



Spurs and Saddles: Recovery

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ISBN: 978-1-60370-363-5, 1-60370-363-2

Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press electronic edition / May 2008

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78650.
www.torquerepress.com

Recovery

By CB Potts

Part One

Red, white, blue and yellow. An abbreviated rainbow of balloons bobbed over the armory, the highest part of the arch hovering over a huge “Welcome Home!” banner.

“Man, that looks good,” Adam said. They’d been in route for well over a day now, testament to the military’s hurry-up-and-wait travel planning. They’d had two days notice that they were finally, actually, at long last, headed home. Two days to shake free from the sand trap: to settle accounts, finish up last minute paperwork, to bid farewell to the few locals who hadn’t tried to kill him.

Then it was thirty hours in an airplane. Only a fraction of that had been spent in the air, Adam riding half hidden in the dark, stinky underbelly of a troop carrier, smooshed between equipment and the men who’d served beside him. The rest had been taxi time, or sit on the tarmac time, or just waste time, postponing what even stop loss couldn’t prevent: the end of a long, long tour in the sand.

But that was behind him. That was over. The balloons, the silly, stupid, primary colored balloons, the plastic symbol of so much joy, were proof positive of this. Only in America, blissfully free of sniper fire and IED’s, or Improvised Explosive Devices, would you willingly walk into a crowd so determined to draw attention to itself.

His mama was there, of course, trying like hell not to cry. Both of his brothers -- Daniel and Elijah -- were flanking her, Elijah’s arm wrapped protectively around baby Mary’s shoulders.

Adam turned his head. He wanted to give his Tom a nudge, show him at long last the family he’d only been able to present in three-by-five prints -- but Tom wasn’t there.

Nope. Tom had abandoned formation, boots thudding across the pavement as he ran toward a petite brunette, who was standing there with an arm full of red roses.

Adam stopped, mid-march, leg hanging out there in space, just to stare.

That girl? Clearly wasn’t Tom’s sister. Nope. Tom was a huge man, close on six-and-a-half feet tall, big wide hands, fingers like sausages -- two-and-a-half buck’s worth of muscle, all crammed very nicely into camo.

This girl, on the other hand, was tiny. Maybe five-five, once you took those ridiculous high heels off of her feet, with a little button of a nose, clearly alien to Tom’s bloodline.

And the way she was kissing Tom? Kissing him now, while the roses cascaded to the ground, forgotten, arms wrapped up around his neck and feet right off the ground?

That wasn't the way sisters kissed.

This was made manifestly clear to Adam when Mary, having finally broken free of Elijah's restraining arm, launched herself across the causeway and into his arms.

"You're home!" she said, wrapping her thin arms around his waist and squeezing for all she was worth. "Adam! Adam! You're home!" When she looked up, the tears were just spilling out of her eyes, twin fountains of joy and long-denied sorrow bubbling up. "You're really home!"

"Yeah, kiddo." He bent down and picked her up. Clutching her to his chest, he smelled the cotton-candy pink brightness of home, pure and happy and untainted.

Goddamn if he didn't tear up a little bit too, then.

"I'm home," he said, voice breaking just a touch. "This time for keeps."

"Dude, you're back!" That was Daniel, standing back and grinning like a loon. He'd grown a good four inches while Adam was away. Elijah, younger and less reserved, threw himself at Adam, wrapping him and Mary both in a giant bear hug.

"Too hard!" Mary squeaked. "You're squeezing too hard!"

"I'll protect you," Adam said, flexing his arms around Mary just enough to loosen Elijah's grip. "No one's gonna hurt you now that I'm back."

"Put her down, put her down!" That was Mama. "I want my boy!"

His sister and brothers simply melted -- out of sight, out of mind, out of existence. Adam didn't know. All he knew is that Mama was there, hugging him fiercely, squeezing hard enough that he was going to be black and blue for a month.

"My baby!" She was crying now -- Mama who had not shed a tear the whole time he was deployed. Mama who wrote cheerful emails every morning, sent care packages littered with smiley face stickers every week, answered every phone call with a chipper "Hello!" was sobbing against his chest. "You're home! My little boy!"

"Hey, Mama." What could he say? There were no words he could say now; this was her time to cry and get it all out. They'd told them that on the plane. All the pent-up emotion family members were holding inside was likely to burst loose now. Couple-three days, everyone would be back to normal. "I missed you, too."

That set off a fresh burst of tears, salty hot against his chest. Adam wrapped an arm around her, and looked over at Daniel. "Where's Dad?"

Daniel nodded toward the back of the armory hall. "In there, with the Channel Five crew. They want to interview you."

“Now?” A cold ball dropped into Adam’s stomach, churning up old acid. “I just got back.”

“You know Dad,” Daniel said, laughing. “Every opportunity’s a good one.”

“He’ll have to take a pass on this one,” Adam shot back. “I’m not cleared to talk to the press yet.”

That wasn’t strictly true. No orders had come down barring the unit from talking with the press, and frankly, the administration could use all the happy homecoming shots it could get. However, command had been pretty clear that they weren’t free men just yet -- Uncle Sam could still tap you on the shoulder if he needed you, and he wasn’t the least bit shy about slapping your wrist if things got out of hand.

“He doesn’t want you to talk,” Mama said, stepping back. “They’re filming all the soldiers walking under the balloon arch and out onto the lawn, that’s all.”

“That’s all right then.” Adam forced a grin. “I don’t think the brass can complain about that.” He reached a hand out and grabbed Mary’s tiny palm. “Come on, kiddo. Let’s go find Dad and check this out.”

It was a good thing Adam was amenable to having his picture taken, because there was really no way to avoid it. His father had positioned a secondary abbreviated rainbow arch of balloons, which just happened to feature a “Davis Motors Welcomes Our Heroes” sign prominently, directly over the armory’s only exit.

Channel Five was there, filming everyone as they passed through. They were trying to get each soldier individually, which, of course, created a bottleneck. A milling crowd of camo-clad soldiers didn’t seem to mind, taking the extra moments to kiss their wives, snuggle their children, meet new babies for the first time.

Adam stopped then too, hoping to get one last moment with Tom. He had to be there somewhere, amid all the sunshine and fanfare and screaming family members -- yet when Adam craned his neck and peered into the throng, he was no where to be found.

Tom had departed his life as abruptly as he’d entered it.

Mary didn’t afford him much time, yanking on his arm, determined with sheer strength of will to get her brother the last few miles home. Mama was on his other side, holding onto his hand as if he wasn’t quite old enough to navigate a crowded hallway.

The camera didn’t miss a single step of their passage.

Nor of Adam’s reunion with his father.

“Son!” William said. He was wearing his car salesman smile, the over-wide grimace well familiar to anyone in Channel Five’s viewing area. It starred in nearly every other commercial, after all. “Welcome home!”

“Hi Dad.” Adam said, voice low.

Mama squeezed his hand. Once. Hard.

“It’s good to see you,” he added.

William threw his arms wide, in a gesture Adam knew better than to step into. “Speak up!” he hissed through his teeth. “They’re recording this!” That was a difficult sentence to manage without moving his lips, but William did a fine job of it.

“Good to see you,” Adam repeated, each word overly loud, slow, and distinct. “I’m happy to be home.”

William beamed. “I bet you can’t wait to get behind the wheel of a new Chevy Camaro Convertible!” He turned away from Adam to face into the camera. “Just like we have here at Davis Motors!”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Adam’s words weren’t overly slow, but they were definitely distinct. “You’re using this for a God damn commercial?”

He dropped his mother’s hand to give the camera the finger. “Screw you. Screw all of you.”

“Adam!” Mama sounded shocked.

“Bullshit on this!” Adam replied. He turned on his father. “What the hell are you trying to do? Bring command down on my ass? So you can sell some fucking cars? Screw you.” He shook his head. “Good thing I came home.”

“Adam.” This was Mary, small and quiet at his side. “I’m happy you’re home.”

He looked down at her and forced a smile. “I know, Pumpkin.”

“We can do that again, if you’d like.” Channel Five’s anchor, an anorexic, praying mantis blonde, leaned into the shot. “Get something a little more family friendly.”

“I don’t think so.” Adam shook his head. “Not until I’m cleared by command.” He glared at his father. “If ever.”

“We’ll talk about that later,” William said. “Now, there are other soldiers behind you, and I’m sure they’d like to get home to their families.”

“Of course,” Adam said. “What was I thinking?” He picked Mary up. “Come on, kiddo.”

“Some things never change, do they?”

Mama shrugged. “Your father means well, Adam.”

“You mean he means to do well.” They were almost home now, but Adam was too angry to see the scenery. “Doesn’t he realize what that little stunt could have cost me?”

“You’re home now.” She shrugged. “That part of your life is over.”

“Heh.” Adam pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing hard enough to slow his words. “I’d like to think so. But it doesn’t work that way.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel asked from the back seat.

“You ever hear of stop loss?” Adam shrugged. “They can call me back any time they get a notion. I’m still on IRR status for the next six years. I’m home, yes. But I’m not a free man.”

“I don’t know that your father was aware of that.” Mama was tight-lipped. “But you could have handled it better.”

“He could have asked.”

“You would have said no.”

“Of course I would have said no!” Adam exploded. “My life is not a marketing exercise! I’m not ‘good material’.”

“Can we just stop fighting?” Mary screamed. “Mama said we’d get ice cream, and you’re home, and this was supposed to be a happy day and...” Her lower lip quivered, shaking side to side despite her obvious efforts to control it. “And now it’s all ruined!”

“Do you see what you did?” Mama asked, tone low. Then she looked up into the rearview mirror. “Don’t worry, baby. We’ll still get ice cream.” Daggers slid sideways out of her eyes, into Adam’s exposed neck. “Everything’s fine. Your brother’s just tired.”

“Yeah, Mary Mary.” Adam sighed. “I’m just really tired.”

A cone of rocky road did much to appease Mary, who occupied herself with chasing chocolately drips around the edge of the cone before they hit the white paper napkin.

Mama, however, still had a lot to say.

“He’s going to want answers, you know.” A tidy spoonful of frozen yogurt disappeared between coral-lipsticked lips. “About that little performance of yours.”

“I want some answers too, Ma.” Adam was doing his level best to keep his voice low, the tone non-threatening. “If he thinks I’m here for some big PR event, he’s got another thing coming.”

“A family business needs a family.”

“You did fine without me here.” That was true. The sporadic letters he’d received from his father during his tour read like sales reports; the numbers were up this month, the no-interest promotion drove them in like flies.

“But now you’re home.” Mama shook her head. All had evidently been decided. “Life can get back to normal.”

“Well,” Adam said with a sigh. “That’s going to be a fun conversation.”

It was a conversation that never came. Not that night, not the next morning over the first passable breakfast Adam had had in years. William had stayed around long enough to gulp down a cup of orange juice, scanning the financial pages without commentary. Then he’d grabbed a travel mug of coffee and disappeared.

Mama followed him to the dealership soon after, once Danny and Elijah had driven to the high school and Mary’d been put on the bus. “You know where everything is,” she said with an apologetic smile. “I’d like to stay home, catch up, but...” she shrugged. “We all have our crosses to bear.”

“It’s fine, Mama,” he assured her. “The world’s not going to stop just because I’m home. I know that.”

She pouted then, guilt pulling down the corners of her mouth.

“Sides which,” Adam quickly added, “I could do with some alone time. It’s been a while.”

That much, at least, was true. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been wholly alone. Now, with the house empty and echoing, Adam wasn’t sure what to do with himself.

Every minute had been regimented over there. Even if there was no overt command, no direct order to follow, there was the continual, over-riding need to look out, to be aware, to make sure that the random passer-by wasn’t strapped down with a one-way ticket to Heaven.

Here, there was nothing. Once the morning flurry of vehicles had departed, ferrying the occupants to work and to school, silence reigned. The streets were still, silent. The only sound was a faint mechanical hum of air conditioners working to chill empty spaces, water pumps working unseen.

It was absolutely wonderful.

For about forty-five minutes.

After that, though, the quiet got weird. It made the house both larger and more confining, all at once. Adam walked into the kitchen, and pulled open the fridge, searching for something to eat.

Everything that had been so hard to get hold of over there was here in abundance: ice cold Coke, real orange juice, deli meat just waiting to be eaten.

“Hot damn,” he said with a smile. One behemoth sandwich later, it was time to start the day. He went into the living room, and turned on the TV.

Six point six seconds later, Adam discovered that some things really hadn’t changed while he was away. Two hundred channels, and there wasn’t a single interesting show on. The same programs that would gather a crowd overseas, where they’d all huddle around a tiny laptop screen to watch bootleg DVDs, totally failed to interest him now.

Then a flash of sand-colored camo caught his eye.

His finger paused on the remote.

“Staff Sergeant Mitchell Hammond spent six years in the Marine Corps, nearly half of this time in Iraq,” the voice over said, as Hammond was shown tinkering under the hood of a Humvee. *“Then, while on patrol outside the green zone, an IED exploded near Hammond’s convoy.”*

The image cut away, replaced with an image of Hammond in a wheelchair. He was wearing a dark suit, shaking hands with a fairly prominent senator, well known for his vocal opposition to the war in Iraq.

“Now Hammond’s seeking to serve his country in another forum. He joins four other Iraq veterans, who are running for senate...”

“You didn’t have enough bullshit over there?” Adam asked the TV.

“The situation in Iraq has gotten out of hand,” Hammond told the cameras. *“The American people deserve to know the truth. They need to know what’s happening to their sons and daughters in uniform.”*

Adam snorted. “They don’t have a clue, man.”

“I have made it my mission to shed light on the situation. The public has the right to know what’s going on. If I’m elected, it will be my first priority to bring transparency and integrity to a conflict that’s been hidden underneath many layers of jingoism and special interests.”

Adam stared at the TV. The segment ended, fading away to be replaced by the latest hi-jinks of a high profile basketball player with substance abuse issues. Still he stared.

Transparency and integrity.

He could use a little of that in his life.

It was time to go see Tom.

Google can be your best friend, when you're looking to find someone. Twenty minutes with the computer, and Adam had a phone number and address.

Tom wasn't far: the address, if it was accurate, was in a small hamlet on the edge of the suburbs. The type of place Adam could imagine Tom living: on the verge of country, where lawns gave way to fields.

He looked at the phone. Tom could be a simple call away.

It would be good to hear his lover's voice.

Tom's voice was magnificent. It was one of the first things that attracted Adam to him. The deep, rolling, bacchanalian baritone just rolled out of his mouth, loud without being aggressive, powerful without pretention.

It was a voice that dropped, most easily, into a seductive growl, into the barely articulate mumbles that urged Adam to suck harder, to take more. They'd had to be discreet, of course. Don't-ask-don't-tell didn't translate into tacit approval of same-sex relationships in the service. Finding hidden corners to hook up had been challenging, but they'd managed.

And God, he missed that voice.

Over there, a simple, "Hey buddy!" had been enough to transform a bad day into a bearable one.

And on the days when the shrapnel had come too close, when death delivered sad tidings to the patrol, when locals who were supposed to be friends proved to be anything but, a pair of strong arms and that voice, muttering, "It's gonna be fine, you know", was all that got Adam through.

Now that was gone, and he'd never even gotten to say goodbye.

In a way, that had been what he'd dreaded the most, the one factor that had made him hang back from entering a relationship with Tom. They had been in a war zone, after all. Any of a million things -- an IED, an assault, sniper fire, the car that refused to slow down at the checkpoint -- could have stolen his lover away.

He never imagined losing Tom safely at home, into the arms of another. The thought had simply never ever crossed his mind. Adam wanted Tom, his voice, his arms...

But a phone call wasn't going to do it. He wanted Tom's voice, yeah, but that wasn't all. He wanted to touch Tom again, to feel the sandpaper tips of his fingers, the soft cushion of his stomach, the oblique angle of Tom's hip bone the perfect place to rest his hands while Adam knelt before him.

God, he wanted to suck Tom off. Suddenly, totally, it was an overwhelming, demanding need.

A need that couldn't be met over the phone.

It was time for a little drive.

Tom definitely lived on the outskirts -- and it was the side of the skirt that didn't hold up too well to public inspection. Houses were far and few between, replaced instead with tumble down mobile homes. Most of the trailers were surrounded with chain link fencing, some adorned with hubcaps, the rest plain.

Yellow ribbons were wrapped round more trees here, wide, plastic strips of sunshine tied into outsized bows.

The road narrowed, the pavement giving way to potholes more often than not. Adam drove carefully, navigating around the worst of the holes. Funny how the skills he'd picked up driving through bombed-out sections of Baghdad came in handy here in the good old US of A.

House numbers were in short supply. Some homeowners had spray painted digits on the side of the trailer, a tangible denial of the fact that emergency services already knew where they lived.

Others simply went without.

Tom's house, however, had shiny brass numbers, perfectly aligned, centered in the middle of the door.

Adam pulled into the driveway: the driveway with perfectly parallel sides, slate gray gravel raked up to support a Toyota Corolla that had clearly seen better days. Behind the car sat a garage, a canary yellow pickup within.

Adam smiled. That would be Tom's truck, vivid and bright and oversized. Just like the man himself.

The porch creaked under his feet, brown painted plywood having long since abandoned memories of better days.

He knocked once, lightly. A chorus of small dogs greeted him, high ki-yi-yis delivered at a million miles a minute, accented by a clearly human female voice admonishing, “Just settle down, y’all!”

The door opened, revealing a petite brunette. The same brunette who’d been at the airport, as a matter of fact. “Can I help you?” she asked, the greeting automatic. She let her eyes run Adam up and down, comprehension slow to dawn. “You must be Adam! From Tom’s unit! He’s told me so much about all y’all. Come on in, I’ll get him!” She pushed the door open wide. “Come in, come in!”

“Don’t mind the mess,” she called over her shoulder, departing down the hall. “We’ve just been so busy, what with the wedding and all...”

In truth, the trailer was immaculate. Four perfectly matched mugs hung from hooks in the kitchen, gleaming in the sunlight. A stack of hunting magazines was centered on the coffee table, spines aligned absolutely parallel to the gleaming edge of the wood.

Even the shoes, shed near the door so as to not mark the carpet, stood in perfect formation. Tom’s sneakers, long and wide, dominated the mat, almost double the size of the petite pumps next to them.

“Adam!” Tom sounded happy, but that emotion didn’t make it all the way to his eyes. “Good to see you, buddy!”

“Yeah, well,” Adam said. “I was in the neighborhood, thought I’d stop by.”

The lie fell between them, flat. Tom lived forty five minutes away as the crow flies, closer to an hour and a half if that crow found himself bound by traffic laws, and they both knew it. This was not a neighborhood anyone happened to be in.

“You know,” he concluded weakly. “Since I didn’t get a chance to tell you good-bye and all. Didn’t want to lose track of you.”

Something happened then in Tom’s face, his features freezing in position as a final decision presented itself to his consciousness. “Cool. Let’s go out to the garage. I want to show you my new truck.”

“Boys and their toys,” the brunette twittered. When Adam looked at her, she shrugged. “He might as well enjoy it now, right? We won’t have much money for fun after the baby comes.”

Adam’s jaw dropped open, but no sound came out.

“Come on, man.” Tom shouldered him toward the door. “Let’s go out.”

They went down the steps, around the trailer to the garage -- which was constructed of piping and carefully lashed tarps. Adam tapped it lightly with one finger. "This looks familiar -- you bring one of these back in your gear?"

"Heh." Tom laughed. "Adam, what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." Their eyes met. "You know why."

"Dude." Tom let his eyes drop, and did not raise them again. "Dude. We're home. It's over."

"I'd guess maybe. A wedding, a baby?" Adam laughed, a sound with no humor in it. "Either you're the fastest mover on the planet, or there was never anything to be over in the first place."

"Yeah." Tom kicked at the ground, turning over a small pile of gravel with his toe, only to smooth it back out with his heel. "Something like that."

"Wow." Adam swallowed, the only way to force the bile that was clawing its way up from his stomach back down. He'd learned that, over there, the first time he'd seen someone in pieces. Your body reacts of its own accord, sometimes, but you can force it away. "Guess that's good to know."

"What do you want me to say?" Tom was angry now, shoulders rounding up. "I never promised you nothing."

"That's right." Adam started walking away. "And nothing's what I've got."

"Adam..."

Adam looked over his shoulder, eyes stinging. "Good luck with the baby, Tom."

The first beer was pretty amazing. Iraq wasn't dry, exactly, but brews were hard to come by. Adam downed it in a gulp, popping open the second before the first knew it was gone.

The subsequent four clearly knew the routine, disappearing quietly and neatly down Adam's throat while CNN commentators discussed when, if ever, troops would be able to leave Iraq.

And so the better part of a week passed. An alternating diet of television and beer, interspersed with a few games of football in the back with Elijah and Danny, and regular after school story time with Mary.

"I'm glad you're home," she told him, after they'd worked through another chapter of Junie B. Jones' misadventures. "Mama cried an awful lot when you were away."

"I'll tell you what, sport," Adam replied. "I'm not so sure she's all that happy now that I'm home."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," came a voice from behind him. It was his father. "Mary, your mother needs you upstairs."

"Okay, Daddy." Mary bounced off of the couch, dancing out of the room on tip toe.

Adam waited until she was clear of the room to say anything.

"You're home early."

"I'll be going back," William replied. "I've just got some business to take care of first."

Adam sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Such as?"

"You need to figure out what to do with yourself." William sat down, propping himself on the very edge of the couch, feet square in front of him. "You can't just sit around and watch TV all the time."

"I've been home exactly six days." Adam said. "What would you like me to do?"

"I'm not saying you don't need a rest. We all have to take a break some time," said the man who prided himself on not taking any vacations since the dealership opened in 1985. "But you have to have a plan."

"And what goes in this plan, Dad?"

"You tell me." William looked at Adam. "Do you want to go to school?"

Adam shrugged. "I'm not sure, really."

"Did you have a job in mind?"

"I haven't really thought about it."

"You've had years to think about it!" William said. "Twenty-eight months you were over there."

"I was kind of busy then, Dad. Trying to not get killed and all." Adam rolled his eyes. "It takes up more time than you might think."

"Don't get smart with me."

"No, sir, I don't have a plan. No, sir, I don't know what I'm going to do with myself. School doesn't sound bad."

It didn't sound good, either, but this was hardly the time to share that little tidbit with his father.

"While you're figuring it out, you can come down to the dealership. Work with me." It was not a question.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Dad."

"Why not?"

Adam sighed. "Dad, think about it. We're not doing well now. Mama can't stand being around the pair of us as it is." He looked William in the eye. "How in the world will the two of us working together make that any better?"

"We did fine together." His father sounded pained. "Before you left."

"I was a kid. Danny's age," Adam replied. "Hell, younger than Danny."

"What difference does that make?" William's salesman voice, his default voice, was starting to slip. In its place was the angry negotiation voice he used with belligerent customers who tried to cut too deep into the margin.

"I suppose you're going to tell me war changed you," William said. There was a strange tone in his voice, a sharp mocking tone Adam had never heard before. "That you've got Post Traumatic Stress Disorder."

"You're a civilian," Adam said. "You wouldn't understand."

"Understand?" William exploded. "Civilians are the reason you get to go play soldier! Civilians pay the taxes that make your little war games possible!"

Adam stared at his father, at his flushed pink face, his sweaty forehead, the veins bulging in his temple.

"I think you've got that backward, Dad," he said finally. "It's the soldiers that make the civilians possible."

He stood up and started walking toward the door.

William's hand fell heavy on his shoulder. "This conversation isn't over yet."

Adam froze, feeling his shoulder square under William's palm. "I think you'll find it is, sir."

"I'm still your father, boy!" William growled. "Don't talk to me like I'm a God-damn A-rab."

“You’re going to be my one-armed father if you don’t let go of me.” Adam could hear Danny and Elijah messing around in the kitchen, horsing around and laughing. “Don’t make me put you down in front of the boys.”

After, he walked for hours. He’d had just enough beer that he didn’t trust himself to drive -- not to mention the fact that his Dad was probably pissed enough to call the cops and report him as DWI.

That would be something; more than two years in a dry country, only to come home and get busted for drunk driving.

He covered miles. You can move a lot faster when you’re not worrying about sniper fire, when you don’t have to check every side road for clusters of insurgents. Life’s easier, by far, when absolutely no one is paying attention to you.

He’d climbed the hill on the edge of town, home to a playground and a few picnic tables. No one was here now; everyone retreated to the safety of suburban dining rooms once the sun started thinking about setting.

Adam climbed up on a picnic table, feet resting on the bench. Below, he could watch the cars maneuver through town, headlights bright, red taillights trailing. Everything was so regulated, so orderly. The laws of the land weren’t only clear here, they were unquestioned.

“Ungrateful motherfuckers.” He spat. “I went to play soldier? War games?”

No one answered him.

“Son of a bitch,” he sighed. “What the fuck am I going to do?”

Tom’s face loomed large before him. Tom, who had had the answers before. Tom, who knew what to do and when it needed to be done.

Tom, who was going to be married.

Tom, who was going to be a father.

His cell phone was large in his pocket, the potential heavy against his hip. Maybe if he called. Tom had called after him, after all, before he cut off the conversation.

Maybe if he called. Maybe there would be a chance.

“What do you expect me to say?” Tom had asked. *“I never promised you nothing.”*

No. He wouldn’t call.

Not today, anyway.

It's amazing how much longer it took to walk home when he really didn't want to go there.

The kids were already asleep by the time he got home, or at least shepherded off to their rooms, dire warnings of their impending doom should they interrupt apparently clearly conveyed before he'd arrived.

"Son, we're worried about you." Mama fired the first shot. "You're not yourself." She nodded toward the TV. "You haven't gotten off the couch in a week. And the drinking..." Her lips thinned. "That's not like you."

"Maybe it's like me now, Mama."

"I don't think so." She smiled. "You're dealing with some things. You've been under pressure. But this isn't the direction you need to go in."

Adam took a deep breath. "I appreciate what you're saying, Mama."

"We understand that you might not know what you want to do with the rest of your life just yet," William said. His car salesman voice was back, Adam noticed, all smooth tones and conciliatory. "That's understandable. I didn't know what I wanted to do with myself when I was your age."

"Most people don't," Mama added.

"But we see you headed in a direction that can't be healthy." William continued as if Mama hadn't spoken. "Choosing to do nothing is a choice, just the same." He started to pace across the living room, black socks in stark contrast to the white carpeting. "A man needs something to occupy his time."

"I understand that, Dad."

"We want you to come down to the dealership. Establish a routine. Get used to life over here again."

"I think," Adam countered, "It might be better if I move out. It's past time that I get a place of my own."

"You're family. This is your place."

Adam sighed. "I'm not saying I'm not part of the family. It's just that..." Words failed him, everything he wanted to say just beyond the tip of his searching tongue. "This isn't right, right now. It's not working."

“We’ll make it work.” This was Mama, a core of steel clearly visible in affection-wrapped words. “We are a family. That is what we do.”

“It isn’t the family that’s not working,” Adam said. “It’s me.” He didn’t tell them, then, about the dreams. About waking up at two a.m., certain he’d heard incoming rounds, only to discover his baby brother snoozing in the next bed over.

He didn’t tell them how Mary had the same brown eyes he’d seen crying so many tears over there.

“What do you mean?” William asked.

“I’m not getting into that conversation again with you, Dad.” Adam met his father’s eyes, held them hard. “It didn’t go too well the last time through.”

William’s eyes dropped first.

“And what about God?” his dad finally asked. “Have you asked him for help?”

“God’s got fuck-all to do with it, as far as I can see,” Adam shot back. “God’s not there, Dad. This isn’t some Holy Quest, us against the infidel.” He stood up, walked to the wall, and let his forehead rest against the cool sheetrock. “This is little kids getting blown to bits, on account that their daddies can’t figure out who all’s in charge.”

“God’s there too, son.” William shook his head, pinching his fingers over his nose as if warding off an impending headache. “Might be that He’s there more than anywhere, really. It being the Holy Land and all.”

“In a way, that makes it God’s war,” Mama chimed in, tone low, words hesitant. “You were fighting for Him.”

“I don’t want no part of that,” Adam raged. “If God’s behind that mess, I don’t want no part of him, either!”

“There will be no blasphemy in this house!” William, even drawn up to his full height, still had to glare up at his son. “Do you hear me?”

“But a murderer’s welcome here?” Adam asked. His words were suddenly soft, hands spread wide. “If I’ve killed little boys, Dad? A girl no bigger than Mary? Their mama? Their grandma?” A sob broke through, tinged with the sand-scented knowledge of guilt and mortality. “You’re okay with that? God’s okay with that?”

William had no answer, but that was okay. Adam had enough for the both of them.

"I'm not okay with that. I'm totally not okay with that. I don't want to kill people. It's one thing if there's a reason -- if this was a just war! But it's not, and I don't want no part of it." He stood up. "If I had my way, no one would have to be in that position."

"Well, son, we don't have that kind of power." William shook his head. "I'm sorry about that, but that's the truth."

"That's where you're wrong, Dad." Adam headed toward the door. This wasn't a sentence he could say in his childhood home, surrounded by all the trappings of his youth. "I might not have that power yet, but someday I'm going to. I'm going to run for Congress."

Mama's jaw dropped open. William snorted.

"What do you know about politics?" William shook his head. "You don't even vote!"

"I do now," Adam retorted. "And I know enough to know things have to change. I know," he added, drawing on a lifetime's worth of dinner conversation, "that every sale has its moment. The public wants change, Dad. I can be the face of that change, if I time it right."

"Things aren't that easy."

"Life's not about what's easy, sir." Adam nodded. "If I learned one thing over there, it's that. Sometimes it's hard. Sometime it hurts. But we do it anyway."

"I'll have to think about that," William said. "There's a lot of factors to consider here."

"With all due respect, Dad," Adam replied. "It's really not your decision."

William flushed scarlet. "But we're the one who will pay the price of it, aren't we? You went to war; it damn near killed your mother! Every time the news was bad, every time there was an incursion -- day after day after day, not knowing." His arms were flying now. "What do you think that did to her?"

"I'm sorry, Mama." There were tears in his eyes, but Adam ignored them. "I surely am."

"It's all right." Mama's fingers were an origami tangle, digits folded over each other at crazy angles. "I'm fine."

"You are not fine!" William bellowed. "And it's high time you start thinking about what your actions do to other people, young man! Did you even think about what your running for office will mean for your family? For the dealership?"

"That's the important thing, isn't it?" Adam shot right back. "As long as you can make money off of it, it's fine. God forbid something might cut into your margins!"

"Why are you so selfish?" William shouted.

“Why are you?” Adam yelled back. He’d spent enough time nose to nose with officers that it was no longer as terrifying to face his father. “What is wrong with you?”

“That is enough!” Mama stood up. “From both of you.” Her face was red. “The children aren’t deaf. They can hear every word you are saying. This will stop and the time it will stop is right God damned now.”

Adam froze. He’d never heard his Mama swear, not once in all his life.

It apparently was just as shocking to his Father.

“I’m going to bed,” William growled.

“And I’m going out,” Adam said. “Clear my head.”

“Don’t go walking out again. You made your mother half crazy this afternoon.” William stood up. “We’ll talk about this again tomorrow.” He stalked out of the room, Mama in his wake.

Adam stared after them.

For a long time.

Suddenly, bed really didn’t sound like such a bad idea after all.

He’d expected a long night of it, tossing and turning, waking every hour on the hour. All of the adrenaline from the argument was still running through his veins, demanding action.

Yet the moment he stepped into the still, darkened room, half the tension melted out of him.

And when his head hit the pillow, sleep followed, fast and furious. He was out cold in two seconds flat.

Morning brought an empty house and a day spent with the computer, CNN and a notebook, trying to formulate a plan. It’s one thing to say you’re going to run for Congress, after all, and another to actually do it.

For all his bluster, Adam didn’t even know what party he wanted to join.

He had to put it all to the side when Danny got home from school and said, “You and I have got to talk.”

“About what?”

“You’re wrecking everything!” Daniel exploded. “I heard Mom and Dad talking last night. This morning. How you’re Mr. I’m-a-soldier-and-I-know-how-bad-it-really-is-so-send-me-to-Congress!” He poked his finger in Adam’s face. “And if that means the Business Council doesn’t want to give my baby brother a scholarship because I’m a radical? I’m okay with that!”

“Danny...”

“Don’t Danny me! You don’t give a damn! Why should you? It’s not your life you’re wrecking!” He turned on his heel and stomped out of the room. “It’s mine!” The door slammed hard enough to shake the entire house.

Adam stared at the door, at the thin wood veneer still pockmarked with tack holes. LeBron James had hung there before he’d left, suspended perpetually a few inches short of the basket, ball teetering at the very end of his fingertips, almost but never quite falling.

Now the door was empty of imagery. The playful child who had lived there, sharing a room with him, was gone, replaced with such an angry, angry young man.

“No, Danny,” Adam told the door. “It’s your life I’m trying to save.”

Dad turned up not long after Danny had departed.

“Hey, Son.”

“Hey, Dad.” Adam looked up warily from the laptop. “What’s up?”

“Seems to me I might have an idea.” William tossed a brochure down on the bed in front of Adam. Centered on the front of the brochure was the largest pig Adam’d ever seen, being knelt on by a pair of grinning men wearing camo and holding rifles.

“You want me to go shoot a pig?”

William laughed. “Not exactly.” He tapped the brochure with a carefully manicured fingernail. “My buddy Calvin runs this place. Down in Texas, nearby where I grew up. They do hunting trips for boars, javelina, deer, turkey -- the whole bit.” He laughed. “They even shoot at bobcats.”

“And you want me to?”

“He’s had a rough couple years. There was Katrina, and even though the real damage didn’t get up that far, it was bad enough. Then back to back flash floods, they did a number on the cabins he keeps.”

“That sucks.”

“Language, Adam.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Anyway, he’s had to shut down for a season to clean up. Clean up what he can, rebuild the rest.” William was staring at the wall, just above Adam’s shoulder. “I thought maybe you could go down there, give him a hand.”

Adam sighed. “Dad, maybe you haven’t noticed, but I’m about to run for Congress. It’s not exactly the ideal time to run off for three months.”

“It’s exactly the time!” William paced across the room. “You and I may not see eye to eye on this whole thing politically, but I do know one thing; once you’re in office, you’re going to be there for the rest of your life.”

Adam started to speak, but his father silenced him with a gesture.

“No. It’s true. Listen to me. You’re a Davis, and a Davis is good at what they do. When you went to school, you were a good student. When you went to war, you were a good soldier. When you get elected, you’re gonna be a damn fine Congressman.”

There might have been a tear in William’s eye, but both of them knew to ignore it.

“Thank you, Dad.” Adam swallowed. “That means a lot.”

“S’all right.” William glanced down at the brochure. “But I want you to think about it. What’s three months when you’ve got your whole career ahead of you?”

“I don’t know, Dad.” Leaving now would lose him a lot of momentum.

Or so he’d read. Adam wasn’t exactly sure he had any momentum -- or, if you pressed him, what momentum was.

“If you still want to run for office when you get back,” William added, “I’ll help fund your campaign.”

“Are you serious?” Adam stood up. “You hate everything I stand for!”

“But you’re my boy.” William opened his arms. “I love you.”

The hug was brief, contact of any sort unusual between the pair. But it was important -- maybe more important than any words that had passed between them thus far.

“So you’ll go, then?” William asked, after they’d parted.

“Yeah. I’ll give it a shot.” Adam replied. “Your buddy needs a hand, it’s the least I can do.”

Part Two

It was a long flight, longer than Adam had expected. Who'd have thought that going from Philadelphia to DFW could take so long? Still it wasn't nearly as long as the flight back home from overseas, and domestic flights offered cushioned seats and in-flight movies.

The fact that the in-flight movie was centered on the difficult lives of inner-city dance troupes made it very easy to sleep through most of the flight.

Adam woke, half an hour before the plane was scheduled to touch down. His seatmate, an older, heavyset woman, smiled at him.

"You must be military."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, automatically. "Or, least I was. Just finished my tour."

"I can always tell," she said. "Soldiers can sleep through anything. Even turbulence."

"Was it bad?"

"Bad enough," she smiled. "You should be glad you missed it."

"I am." He looked out the window. The clouds had banked underneath the plane, concealing the ground in a thick cushion of white. "Can't see nothing out there."

She laughed. "Nothing to see. Where are you headed?"

He fished in his pocket and pulled out Calvin's brochure. "To see a friend of my Dad's. He got hit hard by the weather down here and needs to rebuild."

She glanced at the brochure and smiled. "Well, and God's blessings on you for helping him out. I hope he's thankful!"

Adam laughed. "He hasn't met me yet -- so I'm not sure how lucky he'll be feeling to have me on board. I don't hardly know one end of a hammer from the other."

"You'll catch on." She turned back to her book. "Military men, they have to catch on quick."

"That we do."

"Or," she added, with just a touch of an evil grin, "you won't know if the orders you're following are dumb ones or not!"

“You old enough to be drinking that?” a rough voice at his shoulder asked. Adam looked up to see a tall man with grizzled black-silver hair peeking from under a charcoal gray hat, bright blue eyes, and a thick scar connecting one ear to the corner of his mouth.

“Barely.” Adam took a long pull on the beer, downing half of the bright yellow beverage in one go. “But yeah.” He held out a hand. “You must be Calvin.”

“Yup. If you’re old enough to be drinking that, that means you’re old enough to buy me one.” Calvin nodded to the waitress. “You eat yet?”

“No. Meant to, fell asleep on the plane.”

“I never could get the hang of that. How do you feel about barbecue?”

“I don’t know,” Adam allowed, “that I’ve got any feelings on it one way or the other.”

Calvin cocked his head and grinned at Adam. “Your Dad was right. You ain’t never been to Texas before, have you?”

“Why do you say that?” Adam asked. He and Calvin had only known each other a handful of minutes, and already they’d fallen into an easy banter. It was like being on base, with the guys -- everyone’s in the same boat, so why not be friendly?

Maybe, he thought half a minute later, it’d be better if he didn’t think about over there right now. Maybe these three months would go quicker, easier, if he let himself fall out of the habit of thinking about Tom.

“Because,” Calvin said, clearly unaware of the mental journey Adam had just taken himself on, “everyone’s got an opinion about barbecue. There’s good barbecue, and there’s what we can get here.” He smiled as the waitress set down the beer. “No offense, darlin’.”

“None taken, honey.” She smiled. “I dish it out, not dish it up, you know?”

“I hear you.” Calvin turned his attention to Adam, blue eyes twinkling. “So which one’s it going to be?”

“Both, I reckon.” Adam grinned. “I got a Texas-sized appetite, at least.”

“Oh, boy,” Calvin laughed. “This is gonna be fun.”

The next half hour dissolved into an orgy of beef. “Brisket, bread, and beans,” Calvin told the waitress. “Keep ‘em coming till we can’t eat no more.”

“If this is the bad barbecue,” Adam said, looking at the stack of dirty, sauce-stained plates, “I’d hate to see how much of the good stuff we can eat.”

Calvin smiled. “There’s no bad food in Texas. There’s just good and better.” He stood up and dropped a couple of bills on the table. “This was good. Now let’s go get better.”

Calvin was driving a big old pickup, with “Red Rocks Big Game” painted down the side. It had one real good-sized dent along the bed, just over the wheel well.

“What happened?” Adam asked. “You piss off a longhorn?”

Calvin laughed. “Nope. That’d be too easy. We had some flooding, while back. It brought Bessie here out for a ride, hung her up in some trees.” His eyes were odd then, half-focused, half not. “That was a job and a half, getting her down.” He snapped out of memory and gave Adam all of his attention. “It’s going to be nice to have some help around here.”

“Dad says you need it,” Adam said. “What with the weather and all.”

Calvin nodded. “True enough.” They climbed up into the cab, and Calvin turned the key. Despite the truck’s rough appearance, the motor caught instantly, purring itself awake. “It’s been something. Billy tells me you’ve got some needs of your own, too.”

“What do you mean?” It was good, Adam thought, that Calvin was one to throw stuff right out in the open from day one. Straightforward. He liked that.

“He tells me you’re troubled.” Calvin’s eyes were locked on the horizon, but Adam still felt their weight on him, oblique. Subtle. “That you need peace and quiet and work to get you back in your head again.”

“That may be true,” Adam allowed. “But there’s no guarantee this is gonna help.”

Calvin grinned. “If I’ve learned one thing, boy, it’s that life don’t offer much in the way of guarantees.”

“What about faith?” Adam asked. “Those guarantees any good?”

The grin faded. “I can’t rightly speak to that. Seen it work for some.” Calvin shrugged. “Seems to me it depends on what you choose to put your faith into.”

They rode in silence a long time after that, the crowded tangle of Dallas giving way to smaller, emptier roads as they headed south.

“I have to say,” Adam said, looking out the window, “This isn’t what I expected.” The land was just flat, almost like a prairie.

“What were you thinking you were getting into?”

Adam shrugged. “You know -- tumbleweeds and cactus. Herds of cattle. Cowboys.”

Calvin smiled. “We’ve got all that,” he said, waving a hand vaguely west, “that way. This here’s God’s Country.”

“Great,” Adam groaned. “Last time I was in God’s country, people drove themselves nuts trying to blow my ass up.”

“I don’t think you’ve got to worry about that here,” Calvin laughed. “We got enough ways to kill you down here without resorting to explosives.”

“Well, that’s comforting.” The easy banter between them was nice. It wouldn’t suck, Adam thought, to spend a month or two working with Calvin. He had a quick sense of humor, a laugh that was more than easy on the ears.

And, truth be told, he wasn’t bad to be looking at either. Long and lean, with a strong face, capable, competent hands.

Adam had a quick flash of what those hands would feel like on his skin, touching his face, holding onto his hair -- and then forced those thoughts right away. This was clearly not the time to be thinking like that.

“So you take guys out hunting boar?” he asked, hurriedly. “Let them shoot their own pork chops?”

Calvin grinned. “Boar’s not bad eating, especially if you know what to do with it. But most of the guys who come down here hunt boar for the thrill of it.”

“What’s so thrilling,” Adam asked, “about shooting a big pig?”

“There’s a whole world of difference about boars and pigs,” Calvin replied. “Pigs are smart. They’re probably the smartest animals you’ll find on a farm, and I’m including the farmer in that.” He shook his head. “But boars? Boars are devious.”

“Tricky?”

“Hard to track, hard to find, hard to get a good shot,” Calvin said. “And God help you if you don’t kill him right off the bat.” He held up his hand, fingers spread an incredible distance.

“Tusks on a boar are like that. They’ll rip right into you if they get the chance.”

“Really?” Adam asked. “That’s pretty dangerous!”

“Well, that’s what I’m for,” Calvin said. “I keep the guys from being too stupid, you know? It’s stupidity that will get you every time. You make a bad decision, before you know it you’re standing nose to nose with a boar with no way out.”

“They ever come looking for you?” Adam asked. “The boars, I mean.”

“They haven’t yet.” Calvin chuckled. “That doesn’t mean they won’t, I guess, but they haven’t yet.”

“So as long as I don’t hassle them, they won’t hassle me?” Adam asked. “That’s good to know. Means I won’t have to worry about them.”

“Boars are dangerous,” Calvin allowed, “But what you’ve really got to watch out for is cowboys. Them bastards?” he said. “They’ll get you every time.”

A series of hairpin turns presented themselves, as Calvin directed the pickup up toward the Texas hill country.

“I’ll make sure to keep that in mind,” Adam quipped. “Case one shows up, I’ll know to shoot first, ask questions after.”

“Heh,” Calvin laughed. “Do you hunt?” The pickup had finally rattled to a stop, in front of a low, sloped cabin with a tin roof.

“Not really, no. Dad took me out for white tail a few times when I was a kid, but we never got nothing.”

Calvin smiled. “Billy never could hit the broad side of a barn.”

Adam laughed. “I couldn’t either, really, ‘til I had to.” His smile faded, the dusky gray-greens of Texas replaced with sand-bright memory. Nothing -- not basic, not hunting trips with the old man -- had prepared him to raise the rifle to his shoulder and aim it, aim it at a fleeing back, an approaching vehicle, a pair of terrified eyes.

He shook his head. “Now I can, though.”

Calvin was watching him, an odd expression on his face. “That’s good. There’s good hunting in these parts, you get to wanting to give it a try. Other stuff, besides boar.” He nodded toward the ridgeline, a slight swell in the earth that made a half-hearted attempt to reach for the sky. “Up over there, about a day’s ride out, is where I do most of what I do. Normally.”

“Dad said you’d had some damage.” Adam said. “That you weren’t having a season this year.”

“That’s the sorry truth.” Calvin reached in the back of the truck, grabbed out a couple of pairs of plastic grocery bags, knotted together by the handle. “Seems like you get one thing taken care of, another falls apart.”

“Katrina?” Adam asked.

Calvin shook his head. “We’re too far from the coast for that, actually. Little bit of wind blew through, but it didn’t amount to nothing. Well, that and the fifteen days of over a century mark with ninety percent humidity. What really got us was the flooding -- we had a pair of them, back to back.”

“How the hell did you even have a flood here?” Adam’s eyes scanned the horizon: red dust floated in the air in one direction, like pollen but drier. Clay-gray cracked soil shrinking from the sun retreated in the other direction, leading toward the ridgeline Calvin had pointed out. “Whole place seems miles from the rivers.”

“It’s dry now, yeah.” Calvin stopped his progress toward the house. “But you see there, where the land’s cut away? Rain comes, fast enough, hard enough, and that’s a river, there.”

One gloved hand flattened in the air, even with the top of Calvin’s denim-wrapped thigh. “Water was this high in parts. Never here long, really. Just long enough to wreck everything.”

“That usually doesn’t take very long.” Adam said.

“Not nearly as long as cleaning it all up,” Calvin said. “Hard slow work with just one pair of hands. It’ll be good to have some help.”

“I don’t know what Dad told you,” Adam said. “I’m not the most handy guy in the world.”

Calvin shrugged. “You’re strong, and you’re willing.” He eyed Adam sideways. “Hell, that’s close enough to marrying material for me.”

“Very funny.”

“Ah, you’ll do fine.” Calvin’s eyes narrowed. “How are you on a horse?”

“That depends on the horse.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Adam explained. “If it’s one of them little horses in front of the store you put a quarter in and he bucks around for five, ten minutes, I’m in like Flynn, man. I’m all over that shit!”

“But the living, breathing variety?”

“Might need a refresher, boss.”

“So you’ve never been on a horse in your life.” Calvin groaned. “This’ll be fun.”

“How far do we have to go out?” Adam eyed the tree line. “I could hike it, get started early, meet you out there.”

Calvin snorted. "You'll never find it. It's a goodly ways a way, through some rough country."

"ATV?" Adam looked hopeful.

"Afraid not." Calvin shook his head. "Terrain's too rough, too close. Sides which, I don't want to make a racket back there, scare off the game."

"Well, the guys you have come out here hunting," Adam said. "They can't all be super cowboys." He looked out at the horizon. "How do they get way the hell out there?"

Calvin smiled. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether I like them or not."

Adam laughed. "And do you like me?"

Calvin shrugged. "You're okay so far."

"And that means?"

"I'll give you a try on Buddy. He's not the fastest horse in the world, but he's not two steps from the glue bottle, either."

"He gonna dump me on my ass?"

"That depends."

"On?"

Calvin grinned. "Whether he likes you or not."

"Let's hope he likes me."

"We'll find out in the morning," Calvin said. "Let's get you situated first."

Getting situated didn't take long. All of Adam's life fit neatly into a duffle bag.

"Man, she's getting big," Calvin said, examining the picture of Mary and the boys Adam had put on the nightstand. "She's what? Seven?"

"Almost nine," Adam said. "She'll tell you she's a tweenager."

Calvin laughed. "Everyone's hell bent to grow up so damn fast. Then you get there, you'd give anything to be young again."

"Tell that to Danny. He's already thinking about college."

"College. Lord." Calvin rolled his eyes. "You're making me feel like an old man."

"Age ain't nothing but a number." Adam countered. "Sides which, how do you think that makes me feel? Baby brother's going to be a college kid."

"What about you? Doesn't the GI Bill get you into school for free and all that?"

"Not free exactly, but close enough." Adam shrugged. "I just don't see the sense in going 'til I know what I'm going for."

"Makes sense." Calvin nodded. "Logical way to look at it."

"Now if you could just get Dad to believe that," Adam said, "My life would get a whole lot easier."

"Billy ain't one for listening to me," Calvin said. "That's when I can get a word in edgewise."

"That's Dad." A yawn surprised him, sneaking up out of nowhere. "Wow. I didn't even know I was tired."

"Long flight, long ride." Calvin nodded toward the bed. "You might want to turn in anyway. We've got a long day tomorrow."

"Let me introduce you two," Calvin said. "Adam, this here's Buddy." He patted the biggest damn horse Adam had ever seen, high on the side of the neck. His palm was flat, each tap thudding softly against the dun-colored animal. "He's nine years old, which means he's got most of the stupidity worked out of his system."

He turned toward Buddy. "Buddy, this is Adam Davis. I'm not sure the same can be said about him."

"Very funny."

"Hold out your hand," Calvin said. "Flat, like a plate."

Adam did, half expecting Buddy to sniff him.

"Palm up, dummy." There was no bite to the words. "You really haven't been 'round horses, have you?"

“Nope.” Adam looked at the sticky pile of grain Calvin poured into his hand. “I give this to him?”

“Yeah. Let him know you’re a good guy.” Calvin’s eyes slid over sideways, his glance almost hidden by the brim of his charcoal gray hat. “You are a good guy, aren’t you?”

The air was suddenly charged, the atmosphere tense. Adam paused, just for a handful of seconds, before answering.

“I try to be, yeah.” He forced a lighter note into his voice. “So, how about it, Buddy?” He extended his hand. “You want a little snack?”

Buddy’s nose, soft as silk and twice as hairy, glided over Adam’s palm. Nostrils flared wide upon encountering the grain, a soft whuff of approval quickly followed by a nubile pair of flickering lips.

“See?” Adam reached up to scratch the broad space between Buddy’s eyes. “I’m not a cowboy, maybe, but I’m not a bad guy.”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive,” Calvin said. “But if I’ve got to pick, I’ll take “not a bad guy” any day.” He moved around to Buddy’s side. “Let’s see if we can’t get you up in the saddle and get the day started.”

Did Calvin’s hand linger on his calf just a moment too long while he was helping Adam get settled in the saddle? Was there something more in that unreadable expression he was wearing? Adam tried to figure it out during the time Calvin went into the barn to fetch Ginger, his mare.

Buddy had other plans, though, dancing around a little bit. Hooves thudded in the dirt as he crossed from one side of the yard and back again, pivoting on his rear legs, tap dancing with the front.

“Hey, there, Buddy!” Adam said. “That’s not a good idea, you know.”

Calvin rode out of the barn, smiling. “You still up there?”

“For the moment.”

“Buddy.” There was a firm note, a commanding note, in Calvin’s voice. “Cut that shit out.”

Buddy stopped dancing, instantly.

“Wow. You’re the horse whisperer!”

“Nah, I’m the horse bitcher.” Calvin laughed. “Come on. You follow me, we’ll be fine.”

“Just one thing,” Adam said. “How do I make him stop so I can get down when I want to?”

“If you can stay on ‘til you want to get off,” Calvin replied, “You’ll be able to figure that part out.”

They had a long ride in front of them. The cabins where Calvin’s big game hunters slept were located far beyond the reach of civilization. It didn’t take long for Adam to see that Calvin was right; it would have been a horrible hike, pushing between the close grown tangle of scrub brush up over rocky ground.

“It’s got to be hard hunting in here,” he said. “How do you even see what you’re hunting for?”

“There’s a lot of cover,” Calvin allowed. “Boars don’t like to be out in the open. They feel exposed, they get nervous. Javelinas are worse -- you get them out in the middle of a field and they’re gonna turn on you, surer than shit.” He shrugged. “You want to hunt, you’ve got to go where the game is.”

“Makes sense.” Buddy was placidly walking alongside Ginger, his nose almost touching her haunches. “It’s logical,” he added, flinching away from a branch snapping in his direction, “if uncomfortable.”

“Isn’t it always like that? The things that might work the best might be the most uncomfortable.” Calvin said. “Least to start with.”

“I don’t know about that.” Adam closed his eyes, just in time to see Tom’s face. “Sometimes things start out all comfortable, and then they fall apart.”

“True.” They got quiet then, the ground flattening out enough to let the horses pick up some speed. Adam had to concentrate then, keeping his legs tight to Buddy’s sides, a white-knuckled grip on the reins.

Calvin looked over and smiled. “Dude. You can relax. ‘Lessen you make a fool of yourself, Buddy’s not gonna dump you.”

“I don’t know if it’s a matter of him dumping me,” Adam said, “as it is of me just falling off.”

“Nah,” Calvin said. “You’ve got a good seat on you. Not a natural, maybe, but you’re not gonna fall off.”

Adam raised an eyebrow. “You’re sure.”

“Sure as I can be. Just keep your heels down.”

Adam had to duck to dodge a low-hanging branch.

“Course, you keep wiggling around like that, I can’t guarantee how sure that actually is.” Calvin laughed.

They started climbing another ridge, and Adam let out a low whistle. “Wow!”

It was like entering another country, a country where a vengeful God had plucked all the trees from the Earth and threw them down again, completely at random. Piles of trees framed the trail on either side, trunks twisted around each other like so many oversized Tinkertoys.

“Yeah,” Calvin said. “It’s pretty bad.”

“We’re going,” Adam asked, “to clean this all up?”

Calvin chuckled. “Round the cabins, yeah. It’s got to be comfortable for the guys.” He nodded toward the tree falls. “All that? Critters love that shit. And snakes that love to eat critters love that shit. So you don’t want to be sleeping next to it, you know?”

“I guess maybe.”

Calvin kept talking. “Out here, no. Game’s gotten used to this now.” He shrugged. “No sense cleaning it up, disrupting their rhythm.”

“Sides which,” he added, “We’ve got enough work ahead of us up there.”

If he strained his eyes, Adam could just about see a pair of cabins, surrounded by a tangle of brush.

“That’s the first set,” Calvin explained. “I’ve got another pair a good ride from here, and another a ways beyond that.”

“So six cabins.” Adam nodded. “We can do that.”

“Glad you’re confident.”

Adam laughed. “Hey, I’m a Marine. Cleaning up incredible messes? That’s what we do!”

“Your father tells me,” Calvin said, suddenly somber, “that you’re just as likely to cause a big mess. For him, for the family.”

“Dad.” Adam rolled his eyes. “He don’t know nothing about nothing.”

“He does all right for himself,” Calvin said. “Seems like.”

“Oh, he can sell cars like nobody’s business,” Adam said. “There’s no doubt about that. The old man doesn’t miss a trick.”

Calvin gave the mare a nudge with his heels, urging her around a tree fall.

“Like when we got back?” Adam continued. “You’d better believe Dad was all over that. Davis Motors Welcomes Our Heroes!” Contempt slipped from every syllable. “Sign big enough to be seen from space.”

“You don’t think he was happy to see you?” Calvin’s hat was low enough to shadow his eyes, making it impossible for Adam to read his expression.

The gelding stumbled a bit, then, forequarters rolling forward just enough to throw Adam off balance. “Ho, there, Buddy! Don’t dump me here!”

Buddy tossed his head, black mane fluffing.

“You think that’s funny?”

“He never had much of a sense of humor before,” Calvin said. “You must be pretty funny.”

“Looks ain’t everything.” Adam shot back.

“No,” Calvin said, suddenly somber. “No, they’re not.”

“Somebody can be good looking,” Adam added, “And still be a big jerk.” He couldn’t help thinking of Tom now. Of his wife to be. Of his baby.

“True enough.” Calvin laughed. “Course, you can be as homely as a bull’s back end and be that way too.”

“The best of both worlds!”

They came up on the pair of cabins, which had managed to locate themselves squarely in the path the flash flood had chosen to take. One of the cabins was sitting kind of crooked, angled upward by the mass of trees and debris wedged underneath it.

“That doesn’t look so good.”

“No,” Calvin agreed. “It really doesn’t. I’m hoping we can clean it out from under there, get her level. Then I can see if it’s worth saving.”

The other cabin wasn’t nearly as damaged, and that’s where Calvin had stowed chain saws and supplies. He slid down off of Ginger, lighting on his boots as neat as you please, and started leading her toward a shadow hollow behind the cabin.

“Come on,” Calvin called to Adam.

“There’s just one problem,” Adam said. “I managed not to fall off, but I’m not sure how the hell to get down.” He looked around. There wasn’t a trace of civilization as far as he could see, no power lines, no roads. “Considering it might be a little tough to get a medic out here, maybe you’d better give me a hand.”

“Hold on, then.” Calvin grinned. “I like a man who knows his limitations.” He tethered Ginger to a line behind the cabin, pausing long enough to pull her saddle off.

Then he walked back to Adam.

Who watched every step: the line of Calvin’s long legs, the narrow set of his hips. The way his jeans fit, just snug enough to prove that there was something there well worth being interested in. The flare from narrow waistline to broader shoulders, the set of a powerful neck.

The glint of interest in a pair of eyes, who were watching Adam watch him.

“Come on,” he said. “Swing your leg over here, and step down.” One of Calvin’s hands was near the small of Adam’s back. “I’m not going to let you fall.”

The dismount went smoothly -- nearly as smoothly as the way Calvin’s hand slid from the back of Adam’s waistline, up over his T-shirt clad back, feather light and firm against his body.

Adam stood for a second, just taking in the feel of Calvin’s hand -- strong, confident -- before turning. “Hey, thanks.”

“No problem.” Calvin held his glance for a minute before turning away. “Come on, we’ve got a lot to do.”

Soon the air was filled with the growling whirr of chainsaws, the fast spinning blades pushing through silver gray tree limbs, parting water damaged bark to reveal ash-gold wood within.

They cut for the better part of the morning, chopping through the outermost layer of debris.

Then it was time to clear away what they’d cut.

“Let’s pull out what we can on our own,” Calvin said. “Save the horses for the real heavy lifting, you know?”

“All right,” Adam agreed, the lack of knowledge of what Calvin was even talking about making the decision easy.

Soon they were pulling limbs and small trees clear from the pile, dragging them across the yard to stack on the far side of the clearing.

“Later,” Calvin said, “we can chop it into lengths, use it for campfire wood.”

“All right.”

They worked well together, a steady pace that made progress without busting their balls. There was even time to talk.

“So is your girlfriend okay with you being away all summer?” Calvin asked. “Cell phone reception ain’t for shit out here, but I’ve got a landline down to the house, if you want it.”

“No girlfriend to worry about.” Adam shrugged. “Not my thing.”

Calvin studiously didn’t look at Adam. “A boyfriend, then?”

“Not no more.” Adam yanked on a stubborn limb. “Coming home took care of that for me.”

“You had someone over there?”

“I thought I did. His name was Tom,” Adam said. “Over there. Nothing official, you know.”

“I’d imagine there couldn’t be,” Calvin said. “Given the setting and all.”

“Yeah.” Adam shrugged. “But it was...understood.” A flash of the petite brunette, arms full of roses, standing on the tarmac, raced across his mind, forcing a frown. “At least I thought it was understood.”

“He had a girl back home?”

“With a baby on the way.” Adam yanked on a long tree branch that had worked itself up under one of the camp’s cabins. It splintered in his hands, coming away with a sharp-edged crack. “All the time we were together, she was there, just waiting.”

“It’s not her fault, you know,” Calvin said, softly.

“Well, if it wasn’t for her...”

“You and Tom would be living happily ever after?” Calvin raised an eyebrow. “Two point two kids, rainbow picket fence?”

“No!” Adam blushed scarlet, ducking down to grab another piece of debris. “Don’t be stupid!”

“So you weren’t fixin’ to build a life with him,” Calvin said, carefully not looking at Adam. “And you’re pissed that he had plans of his own?”

The log Adam was holding thudded in the dirt, flat bouncing. “It sounds stupid when you say it like that.”

“Not my intention.” Calvin bent over and retrieved the log Adam had dropped. “I’m just trying to work out what all you wanted from Tom.”

“What’s to figure?” Adam shrugged. “We had a thing, it was good. He’s the one who up and threw it away.”

“Maybe he’s got a thing with this girl.”

“More than a thing,” Adam said, “if they’re having kids.”

“Sounds that way.” Calvin tossed the driftwood onto the slowly growing burn pile. “So where does that leave you?”

“Footloose and fancy free, I guess.” Adam said. “Seeing as the guy I thought was my boyfriend’s gonna get married.”

“Heart broke?”

Adam thought about this, chewing on the concept while he pulled out more trash the flood waters had wedged into place.

“I’d have to say no,” he said, finally. “I’m pissed -- Tom had no trouble hooking up with me, girlfriend or no, you know?”

“And you’re wondering if that was real.” Calvin said.

“Any port in a storm, you know?”

“That’s the way it is, sometimes.” Calvin wiped his forearm across his forehead, sloughing off half a day’s worth of effort. “Sucks.”

“That’s the truth.”

“Yeah.” Calvin looked at Adam for a long moment, out of the corner of his eyes. “Why don’t we call it a day?”

Adam looked at the tangle of flood debris, the handful of cabins, and then up at the sun’s slow progress across the sky. “You sure? There’s least a couple hours worth of daylight left...”

“But I’m hungry.” Calvin started walking over to the horses. “You?”

Adam rubbed his stomach. “Now that you mention it,” he said, half laughing, “of course I am.”

“Now I know I promised you some real Texas barbecue,” Calvin said, “But that’s going to have to wait for another day.” He handed Adam a big sandwich, nearly an inch thick with meat and veggies. “I’m too tired to cook properly.”

“Nah, this is great.” Adam sat back in the chair, letting his legs stretch out in front of him. “I needed this.”

“A beer make that better?” Calvin handed over a surprisingly cold can. “’Cause I might happen to have a few of them here.”

“Beer makes everything better,” Adam replied.

“Not everything,” Calvin said. He stretched out his legs, his boots almost touching Adam’s sneakers. “But it does do wonders for my cooking.”

“Nothing wrong with your cooking.” Adam laughed. “You wouldn’t believe some of the shit we had to eat over here. Mystery meat’s not the half of it.”

“I’m not much of one for mystery,” Calvin said. “I like things plain and simple.”

The air was charged again, an element of tension sneaking in on the breeze.

“No reason things need to be complicated,” Adam said.

“Good to know,” Calvin replied.

Time stretched out then, the seconds sliding into minutes, the minutes keeping watch as the sun started to slide down the sky.

“We’ve got two choices,” Calvin said. “We can ride back down now, spend the night in the house.” He looked sideways at Adam. “But if you don’t mind roughing it, we can sleep out here. We’ll gain a couple hours on tomorrow that way, make some real headway.”

“That’s fine,” Adam said. “But what about the horses? Don’t they need to sleep in a barn?”

Calvin chuckled. “It’s not going to be the first night they’ve spent under the stars. Let’s just put it that way.”

“So let’s do that.” Adam said.

“It’s too bad we don’t have any wood,” Calvin said. “Otherwise, we could have a fire.”

Adam looked out at the tangle of trees, brush angling off in every direction. There was enough wood around them to build a dozen fires, should the urge strike them.

“Smartass.” He got up and started gathering some brush. “You gonna help, or you just gonna sit there and watch?”

“I don’t know,” Calvin said. “Gotta say, the scenery’s pretty nice from where I’m sitting.”

Adam shot him a look.

“Work fascinates me,” Calvin added quickly. “I can watch it for hours.”

“Well, get your ass down here,” Adam said. “And you can get an up close and personal perspective.”

Before long, they had a fire crackling. It wasn’t nearly as big as it could have been, considering the sheer amount of wood they had at their disposal, but it provided more than enough in the way of light and warmth.

And atmosphere.

“I don’t know about you,” Calvin said, dragging a short length of log over near the fire, “But my ass is tired. I’m gonna sit down.”

Adam looked. He considered the possibility of dragging out his own seat, but there was plenty of room right next to Calvin.

If he didn’t mind sitting close.

Which he didn’t think he did.

Calvin didn’t seem to mind too much, either, when Adam wound up next to him. Their hips were touching, blue jeans meeting black, a point of inarticulate yet vital connection.

The conversation wasn’t particularly memorable: soft mumbles, a few questions, and then Adam asked, “So what happened,” Adam asked. His fingertips traced over the jagged lightning bolt scar that bisected Calvin’s cheek. “Here?”

“Had a fight.” Calvin said, shortly. “It didn’t go so well.”

“What were you fighting about?”

“Only thing worth fighting about,” Calvin replied. His eyes locked with Adam’s, holding steady for a long time. “Love.”

“Your lover had someone else?” Adam let his hand drop. Slowly.

“Worse,” Calvin shrugged. “He had a Daddy.”

“His Dad did this?” Adam’s eyes went wide. “He could have killed you!”

Calvin laughed. “That was kind of the point. Things were different then.”

“Different than they are now?” Calvin’s hand was so close, close enough that Adam only had to stretch out a finger to touch him. “Do you think?”

Calvin stared at Adam then, eyes intent for a very long moment.

A very long moment indeed.

“God,” he finally said, voice low and husky. “I sure the fuck hope so.”

And then Calvin kissed him.

It was a gentle kiss, but a strong one -- slow and searching in the beginning, gathering in intensity as the seconds passed.

Calvin was taller, just a fraction of an inch, enough that Adam had to tilt his head up to return the kiss.

Once his head was tilted upward, it was easy for his arms to follow, hands brushing over the broad expanse of Calvin’s chest to clasp behind his neck.

No sooner had his fingers touched, though, just loosely lacing together, fingertips a hairsbreadth past each other, than Calvin pulled back.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“And why not?” Adam asked.

“I’m old enough to be your father...”

“But you’re not.” Adam pulled Calvin’s head down for another kiss. “And you taste absolutely delicious.”

Calvin groaned into the kiss, hands iron hard on Adam’s hips.

That was cue enough for Adam, a signal that it was okay to go farther -- that he’d meet no resistance if the kisses traveled along the line of Calvin’s chin, up the corded lines of his neck, pausing only to whisper, “I can’t wait to taste the rest of you.”

“Inside,” Calvin said. He stood up, kicked some dirt over the fire to dull the flames, and held out his hand. “Let’s go inside.”

There were no lights inside, but Adam didn't need them. They'd left the door hanging open, and flickering orange light from the fire provided just enough illumination for him to see what he wanted to.

And that was the peeling away of Calvin's shirt, revealing a broad, tough chest. There were plenty of scars here, too, some clearly as old as the jagged mark on Calvin's face, but this was not the time to question them.

Adam merely kissed around them, letting his tongue trace over the unmarked flesh, pausing to suckle for a moment at cinnamon-colored nipples.

"Jesus." Calvin breathed. His hands were under Adam's shirt, sliding the fabric up and off. "I have to touch you."

This was something new. Tom had never been one to long for Adam the way Adam had longed for him.

But Calvin, Calvin wanted. He wanted to touch, rough fingertips surprisingly gentle on revealed skin, kisses that demanded more, small bites on the side of Adam's neck.

"No," Adam said. "Let me."

Calvin ignored him, deftly working Adam's belt open.

And God, Adam was so hard -- as hard as he'd ever been. Yet as soon as Calvin's hand touched him, those long fingers wrapping round his throbbing cock, he needed even more.

"God, God," he groaned. "Fucking touch me."

Calvin did more than touch, tumbling Adam onto a narrow bunk and pivoting so he could swallow Adam's cock. There was no finesse here, no gentle exploration. This was need, pure and simple, a voracious hunger. Calvin was moving fast, his lips sliding down the length of Adam's cock, coming to rest only when he reached the furry surface of Adam's balls.

"Holy shit!" Adam closed his eyes, tilted his head back for just a moment. It felt so good, so God damned good.

So incomplete, though -- an essential element of the exchange was missing. He opened his eyes and, working through the dancing shadows, undid Calvin's belt, slid open his fly.

Calvin was ready for him, a thick, stubby cock proudly at attention, a shiny drop of pre-come shining on the surface.

"Yes," Adam said, "I need that."

At the first touch of his fingers, Calvin started sucking harder, doing incredible things to his cock.

Adam let his tongue trace over the surface of Calvin's cockhead, swirling over the satin smoothness before taking him all the way in slow and deep, in contrast with the whirlwind of activity from Calvin.

It was amazing, his mouth, so full, so hot, the tension in Calvin's ass and legs, trembling under his fingers. All the while, Calvin was sucking on him, sliding his head up and down, faster and faster.

He pulled his head up to whisper, "Don't stop, Jesus, don't stop."

Calvin's cock jabbed back toward his mouth, sliding over his tongue toward the back of his throat, twitching all the while.

It was too much: having, being had, all at once. The perfect storm of sensation took Adam out. With a sudden arch of the back, his hands grabbing at Calvin's ass all the while, he let fly, deep into Calvin's throat.

He couldn't stop shaking then, not even when Calvin's cock gave a jerk of its own, loosing a salty-sweet flood.

It was just too good, too perfect -- too fucking awesome to be real.

Which explained, he guessed, his first question after.

"Did that really just happen?" he asked Calvin, who was wearing a rather sticky grin. "Or did I just have the best dream ever?"

"If you're dreaming, kiddo, I am too." Calvin moved on the narrow bed to position himself behind Adam. "And I don't want to wake up."

That wasn't the type of thing a man argued with. Particularly if he was a smart man.

Dawn came early, with the scent of spent smoke winding its way in through the door. Adam woke up to discover he was in bed alone, his jeans still undone and open around his hips.

"What the hell?" he asked, pushing himself up and out of the bed. He'd never even taken his sneakers off. Once Adam was zipped into his clothes, he padded out of the little cabin, looking for Calvin.

Calvin was behind the cabin, tending to the horses.

“Morning,” he said with a smile. “If you’re looking for the john, it’s over there. Third cottonwood on the left.”

Adam hadn’t thought about it, actually, but now that the need was mentioned, it suddenly seemed like a fabulously good idea. He bolted for the tree, Calvin’s knowing laughter following his passage.

“So, boss man, what’s on the agenda?” he asked, upon his return.

“Can’t be the boss man if we’re gonna do again,” Calvin replied, “what we did last night. That wouldn’t be right.”

Adam blushed. “I’d like to do again what we did last night.” He looked over at Calvin. “Fact is, I’d like to do that now.”

“That’s what it’s like when you’re young,” Calvin said with a shrug and a laugh. “Everything’s immediate. Everything has to happen right now. You don’t get it now, you get hell-bent you’re not going to get it at all.”

“I’m not that young,” Adam replied. “I might be able to hold off until, oh, I don’t know. Noon? One o’clock?”

“What do you say we do what we can up here and hold off till we get back down to my place?” Calvin asked. “Where there’s a shower?”

“Sounds good.” Adam let his eyes run up and down Calvin’s long frame. “Sounds really good.”

It was a long day, but a productive one. The fact that clearing out the flood debris was interspersed with occasional kisses and make out sessions made the hours fly by, until Calvin decided they’d done enough for the day.

“Let’s go home, kiddo.” The look in his eye was nothing but need. “I’ve got a hankerin’ to take me a shower.”

“Well,” Adam said, letting the tree branch he was pulling on fall to the ground. “I imagine you’re going to need someone to wash your back.”

The ride home went considerably faster than the ride to the cabin. Buddy caught the scent of home and picked up the pace something fierce, meaning Adam didn’t have much time to ponder what it would be like to get Calvin into the shower, what it would be like to have that body in front of him, wholly naked and soaking wet.

“You better hold on there,” Calvin cautioned. “You let him dump you and bust your ass, I ain’t gonna kiss it and make it all better.”

“Liar.” Adam looked over his shoulder. “I might just fall on purpose, put that to the test.”

Calvin laughed. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s say we test that out without you hurting yourself?”

The bathroom in Calvin’s cabin was small but neat, featuring an old-fashioned cast iron claw foot tub with a shower on a brass bit of piping. As soon as they walked in, Calvin started throwing towels onto the floor all around the tub.

“You anticipating another flash flood?” Adam asked. He’d already peeled off his T-shirt and his belt was sliding through the loops on his pants.

“Never hurts to be prepared,” Calvin replied. “And I think we might wind up making a hell of a mess.”

Considering the sheer volume of soap and water and shampoo that came into play, it wasn’t a certainty that mess was the right word to use for what ensued: the twining of two bodies, flesh slipping and sliding, stomachs flattening, slick against each other as lips met for kiss after kiss after kiss.

“God, Adam,” Calvin moaned. “I shouldn’t want you as much as I do.” He took Adam’s face in his hands, pinning it between dripping fingers. “This is insane.”

“So it’s insane. If you’re crazy, I’m crazy too.” Adam’s hands were busy, one set of fingers wrapped around Calvin’s cock, another cupping his balls. “I want to see you come, Cal. I want you to shoot all over me.”

“Keep doing that,” Calvin growled, “and I won’t be able to stop.” A sad light came into his eyes then. “I’m not as young as I used to be, Adam. If I go now, that might be it.”

“I don’t think so.” Adam’s hand was moving faster now, passage eased by a liberal application of shampoo. “I don’t think so at all.”

Calvin started shaking.

“Don’t hold back on me,” Adam urged. “You know you want to come. You want to give it up for me.”

“But...”

“No buts. Give it to me. Let me see you come. I want you to shoot on my belly. I want your come to drip onto my cock.”

The words, the friction, the water that had long since faded from hot to tepid pounding down on their heads -- all combined to send Calvin, groaning all the while, right over the edge.

A spray, stronger, thicker, definitely hotter than the one coming from the showerhead, splattered on Adam's stomach.

"That's it. That's it, baby," Adam growled. "Give it to me."

"Look at you. You're wearing my come," Calvin said, half in wonder, more than half aroused, even now.

"Always." Adam said it reflexively, only realizing the truth of his words after they'd left his mouth. "I want you on me always."

Kiss after kiss followed that, and when the shower slipped into icy coldness?

They didn't even notice.

Day followed day, until they became weeks. Weeks piled onto weeks, until a month had gone by.

The first pair of cabins were cleared, with the lion's share of the damage to the second cabin identified and judged reparable.

To do that, however, required supplies.

Supplies required a trip into town.

"You can finally taste some decent barbecue," Calvin said. He was making a list of everything they'd need for the cabin's repairs, and to stock up for another month of life working out in the back country.

"I don't know," Adam said. "Everything I've had so far has been great." He smiled. "Some of it better than great."

"You're going to make an old man blush." Calvin said.

"There are worse things."

"Yeah." Calvin grew solemn. "You've got to remember, we're in the Bible Belt down here. So when we're in town," he said, shrugging, "we can't be like we are here."

Adam nodded. "I get it. It's the way of the world, you know?"

"The way of the world, and then some."

“That shit gets old.” Adam said. “You’d think people would get a clue, you know?”

“Some do. Some don’t. You can’t force people to change, you know? They’ll change when they’re good and ready and not a minute before.”

“I don’t know.” Adam shook his head. “Sometimes life changes you when you’re not even looking.”

“What do you mean?”

“Over there?” Adam shrugged. “That changed me. Changed me plenty.” He looked at Calvin. “Now I’m changing again, I think.”

“Is that a good thing?”

Adam considered. “I’m calmer. I’m happier.” He cocked his head, thinking. “But that might be the company I’m keeping, as much as anything.”

“Seeing as the same could be said for me,” Calvin replied, “you might be right.”

They stared at each other, a long, long moment. Then Adam raised his coffee cup. “Here’s to changes, then.”

“To changes.”

Town was quiet and still. They filled up the truck with building supplies and groceries in no time flat.

“The trick’s never to come in on the weekend. That’s when everybody’s out,” Calvin explained. “But I don’t have to worry about the calendar. Least this season.”

“How is it normally?”

“I pick up a group Saturday afternoons, usually. Bring ‘em out to the ranch, and we ride out straight away. Go out first light Sunday morning, make a day of it, spend the night at the cabins.”

He looked at Adam. “The ones we’re clearing out now.”

Adam nodded.

“Then we’ll spend a day in the saddle, riding up to the second set of cabins. They’ll be there until Thursday, when we start riding back. Spend the night on the trail Friday, and Saturday I bring

‘em back to civilization.” He grinned. “Which generally gives me just enough time to pick up supplies before the next round of guys arrive.”

“So you don’t get a break.”

Calvin shrugged. “It depends. This whole summer’s been kind of a break. An expensive freakin’ break, mind you.

“It’s not a break, Cal, if you spend every day of it working.”

Calvin smiled. “I’ve had more than my share of fun.”

Adam grinned.

“Anyway, I’ll have five, six weeks of back to back tours. Then it slows down. Nature of the business.” Calvin shrugged. “Economy’s been bad, past couple three years. People haven’t had the money to come out for a week at a go.”

“Mmm.” Adam shook his head. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“What can you do?” Calvin asked. “As long as I can cover my taxes and insurance, I can keep it going another year.” A deep wrinkle appeared in his forehead, adding years to his face. “But hunting ain’t what it used to be. The guys just aren’t as into it. They don’t bring their kids no more. When they do, the kids just bitch the whole time. They want the internet, they want their video games. Ten years from now, I don’t know if I’m going to have any kind of business at all to speak of.”

“What if you got into something besides hunting tours?”

“What’d you have in mind?”

“I’m not the only guy coming back,” Adam said, each word slow, “who’s messed up. Who needs to ease back into their head, you know?”

“Yeah.” Calvin cocked his head. “What are you thinking?”

“So what,” Adam asked, gathering speed with every syllable, “if you had retreats? For soldiers? They could come spend a week or two,” he added, “getting used to not getting shot at. Like a vacation, before they get thrown back in with their families and jobs and whatnot.”

“A recovery retreat? It’s not a bad idea,” Calvin replied, “But I’d need some help.” He shrugged. “Hunting, I know. It’s damn near all I know, but I know the piss out of it, you know?”

Adam nodded.

“This other stuff -- helping guys get settled down? I like the idea, but I don’t know the get them settled down part. I’d need some kind of clue on how you do something like that.”

“I’d help you,” Adam replied. “It worked on me, didn’t it? And a lot of the guys coming back are just like me.”

Calvin stared at him. “Let me think on that, Adam. It’s not a bad idea,” he added. “Not a bad idea at all.”

“While you’re thinking about it,” Adam asked, “is there any chance of rustling up something to eat? I’m a little on the hungry side.”

“Is there ever a time that you’re not a little on the hungry side?”

“Not that I can recall, no.” Adam grinned and rubbed his stomach. “I’m like a bottomless pit.”

“Well, let’s see if we can’t fill that bottomless pit up somewhat with some good barbecue, Calvin replied.”

“Seeing as there’s no bad barbecue.”

“Well, there is bad barbecue,” Calvin allowed. “We just don’t let them serve it in Texas.”

There was a definite difference, Adam learned, between the barbecue served at airport restaurants and that served in Calvin’s hometown.

For one thing, the waitress didn’t even blink an eye at the sheer volume of food they wolfed down. A regular order in this place was enough to serve as dinner for four back home -- and that was before adding in the cole slaw and potatoes.

For another, there was a roll of paper towels on each and every table, for patrons to clean their hands as needed.

Adam definitely needed. “This is so good! Better than good! This is freakin’ amazing!” He beamed at Calvin. “I think I’ve died and gone straight to heaven.”

Calvin grinned. “Told you.”

“Do they have take-out?” Adam asked. “We should bring this back home.”

“I don’t think the truck’s big enough to carry all you can eat.” Calvin looked sideways at Adam. “Home, huh?”

Adam grinned. “Home.”

Part Three

It took the better part of an hour to put all the supplies away, toting bag after bag out of the pickup into Calvin's cabin.

"Since we're down here," Adam said, "I might as well call Mama, check in."

"I'd be careful," Calvin cautioned, "about how much you tell them about any plans. Nothing's set in stone yet."

"Yeah." Adam agreed. "No sense borrowing trouble."

"I wouldn't go too much into the you and me thing, either. Particularly with your Dad."

Adam nodded. "Yeah. They're not going to handle the whole gay thing too well."

"Especially if it's with me."

"And why's that?"

"Let's just say your Dad and I have some history together."

"Well, I knew that!" Adam said. "That's why I'm here. He told me how you grew up together and all." A thought struck him, and he pulled up short. "You think that's going to bother him? Our age difference?" Adam grinned. "Shoot. Age ain't nothing but a number. He'll get over it."

"That's not what I mean." Calvin sighed. "Back in the day, Billy and I had a thing."

Adam stared at him. "Like Tom and I had a thing?"

"Sort of. We weren't in the service." Calvin shrugged. "Way back before you were born."

Adam blanched. "That was Papa that cut your face?"

"No!" Calvin shouted, loud enough to rattle the windows. "Your papa's a good man. He never knew nothing 'bout this."

Adam chuckled. "That's a relief. I can't picture Papa busting you open." His grandfather was a gentle man, soft spoken and slow moving. Knife fights were about as far from his style as you could get.

"He would have, if he'd of known. He didn't like me none too much as it was."

“And why not?” It was easier, Adam realized, to talk about anything except what he really wanted to know.

Calvin ducked his head. “I was a bad influence.”

“On Dad?”

“It was the Seventies.” Calvin said. “A strange time. Lots of drugs.”

“Dad?”

“He was just Billy then.” Calvin smiled. “But he hasn’t been Billy for a long time.”

“Since he met Mama.” It was a family story, how meeting the love of his life had transformed casual Billy into grown up William.

“Since your Mama reeled him in and brought him to church.” Calvin turned his head to take in what was, in truth, a staggeringly uninspiring sunset. “Once he found Jesus, he had no time for me.”

“Heh. Least you got thrown over for the Lord.” Adam ran his hands through his hair, feeling it feather up around his fingers. Almost time for a trim. “Not everyone can say that.”

“The Lord and your mama.” Calvin laughed. “I’m not sure which one of them took precedence, really.”

“I’m sure it was the Lord,” Adam said. “He pays a lot more mind to the good book than anything she’s got to say.”

“Wasn’t always that way.”

“That’s how it is now.” Adam shook his head. “I can’t remember the last time Dad even paid attention to Mama, much less what she had to say. But that don’t answer the main point. What about us? What’s Dad got to do with us?”

“What do you want me to say?” Calvin shrugged. “Things were. Then they weren’t. Billy found Jesus.” He turned, facing deliberately away from Adam to take in the barren landscape in front of him. “I found this.”

“You were lovers.”

“No.” A small smile pushed up the corner of Carter’s mouth, the peak of the curve almost high enough to intersect with the silver-white shadow of the old scar. “We weren’t lovers.”

Adam walked out of the house sat down, letting the ends of his legs dangle over the porch. His sneakers were just shy of the ground: if he pointed his toes downward, they would drag in the dust. He didn't do that. Enough was in the air already.

"Then what do you call it?"

"Why do I have to call it anything?" Calvin ran his hand over his face once. "It's over. Been over, longer than you've been alive."

"And when I'm gone?" Adam pushed with both hands, propelling himself off the porch. "When I'm not here? Will you call this anything -- this time we've had? Us? Will it get a name?"

"Like as not." Calvin's eyes were on him now, heavy. Bright. "I don't like to think about that."

"And why not?"

"A man can pretend, you know." Calvin's jaw shifted, slow, as he worked the words between his teeth. "Maybe it ain't smart. I don't know. But that don't stop it from happening."

Adam stepped back toward the porch, walking so he stood directly in front of Calvin.

"Tell me what you were pretendin', Cal."

Calvin laughed. "No sense in it. Foolishness."

"Let me be the judge of that." Adam cocked his head upward to stare his lover in the eyes. "I know from foolishness, after all."

"What if I was pretending that you might stay?" Calvin shrugged. "Some people don't get better. There's no recovery for them. They just stay broken. So they stay here." He looked down, extended his hand just a fraction of an inch toward Adam. "I did."

"I don't know." All of the plans that had sustained him when he was away -- becoming a partner in Dad's business, buying a place of his own -- had evaporated. The new plans he'd formed to take their place didn't seem as enticing now. He couldn't imagine running a campaign, much less standing up in Congress. The ideas he'd talked about in town were just fancy, spun off the top of his head. "I never thought about it. Not beyond what we talked about in town."

"Well." Calvin jumped down off the porch and started toward the barn. "I guess that answers that question."

Adam blinked, staring at Calvin's shoulders as he moved away. Cal was angry, that was clear from the taut, set line of his spine, the way each step was more than half a stomp, the subtle, studded line of depressions forming in the dirt after his heels.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

“Out.” Calvin jerked his head toward the house without turning. “There’s meat in the fridge, you get hungry.”

“What the fuck?” Adam asked, his voice breaking on the last word, splitting it somehow into two syllables, each pitched half a note higher than its predecessor. “Come back here.”

Calvin didn’t answer, disappearing instead into the barn.

He emerged, a few minutes later, on Ginger’s back, going full speed. Ginger’s hooves weren’t even touching the ground -- churning legs stirred up a whirlwind of dirt that fluffed out in every direction, trailing Calvin as they sprinted toward the ridgeline.

“Where are you going?” Adam shouted.

Calvin never even looked back.

“Oh, I don’t freaking think so,” Adam said. “Two can play that game.”

He stomped off to the barn, only to discover that Calvin had opened the gate, turning Buddy out to the back pasture. The gelding was standing there now, nose buried in the stock tank, drinking deep of the cold, clear water.

“Come on, Buddy!” Adam called. “We’re going to go for a ride.”

Buddy, hearing his name, raised his head and looked at Adam. Then it was time for another drink.

“Come on, Buddy.” Adam tapped the side of his hip, the way Calvin would. “We gotta get going.”

You have never been ignored until you’ve been ignored by a horse.

Adam bent, slipping between the fence to walk over to Buddy. How hard could it be, he figured, to grab hold of his halter and get him saddled up?

Buddy decided that this was a fun new game, and sprinted away as soon as Adam was within half a dozen paces of him. He hopped over the ground, dancing around the far side of the stock tank.

Twenty some odd acres of fenced pasture lay behind him, room enough to allow him to run all day should the spirit so move him.

“Cocksucker!” Adam said. “Come on, Buddy.”

Buddy lifted his head and whinnied, shaking his mane like a punk in a mosh pit.

“You think this is fucking funny?” Adam raged.

Buddy stared at him, communicating via equine equanimity that yes, he did find the situation quite amusing.

Particularly the part where Adam couldn’t catch him.

Inspiration struck, and he went to the grain bin. Propping the galvanized metal lid open got some of Buddy’s attention, and when Adam thrust his hand in to emerge with a golden handful of yum, it captured the remainder. He gave a little huff, and came meandering over to the gate.

“Listen, Buddy. I know it seems weird, but I’m never going to catch up with Calvin on my own. You’ve got to help me.”

Buddy, intent on vacuuming every last bit of grain from Adam’s hand, didn’t argue. He also didn’t protest when Adam snapped a lead line onto his halter and led him over to the gate.

Getting a saddle and bridle on wasn’t quite as easy. Well, the bridle wasn’t too bad; that slipped on easier than Adam had anticipated. It was the saddle that was the problem. It all looked logical enough, but the damn saddle kept turning, no matter how much Adam pulled. Buddy would puff out his belly while Adam tried to tighten the girth strap, sucking it back in as soon as it seemed to be adjusted properly.

“God damn it, Buddy!” Adam snapped. “Stop fucking around!”

He sounded like Calvin.

Apparently, the similarity wasn’t lost on Buddy, who stopped his shenanigans for a minute or two -- long enough for the saddle to be cinched up reasonably tight.

Getting mounted up was another challenge, but he managed. It required balancing on the seat of the little tractor Calvin kept rusting away in the garage, one hand locked on the saddle horn.

Then it was just a matter of finding Calvin.

Up until this point, Adam had only ridden with Calvin right beside him. That meant he hadn’t had to do a whole lot in the way of trail selection, or steering, or any of that. He was about to learn the critical difference between being a rider and a passenger.

“Come on, Buddy,” Adam said. “We’ve got to find Calvin. And Ginger. Remember Ginger? Let’s go.” And he gave Buddy a kick, like he’d never kicked before.

Buddy took off like a shot.

It didn’t take long for Adam to realize he wasn’t in the least bit of control of the situation. Buddy had his head down, and he was running. It didn’t matter what Adam did with the reins -- he

tugged left and right to no effect, pulling back more than once, only to discover that Buddy didn't give a damn what Adam thought.

Just to make matters more exciting, the saddle was slowly but steadily slipping to one side. Adam had one hand glued to the saddle horn, holding on for dear life, having abandoned any pretense of controlling Buddy's flight.

"God damn it, God damn it, God damn it!" It was a litany, it was a refrain, it was all Adam could manage while clinging to Buddy's back.

They flew through the scrub, sending rocks and dirt scattering in every direction. Branches were whipping Adam's face and arms, ripping the skin wide open. The branches were hitting Buddy, too, urging him to go, go, go.

Once they hit the clearing at the top of the ridge, Buddy got in touch with his inner racehorse and decided to go even faster, jumping over piles of brush and the stray tree trunk that was in his way.

Every time he took to the air, it was terrifying.

Every time he landed, it was worse. The impact sent white bolts of pain right up through Adam's spine. His teeth were knocking together each and every time. He'd bitten his tongue so hard it was bleeding, the flinty taste filling his mouth and making it hard to breathe.

Buddy was wild; white foam flying back from his mouth, spraying all over the place. Gobs of it went whizzing past Adam's head, fear-tinged saliva trying to flee before the inevitable disastrous conclusion to this ride.

"Motherfucker, slow down!" Adam shouted.

This did absolutely nothing to calm Buddy.

The sight of Ginger bursting out of the trees from the left, a wide-eyed Calvin on board, made it even worse.

Adam hadn't known such a thing was even possible, but Buddy went sideways then -- sideways and up, to the right, his front end high in the air, his tail end moving so fast it got ahead of his front quarters. He was bending himself right in half.

There was no way Adam was staying on -- not when the saddle was already in the ten o'clock position and heading rapidly for eight.

He kicked his feet free of the stirrups, let go of the saddle horn and prayed.

The ground was hard, so hard it knocked all the wind out of him, but he didn't have any time to think about that. Buddy was going to fall, and if he didn't move, and move fast, he was going to fall on Adam.

Which was not going to be good.

He rolled, rolled as fast as he could, trying to get his feet under him and scramble out of the way.

Buddy came down, missing him by inches. Thankfully, he rolled the other way, steel tipped hooves narrowly avoiding Adam's head. He regained his footing and stood, saddle completely upside down, eyes wide and white, staring at Adam, as if it was all his fault this wild ride had happened.

"Jesus Christ!" Calvin was off of Ginger and at Adam's side in a flash. "Are you all right?" He glared at Buddy. "What the hell were you doing, riding like that?"

"It wasn't exactly my idea," Adam said.

Buddy's sides were heaving, deep shuddering breaths slowing as the sweat dripped off of him.

"That's not like him."

"I told him," Adam said, his head pounding, "that we had to catch you." He grinned. "So you wouldn't get away. I didn't want to lose you. And we did it." His giggle was half hysterical. "We caught you. We did."

Then he passed out.

He woke up in Calvin's bed, white pillows piled high on either side of him, a thin, striped sheet pulled over his body.

"Ow," he said.

Calvin was there in an instant. "What hurts, babe?"

Adam laughed and instantly regretted it. "What doesn't?"

"I checked you over pretty good," Calvin said. "I don't think you broke anything."

"Not for lack of trying."

"Real danger's concussion." Calvin glanced at the clock. "If you didn't wake up soon, I was going to call the ambulance."

“I think Buddy might have knocked some sense into me, actually.”

“And how’s that?”

“Because I know if I’m staying on here,” Adam said, “Like I want to, if you want me, you’re gonna have to get me an ATV. Bullshit on this horse riding crap.”

Calvin took Adam’s hand between his own. “You do all right when the saddle’s in the upright position.”

“Christ, you didn’t even have a saddle on Ginger, and you stayed on.” Adam shook his head. “I’m just not a cowboy.”

“You don’t have to be.” Calvin’s voice was husky. “I swear. Because please, God, I want you to stay.”

“I want that too.”

“’cause,” Calvin continued. “I think I up and fell in love with you, boy. When I wasn’t looking. And the thought of you not being here?”

There were no tears. Calvin wasn’t a man to cry like that.

That didn’t mean Adam didn’t hear them.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I don’t want to think about not being here either.”

“And then you go flying by on Buddy and I realize you might not just not be here, but not be nowhere.” Calvin’s shoulders shook, a fraction of an inch. That shake translated into a tremble that went right down his arms, into his hands, vibrating his fingers.

Adam squeezed Calvin’s fingers, willing them to be still. “It’s okay, Cal. I’m okay.”

“I’m not letting go of you.” Calvin shook his head. “Not unless you want me to.”

“That,” Adam said, looking directly into Calvin’s blue eyes, “is the very last thing I want.”

Calvin slept beside him that night, arm draped protectively around Adam’s waist. Exhausted, battered, Adam slept -- slept until the moon rose, and set silver light slanting through the window.

That was when he turned, turned to face Calvin. With the man asleep, Calvin’s face showed every one of his years. All the stress, all the hardship, every challenge and obstacle along the way had left its mark.

Even when it wasn't carved into his face by an angry father.

One fingertip traced Cal's scar, examining the boundary between cheekbone and chin. No hair grew there. The well-past-five-o'clock shadow Calvin wore didn't even attempt to encroach on the evidence of old pain.

"We don't have to pretend, Cal," he whispered. "We could make it real."

Cal's eyes flickered open. "Yes." The kiss was slow, gentle. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

The dreaming world, the waking world -- the pair merged in that moment, delivered by slow gesture and lingering kisses, endearments exchanged, promises made.

"You are so beautiful," Cal murmured. "That first minute I saw you in the airport, I wanted you."

"Because I look like my dad?"

"You look nothing like Billy ever did." Calvin's hand slid along Adam's spine, gliding over the swell of his ass. "Don't ever think that."

"It's good to know."

"No," Calvin said. "You're different. You're you. But you've got this light about you. So bright. So strong. I couldn't help but want you."

"And you," Adam said, shifting position so Calvin's hand could have an easier time doing what it was doing. "You're so God damned sexy it nears to kill me every time I look at you."

"You flatter an old man."

"No." Hips levered upward off the bed, flesh pressing to flesh. "I'm not. It's true." He took a ragged breath then. "That feels so good."

"It's supposed to." Cal leaned in, bit at the soft end of Adam's ear. "I love watching you. The way you move. The look on your face, right before you come."

"But you..." Adam started to turn toward Cal. "I want to touch you."

"Later," Cal said. "When you're better. This is for me." His hand started to move faster, twisting, tightening, knowing. "Let me watch you."

"God."

“Yeah.” Cal’s voice dropped a full octave. “I never had such a pretty baby. I never knew a man could be so fine. And now there’s you.”

The need was there then, demanding. Furious, pounding need.

“Cal, I’m gonna. I’m gonna now.”

And faster than thought, the hand was replaced with a mouth, hot and wet and intense.

“Good lord!” Adam pulled the sheets into permanent wrinkles, clutching the fabric so tightly the molecules fused together. “Calvin, love, now!”

And that, in a shuddering, brilliant moment, was that.

After, his cowboy sat back, eyes shining in the moonlight like a cat.

“They have panthers down here?” Adam asked. “Because you look like one.”

“Bobcats.” Calvin grinned. “But I don’t have the whiskers for that.”

“You could stop shaving.”

“If you’d like.”

“Nah,” Adam said. “I love you just the way you are.”

“I love you too, baby.” Calvin’s voice broke. “I really do.”

“I know.” The enormity of what they were saying struck Adam, and he started shaking. “Don’t let me go, Cal.”

“Never, baby. Never.” The arm circled him, encompassing, protective. “You’re mine.”

“Yours.”

“You won’t change your mind in the morning?”

“I won’t change my mind ever,” Adam said.

“Give me the morning,” Cal replied, tenderly. “We can start from there.”

“You’re going to need to get back on Buddy, you know.”

“And why is that?” Adam shrugged, gingerly. “If this is the you have to get back in the saddle or you’ll be afraid forever thing, let’s just take it as a given that I’m afraid forever.”

Calvin snorted. “You’re not afraid. You’re sore. There’s a difference.”

“Not a marked one.”

Calvin ignored that. “Anyway, it’s not just you. It’s Buddy. I don’t want him thinking he can pull that kind of stunt again. Otherwise, he’s going to try it when we’ve got charters down here, and they’re a sue-happy bunch.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Adam glanced over at Calvin. “You’re going to have to saddle him up, though.”

“Yeah, your technique there could use a little work.” Calvin was remarkably cheerful. “For future reference, the stirrups are supposed to point toward the ground.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” Adam replied. “We going up to first camp today?”

“If you’re up to it. We’ll take it slow.”

“Let me give the family a call first.” Adam grinned. “In case today turns out to be a repeat performance of yesterday, you know?”

“Don’t even kid about that.” Calvin padded toward the kitchen. “I’ll get some grub together.”

“Hi, Mama!”

“How’s my cowboy?” She sounded bright. Brittle. Just like when he was stationed overseas.

Adam breathed in. He knew how this part of the game was played. “Great, Mama. It’s pretty awesome out here.”

“Lots of cows?”

“Not exactly. A little more hilly than that. Beautiful.” Because it would please her, he added, “God’s country.”

He could hear her smile over the line. “You doing all right? You eating well?”

“I’m a big fan of Texas barbecue, Mama. You’ll have to try it.”

“We’ll see, we’ll see.” There was a rustle on the line, and she said, “Mary wants to talk to you.”

“And I want to talk to her.”

“Adam!” Mary was all exuberance. “Are you a cowboy yet? Do you have a cowboy hat?”

“I’m nowhere near a cowboy yet,” he replied. There was a soft chuckle in the kitchen, confirming his estimation of his abilities. “But I think I might be getting a cowboy hat soon.”

“You should!” Mary said. “And you should get me a pink one!”

“Okay.” Mary was the one, after all, who’d requested a belly dancer outfit when he was stationed in Iraq. He should have anticipated this.

“And pink cowboy boots!”

“All right.”

“And a pony!”

“Uh, I think we’d better clear that one with Mama and Dad. Ponies need a lot of space, you know.”

“Daddy wants to talk to you.” Mary sounded crestfallen.

“Ok. You keep an eye out for a package from me. We’ll get you that hat you want.”

“Yay!”

Calvin was grinning something fierce in the kitchen.

That grin faded when Adam said, “Hey, Dad.”

“How’s it going, son?”

“Not bad, not bad.” Adam chose his words carefully. “I’m learning a lot.”

“Good to be outside, I know. I used to love that, when I lived down home. Nothing like the fresh air to cure what ails a man.”

“That’s true. You’re right, Dad.”

“I usually am.”

Adam closed his eyes, counting to ten under his breath. “How’s everything at home?”

“Fantastic. Wait till you see the new lines that are coming out. They’re going to sell,” William said, the glee clear in his voice, “like crazy.”

“Yeah. Dad, about that.”

“Yes?”

“I was thinking on staying down here another season,” Adam said. “Giving Calvin a hand. There’s still a lot of work to do to get things cleaned up.”

“Is it going to take that long to put things in order?”

“It might. Damage is pretty bad.”

“And you’ll come home after that?”

Adam looked at Calvin, who was studiously, deliberately packing the saddlebags. “No, I think I’m going to stay down here a while. Calvin could use the help, and it’s good for me to be here. He can train me as a guide, maybe, he says.”

In fact, Calvin had said no such thing, but he offered no objection to the statement. Just a happy little smile.

“Not much money in that.” His father said, tone carefully neutral.

“Some things are more important than money.”

Across the room, Adam could see Calvin’s eyebrow go up. A caution, a warning.

“Like what?”

“It’s peaceful here, Dad,” Adam said. “Quiet. I think I need to be away from people for a while.” He caught Calvin’s eye and grinned. “Away from politics.”

“Well, if that’s what you want.” William’s answer couldn’t have come faster if it were delivered on greased rails. “It doesn’t sound like a bad decision.”

“Nah,” Adam said. “I think things might just work out after all.”