. 'Not now,' he thought, as the cowboy finished rolling the smoke and stuck it between his lips. Again, the wave of electricity charged the cells of Andy's body, centering on his groin and throwing off sparks.

Jesse snapped a match with his thumbnail, and brought the flame to the

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tip of his hand-made, sucking on the end until it was lit. Andy swallowed hard and turned away, pretending an interest in what the horses were doing.

'This is just bloody marvelous,' the young man thought, wishing he'd worn roomier pants.

At first sight, Andy had thought Jesse the handsomest, sexiest man he'd ever seen, but told himself not to bother thinking about him. It wasn't possible that this tough-as-boot-leather cowpoke could be attracted to a city boy, or any boy.

However, the whole byplay with the hand-rolled cigarette seemed calculated to arouse, and whether or not it had been intentional, it was quite effective. Andy's cock was now taking up what little free space there was in his jeans. Cheeks flaming, he fidgeted around trying to hide the fact that he was aroused.

"Easy, Colt," Jesse said. "You're doin' fine. Don't worry about me, or the ranch hands; just keep on like you're goin' and you'll make a cowboy someday."

"Thanks, I was beginning to think I'd never fit in."

"Fit in?" Jesse said slowly. "I don't know 'bout that, but ya could carve out your own space here." The foreman paused for a moment before speaking again. "It's true that you're not like the folks hereabouts, but I'd hate to see ya change just so ya can fit in. Why would ya want to be like everyone else?"

"So they won't make fun of me."

Jesse's free hand settled on Andy's shoulder in wordless support. Just a friendly gesture, he told himself. It doesn't mean anything.

The warmth that radiated from the foreman's palm seemed much hotter than normal body temperature could account for and was spreading across Andy's skin. The urge to put his arms around Jesse's neck was well nigh overwhelming, but Andy controlled the impulse.

"Don't pay no mind to what folks say," Jesse advised. "There ain't nothin' wrong with you."

Andy turned in astonishment. He was very close to the other man, their faces inches apart.

"You don't have to humor me because I own the place," Andy said. "I know what you and the others think of me."

"That right? If I'd a known ya could read minds, I'd a kept a tighter rein on my thoughts," Jesse said.

"Don't patronize me. I'm not a child. If I were given half a chance..."

"Half a chance is about all you'll get in this life," Jesse interrupted.

"Hey, don't do that. Shitfire, boy! If any a the hands saw ya now, your worst fears'd come true."

"I'm sorry," Andy said helplessly, as tears ran down his cheeks. "I've

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never been able to control it. When I get really angry or upset the waterworks come on.”

Jesse took his bandanna from his back pocket and dabbed clumsily at the young man’s face before shoving the cloth into Andy’s hands.

“Look here, Colt,” he said brusquely. “Ya gotta cowboy up, understand? Change, if that’s what ya want, or be yourself, but do it with your whole heart, comprende? Ya cain’t just flit around and expect to be taken seriously. Bear down and you’ll get respect, guaranteed.”

Andy drew a long snuffling breath and straightened his shoulders.

“Ya gonna be okay now?” Jesse asked.

“Yeah. Thanks for not laughing at me.”

Clapping Andy on the shoulder, the foreman moved back, and whistled to his horse. Sirocco came to Jesse and the man reached into a saddlebag. Pulling out his old off-white hat, Jesse jammed it onto Andy’s head.

“There ya go, Colt,” he said. “Now you look like a cowpoke.”

Jesse swung up into the saddle and looked down at the young man. Dark hair curled out from under the cowboy hat as the boy gazed at him in gratitude. ‘God damn it,’ Jesse thought. ‘Why do you have to be so all-fired purty, Colt?’

For a minute there, Jesse had been afraid he would do something unforgivably stupid. The urge to take Andy in his arms and kiss the young man’s tears away was so strong that he had to move away from him. Now he was on horseback, he should be all right.

“Ya comin’?” he asked, in spite of his better judgment.

“Where are we going?”

“I promised ya a ride,” Jesse said. “Seems like a good time t’ me. Unless ya got somethin’ better to do?”

“No,” Andy said quickly. “A ride would be brilliant. Thanks, Jesse.”

Jesse’s heart gave an odd little stutter when he heard his name in that musical accent. Once more, the man admonished himself and resolved anew to resist the shameful feelings Andy roused in him. Maybe a long ride alone with the young man wasn’t the best idea, but Jesse had promised and he was a man of his word.

Chapter Four

Jesse reined Sirocco in and watched the boy ride for a few minutes. There was no denying it; the Englishman had taken to the saddle like he was born there. With a wry smile for life's little ironies, the foreman put heels to the stallion and caught up. Taking the lead, Jesse brought them to the river and rode south along the bank.

As the land rose, Andy gazed in wonder at the spectacular scenery: the impatient river, the sentinel evergreens, and the vast bowl of the sky as blue as Honcho's eyes. The young Englishman chided himself for the schoolgirl thought, and then spoiled it by letting his eyes dwell on the man's handsome profile as he looked up at the clouds.

Easter plodded along in Sirocco's wake, as content as his rider to follow their leader. The gentle gelding flapped his ears at a bothersome horsefly. The biting pest relocated, landing on the horse's broad rump. With a squeal, Easter reacted, crow-hopping into the edge of the water. Andy flew over the horse's head, still holding on to the reins.

Jesse turned and saw the greenhorn splash down in the swift-moving river. His heart stopped until Andy surfaced. His concern became humor as he saw the drowned rat state of the dandy's hair and clothes.

He laughed out loud when the kid pulled a foot free of the mud, leaving one of his designer boots behind. By the time Andy made it back to where Easter was waiting with equine patience, the young man had very little of his own left.

"I guess I must look pretty ridiculous," Andy said.

"I guess ya do at that," Jesse drawled. "Come on, Colt. Since you cain't git any wetter, I'll show ya my favorite swimmin' hole."

When Andy picked up the gelding's trailing reins and started walking, Jesse called quizzically after him. "What're ya doin', Colt? Get on your horse."

"I didn't want to get the saddle all wet and dirty," Andy said and looked perplexed when the man laughed again.

"It's a piece a tack, greenhorn," Jesse said. "It's gonna get dirty. When we get back I'll teach ya all about saddle soap."

Andy looked up at Jesse suspiciously, but the foreman had never played any of the dirty little tricks that the other hands seemed to delight in. Andy had never mentioned the practical jokes, the behind-the-back laughter, or the not so veiled allusions to his sexual preferences for two reasons.

Firstly, since he was, in fact, gay, he could hardly get upset when someone called him queer. Sure, it was boorish and tacky, but so were a lot of people.

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Secondly, Andy might be a lot of things, but he wasn't a tattletale.

Andy mounted up and followed the foreman, as the sound of thunder grew louder in their ears. Abruptly, they rode out from behind a screen of dark-skirted firs and saw the falls. Andy caught his breath at the majestic beauty of all those tons of water dropping straight down to crash against the rocks and splinter into crystal shards.

"It's somethin', ain't it," Jesse said. It wasn't a question.

Andy nodded. "It's magnificent. What's it called?"

"On the maps it's Hedley T. Lamarr Falls, but everybody around here calls it by its old name: Bridal Veil."

"How do we get down there?" Andy asked. "This mud is starting to dry on me."

Jesse smiled. "We ain't going down there. You wouldn't be able to stand up under that. I'm takin' us to a sort a baby falls."

A short while later, they drew rein at a spot that looked arranged by a Hollywood set designer for a movie about unicorns; a series of tiered falls that cascaded down a granite face to drop into a clear pool. Lacy shawls of foam wreathed the boulders wading in the chilly water. The pebbled shore gave way to a grassy band under the cottonwoods.

"Pull off Easter's bridle and let him wander a bit," Jesse said. "He won't go far."

Andy did as Jesse said, and Easter ambled over to a patch of grass where Sirocco was already munching happily. When the young man turned, the cowboy was unsnapping his shirt and pulling it off. Andy picked up his jaw and tried not to stare too obviously.

Jesse's skin was deeply tanned except for the silvery lines of old scars. His muscles were hard and lean, the kind developed through physical work in the out of doors, instead of at the gym. Andy admired the flat plates of the man's chest and had the sudden intense longing to follow the trail of crisp hair down his washboard belly to where it disappeared beneath his waistband.

"This really is not fair," Andy thought, as Jesse bent over to take off his boots, presenting the Brit with a superb view of his buttocks.

"Thought you were anxious to clean up," Jesse said as he straightened.

"I am," Andy replied, as the man's hands went to his belt buckle.

"Well, the water ain't gonna come to you, Colt."

"Oh... right," Andy said, frozen in place as Jesse's Levi's dropped to his ankles.

Honcho didn't believe in underwear, it seemed. Andy suffered a mild heart attack as Jesse stepped out of the jeans, throwing them over a branch with his shirt. The foreman turned and saw Andy still standing there. Before the young man knew what was happening, he was swept off his feet

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and into the water.

Andy surfaced, gasping for breath, shocked at how cold the water was. Jesse came up a couple of feet away, looking around for him.

"It's fucking cold," the boy said through chattering teeth.

"You'll get used to it," Jesse said, moving closer. "Let's get some of the mud out of your clothes, and then you can take 'em off."

Andy stood in the neck-deep water and tried not to groan as Jesse's hands moved on his body like a professional bodyguard's. The sweet torture seemed to go on forever before the man was satisfied that he'd done all he could to rid the garments of dirt.

"Best I can do," Jesse said to the flustered young man. "Give your clothes to Milagra soon as we get back and she'll finish gettin' 'em clean."

"Th-thanks," Andy said.

"Get your clothes off and swim around some," Jesse advised.

Again, Andy followed the foreman's suggestion without argument. Throwing his clothing onto the bank, he forced himself to move through the chilly water and soon raised his body temperature. Feeling livelier, Andy headed for the curtain of falling water.

Jesse watched Andy pull himself up onto the shelf of rock beneath the bottom cascade and silently thanked Easter for this opportunity. He knew it wasn't right to feast his eyes on the kid's sleek body, but he couldn't look away. Though the boy had gotten some sun, he was still pale and his smooth, wet skin glimmered like a mermaid glimpsed through the mist.

"Lord have mercy," the cowboy breathed, as the young man turned and gave him an unobstructed front view.

Despite the temperature of the water, Jesse's cock stirred and began to rise. This time he didn't turn and run away as fast as he could. He squelched his initial dismay, and rode out his anger and disgust. He was alone in the wilderness except for one person who was some distance away and not paying attention to him anyway. Feeling a bit like a criminal, the cowboy took hold of his shaft and stroked gently while he watched Andy bathe.

Jesse cursed under his breath when the object of his fantasy moved behind the screen of water, blocking his view. Wading closer, his straining erection bobbing before him, Jesse tried to see through the silvery curtain. He was at the ledge, when someone grabbed him from behind. Jesse jumped a foot and spun, fists at the ready.

Andy drew back, holding up his hands in a placatory gesture. "Sorry, I was just playing."

Jesse relaxed his posture. God, the kid had nearly given him a heart attack. He was so shaken; he forgot his state of arousal until he noticed the direction of Andy's stare. Given little choice, Jesse decided to brazen it out.

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“Sassy sumbitch, ain’t he?” the foreman said.

“Mind of his own, just like my willie,” Andy said, as casually as he could manage.

The young man’s heart was pounding so hard, he was afraid it would drown out the waterfall. He kept his hands under the surface to hide the fact that they were shaking. Being in such close proximity to Honcho with a hard on had a powerful effect on him. He could almost feel its heat from where he stood and had to exercise rigid control to keep from going to his knees and worshiping that gloriously stiff column of flesh.

“Boss?” Jesse said. “You okay?”

“What? Oh, sorry I... lost my mind for a minute. I’m okay now. I just...”

Andy’s words trailed off as the man lifted himself to sit on the granite shelf with legs spread wide. Far from abating, Jesse’s arousal seemed to have grown longer and harder since he’d first looked at it. Half a dozen schemes for “accidentally” getting his hands on that firm flesh flashed through the young man’s mind.

“Come on,” Jesse said with a gesture. “Have a look behind the falls.”

Andy had stepped behind the sheet of water for just a moment as he sneaked up on the man, but he didn’t say so. Instead, he took the proffered hand and let the cowboy haul him up onto the ledge. For a split second, he had the irrational fear that contact with Jesse’s skin would electrocute him, and then he was standing on the shelf beside the man.

As fate would have it, Andy’s foot slipped on the wet rock, and he started to fall backward. Jesse saved him by the simple ploy of flinging his arms around the young man.

Both men froze in place, wet flesh pressed together, their erections touching. Jesse shivered in reaction to the contradictory urges warring inside him. He knew he should push the other man away, but his arms would not let go.

A brightly limned mental image of himself astride the Brit, riding the willowy young man in pursuit of their mutual pleasure made Jesse’s shaft twitch against Andy’s lower belly. Andy moaned involuntarily as the hard heat pulsed against his skin. He longed to wrap his fingers around it and guide it to the spot that yearned to shelter it. He didn’t care about lack of foreplay, lubricants or mattresses. He wanted the cowboy inside him. Now.

The soft sound Andy made triggered something in Jesse. He had to hear that fascinating noise again. Ignoring the clamoring of the small interior voice that told him he was being nine kinds of fool, Jesse tried an experiment. Cautiously, he moved his hips in the mere suggestion of a thrust and was rewarded by the young man’s whimper of helpless need.

“It’s all right,” Andy murmured softly in the man’s ear. “You can do what you like. I’ll never tell a soul.”

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Sure that any vaguely aggressive move would spook Honcho, Andy stood in the misty spray and let the cowboy explore his body. Jesse was tentative at first, but gained confidence as he realized that there was no one here to point a finger. In one of the bravest decisions of his life, Jesse gave himself permission to continue.

The fantasy-perfect setting, his recent sexual drought and the feel of Honcho's hands on his body conspired to bring Andy to a highly aroused state very quickly. When Jesse finally got up the courage to investigate the young man's crotch, Andy cried out with pleasure at the first timid touch. Greatly encouraged, Jesse took a firm grip on the other man's erection and pulled gently.

Andy nearly went to his knees. Only Jesse's arm around his back kept him on his feet. Jesse squeezed harder, and Andy moaned in his ear.

"You like that, do you, Colt?" Jesse asked. "How 'bout this?"

Andy moaned louder as the man stroked him faster.

"I'll be damned," Jesse said in soft surprise. "You like the same things I like."

Andy clung to the man's neck as callused fingers fondled his taut shaft, eagerly watching for his reactions. The cowboy pumped the young man's rod rhythmically, pressing the thick vein on its underside, flicking his thumb over the swollen head, until Andy could do little more than lean bonelessly against him.

Jesse's caresses grew surer, guided by the volume and frequency of the soft sounds his partner made. It was akin to the glorious feeling of riding Sirocco, knowing he was in control of all that power, grace and beauty.

"Wait," Andy said breathlessly, feeling his release swell inside him. "Let me..."

His words were cut off by the intense orgasm that bloomed in his groin and sent a devastating shock wave radiating through every part of him. Jesse looked surprised when warm liquid spilled over his cold fingers, and then let go of the spurting cock as though it were red hot. He stepped back into the icy falls, his eyes wide.

Andy fell back against the granite wall, panting and trembling in the throes of an intense climax. Jesse's horrified stare fell on the slender limbs splayed against the dark rock, the wet hair catching on the rough stone, the lovely face transfigured by bliss and his heart tore open. He could not love this man but he did. Unable to cope with the contradiction, Jesse tore his gaze away and plunged into the pounding water.

Chapter Five

“Honcho!” Andy called over the roar of the waterfall.

There was no answer.

Andy leaned against the stone and tried to collect himself. It wasn’t easy. He was still vibrating from the force of that climax, and he was confused by Jesse’s abrupt departure. The cowboy had seemed to shed his inhibitions, but then he had run away.

Andy groaned as he pushed away from the wet rock face. Things were just getting interesting, too, since it was Andy’s turn to pleasure Jesse. Now that he thought about it, Andy was more than a bit peeved at the way things had played out.

The cowboy had gotten a first class feel but hadn’t allowed Andy to put so much as a finger on him. On the surface, it seemed generous, but it wasn’t. Andy was sorry now that he had remained passive and let Honcho use him like the object of an experiment.

A wave of something akin to sadness swept through the young man. Was that all there was going to be between them? Nothing more than a frantic, pulse-pounding hand job that neither would ever mention? Andy would have to leave Silver Sage Ranch. He couldn’t be around Jesse day after day with this festering between them. He would go mad.

And just what right did Honcho have to panic? Surely the man knew what to expect if you stimulated an excited penis long enough. It was absurd. The foreman was going to have to come up with a damned good reason for leaving Andy feeling like this. With his violated sense of fair play giving him courage, the young man went in search of the cowboy.

He didn’t have to look far. Jesse was hauling himself up on the bank, muscular back and buttocks gleaming wetly. Andy’s tongue came out to lick at his lips as he watched the man stand up and shake excess water from his hair. God, Honcho was one sexy, beautiful man, definitely worth fighting for. Taking a deep breath, Andy called out.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

Jesse turned, his face mirroring his surprise. “I’m gonna dry off and get dressed.”

“The fuck you are,” Andy dove from the ledge and swam for the shore.

Jesse watched him come in a kind of trance of dread. He wanted Andy to come to him and he wanted Andy to stay away. Frozen in place by his indecision, the cowboy watched the young man wade to shore and approach him. Even in his apprehension, Jesse could not help admiring the lithe body that moved so effortlessly toward him.

“How dare you!” Andy burst out, as he approached.

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The blank look on the cowboy's face infuriated the young man even further.

"How dare you," he repeated. "Have you even the first clue how wrong what you did was?"

Jesse regained some equilibrium and spoke with an ease he certainly didn't feel. "Gimme a minute to figger out that last sentence, Colt," he drawled.

"Figure this out," Andy said, taking a swing at the man's jaw.

Jesse sidestepped the punch easily, and Andy swung again. The foreman blocked the young man's blow, immobilizing his arm. Andy lost his temper completely, thrashing and clawing like a wild cat to break the man's hold. Jesse held on, containing the furious Brit until the storm blew itself out.

"I'm sorry, Colt," Jesse said, resisting the instinct to stroke the wet curls.

"Th-that's n-not good e-enough," Andy stammered, leaning against the foreman's strength.

"It's all I got," the man said.

"Why? Why would you do such a thing if you've no intention of..." Andy's voice trailed off into sobs.

Against his better judgment, Jesse held the boy close and murmured in his ear. "I had to," he said. "I couldn't stop once I touched ya. I know it was wrong and I'll never touch ya like that again. That's a promise."

"No. Please don't say that. I want your touch. I want you. Why can't you just admit that you want me, too?"

"It ain't that easy, Colt. Round here, if ya ain't tough as nails and sharp as barb-wire, ya ain't a man. And if ya ain't a man, ya ain't nothin'."

"That's just stupid," Andy said, his tears subsiding.

"Thanks for remindin' me," Jesse said. "I forgot t' add dumb as dirt t' the list a macho qualities."

"Don't you dare try to make me laugh," Andy warned. "Can we at least talk about this?"

"If ya want to," the man said. "I'd just as soon forget the whole thing."

"Well you're not the only one involved here, Mr. Honcho," Andy said. "And since you violated me..."

"Whoa there," Jesse said. "Violated?"

"What would you call it?"

"I may be stupid but it sure seemed to me that you enjoyed it."

"Well obviously I enjoyed it. To a point. The orgasm was great, thank you very much, but being left cold and alone afterward wasn't exactly breakfast in bed."

"I don't know what t' say. I got carried away and then I come t' my senses. I realized I was standin' there naked in broad daylight pullin' on some guy's tallywhacker. I ain't gay, boy, and this stuff; well it kinda... scares

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me.”

Andy pulled back until he could see the man’s face. “Scared? You?” he said incredulously.

“Yeah, scared. Scared a the way ya make me feel. I swore I’d never let ya get this close t’ me, ‘cause I was afraid a what might happen. Damned if I wasn’t dead on the money.”

“But why? I mean I understand that you wouldn’t want everyone to know about it. The guys who work for you would never let you live it down, but this isn’t the only job in the world and they aren’t the only ranch hands looking for work. No problem is insurmountable. If you want to solve it, that is. Do you want to solve it, Honcho?”

“Stop it,” Jesse said. “Just stop, please. Don’t mix my head up like that. Havin’ sex with another man is wrong, no matter how ya slice it.”

“Is that really how you feel? Or is that how someone told you that you should feel? I never had to go through what you’re going through, thanks to my liberal mum, but I have plenty of friends who did. Your feelings aren’t wrong just because someone says they are. Did what we just did really feel evil to you?”

Jesse shook his head. “Nope,” he said slowly. “It was so powerful that it scared the shit outta me, but it didn’t ‘zactly feel wrong. I’m sorry.”

“If you apologize one more time...” Andy threatened.

“What’ll ya do, Colt?”

“This.” Andy boldly reached out and grasped Jesse’s still prominent erection.

Jesse gasped. “Don’t,” he said softly.

Andy ignored him, tugging gently on his arousal, leading him back to the water.

“Cut it out, now. I ain’t kiddin’.”

Jesse’s voice broke off in mid-sentence as slim fingers fondled his aching hard on. They felt better than anything should, caressing his length with deft confidence, coaxing him to drop his guard completely. His foot splashed into the cold water and he stopped dead.

“Come on,” Andy said. “Come back to the waterfall. No one can see us and you have to let me have my turn. It’s only fair.”

It was all the excuse Jesse needed. Gritting his teeth, the cowboy followed Andy into the river and back to the falls.

“Sit on the ledge,” Andy said, pulling up until his elbows rested on the lip of the rock shelf while his lower half remained in the water. “Right here in front of me. Excellent. Now, spread those legs for me, Honcho.”

“Are ya havin’ fun, Colt?” Jesse said wryly.

Andy looked up, eyes black as sin in the diffuse light behind the falls. Slowly, dimples formed in his cheeks as he lowered his mouth toward the

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upstanding rod. Holding the cowboy's gaze, he closed his lips around the head of the rosy shaft. Eagerly, he engulfed as much of the length as he could before Honcho's hands on his shoulders stopped him.

Jesse took several deep breaths to keep from hyperventilating. He'd gotten blowjobs before, but they hadn't felt anything like this. He had the urge to check around for winged beings with harps. Surely, nothing this side of heaven could feel so good.

The cowboy opened his eyes and looked at the man that accepted him without reservation and awaited his pleasure so patiently. How often did someone like Andy walk into your life and offer him or herself to you. He would have to be crazy to refuse anyone so caring, beautiful, and intelligent just because they were the same sex.

What was wrong with him? Why did he care what others thought? Why couldn't he take what he wanted without guilt? Suddenly, all these questions seemed irrelevant to Jesse. He was here now. Andy's touch felt good and right. More than that, it felt amazing, incredible, indescribable. Andy was right: this wasn't evil, and even if it was, he didn't think he cared anymore. He was so tired of facing the world alone.

Andy felt the man relax and enveloped his hard length to its base. Jesse groaned and leaned back, awash in new sensations as Andy caressed the insides of his thighs, head bobbing on the straining shaft. While Jesse twisted and trembled, the young man licked, sucked and nibbled at his arousal, arousing him to a fever pitch.

Clutching the sides of Andy's head, the man spoke breathlessly. "Have mercy, Colt. You're liable to make me pop my cork."

Andy relinquished the pulsing cock long enough to answer. "That's usually how this ends," he said. "However, I have other plans for Little Honcho."

Jesse recovered his breath while Andy got out of the water and climbed up beside him.

"I want you to make love to me," Andy said frankly. "I know you probably haven't done this with a man before, but I hope you're willing to give it a try."

Jesse licked his lips nervously. All his doubts and prejudices rose up like barricades. Determinedly, he swept them aside and nodded.

"What do I do?" he asked.

"Don't worry about a thing," the young man said. "I'm going to be as patient as you were when you taught me how to ride." Andy reached out. "Stand up," he said.

Jesse rose and faced Andy. Without prompting, he took the willowy body in his arms and hugged fiercely. Andy's skin was cool from the water and Jesse gave in to the impulse to warm him up. The cowboy ran his hands

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and lips over the chilled flesh as the boy shivered. When Andy tried to reciprocate, the man jumped nervously.

"You're going to have to let me touch you eventually," Andy said. "I won't hurt you; I promise."

Jesse leaned his forehead against Andy's. "Sorry, Colt. Don't know why I'm so skittish. Always have been, even with the ladies. Not that there's been many."

"Are you ticklish?"

"Not so's you'd notice. I just get antsy. My stomach goes all topsy-turvy and I want to run."

Andy bit his lip. "I'm not a psychiatrist," he said, "but it sounds like something might've happened to you before you were old enough to understand it."

Jesse's eyebrows went up. "Ya think so? I was given up for adoption when I was born and I was raised in a foster home with a bunch a other little hellions."

Andy's heart ached for the little blonde, blue-eyed boy that nobody wanted and his arms went around the man. Jesse surrendered to the warmth and sympathy that radiated from Andy and let himself be comforted. After a few moments, the close proximity of the Englishman's body worked its crude magic, and Jesse relaxed enough to regain interest in more sensual touching.

Andy smiled to himself as he felt the callused hands slide down his back to cup his buttocks. He sighed when the man pulled him closer and he felt the hard ridge of Honcho's resurrected erection against his belly. Drawing back, he looked deeply into the cowboy's summer sky eyes.

"This is it, cowpoke. You have to ask yourself, can I stick my cock in another man for the purposes of mutual pleasure? Well... can you?"

"Part a me's convinced," Jesse smiled, casting a glance downward. Then he sobered, as he met Andy's eyes again. "Here's what's botherin' me, Colt. I don't know how to say this without soundin' like I'm braggin', but I'm lookin' at Little Honcho and thinkin' 'bout the size a the place ya want me to stick 'im and... well... I'm afraid I'll hurt ya."

Andy forwent his usual teasing tone; Honcho was serious. "I won't lie to you," he said. "For me, there will be some pain, but the pleasure far outweighs it."

"If that's true, I'll be happy to oblige," Jesse said. "One condition."

"Anything," Andy said.

"You put your cock in me first," Jesse said. "If it's like ya say, then I'll ride ya into a lather. Deal?"

Andy slanted an eyebrow at the man. "You really are one-of-a-kind," he said. "All right, we'll do it your way. I've never actually had the urge to top,

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but I'd wear a dress and heels for you, if you asked nicely, so I guess I can do this."

"So, what now?" Jesse asked.

"I sure wish we had something better than spit for lube," Andy said.

"Well, we don't," Jesse said as he knelt.

Andy looked down in surprise and the cowboy smiled.

"Hey, I just had a first rate demonstration. I think I know what to do," Jesse said. "Course I could just spit on your pecker, if that's what ya want."

"You're not nearly as nervous as I thought you'd be," Andy observed as the man gripped his arousal.

"I've had a lot a practice acting tough," the cowboy answered.

"Acting my ass," Andy said. "You're the toughest..."

The young man's words stopped in mid-sentence as Jesse took him in his mouth. Andy threaded his fingers through the man's shaggy sun-bleached hair, and shifted his feet farther apart. With touching diligence, Jesse duplicated the acts Andy had performed on him, and then began to improvise.

"Ah, God, stop!" Andy exclaimed.

Jesse moved back as though the young man had struck him. "I'm sorry," he said quickly.

"You did nothing wrong," Andy said, palming the man's hair. "I was just getting a bit too excited and I'm not ready to come yet."

Jesse relaxed. "Then let's get on with it, Colt," he said.

"Okay, tough guy," Andy said mock-gruffly, backing Jesse up against a moss covered boulder. "Lean back and try to stay relaxed."

Jesse lay back against the moss and ferns spangled with crystal droplets as Andy went to his knees and nudged the cowboy's legs farther apart. Putting two fingers in his mouth, Andy wet them thoroughly. Jesse watched in fascination, his erection growing even harder as the young man sucked his fingers and pulled them slowly from his mouth.

"I'm going to put my fingers inside you first," Andy said. "Just relax and let me open you up a bit. I want to make this as easy as I can for you."

"I know, Colt," Jesse said. "Do what ya need to."

Gently, Andy eased a finger into the virgin opening, giving Jesse plenty of time to get used to the intrusion before pulling back out. Looking into the man's eyes, Andy slid two fingers into him. Jesse drew in a harsh breath, and tensed. Andy waited a moment and then began to rub his fingers delicately against every surface of the tight channel.

Jesse gasped again, this time in surprise. His eyes closed and his mouth hung open as knee-trembling waves of pleasure coursed through him. Sagging back against the boulder, he hung on for dear life as the ripples of bliss mounted in strength.

"Do you like this, Honcho?" Andy said softly.

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Jesse moaned loudly and Andy smiled.

"That's okay, cowboy," the young man said, "You don't have to talk; you're the strong, silent type."

Andy withdrew his fingers and spat again, slicking the head of his arousal. Tenderly, he placed the tip against Jesse's opening and eased forward. Jesse reminded himself to relax and kept his eyes on Andy's face as the young man pushed into him. He felt a great sense of pressure, like having a tooth pulled, that got worse as it continued. Jesse was close to crying uncle when Andy stopped moving.

"You okay?" Andy asked, stroking the man's wet hair.

"Hell, I get hurt worse than this at least twice a day on the ranch," Jesse said in a strained voice. "What're ya waitin' for?"

"Tough guy," Andy said tenderly, as he began to withdraw.

Jesse held his breath, and then let it out in a grunt when Andy drove back into him. The young man lifted his brows inquiringly, but the cowboy shook his head and urged him on. Andy moved slowly, schooling himself to gentleness, though the tight heat of the untried passage was driving him crazy. As he'd said, he preferred to be on the receiving end, but this felt amazing.

It occurred to the young man as he thrust delicately that he must love Jesse Haller, or he wouldn't be willing to go to so much trouble to win the man. It certainly wasn't the normal state of affairs for Andy, which generally consisted of someone becoming obsessed with his looks and pursuing him relentlessly.

Jesse groaned and moved restlessly against the wet rock. "God damn," he gasped. "That feels... Stills hurts a mite, but..."

Andy rocked his hips subtly and Jesse's voice trailed off in another deep groan. Andy took hold of Jesse's arousal and pumped it slowly. The cowboy's body took the hint, his pelvis lifting instinctively in an abbreviated thrusting motion. Andy smiled fondly as Honcho made love to his fist and another epiphany bloomed within.

There was nothing Andy would not do for this man and that insight extended far beyond mere physical love. Abruptly, Andy was sure he knew just how scared Honcho felt as the realization crystallized that this was much more than just a very good time.

Andy stilled and abruptly darted his head forward, claiming a kiss from this remarkable man. Jesse wrapped his arms around the boy, returning both embrace and kiss with equal fire and sincerity. They clung together for a long moment before Jesse spoke.

"You've proved your point," Jesse murmured. "Gettin' poked can feel purty damn good."

Andy gave a surprised little laugh, and then sobered. "I'm going to pull

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out now, okay?”

“That’d be nice,” Jesse answered.

“Are you all right?” Andy asked in concern as he carefully disengaged.

“Right as rain, Colt,” the cowboy said. “But you’ll have to excuse me if it ain’t my cup a whiskey. Hope that ain’t a problem.”

Andy shook his head, eyes shining, and Jesse’s heart swelled until his ribs creaked. He might as well own up to it. He loved this odd boy and the urge to thrust his hard flesh into him until they were both satisfied could not be denied.

“Okay, then,” Jesse grinned. “Let’s you and me go for a ride, Colt.”

Chapter Six

Andy made a small, startled noise when Honcho grabbed hold of him and crushed him in strong arms. Cold water pelted down on his scalp and shoulders as the man bent him backward into the edge of the falls. The sensation took his breath away for a moment and then the cowboy's warm lips covered his.

A hot liquid pulse flooded Andy's lower belly and washed through his whole body. He was a living flame encased in a shell of chilled flesh. Jesse's hands on his body felt like brands claiming him for all time.

Jesse reveled in the smooth flesh that responded so eagerly to his touch. He thrust his tongue into the boy's soft mouth in preview of what his cock would do in Andy's lower opening. Andy returned the cowboy's ardor, slim fingers caressing every part of the man's muscular body that they could reach.

"Now!" Andy shouted over the pounding of the waterfall. "I can't wait any longer to feel you inside me."

Jesse lowered him to his back on the mossy rock. Andy spread his legs in unabashed invitation.

"Come on," he insisted. "Now. Here. Just do it."

Leaning forward, Andy spat in his hand and unselfconsciously used the saliva to lubricate himself. Pulling Jesse toward him by the hips, he hooked a long leg around the man's waist. He grasped the cowboy's rigid rod and seated the tip.

Jesse took over at that point. Gripping his arousal, he eased the head into the spit shiny opening. As soon as he entered Andy, Jesse knew life would never be the same. This might be wrong, and it might cost him dear, but he wanted it, needed it, couldn't live without it.

"That's good," Andy whispered in a strained voice. "Don't stop, Honcho."

Jesse put an arm around Andy's back and held him securely as he sank down into the welcoming heat. When he was sheathed, he looked up into Andy's eyes.

"There. That wasn't so hard now was it?" Andy asked.

"I don't know, Colt. Feels pretty hard to me. In fact, I don't think it's ever been harder."

"I love you, Honcho."

The words slipped out quite naturally, but Andy was horrified, certain he'd ruined everything. He was afraid to meet the man's eyes again.

"Reckon I love you too, greenhorn," the cowboy drawled.

The joy that swelled Andy's heart was so huge that he had to let it out as

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a yell. Jesse grinned at the liberated sound and let out a whoop of his own. The lovers laughed, fused at the groin and at the heart, the two gladdest beings alive. Then the cowboy moved his hips.

"Oh my God!" Andy exclaimed as a bolt of pure bliss blasted through him.

Jesse moved again, and Andy yelped his approval of the action. Cupping the firm ass in his hands, the cowboy rocked up into the tight heat that contrasted so vividly with the chill of the snowmelt. Andy's eyes rolled up and his head fell back as the big cock rubbed relentlessly against his sweet spot. There was no fumbling, no adjusting; Jesse's shaft was a perfect fit, stimulating all the right areas effortlessly.

Andy moaned mindlessly, as the thrusting cock elicited ever stronger waves of pleasure, rousing him to greater heights. The feel of the man's lips, teeth and tongue on his nipples kindled new blazes to add to the wildfire that raged out of control. No one in his varied sexual career had excited him to such a degree.

Jesse lifted Andy's calf to his shoulder, wrapping an arm around his thigh. Andy wrapped his other leg around the cowboy's waist as Jesse adjusted his stance and resumed his rocking stroke. Seeing a gleam in front of his face, the cowboy took the nipple ring between his teeth and tugged gently.

Andy's cry of pleasure echoed off the damp rock, competing with the roar of the falls. His fingers dug into the hard muscles of Honcho's shoulders as he bore down on the rigid length that stretched him so agreeably. Jesse paused and then thrust again to the new rhythm set by his lover.

"Oh my god, Honcho," Andy panted. "This feels too good. I'm afraid I'm going to have a heart attack if I don't come soon."

"You wanna come, Colt?"

"I don't know what I want. Ah, God, I can't think when you do that."

"When I do what? This?" Jesse pulled on the nipple ring.

"Ungh! Oh, oh, oh, yes, that!"

"You sure it ain't this?" Jesse rolled his hips, eliciting a deep groan from his lover.

"You're driving me mad, cowboy."

"Happy to oblige, Colt. You want some more a this?"

Andy moaned mindlessly as Jesse stimulated as many erogenous zones as he could reach. The boy's arousal was at a fever pitch of twitching limbs and ardent, incoherent babbling. Jesse was delighted by the effect he had and eagerly tested the limits of his influence.

"Oh, oh, oh God, don't stop!" Andy shouted. "Oh, oh Honcho, yes, that's it, oh God, that is so sweet, I'm going to come. Oh, oh, oh yes. Honcho!"

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Andy's straining cock erupted, molten seed lost in the flying spray, as he shuddered in the throes of a devastating climax. Jesse was a little surprised that Andy had come without touching his pecker, but he didn't really know all that much about making love to a man.

"Was that good?" Jesse asked, just to be sure.

"Was what good?" Andy murmured in the cowboy's ear. "Did you get the license plate of the truck that hit me?"

Jesse chuckled. "I'm going to let you down now, Colt. I'd stay like this forever, but my legs are giving out."

Andy was immediately contrite. "My poor Honcho," he said, lowering a long leg to the wet stone. "Holding me up all that time. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Jesse said. "I was kinda enjoyin' it. Though I do have to say that for a cuss that ain't any bigger 'round than a minute, you're mighty solid."

"Thanks... I think," Andy said.

Jesse chuckled. "It was meant as a compliment."

"Thanks, but you haven't come yet. Is there something I could do to help?" The boy's voice, low and scratchy with satiety, trailed off suggestively.

"God's honest truth, Colt, to get me excited all ya have to do is show up."

Andy turned and bent gracefully from the waist, bracing his hands against the fern-bedecked boulder. He looked at Jesse over his shoulder, giving the man a stare that should have made the waterfall boil away into steam. The cowboy's cock twitched, yearning toward the boy's exposed opening. It took all his willpower not to grab Andy and plunge his rigid length deep into the young man's sultry heat.

"No," he heard himself say. As surprised as Jesse was at his sudden boldness in this area, he spoke his wishes firmly. "I wanna see your purty face while I'm inside ya."

An electric tingle of sheer erotic pleasure buzzed along Andy's spine to his light up his groin. The man's words made him moan as though they were fingers stroking his cock. The pithy statement of desire was the most sensual thing that had ever caressed Andy's ears.

"How do you want me?" he asked softly.

"Come 'ere, darlin'," the cowboy said.

Andy twined his arms around the man's neck as Jesse strode through the falls and into the river. Reaching the bank, the cowboy carried his lover to where his stallion waited. Lifting Andy to the steed's bare back, Jesse swung aboard atop him. With a minimum of fuss, the cowboy mounted again, easing his ready rod into Andy's sheath.

With Honcho's arm around his lower back, Andy relaxed against the horse's neck. Lifting his legs over the man's thighs, he braced the soles of his feet against Sirocco's powerful haunches. Jesse clucked to the stallion, and the horse ambled forward.

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Andy gasped as the motion of the animal's gait moved the big cock in his passage. His eyes melted into pools of bittersweet chocolate at the exquisite sensation. His fingers kneaded mindlessly at the man's muscular thighs as the gentle rocking drove him into a frenzy of carnal pleasure.

Jesse watched the boy's lovely eyes go dewy as Andy surrendered to the feelings his lover invoked. The knowledge that he had driven this beautiful creature to the limits of physical passion triggered the cowboy's release. Reaching for his lover's renewed erection, Jesse touched his heels to the stallion's flanks.

Sirocco picked up his feet, driving Honcho's big cock deep into Andy. The young man wailed in wanton abandon as the thick rod dragged across his pleasure zone and callused fingers stroked his yearning arousal. Abruptly, Andy rose with fluid grace to capture Honcho's lips, driving his tongue into the cowboy's mouth.

Jesse came explosively, wedged in the velvet vise that clenched convulsively on his spurting organ. Black spots danced before his eyes as he panted raggedly into Andy's open mouth. The boy's cock pulsed in the cowboy's fist as Andy came yet again.

"Whoa, big fella," Jesse whispered, and Sirocco came to a halt.

Andy could do little more than cling to the man as the aftershocks of his climax reverberated through his body. Jesse buried his face in the curve of the damp neck, holding the precious body as close as he could. Several long minutes passed before either spoke in words.

"Easy there, Colt," Jesse said, carefully disengaging.

Andy groaned at the loss of the man's wilting length and Jesse smiled fondly. The cowboy slid to the ground and held out his arms to catch Andy. Andy dropped into Jesse's embrace, and stole another kiss.

"You've ruined me, greenhorn," the cowboy said wryly.

"Mmmmm," Andy purred against the man's neck. "If this is ruination, I want to wallow in it. Mmm, you taste good."

"Andy?"

The boy sobered at the sound of his name on the cowboy's lips. Honcho always called him "Mr. Kells" or, more recently, "Colt."

"What is it, Honcho?"

"You know that we can't be like this unless we're alone, right?"

Andy did know it, but it saddened him, nonetheless. "Right," he answered. "I hope we can find lots of reasons to be alone, though."

"I'll work on that. Thanks for not bein' contrary."

"I love you," Andy said simply. "I won't lie and say that I like hiding my love for you, but if this is the only way I can have you, then I'll take it."

"Then whatta ya say to a quick swim and a gallop back to the ranch?"

"Last one in is a..." Andy's challenge ended in a shout of outrage as

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Jesse raced past him and dove into the river first.

Jesse and Andy drew rein behind the stable. The foreman looked quickly around, and then leaned in his saddle to kiss the boy briefly, but tenderly.

“Go on and put Easter away,” Jesse said. “I need to ride over and check on the dippin’.”

Andy raised his eyebrows. “Dipping?”

“We dip the livestock in a solution that kills parasites, like ticks and fleas,” Jesse explained.

“Ewww. Go ahead. I’ll just put Easter away.”

Jesse smiled fondly and shook his head. “I’m nine kinds a fool,” he said, “but I can’t help lovin’ ya. Damned if ya still ain’t the cutest thing I ever did see.”

Andy cocked his head. “Same goes for you,” he said.

“I’ll never win with ya, will I, Colt?” the man said wryly.

“I don’t know why you’d want to try, Honcho,” the young man said.

“You’ve already got me.”

The cowboy turned quickly away and kicked the stallion to a trot. Andy watched him go, amused by how uncomfortable the man was with displays of emotion. The boy smiled as he dismounted. He’d soon accustom Honcho to affection.

‘At least, when you’re alone,’ whispered a dry voice in his mind. Andy sobered and led Easter into the stable.

“Looks like Honcho’s sweet on you, boss man.”

Andy looked up and saw Dolf mucking out stalls.

“What does that mean?”

Dolf grinned and pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. “I heard two horses stop out back and I looked through a crack in the boards. What do ya suppose I saw?”

“I don’t listen to the gossip of peeping toms,” Andy said.

“You’ll never guess in a million years.”

“I don’t care what you saw,” Andy said, moving toward an open stall.

“I think ya do. I saw Mr. Jesse Haller, the Marlboro Man, Mr. Macho himself, kissin’ another guy. A guy that looked a lot like you.”

“Maybe you thought you saw that,” Andy said.

Dolf sneered. “Give it up, greenhorn. You’re busted. I can’t wait to tell Joe and the boys.”

“Don’t,” Andy said too quickly.

“Why not?”

“It would kill Honcho.”

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"He shoulda thought a that before he started pokin' boys."

"It's not like that," Andy began, before Dolf cut him off.

"No, I'm sure the two a ya are in gay love or whatever, but I don't give a flyin' fuck. If ya want me to keep my mouth shut, it's gonna cost ya."

"How much?"

"You think all I want is money? Oh no, I want some of what Jesse's gettin'."

Andy was stunned. "You're gay?" he blurted out.

"Hell no, I ain't gay. You don't gotta be queer to enjoy a good blowjob." Dolf cocked an eyebrow. "I assume ya give good head. I can't think a any other reason Honcho would honey up to ya. Now, come on, purty boy. On your knees."

"No way."

"I'll let ya think about it, greenhorn," Dolf said. "Ya got until this time tomorrow."

"You have my answer. It's not going to change."

"We'll see," Dolf said confidently as he walked away.

Andy rested his forehead against Easter's warm neck. This went far beyond hazing. What was he going to do?

"Senor Jesse!" Milagra said, as she entered the big kitchen.

"Don't mind me," Jesse said.

"I go home now. I just come in one last time, you know, make sure all is okay."

"Buenos noches, senora."

Milagra looked doubtfully at the sandwich makings on the butcher block. "I can cook you something."

"This'll do me. Don't let me keep ya."

"Senor Jesse?"

"Yep?"

"You look like you have a good day."

"Matter a fact, I did. Might come t' regret it, but right now I wouldn't trade it for the keys to the Pearly Gates."

"Good. I worry about you since Papa Kelly gone. A man should not be alone so much."

"I'm workin' on that," Jesse said.

Milagra's hand went to the wooden beads around her neck. "I say a prayer for your happiness."

"Well, I appreciate that, senora. I got no doubt your words go straight to His ears."

The Greenhorn

“Sacrilego,” Milagra said, crossing herself automatically. “All the time I work here, you been fair with me. You even help my family with jobs and...”

“Senora,” Jesse interrupted gently. “You don’t have t’ thank me for that. Your nephews are hard workers.”

“You took a chance,” she persisted. “And I think you should keep taking chances, you know?”

Having shocked herself with her boldness, Milagra turned to go.

“Sounds like good advice,” Jesse said behind her. “Just hope I got what it takes.”

“Of course I don’ know exactly what you’re talking about,” Milagra answered from the doorway. “But one thing I know. You got all what you need.”

Jesse finished his ham sandwich and cleaned up. As he dried his hands, he looked up to the ceiling, imagining he could see through the boards to the second floor. Andy slept there, and Jesse pictured him snuggled down, warm and drowsy, wishing his lover would sense his need and climb the stairs to his room.

You’re crazy, boy, Jesse thought. We just spent all afternoon in the saddle, literally and figuratively. The last thing Andy wants to see is your pecker comin’ at him.

Jesse’s pecker disagreed, but was overruled. The foreman went to his office and looked over the budget again. He ran a lean machine, but there was always a nut that could be tightened to gain an ounce more performance. And hopefully, the dry numbers would put his erection to sleep.

As it happened, Andy was lying awake, hoping and dreading that Jesse would sneak upstairs. He wanted to tell Jesse all about Dolf’s disgusting blackmail, but he knew he had to handle this on his own. If he were smart and bold enough, Jesse would never hear a word about this ugliness.

It was Andy’s fear that Dolf’s threat would convince Jesse that he was right about hiding their relationship. Worse, it might drive Jesse back into his denial. Andy would not allow that to happen. Not now. Not when it was going so well.

Andy rolled over and punched one of the pillows. He had to find a way to shut Dolf up and make sure Jesse never found out. It was a long fruitless time before he drifted off and his sleep was troubled and restless.

Larry Atchison parked out back of the honky-tonk and flipped on his

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running lights once before turning off the engine. In a couple of seconds, he unlocked the passenger door as a cowboy rapped on the window. The ranch hand slid into the leather smelling interior and waited for the other man to speak first.

“You got anythin’ interestin’ to tell me?” Larry asked.

“Like ya figgered. That faggot Kells is tryin’ t’ outbid ya.”

“And you can bet dollars t’ donuts that my bitch of an ex is puttin’ him up to it.”

“Don’t know ‘bout that. Tell ya what, though, that Kells queer puts my hair up. Wish he’d never come here.”

“Maybe you could... persuade him to go back where he come from. Be worth a few extra bucks to me if that snot-nosed little cocksucker high-tailed it on outta here.”

“I’ll see what I can do. That all?”

“Reckon so; ‘less you wanna make out,” Larry said sarcastically.

“Just gimme my money.”

The cowboy took the folded bills and stashed them in his breast pocket. As he got out of the big vehicle he spoke over his shoulder.

“And don’t be surprised if ya hear Kells caught a sudden bout a homesickness.”

Chapter Seven

Adele Pike hopped down from the cab of her truck and patted the fender of the electric blue land leviathan fondly as she looked around the Silver Sage compound.

"Hey Joe," she called out to the ramrod. "You know where I can find Mr. Kells?"

With his nose up Honcho's butt, Joe thought as he hollered back. "Try the stable, Mizz Pike. Thought I seen him go in there."

Adele walked to the rambling complex that housed the horses, the long wooden buildings quiet and deserted. A lone figure stood in front of a box stall stroking the muzzle of one of the saddle horses.

"Andy," she sang out cheerfully. "It's Adele Pike. I've come to talk about that purchase you're considering."

The young Englishman looked up, and Adele's heart contracted painfully. She didn't know Andy well, but had formed a genuine liking for the young man. What could have put those shadows in his warm brown eyes?

As though Andy were one of her grown nephews, Adele hurried forward to give him a hug. She felt his reticence, and then he relaxed into the embrace gratefully. Adele felt the tremors that ran through his body, but said nothing until he pulled back and swiped his sleeve across his eyes.

Adele was a little shocked by the tears. Here, where she had been born and bred, men didn't cry. Not even when they got thrown into barbed wire fences and it took one hundred and twenty seven stitches to close them up. Maybe it was different in England, but she couldn't imagine what could have happened to make a grown man weep like a child.

Carefully keeping her eyes on the horse, Adele spoke softly. "Maybe it's not such a good time to discuss real estate."

"No. No, it's fine, really. I don't know why I did that. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. If you want to tell me what's wrong, you can be sure I won't repeat it."

Out of the corner of her eye, Adele saw the struggle on the young man's astonishingly handsome face. He wanted very badly to tell someone his problem, but couldn't bring himself to say it out loud. Adele knew Andy would feel better if he spoke, lanced the abscess and let out the poison, but she also knew she couldn't force him to talk.

"Why don't I go up to the house and say hi to Milagra?" Adele said gently. "You can come on up when you're ready."

"Thanks," Andy said in relief. "I'll be right behind you."

Adele walked back out into the sunny, breezy day, reaching for the keys on her belt loop. Cursing under her breath when she found they weren't

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there, she turned back into the barn. The keys had probably fallen off when she hugged Andy.

As she entered the coolness of the stable again, she heard voices and slowed her steps. Adele didn't know why she chose to approach stealthily, but she was careful not to make noise as she reached the corner.

Looking around the corner of the stall, she saw that Dolf Landry had joined Andy. She'd had few dealings with the ranch hand, but had formed an impression of a man with a too-ready grin and sketchy ethics. Sure, he was high, wide and handsome and could make a horse do almost anything, but Adele got a bad vibe from him.

Feeling guilty, but doing it anyway, Adele moved closer until she could hear what the two men were discussing. Dolf's warm baritone had an edge to it that she didn't like. Even more disturbing was Andy's demeanor.

The young man's shoulders sagged and his eyes were dull with defeat. All the sparkle had gone out of him. Unbearably curious, Adele stole into an empty stall a little farther down the row. When she peeked out, she nearly gave herself away with her gasp of disbelief.

Dolf had unzipped his jeans and exposed himself. Andy was looking at the cowboy's semi-erect organ as though it were a coiled rattlesnake.

'What the Sam Hill is going on here?' Adele wondered as Dolf spoke again.

"Come on, purty boy. You know ya cain't wait to taste me. A cum-drunk fairy like you prob'ly dreams about stuff like this."

"I already gave you my answer," Andy said. "I haven't changed my mind."

"That's too bad, sugardrawers," Dolf drawled. "I guess we'll be havin' that comin' out party for Honcho, after all."

"You can't do that to him."

"Of course I can. It'll be easy. Already told Joe. I just have to spread it around a little more. You can imagine what'll happen then."

"Bastard," Andy hissed. "You want a piece of me, come and take it, if you think you're man enough, but leave Jesse out of it."

Dolf grinned and took a step toward Andy. The young man drew back his fist and slammed it into Dolf's jaw before the ranch hand knew what was happening. Dolf hit the ground on his butt and looked up at Andy in shock.

"You hit me!"

"You have a very strong grasp of the obvious," Andy answered. "Come near me again and you'll find yourself in the same position."

"Whatever ya say, boss," Dolf sneered. "Now let's see how Honcho likes his new position as the town laughing stock. When word gets around that Jesse Haller is queer, he'll be laughed out a the county."

Andy's eyes simmered as his brain whirled sickeningly. This was worse

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than the threat of a bashing. It would kill Honcho to have to leave the Silver Sage. This was his life.

Andy had never felt worse. He professed to love Honcho and all he could offer the man was the ruination of everything the cowboy held dear.

Maybe he was being selfish. Would it kill him to take Dolf's cock in his mouth and fellate the man to climax? It would probably take all of three minutes. Andy could hold his breath for three minutes. Surely, he could do this.

Dolf felt the boy's attitude change and his grin came back as he rose from the ground. "Having second thoughts, sweet cheeks?"

Andy ground his teeth together, but made himself say the words. "Meet me at... dark in the trees at the west end of the bunkhouse. I'll have something for you."

"It better be the best fuck a my life," Dolf said.

Andy blinked. "I'll meet you," he said. "We'll negotiate then."

"You got it, boss," Dolf said with a wink.

Adele froze as the ranch hand walked past her hiding place. It was all she could do to stay out of sight. Every instinct screamed at her to rise and denounce Dolf for the despicable bastard he was. But she held her breath until Andy went back to tending the horse and then she slipped out of the barn.

She had to find Jesse. Now.

"Hey good-lookin'," Adele said in the same half-admiring, half-teasing way she'd said the words since they were sixteen and the king and queen of the prom.

Jesse smiled at her over his shoulder and closed the ledger. "What brings you to this neck a the woods?" he said as he stood.

"Remember when you asked me to marry you?"

"This is comin' outta the blue," the man said. "But, 'course I remember. We had just won state. Ya let me get to third base and I asked ya to marry me."

Adele smiled at the memory of that night, and then abruptly sobered. "Did you know then that you were gay?" she asked.

Jesse was stunned. "Gay? Why would ya say somethin' crazy like that?"

"Jess, honey, it's Addie here. I won't judge you or turn my back on you. You... you're like a brother to me. It actually makes sense now. I thought you were the perfect gentleman, but you just weren't interested in me that way, were you?"

"Addie," Jesse said softly. "That's just not true. I was interested in ya

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that way, but... Okay you're right. I wanted to be, but I just wasn't."

"That's what all the brooding was about," she said in relief. "I thought it was me."

Jesse frowned. "You? Impossible, you're perfect. I wanted to marry ya more than anything, but somethin' in me knew it wasn't right."

Adele reached out and touched his hand. Jesse wrapped his fingers around hers automatically. Without words, they reached a new understanding in their long and true friendship. Gently, she put her other hand on his cheek.

"You're just like one of those mustangs you love so much," she said. "You can't be broken to the saddle. You're wild and you're stubborn, but damned if you ain't the handsomest cowboy at the rodeo."

"Well, thanks, little lady, but you're makin' me blush."

"So... how long have you known you're gay?"

"Why do ya keep comin' back to that?"

"Because I'm your best friend and I'll always love you no matter what, ya big galoot."

Jesse smiled in spite of his uneasiness. "I'm right glad to hear that, but there's no need for all the dramatics."

"You can't admit it, can you? I don't believe it. You've never been afraid of anything in your life. Just say it, Jess."

Jesse looked into Adele's eyes for a long moment before he spoke. "I love Andy Kells," he mumbled.

"What?"

"I said, I'm in love with Andy," the man growled.

"I see. It's amazing how everything is coming together for me today."

"What does that mean?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. First, you tell me about Andy."

Jesse sat down on a bale of hay and pulled out a straw. Twirling it between his fingers while he spoke, he tried to tell Adele how he felt.

"I been told all my life that bein' gay is a sin. We made jokes about queers in the locker room and I laughed louder'n anybody. One night on the rodeo circuit, some of my buddies thought it would be fun to beat up these two guys we saw holding hands outside a some bar. I didn't join in, but I didn't stop 'em. I didn't do nothin'. Quit the rodeo and come home shortly after. Pops hired me on and had the faith in me to make me foreman. I built a life here with my work and the mustangs to care about."

Jesse took a deep breath and looked up at Adele. "And then Pops died and this boy shows up and throws me like a widow-makin' bronc. He made me realize that I wasn't happy. He makes me happy, Adele. I can't say it any plainer or simpler than that."

"Then never let him go," was Adele's advice. "I overheard something in the barn a few minutes ago," she continued. "You need to hear this."

The Greenhorn

“Hold on a second,” Jesse said. “You got to grill me; now it’s my turn. Did ya come out here today just to give me the third degree?”

“Jesse...” Adele began only to stop at the look on his face. She knew that stubborn set to his features all too well and didn’t bother trying to put him off track.

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” she said. “Andy plans to set up a few thousand acres for a mustang preserve. I’m handling the paperwork for him.”

Jesse’s jaw dropped. “Why would he do a fool thing like that?”

“He probably thought it would please you,” she said wryly.

“You know it’s my dream,” he said. “But how did Andy know?”

“Oh, Honcho,” she said affectionately. “You don’t even know how much you talk about those ornery dusty-hided worthless cayuses. Everybody around here knows your dream.”

“Didn’t know I was so all-fired popular.”

“You’d be surprised,” Adele said. “You have friends you don’t even know about.”

“Damn right I’d be surprised,” Jesse said. “Ya know how hard it is for me to talk to more’n one person at a time.”

“I know,” she smiled. “But people notice stuff and you’ve done a lot for The Corners in your own way. You don’t like a fuss, so they haven’t thanked you out loud, but you have a place in quite a few hearts hereabouts.”

Jesse had no reply to this and was grateful to see Joe headed his way in hurry.

“Scuse me, Honcho,” the ramrod interrupted. “Sorry t’ bother ya while you’re talkin’ to a lady, but we got a problem.”

Jesse’s expression turned grim. Joe wouldn’t come to him unless it was an emergency. “Sorry, Addie,” he said. “I gotta to handle this.”

“Jess,” she said, grabbing him by the elbow. “I guarantee that what I have to tell you is more important than any problem Joe might have.”

Jesse looked at her in surprise, and then turned back to his ramrod. It was a testament to his trust in Addie that he asked the question.

“Can it wait a few minutes, Joe?”

“Yella Gal’s about to drop and havin’ a hard time of it,” Joe said.

Jesse’s eyes grew grave. The buckskin filly was one of his favorites and this was her first foal. “Did you call Doc Wyman?” the foreman asked.

“Course I did,” Joe sounded wounded. “He’s over at the Frechette spread. Cain’t git here in less’n twenty minutes.”

Jesse’s eyes went to Adele, asking a silent question.

‘I have until dark,’ she thought, as she nodded to him to go.

Adele followed Jesse and Joe, not trying to keep up, knowing she’d find them easily. She arrived in time to see Jesse pull a backward presenting foal

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from the laboring mare and lay it on the straw. The weary mother lifted her head and began to lick the newborn.

“Looks like a little girl,” Adele said softly.

Jesse looked up from his kneeling position, his arm bloody to the elbow, his clothes smirched with manure, and grinned widely. “I think we’ll call her Addie Gal,” he said.

Joe smiled. “Purty name for a purty gal. Look at that star on her forehead.”

Adele watched as the mare finished cleaning the little filly’s head. “No, it’s a hat,” she said. “Will you look at that? You got yourself a Medicine Hat paint there, Honcho.”

Jesse whistled and patted Yella Gal fondly on the rump. “You’re a daisy, darlin’,” he said softly.

“Come on,” Adele said. “You need to get cleaned up, and we still need to talk.”

Jesse rose and stretched. “Reckon you’re right,” he said. “Lead me to water, woman.”

Chapter Eight

Andy looked up as a shadow fell across him. Shading his eyes with his hand, he frowned at the silhouette blocking the sun. Light haloed the tips of shaggy sun-bleached hair, but the outline was wrong. Jesse was wiry; this cowboy was more on the beefy side.

"Dolf," Andy said with certainty. "You're early."

"Thought I might get a preview."

"You thought wrong. Would you mind leaving now?"

"Why? Ya meetin' Honcho for a hairy flute lesson?"

"Go away, Dolf," Andy ordered.

"Sun's goin' down," the cowboy said. "How 'bout you?"

"I told you to leave."

"Sure, boss. I just come in to ask ya a question."

"What?" Andy said with gritted teeth.

"About tonight. Are ya going to bring your own grease, or should I get some?"

"Fuck off," Andy said. "Get out of here before I knock you down again."

"Sure thing, boss. See ya soon." Dolf pointed his index finger at Andy and cocked his thumb. "Bang, bang," he said. "I cain't wait t' shoot ya full a love juice."

"Arschhole," Andy said wearily, turning back to his task.

As Dolf strolled away, Andy applied the brush to Easter's withers. He didn't have much time to think of a way out of this. Either he submitted to Dolf, or Jesse got outted. It wasn't much of a choice really.

"I can't do this," he whispered, leaning his forehead against the horse's neck.

Easter turned his beautiful head and lipped at the despondent boy's hair.

"Sometimes I envy you, Easter," he told the gelding.

Jesse took off his shirt and stood with eyes squeezed shut while Adele sprayed him with a hose. After the major muck had been blasted off, Jesse rinsed his hair and washed his hands. Shaking off excess water, the foreman took a long drink from the end of the hose.

"What's on your mind, Addie?"

"How well do you know Dolf Landry?" she asked.

"Well enough, I guess. He's been workin' here for almost three months now."

Connie Bailey

“What do you think of him?”

“I don’t like him,” Jesse said flatly.

“Good. That makes what I have to say even easier. Would it surprise you to learn that Dolf was blackmailing someone?”

“Cain’t say as it would,” the cowboy answered.

Adele had had time to think, but she still hadn’t come up with the right words for what she was going to say next. When Adele told Jesse who Dolf was coercing and what the price was, things were going to start happening fast. She had no doubt that Honcho was going to open a can of whup-ass, but she hoped she could keep him out of prison.

“I heard Dolf threaten someone in the barn earlier.”

“Who?”

Adele took a deep breath. “Andy.”

Jesse blinked and his face froze into a stone mask. His eyes were cold as arctic nights as he focused on Adele. “What’d Dolf say?” he asked.

“I don’t think I’m going to tell you until Dolf’s fired and off the property,” she said.

“Addie. Tell me.”

Adele looked into her high school sweetheart’s glacial gaze and a shiver ran down her spine. Not because he looked furious, but because he didn’t. Jesse looked as calm as a flat sea.

However, deep in his frozen eyes, a flame burned, hot and blue as a pilot light. She knew it needed but one spark, a few stray molecules of oxygen, and his rage would ignite into an inferno: a firestorm that would reduce his life to charred debris.

Adele couldn’t let that happen. As much as she wanted to see Jesse kick a mud puddle in Dolf’s ass and stomp it dry, she couldn’t let him ruin his life.

“God damn it, Adele! Tell me!”

The mild expletive was shocking from Jesse’s lips. Adele had heard him curse exactly twice in the last quarter of a century; Jesse watched his mouth around the ladies.

“I can’t, Jess,” Adele said miserably. “Really, I can’t. You’ll kill Dolf and spend the rest of your life in prison. What good would you be to Andy in there?”

“Y’know, the fact that you’re scared to tell me, tells me enough. I’m just going to kick Dolf’s ass on general principle until ya decide t’ let me know why I’m doin’ it.”

“Wait,” Adele yelled, running after Jesse’s rapidly retreating figure.

“Jesse, promise me you won’t kill him.”

“I’ll do no such thing, Addie. Ya know I don’t like breakin’ promises.”

“Well, what are you going to do? Go storming around the ranch until you run into him?”

The Greenhorn

"Seems likely."

"Cheese and rice! Please just stop for a minute! I know where they're going to meet."

Jesse spun on his boot heel. "Where?"

"I'll take you, but remember I've got my cell phone. The first sign this is getting out of hand, I'm calling the sheriff."

"You think Pete would haul me in on your say so?"

"Pretty sure," she answered grimly.

"Do what ya gotta do," Jesse said. "Where we goin'?"

Adele eyed the setting sun. "The bunkhouse," she said.

"Hey, purty boy. Over here."

Andy turned right and saw Dolf leaning against one of Silver Sage's carefully cultivated shade trees at the corner of the bunkhouse. The big man pushed away from the trunk and gestured Andy closer.

"Isn't this a bit public?" Andy asked.

"We ain't gonna do it here," Dolf sneered. "They's a shed back this a way."

"Suave," Andy commented. "You must be a big hit with the ladies."

"You got a sweet mouth, but your tongue is too sharp," Dolf said.

"Careful ya don't cut yourself. Be a shame if that purty face got messed up."

"Do you imagine for one moment that I'm afraid of you? If we could settle this with a fight, I'd be glad. However, since you're a bottom feeding mouth breather with no sense of ethics, I have to fear for my friend's reputation. I don't fear you. I only fear the damage you can do with your big mouth."

"In the joint, they know what to do with smart mouths like yours, punk," Dolf said.

"Why doesn't it surprise me that you've been to prison?" Andy said.

Dolf grabbed a fistful of dark curls and yanked the young man's head back. "Keep sassin' me, boy, and see what it gets ya. All I want is a fuck, but if ya piss me off, I'll make ya suffer, ya hear?"

"I hear," Andy said from between clenched teeth.

"Good," Dolf said, as he shoved Andy through the door of the tool shed.

Andy saw that it was really a small barn, holding the mowing tractor and various gardening and lawn keeping tools. Dim and cobwebby, it smelled of old oil and damp earth.

Dolf picked up his coiled bullwhip from the bench where he'd stashed it. Letting it unfurl with a pop, he grinned wickedly when Andy jumped.

"Don't worry," he said derisively. "I won't mark that baby butt skin of yours."

Connie Bailey

Dolf snapped his wrist and the end of the whip wrapped around the beam the light fixture was mounted on. The cowboy let go of the handle and stepped back.

"Grab ahold of it," Dolf told Andy. "Pretend it's... I know. Pretend it's Honcho's pecker. Get a good firm grip with both hands and don't let go until I tell ya to."

"What?"

"That's my price," Dolf said. "Hold that whip until I'm done and Honcho's good name is safe. Let go and I tell the world."

"You're a bastard."

"Yeah. Ya already told me. Now grab the whip."

His cheeks burning with fury, Andy did as Dolf said.

"Hot damn, you're mad as hell, ain't ya," Dolf chuckled. "I bet right now ya hate me more'n you've ever hated anybody."

"I'd say that's a fair assessment."

"And that's why I'm gonna enjoy this so much," Dolf said. "Ya think you're so much better'n me, but I figger this'll even things up a little."

Brusquely, Dolf yanked Andy's jeans to his ankles. "No drawers, huh? Figgers. You gotta be ready when Honcho tells ya to bend over."

Dolf cupped the young man's firm buttocks. "Nice. If ya had tits, I'd marry ya," he said.

Andy's stomach rebelled when Dolf's fingers crept into his crack. At the last second, he remembered to keep hold of the whip as a bone deep shudder racked him.

"Not scared, huh?" Dolf laughed nastily. "I think you're plenty scared, Colt."

"Don't... call me... that," Andy said between breaths.

"Not too bright, are ya?" Dolf said, squeezing the boy's balls just up to the point of pain. "If ya tell me not to do somethin', that's exactly what I'm gonna do. Specially if I think it might put a burr under your saddle."

"Why do you hate me so much?" Andy was compelled to ask.

"Well," Dolf drawled as he took a jar of Vaseline from the bench. "You're you."

Andy gritted his teeth when the man jabbed a callused finger at his clenched opening.

"Damn, you're tight as a skeeter's twat! I better grease ya up good, or you're liable to pinch my pecker off," Dolf said.

Andy had never felt lower. Thus far, his life had been seemed charmed, marked by good fortune, marred by few tragedies. His only flaw, if it was a flaw, was his affection for his own sex and the relatively small amount of grief it had brought him.

"You're awful quiet," Dolf said. "I bet I can make ya holler, though."

The Greenhorn

The big cowboy spread Andy's cheeks and took himself in hand. When the young man felt the hot hardness nudge his opening, he lost his nerve and retched dryly

"Please don't do this," he said hoarsely. "I'll go home and never come back. Silver Sage can go back to the way it was before I came here."

Dolf put his mouth close to Andy's ear and answered. "That was a real purty speech. Let me think on it a minute... Nope. I'm hard now and I'm gonna ride ya, Colt," he said, giving emphasis to the nickname.

Dolf's taunt had the opposite effect than the cowboy intended. Honcho's pet name for Andy reminded the young man of the foreman's strength. Andy braced himself mentally, his knuckles going white as his grip tightened on the whip handle. Dolf was waiting for tears that would never fall.

"If you're going to fuck me, then fuck me," Andy said, "but could you do it without all the chat? You've nothing to say that I want to hear and your breath is atrocious."

"Oh, I'm gonna fuck you. Don't you worry none about that," Dolf growled, as he stepped back. "But first I'm gonna learn ya some manners."

Chapter Nine

Andy clutched the handle of the bullwhip with all his strength in a desperate attempt to remain on his feet. Dolf socked him again, purpling the clean line of the boy's jaw.

"You don't look so high and mighty now," Dolf said, running a hand down the young man's bare chest.

Andy let out an involuntary yelp when the cowboy unexpectedly pinched his nipple hard. A shudder ran through his slender frame as Dolf's hand moved lower. The ranch hand squeezed Andy's jewels, increasing the pressure until the boy's face tightened in pain.

"Bet Honcho touches ya real gentle like, don't he?" Dolf smirked. "You're feeling a real man's hands now, Colt."

Andy tried to shut his ears to the hateful things that the man said, but the mocking use of Honcho's nickname for him came clearly through the mental barrier. He couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"You have the nerve to call yourself a man?" Andy said. "You don't have a clue what it means to be a real man."

"Shut up," was Dolf's clever comeback.

"No, I won't," Andy said. "You can beat me to a pulp, but you can't stop me telling you the truth. You're not a man; you're an animal. No, wait. An animal wouldn't behave as badly as you have. I don't know what you are."

"Dead," said a fierce voice. "That's what he is."

"Honcho no!"

A woman's voice rang out as Dolf turned in utter surprise. Jesse's fist met the ranch hand's jaw with devastating impact. The big man spun and crashed into Andy. Andy let go of the bullwhip and shoved Dolf back in Jesse's direction. The foreman grabbed Dolf by the shirt and swung him around. Adele was there, auburn hair flying, as she placed herself between the two men.

"Move, Addie," Jesse growled.

"I won't let you ruin your life over this piece of shit," Adele said firmly.

They locked eyes for a long moment, and then Adele felt a touch on her arm. She turned to meet Andy's gaze, and let him pull her out of the conflict. Dolf had recovered from the jackhammer punch to his jaw and was ready to even the score.

"Come on," Dolf said. "Defend your boyfriend's honor, Honcho."

"My pleasure," Jesse grated.

"I ain't scared of no pussy fag," Dolf sneered.

"I don't give a good goddamn whether you're scared or not," Jesse said. "I'm gonna kick your ass just the same."

The Greenhorn

"Try it," Dolf dared.

The ranch hand dodged Jesse's right cross, but the foreman's sly left hook spun the big cowboy all the way around. Dolf retaliated viciously, missing completely as Jesse ducked. While Jesse was down there, he gave his opponent a sock in the nuts, fair play be damned.

Dolf doubled over, his chin meeting Honcho's upraised kneecap in a violent collision that nearly severed his tongue. With blood pouring from his mouth, Dolf took another swing at Jesse. Jesse swayed to the right and came back with a hit to Dolf's solar plexus. The foreman drew his arm back for another blow, but Andy grabbed hold of his fist.

"Wait," the young man said.

Jesse glared at Dolf, unwilling to take his eyes from his enemy even though the ranch hand was bloodied. Dolf was far from out of it.

"Why?" Jesse asked sharply.

"You've hit him enough."

"Bullshit," Jesse raged. "It'll be enough when he stops movin'."

"I totally agree," Andy said, "but it's my turn."

Jesse stared at the young man in incomprehension for a long moment before his words sank in. "Scuse me," he said politely. "Go right ahead."

"Boys," Adele said. "Don't you think it's time to call the police?"

"Fuck you, bitch," Dolf said, spitting out a mouthful of blood. "We don't need any cops."

"Now that was just plain rude," Jesse said. "You'd best apologize to the lady, sidewinder."

"Fuck you, too," Dolf spat again. "And fuck your boyfriend while we're at it."

"Dolf," Andy said sweetly. "I'm not a violent person by nature, and so I'm appalled at how much pleasure I'm going to take in this."

Dolf turned to see the young Englishman holding his bullwhip. "You ain't got the sack or the know-how to use that thing," he smirked.

"That's only one of the many things you're wrong about," Andy said.

"You called me a leather freak once and I think that's the only time you've been right. I love leather. I love it so much that I learned to use a whip. I haven't practiced in awhile, but I bet I can make this thing raise a blister on your ass."

Dolf's smile slipped a trifle. "You gonna bark, pup, or are ya gonna bite?" he said with bravado.

"I'll give you to the count of three to make it out the door," Andy said.

"If you're still here when I get to three, I'm going to take your hide off strip by strip."

"Fuck you," Dolf said.

Andy shook his head. "Not only have you already said that, you've

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already tried it.”

Jesse’s head whipped around. “What?”

“Oh yes,” Andy said. “When he was through beating me, he promised me a, now what was that phrase, oh yes, a real western doggy-style butt fucking. Did I get that right, Dolf?”

“You’re a walking dead man,” Jesse told Dolf calmly.

Andy put a hand on his lover’s forearm. He could feel the thrum of hard muscles tense with fury and spoke softly to Jesse.

“It was my bad judgment that put me in this situation and I’ll deal with it myself.”

“Hell no, you ain’t,” Jesse answered hotly. “This sorry excuse for a man ain’t walkin’ away from here. Addie, I reckon you better call the EMTs, cause Dolf’s sure as hell goin’ to be needin’ the meat wagon.”

Andy tightened his grip on Jesse’s arm. “We should get something about our relationship straight right now,” he said. “It’s not going to be a butch/fem, top/bottom, dom/sub kind of thing. If that’s what you want, I’m not your boy.”

Jesse’s eyebrows climbed into his sun-bleached bangs. “Domsb?” he said. “Is that like sushi? I don’t eat much foreign food.”

Andy grinned in spite of himself. “Does that mean we have an understanding?”

“If you want him, he’s all yours, Colt,” Jesse said. “I wish you’d let me give him the ass-whuppin’ he deserves, but this is your call.”

“Thanks, Honcho,” Andy said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” the man said without hesitation.

“Faggots,” Dolf sneered.

Andy’s wrist flexed and Dolf’s hand flew to his ear with a sharp cry of pain. “I don’t much like that word, Dolf,” the young Englishman said, “and I don’t think Jesse does either. You might want to think twice before using it again.”

“I’d hand that whip over before it gets taken away and shoved up your ass, if I were you.”

“If you were me, you’d be good-looking,” Andy said, as the bullwhip cracked again.

“Fuck!” Dolf screamed, clutching at his left cheek.

“You’re a slow learner, Dolf,” Andy said. “Each time you’re rude to me, or one of my friends, I’m going to hurt you.”

“I’m tired a this shit,” Dolf growled and launched himself at Andy.

The hardest thing Jesse ever did in his life was to stand by while the ranch hand attacked Andy, but his faith was rewarded. Andy let the whip fly out and wrap around Dolf’s arm. He yanked hard, pulling Dolf off balance. As the cowboy reeled toward him, he sent Dolf flying into the tractor.

The Greenhorn

Jesse winced dramatically as Dolf's head hit the metal fender with a loud thud. "That's gonna leave a mark," the foreman said laconically.

"Yep," Adele agreed sagely. "He's surely gonna feel that tomorrow."

Dolf dragged himself to his feet, shaking his head groggily. The big man focused on Andy and glared in baffled, bovine rage. Andy raised the whip and lashed out again.

"God damn!" Dolf yelled, shaking his hand. "I didn't say anything!"

"I know," Andy said. "I lied. I'm just going to flog you whenever the fancy takes me."

"That's not fair," Dolf objected.

"You have no right to that word," Andy said, letting the tip of the length of braided leather kiss Dolf's crotch.

"Shit! Cut it out!"

"Are you scared, Dolf?" Andy asked, flicking the whip at the man's groin again.

A spreading wet spot on the ranch hand's jeans answered for him.

"Good," Andy said. "Now you know how I felt. I don't expect that you'll change because of this, but I sure feel a whole lot better about the whole thing. How about you, Honcho?"

"I reckon I'm satisfied as I'm gonna get with you and Addie on my back," Jesse said. "I admit it does make me feel a bit better to know a sissy made Dolf piss his pants."

Adele smacked the back of Jesse's head, nearly knocking his hat off.

"That's not funny," she said warningly.

Jesse held up his hands in a placatory gesture, as Andy spoke to Dolf again.

"Are you still here?" Andy said. "I'm done with you. Get off my land and don't come back."

"By the way," Jesse added. "You're fired, Dolf."

Dolf turned and began to walk, fury in every line of his heavy frame.

"This ain't over," he said from the doorway.

The whip whistled and cut through the seat of Dolf's clothing to leave a red welt on his ass. The cowboy jumped and hurried to get out of range of the wicked weapon. Loud laughter accompanied his graceless exit.

Jesse turned to Andy and gave the boy a wry look. "If you were me, you'd be good-lookin'?" he quoted.

"I was inspired," Andy said. "God, my knees are shaking."

Jesse put an arm around Andy's shoulders and supported him when his legs buckled.

"I'm calling that ambulance," Adele said. "Andy looks like he needs a doctor."

"I'm okay," Andy said. "Just too much adrenalin."

"Dolf sure as hell tangled with the wrong queer," Jesse said proudly.

Connie Bailey

Adele threw her cell phone, hitting the man squarely between the shoulder blades.

“Ow,” he said. “What was that for?”

“Same reason I hit you before. I don’t like those words anymore than Andy does, so stop using them.”

“I’m just jokin’, Addie.”

“It’s not funny,” she said firmly.

“She’s right,” Andy said. “They aren’t very nice words, and you’re a very nice man.”

“That’s bull, but I’ll tell you what’s the truth,” Jesse said. “You sure are purty when you’re mad, Colt.”

“Even with the bruises?”

“I can’t think about that, or I’ll go tearin’ off after Dolf and kick his ass again.”

“You don’t have time,” Andy said.

“I don’t?”

“I need you here,” Andy said.

“Why?”

“Because you’re awfully pretty when you’re mad, too.”

“I think I’ll be going,” Adele said, as Jesse’s eyes met Andy’s with a crackle of electricity that was almost audible.

Chapter Ten

Neither man noticed when Adele walked from the shed and closed the door gently behind her. They were far too engrossed in one another, jazzed on adrenalin, alive with the excitement of a near brush with danger.

"Do you want this as much as I do?" Andy asked, grabbing Jesse's cock through his jeans.

"More," the cowboy said, just before he captured Andy's lips with his own.

Andy returned the kiss eagerly, his tongue sparring with Jesse's, as he pulled the man's shirt from his jeans. "For pity's sake," the young man groaned into his lover's mouth. "Let the monster out."

Jesse blushed, but didn't object as Andy unbuttoned his jeans and grabbed for him. "Damn that feels good," he panted as Andy pumped his erection.

"Then you're going to love this," the young man said, as he went to his knees.

Jesse gasped as hot wetness closed around the tip of his arousal and sucked ardently. When Andy enveloped the rigid length right down to the root, Jesse's hands shot out to grasp the boy's head. The cowboy's knees trembled and his breathing became ragged as Andy swallowed while stroking the velvety balls. Abruptly, his fingers tightened in the dark curls and he pulled the tantalizing mouth away from his crotch.

"Wait," he. "I want to come inside you."

"You're damn right you do," Andy said breathlessly. "Where?"

Jesse looked around the shed, and then grabbed Andy's hand. The boy was surprised when the foreman pulled him up onto the tractor, but when he saw the large saddle shaped seat, he grinned.

"Sit down, Honcho," he said.

Jesse settled himself in the seat and steadied Andy as the boy rested his knees on either side of the man's thighs. The cowboy took hold of the rosy column of flesh that bobbed in front of him and wrapped his lips around the head.

Andy moaned as the man lavished attention on his cock and balls while tweaking his nipples. Aroused to a fever pitch, the young man grasped his lover's saliva slick arousal and seated it at his lower opening. Jesse groaned in bliss as Andy slowly lowered himself onto the rigid length. When the boy sat across his thighs, Jesse pulled his head down for a kiss. Andy whimpered as the long cock pulsed in his passage and Jesse's arms tightened around the willowy body.

With a barely perceptible motion, Jesse moved his cock in the tight channel. Rocking the boy gently against his thighs, Jesse rubbed his thick

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shaft against Andy's susceptible flesh. The young man moaned mindlessly as the friction quickly stimulated him to dizzying heights. The man had barely touched Andy's cock when the boy crested.

"Oh god, Honcho," Andy panted. "I think I'm going to come."

"Go ahead, Colt. You always were headstrong."

Andy's cock erupted along with his laughter, and he pulled the man's face to his breast as he rode out the climax. Jesse sucked at the dark nipples, shifting his shaft subtly in the snug socket.

"That feels so good, Honcho," Andy moaned, "but you're doing all the work."

Andy got the soles of his feet against the tractor's high fenders and lifted himself off the big cock. Jesse groaned in ecstasy and gripped the boy's flanks, as Andy sank back down onto the man's yearning arousal.

"I have died and gone to heaven," Jesse said, as Andy impaled himself steadily on the upstanding rod of flesh.

"This is just the Pearly Gate," Andy said, "but you're almost there."

The young man bent his neck and took the cowboy's mouth in a deep, groin-stirring kiss. Jesse's fingers kneaded the soft skin of Andy's thighs as they flexed. Abruptly, the man stiffened and his cock jerked deep inside the boy.

"Oh shit! Sorry! Shit!"

Jesse and Andy turned to see Joe silhouetted in the doorway.

"Ernesto needed a rake and I was goin' by the shed," the ramrod said lamely.

"Fair enough," Jesse said. "If you've gotten an eyeful, take your rake and close the door behind ya when you leave."

Joe blinked like a wakened sleepwalker. He grabbed the first implement his hand fell on and retreated. As the ramrod walked out, Jesse called after him.

"Joe? That's a shovel."

"That's okay, Honcho. I'll tell Ernesto to dig a hole."

Jesse chuckled as he went back to nuzzling Andy's neck. "We sure as hell gave him a shock," the man said.

"You're awfully relaxed about the whole thing," Andy said, resting his cheek against the top of the man's head.

"There comes a time when a man has to say what the hell and just follow his heart," Jesse said. "I think that time has come for me."

"Bravo," Andy said softly.

"Now," Jesse said sternly. "It's time you explained yourself. Why didn't you tell me?"

Andy met the man's eyes levelly. "I was terrified of your reaction, and I thought it was better that I handle it myself."

The Greenhorn

"That may be true," Jesse allowed. "My first reaction was to put Dolf in a shallow grave, but . . ."

"He threatened to tell everyone about us," Andy interrupted. "He said you'd be, as he put it, run out of town on a rail."

"And that was important to you?"

Andy stared at the cowboy incredulously. "Of course, it's important to me. It directly affects you; how could it not be important?"

"Sorry, Colt. I'm just gettin' used to this love business."

"Oh dear," Andy said. "Let's go over it together. You know how you felt when Dolf threatened me?"

"I wanted to kill 'im," Jesse said promptly.

"You wanted to protect me," Andy translated.

"Well, yeah. What else am I s'posed to do?"

"You also have to understand that I feel exactly the same way about you. When Dolf threatened your happiness, I would have done anything, short of murder, to save you."

"Aw, ya wouldn't bushwhack a varmint for me, Colt?"

"Are you making fun of me?" Andy asked.

"Maybe a little. You're so damn cute when ya get fired up," Jesse said, brushing the unruly curls off of Andy's forehead.

Andy tried to ignore the fluttering that the man's touch caused in his lower belly. They had just made spectacular, athletic love, but it seemed his body was far from sated, at least when it came to Jesse. The young man looked down to hide the kindling desire in his eyes, but the cowboy lifted Andy's chin, tilting his face back up. Andy's eyelids rose and he stared into eyes as blue as Anasazi turquoise.

"Whatta ya say to another mosey down the trail, Colt?" Jesse drawled.

Andy gave him a wicked smile. "Mosey? Hang on to your hat, Honcho; I'm in the mood to play Eight Seconds."

Jesse laughed aloud. "Where did ya learn such a low and disgraceful term for the sacred act a love, young man?" he asked.

"From Addie. She knows dozens."

"Did she tell ya what it signifies?"

"Of course," Andy said indignantly. "It has something or other to do with how long you can stay on the back of a bucking bull."

"Uh, yeah," Jesse said. "Somethin' or other like that. Would it kill ya to take it easy on an old cowpoke? Let me make love to ya, indoors, in a real bed, like a rational human bein'."

"You had me right up until the 'rational' part," Andy teased.

"I guess that is askin' a bit much from a mooncalf like you. Where do ya want to do it, then? On the roof? At the Superbowl? Or maybe you'd like to go for another real bareback ride."

Connie Bailey

Andy laughed. "Come on. My bed is huge and I've actually got something that we can use for lubricant."

Jesse raised his sandy eyebrows. "I can see I'm gonna get a real education hangin' around with you, Colt."

"It's just lube, Honcho, not hot wax on the nipples," Andy paused. "I'll be damned," he said. "Are you blushing, cowboy?"

Jesse dug at the dirt with the toe of his boot. "I'm just a simple country boy," he said.

"Bullshit," was Andy's opinion. "You may be country to the bone, but you're far from simple."

Andy returned from the bathroom to find Jesse reclining on the bed wearing nothing but his boots and his hat. The hat was not on its accustomed perch, but a lower one. Andy's erection pulsed against his lower belly at the sight of his lover so obviously eager for him.

"Come 'ere, darlin'," the cowboy drawled.

Andy grinned, but didn't move an inch closer to the bed. He was looking at his man and he would take as long as he liked. Jesse's tanned skin glowed like honey. Shaggy, sun-bleached hair crowned him with pale gold, framing a face of careworn nobility.

Andy let his gaze roam the rugged topography of a body worked hard in the out of doors for many years. His eyes charted the silvery lines of old scars on the bronzed flesh and his fingers yearned to trace their wild paths to softer hollows. He ached to feel the long lean muscles bunch under his hands, as Jesse pushed into him.

Abruptly, Andy took three running strides and leaped onto the bed.

"Whoa there, Colt," Jesse laughed as he lost his hat.

Andy claimed the man's enticing hardness, squeezing gently as he lowered his head. Jesse's chuckle became a groan as the head of his arousal was engulfed. Andy's mouth was hot, soft and wet, sucking eagerly at the velvet covered steel. His hands crept across the cowboy's rock hard abdomen to tease his nipples in their haloes of crisp hair. Jesse reached for his lover's cock, but was thwarted.

"Please," Jesse said. "I want to touch ya."

Without missing a beat, Andy maneuvered around until he crouched over the man with his rigid rod in Jesse's face. Wrapping his fist around Andy's hard length, Jesse sucked the hanging sack into his mouth. Andy made a startled noise, the muscles of his throat vibrating around Jesse's cock. The cowboy groaned deep in his chest at the indescribable sensation and laved the kid's balls with an enthusiastic tongue.

The Greenhorn

“Bloody hell!” Andy gasped as the man’s tongue entered his opening.

Andy labored valiantly to give his lover the same lavish attentions, but he was terribly distracted by what Jesse was doing to him. It was difficult to believe that the cowboy had never made love with another man before Andy. The cowboy seemed to know instinctively how best to please.

“Easy now,” Jesse said, running a hand down the boy’s flank. “Let up, Colt. If we go at this much longer, I’m gonna shoot my wad.”

“And I’ll enjoy every minute of coaxing you back to life,” Andy promised.

Jesse smacked his lover’s firm backside. “Don’t be sassy. Ya said you’d let me make love to ya like sane folks.”

“I said that? It doesn’t sound like something I’d say,” Andy teased.

“Purty please?” Jesse cajoled, stroking a silk-skinned thigh.

“How do you want me, Honcho?”

Jesse rose to his knees on the mattress and pulled the spirited boy into an ardent embrace. Andy’s breath was stolen by the intensity of the man’s passion, as his lips were taken in a slow, deep kiss that went on for a short eternity. The Englishman clung to Jesse’s broad shoulders and gasped for air as their lips parted.

“Bloody hell,” Andy said again. “I must love you. How else to explain what you can do to me with a simple kiss?”

“Simple?” Jesse pretended outrage. “Let’s see what ya have t’say after this.”

The cowboy wrapped an arm around Andy’s lower back and bent him until the top of his head touched the sheets. The boy moaned his appreciation of the rain of kisses bestowed on his neck, shoulders and chest. The sounds of pleasure increased in volume as Jesse nibbled delicately at his sensitive nipples.

Sucking a taut nub into his mouth, the cowboy slid his callused hand between Andy’s thighs. Andy spread his legs wide in wanton invitation, squirming with delight when he felt the heat of Jesse’s arousal against his lower belly. The young man’s hips moved involuntarily when the cowboy grasped both their erections and pumped them together.

“You can put it in anytime,” Andy panted. “I lubed up in the bathroom.”

“I noticed,” Jesse drawled. “Was that vanilla?”

“Cherry vanilla. Come on, Honcho. Fuck me.”

“I druther fuck ya than go fishin’, but we’re doin’ it my way.”

“Your way is slow.”

“But it’s thorough,” Jesse said, sliding a finger into Andy.

“Mnmfh!” Andy replied succinctly, as the cowboy unerringly found his weakness and exploited it quite shamelessly.

Jesse smiled fondly at the foreigner. “You are the purtiest thing I ever did see and I’ll never get tired of lookin’ at ya like this.”

“The feeling is quite mutual,” Andy said breathlessly. “You’re the most

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beautiful man on the planet.”

“Shucks,” Jesse said. “Didn’t think ya noticed.”

Andy opened his mouth to retort, but closed it again as Jesse withdrew his fingers. The cowboy nuzzled the head of his cock against the young man’s glistening port and Andy lifted his knees obligingly. Jesse eased forward, savoring the sensation of his cock sinking into the tight heat. Andy groaned as the long rod filled him completely, clutching at the man’s hips as he was pulled up onto Jesse’s muscular thighs.

“Ready, Colt?” Jesse asked softly.

“Hell, Honcho,” Andy said in a fair approximation of the man’s twang. “Tse born ready.”

“You know I love ya, don’t ya boy?” Jesse said.

“That goes double for me,” Andy smiled. “Come on, cowboy, let’s ride.”

Jesse smacked the young man smartly on the rump. “Giddy-up,” he said.

Chapter Eleven

“Wha’ th’ fuck?” Andy rolled over into Jesse.

Jesse reached for the phone without thinking, soothing Andy back to sleep as he brought the receiver to his ear.

“Haller,” he said crisply, looking at his watch on the bedside table. It struck him then that this was not his furniture. It wasn’t even his room.

“Well, hello, Honcho,” Adele purred archly. “Did you quit your foreman job to be Mr. Kells’s personal secretary?”

“I just happened t’ pick up the phone,” Jesse said.

“The private line in Andy’s bedroom?” Adele’s voice was the definition insinuating.

“Addie,” Jesse clucked disapprovingly. “How are we going to keep your mind outta the gutter?”

“With a cattle prod, I imagine,” she replied.

“Did ya have a reason for calling?” he prompted in an effort to distract her.

“I wanted to talk to Andy,” she said. “Can he talk, or is his mouth otherwise engaged?”

“Addie,” Jesse warned.

“Can I talk to him or not?”

“Just a minute.” Jesse put the phone against his chest and leaned over Andy. Tenderly, the cowboy kissed the young man’s parted lips and Andy’s eyes opened.

“Mmm, what a lovely way to be woken up.”

“Addie wants to talk to ya,” Jesse said apologetically.

“What are you? My personal secretary?”

“You’re the second person to suggest that career change this morning,” Jesse said, holding out the phone. “Talk to ‘er.”

Andy rolled his eyes and took the phone. Jesse propped himself on one elbow and watched his lover, finding the young man’s smallest movements fascinating. For the first time in longer than he could remember, the foreman was still in bed at eight o’clock and he didn’t feel the slightest bit guilty about it. In fact, it felt purty darned good.

Andy smacked Jesse’s hand lightly when the cowboy reached for his cock. “M-hm,” Andy said, “yeah. Eight seconds. I know. I know. No kidding! Yeah. Oh God, are you kidding? It was great! Yes he is. Totally. Okay, give me the bad news.”

Andy ignored Jesse’s indignant look and concentrated on what his real estate broker was telling him. When Jesse grabbed for his crotch again, the Englishman seized the cowboy’s wrist and held it immobile. The foreman was frankly surprised by the strength of the boy’s grip. Jesse looked up at

Connie Bailey

Andy's face and all thought of play went out of the man's head.

"What is it?" Jesse asked softly.

Andy's eyes met Jesse's, and the hairs on the cowboy's neck rose. A moment later, the young man severed the connection and threw the phone across the room.

"Son of a bitch," Andy shouted, tears trembling on his lashes.

"Tell me," Jesse demanded.

"Adele's fucking pig of an ex-husband is trying to block the designation of the land as a preserve for the mustangs."

"Larry?" Jesse looked surprised. "What's he got to do with anything?"

"It seems that Lawrence T. Atchison, Broker, Attorney at Law, land baron and slumlord has called an emergency town meeting to inform the good people of Whistlestop Corners about this profligate waste of land. Adele did everything in she could to stop it, but her ex-husband has a lot of friends, seemingly."

"Seemingly is right, Colt. Larry has the best friends money can buy, if ya know what I mean. He's the kind that gives good ol' boys a bad name. Wonder what scam he and his cronies have cooked up now."

"We'll have to go to the meeting to find out," Andy said.

"When is it?"

"How fast can you get dressed?"

"I'm sorry, Milagra; I'm in a hurry," Andy said as he stalked through the foyer.

"You got to wait for Senor Jesse to bring the truck around," the housekeeper said calmly. "I see him come down the back stairs and ask where he going."

"Then you know why I can't stop to talk."

Milagra snorted. "He don' tell me nothing' except not to worry."

"Briefly, I'm trying to buy some land and someone else is trying to stop me. I must get to town before the voting is over."

"I ask my question later then. Adios."

"Gracias," Andy threw over his shoulder as he ran outside to the beeping of the Wagoneer's horn.

Milagra went back inside and dealt with her problem on her own, as she'd been doing since she'd left home at sixteen. Picking up the phone, she called on her nephew for a favor.

"You look fine," Adele said, brushing non-existent dust from the yoke of

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Jesse's pearl-snap shirt.

"I told him that about twenty seven million times on the way here," Andy said.

"I don't even know what I'm doin' here," Jesse said.

"Sure you do, Honcho," Andy assured him. "Because you care."

"He's only right," Adele affirmed. "Now come on, hoss. We can't let Little Larry have his way. Someone has to stand up to him. I can't do it; it'll just look like I'm being spiteful. Andy here can't do it because no one will listen to a stranger. It has to be you, Jesse."

"I can't do it," Jesse said. "This was a bad idea. I'm goin' back to the ranch."

Andy caught the cowboy's arm as Jesse tried to leave. "You can't walk out, Honcho," he said. "You heard what Adele said. These guys are just blowing smoke. Someone just has to show them up for the liars they are. Those mustangs of yours may be smart, but they can't speak for themselves."

Jesse looked into Andy's eyes, shining with unshakable faith. "You'll be there with me?" the cowboy asked.

"Now and every day for the rest of my life, if you want me," the young man answered.

"You should go on in," Adele said. "It's better if you sit down front on the aisle. You won't have to excuse yourself as many times."

Jesse gave her a half-smile. "You really think we got a snowball's chance in the Mojave a out-talking your ex?"

Adele blew out her breath. "Nope," she said, "but we have to try."

"You girls comin', or are you gonna hold hands in the hall all day?" asked a sneering voice.

Dolf walked past them and entered the meeting hall, throwing a leer over his shoulder as the door swung shut behind him. Jesse balled his fists and took two steps before Adele and Andy grabbed him by the elbows and hung on.

"We're not here to fight," Adele said. "At least not with our fists. Take a deep breath, kiss your boyfriend, do whatever you have to do, but calm down and get your ass in there."

Jesse unclenched his jaw and let the tension drain from his muscles. "You can let go a me now," he said. "I'm cooled off."

"The hell you are," Adele smirked. "You're a square, Honcho. Always have been; always will be. I thank God he still makes men like you: strong, honest and compassionate. I love you. Always have; always will."

Jesse hugged her tightly before letting go. "All right, little lady," he said, in his best John Wayne impression. "Let's show these pilgrims we mean business."

"Wait," Andy said. "How do I look, Addie?"

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Adele took in the boots, close-fitting Levi's, white button down shirt and red bandanna. Her gaze dwelt on the young man's face, tanned and rosy-cheeked, eyes glowing. Adele cocked her head to the side, lifting one eyebrow.

"You look well-laid," she drawled.

"There's an awfully good reason for that," the boy said without missing a beat.

"Am I gonna have to hogtie the both of ya?" Jesse asked meaningfully.

"Me first! Me first!" Andy said, bouncing up and down.

Adele and Jesse exchanged a significant glance, and then she excused herself. Andy leaned his forehead against Jesse's for a long moment before pushing away.

"Come on," the young man said. "How bad could it be?"

Jesse sighed. If Dolf were involved, it could get pretty bad, he'd bet. Add Larry the Leech to the formula and you had a recipe for disaster. At least all the snakes were in one basket the cowboy thought, as he followed Andy into the hall.

"And in conclusion, I'd just like to repeat that the building of a plant on this land will bring over two hundred jobs and hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to the community," Larry Atchison sat back down with a smug smile as the townspeople applauded his speech.

After looking around for Adele and not seeing her, Andy rose and cleared his throat. After being recognized, he spoke, his voice gaining power with each word.

"As the owner of the property under discussion, I'd like to say a few words. First, I'm astounded that this meeting is even taking place. The land is mine, bought and paid for. I didn't know I needed permission to give this property away, or that anyone else could have a say in its disposition. A reputable professional explained it to me, but I'm still having a hard time believing it. I hope I don't sound arrogant or high-handed; I'm just concerned that this land be used for the best possible purpose. I will sell the land at a fair price, if it turns out that an industrial park is best for the area, though I very much doubt it as it seems to benefit no one except the developers. However, I ask you to listen to someone most of you have known all your lives. Jesse Haller cares about the fate of this herd of mustangs and I'm betting he can make you care too."

Andy looked down at Jesse. Taking a deep breath, the cowboy stood beside the young man. Jesse's eyes met Adele's and took courage from the confident smile she gave him. Reminding himself that he had every right to

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his dream, the man began to speak.

"Like the boy said, you all know me. Some of you went to school with me. Jimmy, you played football with me."

A beefy man sitting behind the front table looked uncomfortable and pretended to study a sheet of paper in front of him. Jesse smiled wryly and continued.

"I guess most a ya know what a shine I've taken to those cayuses. They may not be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash, but I think what they represent is priceless. I ain't some kinda pipe dreamer thinkin' we can go back to the ways of the Old West; modern ranching is here to stay with its automatic grain feeders, helicopters and computer accountin' and I ain't stupid enough to stand in the way a progress. I'd just like to preserve a few relics a our past. After all, I'll likely be one someday."

"They're just a bunch a skinny, bad-tempered nags," Dolf said, from a seat somewhere near the middle of the room.

"If that's all ya see, I feel sorry ya, son," Jesse drawled. "When I see a herd a mustangs runnin' free across the open range my heart takes off like an eagle. For a few minutes I'm soarin' over the grass with 'em, wild and free as this land used to be. As we used to be. Well, times are sure enough tamer and so am I, but I can go look at them mustangs and feel young again with the whole world spread out at my feet. I don't wanna lose that. I don't think any of us would."

"Sit down, Haller," Dolf said. "Nobody else cares about that crap but you."

"I care," Andy said.

Dolf sneered as he rose from his seat. "I don't doubt that. Why don't ya tell these good folks why you'd just hand over a valuable piece a property to a hired hand?"

"To give the mustangs a home," Andy said, slowly and distinctly.

"Bull," Dolf said. "It's a gift to your lover for doin' such a bang up job. Ain't that right?"

"If that were true, it would be a private matter," Andy said. "You should be careful, Dolf. I whipped you once; I can do it again."

"Hold on a minute," Larry said. "You can't go makin' threats in a town meeting."

"Dolf's just pissed because I fired him," Andy said.

"And no cursing either," said Lucille Haines, the town council secretary.

"Sit down, Andy," Jesse said softly.

"You can set your ass down too," Dolf said. "You're all alone here, Haller."

"No, he is not," someone spoke from the very back.

Everyone turned as Milagra Vallenzuela entered the hall with Adele Pike.

Connie Bailey

"I care, Senor Jesse," she said, touching the beads around her neck. "And I will pray that your horses get their home."

"That's very touching, senora," Larry said, "but this is a meeting for property owners."

Abruptly, the sturdy, brown-skinned people occupying the back two rows stood as one. They crowded in behind Milagra and regarded the developer hostilely. Larry cleared his throat and shot a look at Dolf.

"Are you beaners gonna tell me ya own property?" the former ranch hand asked.

"As a matter of fact, they do," Adele said. "I sold it to them. They all pooled their resources for enough collateral to take out a loan and bought the old newspaper building."

Larry spun to fix his ex-wife with a disbelieving glare. "Do what?"

"I conducted business, Little Larry," Adele said coolly. "Isn't that what you used to call it?"

"This is a blatant attempt to manipulate the vote," Larry said.

"Quit your whining," Adele said. "You're just pissed because I went you one better."

"Let's settle down now," Lucille said. "And hear a few more opinions. I'm sure some more of these folks have somethin' to say about all this."

"Damn right," Dolf said. "How do all you macho muchachos feel about Kells bein' a piss garglin' queer?"

"They say it takes one to know one," Joe Gomes said from near the back of the room.

"You sidin' with this Limey queer?" Dolf said incredulously.

"Honcho trusts him and Honcho's always treated me fair and square," Joe said, moving to stand beside the housekeeper. "And besides, my Tia Milagra got me the job in the first place. I can't disrespect her now can I?"

"Didn't know you was a wetback," Dolf sneered.

"Do you really wanna start tradin' insults?" Joe asked. "After all the good times we had?"

Dolf shut his mouth and sat down.

"Thank ya, Joe," Jesse said. "And Milagra, I wanna thank you and your family and friends." The man looked down. "Most of all, I want to thank you, Andy. You showed me there's more'n one way a being a man and I owe ya for that."

"None of this has anything to do with the issue at hand," Larry called the meeting back to order. "I don't give a good Goddamn who's a bull and who's a steer. This land ain't gonna be no playground for dog food on the hoof. I say we put it to a vote now."

"I second that," said Cora, the owner of the local diner. "Sorry, Jesse, but I got to put my mortgage payments before your ponies."

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There was a general murmur of agreement from the group of business owners sitting together in a clump. From the number of nodding heads around the room, the vote was going to be close. Andy longed to take Jesse's hand in silent support, but didn't want to do anything that might tip the scales.

"All right, folks. Let's vote. Unless anybody else has anythin' else to say?"

"May I have the floor?"

Everyone turned to stare at the entrance. The second surprise appearance in less than fifteen minutes set the assemblage buzzing.

A burly man with long braids like pewter chains stood in the doorway. As he stepped forward, another man entered at his heels. Though both Native Americans wore jeans and shirts of typical Lakota weave, they were nothing alike. The second man was lean as a coyote, with night dark eyes and hair. They stopped halfway down the aisle and waited.

"Just who the hell are you two?" Larry asked in exasperation.

"I am Richard Iron-Eyes Hickman," the big man said calmly. "This is my lawyer, John Sixkiller."

"And what might your business be with this town council?"

"That depends," Hickman said. "Mr. Kells?"

"Yes?" Andy said.

"We have heard rumor that a medicine hat foal was born on your ranch recently."

"That's a fact," the Jesse answered when Andy looked to him.

The big Indian glanced over his shoulder at his companion, and the lawyer came forward.

"As you may or may not be aware," Sixkiller said, "the medicine hat paint is sacred to my people. Just as sacred is the land the foal was born on."

"Sacred!" Jesse repeated.

"That's correct," Sixkiller said. "When we heard the rumor, I looked into the history of this area. Part of Silver Sage Ranch and two adjoining spreads are in fact tribal land. I've already filed papers on behalf of Chief Iron-Eyes. We came here today to see the foal and give notice that a few thousand acres of range land will soon be designated as a preserve."

Larry's round face went beet red with sudden rage. "My land adjoins Silver Sage," he said.

"You would be Lawrence Atchison?" Sixkiller asked.

The lawyer handed Larry a piece of paper. Larry sat with a thump, his eyes fixed on the official seal of the U. S. government at the top of the document.

"Adele Pike?" Johnny said.

"Right here," Adele said. "You've got one of those for me, I expect."

"Yes, ma'am," the lawyer said. "You don't look as surprised as the

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gentleman.”

“I’m the one that called you about the foal,” Adele said.

Sixkiller’s professional mask slipped a trifle. “Thank you, ma’am,” he said, and returned to stand at Hickman’s shoulder.

“What kind of hustle is this?” Dolf demanded loudly. “Can these Injuns do this?”

Larry looked up from the legal document, the portrait of a man in shock. “My land,” he said numbly.

“Gone,” Adele said. “Much as I hate to stoop to gloating, how does it feel to have the rug yanked out from under your world, Little Larry?”

“I’ll get you for this, Addie,” her ex-husband said.

“I doubt it,” she said calmly. Without waiting to hear his answer, Adele broke up the now redundant meeting.

Larry slunk away, already punching numbers on his cell phone. He had investors to answer to. Contenting himself with a sneer, Dolf hurried after Larry.

The townsfolk stood reluctantly and dribbled out in small groups, talking excitedly. Soon, the room was soon empty but for a handful of people. After Milagra left with Joe, Jesse, Andy, and Adele were left with the two strangers.

“Why didn’t you tell us, Addie?” Jesse said with deceptive mildness.

“I didn’t know what was going to happen until today,” she said. “I didn’t want to raise your hopes, Honcho, that’s all.”

Andy suddenly burst into laughter.

“What is it, Colt?” Jesse asked.

“The Indians came to the rescue,” the Brit said. “In the movies, it’s always the cavalry.”

Jesse smiled. “That’s funny.”

Holding out his hand to the chief, Jesse expressed his gratitude. “I’m sure am glad that land is goin’ back to its rightful owners,” he said.

“If by rightful owners you mean the mustangs, I’ll agree with you,” the chief said.

“Well, I really don’t know what else to say ‘cept for much obliged,” Jesse said.

“It’s tribal land,” Hickman shrugged. “We would have gotten around to it, sooner or later.”

“Glad it was sooner,” the cowboy said.

“Keep fighting the good fight.” Gesturing to his lawyer, Chief Iron-eyes led the way out of the town hall.

“Thank you, Addie,” Jesse said.

“Hold that thought, Honcho,” she said. “I want to catch up with the chief. I’ll talk to you tonight or tomorrow morning and you can heap

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accolades on me.”

“That’ll be my pleasure, darlin’” Jesse said, hugging Adele tightly.

“All right,” she said in a flustered voice. “Enough, already. I’m late.”

Andy and Jesse watched her leave. Only then did the cowboy breathe a sigh of relief.

“I still can’t believe it,” Jesse said. “All them people standin’ up for us.”

“For you. You were wonderful,” Andy said.

“I was a babblin’ fool,” Jesse said. “Thank God Addie was on our side.”

“The mustangs are safe,” Andy said softly.

Jesse nodded. “You wanna celebrate, Colt?”

“Oh yes, I do indeed,” Andy said.

“Whatta ya wanna do?”

“Can’t you guess, cowboy?”

“You’re insatiable,” Jesse said.

“Big word for a simple country boy,” Andy teased. “You’re not complaining, are you?”

“Hell, no! Where do ya wanna do it?”

Andy smiled. “Listen to you, Honcho. You’ve gotten so bold.”

“You’re not complainin’, are ya?”

“Hell, no!”

Andy grabbed Jesse by the hand and pulled him into the stairwell that led up to the gallery. Closing the heavy door behind them, the young man threw himself into the cowboy’s arms. Jesse was slammed against the wall, as his eager lover swarmed over him with hands, lips, tongue and teeth. Jesse embraced the armful of beautiful boy and responded in kind.

“I feel like the principal’s gonna come along any minute and make us stay after school for a public display of affection,” Jesse said when their lips parted.

“Troublemaker,” Andy giggled. “Delinquent.”

“Seriously,” Jesse said. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

“I don’t care about location,” Andy said.

“You’ll never make your livin’ in real estate, Colt,” Jesse said, as he coaxed the ardent Englishman out of the building.

Twenty breathless minutes later, Jesse parked the ranch vehicle at the river where it meandered out of the Broken Hills. Grabbing Andy’s hand, the cowboy pulled him along the bank until they reached a crescent of sand beneath graceful branches, a miniature beach bounded by a shingle of smooth stones. Andy looked around in appreciation before throwing his arms around Jesse’s neck.

“It’s beautiful, Honcho. Just when I think there can’t be another incredible spot on this land, you show me one.”

“There’s nothing on this earth as beautiful as you,” the cowboy answered.

“Mm,” Andy hugged the man tightly. “I haven’t told you yet how proud

Connie Bailey

I was of you in that meeting. I don't know a braver man."

"For lovin' you, ya mean?" Jesse smiled.

Andy stopped the cowboy's mouth with a lively tongue. Jesse gave as good as he got, with mouth and hands, until both men were breathing heavily and testing the tensile strength of denim. Jesse cupped Andy's buttocks and set him on a flat-topped boulder before taking his mouth again. Andy wrapped his legs around Honcho's as the man deftly unfastened their jeans one-handed.

Andy moaned as the cowboy moved between his thighs, pressing their erections together, as their tongues slid sensuously against one another. The sound increased Jesse's arousal, encouraging him to greater efforts. He rubbed the ridge of Andy's hard flesh, making his lover squirm against the rock.

"Come on, Honcho," the Brit said. "You don't have to persuade me; I'm a sure thing."

Jesse chuckled. "Am I ever gonna get to seduce ya?"

"I don't see how. Whenever I look at you, my underwear falls down by itself."

Jesse laughed again. "Appears I got quite an effect."

"Yes, you do," Andy said seriously. "I hope I have the same effect on you."

"Course you do, Colt. I walk funny most of the time because I'm thinking 'bout ya and Little Honcho gets all excited. Either I stop seein' ya, or start wearin' roomier pants."

"I forbid you to do either," Andy said. "I won't give you up and I won't give up the sight of your arse in those jeans. Now come on buckaroo; I want to go for a gallop."

Jesse gazed at his lover for a long moment. "Damn, Colt," he said. "When I first saw ya, I sure never thought we'd end up like this."

"But you're glad," Andy finished for him.

"You ain't just whistlin' Dixie," Jesse agreed to his young lover's bewilderment.

Andy didn't stay confused for long. When the man's mouth covered his again, Andy grabbed him by the belt loops and rubbed their crotches firmly together. Driven by swiftly spiraling desire, Jesse pushed his jeans down his hips. Andy lifted his buttocks so his lover could bare enough of him to allow intimacy.

As soon as the young man's erection saw daylight, Jesse knelt and took the firm flesh in his mouth. Andy leaned back on his hands, gasping with pleasure as the man lovingly caressed him. The Brit nearly went boneless as his lover licked at his balls and then moved on to lubricate his opening in the most pleasant way possible.

Abruptly, Andy sat up and grabbed two handfuls of straw colored hair.

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"Whoa, pardner," he said in his best approximation of a drawl. "What say we give the big fella a work out?"

"Suits me," Jesse said rising to his feet.

The cowboy's arousal was nudging the hard ridges of his flat abdomen as he leaned over the profligate beauty spread before him. The rosy column of rigid flesh leaked cloudy fluid from the tip, straining toward the tight heat it longed to bury itself in. Andy reached for the pulsing shaft, but his hands were batted away.

"Easy, Colt," Jesse said softly. "I don't wanna rush this. It's awful flatterin' to an old coot to have someone as purty as you hot for me, but let's slow down a little."

"Agh!" Andy exclaimed in frustration. "I want you now!"

Jesse shook his head in wonder. "I love ya, Colt," he said.

"I love you too, Honcho. Now fuck me, damnit!"

"What am I gonna do with ya?" the man chuckled.

"Whatever you like," Andy said, "but do it now!"

"Hang on to your hat," Jesse said, determined to give the boy what he wanted.

Jesse pulled his shirt over his head and tucked it under Andy's backside. Bringing his lover to the edge of the rock, he pushed his legs apart. Andy responded avidly, spreading his thighs as widely as possible, bending his knees and planting the soles of his feet against the sides of the boulder. Without further ado, Jesse eased the head of his shaft into the saliva slick opening and pushed firmly.

"God, yes!" Andy cried out as the hard flesh entered him. "God, Honcho, you don't know what you do to me. I can feel your big cock stretching me and it's the most wonderful, most exciting thing that's ever happened to me. Promise me you'll never stop."

"I promise," the man said instantly. "You don't know what ya do to me, Colt. All I have to do is think about puttin' my cock in ya and I damn near come."

"Don't you dare," Andy warned. "I expect a full ride, cowboy."

Jesse groaned as the boy flexed the ring of muscle at his opening. "You're not helpin' matters," he said.

Andy grunted as the long rod slid home in him. Grasping Jesse's shoulders, the young man sat up farther so he could view the joining of their bodies. Jesse watched his lover's face, desire mounting at the way Andy's eyes seemed to melt like bittersweet chocolate in the sun. Subtly, the man shifted his hips, and his lover moaned.

"You're so big," Andy groaned. "You fill me up. I will never be any happier than I am at this instant; I could never want more than I have right now."

Connie Bailey

Jesse wrapped his arms around the young man and held him close for a long moment. "I feel the same way, Colt," he said. "Let me show ya."

Andy cried out in bliss as his lover thrust, rocking him gently against the boulder. Jesse dipped his head to lick and nip at the alluringly stiff nubs of the boy's nipples and Andy began to writhe uncontrollably. Between the attention of Jesse's mouth and fingers and the action of the hard cock in his sheath, the young man was near delirious with pleasure.

"Is this what ya wanted?" Jesse breathed in his lover's ear.

"Oh fuck yes," Andy panted. "If you touch my cock now, I'll go off like a rocket."

"Are ya ready to come?"

"You're killing me, Honcho," the boy groaned. "I've never been so turned on in my life."

"Are ya ready to come?" the cowboy asked again.

The only answer was a series of moans that increased in pitch and volume. Jesse took hold of Andy's taut arousal and squeezed. He pumped the silk-skinned rod once and it erupted, spilling creamy fluid over his fist. Andy shuddered violently, as a climax that would have registered around eight on the Richter scale commandeered his body.

Jesse gasped at the incredible sensation of his cock being massaged by the boy's sheath muscles. Instinctively, the man's hips moved, thrusting his hard shaft deeper into the trembling flesh. Hot folds of wet velvet hugged the plunging rod tightly, dragging deliciously at its solid length.

"Oh my God, Honcho," Andy panted. "You're making me hard again."

Jesse looked down. Sure enough, the boy's wilting member was beginning to stand. Wrapping his fingers around the stiffening flesh, the cowboy pumped insistently until his lover achieved full erection.

"Come for me again, babe," Jesse whispered.

"Keep doing that and it won't be a problem," Andy answered hoarsely.

"My pleasure," the man assured him.

Andy sucked in a harsh breath and wrapped his legs tightly around Jesse as his lover pulled him off the rock. With his arms supporting the boy's thighs, Honcho thrust in short, sharp strokes. Andy hugged the man tightly, his cheek resting atop tangled golden hair as he bounced on the big cock. His pleasure was so great he couldn't give voice to it.

Jesse pressed his face to Andy's sweat damp chest, fingers sinking into the hard muscles of Andy's buttocks as he climaxed. His release took possession of him, running along his veins like liquid fire to pool like lava in his belly until it jetted up the tight channel. The cowboy dropped to his knees as his legs refused to hold him up. Andy groaned as the twitching rod was driven deeper into him, and held the man tighter.

Jesse fell onto his back, taking Andy with him. The boy got his knees

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against the sand and posted on the still rigid shaft. Jesse looked up at the most erotic sight he could ever imagine and his cock pulsed strongly. Andy moaned in utter bliss as he ground against the tantalizing length of hard flesh.

“Gonna come again, Honcho,” Andy panted, as he rose up and sank back down.

“Let me give you a hand, Colt,” the man said.

Jesse gently replaced Andy’s hand on the young man’s straining rod and pumped steadily. Andy groaned deep in his chest and lowered himself as far down as possible. He took in as much of the cowboy’s length as he could and bore down as Jesse stroked him faster.

“Oh God, Honcho,” Andy cried out. “That feels so good. I love the way you touch me. I love the way you feel inside me. I love the way you’re looking at me right now. Oh God! Oh God, yes! Yes! Yes! Oh!” The young man’s speech deteriorated into a series of incoherent moans and yelps as his pleasure crested.

Jesse grinned in a very smug manner as Andy’s pretty cock spilled a second load over his knuckles. Lovingly, the man licked the thick fluid from his fingers while he watched his boy in the throes of a powerful climax. As the strong orgasm began to recede, Andy relaxed, supporting himself with his palms against Jesse’s chest.

“It’s okay, babe. You won’t squash me,” Jesse said, pulling Andy close. “Lift your butt for a second and I’ll pull out.”

“Don’t you dare,” Andy sighed in the man’s ear. “If I don’t get a few minutes quality cuddle time, I won’t be held responsible for missing limbs or damaged appendages.”

“Sounds like I better stay put,” Jesse answered.

“Just for a minute,” Andy wheedled charmingly.

“That’s fine, Colt. I’m still a little skittish, I know. I don’t mean to seem so all-fired anxious to get away from ya after we, um, ya know, do it. I’m just gettin’ used to the idea of not hidin’ how I feel about ya. But I will get used to it; I swear on all I hold dear, which I’m pretty much holdin’ right now. Why, in a month or two, you’ll be sick to death of hearing me say I love you. Hey, I just said I love you. And I just said it again.” Jesse paused. “Don’t you have somethin’ to say to me?”

There was no answer, and Jesse realized that the soft purring in his ear was the sleeping breath of a very satisfied young man. Easing his softening shaft from his sated partner, the cowboy cradled him to his chest. Lying back on the warm sand with the sun on his bare skin, his lover in his arms and the plangent sound of the river playing a lullaby, Jesse believed it was going to be all right from now on.

Some might call it faith and they wouldn’t be wrong, but whatever Jesse called it, it was strong enough to see him and his Colt through some dark

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times. Of which there were blessedly few. The rest of the time they were happy and that's more than a lot of folks can say. What say we leave them be now, and mosey on to another yarn?

The End.

Line Squall

Chapter One

"Well, if it ain't little Donnie Kilbride."

"Howdy, Ben," Donnie stood up as the horses he'd been hearing came out of the dark. "What you boys doin' in this neck a the woods?"

Big Ben slid down from the saddle, letting the reins drop as he walked toward the fire. "I'm takin' a break from the rodeo circuit. Come back here lookin' for work. When Roy Harold told me you was cowboyin' at Killdevil, and I had to come up, say hi. That there tall drink a firewater is Josh Evans, as fine a roper as you ever did see."

Donnie nodded in a friendly way and pointed to the coffee pot with his foot. "You want coffee; it's still good. I was just about to turn in when I heard your horses. Been a quiet night. Clyde just went off to look for a cow that's calvin' outta season."

"Yeah, we seen that other ol' boy ride off," Ben said. "New blood, huh?"

Donnie frowned. There was something about Ben's manner that just didn't set right. Then the coil of rope settled around his shoulders and was pulled tight.

Josh yanked, and Donnie lost his balance, falling hard onto his side. Ben knelt beside him, putting a hand on his chest, holding him down.

"I remember you from round-up last year," Ben said. "I had an idea then what your game was, but didn't know for sure until I stopped by to have a drink with Mr. Harold today."

Donnie's heart tried to escape through his mouth and he had to swallow it back down. He was lying less than a foot from the fire and his skin was becoming uncomfortably hot. The horrible suspicion that getting singed would be the least of his problems seized hold of Donnie and he began to struggle wildly.

Josh came closer and helped Ben flip Donnie onto his belly. Donnie had a close up view of the silver caps on the toes of Josh's fancy boots and waited for the impact. The blow never came. Neither man kicked, or punched, or even cursed Donnie.

"What the hell's goin' on?"

"I'll tell ya, Donnie," Ben said. "I expect you think we're here to kick your ass all over this mountain 'cause you know what Mr. Harold seen. You'd be right about that, but first we gonna find out if you're any good."

"What the hell you talkin' about, Ben?" Donnie asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"Mr. Harold seen you and that Clyde Love up t' the devil's business. I figger a cum drunk queer like you won't mind givin' me and Josh a taste a what you're servin' that saddle bum."

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"Fuck you," Donnie shouted.

Ben chuckled as he unbuttoned and dragged out his hogleg. "You got it backwards, Donnie boy. We gonna fuck you."

"I ain't fuckin' no guy," Josh said. "He can suck my dick."

"I will chew up and spit out anything you put in my mouth," Donnie warned. "Bet on it."

"And I'll blow your fuckin' head off," Ben retorted.

"Kill me then," Donnie said. "I ain't suckin' your dicks."

Ben shrugged. "Hold 'im," he said to Josh.

Donnie thrashed and bucked like a yearling feeling the saddle for the first time as the two men laid hold of him. He felt cold air on his ass as his jeans were tugged down. He heard Ben spit and did his best to get away, but Josh's knees on his shoulders pinned him good.

"You gonna git it now, Donnie Kilbride," Ben said, as he dropped his pants. "Close them big purty eyes 'less you wanna die a fright."

Josh giggled. "I sure as hell wouldn't want that log up my poop chute."

"Hell, this faggot's gonna love it. Ain't ya, faggot? You like fuckin' guys, Donnie. I'm gonna give ya what ya want. There ya go. How's that feel, queer?"

Donnie clenched his jaw as a hot hardness nudged his asshole. Then a pain so enormous it blocked out everything else stole Donnie's breath. He couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't feel anything but the agony of being torn in half. Ben thrust brutally, burying the rest of his length and Donnie began to heave.

"He's gonna puke on me," Josh said.

"No, he ain't. Give him a minute."

Donnie strained to hold in a scream as Ben shifted his weight. "You boys know I'm gonna kill both a ya when I get loose," he said through gritted teeth.

Ben laughed. "Boy, they gonna find your body under a whole bunch a rocks. Prob'ly blame it on Love. That boy ain't got no kind a luck."

Josh chuckled as Ben shunted his hard flesh in Donnie's sheath. He could feel the shudders that racked Donnie's rigid body at each stroke and even though he wasn't queer at all, his dick was stirring just like Ben said it would. By the look on Ben's face, it sure felt mighty good to him.

"What's it like?" Josh asked eagerly.

"Tighter'n Roy Harold's fist around a dollar," Ben panted. "I'm gonna pop purty quick, then you can find out for yourself."

Donnie cursed, jerked and twitched, his body trying instinctively to escape the impaling, as Ben pounded into him. He was moaning now, though unaware of it, as the thick shaft stretched him unmercifully. Delicate tissues tore and still the rapist drove into him.

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"Please," Donnie whispered. "No more."

"What's that, boy? You want more?" Ben taunted. "Don't you faggots never git enough?"

Tears leaked from beneath Donnie's closed eyelids as Ben increased the depth and power of his stroke. Josh's eyes were glued to Ben's big cock, slick with blood, plunging into the small opening. He never knew what hit him.

A cracking noise like splitting stone over-rode the gasps and grunts of mount and rider. Josh pitched sideways, landing in the campfire. Ben gave one more thrust before it dawned on him that Josh's hair was on fire, but Josh wasn't getting up. Ben pulled out of Donnie just as fury personified flew out of the dark and did justice on him with a rifle butt.

Donnie's hand on Clyde's arm stopped him from clubbing Ben to death. Ben lay on the stony ground moaning and clutching his bleeding, misshapen head. Donnie dragged Clyde to the other side of the fire, Clyde balking the whole way, wanting to get back to Ben and finish the job of hammering him to red jelly.

"Forgot my smokes," Clyde mumbled over and over.

Donnie eased his death grip on Clyde's forearm and he swayed on his feet before dropping abruptly to his knees. "Great God A'mighty, Clyde," he breathed.

Clyde looked at Donnie curiously for a second and then at the gory rifle in his hand. His pulse fluttered and his spit still tasted like pennies, but the surge of adrenalin was fading. The red mist cleared and everything sped back up to its normal pace again.

His eyes went to the bodies of the two strangers and what he'd seen and done hit him like a torrent of snowmelt. They were raping Donnie. No mistake about that. Clyde would never get that picture out of his head no matter how long he lived. Donnie with his face ground into the dirt, bare ass in the air, thrashing like a landed trout at the end of another man's dick.

Clyde hadn't even thought about it. He was still on horseback when he raised the rifle to his shoulder and fired. He realized now that he'd shot the one man first because he wanted to take the other apart with his own hands. Shooting him was just not personal enough.

Donnie pitched forward, catching himself on his palms, and began to retch violently. Clyde dropped his gun and knelt beside Donnie, helplessly touching his back as Donnie dry-heaved like a dog with a bone in its throat. After a while, the hacking and convulsing stopped and Donnie collapsed in a limp heap of long limbs.

"You okay?" Clyde asked.

"Hell no, I ain't okay," Donnie said in a voice with all its bones broken.

Clyde made a noise somewhere between a cough and a sob as he

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gathered Donnie into his arms and huddled over him, shielding him from any more harm. Silent tears rolled down Donnie's cheeks as he leaned against the solidness of Clyde Love, as hard and immovable as the mountain they stood on.

Neither spoke as the stars came out. Clyde cradled Donnie to his chest and numbly watched the glorious display as a swarm of meteorites plunged to fiery death, winking out like coals tossed in water. And all around, things went on as they always had; oblivious and uncaring that something bright and beautiful had passed away forever.

Donnie stirred as the moon was rising, pushing away from Clyde, wrinkling his nose. "Smells like a barbeque."

They both looked over at the man lying half in, half out of the campfire. Clyde's stomach did a slow roll as he realized what the mouth-watering aroma was. Slowly, he stood and dragged the smoldering remains of Josh out of the embers.

Donnie turned away, looking down slope at nothing. He heard the scrape of a boot on stone and Clyde tentatively touched his disheveled hair, just stirring the spiky ends.

"One a the snakes is still wrigglin'," Clyde said.

Donnie nodded once, accepting that it was his privilege and misfortune to pass judgment. "We gotta take care a that," he said. "You'll swing for sure if this is ever found out."

"I don't see what's to be done about it, Donnie."

Donnie's eyes remained fixed on the middle distance. "Don't ya?"

Clyde blew out a breath. "I guess I better go finish that one off."

"No." Donnie hauled himself to his feet. "I'll do it."

Wincing at each step, Donnie hobbled to where Ben lay reddening the grass beneath him. Clyde had sure enough made a mess of his head with that rifle butt. The battered man was hard to recognize as human, much less as Ben. Donnie was horrified by the injuries to flesh and bone until he remembered how it felt being raped.

"You sick son of a bitch," Donnie muttered.

Ben made a snuffling, whining sound and scrabbled at the ground in an attempt to crawl away. Donnie watched dispassionately for a long moment before he looked around for a weapon. Without saying a word, Clyde handed him the rifle.

Donnie's fingers trembled on the blood tacky gun, but he couldn't pull the trigger. Clyde took the weapon out of Donnie's hands and put a round through the rapist's skull. Ben jerked and then the terrible bubbling breaths ceased for good.

"Donnie?"

Donnie looked up suddenly, as though he'd forgotten Clyde was there.

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"What're we gonna do with the bodies?"

"Nothin'," Donnie said. "Let 'em rot."

"We cain't just leave 'em lay for anybody to find."

"Wake up, Clyde. The foreman sent 'em up here. When they don't come back to the ranch house ... well, it ain't gonna take him long to put two'n'two together and git five."

Clyde's face lost its nervous cast, going bleak as a winter sky. "What you mean Harold sent 'em up here?"

Donnie could feel the rage building in Clyde, like a line of thunderclouds piles up behind the fence of a ridge like a bull at the gate. He knew his next words would be the lightning that sets the blaze, and he didn't care. Harold deserved less mercy than the dead cowboys.

"He sent 'em to do what they done," Donnie said simply.

"Why?"

"He seen us together and wanted t' teach me a lesson."

Donnie saw the muscles bunch along Clyde's jaw and then the man was stalking toward his horse. Ripping open his saddlebag, Clyde reloaded the rifle. Spurs jingling, he swung up into the saddle and pointed the horse's nose down the trail.

"Clyde wait. I don't think I can ride none."

Clyde's features sharpened in a spasm of pain. "Don't reckon you can," he said flatly. "You better wait here while I take care a this. Pack up camp, if you've a mind and it don't hurt too bad. I'll be back directly."

"Clyde."

Clyde leaned down from the saddle and cupped Donnie's cheek in his hand. "Don't you worry; I'll be comin' back. Don't wanna leave ya, but... somethin' I gotta do."

Donnie nodded his understanding and stood back. Clyde put his heels to the horse's flanks and moved away into the dark. Donnie stood looking where Clyde had gone long after all trace of him was swallowed up by the blowing dark. Donnie set to work, but he never told Clyde that he wept the whole time he was striking camp.

Chapter Two

Clyde didn't bother with subtleties. He swung down off his horse and kicked in the door of Harold's office. With the barrel of the rifle preceding him, Clyde came on in without waiting for an invitation.

"Y'all sure are back in a hurry, Ben," Harold said as he turned from the cabinet behind his desk. "Wham, bam, thank ya, Donnie, huh? How 'bout a snort to top it off?"

Harold saw Clyde and the fifth of Jim Beam slipped from his fingers to shatter on the floor. The sharp smell of whiskey permeated the stagnant air like the scent of impending violence. Harold's glance flicked sidewise, and Clyde saw the holster on the pegboard.

Crossing the small space in three strides, Clyde lifted the gun down and slung it over his left shoulder. The weight of the peacemaker felt good against his side, almost as good as the dismay on Roy Harold's face. Even more satisfying was the fear that widened Harold's eyes when Clyde drew the Colt.

"Now, you just hold on a minute, boy," Harold said. "Think about what you're doin'."

"Did you think about what you did?"

"What the hell you talkin' 'bout?"

"You tellin' me you didn't send them pissants out t' cornhole Donnie?"

Harold opened his mouth to lie. He surely didn't want to die, not over some no-count mama's boy that had this Clyde fella wrapped around his dick. And looking into Clyde's lightless gaze, Roy Harold had no doubt that this one had the sack shoot him.

"Why?" Clyde choked out, before Harold could answer his first question. "We wasn't hurtin' nobody. Why'd you wanna go and do somethin' so mean?"

Seeing he had nothing to lose, Harold answered candidly. "I took on Donnie Kilbride outta some respect for his daddy, but Donnie ain't exactly a chip off the ol' block, now is he? He might look like any other hand, but I saw through him when he first come sidlin' up sweet as honey, spoiled rotten by his mama, flashin' them big eyes like the whore he is."

Harold paused to spit and Clyde's finger tensed on the trigger.

"Reckon you're sweet on Donnie Kilbride, ain't ya?" Harold continued. "I seen the two a ya, goin' at it like cats in heat. Looks to me like you got a real taste for it, Love."

"Shut up!" Clyde roared, leveling the revolver at Harold.

Harold took an involuntary step back.

"Do I take it that Ben and Josh met with an accident?" Harold asked.

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"No accident," Clyde said. "I killed 'em."

"You know the law's gonna be after ya."

"Expect so."

"Why in tarnation did ya come down here then? Why didn't ya hightail it into the mountains where nobody'll ever find ya?"

"Cause this is where you are, Mr. Harold."

"You reckon to kill me, too?"

"I surely do."

"Then I wanna tell ya that the two a ya make me sick to my stomach,"

Roy Harold said. "I can just about see bein' horny enough to poke an ass as smooth as Kilbride's, but the way you was kissin' and fussin' over that boy is downright queer."

"By rights, I oughta shove this gun up your wrinkled old ass and pull the trigger," Clyde said. "Then you might have some idea how much you hurt Donnie."

Harold's eyes flickered left and Clyde fired without thinking. The rancher fell sideways, knocking over the metal cabinet and uncovering the shotgun leaning against the wall. Harold clawed for the Winchester, but it might as well have been in Timbaktu. The hole Clyde had made in his chest had nicked his heart, and he died in moments, his mouth working like a salmon hauled from a stream.

Clyde doubled over, fighting sudden clenching waves of nausea as the puddle of blood under the rancher crept toward his boots. Conquering the queasiness, he stepped quickly over the corpse, picked up the pump shotgun and checked the breech. The single barreled weapon was loaded, as he'd expected.

Feverishly, Clyde gathered boxes of ammunition for the guns, dumping it in a grocery bag. As he was leaving, he dropped a match among the debris of the Jim Beam bottle. A blue flame sprang to life and Clyde swept an armful of papers off the desk to feed it.

As he loaded his new acquisitions on the horse, the windows of the office brightened with an orange light. Shaky, but dry-eyed, Clyde rode away from the ranch.

"Donnie," Clyde called out as he reached the camp in the cold pewter dawn.

"Here," Donnie called back, walking from behind a tall boulder with the rifle on his shoulder.

Clyde slid to the ground, his eyes skipping over the bodies of Ben and Josh. "Everything okay up here?"

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"Nothin' stirrin'," Donnie answered. "How 'bout down there?"

"Nothin' stirrin' there no more neither. Found one or two things we might need."

Donnie was taken with the Winchester and Clyde didn't try to talk him out of it, but handed over the boxes of shells. The way Donnie shot, he was better off with the shotgun. More chance he'd hit something. Clyde held on to the 30-30 and the Long Colt.

"You know they gonna come after us," Clyde said what he didn't need to.

"That's a fact. Reckon they'll find us by and by."

"Yep." Clyde put a hand on Donnie's shoulder, his heart cracking like chilblains when Donnie winced. "I'm sorry."

"What you got to be sorry about? You done what you had to like a man."

"It had to be done," Clyde agreed. "But we're in a situation now, boy. What them two done to you won't matter to the law 'round here. And even if they figured shootin' them two was right, I don't think they'll look too kindly on me ridin' all the way down there to put a bullet in Mr. Harold."

"Clyde," Donnie said softly and Clyde edged close again like a scolded hound forgiven. "I know you done that for me, and I ... I'm obliged to you."

"Don't," Clyde said. "It weren't no more than puttin' down a rabid coyote."

Donnie had a suspicion that Clyde was lying about how little the killing affected him, but he didn't press it. He'd had a lot of hours to sit here in the dark and think about the future and whether or not Donnie Kilbride and Clyde Love still had one.

"You game to pack it into them mountains?"

Clyde nodded. "What choice we got?"

"None. We never did."

Clyde's mouth tightened at the bitter tinge to Donnie's voice. "It ain't our fault this happened," he said.

"Think anybody else will care?"

Clyde thought that over. "No I surely don't, 'cept maybe for Treena. I told you 'bout her. Reckon that little girl won't understand 'bout all this no how." Clyde paused. "We better git started. Gonna be slow goin' on foot."

"I'll be able to ride soon," Donnie said.

"You sure you don't need a doctor or somethin'?" Clyde finally said the words he'd been avoiding, alluding to the rape in a roundabout fashion.

"I'll be okay in a couple a days, and I don't wanna talk about it no more."

That suited Clyde right down to the ground. "Wish I'd a been here though," he said. "Wouldn't a happened had I been here."

"You woulda been, if Harold didn't send that damn pregnant cow out with us. Stupid son of a bitch."

"Dead son of a bitch."

Donnie laughed unexpectedly, a shocked little cough of surprised mirth,

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and gave Clyde an incredulous look. Clyde ducked his head.

“Come on then; let’s get up the trail.”

Clyde picked up his reins and the reins of the pack mules and began walking deeper into the wilderness. Behind him he left any chance he’d ever had at making a decent life with Treena at his side and some kids some day. Before him the untamed reaches of the range and a life that might end at any second. In the heart he kept carefully hidden was a wild gladness that his time with Donnie didn’t have to end yet.

Chapter Three

Donnie lay on his stomach, a piece of sweet grass between his teeth, on the bank of a lake as deep as his thoughts. Clyde had put together something he called a fishing pole, but he wasn't having much luck. Seemed like neither one of them was cut out to be a fisherman.

The sun was hot on Donnie's shoulders, but he was disinclined to move right at that moment. He'd just gotten comfortable, his chin on his crossed forearms, legs stretched behind him as he watched Clyde try to catch supper.

Clyde threw the makeshift pole to the ground and kicked at it. He overbalanced and went down on his ass in a couple of inches of water. Donnie laughed and Clyde scowled at him.

"Think it's funny?"

Donnie nodded, chewing the stalk of grass. Clyde stood and stomped over, dropping to the ground next to Donnie. Donnie raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment when Clyde moved closer. After a moment, Donnie felt Clyde's hand on the small of his back.

"You mind?" Clyde asked diffidently.

Donnie shook his head slowly, the sunshine making him logy and drowsy. His eyelids were at half-mast, his gaze fixed on the hazy horizon of dusty blackberry peaks. Clyde's touch felt as good as the warmth from the sun, but it provoked another kind of heat. In a few moments, Donnie shifted restlessly, rolling up on his side.

Donnie's eyes met Clyde's in an exchange of mutual longing. "Couple more days," Donnie said.

Clyde nodded, accepting without question. "No hurry," he said, though there was.

"Come 'ere," Donnie invited. "Make a backstop."

Clyde moved closer and pulled Donnie to rest against his chest, Donnie's rangy length stretched straight out in front of him, the sharp toes of his boots framing the sunset. Slowly, like a rusty hinge finally getting oil, Clyde bent his neck and pressed his lips to the top of Donnie's head. Donnie settled in, resting his arms on Clyde's thighs.

He was hungry, sore, and on the run from the law, but he was content that it be so as long as Clyde was with him.

Thomas Robb focused on the small woman choking the life out of a red bandanna, the kind cowboys tied around their necks in the movies. He reminded himself that any story could be THE STORY that catapulted him

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out of the hinterlands and on target to New York City. He was sick to death of Montana, and he desperately needed a break.

"Treena," Thom said softly, like a man coaxing a kitten down from a tree. "I'm sorry to bother you at home, but the folks I talked to said you knew Clyde Love better than anybody."

"I know him," Treena Pacquette said, stressing the verb. "He ain't dead."

Thom could've kicked himself for using the past tense. "You're right," he said. "Would you mind if we talked for a while? I'd like to ask you about Clyde, if that'd be all right."

Treena was torn. Her parents wanted her to distance herself from the scandal. She wanted people to know that Clyde was not a homicidal maniac. He had a temper on him, but he wasn't a cold-blooded killer. She had been shocked when the news broke that the authorities found two dead bodies out on the Killdevil range, and now it looked like the man that hired Clyde had been in his office when it burned down.

"Treena?" Thom prompted.

"Sorry," she said. "Would you like some coffee? It's fresh."

"I'd love a cup."

Treena brought the coffee out to the back porch, and Thom imagined he felt Mr. and Mrs. Pacquette's eyes through the window as he sat on the ladderback chair. Treena sat opposite with a bowl and a sack of pole beans, snapping them as she talked.

"What you wanna know 'bout Clyde?"

Reminding himself that he was speaking to an eighteen-year-old girl, Thom smiled gently. "You and Clyde go together?"

Treena smiled at the speckled enamel bowl. "Yeah. We're goin' to get married when he gets a stake. He's a good boy, works hard, but he ain't never had two nickels to rub together. Ain't his fault. He lost his folks when he was just a kid."

"He's an orphan?" Thom kept her going when she paused. He knew Clyde's history; all the other reporters were talking to the aunt and the sister. Thom was the one that thought to look for a girlfriend.

"Yeah, he has an aunt and sister, but I never met 'em. Said they both run him off for getting' into too much trouble in school; reason he was here lookin' for ranch work. Didn't find nothin'. Heard about that job over at Killdevil, and ..."

The snapping of a fresh bean was loud in the sudden silence.

"Mister?" Treena looked up at the well-dressed man that smelled of cologne instead of manure and tobacco.

"What is it, Treena?"

"You know what happened out there? I only know what's on the news, and I have to sneak around to watch it. My mama and daddy don't want me

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seein' it."

"You know about the ... bodies," Thom said, raising his eyebrows inquiringly and waiting for her nod. "The men found at the camp were both shot with the 30-30 that Roy Harold gave Clyde and Donnie Kilbride when he hired them."

"Donnie Kilbride," Treena repeated the name like a child finishing a dose of medicine. "You wanna know what I think? I think this Donnie Kilbride done the killin'. Who is he anyway?"

"It appears he's a lot like Clyde," Thom said. "Same age, on his own, down on his luck."

Thom didn't mention Donnie Kilbride's family. His phone conversation with Kilbride senior had depressed him for hours. For the first time in months of sobriety, he'd thought about the unopened bottle of Scotch in his kitchen cabinet.

Treena nodded. She sure understood being down on your luck.

"What was Clyde like with you?"

"He was always real respectful," Treena said quickly, her eyes glowing now. "Treated me like a lady, always. You might not think he was much to look at him, but he's a decent man. Wants to get a ranch and raise cows and babies some day."

"How'd you meet?" Thom sat back, unexpectedly charmed by this sparrow of a girl.

"We was on the way to a revival," Treena said. "Mama, daddy and me. Our old car had a flat and Clyde walked by. He seen daddy was wearin' his church clothes and offered to change the tire. Daddy tried to give him a dollar, but you could see he didn't do it for the money. I liked that. Clyde can be real sweet sometimes."

"Sweet. That wasn't a word I was expecting to hear. Did he get into fights much?"

"No more'n any other hand. Clyde don't drink, don't cuss and far as I know, he don't whore nor play cards. He might come from nothin', but he ain't trash, Mr. Robb."

"I don't think that," Thom said. "Do you have a picture of him, by any chance? Seems like the boy was real camera shy."

"Nobody to take pictures after his mama died, I reckon," Treena said as she stood. "I'll be right back."

Thom noted the thinness of her wrists and ankles, the way the floral patterned dress hung from her shoulders. She looked so tired, more tired than any eighteen-year-old he'd ever seen. These people in these small cow towns lived a hard life, no mistake. Thank God and sonny Jesus his mom had married out of her rural beginnings.

Treena saw Thom admiring her African violets when she came back out.

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“They ain’t as hard to grow as some folks think,” she said.

“Yours are beautiful,” Thom said. “Don’t think I’ve ever seen healthier plants.”

Treena’s shy smile peeked out again. “Here,” she said, reaching into her apron pocket. “Me’n Clyde went to a carnival just before he left to find work. Went in one a them booths: four shots for a quarter. Couldn’t get him to smile no ways ‘til I poked him in the ribs.”

Thom looked at the strip of photos, black and white, just over postage stamp size. In the first three, Clyde stared straight into the camera, hat low on his forehead, eyes gleaming in the shadow of the brim, while Treena smiled at him, at the camera and back at him. In the fourth, Clyde’s eyes were half moons and his mouth was stretched in a surprised laugh above Treena’s impish profile.

“Take the top one,” Treena said. “I never liked it as much as the others.”

Carefully, Thom tore the top photo off and handed the others back to her. She quickly slipped them back into her pocket, but didn’t sit. Thom could sense that the interview was over, but he had one last hunch to play.

“Thank you, Miss Pacquette,” he said. “I appreciate this. You seemed curious, so I thought you might like to see this.”

Thom put Clyde’s picture in his jacket and pulled out another slightly larger one. It was obviously a high school yearbook proof and showed a fresh-faced, clear-skinned boy of about sixteen or seventeen. He looked like a dreamer to Treena, not a doer.

“Huh. He don’t look like no killer. He’s cute,” she said grudgingly.

Thom silently agreed. The boy with the big eyes that looked out of the frame with such hope was a son any mother could love.

“You don’t know him, then? Never seen him with Clyde before?”

“No, sir. Clyde didn’t have no friends but me, and maybe the cook at the bus stop. Leastways, he used to talk to Clyde when we went in there for a Co-Cola.”

Thom nodded. “So Clyde’s a loner, by all accounts. Except for you.”

Treena smiled, taking his statement as a compliment. “He used to tell me he could relax around me. I think I reminded him a his mama a little.”

Thom thought she’d hit that nail dead on the head, but kept the opinion to himself. “Thank you again. As my sainted Aunt Gwendolyn used to say, I hope this comes right as rain for you and Clyde.”

“Thank you. You come on back if you need to. Or if you was to hear anything ...”

Thom took Treena’s rough little hand and held it for a moment, cursing his weakness in giving her hope. “I’ll let you know,” he said.

The journalist got into his car, purposely avoiding the rear view mirror. He had no wish to see Treena Pacquette’s slight silhouette standing hopefully

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on the porch of the clapboard house. The image would break his heart; he just knew it. Looking straight ahead, he drove to meet his contact in local law enforcement.

Clyde watched Donnie swing up into the saddle, landing with a grunt of pain. "Git down from there, Donnie. Future generations a Kilbrides are at risk."

Donnie looked down, his face white. "Ain't gonna be none and that's a fact."

"Git down anyway. Makes me hurt to look at ya."

"I'll be fine. We need to get on the other side of this range and we ain't got 'til Christmas."

Clyde clenched his jaw a couple of times as if literally chewing something over. Taking off his fleece-lined jacket, he handed it up to Donnie.

"Set on this."

"You'll freeze, you dumb son of a bitch."

"I'll put a blanket 'round my shoulders. Don't you worry 'bout me. Take the jacket."

"If it'll shut you up." Donnie bunched the jacket under his ass and settled back down. "Better," he said grudgingly, pressing his heels to the buckskin's flanks.

Clyde mounted up and followed Donnie, the set of his lips a little less grim.

Chapter Four

"Hey, Romy," Thom said as the deputy sheriff opened the door of his car and slid into the passenger seat of the Fairlane.

Jerome Walker adjusted his gun belt so the .38 wouldn't dig into his thigh and settled back, looking out the windshield at his cruiser. "Will ya lookit that? Nearly parked on a fuckin' beer bottle. Fuckin' litterbugs."

Thom smiled. "You ever quit bitching?"

"Kiss my ass."

"If I thought it would stop your whining, I just might do that. Can we get down to it?"

"What you want now? I told you all I know. My superiors find out I'm talkin' to you, I could lose my badge."

"Bullshit, Romy. Your daddy is a county commissioner. You'd have to smoke a bone on the Christmas Parade float to get fired."

"That's enough a that talk," Romy said quickly. "You know what you know, Thomas T. Robb, but you don't never need to say it out loud."

Thom nodded. He had his leverage on Romy, and Romy was right. No need to rile the man up by taunting him with flippant remarks. "Sorry, Romy. Not my fault I walked into the locker room at the wrong time."

"Yeah, but you sure are gettin' mileage out of it, ain't ya?"

"Come on now. You know I would never tell anyone. This is the lamest blackmail scheme in the history of such things."

Romy smiled, showing his perfect teeth. "You got to at least pretend ya got me over a barrel, Thom."

"Then give me the latest scoop, or I'll expose you."

Romy's smile became a leer. "And then what?"

"I believe this is called entrapment, officer."

"Okay, then." Romy set his hat on the seat and ran a hand through his thick blonde hair. "Them two boys know their way around the outdoors, and there sure is a lot of mountain out there to hide on. There's a deputy flying around up there in a chopper, but hell, it's like lookin' for your dick in a stack a needles."

"You think those boys'll get away?"

"Don't much care. The deceased were fucks lookin' for a place to up. Ben Bledsoe was a particularly nasty piece a work. Liked gettin' rough with the ladies. Joshua Evans was Ben's dog. Tell you the truth, whoever did kill 'em did the county a favor."

"That the official opinion of the sheriff's department?"

"Hell no! And don't you tell anyone I said that. Damn it, Thom. You make me nervous as a long tailed cat in a room fulla rockin' chairs. You

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want to hear about Harold, or not?”

“Love to.”

“Roy Harold didn’t fall asleep with a see-gar in his mouth. He was shot with his own gun. Cook saw a man on horseback at about the right time to have started the fire. He described someone that could be Clyde Love. Wish we had a picture ‘stead a relyin’ on old Klaus’s memory.”

Thom shifted, fighting the urge to put his hand in his pocket where the photos of Clyde Love and Donnie Kilbride lay face to face. “Klaus?”

“The cook from the diner. He described Love for a sketch artist.”

“Sheriff’s department has a sketch artist?”

“Jessie Algood, the art teacher from over in Sheraton. She’s pretty good. Made Love look a little like that actor.”

“What actor?”

“The one from that movie, you know, with the lady gunslinger.”

“Never mind, Romy. What else can you tell me that I don’t already know?”

Romy slanted a look at Thom. “You never heard this from me, but Ben Bledsoe’s pants was down around his ankles and there was evidence he had e-jac-u-lated, as the coroner put it. Not only that, there was blood on his wang. What the hell you make a that?”

Thom thought of Donnie Kilbride’s earnest face in the yearbook photo, big eyes, sweet mouth, and Thom’s stomach felt cold all of a sudden.

“I know what I make of it: a sick, sordid story. What about you and your colleagues?”

Romy shook his head. “They pulled Ben’s pants up before any pictures was took. Ain’t nobody ever gonna know what happened less they was there. Official version is Bledsoe and Evans saw the campfire and stopped by. They got into a dustup and found out they bit off more’n they could chew. Kilbride and Love’ll be charged with murder.”

Thom closed his eyes for a long moment. He wanted to ask Romy if that set okay with him, but it was a waste of time and breath. Romy was not about to do anything to rock the boat.

“You spent most of your free time up in those mountains when you were a boy. If you were Kilbride and Love, where would you go?”

Romy gave Thom another of those sideways looks. “Lots a places they could go. Gimme your notepad.”

While Thom watched, Romy drew a crude map with the most logical campsites and routes down the other side of the range. Folding the piece of paper several times, Romy stuck it under the visor.

“Don’t you look at that ‘til I’m long gone,” he said, opening the door.

“Why haven’t you shared this knowledge with your colleagues, Deputy Walker?”

Romy snorted. “Cause fuck them, that’s why. They ain’t never done a

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goddamn thing to help me. Just the opposite, in fact. By rights, I should be in charge a this investigation.”

“No argument from me. Thanks for the information. Hey, Romy.”

Romy leaned down and stuck his head back in the car. “What?”

“Why do you stick around here?”

“It’s all I know,” Romy said. “Good luck, Thom. Be careful, you hear?”

“Will do,” Thom said, and waited for Romy to leave.

Thom pulled the slip of paper from the visor and opened it on his knee. A quick glance at the crude map told him all he needed to know. Starting the car, he pulled back onto the two-lane highway, checking his gas gauge. He had plenty right now, but he’d need to fill up, if he intended to drive to other side of the mountains soon.

“You sure?”

Donnie nodded, looking at Clyde over his shoulder. “Hell yes, I’m sure. Do I need to put it in writin’ for ya?”

Clyde dropped his eyes, still not comfortable with what he wanted, much less asking for it. As gently as he could, he tugged Donnie’s jeans down. Firelight bloomed in a false tan over flesh that rarely saw the sun as Clyde put his raw hand on Donnie’s hip. Clyde spat into his other hand and felt a tremor run through Donnie’s lean frame.

“Donnie?”

“It’s all right. Go on. I want you to.”

Clyde took himself in hand, but didn’t enter Donnie. He paused, feeling guilty for what he wanted to do, as his arousal pulsed between Donnie’s cheeks.

“Donnie, we ain’t got to do this right now.”

“Tell you what, Clyde. If I don’t get some soon, I’m gonna die a blue balls.”

Clyde nodded his comprehension. He hadn’t known what he was getting into the first time he let Donnie touch his cock, but he wasn’t sorry. What he was, was ignorant,

“There’s... other things,” he said haltingly. “I reckon we might find somethin’ to do that don’t hurt ya.”

Donnie’s eyelids prickled with tears. “You are too much, Clyde Love. You don’t even know what you’re talkin’ ‘bout, do ya?”

“Ain’t no call to mock me,” Clyde yanked his jeans up.

Donnie rose to a kneeling position, turning to put a hand on Clyde’s shoulder. “Don’t be mad at me. I couldn’t bear that right now.”

“I ain’t mad,” Clyde said with painful honesty. “It hurts me when you make fun a me.”

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"I ain't makin' fun a you, Clyde. You're the only good thing ..."

Donnie's words ended as Clyde embraced him fiercely, stealing his breath.

Their mouths came together in an ardent collision of lips, teeth and tongues as Clyde eased Donnie to the ground on his back. Clyde sank down onto his elbow and hip, sliding a hand down Donnie's flat belly to the nest of dark curls at his groin. Donnie sucked in a harsh breath as Clyde's chilly hand curled around his erection.

"You like that?" Clyde asked in a barely audible voice.

"Yeah," Donnie breathed out. "Don't you?"

Clyde got it then. Whatever felt good to him, would most likely feel good to Donnie. With a map of sorts to follow, Clyde gained confidence. Putting one arm around Donnie, Clyde cradled him to his chest, kissing and stroking until Donnie's breath caught in his throat, his arousal twitched against Clyde's palm, and he spilled thick, warm fluid over scarred knuckles.

"Jesus, Clyde," Donnie panted.

"Was it okay?" Clyde's crushed granite voice rubbed against Donnie's ear.

"Okay? Jesus, Clyde! You damn near stop my heart and want to know if it was okay?"

Clyde's habitual scowl softened as he gathered Donnie closer. Donnie sighed, warm on both sides by Clyde and the fire, boneless in the aftermath of orgasm. Clyde reached into Donnie's coat, and Donnie stirred.

"Lookin' for the whiskey," Clyde explained.

Donnie laughed softly. "Ain't no more. I drunk it all. But you don't need whiskey."

Clyde looked perplexed when Donnie slid down, but he didn't have long to wonder. He gasped and went rigid as his dick was engulfed in hot, wet velvet and sucked enthusiastically. Clyde wove his nicked fingers in Donnie's thick hair and came like the northbound freight with faulty brakes. Donnie swallowed hard a couple of times and Clyde ground out a couple of words.

"Enough dammit."

Donnie let Clyde's spent arousal slide from between his lips and climbed back up to lie alongside Clyde. "Damn. That was real nice. I could git used t' this."

"We have to talk about it?"

"Nope. You got any cigarettes?"

"Think we smoked the last one after supper."

"Supper," Donnie laughed shortly. "That was scrawniest rabbit I ever seen."

There was deep silence except for the crackle of the fire and then Donnie spoke again. "Sorry. I should be glad to have that rabbit. Why do you put up with me, Clyde Love?"

"Go to sleep," Clyde said gruffly.

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Donnie nestled closer to Clyde's heat and closed his eyes. "Mother hen," he said under his breath. He didn't see the fond smile that altered the harsh topography of Clyde's features into something that could be called handsome without stretching the truth.

Clyde lay awake, with Donnie's sweet weight against his chest, one leg thrown over his. He had changed profoundly in the last weeks, letting down his guard, doing things he never thought he would. He had thought they had the range to themselves and no one would ever know what he and Donnie had fallen into.

At first, the violence visited on them at Roy Harold's behest had seemed like old-fashioned eye for an eye wages of sin: a just punishment for what he and Donnie had done together. But he couldn't make himself believe that anymore, not when he was holding Donnie like this.

There was nothing wrong with this love. He felt that in his bones, in his blood, in his heart and his manhood. If he could just wrap his head around it, wouldn't he be content? If he could just rid his mind of the idea that it was a sin. If society would only let them be.

But Donnie's rape only reinforced what Clyde had been taught. If you fuck around with other guys, you're going to get fucked up, sooner or later. Well, if that's the way it was, Clyde would turn the tables. From now on, he did the ass kicking. Let anyone look at Donnie and him sideways and they'd wake in the hospital, if they woke up at all.

The killing of Roy Harold and the two rapists had taken the governor off Clyde's throttle. He was running wide open now; all bets were off, and he saw no reason not to take what Donnie offered him: the unconditional love and tenderness he'd been craving unaware since his mama died.

Donnie's love closed a very old wound, made Clyde feel whole, more complete, and Clyde would not give that up to the law, or anyone else.

If they were caught, they were dead, simple as that. Might as well go whole hog. And woe to anyone that ever tried to hurt Donnie Kilbride again.

Clyde finally slept and his sleep was restful and untroubled by guilt or regret.

Chapter Five

Clyde turned the horses out to graze and began setting up the tent. Donnie had a fire going and the last of the beans was warming in the battered pot. Clyde kept an eye on Donnie as he worked, partly for the pure pleasure of it, and partly because he was worried.

Donnie made out like he was fine, but Clyde didn't buy it. The spark in Donnie's gaze was dimmed and that made Clyde angry and sad as hell at the same time. The feeling was so intense that he wondered if he was going crazy. Pounding in the last tent peg with a lot more force than the job required, Clyde went to the fire.

Donnie looked up. Held out his hand to Clyde. Clyde let Donnie draw him down to the grass beside the campfire. A plate of beans was put into his hands and he automatically began to shovel them into his mouth.

"You got somethin' to say to me?" Donnie asked, as he took the empty plate back and put it with his. Supper didn't take long these days.

"Somethin's wrong," Clyde began, pausing when Donnie grinned at him. Clyde smiled back. "Guess that's a understatement," he said. "But I'm worried about you."

"You look out for your own dumb ass, Clyde Love. Don't be worryin' about me."

"Donnie, I don't wanna talk about what happened anymore'n you do, but I think we got to. It's eatin' at you. When I go to touch you ..."

Donnie looked up from the fire. "Have I turned you away? Ever?"

Clyde shook his head. "That ain't the point. I can feel you flinch."

"I'm healed up. Why won't ya believe me? It's been a week, Clyde."

"I ain't talkin' about that neither. Hell, Donnie, I don't know what I'm talkin' about. I just know somethin's wrong and I wanna make it right for ya."

"Aw, Clyde," Donnie said only half-teasing. "Ain't you the sweetest thang?"

"Why are ya always actin' the fool, Donnie Kilbride? Cain't ya be serious for one minute?"

"I would, but I don't wanna spook ya. You ain't ready for my kinda serious; might never be."

Clyde frowned. "I know you think I'm dumb as a post, but ..."

"Got nothin' to do with smarts," Donnie interrupted. "And you ain't dumb. Let's don't fight. My dick's so hard it's about to poke a hole in my jeans."

Clyde dropped his eyes and looked back up. "I don't know how to feel when you talk like that," he said haltingly. "Part a me wants to sock ya in the jaw, and the rest a me wants ..."

"What?"

Line Squall

“You know what.”

“Cain’t say it, can ya?”

“Don’t wanna say it.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

Standoff.

Then Donnie spoke, his voice grainy with some ineffable emotion.

“When you’re ridin’ alone and ya come up on somethin’ that’s so purty it stops ya right there and makes ya smile, do ya think a me? If ya think a me, do you git this funny achin’ deep in your gut?”

Clyde looked at the fire. “Reckon so. What’s your point?”

“I feel that,” Donnie said. “And usually my dick gets in on it, too.”

Clyde shifted so he could put his arm around Donnie’s shoulders. “Yep,” he said.

“As long as we both feel the same,” Donnie said, unbuttoning Clyde’s fly. “It’ll be all right.”

Clyde didn’t buy that either, but right about then Donnie latched onto him and Clyde lost interest in everything but the rush of pleasure like sparks flying up. Turning, he pushed Donnie to the ground on his back and leaned over him. Donnie looked up, trusting, eager, with a gaze as hot as gas flames.

“I’m sorry,” Clyde said softly. “I cain’t help it.”

“It’s fine. It’s all right. You go ahead.”

Clyde turned Donnie onto his stomach and pulled him up onto all fours. Donnie did whatever he could to facilitate matters as Clyde worked up enough spit to grease his arousal. Donnie swayed forward with a groan as Clyde pushed through the clenched opening, and his breath came in harsh gasps, as Clyde worked deeper.

“That feels just fine, Clyde,” Donnie said.

Clyde didn’t reply in words, but Donnie knew he’d heard by the way Clyde took his pleasure. Donnie clenched his jaw and kept his eyes wide open, fearing what he might see if he closed them. Reminding himself over and over that it was Clyde, Clyde, Clyde that thrust hard flesh into him, Donnie wove his fingers into the mat of grass and hung on.

Clyde came with a hoarse cry, his fingers sinking into Donnie’s flanks, as he shuddered through his climax. Donnie balanced on one hand, reaching for his aching arousal, but Clyde got there first. Donnie looked back over his shoulder, but Clyde didn’t meet his eyes.

“Let me do it,” Clyde said gruffly.

Donnie didn’t argue, but rocked on his hands and knees, fucking Clyde’s callused fist until he spurted. Didn’t take long. Both men collapsed onto their sides by mutual agreement, Clyde spooning up behind Donnie. Donnie made a contented little sound as he worked his jeans up.

“Didn’t feel right,” Clyde said after a minute, his breath tickling Donnie’s

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ear.

“Well I don’t know what more I can do for ya.”

The quality of Clyde’s silence told Donnie he’d taken the wrong tack. Clyde didn’t want to be jollied. Donnie sighed.

“What was wrong with it? You come, didn’t ya?”

Donnie felt Clyde tense against his back and knew they were close to spoilin’ it for tonight.

“Sorry, Clyde. Since I’m such a shitty guesser, why don’t you tell me what’s troublin’ you?”

Clyde pulled Donnie a little closer to his chest. “Well... I don’t wanna sound like... it’s just... most times you tend to squirt just afore me.”

The corners of Donnie’s mouth quirked up in a subtle smile. “Is that all? You pleased me just fine. Why do I got to go off first anyway?”

“I don’t know. I just like it that way, that’s all.”

Jake snuggled back against Clyde. “Ain’t another one like you, Clyde Love.”

“Grateful for that, are ya?” Clyde said.

Donnie didn’t speak again. His mesmerized gaze was fixed on the campfire, gold on black, a prophecy written on the wind in an alphabet he didn’t know. He couldn’t see the future; no one could, no matter what they claimed, but a future without Clyde was not one he wanted.

Clyde held Donnie against his chest, not thinking much about anything, content with the mammalian comfort of animal warmth, another heart beating next to his. He was not alone; he had a companion on this journey and he would not ask for more. It was enough that he had Donnie.

After a time, Clyde would stir and prod Donnie to his feet, both of them stumbling to the tent to fall back into sleep. For now, however, neither was inclined to move.

“Lookit them two salty dudes,” Romy said, spitting out the window of his prowler.

Deputy Dewayne Loomis spat in a show of solidarity and hitched up his gun belt. “Piece a shit bounty hunters.”

“Shee-it, Dewayne, this is crazy. What did those two boys do that you or me wouldn’t a done in the same situation?”

“You know what I heard?” Dewayne leaned on the roof of Romy’s patrol car. “Some ol’ boys Harold use to drink with said ol’ Roy told ‘em a few stories about Donnie Kilbride and Clyde Love. It appears that our fugitives was wranglin’ more’n cattle.”

“Whatever could you mean by that?”

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"You know very well what I mean, Jerome K. Walker. Harold said them boys was queer; prob'ly killed the other two in some lovers' spat. What the hell you doin' up here anyway?"

"Wanted to see if you really had the sack to climb into one a them whirlybirds," Romy said imperturbably. "I heard Nadine in dispatch say she thought you were real brave."

Dewayne straightened up. "Nadine said that? Nadine with the..."
Dewayne cupped his hands in air in front of his chest.

Romy nodded. "I think she's sweet on you, bud."

Dewayne swallowed hard. Being five foot six with thinning hair and weighing in at one hundred and thirty pounds, a lot of it in his ass and thighs, he was not exactly sought after by women. The idea that buxom Nadine might find him of interest set his pulse fluttering.

"Put in a good word for me?"

Handsome Romy smiled easily and nodded. "My pleasure, Dewayne. You reckon you're gonna find those boys?"

"Hell no. If we had ten helicopters, or ten weeks, we could cover the whole area, but with just me and Caleb the pilot, there ain't no real hope a findin' 'em like that."

"Wish I cared," Romy said.

"Tell you what though. The manhunt that went in on horseback will probably catch 'em."

Romy glanced at the mounted bounty hunters. "They ridin' with the posse?"

Dewayne spit again. "You know better'n that, Romy. Aw hell, there's Caleb. Reckon he's done leakin' the lizard. Time for me to go. This ain't what I signed on for."

"Just close your eyes and think of Nadine," Romy advised.

"Tell you what, I'm gonna talk Caleb into flyin' to the other side a the range and settin' down somewhere for a few hours. I could use a nap."

Romy grinned. "Good luck to ya, bud. I'll tell Nadine ya said hi."

Dewayne saluted jauntily and ran to jump into the helicopter. Romy put his cruiser in gear and idled over to the bounty hunters. The two men glanced at Romy, assessed the look on the deputy sheriff's face, and dismounted to walk over to the window.

"Howdy boys," Romy said. "Nice mornin'."

"Sure is, sheriff," the shorter man said. "I'm Curtis Felton and this here's my partner, Ty Whitter. We aim to find them two boys been leadin' y'all such a dance."

"That's mighty nice a ya," Romy said. "Reckon I can go home and watch TV."

"Suit yourself," Ty said, scratching his unshaven jowl. "We got work to do. Was there somethin' you wanted, officer?"

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"Your respect would be nice," Romy said. "But I don't believe in miracles. How do you expect to find Kilbride and Love if an entire county's worth of law enforcement can't?"

"You gotta know how they think," Curtis said. "Don't you worry; we'll find 'em."

"And won't they be sorry," Ty added.

Curtis snickered, glancing slyly at his partner before remembering Romy. "We'll bring them boys down from the mountain," he groveled. "Bring 'em some eye for eye justice."

Romy ignored Curtis, maintaining eye contact with the bigger bounty hunter. "I'd say good luck, but I wouldn't really mean it, so we'll let that go. Tell you the truth, it would really tickle me if the two of ya rode off the mountain and were never heard from again."

"How's that?" Ty asked belligerently.

"Because I know who you are, Tyler D. Whitter, aka the Widowmaker," Romy smiled. "The Widowmaker. You come up with that yourself? Or did you used to wrestle? And you, Curtis Felton, no colorful nickname, but you've been brought up on assault a couple of times. Only reason you're not in jail is the witnesses fail to appear."

Curtis smirked. "People got no sense a civic duty these days. We free to go, sir?"

"Yeah, Curtis, you and your scumbag partner are free to go. And ya can't go far enough to suit me. Go on now; get the hell outta my sight."

In deference to the horses, Romy forbore to sling gravel at the bounty hunters with his back tires as he exited the staging area. Driving down the winding road, he went as fast as was safe and a little more. He felt a powerful need to talk to Thom Robb about this latest development in the largest manhunt this county had ever seen.

Ty and Curtis spat simultaneously as the pretty-boy cop drove off. Curtis hitched up his pants and dug a crumpled bag of Red Man from his jacket pocket. He plugged a chaw of tobacco in his right cheek and began working a new cud.

"Asshole," Ty muttered, staring darkly after the patrol car. "Still thinks his shit don't stink."

"You know Deputy Walker personally?"

"Sumbitch was in school with my cousin Lyle. You 'member Lyle? Big boy with a wall-eye? He was a linebacker in high school. That sumbitch Walker was the quarterback."

"Way a the world, Ty," Curtis said, spitting a brown stream. "We cain't all look like movie stars and have rich daddies. You oughta be more like me. Thank the good Lord for what ya do have."

"A beat up truck, a fair to middlin' pony, a gal that cheats on me and a

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partner that ain't all there? Why would I be grateful for that?"

"The whiskey bottle is always half empty for you, ain't it, Ty?"

"Whut?"

"Never mind. Let's saddle up and get into these bitch tit mountains. I got a feelin' this trip is gonna be a dick-twister. By the time we do catch up to those two pissants, I imagine my temper won't be any sweeter'n yours."

"If you was more like me," Ty said, swinging aboard his heavy-boned horse, "you'd know that things always fuck up in the end."

"Only things gonna git fucked up out here are Kilbride and Love," Curtis leered, exposing a missing incisor.

"You sure got that right," Ty smirked, as he patted the coiled lariat hanging beside the pommel. "We'll have us our own private rodeo."

"Maybe you'll top your personal best at ropin' and hog-tyin'," Curtis chuckled.

"One thing's for sure; them two boys are gonna be saddle broke by the time we bring 'em down from the mountain."

Chapter Six

“Donnie? You awake?”

Donnie pretended not to hear Clyde’s whisper. He was warm and comfortable and could tell from the quality of the light coming through the flap that it was still very early. No need to get up just yet.

“All right then,” Clyde murmured. “Guess I’m glad you’re sleepin’.

Don’t think I could ever say this to your face, but I surely do love you, Donnie Kilbride. I must, or why would I be so willin’ to make a fool a myself? Don’t know why this happened to us or why it’s so hard for me ... Well, maybe I do know why, but I hope to God that you know how I feel. Don’t think I could bear it otherwise.”

Donnie rolled to face Clyde. For a second their eyes met and then Clyde’s gaze slid downward to focus somewhere near Donnie’s chin. Donnie put his hands on either side of Clyde’s face and forced his head up.

“Lookit me,” Donnie whispered fiercely.

A long slow moment measured in heartbeats dragged by before Clyde’s eyes flicked up, brushed Donnie’s and darted off to the side. Donnie let out an exasperated breath.

“Ain’t I purty enough for you?”

“Donnie ... please,” Clyde said in choked little voice.

“All right, then. I’m sorry. But this is why I can’t be serious with you.”

Donnie kissed Clyde’s forehead and let go of him. It was then that he saw the silvery tracks of the tears that leaked from beneath tightly closed eyelids. Donnie felt like a half-ton of Brahma bull had put a hoof right through his chest and stomped his heart good.

“Aw no, Clyde,” he said as he wrapped his arms around the other man.

Clyde wept in silent racking sobs that shook the blankets off both of them. Donnie held on tight, making the noises that soothed spooked horses. After a time, the storm, as all storms do, finally blew itself out.

“I’m sorry,” Clyde said pushing away from Donnie.

“You sure do apologize a lot,” Donnie said, attempting to put things back on a normal footing.

“I got a lot to be sorry for.”

“Like what?”

Clyde stared at Donnie. “I killed three men. I’m runnin’ from the law. And... I never shoulda forced myself on you that night.”

Donnie chuckled softly. “You know that’s bullcrap, Clyde Love. I practically raped you.”

And it hung in the air between them like diesel exhaust, acrid and slightly nauseating, without substance, but impossible to ignore. Donnie had said

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the hard, ugly word out loud and it couldn't be unsaid. Clyde clenched his jaw hard and tried to rid his mind of the vivid, brutal mental image lit by fire and the heat of his rage.

"I'm sorry," Clyde whispered fiercely.

Clutching at Donnie, Clyde took his mouth in a groin tightening commingling of tongues. Donnie pushed aside his surprise in favor of fighting fire with fire, so to speak.

They went at it in silence, working the buttons of one another's flies, grabbing hold and working hard flesh like a chamois on a bar of steel. Donnie was so excited by Clyde's sudden hunger for him that he went off in record time, biting his lip to hold in a yelp of fulfillment that would've turned the coyotes green with envy.

Clyde put a hand to Donnie's shoulder, urging him onto his stomach. Donnie turned over and rose onto his hands and knees on the striped bedroll. Clyde was leaking copiously, and wasted no time getting into the saddle. In half a dozen hard strokes, he came coughing out Donnie's name.

Donnie let Clyde's sated weight push him down to the blankets and they lay like that for a long while, in need of nothing. They heard the banshee wind slip sliding through the obstacle course of glacier calved boulders. Some bird without the sense to move down where it was warmer called once like a coin dropping into a well. One of the horses snorted.

Clyde sprang up, and reached outside the tent for the rifle. A bullet spanged off a rock a couple of feet from Clyde's hand. Clyde snatched up the gun as he rolled out of the tent toward one of the big boulders with Donnie at his heels. They crouched and searched the surrounding area for signs of the shooter.

"I'll get the horses," Donnie said.

Clyde bit back a command for Donnie to stay right where he was. Nodding curtly, Clyde raised the rifle to his shoulder and prepared to provide cover. He blinked when Donnie kissed his cheek, and then Donnie was gone, sprinting to where the horses were tethered.

A shot rang out, chipping flakes off a slab of granite a yard behind Donnie and Clyde made a snap decision. Breaking from cover, he dashed after Donnie. He heard more shots, but whoever was gunning for them was either a lousy shot with a rifle, or too far away, and judging from how close together the last rounds were, there were two of them.

Donnie and Clyde untied the reins and vaulted onto the backs of their horses. No time for saddles, or gathering any of their belongings. They had horses, guns and each other, and that's all they'd be taking with them into the fastness of Killdevil's wild heart.

"Fuckin' idjit!" Curtis spat in Ty's direction as he heard the distant sound of hoof beats. "You spooked 'em good. Blind damn luck, we come up on

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‘em like that. They been careless up to now. They know we’re behind ‘em; they gonna get crafty.”

Ty shrugged. “I saw the shot and I took it.”

“No wonder Sulene cheats on ya, if ya always go off half-cocked like that. When we get down from this mountain, I’m a gonna slap my brother-in-law for saddlin’ me with you.”

“Suits me,” Ty shrugged again. “You ain’t my first pick neither.”

“Nothin’ to be done about it now,” Curtis said. “Let’s go see what they left behind.”

The bounty hunters kicked over the little camp, scattering metal cups, plates, a chipped coffee pot, pulling the tent up from its stakes and rifling through the blankets. Ty dropped the bedroll he was holding with a cry of disgust. Curtis picked it up and looked at the glistening scatter of spunk.

“Well, I guess we know what them boys was up to when we come a callin’,” Curtis said.

“Shit!” Ty commented, rubbing his hand violently against his jeans.

Curtis chuckled. “Come on, Ty; let’s hit the trail.”

“What’s the rush? We can track ‘em.”

“Because there’s an easy trail down a little ways ahead. I’m bettin’ Kilbride and Love will head deeper into the mountains, but if they take a notion to ride down Burdock Gorge, they could be in Ellenville in no time. Ellenville’s got a bus station.”

“They’ll stay on the mountain,” Ty said.

“I believe you’re right for a miracle,” Curtis said. “I got a feeling about Love. Town is the last place he’d go. That boy’s more wolf than dog.”

“Shit,” Ty repeated. “I hate this wind and cold.”

“Then let’s go get ‘er done.”

“Tell you what,” Ty said, digging heels into his horse’s flanks. “When we do catch up to ‘em, I’m gonna put my spurs to ‘em both. You can take that to the bank.”

“Bounty gets paid dead or alive,” Curtis said philosophically as he followed his partner.

Romy pushed away his plate, but held onto the fork, toying with the dry crust. “You ain’t heard none a that from me,” he said.

Thom took the utensil from the deputy’s hand and placed it and the plate in his kitchen sink. “As always,” Thom said, turning on the hot water tap. “I’m curious though. What is it you think I’m going to do with the information?”

Romy fidgeted on the dinette chair. “You’re the reporter,” he said.

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"I had an idea that bounty hunters would show once a reward was offered. Why would you hotfoot it over here to tell me about Curtis Felton and Tyler Whitter?"

"Could be of interest to your readers."

"Uh huh. Or is it possible that you have a conscience after all?"

"Don't be a jackass, Thom T."

Thom finished washing up and turned from the dishes dripping in the rack. "I was thinking of taking a little drive over the mountains," he said lightly. "Could be gone for a couple a days. Any problem with that?"

"None I can see. Whereabouts you goin'?"

"I'll just follow the highway, stop in at some of the towns along there: Perkin, Wharburton, Bear Creek, what else is out that way?"

"Ellenville."

Thom cocked an eye at Romy. "Fair-sized little town as I recall."

"Yep, even got 'em a Greyhound station."

"A veritable metropolis," Thom smiled.

"Stuff like that is why we picked on ya in school," Romy snorted. "A veritable metropolis. You never did learn to tone it down much."

"Why should I?" Thom asked with an edge to his voice.

"Cause some dumb ol' boy will crack your smart ass skull open for ya some day."

Thom shook his head. "I'm getting the fuck out of Montana. I was waiting for a break, but as soon as I finish this story, I'm gone. I'm taking whatever I have in the bank, and heading to New York. I can't stay here anymore."

Romy stood and picked up his hat, a gray Stetson instead of his County Mounty. Jamming it on his head, he started for the back door. Through the kitchen window he could see his old white pickup, parked where no one would spot it from the street.

"Romy," Thom called after him. "You don't have to stay here either."

Romy turned the doorknob. "Damn good pie," he said, and he was gone.

"Donnie?"

"I'm all right. Damn it all, where'd that owl come from?"

"I don't know, but I don't think your horse is comin' back." Clyde reached down and hauled Donnie up in front of him. "Come on. Sugar can carry double for a while."

Donnie liked the feel of Clyde's arms going around him to take up the reins. "All right, but don't push him too hard."

"No need just now. They didn't light out after us like I thought they

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would.”

“Must be confident.”

“Or they know how dumb we are.”

Donnie smiled and Clyde felt a trifle better though they were sure enough up the creek now. A night up in the mountains without food or any kind of shelter was not an appealing prospect. Dying of exposure was a definite possibility.

After a few more minutes riding, Donnie spoke up. “You took the wrong fork. We’re headed down the valley.”

“I’ve a mind to spend a night in a real bed,” Clyde said. “Any objections?”

Donnie thought about it, weighing the consequences of getting caught against being with Clyde in a real bed after eating a real meal and drinking coffee with real milk

“No objections,” he said.

“Reckon I won’t hear no more bitchin’ outta you then.”

“Reckon not,” Donnie replied equably.

The tense set of Clyde’s shoulders relaxed a bit. Maybe he could talk Donnie into seeing a doc while they were in Ellenville. Donnie hadn’t said anything, but he’d bled this morning when the urge to couple became too strong to fight. It still frightened Clyde how powerful the passion was when it swept them up. They were going to have to be more careful.

Clyde clucked to the horse, cupping Donnie’s smile in his heart like a match flame between his hands.

Chapter Seven

Donnie shut the door and turned around. Clyde was on him like a Texas twister, driving him back, rattling the slab of wood in its frame as Donnie's shoulders hit it solidly. Catching fire, Donnie shrugged out of his jacket as Clyde delved his mouth in search of that sweet, elusive taste. Donnie's trembling fingers worked the fastenings of Clyde's jeans.

"Hey now, what're you doin', boy?" Clyde asked as Donnie dropped to his knees.

That was the last thing Clyde said for a while. Donnie worked Clyde's pants down to his boots as he lavished the attention of his mouth on Clyde's long cock. After a few minutes, Clyde's fingers tightened their grip on Donnie's hair and hauled him up.

"No more a that," Clyde said gruffly. "I cain't take it."

"Why? 'Cause you can see it's a man suckin' your dick?"

"Man?" Clyde teased. "Show me a man. Now hush up and get into that bed. I aim to pleasure you proper, Donnie Kilbride."

Clyde gave Donnie a shove that was a bit harder than intended. Donnie landed on his back and bounced off the mattress. Clyde pounced and for a few breathless, laughing moments they rolled, rocked and bucked all over the cheap motel bed. As always, their wrestling reached a point of ignition and they burned another bridge between them and the lives they had abandoned when they ran.

Clyde rolled off of Donnie and lay on his back panting like a marathon runner, staring at the strange ceiling without seeing it. Donnie turned his head on the pillow and put an arm across Clyde's heaving chest.

"How come you never tell me I'm the best you ever had?" Donnie asked, his hand creeping over Clyde to the pack of cigarettes.

"You're the only one I've ever had."

Donnie struck a match. Took a drag as he absorbed the revelation. "You're shittin' me. I guess I figgered you and your fiancée ..."

"Treena's a good girl," Clyde said quickly, and Donnie changed the subject.

"Sure am hungry. We shoulda ate somethin' before we come here."

"Could you a waited?"

Donnie laughed softly, shook his head. "No, I couldn't and that's a fact. Sure could go for some grub now though."

Clyde thought of the horse they'd left cropping grass a couple of miles outside of town and wished it could be that simple for Donnie and him. Clyde didn't much want to go out. He could feel the eyes of strangers on him like flies on his skin.

The old coot that ran this fleabag firetrap had looked at Clyde like he'd

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popped a cow pie down on the counter when Clyde had paid for the room with crumpled ones. Clyde didn't imagine it would be any better at the diner, or the bus stop, or wherever he and Donnie ended up. He wouldn't never be good enough for Them and that surely was a fact.

"Well, if you're hungry, we better feed ya," Clyde said, getting out of bed.

Donnie grinned and aimed a smack at Clyde's lean buttocks. Clyde turned to retaliate and it was soon apparent that Donnie would be hungry a little while longer. Not that he complained about being empty; Clyde saw to that.

"They ain't come this way," Curtis Felton said with confidence.

"Reckon you're right," Ty said. "God damn it! Now we got to go all the way back down."

"And whose fault might that be?"

Ty didn't answer. Hunching broad shoulders going to flab, he turned his horse's head down the trail.

"I know a short cut," Curtis mimicked Ty. "We don't need to go all the way to the fork. We know those boys didn't go down the valley."

"Shut the fuck up, Curt. You didn't argue with me."

Curtis bugged his eyes. "I will never work with you again, boy. You hear me? And anybody's got an ounce a respect for me won't work with ya neither, ya brainless idjit."

Ty turned in the saddle, pointing his sidearm at Curtis. "I told you to shut up, old man. Your yammerin' is getting on my nerves. We're goin' down to Ellenville and find those boys and then you and me is partin' company. Until then, you'd best not rile me."

Curtis held his tongue for the moment. He knew how to pick his battles. Sooner or later, he would have the advantage of this lummo, and he'd take the opportunity to fuck him over. For now, Curtis was content to sip from his flask and stare daggers at Ty's back. In a glum frame of mind, the bounty hunters slunk into Ellenville.

Thom Robb passed the Ellenville city limits sign, but there was no sight of the town yet. Over the crest of the next foothill, he saw a billboard for the new Corvette and then the patrol car parked behind it.

He slowed down a few miles per hour and glanced at the cruiser as he drove by. The sheriff was out of his car, leaning on the trunk, talking to two men on horseback. Something about them rang a bell and Thom

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remembered a piece he'd researched on bounty hunters. The smaller of the two scruffy men was definitely Curtis Felton.

With a new sense of urgency, Thom tooled down Ellenville's main drag. There wasn't much stirring on Sunday afternoon. Most folks were in church, visiting relatives, or cooking Sunday dinner. A few cars and more trucks were parked in front of the bus station and the diner at the other end of Main Street.

Thom pulled into a slanted space and turned off the engine. He was tired of driving, had the splinter of a headache behind his eyes, and a serious caffeine deficit. Given the choice of the Greyhound coffee shop or the greasy spoon, Thom chose the diner.

The waitress's name was Eudella, if you could believe the plastic tag she wore. Nothing else about her was authentic from her nylon hair to her suntan hued pantyhose. The wig was a red not found in nature, her legs didn't match the rest of her doughy skin, and she was giving Thom roughly the same welcome she would've accorded a six-foot cockroach.

"Help you?" Eudella brayed.

"I'd love some coffee," Thom said pleasantly.

"Anything else?"

Thom picked up a laminated menu from the counter. "Can I still get breakfast?"

"That's the question a the day," Eudella said, turning to the window behind her. "Hey, Andy. You feel like cookin' up some more hen fruit?"

"Toast, home fries, bacon," Thom rattled off while he still had her attention.

"You got it, hon," she said. "Have a seat anywhere. Maybe you and them other two can start your own afternoon breakfast club."

Thom turned and his saliva dried up, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth as he swallowed with a dry click in his throat. Donnie Kilbride was sitting less than fifteen feet away eating a wedge of apple pie with vanilla ice cream. He was alone, but there were two cups of coffee on the table.

"You lose your way?" Eudella asked sharply from behind Thom.

Thom spun and saw the waitress holding his coffee.

"Pick a table," she said.

"Oh. I'll just sit here at the counter, if that's all right."

"Suit yourself, hon. Less steps for me."

Eudella set down the cup and walked into the kitchen. Thom doctored the inky coffee with cream and sugar and watched Donnie surreptitiously. He couldn't believe his luck. If he could just get one of them to grant an interview, he could write his own ticket. Taking one more look at Donnie, Thom prepared to stand.

A heavy hand came down on Thom's shoulder, keeping him on his stool.

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Thom turned and met a gaze so intense that he cringed back. A second later, he realized he was face to face with the alleged triple murderer, Clyde Love.

"Mister," Clyde growled. "I don't know who you are, and I don't care. If ya look at that man again, I will mop this floor with your face."

Thom looked down at the dingy black and white tiles. "I didn't mean any harm," the reporter said as calmly as he could.

"Folks always say they don't mean no harm," Clyde said. "But harm gets done all the same."

Thom's eyebrows went up. He'd had a mental image of a hayseed Cro-Magnon trapped by circumstance and the country code of blind loyalty to your friends, but there was a lot more to Love than standard issue good ol' boy. Thom's already considerable investment in the story doubled.

"Clyde," Thom said and the man's face underwent a swift transformation. "I'm not going to turn you in. I just want to know what happened. How you come to be here today?"

Clyde glanced at the booth as Donnie turned to see what was keeping him. The click when their eyes met was almost audible to Thom. An invisible wire, white hot as lightning, crackled between Donnie and Clyde, and abruptly Thom understood everything.

"Oh my giddy maiden aunt Gwendolyn," Thom breathed. "You did kill them."

Clyde grabbed Thom by the collar and yanked him off the barstool. Eudella looked up from wrapping silverware.

"Everything okay, boys?"

"Just fine, ma'am," Thom said. "Would you make my breakfast to go, thanks?"

The muscles bunched along Clyde's jaw as he got hold of himself. Without a word, he let go of Thom and went over to the booth. Donnie look curiously at Thom, as Thom slid in across from him.

"Hi," Thom said. "I'm Thomas Robb and I work for a newspaper. I'd give you my card if I thought it would mean anything to you. If you'll let me, I'd like to tell your side of things."

"Why would you do that?" Donnie asked.

"Mostly because a little lady named Treena told me Clyde was a decent man."

"You seen Treena?" Clyde spoke up.

"She's holding on," Thom said. "I won't coddle you; you broke her heart, but she'll get by."

Clyde shook his head. "I didn't mean to hurt Treena. This thing just happened."

"Here's your breakfast, mister," Eudella called. "That'll be a buck sixty-

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five.”

“Come on,” Thom said to the boys. “I’ll pay up and we’ll go somewhere less public.”

“We got a room,” Donnie said, drawing a sharp look from Clyde.

Thom paid and drove Donnie and Clyde to the outskirts of the town. Pulling into the Mar-Lou Motor Court, Thom went into the motel room with the two fugitives.

“I just want to get your story,” Thom said.

“You want our story, Mr. Reporter? Well, here it is. Listen close, now, ‘cause I don’t wanna have to repeat myself.”

The color drained from Thom’s face as Donnie recited the bare facts of the night of violence that ended in three deaths. When Donnie finished speaking, Thom let out a big breath.

“Sweet sonny Jesus, that’s tough, boys. I don’t know how to tell you how bad I feel about all this. You two are the victims here, but damned if the state of Montana cares. You’ve got to get out of here.”

“You really think we don’t have a chance if we stick it out here?” Donnie asked.

“On my way in, I saw a couple of bounty hunters. Could be they got wind that you’re here. The law’s bad enough, but those boys won’t cut you any slack. Dead or alive doesn’t matter much to them.”

Thom paused to choose his words before going on. “Bad blood comes up in people when they form mobs,” he said. “Things get mighty ugly, mighty fast. You boys are gonna wake up one mornin’ surrounded by a crowd, whether it be officers of the law, vigilantes, or right wing fundamentalists. Clyde? Could you shoot Donnie to keep a mob from getting him?”

Clyde scowled at his lap. “Yeah,” he said in a voice that scraped the ground.

Thom watched the shock bloom and fade in Donnie’s guileless eyes. “And you, Donnie? Is that what you want? The two of you in some no tell motel with each other’s guns in your mouths? God, I hope not. I need a happy ending.”

“And just how would that be possible?” Donnie wanted to know.

“If you want, I’ll do what I can to get you out of Montana and down to South America.”

“South America,” Clyde muttered. “What the hell we know about South America?”

“No extradition back to the U.S.,” Thom said. “That’s all you need to know.”

Clyde lit a cigarette, blew out smoke. All three men turned at the knock on the door.

Chapter Eight

“Open up; it’s the manager.”

Clyde and Donnie exchanged a glance as Thom stood. When no one said anything, Thom went to the door and opened it cautiously.

“What can we do for you?” Thom asked briskly.

The turkey-necked proprietor of the motel didn’t look surprised to see Thom, but he did look annoyed. “What y’all got goin’ on in there?”

“Is there a problem?” Thom countered.

“It’s past check out time. Them saddle bums owes me for another night.”

“That’s easy to fix. I’ll pay.”

“I just bet you will.” The manager took in Thom’s pale blue Oxford shirt and red bow tie. “I ain’t runnin’ no queer cathouse. You wanna fuck a real cowboy, you can do it somewhere’s else, Gaylord.”

Despite his nervousness, Thom’s first impulse was to laugh. Gaylord? He shook it off. It wasn’t really funny.

Donnie and Clyde looked at Thom in surprise when the reporter slammed the door in the owner’s face and locked it.

“What the hell you do that for?” Donnie asked.

“We have to go. Now,” Thom said firmly.

“Hold on a minute.” Clyde stood next to Donnie. “Where we goin’?”

The door rattled as something harder than a fist pounded on it. “Open up, boys,” Ty Whitter aka The Widowmaker called out.

Thom went to the window and saw Curtis Felton looking in at him.

“Go,” Thom yelled. “Now.”

“Shit!” Curtis said. “They’re rabbitin’. Told ya one a us shoulda been out back.”

“Old buzzard said they wasn’t no back doors in these here rooms.”

“You can kill him later. I’m goin’ round back. You just ...”

A boom from inside the motel room drowned out the end of Curtis’s sentence.

“What the hell was that?” Ty shouted as he stepped back from the door.

Another booming roar assaulted their ears.

“Shit! That’s a shotgun,” Curtis said.

Coming up beside Ty, Curtis kicked at the wall beside the door. On the third try, his boot knocked a hole in the dry rotted wood.

“Sumbitch! Come on, Ty,” Curtis yelled as he ran for the end of the motel.

Ty clumped along like a drunken Clydesdale behind his wiry partner, rounding the end of the row of rooms in time to see someone disappear around the other end. Curtis had drawn his sidearm, but didn’t waste bullets. Ty glared at the ragged hole in the back wall and then ran after Curtis again.

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Thom ran for his car with Donnie and Clyde on his heels. As he reached for the door handle, a hole magically appeared in the metal and paint chips flew. Clyde shoved Donnie behind the car, and yanked Thom back by the elbow.

“Run,” Clyde said.

Donnie didn’t hesitate. He ran across the gravel lot and into the highway. Thom was several feet behind him, envying Donnie’s turn of speed, when he saw the behemoth from the corner of his eye. Clyde plowed past Thom, tackling Donnie to the pavement.

“Daddy!” screamed the dark-haired stunner driving the Cadillac convertible.

The big man in the passenger seat grabbed the steering wheel and jerked it hard toward him. The luxury car slewed around like a yacht in quicksand and skidded to a stop a few feet from Donnie’s prone body. As soon as the chassis stopped rocking on the frame, the man jumped out without opening the door.

“You silly sumbitches!” the well-dressed man yelled in a Texas twang. “You crazy? My baby girl is scared outta her wits! Get up off the ground, ya jackasses.”

Thom glanced over his shoulder and saw the bounty hunters coming at a dead run. Time seemed to slow and a cold certainty settled over him. He could prevent tragedy if he was brave enough to act on what he believed, but he would have to do it now. Before he could think any more about it, Thom turned to Clyde.

“We need that car,” he said.

Clyde pulled the peacemaker from his jacket and pointed it at the loud Texan, who immediately began to bluster.

“Are you outta your mind, boy? The day I let some pissant fresh outta diapers back me down is the day I will have a tag on my toe.”

“Suit yourself, mister,” Clyde said, cocking the revolver.

“You are making a big mistake, boy,” Johnson told Clyde as Thom and Donnie moved toward the Caddy.

Clyde didn’t answer. He held the gun steady on the blowhard as Donnie opened the drivers’ door of the car and offered his hand to the girl. Daintily, she spurned his help, but shot him a look from under her lashes as she got out on her own.

“Thanks for cooperating, miss,” Thom said, sliding into the seat.

“Remember my face, sir. I’ll be the lady testifying against you when the law catches up with your car-thieving carcass.”

Donnie grinned at Thom’s expression as he hopped into the back seat. “Come on, Clyde,” he yelled.

Thom turned to stare at Donnie as comprehension dawned in the rich man’s small eyes. The can was open now, and the worms were everywhere.

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Thom reached for the ignition and saw the keys were missing as Clyde vaulted into the car. He looked up and light glanced off the keys dangling from the Texan's meaty fist. Looking left, Thom saw the bounty hunters clear the parked cars and raise their weapons.

"I reckon you murderin' mutts have come to the end a your trail," the Cadillac man said. "I hope they give ya matchin' 'lectric chairs and let me throw the switch."

The looker snatched the keys from her father's hand and threw them as hard as she could toward Donnie. Donnie jumped up on the seat and snagged them as they flew overhead. Tossing the keys to Thom, Donnie grinned and waved at the girl.

Thom threw the Caddy into reverse and turned its nose back the way it had come. He put his foot down on the accelerator and the big car burned rubber as he dropped it into Drive. Donnie turned, kneeling on the seat and waved his hat over his head with whoop.

The pretty young woman smiled and waved as her daddy scowled, shook his fist and called down dire imprecations on the men fleeing with his brand new convertible. He turned to glare at his baby girl when Ty and Curtis arrived. The bounty hunters fired after the speeding car getting the Texan's immediate attention.

"You sumbitches put a hole in that car and it'll come outta your mangy hides, you hear me?"

Ty turned and cracked the red-faced man across the jaw with his pistol. The Texan went down with a look of bovine bafflement on his ruddy face. The girl stared wide-eyed as he crumpled to the ground, and then looked up at the two scruffy men.

"I don't know who y'all are, but my daddy's gonna be mighty put out when he wakes up. Y'all might want to skedaddle now."

"You got hide, missy, I give ya that," Curtis said. "Come on, Ty. We got to find a vehicle."

As Curtis and Ty ran into the motel office, the young woman knelt beside her father. He was breathing just fine. He'd have a knot on his jaw, but he'd live. Having assured herself the ornery old bastard hadn't gotten himself killed, she dismissed him from her thoughts.

Her full lips curved in a dreamy smile as she called up the image of the handsome young man with the appealing grin. He might be an outlaw, but he sure was easy on the eyes. She giggled, imagining her daddy's reaction to such a suitor as the greasy men came out of the office with a set of keys.

Brushing off the knees of her pant, she went in to call the police and an ambulance for Daddy as Ty and Curtis got into the motel owner's old Bel Air and drove away.

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Clyde turned to look into the back seat and Thom glanced up at the rear view mirror. Donnie Kilbride had fallen asleep sprawled loose-limbed across the bench seat. The young man rested serenely, sooty smudges of long lashes lying softly against pale cheeks, a wistful quirk at the corners of his mouth. Thom's carefully hedged heart opened its gates a little at the sight.

"None of this seems to bother Donnie too much," Thom commented lightly.

"He ain't all there."

The fondness Clyde couldn't hide made Thom ask, "How long you two been friends?"

"We just met," Clyde mumbled, eyes on the dashboard.

"Really? You seem to have such a deep bond."

"What you mean by that?"

"You act as though you've known each other forever. "

"Oh. Reckon so."

Thom mustered his courage and braved Clyde's reaction to his next words. "I don't even know how to ask you this," he said. "I get the feeling if I try to talk to you about it, that we'll end up in the ditch, but I have to."

Clyde's eyes darted sidewise at Thom, but he didn't speak.

"I can see that you and Donnie have a very close, very ... special friendship. I'm not judging you. I'm not labeling you either. Sorry, what I mean to say is that I'm not accusing you of anything. I just want you to know that you can talk to me if you want to."

Again, Clyde's eyes slid toward Thom and away again. "You think we're queer."

"I didn't say that. I don't think I'd be wrong though, if I said that you love Donnie."

Clyde flinched and turned to look out the side window. "I appreciate you helpin' us out and all, but I can't ... I can't talk about this."

"I understand. Would it help if I told you I had a friend like you once?"

"He didn't talk?"

Thom was pretty sure Clyde had made a joke, but he didn't laugh. "He talked, just not to me. He was the quarterback at my high school and he and his jock friends used to give me a real hard time 'cause I was smart and cared about my clothes. Then one day I went back to the locker room after school was over to get my jacket. I had to wait until all the football players were gone or they'd pick on me. I won't tell you the many ways they found to humiliate me. Well, lo and behold, I walk in on Mr. Stud Quarterback yanking it."

Clyde looked over. "Right there in school?"

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"Yep," Thom said.

"What'd ya do?"

"I dropped to my knees and sucked him off."

There was silence as the odometer ticked over twelve more miles and then Clyde spoke.

"He let ya, huh?"

"He surely did, and for five glorious weeks, right up until the prom, me and him would sneak off and meet up every chance we could for fifteen minutes of the hottest..."

"I get the picture," Clyde said hastily.

"Yeah, well, it all ended very suddenly. He'd like to deny that it was anything more than curiosity and hormones, but..."

"You love him?"

"Sure enough," Thom said.

An even longer silence descended, before Clyde broke it.

"I don't know if I can ... describe what it is that I feel about Donnie."

Thom held his tongue and drove, giving Clyde room to talk if he wanted to.

"I ain't never felt nothing close to this," Clyde said, his voice barely audible above the whine of the tires on the asphalt. "Cain't explain it 'cause I don't understand it myself. I ain't never looked at another man in my life. You gotta believe that."

Clyde glanced obliquely at Thom. Thom nodded without taking his eyes off the road.

"This thing with Donnie... blindsided me. I don't know why it happened to me, but I sure cain't shake it. And when it grabs hold, it grabs somethin' fierce and it don't matter where we are, or what time it is..."

Clyde looked into the back seat again. Thom stole a glance at the taciturn young outlaw and saw the light of quiet adoration in his eyes as he checked on his companion. The reporter's resolve to make sure these two got away became a moral imperative. He didn't care what consequences he would have to face in the aftermath.

"There's nothing wrong with the way you feel, Clyde."

"Wish I could believe you, mister."

Thom swallowed hard, trying to rid his throat of the lump that had formed there. "I wish I could drive this piece of rolling Detroit steel right out of a world that can fuck up two kids like you and Donnie to the point that you're afraid of love. That is the most fucked up thing I have ever heard in my whole sorry fucked up life. I hate these fucking people."

Clyde turned his head a few degrees and took in the tears that slid down Thom's face as he spoke. The reporter's abrupt use of profanity gave his words brutal emphasis. Feeling the weight of Clyde's stare, Thom glanced at the young man's shocked face.

Line Squall

“Sorry,” he said. “Guess I’m a little ... overwrought, as my Aunt Gwendolyn would have said.”

Clyde’s eyes got wider as the reporter let out a yell.

“Damn!” Thom said. “That was some wild ride. We were shot at! Shot at! I still can’t believe it happened. I’ll probably fall apart later, but right now I’m so glad to be breathing that I could bust.”

Clyde took another of those anxious/doting peeks into the back. “Yep. Me too.”

Thom laughed long and loud at that, felt his humor twisting into hysteria and tied a knot in it. “Sorry,” he wheezed. “I can see that you’re jumping up and down with joy.”

Clyde’s cautious smile made an appearance. “Mister, you ain’t all there neither.”

“Well, Clyde, this is how the good Lord made me, and as my beloved Aunt Gwendolyn also used to say, He don’t make mistakes.”

A small crease appeared between Clyde’s brows and he turned away from Thom as he chewed that one over. Thom turned the radio on low, but couldn’t find anything but gospel stations. He settled on one that seemed to have more music and less preaching and put his foot down on the gas pedal.

After a few minutes, he realized the odd soothing sound he heard was Clyde humming along with the choir. Thom leaned back against the seat, and let the highway trance take him. He still had Treena’s phone number in his wallet. He would find a phone at the first sign of civilization and set his crazy plan in motion.

Chapter Nine

Romy's radio squawked and he picked it, gave his call sign and let go of the button. Nadine informed him that he had a message from a Treena Pacquette over to Langtree. Miss Pacquette wanted to know if he was visiting Ellenville soon, and could he rob a few minutes to kick up his heels?

"She made me write down them precise words," Nadine said, a question in her voice.

"Damn," Romy swore into the keyed open mike. "Oops, sorry Nadine. Can't believe that little gal would call me at work."

"Now, Romy, you been up to the devil's business, ain't ya? Some day some little gal's ol' man is gonna blow that handsome head clean off your shoulders."

"Not over the radio, Nadine," Romy said quickly. "Thanks for the message."

"Over and out."

Satisfied that Nadine thought no more about the message than that Romy was tomcatting around, he gave some thought to it. Romy picked out the words rob, kick and heels and connected them with Ellenville.

"God damn you, Thomas Taylor Robb," he muttered. "I should let your ass fry."

Romy started to put the radio back in its cradle, but instead he pulled over to the shoulder and put in a call to the Ellenvue P.D. After listening carefully to their dispatcher with a growing sense of dismay, Romy tossed the mike on the seat and slammed the cruiser into gear. Tromping the pedal to the floor, he left a plume of dust as he pulled back onto the pavement and sped away.

"Where you takin' us?" Clyde asked when Thom turned off the highway onto a dirt road between the orderly government-planted pines.

"I know a place up here on Kickheel," Thom said, as Donnie sat up in the back seat. "I did a piece on it a few weeks ago. Anyway, there's a Forestry Service storage facility where we can hide out for a while."

"Sure is pretty here," Donnie yawned, as the road climbed higher.

"Sure is, and the ranger that tends this site is only here twice a day."

"What if he shows up? Clyde asked.

"I hope we'll be long gone by then," Thom said as they drove out of the trees.

On a grassy open shelf stood a brown and green Forestry Service barn.

Line Squall

To the right was a large rail-fenced field that held a small herd of horses. Donnie and Clyde showed immediate interest in the animals.

"Them ponies is underweight," Clyde observed.

"Mustangs," Thom said as he drove the Cadillac behind the barn. "They were rounded up about a month ago."

"Yeah? Forestry Service gonna start sellin' saddle horses?" Donnie asked. "Or maybe they're gonna use 'em for rodeos."

"Dog food," Thom said. "They'll be shot, ground up and put into cans."

"Why?" Donnie asked.

"Because that's what our society does with anything that doesn't fit in," Thom said, turning off the engine. "We isolate it and destroy it."

Donnie looked at Clyde as he got out of the car. Clyde shrugged. Thom caught the by-play.

"I know. I was happy to be alive a couple of hours ago. Now I'm Mr. Gloom and Doom."

"Guess you got reason," Donnie said. "Ain't you gonna be in a world a trouble over all this?"

"Undoubtedly. Ask me if I care."

"You care?" Donnie obliged.

Thom shook his head. "For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm doing what I want to do. I can't tell you what that feels like, and maybe I don't have to. At any rate, I'll do anything in my power to help you get away."

"Why would you do that?" Donnie asked.

Clyde took Donnie's elbow and dragged him away. "C'mon Donnie. I wanna look at those ponies."

"I was talkin' to Thom," Donnie protested as he was pulled toward the corral.

"Thom needs to rest, not be pestered. He told me why he's helpin' us, and I'll tell you."

"Seems like I missed a lot while I was asleep."

"Miss a lot while you're awake."

Donnie shoved Clyde hard. Clyde stumbled a few steps, recovered, and dove at Donnie's knees. Donnie jumped into the air and Clyde hit the grass where he'd been standing. Donnie pounced, as Clyde rolled aside and both flailed for a few seconds trying to get a hold.

Clyde ended up atop Donnie, both panting and grinning like hounds on a hot day. Then, as if a bell had rung, they lunged at one another with equal passion. Thom turned away and went inside the barn to give them some privacy.

Down on the highway, the bounty hunters passed the entrance with its discreet green shield-shaped sign. They drove on to Cartlett before realizing they must've missed their quarry and turned around. After a search of the

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limited side roads, they noticed the fresh tracks on the Forestry Department easement.

“Donnie.”

Clyde’s voice brought Donnie back from the blissful place he went when he and Clyde were like this. Clyde never spoke during sex, as if acknowledging it would somehow make it too real. However, Clyde was changing so fast these last few days that Donnie’s head was spinning.

“What you need?” Donnie asked, ready to give Clyde whatever he asked for.

“I don’t wanna hurt you no more.”

“Damn it, Clyde. Are we back to this?”

“Donnie ...” Clyde moved from behind his friend and Donnie looked over his shoulder in concern.

“What’re you doin’? I’m set to pop, boy. You get back in the saddle, you hear?”

“I cain’t. I keep seein’...”

“What?”

“That sumbitch on top a ya. After that, I just cain’t understand how you could let me...”

“Let ya?” Donnie chuckled. “Clyde, don’t ya know how much I crave ya? And if ya ever compare yourself to that trash again, well, I don’t know what I’ll do, but ya won’t like it. Damn it Clyde, ya really are a dumbass if ya think...” Donnie paused. “Look here, boy. I love ya, and that’s a fact. And that’s what makes it different. All right?”

Clyde licked his lips, wanting to believe Donnie, wanting to get back on and finish the ride.

“Tell you what,” Donnie said. “If you cain’t stay on, we can change places.”

The look on Clyde’s face was worth it, and in less than five heartbeats, Donnie got his wish. Clyde still wasn’t completely convinced that he should be doing this, but he could see that Donnie wanted it, and he intended to spend the rest of his life giving Donnie what Donnie wanted. It was good to have a purpose.

“Hey there, Dewayne,” Romy called out as he hurried over to the makeshift helipad.

“Romy! What in tarnation ya doin’ up here?”

“Gotta a message for ya from a lady friend.”

Line Squall

“Nadine?”

“I ain’t sayin’ nothin’, but if you was to drive to her house right now and offer to plow her field, I dare say you won’t be bored.”

Dewayne’s eyes glittered in anticipation. “Hot damn!”

“Here ya go,” Romy tossed the other deputy his keys. “Saddle up, cowboy.”

“Shit! I got duty.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Romy said. “Me and Nadine got an understanding. I’ll take your shift, and she gives me the easy calls from dispatch.”

Dewayne winked. “Mum’s the word,” he said, as he waddled off.

“Howdy, Caleb,” Romy said, hopping into the bubble cabin of the chopper. “I’ll be ridin’ with ya today.”

“Like I give a good goddamn,” the pilot snorted. “Belt up; we’re takin’ off.”

As they rose above the landscape, Romy spoke into the headset Caleb handed him. “I need to make a little detour,” he said.

“No can do,” Caleb shook his head. “What is it with you county boys? You all lazy, or what? I’m gonna fly my circuit and go back for fuel. Got it?”

“Consider it gotten,” Romy said, drawing his service revolver and pointing it at Caleb. “My turn. You’re gonna fly me where I tell ya to fly me, or I’ll shoot ya.”

“And I suppose you can land this thing?”

Romy let the barrel of the Smith and Wesson droop. “You’ll be able to fly just fine with a bullet in your kneecap,” he said.

Grumbling under his breath, Caleb changed the craft’s heading and pushed the throttle forward. In moments, they were a dot against the blue tile sky.

“So what you think about that reporter fella’s plans?” Donnie asked without opening his eyes.

Clyde took the stalk of grass from his mouth and brushed the end of Donnie’s nose with it. Donnie flapped a hand in front of his face, and Clyde repeated the prank.

“Dumbass flies,” Donnie groused drowsily.

Clyde stole little glances at Donnie’s sun dappled body against the green of the grass, interspersing them with glances at the mustangs. It was a heady thing to be lying here bare-chested, hell, bare-assed, in broad daylight with the echoes of a powerful orgasm reverberating in his every fiber.

He and Donnie had made love for the first time, by Clyde’s reckoning. This was no rushed, overpowering spasm of lust that could not be denied. They had taken their time, mindful of Donnie’s wounded body and spirit,

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and when it was over, it seemed to Clyde that Donnie was truly healing at last.

“Clyde?”

“What?”

“You gonna answer me?”

Clyde leaned over Donnie and Donnie felt the shadow fall on him, blocking the sun. Donnie smiled in simple contentment just before Clyde’s lips covered his in a kiss bereft of all urgency, a gentle benediction and a pledge.

“Ain’t that the sweetest thing you ever did see, Ty?”

At the sound of the reedy voice, Donnie and Clyde jumped to their feet.

“Where’s the other one?” Ty asked, pointing his gun at Clyde.

Clyde looked at the ground between his boots, willing his gaze away from the Colt lying a few feet away in the tall grass. He tried not to think too hard about the shotgun and rifle on the floorboard of the Caddy. For all he knew, these bounty hunters could read his mind. They had found this place, hadn’t they?

“Come on, girls,” Curtis said, gesturing with his rifle. “Let’s go into the barn.”

When Thom heard voices outside, he didn’t stop to investigate. Climbing out the window, he landed on the Caddy’s hood. As quietly as possible, he jumped down and reached into the back seat. His hand touched cold metal and he pulled out the shotgun. Holding it awkwardly, he studied it, hoping the proper way to use it would become self-evident. For the first time in his life, he wished that he’d gone hunting just once.

“Why am I such a sissy?” he muttered as he wrapped his finger around the trigger.

His heart hammering, Thom looked around the corner of the barn and saw the bounty hunters holding guns on the boys. As he watched, they entered the building, closing the door behind them. Think, Thom ordered himself, his knuckles white on the weapon.

“You partial to one or the other?” Curtis asked as he lashed Clyde’s hands together behind his back.

“Always did like blue eyes,” Ty answered, throwing a rope over a rafter.

Line Squall

Thom ran around back and climbed up on the car again. Hardly daring to breathe, he peered in the window. Fear unfurled its cold tentacles in his belly, his tongue stuck to the roof of his suddenly dry mouth, and his knees almost gave way.

Clyde was tied to a post, his arms pulled behind him, his wrists lashed tightly together. Directly in front of him stood Donnie, arms stretched above his head by the rope that ran from his bound hands to the roof beam. Little details snagged Thom's attention as he stared, petrified, at the alarming tableau.

The way the scant light ran like water along the edge of the hunting knife in Ty's meaty fist. The dark gap of a missing tooth in Curtis's eager leer. The blood that dripped from Clyde's wrists as he worked frantically to free himself. The tremor in Donnie's voice when he spoke.

"It's all right, Clyde," Donnie said softly. "These sumbitches cain't hurt me none."

"You gonna find out different, boy," Ty said. "I guarantee it."

"Reckon you cowards'll do whatever you want," Donnie said. "You got the guns and we're tied up. But it don't matter. You cain't touch what we got between us."

"Faggot," Ty snarled, pressing the sharp blade to Donnie's cheek.

A bead of red welled up where the point dug into the thin skin over Donnie's cheekbone and Clyde let out a roar that made both bounty hunters turn toward him.

"You pieces a shit hurt him and I will come outta my grave to git you," Clyde raged.

"Well, lets just find out," Ty said moving toward Clyde with the knife.

Thom took a deep breath and dropped through the window holding the shotgun.

"Okay you... mother... fuckers," Thom said haltingly. "Drop your guns."

Chapter Ten

Thom held the shotgun gingerly, obviously unsure what to do next.

"Just like strokin' your dick," Clyde said clearly.

Thom's fingers cupped the wood of the pump, pulling it back, as Clyde instructed. He jacked it and pulled the trigger. Ty staggered back with an astonished look on his face as the gun boomed in the cavernous barn. Curtis fired his pistol, the shot going wild and putting a hole in the roof as Thom stood deaf and blinking. Ty charged forward, tackling Thom and the reporter went down, dropping his weapon.

Using his superior weight and a dozen dirty tricks picked up in bar brawls, Ty soon subdued the journalist. Dragging Thom across the dirt floor by one foot, Ty stopped beside Curtis to get the only pair handcuffs they had between them. It was then he noticed that his partner was slumped against the wall because he couldn't stand on his own.

"Shit fire, Curt!" Ty breathed, looking at the hamburger the pellets had made of Curtis's midsection. "That panty-waist got ya good, didn't he?"

Curtis made a gargling noise and Ty shook his head.

"Hell, I don't know how you're still standin', pard. Gut shot s'posed to be the most painful a all wounds. Ain't that a bite though. Asshole misses me completely and hits you on the other side a the fuckin' barn."

Curtis slid slowly down to sit on the ground, legs splayed wide in front of him, his back against the plank wall. Bloodshot eyes, webbed with wrinkles looked up in appeal. Ty shook his head in mock regret.

"Sorry, pard. Reckon there ain't nothin' can be done for ya out here in the ass a nowhere. Ya best lay down and try to die quietly."

The pleading look left Curtis's eyes to be replaced by impotent rage. Ty chuckled as he hauled Thom up, only to toss the reporter toward where Donnie hung in his bonds. Thom glanced up at Donnie, and then over at Clyde. Clyde still worked furiously to free himself.

Thom jumped at sound of another shot, and turned in time to see Ty put another round in Curtis's skull. Clyde and Donnie looked only at one another. Donnie's face was calm, as beautiful as Joan of Arc at the stake. Clyde's features were contorted into a primitive mask fashioned roughly to represent an amalgam of fury, fear and desperation.

"Tired a his yammerin' anyway," Ty remarked as he strolled over to his victims, dealing Thom a casual kick in the ribs on his way to Donnie.

"Wait," Thom said when he got his breath back. "Don't hurt the boy."

Ty glanced down at Thom, but didn't let go of the fistful of Donnie's hair he clutched. "You wanna keep quiet, fancy pants, or you be next."

"Fine," Thom said. "Just leave Donnie alone and you can do what you

want to me.”

“I’m gonna do what I want with alla ya,” Ty snorted. “Ain’t no way I can catch any shit for this one. Law don’t care if I bring these shitbirds in dead or alive, and you aidin’ and abettin’, mister. If I shoot ya, they’ll likely believe my story. ‘Specially since your fingerprints are all over that scattergun.”

“Don’t... please,” Thom begged as Ty tugged at Donnie’s waistband.

“You’re wastin’ your breath,” Ty told him. “I’m horny as hell and you ain’t near as purty as ol’ Donnie here. I do believe that is one a the sweetest asses I ever did see.”

Donnie finally spoke. “For cryin’ out loud. Will you quit jawin’ and do what you’re gonna do? I’d rather be corn-holed than listen to your bullshit, ya ignorant, shit for brains asshole.”

“Pup’s got a bark,” Ty grinned. “I’m gonna enjoy breaking’ ya down, Donnie Kilbride.”

“Mister.”

Clyde’s voice was low enough to slide under the door, but everyone heard him clearly. Ty met Clyde’s gaze over Donnie’s shoulder, and they stood locked eye to eye for a space of time that Thom measured in rapid heartbeats. Whatever Ty saw in Clyde’s eyes made the bounty hunter pause, but it didn’t deter him. He had helpless prey at his mercy and couldn’t pass up an opportunity to inflict suffering.

Clyde didn’t say anything else, and Ty dismissed him with a sneer, returning his attention to his victim. Juggling his Colt, reluctant to holster it, Ty managed to work his erection out of his fly. Letting his gaze dwell on his captives, Ty gave his peg a few pulls.

“Are ya shy, or somethin’?” Donnie spoke again. “Need Clyde to tell ya how it’s done, ya sorry excuse for a man?”

“Boy, you are stompin’ all over my nerves,” Ty said. “Ya’d best shut your cocksuckin’ mouth ‘less ya want me to bang ya dry.”

“Ya just don’t get it, do ya, mister?” Donnie answered. “Ain’t no sense in threatenin’ me. Ya already said you’re gonna do whatever ya want with us. Ya cain’t scare me no more. I’m petrified. But I ain’t gonna scream for ya, and I ain’t gonna beg. You ain’t the first piece a shit’s ever tried this. I survived the others; reckon I’ll get through this, too.”

“Almost sounds like you’re darin’ me.”

“I expect it does,” Donnie said wearily. “Likely that’s all ya can hear.”

“Let’s see how smart ya are with my dick up...” Ty broke off as the mustangs whinnied shrilly in alarm. “What the hell is that?”

The noise that disturbed the horses seemed to come from above and all around the barn. They could now hear the roaring and creaking of a high wind in the pines that sprang up out of nowhere. The ominous hollow

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clattering like a freight train bearing down on the building grew louder, and the occupants held their breath, looking up at the ceiling. All except for one. Clyde's eyes were closed as he worked the ropes down his blood slick hands.

Ty's nerve broke, and the bounty hunter ran to the door to see what the hell was going on. Clyde hit him hard from behind and Ty pitched forward into the half-open door, breaking his nose and rebounding into the wall. Clyde grabbed hold of the big man's shirt and slung him outside. Ty reeled a few steps before regaining his balance and turning to do battle.

A wild wind circled the clearing, capriciously whipping dust, debris and pine needles into the air before losing interest and flinging them away. The noise was so loud out here that it drowned out the curses the two men shouted as they charged at one another. The horses plunged and wheeled against the fence as panic escalated.

Thom managed to get to his knees, and then to his feet. He stood swaying slightly in front of Donnie Kilbride and tried to figure out how to free the boy. Futilely, he swiveled his wrists in the handcuffs, as he searched for some way to...

"Maybe that ol' boy has the key in his pocket," Donnie said.

Thom blinked, and realized he'd been close to going into shock. Taking several slow deep breaths, he crossed to Curtis's corpse. With a will he hadn't known he possessed, Thom awkwardly searched the dead bounty hunter's clothing. His Aunt Gwendolyn must have been smiling down on him because he found the key ring quickly.

Clyde and Ty did a slow inimical waltz around the clearing, Ty doing his best to bear hug the life out of Clyde, Clyde trying his damndest to throttle the bounty hunter. Both were battered, bleeding from cuts and scrapes, staggering, leaning on one another before breaking apart to swing again with underwater slowness.

Ty had expected an easy victory. He outweighed this boy by more than fifty pounds and Love's hands were a bloody mess. However, it didn't go as Ty expected. Clyde came at him without regard for consequence or personal safety. Far from handicapping him, Clyde's pain fueled his rage like nitrous oxide injected into a powerful engine.

Ty slowly and painfully came to the knowledge that he was not fighting a man, but a force of nature. The notion that it might be wise to cut his losses occurred to him. But he still had to get past Love. Abruptly, Ty used the last trick in his book.

Falling backward, the bounty hunter took Clyde with him. The impact jarred them apart, and Ty scrambled away on his ass and elbows. Clyde came after him.

"Give it up, boy," Ty said, drawing the hideout knife in his boot. "I'm willin' to call it quits, but ya take another step and I'll cut ya wide open."

Line Squall

Clyde didn't acknowledge Ty's speech by word or gesture. He moved steadily forward, his intent to kill evident in his expression. Ty got to his feet and backed away.

It was then that the machine descended from the sky, terrifying the mustangs and blowing Clyde and Ty off their feet with the wind of its advent. Ty started crawling away, but Clyde grabbed him by the leg and hauled him back. The bounty hunter struck at Clyde with the knife, missing, stabbing deep into the ground close to Clyde's neck.

Ty yanked the blade out as Clyde surged up, throwing the big man off. The bounty hunter slashed at Clyde as Clyde rolled away in the tall grass where he'd made love to Donnie such a short eternity ago. Even if he died here, he had that; he had been whole and happy for a few minutes, a bliss Ty would probably never know.

Neither Ty nor Clyde paid any attention to the deus ex machina that filled the clearing with dust devils and drove the small herd of wild horses into a frenzy. The rail fence began to give way as Ty got a knee on Clyde's chest. The bounty hunter drew back his knife, as Clyde's hand fell on Harold's Colt, lying where he'd left it when he'd shed his pants.

Ty froze when Clyde stuck the barrel of the gun in his face. "Whoa now, boy," he said as the first mustang galloped past and the noise and wind died.

Clyde rolled up to his knees, holding the gun in both hands, the muzzle pressed firmly to Ty's lips. "Shut up!" Clyde roared. "You just keep quiet and take your medicine, ya hear me?"

"Put down the gun, Love," Romy said from behind Clyde.

"I can't do that," Clyde said, as Romy walked around where he could be seen.

"You see this uniform, Love? Now drop the gun. If you don't put down the weapon, I'll have to shoot ya, and I surely don't want to do that. Come on, now. You don't wanna die over no piece a shit like this ol' boy."

"I got to," Clyde said.

"I repeat," Romy said even louder, "if ya don't put down the gun, I will have to shoot."

"Clyde, don't."

The one voice that could sway Clyde penetrated the red haze of rage. Reluctantly, Clyde eased up on the trigger as Donnie ran toward him. Ty sneered his disgust as Donnie stopped beside Clyde and put a hand on his lover's shoulder.

"Please, Clyde. Much as this jackass needs killin', I don't want ya to die. I want ya to live and be with me."

Clyde's gaze wavered and slid toward Donnie.

"Come on, now, you dumbass cowpoke," Donnie said. "You ain't no vigilante. Let the sheriff have this one."

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Clyde began to tremble and the Colt's barrel drooped toward the ground. Romy began to hope this situation wouldn't get any worse as Donnie Kilbride took the revolver from Love's shaking hands. Movement in Romy's peripheral vision distracted him for a moment as Thom hobbled through the barn door. It was only a momentary lapse, but it was long enough.

Ty threw the knife he'd held alongside his leg. The bright blade clove the air seeking Clyde Love's heart, but Donnie got in the way. Clyde caught Donnie as his lover stumbled forward with the force of the throw that embedded the blade in his flesh.

"No," Clyde choked out as Donnie sagged against his chest.

Romy pointed his gun, but Ty was between him and the chopper. Clyde lowered Donnie to the grass and picked up the Colt that had fallen from Donnie's limp hand. Bringing the long-barreled gun to shoulder height, Clyde fired in a downward trajectory.

Ty stumbled and almost went down. Clutching at his calf, he limped on. Another bullet slammed into his opposite ankle and he pitched sideways into the path of the stampede. The herd of mustangs poured through the broken fence and right over Ty. Kicked and trampled by dozens of hooves, Ty suffered broken bones and ruptured organs before a flying blow to the skull put him out of his misery.

Clyde dropped the gun and dropped to his knees, cradling Donnie in his arms. Romy stood in the center of the clearing, torn between going to Thom, or the fugitives. He jumped when Caleb tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey Romy, I don't know what the hell's goin' on here, but I'm leavin' before I lose my job."

"You do that," Romy said. "And if ya ever breathe a word a what you seen here, I'll make it my personal mission to find ya and make ya sorry."

"Don't sweat it," Caleb said. "I'm joinin' the Army anyway. They need chopper pilots. And tell you the truth; I don't give a good Goddamn about all this law crap. I just wanna fly."

"Good luck to ya," Romy said. "I wouldn't really a killed ya, Caleb."

"Like hell you wouldn't," Caleb said. "Good luck to you, too. Your ass is gonna be grass when this shit hits the fan."

"No kiddin'," Romy deadpanned. "Now git on outta here."

"Sure you don't want me to take that fella to a hospital?" Caleb asked, nodding at Donnie.

"I'll take care of this situation," Romy said. "Ain't gonna tell ya again to git."

Caleb took off, spotting the herd of wild horses high-tailing it for open country, and for a moment his callused heart soared as it did when he was flying for fun.

"So long, Jerome Walker, you crazy bastard," he said, as he banked up on one side and turned back to base.

Line Squall

"Easy, Clyde," Donnie groaned, as his eyelids fluttered.

"You ain't dead," Clyde blinked his tears away.

"If I was dead, I don't believe my shoulder would hurt this bad."

Romy helped Thom over to where Clyde and Donnie slumped together on the grass. Thom was beat up pretty bad, but he was moving under his own steam and anxious to see how his boys were doing. Romy took a look at Donnie and pursed his lips.

"Reckon we'll be needin' a doc, after all, but you boys ain't critical. Clyde Love, Donald Kilbride and Thomas Robb, I should be arrestin' your asses and throwin' ya in jail, but I'm in the mood to do somethin' really stupid today. Clyde, lay your friend down here by Thom, and help me drag what's left a Ty into the barn."

"Why?"

Thom answered. "Cause if we burn the barn with two bodies inside, the law might assume they were you and Donnie. At least for long enough to let you get a head start. Is that what you had in mind, Romy?"

"Nope. I had in mind to put in my years on the force 'til my butt got big enough for a seat on the county commission, but I don't see as I have any choice now. Since ya decided to play Lone Ranger, I get to be a fugitive with ya. Goddamn, ya piss me off, Thomas T. Robb."

"Yeah, I know," Thom said. "Sorry."

"Oh, just shut up and look after that boy. Me'n Clyde'll be back in few minutes."

Though clearly reluctant to leave Donnie, Clyde helped Romy carry Ty Whitter's battered corpse into the barn. Dropping him near his luckless partner, the two men took a quick breather.

"Hoo-ee, that ol' boy smells like he's been dead for a week already," Romy commented.

Pulling a pack of Marlboros from his breast pocket, the deputy offered them to Clyde. Clyde took a cigarette with a nod of gratitude and reached in his pocket for matches.

"Here ya go," Romy said, holding a flame to Clyde's cigarette.

Clyde nodded again and took a deep drag as Romy looked around the big building.

"This looks like it'll burn real good," the deputy said.

Clyde looked at the ground.

"Lotta hay and straw, hell, this place is built a seasoned wood. Go up like a Christmas tree on New Year's Eve. Sure am glad them ponies got away."

Clyde mumbled something.

"Aw, that's okay, boy," Romy said. "You ain't got to thank me. Reckon I still give a damn about Thom T."

Clyde looked at the coal of his cigarette, the toes of his boots, the

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rafters, before finally raising his eyes as far as Romy's collar. "You the quarterback?" he asked.

Romy stared intently at Clyde for a long moment. "Yeah, I was," he said. "What'd Thom tell you about us?"

"Told me he loved ya."

"He said that?"

"Yep." Clyde crushed out his cigarette butt.

Romy was staring into the middle distance, his smoke burning forgotten between his fingers. He dropped the butt suddenly with a curse, looked toward the barn door, and back at Clyde.

"Hey, Love. You ain't got to say nothin' you don't want to, but I was wonderin' about you and your friend, Donnie."

"What about us?"

Romy gave Clyde a look. "Ya seem awful close."

As if the weight of the entire world rested on his neck, Clyde lifted his head to meet Romy's gaze. "I love Donnie Kilbride," he said.

Romy nodded. "Thought so. Is it worth it?"

"Yep."

Romy nodded again. "Even if you die?"

"Ever'budy dies, mister. At least I ain't gonna die knowin' I missed my chance at somethin' most folks only dream about."

Romy nodded a third time. "He sweet to you?"

"What?"

"Nothin'. Just my foolishness. Hell, you two buckaroos are young, dumb and fulla cum, ain't that right? Don't suppose ya give a thought to much other than stayin' alive and gettin' your rocks off nine or ten times a day."

Clyde turned away. "We need to get Donnie to a doctor," he said.

"What about you?" Romy said. "Your hands are a mess."

Clyde shrugged off the man's concern and walked out the door. Romy lit a match and dropped it in the straw before following Clyde outside. Thom gave Romy the keys and the deputy drove the Cadillac around front. They got Donnie into the back seat and rolled away from the blazing pyre. Trusting his uniform to keep them from getting pulled over, Romy headed south.

As the air began to lighten toward dawn, Romy pulled into a gravel lot surrounding a small cinder block building. The sign wasn't illuminated, but it had the look of a clinic, and lights came on as soon as Romy rang the bell. Thom and Donnie were hustled efficiently into exam rooms by a small, dark skinned man and a woman that was obviously his wife.

Romy and Clyde were left on their own and went outside to smoke. Romy lit Clyde's cigarette and they both stood staring at the hills where the sun would come up in a couple of hours. Neither spoke; they'd said what

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they needed to in the barn.

Thom came out before long complaining that he looked like the Mummy with all the bandages they put on him. Clyde was gone before Thom finished telling him he could go in and see Donnie, and get his abraded wrists attended to. The reporter smiled fondly as he watched the cowboy hurry away.

“Appeal to ya, does he?” Romy drawled, tossing away his cigarette.

“What foolishness are you talking now?”

“The way you looked at Love. Thought maybe you liked him. Huh? Ya think he’s cute?”

Thom curbed the smile that wanted to break free. “I don’t think I like your tone, officer.”

“Come on, Thom. Ya gonna make me say it?”

“After all you’ve put me through in the last eight years? Hell yes, I want you to say it!”

“I’m a big queer,” Romy muttered.

Thom laughed abruptly. “That’s not exactly what I was hoping to hear, but I reckon it’ll do. What changed your mind?”

“Love.”

“Yeah, he can be quite the persuasive speaker,” Thom joked.

“He may not say much, but when he does say something, you can bet it’s the truth.”

Thom cocked his head to the side. “I do believe you really have changed, Jerome K. Walker. Are you saying you feel the same way about me that I’ve felt about you since high school?”

“Reckon I am.”

Thom shook his head, looking away to hide the tears that overflowed. Romy moved closer and Thom put up a hand to ward him off. Ignoring the gesture, Romy took Thom in his arms and held him loosely. Thom had half a mind to demand that Romy let go of him, but the warm embrace felt good despite his fractured ribs.

“So what does all this mean?” Thom asked.

“Well, I sure as hell cain’t go back home, now can I? Reckon I’ll have to run off to Mexico with ya. That suit ya?”

“We’d have to give up everything,” Thom said.

“I know. You’ll likely never get to be a big city reporter, ya know.”

Thom thought about it for a minute as he breathed in the scent of Old Spice, sweat and Juicy Fruit gum, a never forgotten fragrance that haunted his wet dreams. There was really no decision to make; he’d crossed a line when he threw in with Clyde and Donnie.

“All right,” Thom said. “Mexico. Guess we’d better go get the boys. We’ve been here long enough and Hernando should be through with Clyde

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by now.”

As they entered the building again, Thom looked at the sign, and then at Romy. “A veterinarian?” he said incredulously.

“Hernando owes me a favor for not busting his nephew, and a doctor is a doctor.”

Thom rolled his eyes as Romy called out. There was no answer and when they opened the door to the surgery, they found Hernando and his wife bound and gagged. The doctor informed them in rapid Spanish that the boys had been gone for at least fifteen minutes, maybe a half hour.

“We have to find them,” Thom said.

Romy pursed his lips and showed no inclination to dash out to the car. “I ain’t sure that’s what they want, Thom T. What say you and I look after each other for a while?”

Thom was still upset with Romy when they pulled back onto the road, but came to see that Romy was right, in a couple of hundred miles. Clyde and Donnie had made their choice to go off on their own. They had accepted all the help they were going to, and Thom would have to live with that, even if he never knew if they made it, or not.

Epilogue

Romy rode back to the ranch with the flour and sugar and some mail that had been waiting for a week or so. Not many letters found their way here to La Paz, Mexico; Romy and Thom had given this address to only a handful of people.

Thom greeted him with hot coffee, a sweet kiss and a neck rub that reminded Romy of why he loved this man so much. Smiling contentedly, the ex-lawman turned over the three pieces of mail and watched Thom read each address voraciously. He knew Thom missed working for the newspaper, but it was a worthwhile trade off for what they had: a small ranch with a vegetable patch and an orchard that provided almost all their needs.

Thom's face froze for a second as he stared at the piece of mail he was holding, and then he ripped open the grubby envelope. Romy frowned as he watched his lover unfold the single sheet of paper and begin reading the sparse, scrawled writing.

"Who the hell is it from?" Romy asked as tears welled in Thom's eyes.

"It's ... " Thom couldn't speak and handed the letter to Romy.

As Romy read, Thom came around the table and sat on his lap. Absently, Romy put his arm around him and stroked his back. Thom put his cheek atop Romy's head and re-read the words that filled him with such overwhelming emotion.

"Reckon they got my letter?" Donnie asked.

"Reckon so," Clyde said. "Been a couple, three months since you sent it off."

"Hope so. I'd like Thom to know we're okay. "

"You call this okay?"

Donnie followed Clyde's gaze, taking in the snowy soaring peaks of a range to rival the Rockies. Thousands of feet below, a silver thread known as the Rio Magdalena showed them their course. Donnie put his trust in the trail-wise pony he rode, but Clyde wasn't so comfortable with the sheer drop to his left.

"They're just mountains, Clyde. We know mountains."

"Not like these. Why'd I let you talk me into this?"

"Cause you ain't got the sense God give a sheep. Now stop complainin'. These are the Andes mountains, some a the tallest in the world."

"You can have 'em. Thought we was goin' to find a ranch to work."

"We are. I told ya. Argentina's got cowboys."

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"Yeah and you showed me a picture in a book. They wear some mighty funny pants."

"You don't have to wear 'em, Clyde."

"You got that right."

"You ain't never gonna grow up," was Donnie's opinion as he urged his horse on down the trail.

Clyde smiled at Donnie's back. He didn't know why it gave him such pleasure to kid Donnie until he got a rise out of his friend, but it surely did. Seeing Donnie's eyes flash made Clyde feel like there was a warm campfire burning inside him. His mind turned to thoughts of the evening fire and how it painted flickering patterns on Donnie's skin.

Donnie looked back as Clyde shifted his seat. "Gettin' a little saddle sore, friend? We can quit early today if ya want."

"Suits me right down to the ground," Clyde said, the surge at his crotch swelling.

"A shrimp boat?" Romy chuckled. "Cain't picture Love on a boat."

"Well, that's a small part of the story, I'm sure," Thom said. "Donnie doesn't give a lot of details, as you can see. It's all 'We lived rough in the woods for a while. We got a ride with a old boy haulin' pigs. We worked a spread near Nogales for a bit.' No details at all."

"You've got a good imagination," Romy said. "Use it."

A gleam appeared in Thom's eyes. "Well, this proves they have our address, and at least one of them knows how to write. We can hope they'll stay in touch."

"That's a real reasonable attitude, Thom T," Romy said suspiciously.

"Hey, what are ya doin? That tickles. Hey!"

Romy grabbed Thom and pulled him across his lap. Thom stopped tickling and looked into Romy's bright blue eyes. A silent message passed between them, a question and an answer, an invitation was accepted and their lips came together with groin-stirring impact.

"Wanna fool around?" Romy mumbled into Thom's mouth.

"I think we just have time before we have to feed the critters."

"Then let's get to it."

Romy stood and sat Thom on the table, parting the other man's thighs, pressing as close as he could. Thom wrapped his arms around Romy as he was gently laid down and his pants removed. This was going to be a quickie, but he didn't mind in the least. When it came to Romy, Thom was always ready.

"Hey, boy, what do you think you're doin'?" Thom said when Romy

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picked up the bottle of extra extra virgin olive oil. "You know how hard that is to come by down here? You know good and well there's a can a Crisco on the back of the stove."

Romy shook his head. "Naggin' couldn't be no worse if I'd a married a woman," he said.

"Oh, hush up and do what you do best."

Romy grinned as he used some of the olive oil on Thom and himself. "This is the only reason ya keep me around, ain't it?"

"You finally figured it out, you hayseed? If it weren't for your big, unh, oh, Romy... God, Romy, that's good, so good."

"So I guess as long as I got this," Romy punctuated his words with a shallow thrust, "I'll be welcome 'round here."

"Well... as long as you can get it up," Thom drawled.

"Won't be a problem," Romy said.

"Whatta ya say now, Clyde?"

"Beautiful," Clyde mumbled, his eyes going to Donnie standing on the lakeshore.

"It's called Titicaca," Donnie said as Clyde came toward him.

"Is not," Clyde said in surprise.

"Sure is," Donnie grinned. "Ain't that a hoot?"

Clyde's lips twitched. "Titty-caca?"

"Sure enough."

"I got a fire goin'," Clyde said as stopped behind Donnie.

"Figured."

Clyde slipped his arms around Donnie and laid his cheek on Donnie's shoulder. The sun went down, turning the water red and gold like the scales of a dragon. Not that Clyde or Donnie had such a fanciful thought. More burning issues occupied their minds: Who was cooking tonight? Was there any tobacco left? Should they wait until after supper, or just drop to the grass and go at it? Any minute they would stir, but not just yet.

"Donnie?"

"Mmm?"

"You send another letter?"

"M-hm."

"Good."

Clyde pulled Donnie closer, and Donnie turned his head far enough for Clyde to reach his mouth. Clyde craned his neck and took the offered lips. Much as he enjoyed the rush of their car wreck couplings fueled by overpowering desire, he thought he might get to liking this sweet stuff even

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better.

"You're headin' purty far south, friend," Donnie said, as Clyde's hand slid down the front of his shirt to his jeans. "Look out for monsters."

Clyde snorted, tickling Donnie's ear. "You have a mighty high opinion a yourself, Donnie Kilbride."

Donnie leaned happily back against Clyde's solid strength as Clyde fondled him with a self-assurance that excited Donnie as much as the caresses. It was no hardship at all for Donnie to let Clyde get his fill of feeling him up before taking things farther. In fact, Clyde's recent leanings toward gentleness in the physical department made Donnie realize how much more there was to this thing than mere friction.

"Clyde?"

"Busy," Clyde mumbled, his lips moving against Donnie's nape, his fingers moving against Donnie's arousal.

"I love you, Clyde."

"Know ya do."

"Didn't want ya to forget," Donnie said pulling away and turning to face Clyde. "Let's go over to the fire now. I'm hungry."

Clyde frowned at the delay, but they had all the time in world. It was all they had, but they didn't need much more than air to breathe and each other.

"Ya know what today is?" Donnie asked as they sat down on their bedrolls.

Clyde looked up from poking at the fire. "Uh, Tuesday?"

Donnie shook his head as he handed Clyde the bottle of tequila that had been in his saddlebag for months. Clyde took it, but didn't drink right away.

"Ain't we gonna have dinner first?"

"This is a toast," Donnie said.

"To what?"

"To you, Clyde Love."

"What did I do?"

"You were born twenty-three years ago today."

"Well, I'll be dipped. I clean forgot."

"I didn't," Donnie said. "This is the first birthday party either a us has had since... Hell, my last birthday party ended with me yellin' at my dad that I was leavin' and never comin' back."

Clyde moved closer to Donnie and put an arm around his shoulders. "You don't never have to see 'im again."

"Or my mama neither."

"Think she'd be glad to know you're happy," Clyde paused. "Are ya happy, Donnie?"

"Could be happier."

Clyde's incipient smile sagged a bit. "Thought you said this was the

happiest you been since you was a kid.”

“I wasn’t lyin’, but right now I’d be a lot happier if ya’d take a drink so I can give ya your present.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Same thing I give ya most every night.”

“Just what I wanted, and it fits just right,” Clyde said.

There was a time when Donnie wouldn’t have known that was Clyde’s idea of a joke. In four years of constant companionship they had learned one another’s ways and the powerful bond between them had deepened. It was still rare that either of them called it by its true name, but they both knew it was love that they felt.

Nor had there been any lessening of the heat that bloomed between them when they touched. A glance was enough to spark a wildfire that would blaze out of control until it ran out of fuel. Neither understood this combustible component of their friendship, but they could neither deny, nor resist it.

“Ya gonna take a drink, or sit there like a bump on a log?” Donnie asked.

Clyde tipped the bottle and took a swallow of the Mexican liquor. He didn’t care all that much for tequila, but it was his birthday and he felt he should have a drink for some reason. Donnie took the bottle and drank. It was a strange and smoky mystery to Clyde how he could be instantly roused by something so simple as watching Donnie swallow.

Donnie felt the welcome weight of Clyde’s longing stare and set the bottle down. “It’s your birthday, boy. What ya wanna do?”

“Reckon ya know what I want.”

“Reckon I do, ‘cause there ain’t ever but one thing ya do want,” Donnie said. “Just so ya know, ya can have whatever ya want.”

“I got ever’tthin’ I want,” Clyde said, raising his eyes to Donnie’s. “Come ‘ere.”

Donnie turned so he could put his arms around Clyde and brought their lips together. Clyde pulled him closer and he ended up half across Clyde’s lap. Leaning in as the banked fire in his loins put forth flames, Donnie urged Clyde onto his back. Clyde gripped Donnie’s hips hard, as Donnie slid atop him to lie face-to-face, chest-to-chest, crotch-to-crotch.

Clyde exhaled sharply as Donnie’s arousal rolled over his and he was suddenly far too warm. Still coherent enough to be mindful that they couldn’t get more clothes right away, Clyde tugged at the snaps of Donnie’s shirt, rather than ripping them off. Donnie smiled knowingly and lifted his ass far enough to deal with the buttons of their jeans.

Donnie had to kneel to get his pants down and by the time he was bare-assed, Clyde had shucked his jeans as well. Clyde groaned deep in his chest as Donnie lay back down on top of him. Clutching a double handful of

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Donnie's muscular backside, Clyde raised his pelvis, seeking as much contact as possible.

"You was born ready, wasn't ya?" Donnie said softly, looking into his lover's face.

"Not 'til I met you, Donnie Kilbride."

Donnie cupped Clyde's cheek in his palm. "You ever sorry you took the job at Killdevil?"

A crease appeared between Clyde's brows. "Well... I guess there are a few things to be sorry about. If I had my way, I'd a never had to kill nobody... but that's how it happened. I made up my mind that Harold and them boys needed killin' and I ain't gonna lose no more sleep over it."

Donnie waited, his eyes on Clyde's. Clyde finally had to smile.

"Course I ain't sorry. If I hadn't a took that job, I wouldn't ever a met ya."

"And that's a good thing, is it?" Donnie made a subtle humping motion with his hips.

"Come on, Donnie," Clyde moaned. "Ya know you're the best thing ever happened to me."

"Yeah, but I like to hear ya say it sometimes. Happy birthday, Clyde."

Clyde drew breath to thank Donnie for remembering his birthday, but he never got the chance. Donnie attacked him like a starving man on a Thanksgiving dinner and Clyde lost interest in anything but the feel of Donnie's hands and mouth on his flesh. When it reached the point where Clyde felt he would burst his skin if he didn't come, he rolled over.

To Clyde's surprise, Donnie resisted. Keeping Clyde under him, Donnie grasped Clyde's cock and seated it. Clyde instinctively grabbed Donnie around the waist to help support him, as Donnie began to lower himself onto the rigid shaft.

It was immediately obvious that Donnie had prepared himself for this at some point earlier in the day. Clyde's arousal eased into tight heat that gave way like layers of wet velvet and closed around him like a vise. He couldn't imagine a sweeter feeling than entering Donnie at this leisurely pace, watching the swift changes of expression on Donnie's face like cloud shadows moving across the mountain meadows.

Donnie's front teeth caught at his lower lip, his eyelids softly closed, as he enveloped Clyde's length to the root. Clyde lay still, mesmerized by his lover's beauty, sweetness and generosity. It was a daily miracle of his life that this man loved him, and not only bore his lust, but matched it.

"Best birthday I ever had," Clyde said.

Donnie bore down on the shaft that filled him so perfectly, making Clyde gasp. "It ain't over yet," he grinned.

Donnie rode Clyde for considerably longer than eight seconds that night, more like eight times, truth be told. They pleased each other in every way

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known to them, and even got a little creative when they ran out. There was no longer any question of embarrassment, or shame, or holding back between them. They spoke honestly to one another, stating desires and dislikes with equal candor. It saved them a lot of grief in the long run.

They eventually did make their way to Argentina and worked the biggest cattle ranch they'd ever seen, but wanderlust had gotten a hold on them and they moved on after a year or two. On fine new Criollo saddle horses, they trekked south across the Pampas to Patagonia and over the Andes to the capital city of Santiago. After a night of sampling big city sins, they got on a big boat and sailed away westward.

Now I've heard tell that those boys made it island by island to the wild and woolly land Down Under. It puts a smile on my face to imagine Clyde and Donnie a-wranglin' kangaroos, but I don't know that for sure. There came a time when Donnie's sporadic letters stopped arriving at the little ranch in Mexico and once in a while Thom would wake at night with tears in his eyes for no reason and Romy would rub his back until he fell asleep again.

Anyway, it all happened more'n thirty years ago, and in thirty more, probably nobody will care about a couple a no-count pissants queer for each other that went on a killing spree and got the fiery death they deserved. No need for them to know that the two desperadoes got clean away: it wouldn't make as good an ending to the story.

I'm glad they got away. The light in Thom's eyes when he spoke to me of Donnie and Clyde told me they weren't nothing like the stories would have you believe. I've never known two better men than Thom and Romy, and their opinion goes a long way with me.

They took a disposable boy whore off the streets of Nogales, cleaned him up, raised him with love and respect and sent him off to college in the United States. Today he's a lawyer, a damned good one and a bulldog advocate of equal rights for all. If he tends to specialize in cases where his clients are gay, that's nobody's business but his.

And if anyone wonders why the practice is called Killdevil and Associates, I'm happy to tell the story one more time.

The End.

Bio

I was born on an Air Force base and I've been in flight ever since. My father took the family with him wherever he was stationed; Spain, Morocco, Turkey, and Alaska were among his postings. While studying commercial arts, I married a musician who turned out to be a pilot in disguise. Having no burning ambition of my own at the time, I devoted myself to his dream. His job as aircraft designer and competition pilot has taken us all over the world. I have now set foot on almost every continent (a personal life ambition), but I don't hold out much hope for Antarctica anymore.

I have always loved to read. Since I was four, reading has been my favorite diversion and books my best friends. A few years ago, with my husband's support, I set out to become a writer. I wrote every day and posted what I wrote at various Internet groups and later on livejournal. I cannot recommend this school of writing highly enough. The candid feedback I received was invaluable to my development. I kept working at it, and one day I received the most exciting e-mail ever. A publisher wanted to talk to me.

That's pretty much it so far. There are a few fun facts like: my only child is a rescued Greyhound named Lizard, I live at a small grass airfield with a hang gliding school, I have what's commonly referred to as a "photographic memory", I collect words as a hobby, and my only nickname is "The Judge".

Pleased to meet you.

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