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Recovery Ranch

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Part One

Timmy Halleck was the usual machine gunner, but he'd come up sick as a dog that day. Lucky bastard, and he'd tell you that, despite the three-inch scar right across his gut.

At first, they'd thought the mess hall grub hadn't gone down too well -- that happened sometimes, especially with new guys, and this was Halleck's first tour. As the night had worn on, and his groans had turned first to tears and then to outright sobs, it was clear that wasn't the case. Something more was going on. The medic had come by, poked his fingers knuckle-deep into Timmy's gut, provoking the type of scream you wouldn't think a testicle-bearing being would be capable of generating.

"Soldier, you got a gall bladder in there?"

"Sir," Halleck panted. "I don't know, sir."

"Well, if you do, boy, you won't for long." The medic had rumbled a few words into his radio. "You're gonna go home from the sand box a few ounces lighter than when you arrived."

And that's how Adam wound up for the first time ever in the machine gunner's position, atop the troop carrier, surrounded on three sides by khaki-painted metal walls about two feet too short for comfort. In front of him, the heavy, black mass of the .50 caliber machine gun, awkward to maneuver but more than enough, Sarge had assured him, to make the rag heads put their dicks in the dirt and start praying something fierce.

It wasn't much comfort, actually, but considering the environment, Adam took what he could from it.

It just wasn't setting up to be a good day. The electricity, long promised to return this very week, had failed to make an appearance. Those locals who had been friendly found their patience wearing thin. Tolerance already uncomfortably near the breaking point had been taxed further by the demolition of the neighborhood's only working well -- the fact that insurgent forces had been directly behind the destruction had done next to nothing to minimize resentment toward US forces.

Not when it was the women who had to walk a mile or more now for water, carrying heavy, plastic jugs back through the shattered remains of their neighborhood each and every day.

Add to that the fact that the old school building, theoretically reclaimed for the good guys, was rumored to be the latest, greatest place to hang out if you wanted to put together a few IEDs, just to pass the time.

Orders had come down from on high to go check out the veracity of that particular rumor, and should it prove true, round up the troublemakers and restore some version of order.

That same order could be easily restored, Adam thought, if the brass would just get off their asses and get the power back on. There was no reason for this neighborhood to be out -- two streets over, they'd had electricity for weeks now.

That led to a lot of resentment: resentment that could be seen in the shiny brown eyes of the boys that lined every street, hanging out in the darkened shadows between battered buildings, darting here and there at a moment's notice.

They were the same boys who had been laughing and smiling the week before, when Adam had gone out with a bunch of the other guys and distributed a whole truck's worth of sneakers and school supplies a charity group had shipped over from back home. Those kids who said, in half-Arabic, half-English wonder, "Santa Claus?" when Tom had pulled out a bag bulging with soccer balls.

Now, though, those eyes were wary, fearful. Judgmental. Something had happened, although no one was real clear on exactly what that something might be.

The older boys were in short supply, their absence echoed by the scarcity of men along the sandy streets.

This was different, and in Iraq, different meant danger.

"You see anybody up there, Davis?" The question came up from below. They were moving slowly, a glacial pace the best defense against IEDs. If you could spot them and avoid them in time, you could live another day.

"Nope." Adam scanned the flat rooftops, peering into the caramel-colored shadows, searching for the odd-shaped lumps that could be snipers. "Deader than dead up here."

"Let's hope it stays that way."

"That'd be nice." The school building was a little over two blocks away at this point, half a mile of spare, stony sand separating his unit from their objective.

A third of the way along, some two hundred and fifty yards or so, a small cloud of sand dented upward, grains of sand forming a half-helical arc in the heat. It was so hot that the tiny cloud appeared to waver, dancing like a miniature tornado.

Adam blinked. "Did you see that?" he asked. "Straight ahead!"

There was no reply, as a succession of tiny sand tornados began to form, each one a foot nearer to the convoy than its predecessor.

"Sniper!" The shout was loud, angry. "Two o'clock high!"

Adam whirled, yanking the heavy Browning machine gun around as fast as he could. "Where?" He couldn't see anyone, but the shots were coming faster and faster. "Where the fuck is he?"

“High! He’s high!”

Adam looked up, searching for the tell-tale muzzle flash that would reveal the sniper’s position. He needed to see, needed to be sure, before he opened fire. There was too much risk otherwise -- risk of hurting civilians, risk of taking out kids. The orders were clear: identify your target before taking the shot.

“Davis!” Sergeant Moore shouted. “The tailor’s! The tailor’s!”

There he was! Crouched in the corner of the second story window over the tailor’s shop was a sniper -- no more than a kid, whip thin and wiry, with a rifle at his shoulder and another propped against the wall next to him.

Adam fired, the pressure on the trigger coming a scant-half second after Jerome Harris yelped, “Motherfucker! He got me!”

“No!” Adam cried. “No!” The M2 was firing non-stop, punctuating the side of the tailor’s building with high-speed death. “Not today! Not today!”

“Babe.” The voice was flat, firm. “Babe, stop it.”

It was Calvin. Calvin’s voice, unmistakable. Welcome.

Wrong. Wrong for Iraq. Calvin had never been overseas, never served time in the sand.

Adam blinked and blinked against the sudden darkness.

“Calvin?”

“I’m right here.” His lover was beside him, all warm skin and concern. “You were dreaming, babe.”

“Fuck.” It was cold, suddenly, the Iraqi sun that had him near roasting a few moments before no longer doing the trick. Adam pulled the blankets up from the knot they’d formed around his feet, covering himself. “I hate when that happens.”

Calvin nodded. “Not unexpected, though.” He ran his hand over Adam’s arm, soothing weight progressing slowly from shoulder to wrist. “Trauma takes time to work itself out of your system.”

“It just makes me so mad, you know?” Adam asked. “If I’d have seen that stupid bastard five seconds sooner, Jerome never would have gotten hurt.”

“He’s doing fine now,” Calvin assured him.

“Fine with a fake arm,” Adam said. The sniper’s shot had shattered Jerome’s elbow, splintering the bones in his forearm so badly that the arm had to be partially amputated and replaced with a prosthetic. “What the hell kind of life is that going to be?”

“It’ll be as good as he can make it,” Calvin shrugged. “Just like the rest of us.”

“If I’d just been faster,” Adam repeated. “I could have taken that little bastard out sooner.”

“You can’t change what’s been, babe. No one can.”

“I know. I know.” The blankets weren’t enough, not when it was so freezing cold. “But I should have been faster.”

Calvin sighed. “And then what? Maybe Jerome would have been on patrol the next day, gotten himself blown up some other way that didn’t turn out so good. Another sniper. An IED. He could have gotten killed when y’all took the school back.” Silence fell between them. Three men had died that day, one of them from Adam’s unit. “You never know. Maybe getting hit and sent home saved his life.”

Adam chuckled. “Be nice if you had some psychic powers. Then you could tell me that was the case for sure.”

Calvin fell back against the pillows. “Ain’t nothing in life guaranteed, boy.” He looked over at Adam. “You gonna be all right?”

“I think so, yeah.”

Calvin closed his eyes. “Then try to get some sleep. We got a hell of a day tomorrow.”

“I thought,” Adam groaned, “that we had a hell of a day today.” The better part of the day had been spent clearing debris from flood-damaged cabins. After working most of the summer, they’d finally reached the last pair of hunting cabins Calvin maintained, only to discover that the damage there was worse than anywhere else. There was no salvaging these cabins. They had to be torn down and rebuilt.

“I had me a look at that second cabin,” Calvin said. “And there’s nests all down the back side of it.”

“What kind of nests?”

“Bald-faced hornets’ nests.” Calvin held his arms up in the darkness, hands a good two feet apart. “Near about this big.”

“Oh, hooray.” Adam shook his head. “Any chance they don’t bite?”

“Everything bites in Texas.”

“Even you.” Adam reached over and patted Calvin fondly. “Even you.”

“I said I was sorry!” In the darkness, Adam couldn’t see Calvin’s blush, but he knew it was there. “The heat of the moment and all...”

“Mmmhmm.” Adam smiled. “So do these things bite-bite, or do they bite-and-leave-you-dying?”

“They bite-bite,” Calvin replied. “Unless you’re allergic.”

“Not that I know of,” Adam replied. “But I can’t say I been bit by a bald-faced hornet before.” A memory shook him, and he shuddered. “They got some big-ass spiders over there, though, and one of them took a pretty good nip out of me. My finger swelled up like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Great.” Calvin said. “We’re gonna have to make sure you don’t get yourself bit too bad. I keep an epi-pen in the first-aid kit, but I don’t want to have to count on that.”

“It’ll be fine,” Adam assured him. “I been through worse.” He closed his eyes. “Now if I can just get through the rest of the night without any more dreams, then I’ll be happy.”

Calvin reached over and pulled him close. “Me, too, babe. Me, too.”

Perhaps it was indulgent fate. Perhaps there’s a quota on PTSD induced nightmares. Perhaps it was the comforting arm of his lover, slung snugly around his hip.

Adam wasn’t sure of the cause, but he woke early, thankful to have passed the intervening hours without any more nightmares.

The sun was only beginning its slow crawl up the side of the sky, but Calvin was already awake, pattering around the small kitchen the cabin offered.

“How do you do that?” Adam asked.

“What?” Calvin said. “I crack the egg, it falls in the pan, you mix it up some with some milk.” He flopped some toast onto the plate and tilted the frying pan over it. “And voila! You have breakfast.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Adam said, taking the plate and sinking into a chair. “How do you always manage to get up before me?” He shook his head. “I never even felt you get out of bed.”

“Years of practice,” Calvin replied. “Sides which, you sleep like the dead.” He cocked his head. “When you sleep, that is.”

“Mmm. There is that,” Adam said. “These are good eggs.”

“Eat up,” Calvin replied. “We’ve got lots to do today.”

“Hooray.” Adam grinned at Calvin and shoveled in a few bites before asking, “There any time in that schedule for a good morning kiss, you slave driver?”

“I think,” Calvin said, stepping closer, “that we might be able to work that into the day.”

“Good thing,” Adam said. He reached out, wrapping his arms around Calvin’s waist and pulling Calvin near. “Because I need my morning motivation.”

“Mmm.” Calvin bent, velvet soft lips meeting Adam’s upturned mouth. “We can’t be having that, can we?”

“Mmmhmm.” Kisses were like potato chips -- rare indeed was the man who was satisfied with only one. Adam kissed Calvin again, letting his tongue sneak past his lips to brush against Calvin’s teeth, to push against an equally responsive tongue.

“Babe,” Calvin cautioned. “You’re gonna get me all worked up, you keep doing what you’re doing.”

“And the problem with that is what?” Adam’s hand slid, rather strategically, from the side of Calvin’s hip to the front of his jeans. “Exactly?”

“I don’t know.” Calvin’s voice was deeper now, husky. “I knew it a minute ago,” he said, closing his eyes as Adam’s hand began to move. The next words were soft, barely above a whisper. “But I plumb forgot.”

“That’s okay.” Adam undid Calvin’s belt, tugging down his zipper. “It’s not your memory I’m after.”

“And what are you after?” Calvin reached down, rearranging some loosely-bunched fabric, revealing his rapidly hardening cock. “Exactly?”

“This,” Adam replied. His fingers curled around Calvin’s length, soft and strong all at once. “This is what I had in mind.”

“Oh, babe,” Calvin replied, shallow breaths timed almost exactly with Adam’s caresses. “That feels so good.”

“Mmm.” Adam smiled. “Then you’re going to love this.”

The first kiss graced the very end of Calvin’s cock, Adam’s lips flattening over the plump mushroom silk surface, his tongue flickering out to trace the subtle valley bisecting the flared head.

“Oooo.” It was an in-drawn breath, a shudder.

“Yeah,” Adam purred. “Just like that.”

Then, in a demonstration of precision and control, Adam began to swallow his lover’s shaft, lips descending inch by inch in slow motion. It took an eternity to traverse the distance from cockhead to base, each second punctuated by Calvin’s throaty groans, progress urged by the silent twist of fingers on the back of Adam’s head.

“Jesus, babe,” Calvin groaned. “You’re killing me.”

In response, Adam ran his tongue along the underside of Calvin’s cock, flicking into the hollows left between ropy veins, pressing the spots he’d discovered to be the most sensitive skin on his lover’s body.

Then he pressed his lips down, meeting the softly furred flesh at the base of Calvin’s cock. Silver-tinged curls crinkled up against his face, tickling his nose, but still he kept on, tilting his neck so Calvin could slide just that much further in.

“Lord, Lord, Lord.”

Sliding back, revealing Calvin’s glistening cock to the open air, took almost as much time as the initial engulfing had. Yet the flesh wasn’t exposed for long, re-embraced rapidly by Adam, Calvin’s cockhead returning to the back of Adam’s throat like an eagle returning to the roost.

Calvin had no words, his eyes closed, his mouth half-open. His fingers, dancing through Adam’s hair, said enough: the pressure speaking volumes about bliss and wonder, need -- and the fervent hope that deliverance was still a long way from coming.

Outside, black clouds skittered across the sky, pushed into position by a high-pressure front just jam-packed with thunderstorms. Flashes of light illuminated the clouds from within, revealing smoke and copper colored twists of moisture, snarling around a violent core.

Adam and Calvin took no notice. There was a much more immediate storm brewing, the rolling thunder outdoors inaudible beneath the pounding heartbeats, the symphony of gasping, shuddering breaths.

“Oh, babe,” Calvin said. “If you don’t, I’m gonna.”

Adam responded quickly, sucking harder, sliding further, taking Calvin as far inside as he could.

A crack of thunder broke just then, loud enough to shake the house.

“Lord!” Calvin arched his back, hands flying to cover his eyes. “Good God almighty!”

Adam pulled away with a grin, wiping a shiny trail off of his bottom lip with the back of his hand. “That must have been pretty good, to turn you into a preacher man.”

Calvin grinned, blue eyes twinkling brightly. “You’re enough to give a man religion, you are.”

Another crack of thunder boomed, followed by the rapid-fire flicker of lightning tracing a crooked path to the ground.

“Although it looks like some of the earth-shaking was Mother Nature’s doing,” he added, pacing over to the window. “We’re in for a good ’un.”

“So no hornets?” Adam asked.

“No hornets.”

“Shucks.” Adam grinned. “Isn’t that what we’re supposed to say down here, when an occasion like this presents itself?”

“I suspect,” Calvin replied, “that the traditional response is, ‘Looks like a real nice day to spend in bed.’”

Adam grinned. “That sounds fabulous.” His eyebrows wrinkled together, twin agitated, russet caterpillars, as more thunder boomed. The storm seemed louder and closer than it had been just a few seconds ago. “But what about Buddy and Ginger? Don’t we have to do something?”

Calvin grinned. “They’re smart. This isn’t the first little cloudburst they’ve run into.”

Adam peered out the window, taking in the billowing layers of clouds overhead. “I don’t know how little this storm’s gonna be.” He stepped backward. “Anyways, I thought everything was bigger in Texas.”

“Well, some things are,” Calvin allowed, with half a hint of a smile. “The important things.”

Adam gave him a look.

“Seriously?” Calvin said. “We would have heard it on the radio if a big storm was blowing in. It’s not the type of thing they let you miss. This here’s just going to be a little gully washer.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“It sounds pretty bad.”

“Big as life and twice as loud, right?” Calvin said.

“We used to say that over there,” Adam replied. “Course, we weren’t talking about rainstorms much.”

“This is the all-natural version of shock and awe,” Calvin said. “The original version of what all y’all do over there.”

They stood, watching the storm unfolding itself across the sky. Long, copper-tinged clouds parted to reveal shockingly dark ebony cores, home of startlingly bright white flashes of lightning.

The lightning would fork downward, bolts thicker than any Adam had ever seen before, splitting into smaller and smaller branches until hitting the Earth at some long-distant point.

“You all right, babe?” Calvin asked, voice soft.

That’s when Adam realized he was shaking, small tremors coursing through his arms, jostling his shoulders. His teeth hurt, hurt like crazy, and it was only after he’d unclenched his jaw that he understood why.

“I don’t know.” He looked at Calvin. “I thought I was.”

“You got all tense there for a minute,” Calvin said. “And I don’t know that you were all the way with me, you know?”

“Oh, I’m here.” Adam reached out and took Calvin’s hand. “I’m not going anywhere right now.”

“That sounds good to me, too.”

They stood, hands clasped, watching the show outside the window. The storm was moving closer, lightning covering the land in big, galloping steps. Every step was accompanied by the dum-dum-dum-THUD of summer thunder, echoing and re-echoing all around the cabin.

“Jesus, that’s loud,” Adam said. “Sounds just like mortar fire.”

“But it’s not.”

“I know it’s not.” His words were sharper than he intended, an edge riding every syllable.

“Do you?” Calvin held up his hand, fingers still twined through Adam’s. “All the hair you got is standing straight up. I can feel your pulse just a-racing.”

“I can see the storm, Cal.” Adam shrugged. “Course I know it’s just the weather being stupid.”

“It’s the weather being weather,” Calvin corrected.

Adam dropped his hand. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you’re over-reacting to a little ol’ rainstorm. Maybe not here.” Calvin’s fingers tapped the side of his temple. “But in here.” Calvin’s hand centered over his heart. “Inside.”

“I thought you didn’t have psychic powers,” Adam sneered. “To get inside my head like that.”

“Boy, I don’t need no psychic powers to see you’re all riled up. Blind man can see that.”

“Mmmph.” Adam snorted. “I said I’m fine, I’m fine.” He looked sideways at Calvin. “So let’s drop it.”

“Fine.” The word was short, clipped. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.” Adam turned his head, his gaze taking in the rumpled bunk where they’d spent the night. “Now, didn’t you say something about spending the day in bed?”

Cal pushed the door open. “I got me an idea on how to take care of them hornets. If it works, we won’t have to worry about you getting stung.” He stepped outside, pausing long enough to say, “But if you want to grab a few more winks, now’s as good a time as any.”

Part Two

“Well, fuck you, too, then,” Adam said, after the door had closed. Calvin was moving fast, up toward the far cabin. His shoulders were rigid, despite the long, lanky movement of his legs: anger stiffened him. “You don’t want to go back to bed with me?” Adam turned and kicked the chair where he’d been sitting. It went over on its side, wood crashing into wood. “After that? Then screw you.”

He returned to the window, just in time to see Calvin rummaging through the gearbox.

“Yeah, lucky me. I get to blow you, and then I get to bust my ass cleaning up your camp, and you don’t even want to sleep with me when I ask you to?” He stared a long minute at his lover, the way Calvin’s back formed an awkward arch as he searched for something.

He wondered what Calvin was looking for.

Another bolt of lightning zig-zagged through the sky, impacting the ground at exactly the point where land met sky, the horizon delineating the world into charcoal-colored sky and strangely luminescent earth, the golds and greens of distant foliage starkly bright. The thunder that came, a pair of heartbeats later, was so loud it appeared to originate within Adam’s head, reverberating through his brain, battering the inside of his skull.

His hands flew to his face, covering his eyes, palm outward, as if to ward off incoming shrapnel.

“Stop it!” he shouted. White flashes of light were skittering across his vision. He could smell the sand, the mother-loving foul scent of glass-baked earth. “Stop it now!”

The sound of his voice -- child-like, afraid -- startled him, bringing him back from a journey not yet fully started. There were wide planks under his boots, cabin walls around him. The air in his nose hung heavy with the promise of rain, and outside, everything was green.

Everything, that is, except Calvin, who had straightened up and stood staring back at the window, eyes narrowed to help him see what was going on.

“Fuck that noise,” Adam said. The thought of having another discussion with his lover about his supposed reaction to the thunderstorm was more than he could bear. “I’m going back to bed.”

He kicked off his boots and flopped down on the bunk. They’d managed to snarl up the sheets pretty good last night, and he kicked the more annoying knots of fabric out of the bed.

“God fucking damn it!” he snarled. “Why the hell does everything have to be messed up?”

The only answer the universe had for Adam was more thunder, rumbling down from the sky with all the intensity and power of a hail of approaching gunfire: Bam! Boom! BAM!

“Give me a break!” Adam piled the pillows -- his, Calvin’s -- over his head, burying his face in the lumpy mattress. There might have been tears, but he wasn’t about to pay no attention to them. “I don’t want to hear this shit!”

And for a while, he didn’t. The storm was moving on -- or the restless night he’d just awoken from had left Adam more tired than he realized.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but he sure knew what woke him up.

It was the smell of smoke.

At first he smiled. This smoke was wood smoke, light gray and ashy. Happy smoke, not at all like the heavy, black, acrid, petro-chemical smoke they had over there. There’s nothing like the half-rank cloying smell that comes from a mudhut after it’s been hit by a bomb: the slow melt of carpets, the fast, hot flare of wall hangings, all accented by the wailing of the women, the circle of accusatory, brown eyes watching the flames devour what little was left of their life. Wood smoke was happy smoke, campfire smoke.

Nights under the stars with Calvin smoke.

Night.

It was bright now, though, when he opened his eyes, having pushed the pillows to the ground in a blue-ticked slump. Not night. Not outdoors. He was in the cabin, smelling campfire smoke.

And Calvin?

Calvin was outside in a lightning storm.

Lightning caused fires.

The facts started tumbling through Adam’s mind, each idea prompting the next, a logic domino race, forcing Adam’s consciousness to ratchet through several gears in a matter of minutes.

“Shit!” He sprang out of bed and ran out of the cabin, without bothering to pull his boots on. “Calvin! Where are you?”

There was a light rain coming down, a steady, thin cloud of water that changed the soil to mud, soaking through his socks.

“Calvin!” he shouted.

There was a thin, blue curl of smoke coming 'round the far side of the second cabin, smoke accompanied by the steady crackle of flames.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Adam took off running toward the cabin, reaching the front corner just as Calvin emerged from behind the building.

“Babe! What’s the matter?” He looked at Adam. “Where are your boots?” He’d lectured Adam long and hard, those early days, about the perils of going barefoot in Texas. “You need your boots!”

“Smoke!” Adam sputtered. “I smelled smoke!”

Calvin grinned. “You did.” A puff of wind brought a fresh ribbon of smoke sneaking 'round the back of the cabin. “You do.”

“You’re all right then?”

Calvin grinned. “Better than all right.” He waved an arm. “Come see. I got rid of them hornets.”

Adam looked down at his feet, socks already covered in mud. “What the hell.” He followed Calvin, who was headed back around the cabin. “I’m not gonna get any dirtier.”

“Wouldn’t count on that,” Calvin muttered.

“What was that?” Adam asked.

“Nothing,” Calvin said. “Look.”

Some small distance from the cabin, a bonfire was blazing: long planks were perched precariously atop some burning flood debris. On the very end of each plank were crackling, misshapen lumps.

“See that there?” Calvin said. “Hornets.”

Adam peered into the smoke. Zipping through the hazy gray veil, there were some black specks moving against the wind, rapidly whirling upward.

“Aren’t they going to all come out of there and come after us?”

“A couple might.” Calvin shrugged. “Most of ’em are gonna burn up, and hornets don’t fly none too good in the rain.”

“I wouldn’t think a fire would burn all that well then, neither.”

“Best time, really.” Calvin looked around. “Makes it easy to keep shit from getting out of hand.”

“Storm’s pretty well done, then?” Adam asked, looking upward. The sky was a solid blanket of gray clouds now, the distinctive, copper striped bank of storm clouds having moved on, out of sight.

“Except for the rain.” Calvin grinned. “We could use the water. I ain’t complaining.”

“Not much good if you did, anyways.” Adam wriggled his toes against the earth, squishing in the shallow mud. “Who’s gonna listen?”

“Well, even if someone listens it’s not like there’s much they can do about it.”

“Yeah.” Adam pondered this for a moment, watching the flames work their way steadily through the brush pile. A twig would catch ablaze, burning in place, holding its form until it was reduced to ashes, only abandoning any pretense of coherence when the flames moved on. Then the twig would collapse, the ash fall a miniature, flame borne avalanche. “Sometimes just having someone there to listen helps, though.”

“Sometimes.” Calvin nodded.

“Well, least ways it can’t hurt.”

“So I’m told.”

“God damn you’re stubborn!” Adam exploded. “Can’t a man tell you he’s sorry?”

Calvin grinned. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“I thought it was.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Calvin shrugged. “You got nothing to be sorry for.” He kept his eyes fixed on the fire. “Shit happens.”

“Babe.” Adam reached out for Calvin’s hand.

Calvin took his hand. “It’s alright.”

“No, it’s not.” Adam squeezed his fingers together, reassured by the pressure of Calvin’s hand squeezing back. “We gotta talk this through.”

“One hornet’s nest at a time, babe.” A half-helix of hornets zoomed out of the flames, trailing sparks behind them. “Let’s not borrow trouble.” He turned toward Adam and grinned. “Like you getting pneumonia, standing out here barefoot in the pouring rain. No hat.”

“I have,” Adam replied, with elaborate dignity, raising one foot out of the mud, “socks on.”

“Lot of good that’s going to do you.” Quick as a wink, Calvin pivoted and hooked an arm under Adam’s raised leg. He yanked upward, dumping Adam flat on his back. “When all the rest of your clothes are soaking wet.”

Adam started to struggle to his feet, the effort cut short by the sudden welcome weight of Calvin atop him. “What are you doing, you crazy fool?”

Calvin looked up, his face the picture of innocence. “I’ve got to make sure you’re not getting sick, don’t I?” He slid the tongue of Adam’s belt through the denim loops holding it in place, worked the buckle open. “So I’m going to take your temperature.”

The rain picked up in intensity, large drops falling faster, splattering into the mud all around them.

“Now?” Adam asked.

“No time like the present,” Calvin replied. “Out here, a cold can come on like that.” He snapped his fingers.

“Who knew?” Adam replied, propping himself up on his elbows to watch Calvin’s actions. “Good thing I’ve got you to keep an eye on me.”

“More than an eye” Calvin freed Adam’s cock from the striped briefs he was wearing, running callused fingers up the side of the rapidly stiffening shaft. “If I got anything to say about it.”

“In this rain?” Adam said. “Babe, you’re gonna drown.”

Calvin looked up with such a grin that Adam’s cock twitched, the action wholly unrelated to anything the older man might have been doing with his hands. “Why do you think,” he asked, “us cowboys wear these hats?”

“That is,” Adam groaned, as Calvin licked the underside of his cock, “an excellent question.”

It was a question that went unanswered, conversation lost between a series of licks and kisses, slides and swallows, Adam’s words replaced by breathy moans and an almost endless stream of profanity.

“Sweet Jesus, fuck, fuck, fuck.” It was like prayer, somehow, a perverse Gregorian chant, growing louder and faster as Calvin grew more demanding, taking Adam deeper into his mouth, sucking that much harder. “Fuckity fuck fuck fuck.”

Calvin’s hands were scrabbling at the side of Adam’s hips, grabbing hold of Adam’s jeans and lifting him higher.

It was only a matter of inches -- inches Calvin used to allow more and more of Adam’s cock to slide into his throat -- but it was so much more than that. Being lifted, being controlled, ever so subtly -- it was the most erotic thing Adam had ever experienced.

So erotic that any thought of holding off, of making the moment last, flew right out of his mind -- along with every other thought, past, present and future.

All that remained was Calvin: Calvin's mouth, Calvin's hand, Calvin, there, holding him. Having him.

It was enough. It was everything.

"Ooh!" His hips, already raised, went higher, cantilevered by bliss as Adam's shoulders went down into the mud. Adam's head went from side to side, rolling with the moment. "Baby, baby now!"

Calvin held him tight, an iron grip on the sides of Adam's pelvis preventing any motion -- an isle of stillness in his trembling, thrashing body.

"God," Adam groaned, profanity giving way to proper prayer as he came. "God, God almighty."

After, Calvin still held him, licking every last drop of come from Adam's shaft until there was no more to be had.

Only then did Calvin tuck Adam back into his shorts, fumbling with heavy, wet material.

"Here, let me zip that," Adam said. "You must be freaking soaked!"

"I'm a little wet, yeah." Calvin grinned. "But not as much as you."

"Dude," Adam said. "Totally worth it."

"Well, not if we both come up sick." Calvin got up on his feet and extended a hand to Adam. "Come on up."

There was a wet, cold, sucking sound as Adam left the mud.

"Man, I'm covered!"

"Looks good on you," Calvin said. "Then again, most things do."

"True that." Adam grinned and struck a modeling pose. "Ranch hand today, sex symbol tomorrow."

"Sick bed day after that." Calvin gave the fire a glance. "That should be all right for a minute or two." He started back toward the first cabin. "Come on, let's go get dried off. Cleaned up."

"Can we get dirty again after?" Adam asked.

"Maybe." Calvin grinned. "We'll have to see."

They hadn't even covered half the distance when the clouds opened up in earnest, sending the rain sheeting down.

"Son bitch!" Calvin started running for the cabin, his pace lengthening with every step. "If it ain't one damn thing, it's another!"

"It's not that bad." Adam jumped up onto the porch, thankful for the shelter the tin roof provided. "What'd you say, a gully washer?"

"Fair to say the gully's done been washed," Calvin replied. He took off his hat, shaking a half-cupful of fresh rain downward.

Adam laughed. "Dude, you're soaked!"

"You think?" Calvin stretched out like a T, small droplets of water falling from his sleeves to puddle on the porch floor. "My damn jeans weigh eight hundred pounds."

"Well," Adam replied. "I guess we'll just have to get you out of them clothes."

"Warm and dry sounds good." Calvin reached for the porch door.

"Not so fast, Mister." Adam caught his hand. "You're not going in there soaking wet. You'll drip all over everything, make a hell of a mess."

Calvin laughed. "In case you didn't notice, that's not exactly the Houston Hyatt, babe. The carpet ain't about to complain."

"The carpet isn't going to be stepping in cold puddles," Adam retorted. "Gimme your shirt."

"Now?" Calvin looked at Adam with much the same regard a goat offers a new fence. "You want my shirt?"

"Take it off."

An eyebrow went up, but the shirt came off, one button at a time. "Here you go."

Adam twisted the garment in his hand, wringing out a sheet of water. "T-shirt, too."

"I'm fine."

"You're soaked. I can see it from here. Gimme the shirt."

"Satisfied?" Calvin's nipples were erect, tender, cranberry flesh protesting the cold. Goose bumps covered both arms, his pecs. The black hair that curled over his chest, bisecting his stomach with a narrow fringe, was trembling in time to his shivers. "Or do you want me to catch my death out here?"

“Ounce of prevention,” Adam replied, “’s worth a pound of cure. Those jeans aren’t doing you no favors, neither. You’re gonna get a kidney infection.” He nodded sagely. “I seen it. I know.”

“Lots of hypothermia-induced kidney infections in the desert, I bet.” Calvin sighed, his fingers working over his belt. “You just want to get me nekkid.”

“Now, now, now,” Adam said, chiding. “You took such good care of my health a minute ago, didn’t you? Least I can do is return the favor.”

“So it’s not you wanting to get me nekkid?” Calvin asked.

“Well, I didn’t say that.” Adam took in the sight of Calvin’s long, lean thighs. “It just turns out that that’s an added bonus.”

Calvin was watching Adam’s gaze. “I’m not as young as I might be,” he said. “And it is pretty cold out here.”

“Especially if you’re standing around naked as a jaybird.”

“Jaybirds have feathers, at least,” Calvin grouched. “I’m just freezing my balls off, that’s all.”

Adam stepped forward, reaching out and cupping his palm under Calvin’s package. “Everything still seems to be where it belongs.”

Calvin batted his hand away. “Smart ass. Your hands are freezing.”

Adam looked at him and smiled. “Least wise I’m smart enough to come in out of the rain.” He turned, pulled the door open, and still fully clothed, in sodden, dripping jeans and T-shirt, not to mention filthy muddy socks, entered the cabin.

“Hey!” Calvin shouted. “Hey!” He followed his lover into the cabin, arms waving. “Wait just one cotton pickin’ minute!”

“What?” Adam had peeled off his soaking wet T-shirt and dropped it in the sink. “Is there a problem?”

“You!” Calvin sputtered. “Why the hell did you have me strip down out there,” he started, indignation bubbling up as Adam slipped off one filthy sock and then another, tossing them near the door where they landed with a heavy, wet thud. “If you were planning to come in here and...” His words fell away, as Adam’s hand moved to his belt.

“If I was going to come in here and...” Adam prompted. He was moving very slowly now, taking his time to ease the brass button through the loop, to tug the clunky zipper down. “You were saying?”

“Jesus, Adam.” Calvin’s cock gave a twitch, but he ignored it. “I ain’t never seen nothing like you.”

Adam grinned. “Nothing special, really.” His jeans were so wet they clung to him; he had to peel the thick denim down the flat planes of his hips, pushing them off of his thighs.

“Don’t know about that.” Calvin’s voice was low, husky. “Don’t know that at all.”

Adam’s thumbs were hooked in the waistband of his shorts. “You want these off, too?”

“I love to look at you.” Calvin said. “Dressed. Naked. It don’t matter. I could look at you all day long.”

Adam looked up at him, eyes bright. “Why?”

Calvin shrugged. “I don’t know that there is a why.” He ran his hand across his chin, the swell of his thumb catching slowly at his lip, dragging, its passage a scant half second slower than the rest. “It’s the look of you, but not the look of you, you know?”

Adam’s eyebrow wrinkled. “Not exactly.” The laugh was soft, warm. Seductive.

Calvin smiled. “It’s like you got a light shining on you, through you.” Words became whispers, hoarse breath wrapped ’round gravel. “All the time. It draws you in.”

“Now?” Adam stepped out of his shorts, arms fanned out a few inches from his hips. “Am I shining now?”

Calvin looked, looked at his fine young lover. He saw the creamy, alabaster skin, darkening with two distinct set of tan lines: the stark edge minimal sand tan, short sleeves and V necks delineated in a subtle melanin distribution: darker here, paler there, golden throughout. The flat, pink nipples. The muscle corded neck too stiff to bow. A stomach, impossibly flat despite the prodigious amount of food Adam ingested. The cock, awake with the vigor of youth, the curly, russet nest ’round the base of his shaft resembling flames, practically vibrating from the barely contained energy harbored nearby. Hips that didn’t quite flare, thighs sparsely furred.

“Yes.” There was a tear there in him, then, a little catch that slid in just under his ribs and set a barb. Not enough to make him bleed, mind you. Just enough to sit there and deliver a little bit of pain any time Calvin thought to look back on this moment. “Like the sun.”

“I’m glad.” Adam smiled at Calvin. “You’re pretty damn easy on the eyes, too, you know.”

“It don’t matter what I look like,” Calvin said. “This. This is bigger than that.”

Adam cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

Calvin stopped then, blinking his eyes enough to see his lover in another aspect, the more everyday vision of a young man.

“Nothing.” He smiled. “An old man gets notions.”

“Any of those notions involve us getting into bed?” Adam’s smile was pure seduction. “Warming up a little bit?”

“Chores need doing.”

“You’re already naked,” Adam replied. “As am I.”

“Saves time that way,” Calvin allowed.

The cabin didn’t have rooms, per se -- kitchen fixings were clustered in the front corner of the room, with a rounded table bragging a few chairs off to the side. A pair of metal-framed beds made up the rest of the room, coupled with a pair of folding chairs that had seen better days.

So it only required a few steps for Adam to leave the kitchen and climb into bed.

“Come on, babe.”

That same distance seemed impossible to Calvin, suddenly, strangely.

“We can’t. Not right now,” he said. “There’s things to be doing, you know.”

“What things?” Adam turned toward the window. The rain was still pouring down, splattering flat against the pane glass, obscuring the view with its passage. “It’s pissing down out there. We’re not gonna clear cabins. We’re not going to ride back down to the house in that shit.” He folded his arms behind his head, a fleshy pillow for an almost-angelic smile. “There’s nothing to do but lie back and enjoy the day.”

Calvin nodded slowly.

“We could make us some plans, though,” he said. “About what all we’re gonna do once this rain lets up.” He smiled, to soften the words. “It can’t be all -- you know. All the time.”

“Would be nice if it could,” Adam said.

“Yeah,” Calvin agreed. “It would. But there needs to be more than that.”

They stared at each other a moment then, the space between them charged with words unsaid.

Calvin dropped his eyes first, unwilling to be the one who said what needed to be said. He wanted to hear those words, not create them.

That gave Adam some room.

"I imagine we'll have to burn off the last of them hornet nests," Adam said. He slid over in the bed, pushing the bedding down to reveal the striped sheet below. "Lessen that rain destroyed them for us." He patted the mattress. "Come here, Cal."

Calvin crossed the distance and sat on the bed, feet still on the floor.

"My God, you're stubborn," Adam laughed. "What does it take to get you to relax and enjoy yourself?"

"There's a time for everything," Calvin said. "It's just strange, sacking out in the middle of the day."

"You get used to it. Over there," Adam said, "we learned to sleep whenever we could. No guarantee that night's going to be calm and restful, you know?"

"Is that getting better," Calvin asked. "Being here?" He drew his feet up off the floor and slid them under the blankets.

"Little bit," Adam allowed. "I think. Part of that's the atmosphere, you know? It's quiet and cool here. Even when it's hot, it's not hot like there."

"Makes sense."

"Course, you keep me pretty busy, too. You get too tired out to think about shit. There's too much to do."

"Work can do a lot to heal a man," Calvin said. "It's done wonders for me."

Adam looked at him then, clearly curious about what lay behind that statement, but Calvin said nothing. When some handful of minutes had slid by and it was clear no more conversation was coming from his direction, Adam spoke again.

"So that's what we got to do for the guys we have come out here. Give them peace and quiet and some work to do. Let them get the bugs out of their system."

"You think that's enough?" Calvin said.

"Worked for me." Adam shrugged. "I'm way better than when I first got here."

"Least until there's a storm." The words were gentle, but firm. "Then you're worse than I've seen ya be."

Adam bowed his head. "Yeah. I'm not sure exactly what to do about that bit."

"Maybe we'd better figure that out," Calvin said, "before setting ourselves out to help other guys out." He cleared his throat. "And I'm not sure how much of you getting better has to do with being here," he continued, words slowing, growing more cumbersome with every syllable. "And how much is on account of you and I, you know?"

“Hmm.”

A long moment of silence followed, punctuated only by the rain against the window, growing more intense one moment, lessening somewhat the next. Outside the cabin, Calvin knew, the rain was sluicing over the ground, seeking out well-worn channels, speeding from high ground to low.

Ginger and Buddy were probably nose to tail under the scrub, shunning the lean-to he'd built out here two summers before. They'd never much liked it, preferring a starry sky to any roof.

The hornets that hadn't burned were fighting a furious battle against their species' interpretation of the great flood: Noah's exodus wasn't shit, really, when compared to the torrential rain pounding into their homes, most capriciously upended and set ablaze.

Calvin thought about all of these things and a dozen more, waiting on Adam's response. He remembered what the ground smelled like, after a good rain, and looked forward to that rich, earthy scent filling his nostrils again. He thought about the seventeen other ways he could have taken care of the hornets, but fire was good -- Calvin liked fire. He thought about what kept his lover so silent, now, as they were skin to skin in the narrow bed.

Then he decided he'd thought enough.

“Maybe I'm wrong,” he allowed. “Maybe there's less to you and I than I thought.” His feet found their way out of the bed again, returning to the cold comfort of the wide planked floor.

He turned his back, staring at the cabin door. It was pissing out there. Nothing but foolishness would drive a man out into that mess.

But as Adam's silence stretched out, the space between them doubling and redoubling with each unsaid word, the torrential downpour started to hold an appeal all of its own. Hell, just because the horses didn't like the lean-to didn't mean he couldn't take some shelter there. He'd done it before, Calvin thought, couple times when he had more hunters than cabins to put them in.

It just meant getting up and walking away -- stopping to grab his last, dry pair of jeans, first, to be sure. Then he could go.

Get away from this silence.

Get away from whatever Adam had to say.

Get away from the fact that he was nothing but a fool, thinking he'd found a little bit of something special.

He should have known better.

'Specially at his age.

More than half-disgusted with himself, Calvin stood up.

"Where are you going?" Adam asked. "I thought we were hanging out."

Calvin turned. "What?"

"I thought we were gonna chill," Adam said. "Relax. Get comfortable." He propped himself up on his elbows, looking genuinely puzzled. "Work out how we're going to help other guys get back into their heads."

"What about..." Calvin said, words failing him. "What I said? You and me?"

"We're going to have to do without that," Adam said blithely. "I'm not willing to share you with every GI who comes back a headcase, and that's that. They'll have to get better without you." Adam smiled. "You're mine."

Part Three

They'd talked long hours that day, while the rain splattered down, cloudbursts drumming on the tin roof overhead. It was one thing to say you were going to run a recovery center for returning soldiers, another to actually do it.

Sleep surprised them, sneaking up in between discussions of how many weekends would be needed to accommodate existing hunting clients and how many would be devoted to peace and quiet and hard work.

"Maybe we could combine the two," Calvin suggested. "Take the guys hunting."

Adam rejected the idea immediately. "They've done more than enough shooting."

"Might be good to give them a chance to see things different, you know," Calvin said. "Get some fresh perspective." He shrugged. "Take a bad experience, turn it into a good one."

"I don't think so."

"Maybe you should try it," Calvin said. "Before you decide it ain't gonna work."

"You don't understand."

"Not yet," Calvin agreed. "But I will. I've got to, if we're going to make this work." He looked at Adam out of the corner of his eye. "But you've got to trust me."

"I do trust you."

"There's trust, and there's trust."

"Well, that makes it much clearer." Adam snorted. "Thank you."

"Let me take you hunting," Calvin said, "and you'll see what I mean."

"What if?" Adam started trembling. "What if it makes me all bug fuck?"

"Better we know that now before we look at this any further, right?" Calvin shrugged, and pulled Adam into his arms. "When it's just you and me. When it's safe."

"Safe?" Adam shook his head. "It could go bad, Calvin."

"I trust you."

"I don't trust me." Adam closed his eyes, seeing nothing but sand. "You don't get it, Cal. I don't know when it's gonna happen. One minute, I'm fine. Next minute, I'm there." He shrugged. "And if I start acting like I'm there, and I got a gun in my hands..."

“You haven’t done that yet, have you?” Calvin’s voice was calm. Confident. “I haven’t seen you do that.”

“But what if it does?”

“You can’t let that fear rule you, boy.” Calvin shook his head. “Just like riding Buddy. You can’t shy off of what scares you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Calvin.”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that!”

“We’ll deal with it.” Calvin pulled the blankets up around them, one arm tight around Adam. “When we have to. Not before.”

Snores came quick after that, bare back to chest, heartbeat thudding against heartbeat, separated only by the thinnest ribbon of flesh and muscle.

Flesh, muscle and need.

The next morning the sun came bright and sharp, particularly brilliant as if to overcompensate for its absence the day before.

It found Adam alone in the bed, the space beside him already cool to the touch.

“Jesus, does this man never sleep?”

“You already got me to spend one full day in bed.” Calvin grinned from the kitchen. “Don’t count on it happening again.”

“Right.” Adam laughed. “I can tell you mean that. Really.”

“One of us,” Calvin countered, “has to be the responsible one.”

“And that’s you?”

“Apparently.”

“So, oh responsible one,” Adam said, letting the bedding wrapped around him drop a few inches, baring the angled side of his ribcage, the soft sweep of his stomach. “What are we going to do today?”

“Well,” Calvin said, eyes drinking him in. “I reckon we could spend another day doing what we spent yesterday doing, or we could go down to town and get some supplies.”

Adam sprawled on the bed. The blankets were gone now. He lay there, bare-assed naked, on his stomach, facing Calvin. "I vote for spending today just like yesterday." He leered at Calvin, letting his gaze linger directly on the older man's crotch. "That was fun."

"It surely was," Calvin replied. "But we might want to get some food, you know. So you can keep your... strength up."

"I am young," Adam growled. "I have the strength of many men."

"You do realize we're down to the last case of soda?" Calvin asked. "And there's maybe enough stuff for one, maybe two meals?" He smiled. "I ask only because I'm curious."

"That does put a different perspective on the matter," Adam said.

"And there's barbecue in town," Calvin reminded him.

"This is sounding better by the minute."

"So get your lazy ass out of bed, and let's go."

"I knew there was a part of this plan I didn't like." Adam groaned and rolled out of bed. "This damn bed doesn't get comfortable until five minutes before I got to get out of it."

"Oh, that's not true," Calvin shot back. "I seen you plenty comfortable in that bed."

"Not when I'm by myself."

"We'll have to work on that." Calvin grinned. "That'd be a show to see, no doubt. But I've got a hankering for some barbecue."

He tossed Adam a pair of jeans. "Your last shirt's soaked right through. You're going to have to wear one of mine."

"All right." Adam buttoned up the shirt, the clothes enveloping his slender frame. He looked down at himself and grinned. Then he ran his fingers through his hair, ruffling the ashly fringe into a tangle. "Do I look presentable enough to go to town?"

Calvin eyed him critically. "You almost look disreputable enough," he said, "to pass for a native."

"You make that sound like a bad thing." Adam cocked his head. "Aren't you a native?"

"Yeah," Calvin shot back. "And look what it got me."

"It got you me." Adam smiled. "Isn't that enough?"

Calvin kissed him. "More than enough."

The horses had clearly had enough of life under the stars. They got saddled up without difficulty. Buddy was prancing in place as soon as Adam settled into the saddle.

"Ready to go or what, dude?" Adam asked. "Buddy's rip-roaring."

"He always gets like that," Calvin said. "Old enough to know better, but he don't."

"You're just like me, aren't you?" Adam patted Buddy on the side of the neck. "Old enough to know better, too damn young to care."

"That's comforting," Calvin said. "The blind leading the blind." He gave Ginger a little nudge, and they started down the trail toward home.

They hadn't gotten far when Buddy decided they weren't going fast enough. Huffing and tossing his head, he tried to push past Ginger.

"Where you going, babe?" There was more than a little laughter in Calvin's voice. "Out for another wild ride?"

"Not if I can help it." Adam's last wild ride had left him battered black and blue.

"Hold on there, Buddy!" He pulled on the reins. "This isn't the Kentucky Derby."

"He's just in a hurry to get home," Calvin said. "Back to the barn proper." He leaned over in Ginger's saddle, reaching out to pat the big dun on the side of the neck. "Ain't that right, boy?"

Buddy whinnied.

"I didn't know you spoke horse," Adam said.

"I don't. I didn't understand a thing he just said." Calvin laughed.

"I did." Adam shifted in the saddle. "It was 'Come on, already! Let's go!'"

"You think you can stay on him this time?"

Adam grinned. "'Course I can. I haven't fallen off a horse in... weeks now!"

"And how long has it been since you've had Buddy moving any faster than a full stop?"

"Two weeks," Adam replied. "Three tops. Maybe four."

“No time like the present, right?” Calvin smiled. Then he leaned forward in the saddle, just a few inches, gave Ginger a pretty good prod in her side, and said, “Come on, Old Lady! Take me home!”

Ginger took off like she was the frontrunner at Churchill Downs: head down and hooves flying, she careened over the path like she was on rails.

Buddy was right behind her, so close that there were more than a few instances where Adam was sure the big dun’s nose was going to be clipped by Ginger’s steel-tipped hooves.

“Holy shit!” he said, no louder than a breath -- they were going too fast for proper speech, sounds whipped away by the wind as soon as they were uttered.

Nevertheless, Calvin heard him, craning his head back to make sure Adam was still behind him.

Adam flashed Calvin a smile and tried gripping a little tighter with his thighs. Calvin had told him it was all in the legs -- that a good horse would be able to pick up what his rider wanted just from some simple pressure applied at the right time, in the right spot.

Judging from Buddy’s reaction, Adam’s thighs had found the “Go much faster” spot.

The big dun lurched, moving forward with one awkward bound until his nose was even with Ginger’s.

Calvin looked over. “Boy, what are you doing?”

Adam shrugged. “Fuck if I know!”

Adam might not have known, but Buddy clearly did, moving rapidly in front of Ginger. This time, thankfully, he opted to stay on the trail, bypassing the scrub patches he’d gone through the last time Adam had had a hankering to go fast.

Most of the trail was relatively flat. There was one steep grade, just after the first set of cabins, descending toward the main house.

Adam and Buddy were a good five or six horse-lengths ahead of Calvin and Ginger by this point, a tribute to Buddy’s uncharacteristic haste to get home.

They weren’t so far ahead, however, that Calvin’s voice couldn’t reach them.

“Lean back, you idiot! Lean back!”

Adam’s nose was nearly touching Buddy’s mane, the saddle horn uncomfortably crunched into his stomach. Calvin’s words were enough to bring him upright -- which probably saved him, when Buddy decided the descent was far too steep for comfort and stopped abruptly.

“What the hell, Buddy?” Adam kicked the big dun in the side. “We’re almost home. I can see the barn from here.”

Buddy didn’t move. Not a step, not a twitch of the tail. Nothing, until Ginger got closer.

“Why’d you stop?”

“I don’t know,” Adam replied. “Really wasn’t my idea.”

“Don’t know if I’ve mentioned this,” Calvin smirked, “but the rider is technically supposed to be in charge. At least a bit.”

“Hey, I stayed on. That’s progress.” Adam grinned. “Maybe Buddy’s just a gentleman. Waiting on the old lady.”

“I doubt that.” Calvin tilted the reins, guiding Ginger around Buddy. “But you never know.”

That’s when Ginger pulled up short and refused to take another step.

“What the fuck?” Calvin said. “That’s not like you.”

“What’s going on?” Adam said.

“I don’t know,” Calvin said. “Shh, for a minute.” His eyes scanned the ground, intently studying every rock, every shadow, every little scrubby bush alongside the trail.

This went on for ages.

“What are you looking for?” Adam asked, finally.

“Snake,” Calvin said. “Sometimes that’ll spook ’em. Best way to get yourself bit, step on a snake.” He shook his head. “It’s not pretty.”

“Rattlesnakes?”

Calvin shrugged. “Sometimes. Out here, sometimes we get copperheads. They’re so freakin’ hard to see, you don’t see one ’til you’re right on top of it, and then you’re too late.”

“Is there anything out here that won’t kill you?” Adam asked. “Just out of curiosity.”

“Depends.” Calvin said. “If you keep your head on, you’ll be fine.”

He smiled. “There’s the problem. Right up there.”

Further down the trail, four dusky-gray animals careened out of the brush. Each was no bigger than a good-sized puppy, but far more coordinated: little hooved legs flying, snouts to the ground, squealing like a bunch of schoolgirls.

“What the hell are they?” Adam asked.

“Baby javelinas,” Calvin said. “When you see little ones like that, Mama’s not far behind. That’s why the horses stopped.”

“They’re worried about a pig?” Adam was incredulous.

“More than a pig.” Calvin nodded, indicating the dark shadow following the herd across the trail. “They don’t have tusks like the boars do, but don’t let that fool you. She’ll do a number on you, get between her and her little ones.”

“Really?” Adam leaned forward in the saddle. “She don’t look all that scary.”

As if on cue, the javelina stopped, turned her head and stared at Adam. Beneath him, Buddy shifted his weight on his hooves, clearly nervous.

“The female of the species is always more deadly than the male,” Calvin quipped. “But if we don’t bother her, she won’t mess with us.” He smiled. “Go on, Mama! We’re not interested in you today!” He waved his arm.

The motion was enough to get Mama javelina up and moving, her hindquarters churning like a lopsided washing machine, driving her litter of little ones in front of her. It wasn’t until the clouds of dust they’d churned up had settled flat that Ginger and Buddy could be persuaded to move again.

“These two must be a big help on a hunt,” Adam quipped. “Freezing up every time they see the game.”

“Javelinas aren’t game, technically,” Calvin said. “That’s why we can hunt them whenever. Anyway, these guys know when they’re working. This is just a little pleasure ride.” He turned to Adam. “You’ll see.”

“I guess,” Adam replied.

The trip into town was remarkably uneventful. The waitress at Calvin’s favorite barbecue joint didn’t even bother taking an order: she just brought tray after tray after tray of food until the pair of them couldn’t eat another bite.

“That was good,” Calvin said, patting his stomach.

“Yeah, it was.” Adam grinned. “You know what would go perfect with that? Some ice cream.”

“Don’t you ever get full?” Calvin asked.

"I keep hoping to," Adam said, voice low. "But my boyfriend don't seem interested, you know?"

"Stop that," Calvin hissed. "Someone's gonna hear you."

"Who?" Adam looked around the restaurant. They were the only diners in there under the age of seventy. "Unless they got their hearing aids set on super-super sensitive, nobody here heard nothing."

"Anyway."

"Anyway," Adam grinned. "We got supplies to get." He tossed a pair of bills onto the table. "Race you to the truck, old man."

Calvin let him win, just for the pleasure of watching that tight little butt moving at top speed.

"Now what?" The bed of the truck was full of plastic grocery bags, handles knotted together, a sack of grain, building supplies. "You happy, now that you've bought out the whole damn town?"

"Post office," Calvin said. "Got to see if my publisher's clearinghouse check's come in yet."

"Hope springs eternal."

Calvin looked over at Adam, a quiet smile playing on his lips. "It does, that."

"Mail call," Calvin said, flopping a thick-folded sheaf of paper onto the truck seat. "I've never seen that box so full before. I think everybody I owe money to must of up and written twice this month."

"Don't forget," Adam said, "that my change of address must've gone through by now. Some of that pile's likely to be for me."

"I'm guessing that's the case with this," Calvin said, deftly sliding an oversized envelope out of the pile. It was light purple, addressed in sparkly ink, and more than half-covered with fuzzy unicorn stickers.

"That does look like Mary's work," Adam grinned.

The envelope was stuffed with small drawings, pages carefully separated from coloring books, and a photo of his baby sister Mary, beaming beneath a fuchsia cowgirl hat.

"That's cute," Calvin said.

Adam smiled, eyes fixed on the loopy handwriting angled across the page. “She says here that she’s ready for her pony.” His smile faded. “Then she says Dad can pick it up when he visits.”

He dropped the small stack of purple pages into his lap.

“There a letter from the old man in there, babe?”

Calvin rifled through the stack, extracting a heavy cream-colored envelope with an oversized Davis Motors logo in the corner. “I’m guessing this is it.”

“See?” Adam managed a weak grin. “I told you you’ve got psychic powers.”

Like most of William’s letters, this one was terse, short and to the point.

Son,

The National Dealers’ Convention is scheduled for the last week of July in Dallas. Please expect my visit on the following Saturday.

Dad

“Hmm.”

Calvin plucked the letter from his fingers. “Billy’s got a way with words, don’t he?” It looked like a thought struck him, wrinkling his smoked charcoal eyebrows. “I wonder why he didn’t just call.”

“If he called,” Adam replied, “I could have told him no.” He nodded to the single page Calvin held. “Doing this takes all the choice out of it.”

“A done deal.”

“Yeah.”

Calvin looked at Adam sideways. Then he started the truck, easing it into gear and onto the highway, headed back to camp. “Would you have told him no?”

Adam thought about it, turning the idea over in his mind a long minute before answering. “Honestly? I really don’t know.” His eyes flickered up to meet Calvin’s. “I’m so tired of fighting, babe. And I know a big one’s coming.”

“It might not be that bad.”

Adam snorted. “You don’t know Dad.”

“I know he loves you,” Calvin said. “Under it all.”

“That and a dollar,” Adam shot back, “is going to buy a metric boatload of nothing.”

Calvin smiled. "That's the good thing about Texas."

"What's that?"

"Whenever we get a metric boatload of nothing," Calvin said, nodding toward the scenery outside the truck window, "we've got plenty of room to put it."

Adam burst out laughing. "Never thought of that."

"It's gonna be fine, kiddo," Calvin said. "You'll see."

Part Four

It was not fine.

William got out of his car, early that July morning, as pissed off as Adam had ever seen him.

“You forget how far out this place is,” he snapped, in lieu of greeting. “And they’re not real big on road repair in these parts, apparently. Damn near snapped an axle, trying to get up here.”

“Hi, Dad. Good to see you,” Adam said.

“Billy,” Calvin laughed. “Those are the good roads. You should be lucky you didn’t try to come by the short cut. Holes down there will swallow that tin can of yours.”

“I didn’t dare try it,” William said. His eyes flickered up to meet Calvin’s. “You know I go by William now.”

“I’ve heard.” Calvin smiled. “But you’ll always be Billy to me.”

“Come on in, Dad,” Adam said, interrupting a conversation that was taking place without the benefit of any words being involved. “Come get a drink.” He eyed the horizon, the sun still wavering high in the sky. “Maybe a bite to eat.”

“Ate at the airport,” William snapped. “It’s awful. All you can get down here is barbecue. It’s like they never heard of a club sandwich.”

“There are worse things.” Adam started heading for the refrigerator. “You want some sweet tea, Dad?”

“That sounds good.” He climbed the narrow steps, crossed the porch. “The place looks just like I remembered,” he said to Calvin. “After all this time.”

“Takes a lot of hard work to keep it that way,” Calvin replied. “I got a lot to be grateful to your boy for.”

“Glad he’s made himself useful.” William took the glass of tea, thick fingertips tracing clear paths through the condensation already clinging to the side of the glass. “I figured another pair of hands would be helpful.”

“More than helpful. More than hands, too,” Calvin said. “Adam’s got some great ideas about how I can improve this place. Stabilize my cash flow.”

“Really?” William’s ears perked up, a foxhound hearkening to a distant bugle. “Tell me about it.”

Calvin explained, then. Explained how the hunting business wasn’t quite what it used to be. Talked about the plan to host retreats for returning soldiers.

“The way we figure, we can give them space to work out whatever stuff’s left over from over there.” Calvin waved his arm. “We got peace and quiet in abundance, and the neighbors are far enough away that no one’s gonna care about some guys blowing off steam.” He smiled. “Couple months a year, it could more than make up the slack in the hunting business. Never replace it, but definitely give me what I need to make this place grow.”

“And it’ll make a real difference in a lot of guys’ lives, Dad,” Adam interjected. “Nobody’s really handling this now, as far as I can tell. We could do it.” He smiled. “What do you think?”

“It sounds as good,” William said, “as any half assed plan ever does. There’s a million questions. How are you going to market this business? Is there even a call for this?” His eyes narrowed. “You say no one’s doing this. Maybe there’s a reason. How do you know it works?” He eyed Adam. “And don’t give me that ‘It worked for me, so it’ll work for everyone’ crap. Business is more than been there, done that, you know. You’ve got to convince the customer they have to buy.”

“Tell me, Dad,” Adam shot back. “If there had been a way I could have come home without all the nonsense. Without Mama crying all the time. Without all the fighting. Wouldn’t you have gone for that?”

“What makes you think other soldiers are as messed up as you are?” William asked.

“Most of them that I’ve seen are happy enough to get back to their homes. Back to their families. Back to life as usual.”

“And the ones you haven’t seen?” Adam shrugged. “You don’t hang your washing in the front yard, Dad. You know that. Especially if you’re a Marine. You keep that shit to yourself. Only time you can let it out is when you’re among your own. People who been where you’ve been.”

“And that’s what you’re planning to do?” William directed the question to Calvin. “Give all these kids a place to let it all out? Run around and have their temper tantrums?”

“On a limited basis.” Calvin smiled. “They’re not all kids, you know, Billy. There’s reservists our age over there, doing their bit. It’s not any easier for them. They come back with lots of issues. Stuff they don’t want to unload on the wives. On the kids.”

“I missed the part where you explain why you’re qualified to do this,” William said. “Either of you. It’s one thing to take a bunch of guys out hunting. It’s another to pretend that you’re providing some kind of therapy.” His hands started waving in the air. “What kind of credentials do you need for this? Have you considered the zoning? The insurance? The liability? What if one of these guys goes all Rambo on your ass and starts shooting the place up?” He glared at Calvin. “What then, Cal?”

“Better here,” Calvin replied, “where we can handle it, instead of their homes. Their jobs. Their schools. If you’re going to -- how’s Adam say that? flip your shit -- there’s

no better place to do it than way out here.” He smiled. “Nobody to hear it but the boards, and they don’t care.”

“Calvin knows how to run a business, Dad,” Adam cut in. “He’s been running the camp for twenty-odd years. Longer,” he added, “than you’ve had the dealership.”

“And what’s your role in this?” William asked, eyeing his son.

“I know how to be a soldier, Dad. And what it’s like to carry all that stuff around in your head.” Adam started pacing. “Way I figure, there has to be a time to de-stress. A man needs some quiet. Over there, every minute something’s happening. And here,” he continued, faltering for a minute, “it’s so loud. At home. The TV. The kids. Getting to work.”

“You would know about that how?” William asked. “You never even once came down to the dealership, whole time you were back.”

There was a note in William’s voice Adam hadn’t heard before. Maybe it’d been too loud at home. Maybe his head was too full of other stuff. But he’d missed it, until that moment.

“And I’m sorry, Dad. I should have. Should have come down and seen what you’ve been doing.” He nodded his head. “Like you’re doing now. I see that now.”

William blushed, a pale pink cloud flitting across his complexion. He waved his hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about that.”

Adam nodded.

“Anyways, I’ll take care of the soldiering bit: get the guys out, loosened up. Do a little working out, do a little horseback riding. Maybe some shooting,” he added, eyeing Calvin sideways. “We’ll see about that.”

Calvin nodded.

“And Calvin handles the logistics: the getting the guys here, getting them fed, getting them home again. All the same stuff he does with the hunters. And he’ll still be doing that, too. Just not all at the same time.”

“That would be a lot,” William agreed. “So let me get this clear: the hunting camp is still the hunting camp, but this -- rehab center you’re planning. The two of you are in this together.”

“Yeah. Calvin and I are partners, Dad,” Adam replied. “We’re going to run the business as a team.”

“So you’re business partners.” Much of the stress was in the third word in that sentence, the business half of business partners. With that came a subtle, almost imperceptible, relaxing of William’s shoulders, taut muscles loosening just a fraction.

“Not just business partners, no.” Adam caught his father’s eye, held it. “We’re partners-partners too.”

Calvin coughed, shook his head. The message in his eye was clear: Not Now!

“What did you say?” William snapped.

“Nothing.”

“You said something.”

“He said it was nothing.” Calvin’s voice, large, booming. Shades of Texas thunder, distant, perhaps, on the horizon, but containing all kinds of danger. “So it was nothing.”

“You’re telling me you know my son better than I do?” William asked. “Telling me it was nothing when it was something? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No.” Calvin shook his head. “I’m not saying that at all.”

“That’s good.” William patted Adam’s shoulder. Friendly. Proprietary. “So that’s enough of this partner nonsense, then...”

“I’m not saying that, either, Billy.” Calvin stood up. “I might not know Adam as well as you think you do. But I do pay a hell of a lot more attention to him.”

William shrugged. “Not like you’ve got much choice, out here. Who are you gonna talk to except him?” He laughed. “Cottonwoods don’t offer much in the way of conversation, as I recall.”

“That’s not the point, Dad.” Adam said.

“Like you’d argue with the star treatment,” William scoffed. “You always did like being the center of attention.”

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

“Real life just doesn’t work that way,” William continued. “It’s too bad, but it’s the truth.”

“Real life down here does,” Adam sputtered.

“This isn’t real life,” William said. “This is where people go to play. To have their vacations. To get away from real life.”

“Or to heal,” Calvin said.

“Hiding ain’t healing, Cal, and you damn well know it!” William snapped. “I don’t care how much you tell yourself otherwise, you aren’t any better off now than you were twenty-five years ago!”

“And you are, Billy?” Calvin crossed his arms, burying his fists into his elbows for a few seconds. Then he let his fists hang again at his sides, loosely clenched. “All them years singing songs to Jesus straighten your shit out?”

“I do all right.” William shrugged. “Least I don’t go ’round claiming to be all enlightened and shit.”

“I never said I was enlightened, Billy.” Calvin smiled, and it was the saddest smile Adam had ever seen. “I said I was happy. I’m sure you do all right. You make your money, all right.” He shook his head. “But I don’t think you’re happy.”

“I. I...” William sputtered, looking from Adam to Calvin and back again. “Who ever said shit about being happy?” he finally exploded. “Happy, my ass! Happy, my left nut! A man does what has to be done, whether it makes him happy or not.” He turned on Adam. “I thought even if the military couldn’t get anything else through that thick skull of yours, you would have gotten that!”

“Oh, it did, sir,” Adam replied. “It also taught me to identify all my options before committing to a course of action.” His gaze was steady. “Which is what I’m doing now.”

“You want to be careful, Son,” William said. “Some of those options have life-long consequences.” His eyes narrowed, taking in the scant inches between Calvin and Adam. “Some even longer than that.”

“I’m always careful,” Adam said.

“And nobody’s talking about forever, anyway,” Calvin cut in. “So can it with all the dire gloom and doom shit, Billy.”

Adam gave him a look, but Calvin kept talking.

“He makes a run of it down here, it all works out, no harm, no foul,” Calvin continued. “Or it doesn’t work out, he does something else. College. Business.” His smile narrowed. “He could always sell cars. I hear there’s money in that.”

“You don’t think I want more for him than that?” William’s face was red now. “Sixty-five hours a week, every mother-loving week of his life for a six percent commission and a bonus? If he’s lucky?”

“Then why,” Adam asked, “are you so hell-bent, Dad? Tell me why?”

“Because I know it works!” William’s chair went over on the floor, kicked out of the way to allow Adam’s father to pace the narrow room. “So many things in this world don’t work. You see it all the time -- kids still living with their parents when they’re thirty ‘cause they never knew how to make an honest dollar.”

“I know, Dad, I know.” Adam held up his hand. This was an old speech.

“No, you don’t know!” William shot back. “If you knew, you’d appreciate that I got something I know works and I want you to be part of it. No. You’ve got to go off, join the service. Come play in the woods.” His hands floundered in the air before him, two wounded grouse plummeting to earth. “Spend your life -- having fun.”

“Some of the time, yeah,” Adam countered. “I like being here. I like working on the ranch. I even like the horses. Sometimes.” He smiled at Calvin. “But I also like the idea of helping Calvin get this place ready for the future. Wasn’t it you, Dad, who said businesses have to adapt? That’s going to take some work. And if we can help some vets, help them smooth off the edges and sleep through the night? So they don’t go back and screw up their family life the way I did?”

“Adam,” his father said.

“Well, that’d be good, too. We’d be making a real difference. A positive difference. And that’s going to take a hell of a lot of hard work, because, as you’ve so kindly pointed out, sir, we don’t know what the fuck we’re doing.” Adam was getting louder, and he realized that, taking a breath to modulate his tone. “But we’ll figure it out. And then we’ll see what happens next.”

“You’re sure of yourself.”

“I have to be.” Adam snorted. “It’s not like my father believes in my ability to make a good decision. To think shit through.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe in it,” William said. “But I’m not used to it. I’ll give you that.”

“You willing to get used to it?”

“Do I really have a choice?”

Father and son stared at each other then, eye to eye, man to man. Finally, Adam spoke, without the faintest shadow of a grin.

“Not really, no. I’m going to try to make good decisions whether you like it or not.”

“There are,” William said, “worse things to bear.” He nodded. “You’ve got some time, I guess. But whatever happens,” William said, “your mother is not to find out about this...” He looked Calvin up and down. “Relationship. Not from you all. I will tell her, when I’m ready. Is that understood?”

“If you say so, Dad,” Adam said. “Manage the message, right? That’s what you want to do.”

“I do.” William smiled sadly. “She’s not going to take it well, you know.”

“I know, Dad.” Adam shrugged, adequate words far beyond his grasp. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You are who you are. She is who she is.” William swallowed. “But she deserves some privacy to take the news.”

“Fair enough.”

“And now I want to talk to you, Cal,” William said. “One on one.” He turned to Adam. “Please. Give me that much.”

Adam looked at Calvin, who nodded.

“I’ll be indoors, if you need me.”

Calvin smiled. “I figured that.”

They waited, the pair of friends, until Adam had gone inside.

“All right, Billy,” Calvin said. “Here’s your chance. Say what you’ve been thinking.”

“You’re sleeping with my boy.”

Calvin dipped his head. “I am.” He raised his head again, blue eyes fixed on William. “Swear to God, Billy, I never meant for that to happen. It just did.”

“Does he know?” William asked, eyes skittering toward the door. “About you and me?”

“I told him.” Calvin dipped his head, so his hat obscured most of his profile. “Didn’t really seem right not to.”

“Before -- you and him?” William sounded like he was strangling, looking for the air for each word. “Or after?”

“Before,” Calvin said. “Not before I kissed him. Not before he kissed me. But before. You know.”

William swallowed.

“Was that why?” William asked. “That you went to him? That he went to you?” His voice broke. “Were you looking for me?” There were real tears then. “Was he?”

“It’s been twenty-odd years. I’ve had other lovers, Billy.” Calvin cocked his head. “Did you really think I spent all this time waiting on you?”

William grinned a little. A quick hand motion that both men ignored wiped the tears away from his eyes. “Sounds silly when you put it that way. Guess I was flattering myself.”

“It happens.”

“And now you’re seeing Adam.” William’s voice was strange, accusatory and hurt all at once. “And you say he’s not a substitute for days past. Making up for us not working out, back in the day.” He looked at Calvin. “You know it wouldn’t have worked. Couldn’t have worked.”

“I don’t know that,” Calvin snapped. “I still don’t. But it didn’t, and that’s what it is.”

“And now my son’s standing second-best.”

“Adam’s not the best I could get,” Calvin was angry, suddenly, and not trying to hide it at all. “He’s the best. Period.”

William cocked his head. “You mean that.”

“I do.”

“And he’s not going anywhere, is he?” Adam’s silhouette was carefully positioned to show he was doing anything except try to listen to the conversation outside. “He’s as stubborn as the day is long.”

“I wonder who he gets that from?” Calvin chuckled.

“No idea.” William’s voice dropped. “You’re not planning nothing permanent? No kids. No flying up to Beantown to get married?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it, and frankly, it ain’t the kind of thing I’ve thought much about.” Calvin eyed William. “You’re awful hard on the boy, Billy. There’s no sense beating him up over things that never once occurred to him.”

“They should occur to him.”

“He’s young.”

“Too young,” William retorted. “By half.”

“So were we,” Calvin said, softly. “Once.”

The door opened, Adam’s bare feet padding across the boards into the silence. “I reckon if you two haven’t killed each other yet, you’re not going to.”

“Night’s still young,” William said.

“But I’m pretty tired,” Calvin countered.

“What are you talking about,” Adam asked. “Seriously?”

“Your father wants to know if we’re planning to have children.”

Adam's eyes went wide. "Hasn't really crossed my mind, honestly."

"That's what I said. Told him we hadn't talked about it."

"You should. Children are important," William said. "A man needs children to complete him. Mature him." He turned to Adam. "You'll see, sooner or later."

"So when's that gonna work on you, Dad?" Adam asked.

"Wait, babe." Calvin held up a hand, choosing not to acknowledge William's wince at the endearment. "Your father has a point."

"I don't think he does," Adam shot back. "You don't have kids to fill your needs. We don't exist to mature you." He sneered the last few words, an ugly tone of contempt. "We have our own reasons for being."

"None of us have our own reasons," William replied. "We've the purposes the Good Lord has chosen to bless us with." He shook his head. "It's our duty to discover what those purposes are."

"Maybe this is my purpose," Adam said.

William shook his head again. "The Lord wouldn't give you a purpose contrary to his will, son."

"Did he call you and tell you that?" Calvin asked.

Adam chuckled. "God's always had Daddy's number."

"Well, he's pretty certain he's got the man upstairs all figured out." Calvin shrugged. "I don't know if I'm qualified to speak for the big guy myself."

"If you spent a little more time with the Word, you might," William snapped.

Calvin spread his arms wide. "Look around, Billy," he said. "You might live with the Word. I live IN the Word."

William turned his head, eyes scanning the dusky horizon.

"You might have a point," he finally allowed.

"All I know," Calvin replied, his tones soft and soothing, the tone reserved for skittish horses, "is that the Lord does what he wants, when he wants, how he wants. It don't matter none whether I understand it or not." His shrug was careful, elaborate. "Maybe Adam's purpose is the same way."

"Or," Adam added, "I'm here to show Daniel and Elijah how NOT to live their lives."

"I think," William said, pinching the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, "that I prefer to believe the former."

“I never said your boy wasn’t a smart ass,” Calvin said.

“He is still my boy, you know,” William said. His eyes, revealed from the long pinch, were very, very bright. “No matter how this all turns out. You understand that, Cal? My boy.”

“I hear you, Billy.” Adam started to say something, but Cal raised a hand, silencing him. “I really do.”

“I hope so.” He stood up, moving more slowly and awkwardly than Cal would have imagined he’d ever moved before. Adam bent forward to grab his Dad’s elbow, to proffer a bit of last minute support.

“This isn’t easy, you know.” William waved away the hand. “I’ll be all right. It’s just been a long day. And it’s a long drive back to town.”

“You can stay here, Billy,” Calvin said. “You know that. Door’s always open for you.”

“I can’t do that, Cal.” William shook his head, raised his hand. “Not tonight.” He went down the stairs, headed toward his car. “Take care, Adam.” He paused long enough to look over his shoulder. “I mean it.”

“Dad!” Adam cried. “Wait! Don’t you want some water? A sandwich?”

William lifted an arm, a silent dismissal.

“Let him go, babe,” Calvin said. “He’s got to do what he’s got to do.”

“You sure?”

“Trust me.” Cal turned on his heel and started walking back into the house. “If I ever was sure of anything, I’m sure of this.”

They watched him go, red taillights retreating into the Texas twilight. Night came late this time of year, the sun stretching out its journey across the sky as long as possible, shedding light slantwise over the Earth.

Man’s energy doesn’t follow the same schedule.

“Jesus,” Calvin said. “What a day.”

“It’s been a long one,” Adam agreed. “I’m more tired than when we work all day.”

Calvin grinned. “When have you ever worked all day?”

"I'm sure it happened," Adam replied, "at least once or twice." He shook his head. "Not that Dad would ever believe it."

"How do you think that all went?" Calvin asked.

"He took it better than I thought," Adam said, shrugging softly. "He's pissed, though."

"I could tell."

"I'm not sure what he's more pissed about -- me and you hooking up, or the fact I'm not coming back to sell cars."

"Maybe he was counting on your help," Calvin said. "Looking forward to working with you."

"He's got Danny to do that."

"Lots more people will buy cars from you than from Danny," Calvin said. "Danny's just a kid."

"And the fact that Dad knows that?" Adam said. "That's the root of the problem, right there." He closed his eyes. "At the end of the day, it's all about the bottom line with Dad."

"That's not true, Adam." Calvin shook his head. "It might seem like that, I'll grant you, but that's not true at all."

William was truly gone now, even the echo of his vehicle's passage through the valley faded away. Night was thinking about falling; the sky had grayed, although true blackness was still the better part of an hour away.

"I don't know about you," Adam said. "But I'm beat. I'm going to bed."

"Go on in," Calvin said. "I'm just going to check the barn real quick, and then I'll be in."

Adam was in bed already by the time Calvin made it into the cabin, his clothes in a cotton slump at the foot of the bed, just to the side of a pair of boots on their side.

"You're going to pick up a scorpion if you're not careful," Calvin said, for the hundredth time since he'd met Adam.

"I've got that covered," Adam replied, without missing a beat.

"How's that?"

Adam pointed to the wall, where a tiny brown and cream colored gecko hid in a shadow. "I'm training the lizards to eat the scorpions."

"And what happens when we run out of scorpions to feed your lizards?"

Adam frowned. "Hadn't thought that through yet."

Calvin sank into bed beside Adam. "I wouldn't sweat it. We've got lots of time."

"Do we?"

"Sure," Calvin replied. "There's probably six million scorpions out there." The pillow felt so good under his head, soft and cool and lumpy in exactly the right places. "Man, I'm beat."

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

"About the time. Having lots of it. Did you mean what you said?" Adam asked, eyes focused on the cabin's ceiling. "When you said that earlier?"

Calvin shrugged. "What part? I said a lot of stuff earlier." He tucked his eyes into the crook of his elbow. "I talked more today than I have all year, I think."

"When you said we weren't talking about forever." Adam turned, propping himself up on one elbow to look at Calvin. "I'm talking about forever, Calvin."

Calvin didn't move his arm. "Adam, you are twenty-one years old. That is too young to talk about forever."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Adam sounded indignant. "How old do I have to be to think about forever? What's the magic cut-off age for that?"

"I'm not sure," Calvin drawled. "But I'm pretty sure it's whatever age it is you realize you're too grown up to ask stupid questions like that."

"Thanks." Adam snorted. "A lot."

Calvin pushed his hands through his hair, sighing once, deeply, before speaking. "What do you want from me, Adam? I'm an old man, and I'm tired."

"I want forever."

"Adam. I am forty-nine years old," Calvin said. He turned to face Adam, tracing one finger along the side of Adam's face, callused fingertip raspy on blond stubble. "Do I want forever, yes. Do I expect forever?" His shoulders curved, up, around, strangely fluid under the weight of old grief. "I'm forty-nine. I'll be thankful for this as long as it lasts. And for whatever days I may have beyond that."

“You think I would leave you?”

“Everybody leaves, boy. Some sooner, some later. Some walk out.” His face darkened. “Some get carried. Sometimes they want to go, and sometimes they go kicking and screaming and cursing the whole way.” He covered his face with his elbow. “So yes, someday you will leave. Or I will. But Lord, I hope that day’s a long time coming.”

“So no forever.”

“But a long time coming. Best I can do, boy.”

Fingers laced through fingers. “That’s gonna have to be enough then.”

Part Five

“Where the hell did you come up with a hair brained idea like this?” Adam asked. “I mean, we did some stupid shit over there, but this,” he continued, raising his hands into the air, “this takes the cake.”

“You’d better keep a hold of that saddle horn, you don’t want to wind up eating dirt,” Calvin said. “There’s solid thinking behind this, believe it or not.”

Adam, from his seat atop Buddy, eyes covered with a black, folded bandana, shook his head. “I’ll be going with the ‘not’ on this one, Calvin.”

“Ye of little faith.” Calvin snorted. “I didn’t make this up just so I could laugh at you. Never mind the fact you look pretty funny like that.” A chuckle burst through before he could stop it. “There’s a reason for this.”

“Which is?”

“I did some reading about this before,” Calvin said. “About a hundred years ago or so. There’s this bit where you can use horses to help crippled kids build confidence.” He shook his head. “You don’t say it like that, of course.”

Adam smiled. “Of course.” An excess of politically correct language was never likely to be Calvin’s problem. “You’re saying I’m not confident?”

“You got plenty of self-confidence,” Calvin said. “Self-confidence is not your problem. The point is that you’ve got to trust me. Trust me to keep you safe. Trust me to take care of you, no matter what.”

Calvin clicked his tongue, and Buddy started walking.

“Jesus!” Adam grabbed at the saddle horn. “I have a hard enough time with this shit when I can see!”

Calvin laughed. “I know.” He led Buddy over to where Ginger was standing, saddled up and waiting. “You’re gonna have to trust me.”

“Where are we going?”

“Around.”

Calvin couldn’t see Adam rolling his eyes through the blindfold. Didn’t matter. He knew that’s exactly what the younger man was doing.

That made him laugh.

They went miles that day, circling the corral for hours. “Put your arms out,” Calvin said, “like a T.” When Adam hesitated, he said, “Trust me. Trust Buddy. We’re not gonna let you down.”

“I’m holding you to that,” Adam said. Letting go of that saddle horn wasn’t the hardest thing he’d ever done -- far from it -- but it wasn’t the easiest, either, there, in the dark, Buddy solid under him, nothing keeping him in place but his toes, curling in the stirrups.

“It’s going to be fine.”

And in time, it was. Buddy was in no hurry. After a time, Adam had let his arms drop, but they rose much easier on the saddle horn now.

“Listen to him,” Calvin said. “Hear his breathing. Listen to his hooves. He’s never going to hide anything from you, you know. But you got to pay attention to the signals he gives you.”

“What?”

“Shut up and listen,” Calvin said. “Horses need listening to.”

And for a long time, that’s what Adam did. They circled ’round and ’round for half of eternity. Adam listened, listened to Buddy’s slow breathing, the way his mane swished against the side of his neck, long, black tendrils catching in the shorter, dusky hair for a raspy moment before swinging free again. The syncopated rumble of hooves has its own beauty, its own pace, as did the soft whickers of conversation between Ginger and Buddy, on going despite the fact that their riders were so strangely silent.

Then Buddy drew a deeper breath, a big whoosh of oxygen all at once. His hind feet broke their rhythm, moving just a little faster than they had been.

Adam tightened his grip on the saddle horn, just before Buddy started to run in earnest.

“Holy shit!” Adam said. “Calvin!”

“I’m right here next to you, babe.” His lover was right beside him. “It’s okay.”

Adam forced a smile. “This is a little faster than okay, actually, considering I can’t see.”

“You’re fine.” He could almost hear Calvin’s grin. “I saw that you were listening to Buddy. You closed on that saddle horn pretty tight when you heard it coming.”

“I don’t know that I heard it coming,” Adam said. One hand reached up toward the bandana. “Or if it just happened. Good luck and all.”

“No such thing as good luck,” Calvin said. “There’s just work and the doing of it. A man makes his own luck in these parts.” He chuckled. “But I think I proved my point. You can take that thing off of your face, if you want.”

Adam pulled off the blindfold, blinking into the bright afternoon sun. “That was pretty cool, actually.”

“You feel like you can trust me now?” Calvin said. “Through thick and thin?”

“I know I’m hungry as hell,” Adam replied. He rubbed his stomach. “Last ten minutes all I could hear was my stomach rumbling.”

Calvin stared at him. “Is that right?”

Adam nodded. “I could eat a horse.” He leaned forward and tapped the side of Buddy’s neck. “Not you, though. That wouldn’t be right.”

Calvin smiled. “What’d you want to eat?”

“Whatever you’ve got in mind will be fine,” Adam answered. His eyes flashed upward. “After all, I trust you.”

The moon rose, full and fat and heavy, casting the landscape into sharp relief, rendered in silvery white and flat grays, the scrub, the cottonwoods, the truck, the horses -- all was flat and artificially static against a perfect, pitch black sky.

Bars of moonlight, five inches thick and as long as a man’s arm, sprawled across the wall over the bed. Adam counted them. Four bars up, four bars down. Nearly two feet of light, stark and bright in the dark room.

And next to him, in that dark room, his lover, who was most definitely not asleep.

“Calvin?” It was a whisper.

“Yeah, boy?”

“You awake?”

He could almost hear the smile. “Nah, babe. I’m fast asleep.”

“Why are you up?”

“I was thinking.”

There was a pause then, long and still. Outside the window, the cicadas were having a hell of a time of it, their chatter merging into one long, low buzz. They were deeper than the crickets Adam listened to in Pennsylvania. Larger. More menacing, somehow.

“About what?” Patience is not a virtue of the young.

“‘Bout earlier. What you said when we were in town.”

“I’m sorry.” Adam shook his head, remembering the way his lover had blushed scarlet. “My mouth’s twice as big as my brain, sometimes.”

“Don’t be down on that mouth of yours.” Calvin’s voice was all gravel and smoke, fitting for the darkness. “It’s pretty damn awesome, if you ask me.”

Adam chuckled. “Glad you think so.”

“Know so.”

“Mmm.” He pondered turning to kiss Calvin and then decided against it. Some questions were easier asked this way. Especially questions he was pretty sure he knew the answer to. “So what were you thinking about?”

“How my boyfriend wants me to fill him up.” The word boyfriend slid right out of Calvin’s mouth, long and slow and perfect. “Or so he says.”

“It’s not a bad idea.”

“No, it’s not.” Calvin moved just a little closer. “In fact, it’s a damn good idea.” His breath was hot against Adam’s neck. “But I’m wondering if it’s the first time you’ve had this particular idea.”

Adam blushed. “I’m not a kid, you know.” He looked away, expression unreadable in the darkness. “I’ve done stuff.”

“There’s stuff,” Calvin said. “And there’s stuff.” His words came slow, each syllable hesitant, a deer reluctant to step into the open. “I gotta know what I’m dealing with, so I can make sure you’re enjoying it, y’know?” There was a catch in his breath, ragged and sharp. “I don’t never want to hurt you, boy.”

Adam smiled. “I ain’t much on getting hurt.”

“You gotta trust me.”

“Didn’t we spend all day working on that?”

Calvin smiled. “And I’ll spend all night the same way, if need be.”

“Not sure how Buddy’s gonna feel about that,” Adam replied. He turned on his side, bringing him face to face with his lover. “I think he went further than I’ve ever taken him, just a-walking in circles.”

“He’s fine.” Calvin dismissed it with a wave. His eyes locked with Adam’s. “Boy, I got to know what you done, before I start doing what I’m fixin’ to do.”

Adam dropped his eyes. “I ain’t never...” he began, swallowing the next words convulsively a scant half second before bringing his eyes back up to meet Calvin’s gaze. “What we’re about to. I haven’t.”

“I figured that.” The few details Adam had shared about his relationship with Tom hadn’t told Calvin much, but there had been enough to make some assumptions. “But are you totally new to this?” His gaze dropped, taking in the long line of Adam’s spine, the slight swell of his ass. “Being touched there?”

“I touched my own self,” Adam admitted, the shy words enough to send a jolt right through Calvin. He hadn’t thought he could get any harder than he already was, but that -- those words, that image -- was almost enough to make him lose it. “My finger, a bit, you know?” Adam’s blush grew darker, hotter. “Once, two fingers.”

Calvin bit back a groan. “And how’d that feel?”

“Good.” Adam’s eyes were disarmingly frank, wide open. Guileless. “I bet it’d feel a whole lot better if it was you doing it.”

“Let’s find out.” Each word was strangled, desire and need overwhelming coherency. “We’ll take it easy,” Calvin said. “Start slow and enjoy the ride.”

He was sweating, Calvin realized, salty drops spilling off his forehead and into his eyes. He hadn’t even let himself dream on this, the possibility too much to consider.

Now? With his most secret dream within reach?

“I won’t hurt you, babe.” Only now did he reach out, palm cupping over Adam’s shoulder. He was hot, so hot. Scorching. “I promise.”

“I know, Cal.” Adam shifted position again, stomach to mattress. The blankets slid off, disappearing into the narrow space between the bed and the wall. “I trust you.” He spread his legs, thighs parting readily.

Calvin bit his lip, hand reaching out tentatively to stroke Adam’s ass. It was a funny thing, to be so shy now. He’d slapped this ass a hundred times, and grabbed it maybe half as many times.

Halve that number again, and you’d be pretty close to the number of times Calvin had clenched his hands, half-digging the meat on these cheeks, holding on for dear life as he swallowed Adam’s pretty, long, thick, pink cock.

That cock was hard right now, stiff between a lumpy mattress and Adam’s weight. It was hard and hot and it wanted -- Calvin could almost feel the need pulsating through Adam’s flesh, traveling at rocket speed along taut-stretched nerves, each impulse an unconscious shiver, an inarticulate anxiety. They arrived against Calvin’s palm as so many pinpricks, miniature lightning bolts of want crackling like skin-trapped static.

“God damn, babe,” Calvin said. “Look at you.”

Adam turned his head to see. “Am I shining?”

“You have no idea.” It was like touching an angel, perfect and pure, Calvin thought. He’d had his share of lovers over the years, some young, some pretty, some precious few both. None had had this radiance about them, this almost inescapable force that drew him in, made him look.

It was moths to the campfire, that’s what it was. Or more properly, Calvin reflected, with a wry little smile, it was a moth that had seen him a bunch of citronella lawn candles coming up cold on a big old bonfire, ten feet tall and blazing bright.

Nothing could compare.

“Tell me,” Adam urged.

Calvin stopped watching the passage of his hand, even now still starkly tan against Adam’s white flesh, to meet Adam’s eyes. “Boy, I can’t.” There was real pain in the words, rent from somewhere between contemplation and comprehension. “There just aint the words for it.”

He bent then, moving so he could rest his lips against the plush full moon curve of Adam’s arse. The kiss was soft, velvet -- almost, but not quite, worshipful.

It was also followed quickly by hands growing braver by the second, feeling, weighing, exploring not unfamiliar territory, but a country undefined.

“Mmm.” Adam all but purred. “That feels good. I love when you touch me.”

“I love touching you.” If Calvin had ever spoken truer words, he couldn’t remember the occasion of them. “I can’t wait to be inside of you.”

“There’s stuff,” Adam said, tossing his head a fraction of an inch toward the wall. “Under the pillow there.”

“Is there?” Calvin cocked an eyebrow. “You were planning this?”

“Hoping for it,” Adam said, his hips coming half an inch off the mattress with the reply.

“Really.” Calvin smiled. “I’ll have to make sure not to disappoint you then.”

“You could never disappoint me.”

“Good to know.” Calvin let his fingers trace along Adam’s ass crack, beginning at the silky smooth divot where flesh parted from itself at the base of the spine, right around the plump curve to the soft cushion of scrotum, hidden in darkness and heat. “I’ll have to remember that.”

“Mmm.” Adam’s eyes had closed when his cheeks were parted. The flat, rounded edge of his lower lip disappeared behind his teeth, forcing a soft bow of flesh outward.

Calvin wanted to kiss that bow, to feel the difference between the dry, dusky flesh on the outer edge of the curve and the fresh, wet, slick, revealed skin, seldom seen. No one else had seen Adam this way, ever, he thought, and the thought was enough to give him a jolt, right at the base of his gut. He was the first man to stare at Adam’s lips that way, to want to taste the place where kisses were stored.

But to do so would mean shifting position, and that he could not do right now. Not when his finger, cool and slick with lube, had found its way to Adam’s entrance, tight as hell and twice as hot.

“How’s that?” he asked, desperate to know. Closed eyes and clenched lips could be good -- they certainly looked good -- but they could very easily be bad.

“God,” Adam breathed. “It’s so fucking hot. Feels so good, babe.” His eyes flew open. “Please don’t stop.”

“Not planning on it.”

Nothing, not another flash flood, not a hive of hornets, not a thunderstorm loud enough to knock the whole damn state off of its foundations, was going to interrupt this moment. Not when Adam was lying there, grinning and grunting, a morning-dew layer of sweat gracing over the high fine angles of his shoulder blades, pooling into a river that traced down the bumpy bed of his spine.

This was too good to stop.

Calvin pressed in a little further, watching intently as the flare of his knuckle passed through the tight little ring of muscle.

Adam’s eyelids tightened, squinching shut just a fraction tighter.

“Is that all right?”

Adam nodded. “I can take it. Gimme more.”

“No,” Calvin said, letting his hand rest easy. “Not until you say it so as I can believe you.” He started letting his finger slide in and out slowly, establishing a steady rhythm. “It takes a little time to get ready.”

“I want you now.” Adam’s voice was hoarse.

“We got all night,” Calvin replied. “There’s no fire.”

Adam’s hips were starting to come up off the bed, meeting every slow thrust. “That’s what you think.”

Calvin smiled. "We'll see, babe. We'll see." It was time for another finger, to push the passageway just a fraction wider. "Can you take this?"

"God almighty." Adam was covered in sweat. "Hold still a minute."

"Is it too much?" Calvin started to pull his hand out. "We can stop."

"Don't you fucking dare!" Adam snapped. "I just got to get used to it, that's all."

A long moment passed, stretching out into a slow, blissful dance: Adam's internal muscles accepting and relaxing one moment, tight and aggressive the next.

"God damn," Calvin said. "Ain't never felt nothing like this."

"That makes two of us, babe." Adam started moving his hips again, slowly at first, gathering speed and confidence at roughly the same rate. "But I want more. I want you."

"You're sure?"

"Surer than sure."

Calvin rolled onto his knees, slowly pulling his fingers out of Adam's arse while changing position. "Then I won't ask you again."

How long had it been since he'd lubed up like this, prick so hard it was almost trembling with need? Too long, Calvin decided. He was damn near as nervous as the boy must be, lying there on his stomach, legs spread like a three-dollar whore, just waiting on him.

God damn that was a beautiful thing.

Doubly so up close, when he had his cockhead just nosing between those cheeks. Already he felt that tight cavern, just waiting on him to come knocking.

"You ready, Babe?" he asked, one hand riding easy on Adam's hip.

"Been ready." The reply came quickly, accompanied by a quick pinion-push of the hips. Calvin was inside before he knew the journey had started in earnest, sliding easily into the slick, hungry passage.

"Yeah," Adam growled. "That's what I been waiting on." He planted his palms on the mattress, shoulders squared and bulging with power barely restrained. "Let's see if we can't turn you into a cowboy."

All summer, Calvin had worked alongside Adam. He'd seen Adam pull trees -- eight inches in diameter, a dozen feet long -- out of the way using nothing more than sheer brute strength and a few choice profanities. When they loaded up supplies, Adam tackled more than his fair share of the grub. He could carry a sack of grain under each arm, almost without noticing them.

None of this had truly prepared him for exactly how strong Adam was -- nor what it would feel like to be lodged inside a man capable of lifting him off the bed. It wasn't quite a push up, nor a scramble for position, but it did get Calvin up off one knee, wrangling to hold on.

"You want it like that, boy?" Calvin grinned. "We can do that." A quick grab forward swept Adam's arm out from under him, bringing them crashing back down on the mattress. "Now you stay down there and let me get me some." He started with a few slow strokes, deep and easy, pushing into virgin territory. "Start slow and enjoy the ride, remember?"

"We been slow," Adam countered, a sudden thrust sending him further onto Calvin's cock. "Long enough."

"Yeah?" Calvin started moving a little faster, meeting Adam's motions with some force of his own. "You want to go faster?"

"Yeah." It was a growl, pure and simple need.

"Then we'll go faster." Flesh was slick now, a flurry of damp slaps in the darkness. "For as long as I can."

"Go when you can," Adam urged. "I want to feel you. Feel you shoot in my ass. Fill me up with your come."

"Don't do that," Calvin cautioned. "You talk like that, boy, and I'm gonna be done."

"Fuck me, Calvin. I want you fucking my ass," Adam groaned. "Fuck me hard. I'm your boy, ain't I?"

"My boy." Calvin groaned. His fingers tightened, leaving a series of blue-black bruises that would take days to fade. "Gonna come in my boy."

"Come now!" The urgency was real, the need unfeigned. "I need you!" Adam's voice clawed up half a register, borne aloft by desperation and sheer want. "Calvin!"

"Adam!"

Then there was no speech, just a shared shuddering moment. Calvin held Adam tight throughout, the grasp of a man drowning -- life itself depended upon his ability to hang on.

Then Adam relaxed, letting his body fall down onto the mattress. "Holy shit, babe."

Calvin collapsed next to him, taking care to shift his weight away from Adam's legs. "You're telling me."

"Is it..." Adam began, words fading away into silence.

“Is it what?” Calvin asked. His fingers, long denied, twitched for a cigarette. Longer than his boy had been alive, he’d gone without a smoke. Right now, he would have killed for one.

“Always like that?” Adam asked. “That intense? That powerful?”

Calvin smiled. “I’d like to say yeah.” He shrugged. “But it changes. The more you know your lover, what turns them on, what sends them over the moon?”

“You mean it can get better?” Adam’s eyes, even in this dim light, were wide. “Than that?”

Calvin laughed. “Maybe I better not tell you that. You’ll never be leaving me alone then. We won’t get shit done ’round here.”

“There are,” Adam pronounced, “worse fates.”

“Yeah, there are.” Calvin laced his fingers through Adam’s. “That was really something, you know.”

Adam squeezed. “Yeah, it was.”

Calvin turned his head and planted a tender kiss right along Adam’s hairline. “I love you, babe. I really do.”

“Me, too.” Adam wiggled a little bit in the bed, stretching out for sleep. “And I hope to God you still respect me in the morning. Because my ass is going to sleep.”

Calvin gave no answer, save his soft snores.

Part Six

“So it’s settled,” Adam said, stepping away from the table. “Tomorrow’s the big day.”

“You’ll bag your first boar,” Calvin agreed.

“God willing and the creek don’t rise.”

“Heh.” Calvin shook his head. “I’ve had enough of that creek rising for now.”

“Night’s still young,” Adam said. “What say we saddle up Ginger and Buddy and go out for a ride?” He smiled at Calvin. “Under the stars?”

“No,” Calvin said, bending to kiss the top of Adam’s head. “We got an early start tomorrow. It’s time to sleep.”

“For who?” Adam asked, incredulous. He wasn’t about to be sent to bed like a little kid, that was for sure.

“For me.” Calvin kicked his boots off. “Three a.m. comes sooner than you’d think.”

“I thought we were going to go out at first light,” Adam protested. “Why are you getting up so early?”

“The horses aren’t going to saddle themselves,” Calvin said. “And I want a little hot food in my stomach before we head out.”

“I can help you saddle the horses,” Adam said. “You could sleep later.”

Calvin cocked an eyebrow. “That’ll shave ten, fifteen minutes off my time, sure.”

“Smart ass.” Adam looked affronted for a moment before kicking off his own boots. “We got plenty of time for -- you know.”

Calvin grinned. “You are amazing.”

“Don’t know about that.” He sank onto the bed next to Calvin. “I just know I want you.”

“If you want me,” Calvin replied, in the breathless moment that followed the kiss, “to take you hunting, you’re gonna need to let me sleep.” His smile was kind, self-deprecating. “Or I’m not gonna be for shit tomorrow.”

Adam sat back a moment and blinked. “You’re serious.”

“You’ll see,” Calvin said. “It’s a long road ahead of us, boy. And I’ve been told by people who know firsthand that it’s a hell of a lot tougher than basic training.”

Adam snorted. “From some guy in the Navy, I bet.”

“Nope.” Calvin shook his head. “From a stubborn Jarhead.” He grinned. “Come to think of it, he’s a lot like you.” Calving gave a quick shrug, then. “Course, he was smart enough to listen to me.”

“Can I help it that I want you?”

“God, I hope not,” Calvin said. “But you’re gonna need to keep it on a low boil for a bit there, kiddo. Especially when there are guests here.”

“I know, I know,” Adam sighed. “All the more reason, really, that we should take advantage of every moment we got.” He nuzzled in, stealing a kiss from the side of Calvin’s neck. “Like now.”

Calvin laughed. The sound was different now, deeper, kindlier. Perhaps indulgent.

“I’ll tell you what. You do me proud tomorrow, bring down a big ’un, and we’ll do whatever you like, however you’d like, for as long as you’d like to.” Calvin looked heavenward. “Or the good Lord calls me home. Whichever comes first.”

“Promise?”

“Absolutely. But now, my boy, even if you don’t need the sleep, I surely do.” Calvin crooked his arm over his face. “So good night.” A little grin danced over his lips. “I’ll wake you at half past three.”

“Good Lord, what time is it?” The sun hadn’t even thought about rising yet, that’s how early it was. The sky was a greasy gray-green, the sheen of clouds not quite sure if they belonged to the night or the morning.

“Half past four,” Calvin said. “Time to get up and going. Coffee’s waiting on you.”

Adam pushed the blankets off. “I thought you were going to wake me at three. When you got up.”

“Tried. You sleep like a rock.” The truth was that Calvin hadn’t even tried. One glimpse of tousled, russet curls, tiny little bends fringing out at the very tips of that precision cut hair fanning over the pillow, and he’d decided against it.

If the boy actually stayed. If this hair-brained plan of turning a tumble-down hunting camp, way out here in West Bumfuck, into a rehab center actually happened. If whatever magic spell Adam was clearly under didn’t break, and he decided that he really did want to stay here forever, with a broken-down old cowboy?

Then Calvin would mess around with waking him up early.

Not before.

“Sorry about that.” Adam gulped the coffee down, the straight black java still steaming. “I meant to get up.”

“No worries. Take your time.” Calvin smiled. “No sense burning your gullet out before we get going.”

It was early, so early the sun had yet to think about rising. Early enough that the ground was still wet, cold curl furls of condensation shivering against itself in a desperate effort to return to the sky.

The horses moved slowly through the silence, one heavy hoof at a time. They weren’t early risers by nature, apparently, unlike Calvin. And they weren’t shy about making their displeasure known, huffing and whuffing and murmured equine expletives.

Adam, however, kept quiet. Calvin had told him the value of silence.

“I haven’t been out much this year, but that doesn’t mean they’ll forget.” His lover had been deadly serious, face intent in the golden half-circle of lamplight. “They keep to the same trails throughout the season, moving on when the pickin’s get slim.”

He’d tapped a gray-green topographical map. “Nine times out of ten, you can pretty much figure that where the white tail go, they’re gonna follow. That’s true to a point. But here, right here, you’re never gonna see a deer.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Calvin grinned. “I ask ’em, you know, but they don’t give me much in the way of answers.”

“Smart ass.”

“It might be too open for them,” Calvin allowed. “The scrub’s pretty dense right up to here,” he continued, one close clipped fingernail tracing a line on the map. “That’s great cover, and everybody loves it.”

“Not Buddy.”

“Everyone who’s not looking to get shot loves it,” Calvin amended. “But it’s hard hunting in the brush. Best if you can drop ’em out in the clear.” He looked at Adam, intense. “Best too if you can kill ’em right off.”

“What happens if you don’t?”

“Long hours. Long hours following the trail ’til you can finish it off, then longer hours dragging the kill out.” Calvin grinned. “That’s the part the charters don’t see, most of ’em, anyway. They leave that stuff up to me and go back to the camp and have a few cold ones while they’re waiting.” He chuckled. “The good ones, they’ll see it through.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Adam said. “I’ll be a good one.”

“Damn right you will be. I’m not about to do all the work while you take it easy.”

“Why not?” Adam asked. “That’s really worked for me so far.”

“Now who’s being the smart ass?” Calvin turned his attention back to the map. “We’ll come ’round this way. There’s a salty bit of ground out there, and the boars can’t stay away from it. We’ll set up here, and see what happens.”

“It’s maybe forty, fifty yards.” Calvin mused. “You think you can make that kind of shot?”

“What am I gonna be shooting?” Adam asked. “If I had ma duce, it’d be no problem.”

“Plow a fifty caliber round into a boar, and we won’t even have sausage left,” Calvin laughed. “We’ll be using 30.06s.”

“They deliver enough of a kick?” Adam’s eyebrow went up. “To stop a boar?”

“They get fired up, really cantankerous,” Calvin said. “They’ll get riled up, especially if you’ve grazed them. But even then, when they’re all full of piss and vinegar, you’ll see that the 30.06 is more than enough. It’ll punch right through the shield of muscle they got built up over their ribs.”

“Good to know.”

“We won’t be able to put it to the test, though, unless you can be really quiet.” Calvin looked deadly serious. “Quieter than I’ve ever seen you be. Boars can hear really well. They’ll pick you up half a mile away.”

“Radio silence, got it.” Adam tapped the side of his head, reflexively.

Calvin caught the gesture, but didn’t say anything.

He didn’t have to. His expression spoke volumes: recognition that his lover was more than his lover, but a soldier still fresh from the field, the acknowledgement that there was more to Adam than what he saw on a daily basis. There was sorrow in that acknowledgement, the sorrow of a rancher who saw that the day ahead held plenty of long, hard hours of unavoidable work.

It was that sorrow that Adam was thinking about now, the fact that without even trying, he’d brought Calvin so much grief.

You couldn’t tell that now, to look at him. Calvin was flat on his stomach, kitty corner to Adam’s position, eyes riveted to the dusky gray-blue line where the scrub thinned out and fringed the clearing. He was so intent, so wholly in the moment.

Adam sighed, internally. That was a trick he'd learned over there -- to swallow his words, to let emotion slide down his throat into his stomach, where it could do no harm.

Boars had sharp ears, but they had nothing on insurgents. Those bastards had directional microphones -- command said they came from Iran, but everybody knew they came straight out of Saudi Arabia. Normal ragheads didn't have stuff like that -- high tech spy ware positioned on the rooflines of first-century shacks.

Add to that the dozens and dozens of eyes that were on you, all the time, eyes that rode on smiling faces, smiling faces that took the proffered aid and cheered for the new school building. Those eyes watched, and they understood, and they reported back -- a clear chain that connected today's encounter to tomorrow's suicide bombing.

Did boars work that way, he wondered. Did those porcine brown eyes catch a glimpse of danger, spurring a squealing warning to the rest of the herd? Or was this instead truly survival of the fittest, where each porker was left to face the universe's challenges to the best of their ability and devil take the hindmost?

He didn't know.

This gun, this ridiculous little gun Calvin had provided him with, seemed wholly inadequate for the task at hand. Two shots at a go, and then you had to work the bolt, readying the rifle again.

A trigger finger trained on automatic weaponry found that a strange concept. It was an itchy idea, one that crawled over the back of his hand and worried at his knuckles. Could he, if he had to, fire fast enough? Were his reflexes adequate to get off round after round after round?

Death came quickly, when it came. Sarge had been merciless about that, back in basic. "Lollygagging will kill you, boy!" he'd barked, back when Adam hadn't been fast enough off the mark on those first few range days. "Worse than that, it'll kill your unit! Do you hear me?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Adam said, realizing to his horror that he'd mouthed the words -- here, in real time, lying in the dirt with Calvin. He was more than halfway back to basic, and that wasn't a healthy-ass place for his head to be.

He shook his head, blinking his eyes rapidly.

Calvin caught the motion, turned his head to see what Adam was doing. One hand came up off the ground, a few inches, a signal. Be still.

His heart was pounding, thudding into the dirt. If those damn boars had such sensitive ears, Adam thought, the whole gig was up. The reverberation of his racing ticker would scare off all the game for a hundred clicks.

He was going to have to get a handle on this shit, or he'd never be able to help Calvin, much less ever become a guide on his own. The first criteria for running a successful hunting camp would have to be not scaring all the animals away.

'Course, he wouldn't mind scaring all the damn bugs away. Every damn thing down here had wings and pinchers and stingers and bit -- and they all seemed to zero in on him. They didn't bother Calvin.

"That's because I don't taste good," Calvin had said, when he'd asked about it. "It's your own damn fault."

"Nice try," he'd shot back. "I happen to know you taste great."

Calvin had blushed. Blushed. This big old cowboy, with more scars on him than a two-dollar whore, turned the most delicate shade of pink at Adam's words.

It had taken all of his self-control not to laugh -- but Calvin's dignity was a most fragile thing, and Adam didn't want to piss the man off.

God knew he managed to do that enough without even trying. Adam let his forehead droop, the weight of all the pivotal conversations he'd not picked up on until after Calvin was already hurt heavy on his mind.

In retrospect, he could usually pinpoint what had gone wrong. Where the conversation had gone wrong, why his lover suddenly found the need to go to the barn or check on the horses or set hornets' nests afire.

What eluded him was why it kept happening, why hurtful words would just fly out of his mouth without even pausing for a moderating thought.

Calvin didn't do that. Everything that Calvin did was intentional. Well thought out.

Which is why Adam was so surprised when Calvin spoke.

"Babe." It was a hushed whisper, just loud enough to reach Adam's ears. Adam looked up, startled. Calvin nodded toward the horizon line, where dark blotches were beginning to appear in the gray blue shadows. "Here they come."

There were six of them, two sows and four little ones, snouts right to the ground. Adam slowly eased the 30.06 into position, but he knew it wasn't time yet.

"We won't worry about the gals," Calvin had said. "If we were hurting for meat, then yeah, but we're not. There's one big leggy boar that follows this drift, and I've had my eye on him for a while." He raised his hand, fingers spread. "Nice tusks on him. Like that." He'd laughed. "You'll smell him before you see him, I guarantee."

The slow moving Texas wind, the barest hint of a breeze, borne aloft by the slow rising condensation, proved Calvin right. Adam's nostrils flared, pushed open by the rank, sour smell of porcine love, the olfactory herald of the biggest damn pig he'd ever seen.

It wasn't fair, really, to call a boar a pig. To say pig was to bring to mind pink-skinned, smiling faces, with corkscrew tails and high pitched squeals.

A boar, particularly this boar, was nothing to smile about. Stiff legged and ornery, even before anything happened, this boar stood almost three feet tall at the shoulder. He was covered in matted, black fur, which stuck out from his shoulder at crazy angles. Constantly swiveling ears topped a sinister looking head, which was covered in dried mud.

At the end of his snout -- and from where they were, it looked like his snout was just as thick as Adam's forearm -- were two solid tusks, curving out and then backward, the color of dirty ivory. It wasn't hard then to understand Calvin's cautions, about how a boar could tear into your flesh and open your gut, or charge a horse and force it back and over, just from sheer fury alone.

Calvin was smiling. He tipped his head toward the boar. His meaning was clear. Take the shot.

Adam raised the rifle. Further along, his fingers splayed to support the barrel, his elbow locked against the russet tinged sand. The stock was tight in his shoulder -- even though the hunting rifle wasn't nearly as large as the ordinance he'd handled over there, Calvin assured him that it'd deliver enough kick that he'd feel it.

He bent his head and looked through the scope. Through the narrow circle, cut through with crosshairs. Relying on optical magic to bring his target into view.

The boar never saw him. He had his head down, snuffling and grunting over the salty sand.

"Target acquired," Adam murmured. His index finger was trembling, just a little, and he willed it still, focusing on the boar.

He'd never looked at a target so long before. Never took the time to watch the air pass in and out of a pair of lungs, to pick up the natural rhythm of an ambling porcine walk. Every time he'd shot, it had been reactionary, a response to the lead flying fast and furious in his direction. It was one thing to shoot someone intent on shooting you. It was quite another to pull the trigger on an unsuspected target. Someone, or something, who never saw it coming.

For a split second, Adam felt sorry for the boar. Poor bastard wasn't doing nothing wrong. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Like how many patrols, gone horribly bad because someone decided to check out the house on the left rather than the house on the right? The smallest thing -- the fact the Hummer was too tall to clear the lines drooping over one alley, forcing them down the other, directly into an ambush -- could change the course of a dozen lives.

Had this boar opted not to follow the drift that day, Adam mused, he might have fathered another generation in just a few weeks.

But he had, and that was his own bad luck.

Boars and men, Adam thought with a smile. Really not so different after all.

He gave a steady squeeze, pulling that trigger finger slowly back.

Just like in basic.

The 30.06 was loud, louder than he remembered. The force of the shot kicked him a little bit back -- it was startled fear as much as anything that brought him up. There was dust and the stink of burnt powder, and above it all the high, furious squeal of the boar.

“Good job, babe!” Calvin was on his feet, rifle up and on the boar. “Let’s go finish it off.”

The boar, however, had other plans. He stood, wavering on four split hooves, as the pair of sows and their hysterical brood shot past, legs churning faster than their length would seem to allow. Small whuffs of air, heavy and thick with fury, accompanied every loud breath he took while staring at Adam, eyes disconcertingly brown.

“Is he gonna charge?” Adam asked. He quickly worked the bolt, chambering another round.

“He might.” Calvin squinted. “Looks like you got him pretty good. He might not have any running left in him.”

The boar cocked his head, as if considering Calvin’s words. Then, with energy unsuspected, he reared half back on his rear legs and turned, treating Adam to a quick glimpse of bright red belly wound before plunging into the scrub.

“Fuck!” Calvin said, long strides bringing him quickly across the clearing. “Who knew that dog could still hunt?”

Adam looked at him, puzzled.

“Never mind.” Calvin peered into the brush. “He’s moving fast.”

“He can’t have gone far,” Adam said, looking down at the rust-red pool on the ground. It smelled hot and sharp and flinty, a heady, metallic odor. “That’s a metric fuckton of blood right there.”

“That’s not necessarily a good thing,” Calvin replied. He squatted down, knees bent deep, one hand trailing downward. He balanced on his toes, braced on three extended fingers, an impromptu manual tripod. “You see all this pink shit here? Where it’s bubbly?”

Adam peered at the puddle, following Calvin’s nod. The pool wasn’t static and still, the way he’d expected: there was a subtle play of sheen and color at work, the boar’s ichor shifting from crimson to cranberry to silvery white. The outermost ring of the

puddle, the final half-inch of the iron-scented corona, was almost obscenely frothy, a web of thick-walled bubbles.

“Yeah.”

“That shit’s bad news. It means you got him in the gut.” Calvin frowned. “He can go hours that way before he drops.”

“Fuck!” Adam kicked at the ground. “I thought it was a good shot.”

“Was a good shot,” Calvin replied, the words absent, automatic. “Just in the wrong place.”

“Don’t bullshit me,” Adam snapped, shoulders rigid.

Calvin looked startled. “’S not bullshit.” He smiled. “It’s true.” He straightened up, eyes searching the scrub line. “Happens all the time. It’ll be all right.”

Adam relaxed a hair. “So now what?”

Calvin grinned. “Now you learn how to track boar.”

At first, it was easy. The boar was bleeding pretty heavily, leaving a thick, red ribbon for them to follow.

“The quicker you can go at this point, the better,” Calvin said. “The further out he goes, the further we’re going to have to bring him back.”

“Shouldn’t we have the horses?” Adam asked.

“They’re not going to want to go where we might wind up,” Calvin said. “Better to spare them now. We’ll need ’em later.”

The wisdom in his words was soon apparent, as the wounded boar’s trail led directly through a rocky patch, shot through with small cacti and thorny brush.

“Boy, he decided to spend his last few moments in comfort, didn’t he?” Adam asked, wincing as his hand brushed against a cactus. “Son of a bitch, that’s sharp!”

“Be careful,” Calvin cautioned. “Now’s not the time to cut yourself wide open.”

“Could you let me know when that time is?” Adam asked. “I’ll call in sick that day.”

“Very funny.” Calvin pointed toward a thick knot of scrub. “You see how it’s all broken down in the front there? I think our boy’s hiding in there.”

“What’s the plan?”

“You got to remember, especially if you’re out here alone, to always give yourself a way out. Don’t get yourself boxed in, where the boar can get you backed up.” Calvin’s voice was steady, although Adam could hear a high, excited note in it. “Make no mistake, that bastard will rip you apart if he gets the chance.”

“Can’t say I blame him.” Adam was peering into the brush. “I’d be pissed, too, someone shot me in the stomach.”

“The right thing to do is to finish him off clean and quick,” Calvin said. “Since there’s two of us, I can flush him out, and you can take the shot.” He smiled. “Do what you did before, but higher and to the right a bit.”

“What if he turns back on you?”

“Won’t be the first time.” Calvin shrugged. “Won’t be the last.”

“You sure?”

“You gotta learn somehow, boy.” There was another shrug, this one accompanied by a smile. “This is as good a way as any. It’s how my Pap taught me, way back then.”

“Wow,” Adam mused. “I didn’t know they had guns way back then.” He cocked his head. “Or did y’all just throw rocks real hard?”

“Keep it up and I’ll show you, smart ass.” Calvin gave him the nod. “Just be ready. He’ll be fast when he goes.”

Fast wasn’t the word for it. That boar exploded out of the thicket, moving so fast that its hind legs were hitting the ground a split second before the forelegs. Its eyes were white, nostrils flared, a long line of spittle trailing from his mouth.

Adam saw it all through the sights, the churning legs, the gaping wound, the high, rounded shoulder where Calvin wanted him to bury the next round.

It was really hot all of a sudden, that oppressive old heat that had plagued him all through his tour. The sun was brighter than bright, white bright. On the air, he could smell the burning: the oil wells, the infrastructure.

In his ear, Sergeant Moore.

“Now, I can give all you bastards some noble sounding speech about liberty and democracy and all that crap,” Moore said. “But that’s all shit. Out here, there’s one rule: we kill them before they kill us. Before. Not after. Is that understood?”

“Sir, yes sir,” Adam barked, a scant half second before he pulled the trigger.

The shot surprised him, the high, thin, resonating echo of gunfire shattering the memory of Sergeant Moore. He'd aimed surprisingly well; the round caught the boar high, spinning him around ass to nose.

Adam had chambered another round and aimed the rifle again, reflexively, automatically. When the boar's snout came 'round to face his own, he was ready.

This time there were no voices.

"It's your boar," Calvin said. The heart was twitching in his hand, having not yet picked up on the fact it had been separated from the rest of the boar. "Your boar, your heart."

Adam's eyes went wide. "You got to be fucking kidding me."

"It's tradition." Calvin's eyes were steady. Steely. Suddenly Adam didn't know him at all. "First kill, first blood."

"You want me to eat that?"

"Some do." Calvin's expression was unreadable.

Adam swallowed. He held out his hand, willing it not to shake. "If you say so, babe."

Calvin laughed. "Don't be stupid." He tossed the heart into the brush. "Organ meat's shot through with parasites. Get you sicker than shit." He bent back over the carcass. "You gotta watch out for that macho shit."

Adam laughed. For a brief moment, he'd felt something he'd only found in the Corp previously -- the easy familiarity, the dark male humor that was the perhaps inevitable response in the presence of death.

Get this conversation a little larger -- bulk it out to include four or five more guys, the size of a small squad, and Adam could see the appeal.

"You're right," Adam said. "This could work. Really, really work."

Calvin smiled.

"With the right guys," Adam added quickly.

"Of course."

Calvin dropped his eyes. His hat obscured most of his face -- but not so much that Adam couldn't see his smile.

“So,” Calvin asked. “You think you’re ready to do it for real?”

Adam dropped his T-shirt on the floor, eyes widening in disbelief. “That wasn’t real?”

“Oh, it was a start,” Calvin said. “You’ve got a taste for it now, and I know for sure you’re more than capable of holding up your end of the hunt.” He chuckled. “You’ve got a little bit of learning to do, sure, but none of us were born knowing everything.”

Adam grinned. “You sure about that?”

“Pretty sure.” Calvin cocked his head. “Question is, what did being out there do to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did it trigger memories?” Calvin asked. “Did you think you were back over there?”

Adam shook his head. “Can’t say that it did, no.” The brief flash of Sergeant Moore’s voice echoed through his head, but that was nothing. Certainly not worth mentioning. “It might have been good to fire a couple of rounds before getting out there, I think. The gun surprises you, kind of.” He shrugged. “It’s the same, but it’s different, so it’s all good, you know?”

There was a long pause then, as Calvin considered Adam’s words. “If you say so. I’m trusting your judgment on that, babe.” He stared at Adam. “Tell me this: do you think you can take it to the next level? Go out with a bunch of guys for a couple of days?”

“You’re talking about a real charter,” Adam said. “I thought you weren’t doing any this year.”

“I wasn’t,” Calvin said. “But I got the Owens guys -- they said they’d come down anyway, never mind any damage. Just to give them a call. But I’ve been holding off on it.”

“And you feel comfortable having them come down now?”

“If we’re gonna do this,” Calvin said, eyes suddenly bright. “For real. Then I’m thinking it’s better to ease into it. Start slow. Give you a chance to come up to speed on how this all usually goes, easy like.”

“Start slow and enjoy the ride,” Adam said, his voice quiet.

Calvin blushed. “Like that, yeah.”

“Sounds good.” Adam kicked his jeans off and started toward the bathroom. “Though I don’t know if I’m ever going to like hunting as much as I do some other things.”

He could feel Calvin watching him go, a small laugh riding easy on his lips. “Let’s hope not, boy. Let’s hope not.”

Part Seven

“It’s a good thing you know these guys,” Adam said, watching the crowds throng out of the airport. “Otherwise, I don’t know how we’d ever find them.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Calvin said. “There’s no mistaking the Owens boys.” His smile deepened, and he tipped his hat toward the escalator. “Here they come now.”

Descending the escalator was a vision in safety orange: two men, one of whom was clearly on the far side of seventy, clad head to toe in camo.

“That’s the Owens boys?”

“Michael and his son Art.” Calvin shook his head. “The future of the charter hunting business, right there.”

“Calvin!” Art had spotted the guide. “Good to see you!”

Calvin looked sideways at Adam. “It’s showtime, bud.” Then he smiled. “Art! Good to see you, my friend!” He nodded as Art stepped off the escalator, and extended an arm to help Michael off the moving staircase. “And how’s the old man?”

“Upright and breathing,” Michael said. “That means it’s a good day, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Beats the alternative,” Calvin agreed. “Let’s get your stuff loaded up and head out to the ranch.”

“One minute, young man.” Michael looked confused. “I’m pretty sure I should use the little boy’s room before we get started. It’s a long trip, isn’t it?” Years had fallen off of his face, making him resemble nothing as much as an overgrown toddler, lost and halfway to scared.

“Yes, Dad.” Art took Michael’s arm. “It’s quite a drive.” He looked, half pleading, at Calvin. “Let’s have the guys pack up the gear while I take you to the bathroom.”

Calvin nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Adam, give me a hand here.” The Owens had minimal luggage, but Calvin managed to make a production out of dividing the load with Adam.

The sight of activity was enough to spur Michael to action. He took off, purposefully, down the concourse, headed toward the rest rooms.

“Is he going to be okay to hunt?” Adam asked.

Calvin smiled, sadly. “He seems a lot worse this year than last.” He tipped his head forward a few inches. “Art tells me it’s not Alzheimer’s. They done all the tests, and nothing. But he’s not good.”

“And we’re giving him a gun why?” Adam asked.

“Because sometimes a man needs to feel like a man,” Calvin said. “And that’s why they go hunting.”

They started moving toward the double-glassed doors, maneuvering bags between commuters in a hurry and college students eager to get back to school.

“Even so,” Adam finally said, obviously trying hard not to let his hesitancy show through. “Is that a good idea? If he’s not all there?”

“The gun’s not the problem you think it is,” Calvin replied. He smiled. “Bullets are the problem. And we’re not giving Michael no bullets.”

Adam laughed. “That’s gonna cut into his hunting something fierce.”

Calvin lifted a bag. “This here, if I know Michael, which I do, has a couple bottles of liquid pain reliever inside. Once he hits the tree stand, he’s gonna start dipping into it, and before you know it...”

“He won’t be feeling any pain?”

Calvin laughed. “Unless he falls out of the tree stand, he’ll be fine.” He nodded toward Michael and Art, who were headed back in their direction. “Art’s the hunter. But he’s good. He doesn’t need any hand holding.”

“Good to know.” Adam smiled. “All set, you guys?”

“Bright eyed and bushy tailed!” Michael pronounced. “Ready to go! Can’t wait, actually!” He was smiling.

“I guess that’s full speed ahead, guys,” Art added.

The truck hadn’t even pulled out of the airport driveway before Michael’s snores filled the cab.

They went some time in silence, Calvin at the wheel, Art riding shotgun, Adam directly behind Art. Michael was snoring right behind Calvin, sawing wood at sixty miles an hour.

Then Calvin hit a pothole, dropping the front left tire sharply, and suddenly. Michael responded to this jolt with a markedly louder snore.

Calvin burst out laughing. “Some things never change, do they?”

Art laughed. “I guess not!” He turned in his seat to face Adam. “My father can sleep through anything.”

“Up to and including a hurricane,” Calvin added.

“So why were we being so quiet?”

"I don't know." Art laughed. "But we do it every year."

"Tradition," Calvin added.

The Owens boys had a lot of traditions, Adam soon discovered. Traditionally, they bunked up in the larger, comfier cabin. Traditionally, they had a big old campfire that burned into the night.

Traditionally, Michael Owens spent the first night of hunting camp every year singing his own bawdy versions of hit songs. He'd made it through Nirvana's Smells Like Teen Spirit -- here my nuts are, in containers! -- Robert Palmer -- Might as well face it, you're a dick with a glove -- and was halfway through a horrible, warbly, perverse version of Bryan Adam's Summer of Sixty-Nine when he slumped over in his chair.

"Is he all right?" Adam asked, half jumping out of his chair.

"S fine," Art slurred. "He's jus' a little drunk." He burped. "Happens." He gave a high-pitched hiccup. "Every year."

Adam wasn't buying it. He started across the campfire circle, stopping only when Calvin reached out and grabbed his arm.

"It's all right, babe. It's tradition."

"You sure?"

"Sure I'm sure." Calvin smiled, the firelight dancing across his grin. "Trust me."

No more than a pair of heartbeats went by before Michael started snoring again, loud, drunken, ragged breaths, chugging just like the little engine who could, up the steep grade from the pit of Michael's lungs before descending -- wheeeeeeeze -- down the other side.

"You see," Calvin said. "Tradition."

"Least you'll be able to sleep in tomorrow," Adam said, nestling into the bunk. He was speaking across the expanse of the cabin.

Not by choice.

Calvin had insisted. "It pains me, too, boy." He shook his head. "But I can't have the guests up and walking in on the two of us... being us."

"They're not going to care."

Calvin had fixed him with a look. "You think the type of folks who book week long vacations hunting in the Texas hill country aren't going to care if the guide's gay or not?" He shook his head. "They're not about to bed down in the back country with a queer."

"That's stupid."

"It's not even that," Calvin said. "Most of 'em aren't going to give a rat's ass, really. But they can't let their friends know that they camp at a gay guy's ranch. They'd have questions." He shrugged. "Rather than answer questions like that, most of 'em just wouldn't come."

"Because of that."

"They wouldn't say it was that," Calvin said. "They'd have another reason. Their hip was acting up, or money was tight, or some shit like that." He'd been mad then, but he was hell bent if he was going to show it. If it hadn't been for the taut line of his lips, the trembling muscles in Calvin's forearms shaking like a dashboard hula dancer, Adam never would have known. "Later you find out their hip wasn't too bad to go some place else. Or that they had more than enough money to take their game down that away." He jerked his head toward the long-distant Gulf Coast.

"Sounds like experience talking," Adam said.

"Not mine." Calvin shrugged. "I been smarter than that, you know?" He looked at Adam. "Fact that it's been just for me for a good long while now doesn't hurt much, neither."

"How long do you think it's going to work?" Adam asked.

"If we're careful?" Calvin shook his head. "A season. Maybe. Two, tops."

"How much business will you lose?"

"I don't know. There's no way of knowing, really. Some won't care a lick, long as they get their boar. I got a group, real crazy guys, who come down spear hunting every fall. Just them and a bunch of sharp sticks. Like cavemen." He laughed. "Way I figure, you're that freaking nuts, you're not going to care who I'm bedding down with. Them boys wouldn't turn a hair if they found me curled up with a sidewinder on one side and a greased pig on the other."

Adam burst out laughing.

Calvin smiled. "Wait 'til you meet them. They're out there. But other guys?" The laughter died in his throat. "Them, I don't know. They're churchgoers. A couple of them cut their charters short every year, so they can get back in time for Sunday service."

"Yeah, you might lose them," Adam said. "It wouldn't surprise me."

“I can’t lose too many,” Calvin said, “and meet my expenses.”

“The new business will more than make up for it,” Adam replied.

“It should, yeah.” There was a long pause. “But that’s not a real -- tolerant -- crowd neither.”

“Some aren’t,” Adam agreed. “But I think you’ve got to be realistic about it.”

“What do you mean?”

Adam turned on his side so he could look across the room at Calvin. “Can you really tell me you think Michael Owens is gonna make his way up here now?” It had taken Adam and Art’s combined efforts to get the old man into bed. “And his boy’s so beat he’s sleeping like a dead man.”

Calvin grinned. “You’re right about that.”

“And I want you, Cal.” Adam would bet just the words -- simple, direct -- were enough to send a jolt right through Calvin, waking his drowsy cock. “What’s the sense of denying ourselves now?”

Calvin stared at him, a long, slow moment. “Sometimes I think you gave up on politics way too soon, boy.” He pushed the bedding down and patted the mattress beside him. “The way you talk. You could sell shit to a farmer.”

Adam crossed the cabin in a nano-second, feet barely touching the floor. “There are worse things,” he said, sliding into the bed, nestling right up close to Calvin. “Yeah. This is much better.”

Calvin draped an arm over Adam, snugging him around the waist. “You really are something.” Calvin gave him a kiss then. “We’ll have to be quiet. No sense waking the guys.”

Adam smiled. “Me? I won’t say a word.”

He kissed Calvin, letting his lips move from his lover’s mouth down the side of Calvin’s neck. At the same time, a silent hand wrapped ’round Calvin’s cock, urging the rousing flesh more fully awake.

“Lord,” Calvin breathed.

Adam broke off his kissing to look up with a chiding smile. “You said quiet.”

“Mmm.”

Adam’s tongue flicked over Calvin’s nipple, little half bites worrying at the tender flesh.

“That’s not helping,” Calvin pointed out. “Me staying quiet and all.”

Adam replied, lips velvet butterfly wings against Calvin's stomach. "I'm trusting you," he said, "to keep it under control."

Calvin closed his eyes. The boy had the damndest way of bringing his own words back to haunt him, right at the most critical moments.

Critical moments like now, when a hot little mouth closed over his shaft, incredible wet heat engulfing him. It wasn't tight, exactly -- especially when compared to the mind-blowing grip of Adam's backside -- but it was blissfully close quarters, and want wrapped 'round him like a glove.

And the things Adam did with his tongue -- dancing along the underside of Calvin's prick, pressing buttons Calvin didn't even know he had.

The sheet came free from where it'd been wrapped around the mattress corner, he'd been pulling on it so hard. Calvin shifted his legs, trying to get some leverage, some control over what Adam was doing to him.

A heavy hand, fingers splayed wide, palm cupping his balls, put a stop to that right quick.

This felt too damn good to move away from.

Charter be damned.

"Yeah, babe," he whispered. "That's it. Right there."

Adam replied by sucking harder, head bobbing quickly. He put more pressure on Calvin's balls, knowing fingertips brushing the most sensitive skin behind.

"Fuck." Calvin stiffened, his back arching. "God damn, babe." It was too soon, too fast. "You're gonna make me..."

Adam swallowed him, lips suddenly flush with Calvin's stomach. He could feel the hot, curved back of the boy's throat, right against his cockhead. Then Adam shifted position, and suddenly he could go deeper, further.

There were no words, no sounds, nothing, save desperate clutching at freed sheets, Calvin frantic to find some anchor to keep him tethered to Earth while Adam forced him to fly.

After, of course, there was conversation, low and intimate.

"Now, wasn't that better than sleeping alone?" Adam asked.

"Much," Calvin agreed. Adam was still hard, his cock a blunt prod against Calvin's thigh. "You gonna be able to keep that quiet when I do you?" He dropped a hand,

stroking Adam's shaft. "'Cause I don't expect you're going to be able to sleep with this."

Adam melted into the touch, letting his hips angle forward so Calvin could get a better grip. "I don't expect I will, neither."

Calvin smiled and began a series of long, slow strokes. "Even if I take my time with you? Savor the moment?"

"We'll have to see." Adam rolled onto his back, legs splayed. "I'm game if you are."

"Mmm."

There are many sounds in the Texas night. The wind was strong that evening, pushing the chorus of a hundred million crickets ahead of it to form a constant, low-grade background buzz. Over that was layered the creaks and cracks of the trees, protesting every bit of their age while dancing in the breeze. A pair of night owls were having a heated discussion about territorial boundaries.

Woven into all that was the sound of Adam trying hard to keep quiet. Moans escaped, though, through tight clenched lips. Teeth that do a great job biting a lower lip can't stop the sound of raw need.

It was a valiant struggle, and Adam kept it up a long, long time.

But at the end, while Calvin stroked and tugged and sucked, there in the darkness, it was all too much.

"Jesus, Calvin!"

From the porch of the other cabin, Art heard the cry.

Heard it, knew it, and smiled.

"You got to be kidding me." The light was still dim. The corners of the cabin were pitch black. Even blinking, Adam couldn't see the bunk where he was supposed to have spent the night.

"Art's up already," Calvin said. He pressed a steaming mug into Adam's hands. "I told you, he's the real deal."

"What about his dad?"

"I'm thinking you should hang around, take him up to the tree stand when he gets around to waking up," Calvin said. "It'll spare me from riding back to check on him."

Adam nodded. "All right."

"I'll take Art out, up 'round the big bluff there. See what we see."

Adam took a sip of the coffee. "Sounds good."

"So you're up?" Calvin was twitchy, clearly ready to go.

"Yeah." Adam smiled. "Go on."

It was like telling a little kid he had free run of the candy store, Adam thought, or letting a bunch of guys know there was free beer and chicken down the street.

What else could make a man move that fast?

"So you got stuck with babysitting duty?" Michael Owens emerged from his cabin hours later, dressed carefully in a bright orange jumpsuit, his hair a white, tangled mess fringing out from under a matching ball cap. "Sorry about that."

"It's not a problem," Adam said, handing over a mug of coffee. "Calvin's way more into the early morning bit than I am. I had enough of that when I was in the service."

"Isn't that the truth?" Michael said. His voice dropped, as if he was confiding a secret. "I was too young, you know, for the big war. Just a kid then." He shook his head. "Korea. That was my war."

"Hard time of it there," Adam replied. "From what I've heard."

"Oh, it was. Different than what you have now." Michael's eyes narrowed. "Still, seems like the brass still has their heads up their ass. Least from what I can tell from the news."

"Some things never change."

"You're better off away from it," Michael said, decisively. "Nothing good ever comes out of it."

"It takes a lot out of you."

"Did a number on my boy, it did." Michael looked sadly toward the trail. "When it was his time."

Adam did some quick subtraction in his head. "Vietnam?"

"That fucking shit hole." The obscenity startled Adam, almost as much as the flat monotone the words were delivered in.

"Was it hard when he came home?"

“You have no idea,” Michael said. “Look around now, there’s yellow ribbons on every tree. ‘We support our troops’ magnets. Rallies to welcome the planes.” He shook his head. “My boy didn’t get that. He came home to people screaming at him. Calling him a baby killer.”

“Jesus.”

“War is what it is, you know?” Michael gave the exact same shrug Adam’s squad leader used. “You have to do what you have to do. It’s not always pretty.”

“No, sir, it’s not,” Adam agreed.

They sat there then, watching the last of the morning mist melt away. It was supposed to be a scorcher -- the weather forecast had promised clear skies and lots of sun -- and the heat came early.

When Adam looked at Michael next, the old man was sweating. Sweating profusely, with bright diamond rivulets of perspiration trembling down his forehead, dripping from his brow.

“You all right, there, boss?”

Michael nodded. “A little hot, that’s all.”

“Maybe you could take off that hat for now,” Adam suggested. “And the jacket.”

“I wanted to be ready,” Michael said, “for when Calvin came back to take me out to the tree stand.” He smiled up at Adam. “I was going to tell him not to bother with the rifle this year. There’s no sense in it. I haven’t shot anything in a decade.”

“It’s good just to be out, right?” The decision to leave the gun behind struck Adam as a very good decision indeed. Maybe Michael was more aware of his condition than he let on.

“If I had my way that’s all I’d ever do.” Michael carefully took off his hat, revealing a sweaty, matted mass of ivory hair, thinning in the center. “Have me a little cabin, just like this, and sit on the porch every morning.” He took a sip of the coffee. “Watch the sun come up.”

“Sounds like the type of thing that a man should be able to do.”

“It’s the type of thing my boy wants,” Michael said. “But he won’t let himself have it.”

“Why not?”

“The business.” Michael rolled his eyes. “He’s got a pretty successful practice, he does. But it takes every minute of his day. He’s there first thing in the morning, and he’s there ’til the doors close every night.”

"I know how it is," Adam said. "My dad's got a car dealership."

"Your dad married?" Michael asked, cocking his head sideways. "Or is he divorced?"

"Married," Adam answered, puzzled by the question. "Him and Mama been together twenty-odd years now."

"God bless 'em," Michael said. "It's a hard row to hoe, that. The business is what sent Corrine packing, you know. She couldn't compete with the practice." He nodded, as if it was certain Adam would know what he was talking about.

"That's too bad."

"It's a God damn shame, that's what it is!" Michael's face flushed. "We're it, my boy and me. The line dies with him." He shook his head. "Nine generations in this country, and then nothing. We disappear."

Adam winced, hurriedly covering the gesture with a shrug. "We all disappear, sooner or later."

Michael laughed, a short bark. "Ain't that the truth." He looked over at Adam. "I was just hoping on later, truth be told."

Adam stood up. "I think we all are." He stretched his arms. "What do you say we get you out to that tree stand?" The old man would have a few hours before the heat got to be too much, Adam thought.

"Well, I could sit out there and have my medicine," Michael mused. "Or I could sit right here and do the same thing."

"Are you sure?"

"Honestly?" Michael laughed. "I would have done it years ago, except that it would break Calvin's heart." He shrugged. "You're young. You're tough. I figure you can live with the disappointment."

Adam certainly handled disappointment better than Art.

"No luck?"

"If it weren't for hard luck," Art said. "How about you, Dad?"

"The morning was everything I could have wished for," Michael replied.

It was a nice way to handle the fact that the older man hadn't left the chair all morning, except for a few tottery trips to the bathroom.

“You wouldn’t believe how much debris is out there from the storm. It’s incredible.” Art grinned. “And how much of it manages to be directly in line of my shot.”

Michael laughed. “That damned debris, sneaking up on you like that.”

Art laughed back, long and loud. “You know it.”

“Tomorrow will be a better day,” Calvin said.

“Let’s hope so,” Art said. “Or we’ll be flying home empty handed.”

“Dinner smells good,” Calvin said, an odd non-sequiter for him. “What you got cooking in there?”

“Camp stew,” Adam replied, puzzled. “I was going to make some biscuits to go with.”

“You can’t make biscuits worth a damn.” Calvin stalked up onto the porch, headed for the camp kitchen. “I best take over now.”

Adam followed. “What’s the matter?”

“Let’s hope it’s a better day,” Calvin mocked. “That damn fool made so much racket it’s a marvel we saw any game at all.”

“I thought you said he was one of the good ones.”

“Normally, he is. I don’t know why he’s so damn gabby this year.” Calvin picked up the pan lid, peered inside. “This smells good, babe.”

“Thanks. I took the stuff out of the fridge myself.”

“Hell of a job.”

Adam grinned.

“Better job than you did taking Michael out to the tree stand,” Calvin said.

Adam’s grin faded. “He didn’t want to go.”

“He never wants to go.” Calvin shook his head. “You need to get him motivated.”

“You didn’t see him.” Adam’s voice rose. “Man looked like he was going to keel over dead. Face all red, sweating like a crazy fool.” He forced himself calmer. “Way I figured, if he up and had a heart attack, it’d be way easier to get him help here than way the fuck out in the scrub.”

“Shh. He’s gonna hear you.” Calvin took a deep breath. “There’s good sense in what you’re saying, boy.” He shrugged. “I just saw the mare’s saddle was just how I’d left it, and figured you didn’t even bother with it.”

“Nope.” Adam stuck both his hands in his pockets, pushing the denim taut. “I just figured when he said he wasn’t up to it, he knew what he was talking about.”

Outside the window, Michael and Art were gabbing like a pair of old women, reliving the day’s events. They looked as happy as a pair of pigs in fresh mud, just wallowing in it.

“Sides which, what difference does it make if he drinks here or out to the tree stand?” Adam asked. “He’s sitting and drinking either way.”

Calvin laughed. “Because drinking out there, he’s a sportsman. Pound them down here, and he’s just a drunk.”

Adam laughed. “Well, when you put it that way. I’ll make sure to get him out there tomorrow.”

“Nope.” Calvin shook his head. “Tomorrow, you’re taking Art out.”

“You think I’m ready?” Adam asked. “To go solo like that?”

“Nope,” Calvin said. “But I can’t face another day like this one, if I don’t have to.” He smiled at Adam. “And you’re here. So I don’t have to!”

“Nice.”

“Seriously, it’ll be good for you to get out there with somebody who isn’t me. Give you another viewpoint, you know?”

“Right.” Adam laughed. “You just want to sit around with Michael and have some of that there medicine.”

“The thought never once crossed my mind.” Calvin paused and then gave a brilliant smile. “But now that you mention it…”

“Art’s good. You don’t have to worry about him. He knows what to do.” Calvin grinned. “He makes a hell of a lot of noise doing it, but that’s another story.” Then the grin faded. “Still, you got to be prepared. That boar starts charging, you don’t worry about letting him have the shot, you understand? You take him out. Plant one in his ass end. You’ll break his pelvis and stop him cold. Don’t dick around trying for no head shot.”

“Got it.” Adam smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s gonna be fine.”

“I’m counting on that.” Calvin took another pull on his coffee. “But I got one ear open, too, you know.”

“I know.”

“And I saddled Buddy up for you.”

“Stirrups down?”

“Thought you might like it that way.”

“Thanks, babe.”

Calvin’s eyes widened, just a fraction. “Morning, Art! Here’s your coffee.”

“Thanks, Cal.” Art took the mug and grinned at Adam. “Are we all set, Captain?”

“Corporal, sir.” The correction automatic, the words came out of Adam’s mouth before he realized he was speaking. Then he smiled. “And I think we’re more than ready, if you’re good to go.”

“Marine?” Art asked.

Adam nodded.

“I thought so.” Art grinned. “Then you’re probably just like me.”

“How’s that, sir?”

“I was born ready.” Art set the coffee cup down and delivered his next words in a mock-threatening tone. “How about you?”

It was probably a good thing, Adam reflected, that from that angle Art couldn’t see Calvin rolling his eyes. He thought about the question, and supplied the Corps’ all-purpose answer.

“Boo yah!”

Art echoed the cry, with an accuracy that only comes from long, obsessive hours spent in one’s den, watching Military Channel re-runs.

It sent a shiver down Adam’s spine. Not a good shiver, the type you get when your lover’s fingers trace the inside of your thigh, that delicious frisson of pleasure and anticipation.

No.

This shiver was not that.

“I can tell,” Calvin said, giving voice to Adam’s thoughts, “that this is going to go well.” He shook his head. “If all y’all could manage to not scare all the game clear to Carolina, I’d be grateful.”

“We’ll do our best,” Adam said.

“But no promises.”

“Yup,” Calvin repeated. “I can see this is going to go well.”

Half a mile out of camp, and Adam was starting to worry that Calvin was right: there wasn't going to be a single living, breathing creature left in this part of Texas by noon at the rate they were going.

It wasn't that Art was a talker. That wasn't it exactly. It'd be more fair, Adam reflected, to say every now and then a breath managed to insinuate itself into the flow of words that just streamed out of Art's mouth, fast and furious.

He was fascinated with Adam's military service, and started to talk about his days as a grunt in 'Nam.

One story followed another, in rapid succession.

Adam could almost see the game fleeing before them, waves of javelinas and squealing, snorting drifts of boar taking to their heels as soon as the high, nasal tones of Art's voice crossed the scrub.

“And then we had maneuvers that brought us up from just north of Da Nang -- and it was bad back then -- right up to the border.” He nodded his head. “You know. Laos.” The shrug was deliberately careful. “The brass said we weren't there, but we were. They told us where to go, and we went.”

“You had a patrol?”

Art shook his head. “Nope. I never got much in the way of rank. I was a Private First Class then, and I'm a Private Fuckin' Citizen now.” He smiled. “PFC, through and through.”

Adam laughed. “That's not a bad deal, man. Not bad at all.” He saw some movement up ahead. “But now we got to get it together.” He thought about how Sarge had handled it, when he needed the squad to settle down and get serious. “It's time to stow the chatter.” He tilted his head down the trail, toward the location where the motion had come from. “There's a potential target up half a click here, and we should check it out.”

“Roger that,” Art said. There was a strange shine in his eyes, but he was incredibly, thankfully, quiet after.

He was also very attentive. When Adam, using only hand signals, indicated they should dismount, leaving the horses behind, he obeyed without a word.

He had his hands wrapped 'round the rifle barrel, intent and focused. Adam gave him a nod to go 'round the far side of the rise, which would give them a nice little elevated position.

Art nodded and went, Adam moving to a position overlooking him.

The clearing was empty. There was no sign of what had gone rustling through the scrub.

Great, Adam thought. I finally got him to stop yapping. For what?

For a long time, there was no answer to that question. Adam watched the scrub, waiting for something -- anything -- to come pushing through.

There was nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Adam was just about ready to give Art the signal to move on when the older man flashed him a quick look and a smile.

Adam was puzzled, until he followed Art's gaze.

Down a good ways, at the far end of the clearing, was the shadow of a boar. It was a big one -- the type Calvin had pointed out to him as a European boar, bigger and bulkier than the native boars.

Bigger, bulkier and a hell of a lot meaner.

His trigger finger started getting itchy. The boar was too far, and standing at a funny angle. There's no way Art could make the shot. One look over at Art, in position with the rifle at his shoulder, expression intent, indicated that he was sure the hell going to try.

Great, Adam thought. Best case scenario, he'll wound it, and I've got five hundred pounds of pissed off pork chop tear-assing this way to rip us a new pair of assholes. He bent his head, sighting up on the boar.

Concentrate on the back end, Calvin had said. If it starts to charge, target the hips.

Because there's no way Art could ever possibly make that shot...

The rifle crack split the morning wide open, sharp and bright and loud.

"Come on," Adam muttered. "Miss completely. Miss completely. Miss completely." Art's disappointment had a lot fewer consequences than a boar's final rage.

It wasn't to be. Art's shot took the boar high on the neck, just behind the fat, fringed ears. He jerked, once, startled by death's sudden arrival and fell over on his side.

"Hot damn!" Art's fist pumped the air, punching a hole in the sky. "That's it, baby! Right there!"

"Yeah!" Adam shouted. "You got him."

They met, a triumphant high five slap of hands. "That was a hell of a shot, my friend."

“Hot damn!” Art was trembling. “There’s nothing like this, is there?”

Adam smiled. “Let’s go check him out.” He drew his hunting knife, the blade reflecting sunlight almost as bright as Art’s smile. “We gotta be careful, in case. You know.” He caught Art’s eye. “I need you to cover me, bud.”

“Roger that.” Excited, trembly Art was gone, an eerily calm expression on his face.

“Right.” Adam swallowed a little smile. “Let’s go, then.”

It was nerve-racking. Even with Art providing covering fire, getting up close to a wounded boar was dangerous. A critically wounded animal could put up quite a fight -- and when that fight involved four-inch long tusks, that was no small matter.

Crossing the clearing took an eternity, each step more cautious than the one before it. They were maybe a dozen yards from the boar. Adam could hear his heart thudding in his ears, the pounding pulse almost exactly the same rhythm as the mix the squad would play when they were on patrol, when anything could happen, at any time, with no warning.

Adam smiled. At least he only had one threat to worry about here, a more-than-likely-mortally-wounded boar.

That’s when Art spoke.

“God damn this was easier when we could just call in an airstrike.”

Adam burst out laughing, a loud bark of joy. “I guess maybe!”

The boar didn’t turn a hair.

“Good job, man!” He turned to Art. “You really got him!”

“You really got him?” Calvin was beside himself. “I send two of the noisiest guys in the state out together, and you’re back in half a day telling me you got him?”

Adam grinned. “Hey, when you’re good, you’re good.” He tilted his head toward Art. “And this guy -- he’s good.”

Art blushed. “The credit’s all on you, dude.” He looked at Calvin. “This guy’s great. You get out there on the trail with him... it’s just like being in Nam again.” He trailed off, thinking. “But in a good way, you know?”

Adam and Calvin looked at each other, wary.

“Yeah,” Calvin said. “I’d kind of thought that myself.”

“And now, young man,” Michael crowed. “It’s time for one more Owens tradition -- the celebration of the boar!”

“The bagging of the boar!” Art echoed.

Like many Owens traditions, this one involved sitting by the campfire and drinking heavily.

Adam was okay with that.

“It was good of you guys to come down,” Adam said. He nodded toward Calvin, who was tending the horses. “He was worried how you’d feel about the place, what with the flooding and all.”

“Shit happens, man,” Michael said. He was a big man, sausage thick fingers laced together over a protruding stomach. “We know that. That’s how nature works.” He shrugged. “We’re just sorry we can’t stay longer. If we’d known it was this good already, we would have come for a week.”

Art nodded. “Besides, you can’t even really tell that anything happened. You all must have been busting your balls getting this place ready.”

“It was mostly Calvin,” Adam said. “That guy never takes a break.”

“Old school,” Michael said. “They brought us up to work an honest day, way back when.” He gently punched Art in the biceps. “Not that that’s anything you’d know about.”

“Not that my father had anything to do with that,” Art teased.

Adam suddenly felt sick, a knot in his stomach twisting right up out of nowhere. “Scuse me, guys.” He scrambled to his feet, getting clear of the campfire and stepping into the welcoming darkness.

“You all right, dude?” Art called after him.

“I’m fine,” Adam called back. “I think the beans didn’t set right.”

“I wouldn’t tell Calvin that,” Art joked. “He’d make you do all the cooking, stop the complaining.”

Adam laughed, giving a friendly wave that the guys probably couldn’t see before stepping deeper into the night. Buddy and Ginger were tethered out behind the far cabin: he and Calvin had left the more comfortable cabin for the guests and taken the more rugged one for themselves. This was a change for the horses, who’d spent most of the summer on the other side of the trail. He might as well go check on them and make sure they were settling down all right.

See if Calvin needed a hand.

Doing that would distract him, get the echo of Art's joke out of his head. Stop him from thinking about his father.

All his lessons, all his lectures. All the little shoulder punches he'd never feel again. It was a loss he hadn't felt, not till right this minute. The weight of being a disappointment is a powerful thing, strong enough to crush the air out of a full-grown man's lungs.

It was a weight he'd borne unthinking until this moment, watching Art josh in the firelight with his father. Then it was omnipresent, descending with steam-driven pressure from the heavens, the sure knowledge that he'd never have that camaraderie, that relationship again.

"Jesus wept, man." It was his mother's expression, adapted, and that knowledge didn't help. Adam walked over to Buddy. "How you doing, big guy?"

Buddy whuffed, a warm exhalation of welcome, and nudged his nose against the front of Adam's shirt.

"Sorry, Buddy. No treats today." A little tear caught the edge of Adam's voice, forcing some pain into words that were once his fathers. "Just wanted to see what you were up to."

Buddy whuffed again, perhaps to let him know that this time, the absence of grain would be forgiven.

"Thanks, big guy." Adam reached up and scratched the center of Buddy's forehead, just under his black forelock.

"Hey." It was Calvin, moving on quiet feet. "The guys said you weren't feeling so great." He cocked his head. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Adam said. "I just needed some fresh air for a minute."

"You all right?"

"It's weird," Adam said. "Don't get me wrong: Michael and Art are great guys."

"Salt of the earth," Calvin agreed.

"But I'm used to it just being you and me." Adam shrugged. "Having other people around makes it weird."

"Screws with your head, don't it?" Calvin said.

Adam looked at him, surprised.

“What?” Calvin said. “Happens to me every year. I go a couple months all by my lonesome, and then I’ve got people here twenty-four/seven. It’s a switch.”

“Hmm,” Adam said. “I thought it was just me.”

“Nah.” Calvin grinned. “Other things will screw a man up besides soldiering, you know. Ranching does a number. Solitude.” He cocked his head. “Some say hanging out with me too much will do it to you.”

“I was thinking that,” Adam said, smiling. “But I wasn’t sure, you know?”

“It’s a safe bet,” Calvin replied. “Come on down. Michael’s about to launch into the best dirty stories he’s heard this year.”

“Oh, there’s a must-miss,” Adam said.

“Uh-un, babe. If I get tortured, so do you.” Calvin grabbed his arm. “I’m not about to face this alone when I don’t have to.”

“Shit!” Calvin hit the steering wheel. “I left that stupid thing on the counter.” He looked into the back seat, where Michael and Art were waiting to go back to the airport. “Y’all hang on just a minute, I’ll go grab that.”

“It’s not like Calvin to forget something,” Adam said, watching Calvin jog across the yard. “He’s usually right on top of shit.”

“Yeah, he’s real good people,” Michael said. “It’s nice to see he’s found someone to make him happy.”

Adam raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, don’t say anything,” Michael said, leaning forward and patting Adam’s hand. “He’d be mortified if he knew we knew, and I respect that.”

Art nodded his head. “It’s cool.”

“But how did you know?” Adam sputtered. “We were so careful!” It had been a struggle to not casually kiss Calvin throughout the day, as he’d gotten accustomed to doing, but Adam was sure he’d not slipped, not even once.

“The way he looks at you.” Michael shrugged. “There’s three things you can’t hide out here: smoke from a fire, a wounded calf, and a man in love.”

Part Eight

They dropped the Owens off, Calvin walking Michael up to the security gate, a firm arm at his elbow.

“A pleasure as always,” Michael said. He smiled at Calvin. “Good to see things are looking up for you.”

“They’ll be better still when you come out next year.”

There was a long pause then, Michael’s trembling hand tracing nervous signatures in the air. The two men looked at each other, a silent conversation conducted with no more than a look in an eye and a raised eyebrow.

And then Michael smiled. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“That was really something,” Adam said. “Charters aren’t bad at all, really. I like the Owens.”

“It’s the last time you’ll be seeing Michael,” Calvin said, tone flat. “He doesn’t have it in him. Not for another year.” Calvin gave a sad shrug, shoulders rounding forward toward the steering wheel. “Least wise I don’t think so.”

“Art will be back, though.” Adam was confident. “He’s really into it.”

Calvin sighed. “He’s really into whatever you did that made it seem like a field exercise, back in the day.” His fingers drummed against the wheel. “I’m not at all sure that’s a good thing.”

“Me, neither.” Adam shook his head. “I never really considered what being around me would do to the other guys. In their heads.”

“Right.”

“I was more worried about what being around them would do to me.” His eyes flickered over to Calvin. “If it would set me off or not.”

“But this didn’t?”

“No. It was different.” Adam’s voice was getting louder. “I was in the moment. Here and now.”

“It’s all right.” Calvin was calm, his voice soothing. “I just need to know, you know?” He shook his head. “I don’t think Art was really in his head this trip, honestly. He’s worried about his dad, and it shows. Hard.”

"I know." Adam flopped back in the seat. "It's just that maybe the Recovery Ranch thing isn't a great idea. What if it doesn't make guys better? What if it makes them worse?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, Dad did have some points. I'm not any kind of shrink. I'm not a counselor or a therapist or nothing like that."

"But you know," Calvin said. "You know what it's like. And you listen." He shrugged. "If hunting helps, then hunting helps. But if it doesn't, it doesn't."

"And we play it by ear?"

"Take each day as it comes." Calvin smiled. "Michael has had a great decade hunting down here, doing exactly that."

"And he was never mad he didn't get a boar?"

"Most of the time getting the boar isn't really the point." Calvin looked up in the rearview mirror. "We got the mail, groceries, that strapping for the barn, and that's it. Was there anything else we were supposed to get in town?"

Adam reached over and took Calvin's hand. "I got everything I need, right here."

The supplies were stowed, the beers were opened, and Adam and Calvin sat down in the kitchen to look over the mail.

"Not as much as last time," Calvin commented.

"I'm not as popular as I used to be." Adam grinned. "Fame is a fleeting thing."

"You've still got one fan, at least," Calvin said. "Looks like a card," he continued, handing over the square, blue envelope. His eyes narrowed. "When is your birthday, anyways?"

"Not till the tail end of October," Adam said. "You're safe."

He ripped the envelope open and pulled out a small, floral card. "It's from Mom."

"Did Billy talk to her?" Calvin asked.

Adam stared at the bouquet on the front of the card, irises and lilies gathered in a funeral bunch. "I don't know. I'm about to find out, I guess." But he made no move to open the card.

"You don't have to read it, babe."

Adam gave a sad little grin, a half smile that pushed up the side of his mouth. “Yeah, I do.” He shrugged. “Armed insurgents, no big thing. Fire fight in Fallujah? Been there, done that.” He took another long minute, staring at the card. “But a letter from Mama?”

“Your mother’s a scary woman,” Calvin said.

Adam shot him a look.

“It’s true!” Calvin protested. “She took the biggest, wildest hellraiser I ever met and turned him into a church-going, Jesus-freak, car salesman.” He nodded solemnly. “That took some balls.”

“You’re not making this any easier, you know.”

Calvin plucked the card from his fingers. “Then let me read it.”

He flipped the card open, eyes flying over the message scrawled inside in a matter of seconds. Then, with his expression carefully neutral, he handed the card back to Adam.

“Well?”

“It’s the type of thing that a man needs to read himself, if he’s gonna read it.” Calvin stalked to the door, headed outdoors. “But I wouldn’t be in an all-fired hurry to read that, if I were you.”

The door whined when he pushed it open, old springs protesting the speed of egress. But Calvin seemed to pay them no mind, his boot heels falling heavy as he crossed the threshold. The door fell shut behind him, thudding up against the jamb once before bouncing out a couple inches, shaking the way only old wood can before settling back into place.

Adam waited until the door had closed completely. Then he waited until the charcoal crown of Calvin’s hat disappeared from sight, around the far corner of the barn.

Then, and only then, did he open his mother’s card.

My Darling Son,

Every child breaks a Mother’s heart. That’s what children do.

That makes what your father told me a little easier to bear. Not much, but a little. I’m holding onto hope, Adam. Hope that this is all just a mistake, some crazy fallout from that stupid war.

Hope that you realize that there’s still time to save your eternal soul.

We’re supposed to hate the sin and love the sinner. That’s what Pastor says, and he told me to pass along that he’s praying for your swift recovery.

I don't know that Pastor's right, Adam. I don't know that I could love someone who defies the Lord and spits in the eye of everything that's good and right in this world.

I raised you better than that. Or I thought I did. I must be wrong. There's no other reason for what you're doing. I am so sorry. For whatever I did wrong, for however I failed you, Son, forgive me. Let me know what I did and I'll fix it.

When you're ready to come back to the Lord, Son, we'll be waiting here with open arms and thankful hearts. Remember this: your namesake got thrown out of the Garden for defying God's will. As your mother, I'm worried that what you're doing down there with your companion will have much the same results.

Turn away from it, Adam. Now. Before it's too late.

Come back to us.

Mom

Adam let the card fall to the floor, pinching his fingers over the bridge of his nose, just between his eyes. "Jesus, Mom."

He stood up and paced the length of the room. He wasn't sure, really, what he'd been expecting from his mother in the way of a response. Now that he had it, he discovered that he wasn't surprised.

Her message was just harsher than he'd anticipated.

Calvin was leaning on the fence, staring out into the back pasture. "Your mama doesn't pull any punches, does she?"

"I guess maybe." Adam braced his forearms on the top rail, letting his boot rest easy on the bottom.

"I'm sorry, babe." Calvin shook his head a few inches. "I never wanted to get between you and your kin."

"If it wasn't you, it'd be someone else." Adam shrugged. "She was going to find out I was gay sooner or later."

Calvin looked over at him. "She have any idea this was coming, or is this more a jolt out of the blue for her?"

"I don't know," Adam said. "I guess I kind of always thought she knew, on some level." He stared off into space, not actually seeing the stock tank or horses before him. "Not that I was all 'I'm fabulous', you know?"

"But you thought she knew."

“Kinda.” Adam shrugged. “You think your ma pays attention to stuff, you know? I never had no girlfriends.”

“Did you have boyfriends?”

“Not then, no.” Adam blushed. “I kind of had a crush on the vice principal. Grant Wilson.” He shook his head. “Nothing came of it. He never knew, I don’t think.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Adam replied. “I can’t think too highly of a man who turns his back on his family, you know?”

Calvin’s lips thinned, one against the other. “There’s something to that.”

“On the other hand,” Adam continued, “I can’t think too highly of a man who turns his back on his own self. Who he is.” He reached out and took Calvin’s hand. “Who he loves.”

Calvin took the hand, squeezed it gently. “I appreciate that. More than you know.” He took a deep breath. “But, babe. Family is forever.”

“And?”

“And,” Calvin said, “assuming everything goes perfect for us -- we stay in love after this season, and the season after that, and the season after that. That you don’t decide you up and want somebody your own age...”

“I won’t.”

“Let me finish,” Calvin barked. “Assuming that. Assuming I don’t take sick or fall off Ginger and bust my head open. Assuming everything goes perfect -- and in my world, not much of nothing does, just so you know -- we’ve got what? Twenty years? Twenty-five?” He shook his head. “You’ll be younger than I am now. That’s a powerful long time to face without a family.”

“I don’t hear you talking none about your family,” Adam said. “You manage.”

“My family.” Calvin snorted. “Why the hell do you think I’m so hell bent on this?”

“I don’t know,” Adam said. “Tell me.”

“Everything your mama says -- well, some people would say she’s harsh. More than a few people, actually.” Calvin shrugged. “Times have changed. Considerably. Twenty years ago, that would have been one of the nicer things anyone would have said to me.”

“It was that bad?”

“You seen the scars on me, boy.” Calvin turned away, his shoulders square. “Not all of them came from other people’s daddies.”

Adam stared at his lover’s back for a long moment.

“I’m sorry, Cal.”

“Shit happens.” Calvin turned back to face him. “But I’ll tell you this. It’s been over twenty years -- hell, it’s been longer than you been alive -- since that day. And I ain’t been back. My mama’s dead and gone, six years in the dirt.”

“Did you go to the funeral?”

“Dead men don’t go to funerals,” Calvin replied. “Less they’re the ones riding in the coffin.”

“Jesus,” Adam breathed. “That’s fucked up, man.”

“That’s life,” Calvin replied. “It’s hard, and it’s harsh, and that’s the nature of it. That’s without making things more difficult than they have to be.” He swallowed. “We got twenty-seven years between us. Near on twenty-eight. You know what that is? That’s Michael and Art.”

“And?”

“And is that what you want? To find yourself, twenty years down the road, with a seventy-year-old lover who can’t even remember where the bathroom is? Are you going to want to give up your life to take care of me? The way Art has?”

“I would.”

“I don’t want you to!” Calvin’s hands flew up in the air. “I wouldn’t wish that shit on anybody -- much less you! I love you! I don’t want you to have to clean up my drool and shit.”

“So what should I do?” Adam asked. “Go home, find me a wife, settle down, bang out some babies, praise Jesus?”

“People do. It would make your mama happy.” Calvin shrugged. “Probably save Billy a world of heartache, too.”

“It’d be wrong, Cal.” Adam’s voice was flat. “Plain and simple, it’d be wrong.” He took a deep breath. “If this is your way of telling me to move on, that we’re done, then come on out and say it. Don’t wrap it up with a mess of shit about our future or my family.”

“Are you fucking nuts?” Calvin exploded. “Do you think I want you to go? Yeah, there might be just twenty years ahead of us, but they’re my twenty years. They’re all I got, boy, and yeah, I sure the fuck want you in them.” He was shaking then, his shouts so loud that the horses stopped grazing. “But I said I wasn’t going to hurt you,

and for the love of Christ, I'm not about to. If being with me costs you your family, I can't do that. I can't hurt you the way..." His words failed.

"The way you been hurt?" Adam asked. "When your family did what they did?"

Calvin didn't say anything, and for a moment, Adam thought his lover hadn't heard him. Then, after an eternity had elapsed, an eternity in which Adam reconsidered and damned his question a dozen times over, Calvin gave a short little nod. "Yeah."

"It doesn't have to be that way." Adam shrugged. "Mama is who Mama is, but you know what? I am who I am, too." He switched legs on the rail, letting one boot trail in the dust. "I'm gonna write her back, let her know where I stand. Then it's up to her. It'll take some time, but she'll come around, or she won't. It's her decision."

"That's a hard line you're drawing."

"I'm a hard man." Adam cocked his head. "I know you don't think so. I know you're the one with the answers, and I'm the one fucked in the head..."

"I never said that."

"I know. You're not the only one talking," Adam said, his words heavy. "But there are some things I know in this world, and believe me, I know I'm right about this."

"What happens if you're wrong?"

"What happens anytime I'm wrong?" Adam shrugged. "It's not like I've never fucked up before. You pick up the pieces and you move on." His eyes locked with Calvin's. "And at least you'll know you tried for the dream."

"Am I that dream?"

Adam stepped closer to Calvin, far closer than the arm's length he'd insisted was mandatory when there were guests on the ranch. So close, in fact, that he could see the pores in Calvin's skin, the sheen in his eyes, the fear twitching at the corner of his mouth. "God damn right you are."

The kiss, long denied, couldn't be stopped any longer. Adam wrapped his arms up and around Calvin, pulling his cowboy down for a long, slow, searching kiss, tongues twining against each other, heat building, moment by moment.

"My dream," Adam murmured, velvet lips dancing against Calvin's. "All mine."

"And you're mine." Calvin pulled Adam closer in a big bear hug. "I just can't believe you're real."

"Then I'm gonna have to keep showing you." Adam started unbuttoning Calvin's shirt. "Sooner, better than later."

“I’ve got,” Calvin groaned, the pleasure sharp-edged as Adam bit at his nipple. “No objection.”

“I didn’t think so.” Adam stepped back, walking Calvin back against the fence. “You might as well get comfortable.”

Calvin smiled. Then he spread his arms out along the top rail, chest bare to the morning sun. “I can’t believe you’re doing this.”

Adam ran his fingers down the side of Calvin’s cock, gingerly tracing a line from the flared edge of the cockhead down the thicket of black curls that framed the base.

“Why not? I love doing this.”

“I’m glad.” Calvin shut his eyes, taking in a quick, deep breath at the first touch of Adam’s lips. “God damn, that feels good.”

Adam shouldered Calvin back half a step, so his ass was flush against the fence, rough wood on tender flesh. Adam grabbed the fence on either side of Calvin’s hips, locking him into place.

He pulled his head back, just long enough to smile up at Calvin. “This,” he said. “This is worth all the risks.”

There, with the sky blue bright overhead, no sound save the cicadas hum and the squabbling cries of purple martins, his lover’s lips slip sliding up and down his cock, Calvin discovered that he’d have to agree.

“God, boy!” He had to feel Adam’s hair, that russet gold fringe. Calvin took Adam’s hat off, hanging it off the fencepost near to his head. That gave him the access he wanted, to let his fingers slide through the silk, to feel the subtle work of muscles as Adam took him deeper and deeper.

Adam bent his arms, bringing Calvin tighter up against the fence. He was voracious -- he couldn’t seem to get all of Calvin as fast as he wanted to get the man.

“Take it easy, boy,” Calvin groaned, closing his eyes when Adam’s tongue traced across his balls. “We’ve got all day. And a hundred days after that.”

Adam started pumping faster then, lips tight around Calvin’s cock, as snug and tight as he could make them. It went hot and fast and furious, speed increasing as Calvin doled out the words he knew Adam wanted to hear.

“My boy.”

“Mine.”

“Forever.”

That last did it for both of them: Calvin coming so hard his knees buckled, Adam grinding himself to release against the slow-bending legs.

“Hey,” Calvin said, after reaching down to help Adam back to his feet. “Looks like you got forever.”

“That’s longer than my hat’s gonna have!” Adam jumped up, jeans clearly undone. “Buddy, what the fuck is the matter with you?”

Unseen, unnoticed, the big dun had sidled up to the fencepost and was now chewing quite contentedly on Adam’s hat.

“Heh!” Calvin got hold of the hat. “Let go of that, you big dummy.” Buddy let go with a whicker that was suspiciously close to a laugh.

Calvin examined the hat. “No harm, no foul. It’s just a little wet there.”

“A little wet?” Adam repeated. “The damn thing’s soaked through with horse spit!”

“There are worse things,” Calvin said.

“Like what, I’d like to know.”

“Getting chigger bites on your prick’s pretty likely gonna suck,” Calvin laughed. “I’d make that my priority, if I were you.”

Adam looked down, and then he looked at his hat, and then he looked at Calvin. “Might be some wisdom in that.”

“You’d be amazed,” Calvin replied, “how often that is the case.”

Part Nine

“We’ll start small,” Calvin said. “If you can get three or four guys interested, we’ll run them out the last weekend of the month. It’s the slowest time of the year, anyways. We’ll see how it goes.” He eyed the computer doubtfully. “I don’t know how many people actually read this stuff, anyways.”

“You’d be surprised,” Adam said. “Social networking. Go where your customers hang out if you want to attract business.” He smiled. “Learned that one from Dad.”

“Well, if it works,” Calvin said, “that’s two points for Billy. I sure the fuck never would have thought of it.”

Within two hours, the posting to the military families resource board had received twenty-five interested responses.

Half had balked at the price Calvin quoted them, and half of the remaining guys couldn’t come until the fall. But that left half a dozen interested guys, of which Calvin picked four.

“This is pretty cool,” he said, scrolling through the email. “If I had known I could order guys by the six-pack, well, I’d have had a lot less lonely nights.” He looked up at Adam and winked.

“I’m okay with that,” Adam said. “If you think you could keep up with six of me.” He thought for a moment. “That might be kind of hot, you know. You, big old bed, a whole platoon working you over...”

“Um, yeah.” Calvin shook his head. “I don’t think so. This old ticker would give out before I was more than halfway done.”

“What a way to go.”

“More than content with how things are right now, thank you.” Calvin tapped a few keys. “Although a man always needs a back up plan.”

“And thank you very much!” Adam chuckled the back of Calvin’s head. “Smart ass.”

He leaned over the table, peering at the screen. “Maybe I should do a visual assessment first. Make sure that only ugly guys come here.”

“What, so you can be the only babe?”

“No.” Adam turned his head and leaned in for a quick kiss, fast as a moth drinking from a puddle. “There’s you.” A thought struck him, and his brow wrinkled. “Actually, scratch that. Maybe I better get a good mix of guys so they’re not all into you.”

“I don’t think,” Calvin said, dryly, “that you’ll have to worry.”

Calvin had some great plans. They were going to take the guys out for a ride, two days, one night, to get to the first set of cabins.

“You do enough talking and bull shitting along the way,” Calvin said, “to get a feel. Is this guy going to be good to hunt with, or is he gonna be a big pain in the ass?” If the guys turned out okay, or so Calvin’s theory went, they could suit up with hunting gear stowed at the second cabins and finish out the week that way. If not, “Well, we still do got that third cabin to finish clearing out completely,” Calvin said. “We got enough crap wood out there to burn for a month.”

“Sounds good,” Adam said. “We’ll play it by ear.”

He just had some business to take care of first. A long afternoon went by, Adam at the kitchen table, notebook and pen before him.

“Now, I’m not much on this writing thing,” Calvin said. “But I’m pretty damn sure that at some point in the process, you’re gonna need to pick up that there pen.”

“Smart ass.” Adam looked up. “How do you even start something like this?”

Calvin shook his head, staring out the window for a long moment. “Can’t say as I know. There might not be one right way.”

“What would you do?”

“If it were me?” Calvin smiled. It wasn’t a particularly cheerful smile, bitter irony curling his mouth up with sour memory. “Well, I’d have no problem writing a letter.”

He headed for the door.

“My mama couldn’t read. That helps a lot, I’m thinking.” His fingers traced over the doorknob, persuading it to open with a touch. “But I guess if it were me, and my mama could read, I’d start it with “Dear Mama.”

Dear Mama was indeed a good opening. It was the best part of the letter so far, and two hours into the composition process, Adam didn’t have too much more than that to say.

He got up from the table and walked to the window. Calvin was out there, messing around with Ginger’s foot -- she’d gotten a little split in her hoof. Nothing major, but it needed minding, as Calvin would say.

It just made no sense. Here was this good man, this good and gentle man, Adam thought. Why wouldn’t God love him? What was so wrong with this love, this strong little flame that kept burning in him, that Jesus would turn him away?

Jesus was supposed to love you, no matter what. That's what all those damn songs he used to have to sing went on and on and on about.

He must have missed the verse about "And if you fall in love with a guy, you're going to burn, burn, burn!"

Adam buried his head in his hands. There was no sense lying here. The issue wasn't with Calvin. Sure, it was right now, because there was Calvin, but if it wasn't Calvin, eventually it would be someone else.

Like when it had been Tom.

The issue wasn't his lovers, Adam thought. The issue was that he loved them at all.

What's love?

The questions don't get any easier, the older you get, he mused. He was going to have to take that up with Calvin. Discover at what age one was supposed to actually have the answers to this type of thing, rather than just wonder about them.

Although there was a better than fair chance that Calvin was still wondering, too.

He'd own that, too, Adam knew. If he asked Calvin, the cowboy would stare off into space for a while, blue eyes focused on a whole lot of nothing, lips moving against each other slowly while he pondered.

Then Calvin would smile -- that smile that just got Adam, right there, each and every time he saw it. He'd shake his head and say, "Damned if I know, boy. Some things ain't got no answers. They just are."

That didn't mean he walked away from what he didn't understand. Calvin was courage given flesh, Adam mused. He was covered with scars. The one on his face, long faded, was still starkly there, an ever-present reminder to Adam, this is the price of love.

Calvin knew what his love would cost him, and he loved anyway.

The only thing holding him back from opening up to Adam one hundred percent, from letting his lover truly love him, Adam realized, was fear, plain and simple. Calvin was afraid that Adam couldn't stand for Calvin the way Calvin had had to stand up so many times.

Couldn't or wouldn't.

Either way, Adam had to admit, it was a fair question. He'd never say that out loud, not to his lover, but the question was there.

Could he pay that price? Would he pay that price? It was one thing to spout out bold words about forever and dream serenades out of sagebrush, but could he do what he had to, in the long run?

Could he stand up to the family who didn't understand him for the man who did?

"God damn right I can," Adam muttered.

Suddenly, the words that had been bottled up started coming, fast and furious, flat out jumping out of his pen onto the paper.

When he was done, he didn't read it.

He didn't dare.

"You sure about this?"

"Nope." Adam shook his head. "Not at all." He licked the envelope, pressing the cream colored flap down firmly. "But it's done."

"You still have to mail it."

Adam scrawled the last few digits of his old zip code with a flourish. "Here you go. We'll send it the next time we head into town."

"You're sure?"

"Yup."

Calvin slid the envelope into his back pocket. "Well, we got a couple days 'til then." Their first charter, four of the G.I.s who thought a week in the Texas backcountry might be exactly what they needed to reset themselves, was due in on Monday. He lifted his hat a minute, letting the breeze push through his hair. "You let me know if you change your mind."

"I won't."

"All right then." Calvin stared off into the distance for a moment. "Did we ever bring them beers back from the cabin?"

Adam nodded. "Yup. Threw 'em in the fridge when we got back."

"So you know right where they are?"

"Yeah."

Calvin smiled. "That'll make it real easy for you to grab me one, huh?"

"I suppose." Adam stretched theatrically. "Since I was up and everything."

“That’s what I was thinking,” Calvin agreed. “You might want to grab one for yourself,” he added, as Adam pushed back his chair and stood. “It’s thirsty work and all.”

“Very funny.” Adam disappeared into the house for a brief moment, reappearing with a pair of long neck bottles. “S’already cold.”

“Only way,” Calvin said, taking a long swallow, “for a beer to be.”

“This is nice.”

“It is.” There was a small pile of long necks on the floor between them, brown bottles pointing off in a variety of directions, an alcoholic compass rose. “We might regret it in the morning.”

“Maybe.” Adam grinned. “You might want to consider sleeping past o-fuck-thirty and see if that helps.”

“Man can’t sleep the day away.”

Adam downed the second half of his beer in one long swallow. “Sure man can. It takes practice, but you can do it.”

“Smartass.” Calvin was starting to open another beer, but then he saw Adam pound down another one and thought better of it.

“Better than a dumbass.”

“True enough.”

They sat a while then, watching the sky gray. A thin cloud of insects was hovering just above the horizon line, whirling and whizzing past each other, an elaborate mating dance.

Adam managed to down another pair of beers during the show.

“Looka that shit,” Adam slurred. “Flyin’ and fuckin’ at the same time.”

“More than I can manage.” Calvin shrugged. “Sides which, I don’t have a plane.”

Adam hiccupped. “Tha’s funny. I don’t even have a plane.”

“Yeah,” Calvin said. “Me either.”

Adam started giggling, a peal of laughter that got steadily louder and louder. “Tha’s what I said.”

"I know." Calvin smiled, stretching his legs out, crossing them, uncrossing them, and carefully re-crossing them again. "Let me ask you something."

"Wha's that?"

"Why me?" Calvin asked. "Why in the world are you into me?"

Adam blinked at him. "Cal, why the fuck you asking me that now?" His hands were spread, eyes open wide, with the bright promise of tears shining on the surface. "Have I done somethin'? Not done somethin'? Let you down?"

"No. None of that." Calvin flushed and looked down. "Man's never so honest as when he's drinking, you know?"

"Izzat true?" Adam contemplated the thought for a minute. "Someone should tell the cops that. Beer's way the fuck cheaper than truth syrmem. Syrment. Syr-stuff. You know, the truth juice shit."

Calvin smiled. "I'm sure they've looked into it."

"Its a stupid question, anyways." Adam shrugged. "How could I not be into you? You're you, you."

"I see."

"Let me 'splain myself."

"You've had too much," Calvin said, tipping his hat toward the miniature mountain of beer bottles between them. "Why don't you sum up?"

"Fair enough," Adam agreed. He wavered to his feet, swaying forward until he'd achieved a perfect forty-five degree angle, at which point he'd freeze, consider his surroundings, decide he didn't like them, and start swaying back. "I love you because I love you." His hand started waving. "Nobody else does. Not so much as me."

"That's probably true," Calvin agreed. He didn't want to move and get Adam off balance -- but he shifted to the edge of his seat, poised to move fast. Just in case.

"And that means I love you! I know you think I'm young and stupid and shit. But dude." Adam's eyes went wide. "What if it all happened tomorrow? The bombs could fall out of the sky over here, just the same as over there. We ain't the only ones who got planes, you know?"

"I know."

"Or terrorist shit." Adam started pacing, and this was a marvel to see, every step a delicate dance on the tightrope that separated sobriety and consciousness. Right now, dreams and visions were starting to intrude into Adam's perception. It wouldn't take long, Calvin thought, before the boy passed out and that'd be all he saw. "They can poison the water, Calvin, and we'd never know it--" his arm waved, a deliberate,

drunken dramatic pause. “‘Til it was too late! Or fuck with the food. Or some shit like that.” He peered at Calvin. “They’re crazy fuckers over there. I been. I seen ’em.”

“I know.” The words were gentle. “But what do they have to do with us, babe? With you and me?”

“Don’t you get it?” Adam exploded. “That’s why there’s a you and me. Tha’s why I don’t want to just say ‘Yeah, it was fun’ and walk on. All this,” he said, waving his arms so wildly he almost lost his balance. “It can all be gone tomorrow. I made it this far. But really,” he asked, freezing in place to stare at Calvin, “how the fuck long do you think this luck’s gonna hold out?”

“Whoa, boy.” Calvin stood. “I think it’s time for bed, Adam.”

Adam leered at him, eyes unfocused. “I likes bed. I like bed with you.”

“I know.” Calvin started guiding Adam into the cabin. “Let’s sleep first tonight, all right?”

“But...” The grope was clumsy, ill-aimed, but the intention was clear just the same. “What about...”

“We don’t have to have sex all the time, Adam.” Calvin had the younger man halfway to the bed. “Really.”

“But then you’re not going to want me aroun’ no more.” Adam took a couple lurching steps and fell onto the bed. “I can see where this is headed.”

“That’s enough of that.” Calvin slipped into bed next to him. “You’re talking foolishness.”

“Nobody more honest than a drunk, right, Cal?” Adam snuggled his head into the pillow. “That’s what you said.”

“How’s your head?” Calvin had the coffee on the counter, but made no move to offer Adam any. “I didn’t expect to see you up this early.”

Adam peered at the clock. “It’s one o’clock?” He blinked, rubbing his eyes again. “It’s one o’clock in the morning? What the hell are you still doing up, Cal? You’re never gonna sleep, drinking coffee now.”

“I been,” Calvin said with a grin, “drinking coffee a good while now.” He pushed the curtain back, letting the full flood of afternoon sunlight spill into the room. “It’s one in the afternoon, my boy.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Time don’t lie.”

“No, I can’t believe you let me sleep that long.” Adam’s hands went to his head. “And I can’t believe you got a freaking razorback to dance on my skull.”

Calvin laughed. “No sense waking you up. Way I figure, that was the last hurrah. I sure the fuck can’t have you drinking like that when guests are around,” he said. “I need you sharp.”

“Man, was I all stupid and shit?” Adam blushed. “I never really could drink worth a damn.”

“You were fine.” Calvin raised an eyebrow. “I never knew you were so into cross-dressing, that’s all.”

Adam’s eyes went wide, his head cocked like a goat looking at a new fence. “What?”

“Yeah.” Calvin smiled. “You were all into it, man. How you want some silky undies, and a girdle, and a bra, and some high heels and stockings...”

“Oh, shut up!” Adam snapped. “I know I didn’t say that!”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.” Adam grinned. “It’ll take more than beer to get that type of thing out of me.”

“Remind me to stop by the liquor store,” Calvin joked. “I can’t wait to see you in your ensemble.”

“Smart ass.” Adam poured himself a cup of coffee. “So I didn’t do nothing too stupid, then.”

“Not that I’m gonna tell you about, no.” He watched Adam pour a good quarter cup of sugar into his coffee. “There’s some Excedrin there, in the green bottle. I reckoned you might be feeling it.”

“I am,” Adam admitted. “What’s on the agenda for the rest of the day here?”

“Not too much,” Calvin said. “We’re just gonna straighten out the cabins, get them ready for the new guys. A little housework.”

“Housework and hangovers,” Adam grimaced. “That goes together well.”

“That’s how it’s been,” Calvin said, “pretty near from the dawn of time.”

“Howdy! Welcome to Texas!” A firm handshake, bright eyes shining. There had been no difficulty picking out their charter group among all the incoming commuters thronging through the airport. They stood straighter. They moved crisply. They managed, somehow, to never wind up standing with their backs open. They’d seen

Adam a good five seconds before he'd seen them. "Adam Davis, from Recovery Ranch."

There were four of them: Wyatt, Dave, Mark and Tyrone. All Army, all from the same unit -- and all come home to discover that sliding back into the go-back-to-work at the GM Plant transition wasn't quite as smooth when better than half them GM jobs were gone.

"Sure, we've got our jobs. They had to hold them for us since we were deployed." Wyatt shrugged, sharing the tale on the way to the ranch. "But that's led to an awful lot of bad feeling, man. You've got no idea."

"He's right. People who were your friends, who sent care packages and shit when we were away?" Mark echoed. "Those mo-fos got no time for us now that we're back. They think we up and took their jobs."

"Nice to know you've got that kind of power, y'all." Adam grinned into the rearview mirror. "Directing the economy and shit."

"Right, you know it," Tyrone said. "And with all this stop loss shit, who knows how long we'll be home?"

Adam nodded. "I hear you."

"That's what made us decide to give this place a try. Spend a little of however much free time we might have left around people who aren't pissed at us."

"Or no people at all," Wyatt said. "Just some peace and freaking quiet." He looked at Adam. "I don't know about you, but my kid's been right up my ass!" He shook his head. "You love them and all, but good God. A man needs a little bit of room."

"Room we got," Adam said. "More room than you're gonna know what to do with."

"Sounds good to me."

Turned out most things sounded good to this crew. A big dinner at the main house, with Calvin's barbecue sandwiches served on paper plates?

"This shit's better than perfect, man." Dave patted his stomach. "I don't even know if I need any more than this. My ass is cured!"

Wyatt laughed. "I still want to see your ass up on a horse." He turned to Calvin. "A cowboy, he just ain't."

"No worries. Adam couldn't tell one end of the horse from the other when he first got here," Calvin said. "Now you couldn't tell he wasn't born on a horse."

Adam smiled, absurdly pleased by the comment. "I'm not sure if that's true or not, there, that."

"Let's hope it is," Dave said. "Because otherwise, I'm gonna spend this whole trip falling on my ass!"

They were four guys determined to have some fun, and fun they had. Dave's horsemanship left something to be desired, but he was the guy you turned to quick when you needed a sarcastic comment or a fast joke. Wyatt was the leader, clearly, he listened to what Adam or Calvin had to say, but he was the one the others turned to to see if what Adam or Calvin said was worth listening to.

Tyrone turned out to be some kind of photo nut, snapping pictures of just about everything that moved and quite a few things that didn't.

"He thinks he's gonna be an artist," Wyatt confided. "He had a few shots from over there show up in some magazines, and now he's got the bug." He shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe he'll be able to fall back on that when GM finally gives us the boot."

"You think that's gonna happen?" Adam asked.

Wyatt nodded. "Good will's only going to be on our side so long. Once they're not mandated to hold onto us, our jobs are gonna be gone, just the same as everyone else's." He smiled. "Leastwise my brother-in-law will have one less reason to hate me, then."

Calvin chuckled. "If I know one thing about in-laws," he said. "It's that they don't need much in the way of a reason."

"True that," Tyrone agreed, nodding his head. "That is so very true."

"What do you think," Calvin asked, speaking across the darkened cabin. "Are they all right to take hunting?"

Adam shrugged. "I'd say yes. They seem fine. I don't even know if Tyrone's going to want to. He's all into his camera and shit."

"It doesn't seem like we're helping them all that much, really," Calvin said. "It's just a bunch of guys, blowing off steam."

"There are worse things," Adam said. "I don't know. I don't know that it is really helping, honestly. But it's not hurting."

“Yeah, baby.” Wyatt was looking over the small collection of rifles Calvin kept. “You got some really pretty toys here.”

Adam smiled. “It’s different, kinda. From being over there.”

Wyatt raised an eyebrow. “I’d imagine it’d have to be. Different ordinance. Different objectives. Different strategy.”

“Not so much the strategy thing. You lay low, keep an eye, acquire the target, you know?”

Wyatt nodded.

“Maybe have some flankers, if you want to flush the boar out of the brush, toward you. Some people,” Adam continued, “use dogs for that, but seeing as all y’all are Army, I didn’t reckon you’d find much difference either way.”

A bray of laughter came then, from all four guys.

“You’re one brave jarhead, you,” Wyatt said. “So you’re telling me a Marine would use dogs?”

“They don’t have to,” Dave cut in. “Marines is just so pretty, the boars walk right on up to them and start snuggling. They think they found Ms. Right!”

“The power of sex appeal,” Mark crowed.

“Well,” Adam said, shrugging, “When you got it, you got it.”

“Truth be told,” Wyatt said. “I’m not all that hell-bent to tag a boar. My wife’s already bitching she don’t know how to cook one.” He looked around. “How about you guys?”

Muttered nods answered. “But I do want to shoot some shit up,” Dave said. “That’s half the fun.”

Adam’s stomach gave a lurch. Why did this conversation have to happen when Calvin was down to the main house? He didn’t know what to say -- but he was pretty sure Calvin wasn’t gonna be behind shooting animals just for the sake of shooting them.

“Maybe,” Wyatt said, turning his head so he could gaze down the trail. “We could set up some targets, do some accuracy drills.” He cocked his head. “Bet that bend down there’s five hundred yards if it’s an inch.”

“Sounds good,” Adam said.

Wyatt gave his guys a nod. “Go on and set up some targets. Maybe a hundred yards, then two fifty, then five. Something big enough to see.”

They took off, dragging some large branches out of the debris pile along the way.

“That’s a good idea,” Adam said. “I never thought about setting up a firing range.”

“Truth be told,” Wyatt said, “I’m not real sure how the guys are gonna be with a firearm in their hands again. That’s part of why I wanted to do this.” He took a deep breath. “Especially if we get called back up. I need to know they’ve still got it, when I need for them to have it.” He looked around. “Here’s as safe a place as any to find that out.”

“Makes sense to me.”

Dave, Tyrone and Mark thought so too, after propping the targets into place. They lined up and started firing, one at a time.

“Son of a bitch, Dave!” Wyatt grouched. “Did you leave your glasses over there in the sandbox or what?” He had completely missed the two hundred and fifty yard target. “Do that again, and hit it this time.”

The next shot caught the target, just on the edge.

“Well, you wounded him.” Wyatt nodded. “Next time, I expect you to take that bastard out!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Dave replied. It was clearly automatic. Wyatt must have run the squad with a tight hand.

It went like that for the better part of an hour, Wyatt leading the trio of shooters through a number of rounds, encouraging one minute, berating the next.

It was a steady stream of lead, so constant and so loud that Adam never even heard Calvin approaching. Ginger’s hoofbeats weren’t heavy enough to drown out the barrage of fire careening down the trail.

But Calvin’s words?

Adam sure the fuck heard those.

“What in the name of Christ is going on up here?” he asked, flushed and sweaty from a hard ride. “All y’all have been firing non-stop for an hour. Sounds like Ruby Ridge up here.”

“Target practice,” Adam said, keeping his eyes locked with Calvin’s. “Wyatt thought it would be a good idea that way. Easier to keep the guys calmer, you know.” He stared, intently, reaching out to squeeze Calvin’s arm once, hard, just above the elbow. “Not a bad plan, boss.”

Calvin took a deep breath. “Hell of a way to scare all the game off, though.”

“I never thought of that,” Adam said. “I swear to God, that never occurred to me.”

“Don’t sweat it.” Calvin’s smile was thin. “They’ll come back around.” Then he looked up at Wyatt and his crew. “All y’all having fun?”

“That was some wild shit!” Wyatt said. They were in the lobby of the airport, waiting on a slow moving security line. “I don’t know about you guys, but I feel way better.”

“Tell your friends,” Calvin said. “We’re gonna be doing this. Or something like this, anyways, a couple times a month.” He shrugged. “At least until there’s no need for it.”

“May that day come quickly.” Wyatt was suddenly somber.

“Not that we wish ill on your business, Calvin,” Tyrone interjected quickly. “Anything but.”

“Yeah, we want you to stick around,” Dave said. “Save us a weekend this time next year. Long as we’re here, we’ll come back.” He smiled. “Especially if you make that barbecue again.”

“I’m pretty sure,” Calvin smiled, “that that could be arranged.”

“That went well, I think,” Adam said. “Sounds like you think so, too.”

Calvin looked at him.

“Well, you said we’d save them a weekend,” Adam protested. “And I thought it went okay. They said they had fun.”

Calvin smiled. “Oh, we’ll be doing it again, I’m sure. But,” he continued, reaching out to pat Adam’s knee. “There’s gonna be a few changes made first.”

Part Ten

“Who’s brilliant, kick-ass idea was it to have a firing range, anyway?” Adam said, red-faced and sweating. Buddy’d done a good job helping him pull out some of the larger debris, but, as Calvin had said, there was no sense wasting him on the little shit.

“I believe,” Calvin said, “that it was yours.” He looked at his lover, sweaty and frustrated. “I also think you’re gonna burn like bacon, you don’t put your shirt back on.”

“Too damn hot to wear a shirt. You trying to give me heatstroke, kill me off?” Adam said. “It’s two freaking hundred degrees out here.”

“That’s true. That’s why you’re coming with me.” Calvin nodded toward Buddy. “We’re going for a little ride.”

“Where are we going?” Adam asked, swinging up into the saddle with a reasonable level of expertise.

“To show you one of the joys of a Texas summer afternoon,” Calvin announced. “Come on.”

Ginger set out at a brisk pace, ears pricked forward.

“She knows where we’re going, don’t she?” Adam asked.

“Yup.”

“And you’re not going to tell me.”

“Nope.” Calvin grinned. “It’s a surprise.” He leaned forward and patted Ginger. “Course, you could always ask my girl.”

“Fat chance. She’s still not speaking to me.”

“You just have no luck with the ladies.”

“I’m all right with that, seeing as I seem to have awesome luck with the guys.”

“Hmm.” Calvin smiled, a little pink flush on his cheeks. “You’re gonna want to keep to the trail here, though. Get off, and there’s a lot of mesquite thorns that’ll tear you up. That’s why I don’t go this way too often.”

Adam looked down, eyes widening at the sight of the thorns gracing the shrubby little trees. The branches were studded with them, almost bony protrusions promising pain to any foolish enough to get too close.

“I guess maybe!” Adam slumped forward a little bit, stretching forward over the saddle horn. “Calvin, why in the world did you choose to live where everything wants to kill you?”

“Because you don’t get a lot of company that way.” Calvin grinned. “You got to be a good one to stick around.”

“A good one or just too damn stubborn to leave,” Adam corrected. “And I’m not sure I can tell the difference.”

“I don’t think,” Calvin said, “that there is a difference.”

He urged Ginger up a small rise. “You smell that?”

Adam sniffed the air. “Water?”

“Um-hmm.” Calvin gave Ginger a little kick. “Come on. This will be fun!”

They cleared the ridge, coming out on a clearing bordered by a long, shallow stream. Calvin didn’t even slow down, letting Ginger run right into the river. The water splashed up all around him, framing him in a shower of crystalline raindrops.

“Yee hah!” Adam shouted. “Come on, Buddy!”

Buddy was not quite as enthusiastic about the water as Ginger was. He charged right up to the stream’s edge, and then stopped abruptly, pivoting on his front feet at the last minute so his side was parallel to the bank.

The shift was so sudden that it caught Adam off guard. He went sideways out of the saddle, landing in the stream.

“Whaa!” he shouted. “This water is cold!”

Calvin walked Ginger up to the bank, dismounting neatly onto the sand. “Boy, I give you a perfectly good horse, and you keep falling off of it.” He smiled. “What am I going to do with you?”

“What would you like to do to me?” The water wasn’t so bad once you got used to it, Adam discovered. The shallow places where the sunlight warmed the water were actually borderline comfortable.

“Tons of things,” Calvin replied. “But I thought we’d start with swimming.” His hand dropped to his belt. “Traditionally, you know, people take their clothes off before they get into the water.”

“Who am I to argue with tradition?” Adam asked. He crossed his arms. “Why don’t you show me how it’s done?”

Calvin grinned. “I don’t even know if it’s what you say or the way you say it,” he said, fingers slowly working his belt open. “But God damn, you get me hard, boy.”

“Let me see.” Adam sat up in the water. “Seeing as I’m not going to be getting stiff any time soon, sitting in this ice bath here.”

From the shore, Buddy whinnied.

“Glad you think that’s funny.” Adam splashed some water at the big dun, who danced neatly out of the way. “I notice you’re not in the water.”

Adam’s attention returned to Calvin, who was slowly working his jeans down over his hips. It was an awkward process, for as he noted, he was already pretty hard -- a long, thick cock jutting forward, fat and swollen with need.

“You see what you do to me?”

“Shame to waste that,” Adam said. “Losing it in the cold water.”

“But I’m pretty hot,” Calvin said. “I got to cool off somehow.”

Adam grinned, his eyes darting up the creek bed toward a deeper pool. “Come over here,” he urged. “I got an idea.”

He slipped into the pool, which was just about shoulder deep. There was a narrow rock shelf along one edge of the pool, covered in a few inches of ice-cold water.

“Come sit here,” he said, patting the stone. “Let your legs hang right down in the water.”

“What about this?” Calvin said, pulling on his shaft. “That’s never gonna last, you know.”

“It will if I make it.” Adam let his tongue trace a lascivious circle around his lips, leaving them shiny pink and wet. “I’ve just got to make sure you don’t get cold.”

“That’s gonna be quite a challenge.” Calvin winced when he stepped into the water, his nipples rearing erect from the cold.

“I’m up to it.” Adam positioned himself so his head would be between Calvin’s legs. “All you got to do is sit down and slide right into my mouth. I’ll keep you nice and warm.”

“This is gonna be fucking awesome,” Calvin said. “If it works.”

His descent to a seated position was awkward -- slippery rocks, frigid water -- but sliding into Adam’s mouth? That was like coming home -- hot and wet and so God damn intense. Every sensation was amplified tenfold, Calvin thought, by the contrast with the icy water. The hard rocks he was sitting on were offset by a soft mouth. The stress and anxiety he’d been carrying melted away when confronted with this calm, peaceful scene.

“God, babe.” He closed his eyes and turned his head up to the sky. “I never knew it could be like this.” His hand, dripping wet, caught in Adam’s hair. “Never in a million years.”

Adam smiled, daring to slip his head back for only a scant second. “Me either.” The return of his mouth, so hot, so close, was more than enough to revive any flagging spirits.

“I want it to be like this,” Calvin said, slowly. “All the time.”

Adam smiled, as best he was able. Calvin could tell from the way the corners of his eyes folded out.

“Not just this, although this,” he said, shifting his weight to push a little further into Adam’s mouth, “is pretty fucking awesome.”

Calvin’s eyes slid down Adam’s body, to where his limbs were floating, just under the surface of the icy water. “It’s not gonna be awesome if you get hypothermia, boy. You start shaking, you get your ass out of there.”

Under the water, Adam made his thumb and forefinger touch, three fingers fanning out about them. Okay.

“The soldier bit might work. I think it will. We’ll give it a shot.” Calvin’s words started coming faster, almost in perfect time with the flickering of Adam’s tongue. “Since we’re gonna have us a firing range and all. But I think you’re gonna have to do a little schooling.”

Adam pulled his head away.

“What?”

“Yipes!” Calvin yelped as his prick splashed down into the frigid water, beating an immediate retreat. “Oh, boy. You’re gonna pay for that.”

Adam blushed. “I’m sorry.” He went to cradle Calvin’s rapidly softening prick with his hands, only to realize at the last drippy second that his hands were soaking wet and ice cold. “But you startled me.” He pushed himself up out of the pool’s depths, to sit on the ledge next to Calvin. “What do you mean, schooling?”

“Well, when we had the guys here, it was pretty damn clear to me that I didn’t know what the hell to do, counseling wise. And I don’t think you know much better neither.” Calvin shrugged. “No disrespect intended.”

“None taken.”

“One of us needs to know something.”

“Agreed.”

Calvin sighed, shoulders relaxing as if a weight had slipped off, unnoticed. “That’d help us be prepared for what all we’re dealing with. And,” he added, after taking a big swallow of nothing, “you’re the one who has school paid for ahead of time.”

“Good point.”

“And if this don’t work out, it gives you something to fall back on.”

“Up, up...” Adam started to protest.

“Wait,” Calvin said. “Hear me out. This isn’t me making plans for you, boy.” A little twinkle sparkled in the corner of his eye. “Not that I don’t do that,” he added, running his fingertips over the side of Adam’s face, sliding down Adam’s cheekbone. “Often enough.”

“But Wyatt said it his own self, didn’t he? Maybe we’ll be out of business before we get started.”

“I don’t think that’s likely.” Adam hadn’t been following the news particularly closely since he’d come to Calvin, but Wyatt and Dave had done a great job bringing him up to speed. “Especially if the vote goes the way I’m afraid it will.”

“I don’t think it’s likely either.” Calvin let his leg trail out in the water, toes ghostly long when viewed through the water. “But I don’t think getting bit by a rattler’s all that likely neither, and I keep a snake bite kit, don’t I?”

“Point taken.” Adam looked over at Calvin. “I don’t want to go away to school.”

“There’s schools.” Calvin shrugged. “Around. I don’t know shit about them yet, but I reckon we’ll find out. Get you a little car for the commute. Maybe a bike.”

“A motorcycle?” Adam beamed. “That’d be so cool.”

“Yeah, I’m not loving that idea,” Calvin said. “You keep falling off of flesh and blood horses. I don’t want to think about you going off a bike.”

“Bikes do what you tell them.” Adam nodded emphatically. “They don’t have a mind of their own.”

“See, that’s why I feel better with you on Buddy.” Calvin grinned. “At least I know one of y’all’s thinking.”

“Smart ass.” Adam reached behind Calvin and gave him a push. “You know what that gets you?”

Calvin went into the water with a massive splash, hat floating on top of the waves as he went down deep.

He came out shaking like a dog who’d fallen off a dock. Drops were flying off of his hair, off his outstretched arms, even off the end of his cock.

“Oh, boy.” Calvin quick stepped behind Adam and hooked his hands under his lover’s shoulders. “What a bad idea that was!”

He tossed Adam into the creek. “How do you like that, buddy?”

Adam had no more than surfaced when Calvin threw himself into the water right next to him, knees clenched up to his belly, a gigantic cannonball.

“Splush -- phew -- phew!” Adam sputtered. “You trying to drown me or what?”

“You shouldn’t start games you can’t finish,” Calvin smirked. “It’s bad manners.”

“Hmm.” Adam caught hold of Calvin’s arms and used them to pull himself close, so he was eye to eye with his lover. They were just deep enough to be floating. One step backward, and Adam could bring them onto a sandy ridge, but right now he felt no need for that. He had all the support he could ever want, right there in his arms. “I don’t start things I can’t finish.” He took a little kiss there, tasting the cool creek water still clinging to Calvin’s lips. “Ever.”

“That’s good. It means I get you set up in school, you’re going to see it through.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“And what do you want?”

“To know I’m coming home to you.” Adam kissed Calvin again. “For you to be willing to take that chance, Calvin. Yeah, it might all go bad tomorrow. But I don’t want to give up today.”

“If we weren’t in the freaking water,” Calvin said, “I could show you how good that sounds.”

“There’s no rule that says we have to stay in the water,” Adam replied.

“Someone keeps throwing me in.”

“I’ll stop if you will.”

“There’s a safe bet, huh?” Calvin laughed. “I won’t do it if you won’t.”

“More like I can’t if you can’t,” Adam said, suddenly serious. “And that works because it’s true.” His eyes flickered up to meet Calvin’s. “I am more than willing to give us my all, Calvin. I think I have been doing that.”

“You’ve done some pretty big things on that account,” Calvin agreed. “Yes.”

“I need that from you.” Adam swallowed. “I need you to be as into me as I’m into you.”

“God, boy.” Calvin went hoarse. “If I were any more into you, I’d go nuts.”

“Then show it.” Adam shook his head. “No more separate beds. God damn what the charters think. They’ll deal, or they won’t.”

“Just like your mother.”

“Exactly.” Adam swallowed. “I don’t want to be with a man who’s ashamed of me.”

“I’m not that.”

Adam stared at Calvin, feeling the water hold them up, cold currents swirling around his legs. His jeans were heavier than heavy now, but that wasn’t doing as much damage to his buoyancy as Calvin’s answer.

“What do you mean, you’re not that?”

“I’m not ashamed of you.” Calvin kissed Adam now, a tender flurry of lips worrying at the side of Adam’s neck. “Not at all.”

“So you’ll show that.”

“It’s gonna take some doing,” Calvin said. “Every time I done this, ever, in my whole life, it’s gone wrong for me.”

“I know.” Adam lost all the traces of his youth right then. Looking in Calvin’s eyes was a man who’d seen enough suffering. A man who understood pain. He’d been there. “It’s not a small thing I’m asking, Calvin.” He shook his head. “Not when it’s forever.”

“I can’t do it alone.”

“No one’s asking.” Adam smiled. “But I do think we’d better get out of this water, or neither of us is gonna be doing nothing.”

They stood on the shore, toweling off with the small, terry rectangles Calvin had stowed in his saddlebag. Standing there, on the sandy shore, red clay stark against a blue sky, gray hillocks climbing skyward in almost every direction, he looked like a statue -- a deep tan torso, criss-crossed with a network of scars and lines, divots and cuts.

He caught Adam looking.

“You sure you want this?” He spread his arms. “I’m no spring chicken, Adam. I’m an old man. Damaged goods.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“You might,” Calvin said. “When you’re up at school, surrounded by perfect guys. Guys your age. Young.”

“And I might get abducted by aliens.” Adam shrugged. “I don’t see the sense in losing any sleep over that.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Time. Time will make that better,” Adam said. “Besides, I like your scars. They tell your story.” He stepped closer. “How’d you get this one?”

Calvin looked down and grinned at the point where Adam’s fingers were tracing a jagged edge scar just under his ribcage.

“That. That was the time I managed to get wedged between the side of a cattle chute and a little baby bull that didn’t want to come out a steer.”

Adam bent and kissed it. “I love that you’re the type of man who cuts the nuts off of cattle.”

He let his fingers slide upward, to a purple, viscous half moon gouge. “This one?”

“Daddy.” Calvin took a deep breath. “Way back when. All them purple ones are him.”

Adam blinked. There were dozens of purple scars, each an inch or so across, crescent shaped.

“Tire iron.” The unasked question answered.

“I love you for standing up to your daddy.” Another kiss. “For surviving his rage.”

Another scar, this one pinkish white and wrinkled. “This one?”

“I should have known better, that day.”

“You know better now?”

“Now,” Calvin said. “I don’t have to consider renting love by the hour. I got the real thing, don’t I?”

“Yeah, you do.” A kiss then, the pair of them hungry and needing. “The absolute real thing.”

“Ain’t nothing like the real thing,” Calvin grinned.

“Wait a minute.” Adam pulled his head back. “You got cut by a whore?”

“Jesus, Adam.” Calvin bowed his head. “I ain’t a proud man. That was a long time ago.”

“No, no, no!” Adam said. “You’re missing the point.”

“And what is the point?” Calvin asked.

“The point is this, that is the hottest damn thing I ever heard,” Adam said. “Imagine you. Getting a guy up to your hotel room.”

“Stealing my wallet,” Calvin interrupted. “Trying like hell to stick me when I tried to stop him.”

“Well, yeah,” Adam said. “That part would suck. We’d have to leave that out. But man, I could be your rent boy.” He raised an eyebrow. “That would be hotter than hot.”

“You are really something, you know that?” Calvin bent in for another kiss, letting his forehead rest against Adam’s when he was done. Their eyes were inches from each other. “Is it going to be like this all the time, having you around?”

“Depends. You really ready for that?”

Calvin smiled. “I sure the fuck hope so.” He took one more kiss. “I really, really do.”

The End