

ONE MARRIAGE THREE WEDDINGS



JENNA HILARY SINCLAIR

I. I Take You to Be My Constant Friend

THE first time Mike and Harry had a drink at JT's Bar, they ended up there by mistake.

"You planned it all along," Harry accused Mike that night, and for years afterward too. It got to be something he said that reminded them of the long years they had traveled together and a time when their world had opened up a little. Just a little, because they hadn't needed it to open very much.

"Like hell I did," Mike always retorted, and though Harry mainly thought Mike hadn't known he was dragging him where he'd never been before, didn't want to go, and would've turned away from if he could've, Mike never actually denied it, did he? So Harry kept putting on his fake sour face and accusing him, even twenty years later when he was sixty-five, and he intended to keep saying it until the day he died. Mike with his feathers ruffled was a sight to appreciate.

The westerly wind blew hot and strong that August day in 1991, and it went with them all the way from northern New Mexico to Amarillo, Texas. They drove away from their small ranch at five in the morning after a pre-dawn feeding of the horses. Harry was behind the wheel to start because he didn't like city traffic; they'd switch off halfway there so Mike was the one who negotiated the elevated lanes of the in-city interstate. Mike poured him a cup of coffee from the thermos they had with them, and Harry took it with a nod.

He sipped carefully because their coffeemaker ran to steaming-hot. "You still mad at me for not wanting to go to Neil's wedding?"

Mike rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Nah. I get it. No, on second thought, you’re a stubborn jackass.”

“Wouldn’t wanna change too much.”

“There ain’t no danger of that.”

That was enough conversation for an hour before sunrise. Mike tipped his hat over his eyes, leaned against the door, and dozed while Harry dealt with the turns through the Cimarron Canyon State Park, and he kept dozing as almost a hundred miles later they skirted the long plain dominated by the ancient Capulin Volcano. Harry didn’t mind; they didn’t often get to drive together, and he liked doing it even when Mike was silent company. The important thing was that he was there. Harry thought of turning on the radio but began to hum to himself instead. Mike stirred and said thickly, “You’re gonna scare the children,” an old joke between them, and then he seemed to go back to sleep.

When they crossed the Texas border and were headed for Dalhart, Mike took over driving, and Harry tried to snooze, but he was wide awake and couldn’t keep his eyes closed.

Even though they were real early in motel-time, they checked into an Amarillo Holiday Inn by ten-thirty, the one next to the Quarter Horse Museum. *Just one room, thanks. One big bed if you got it*, Mike told the desk clerk while Harry stood silent guard over their F-150 in the parking lot, looking away from the transaction going on inside. Seven years of living together in the high reaches of the Seguro Valley had smoothed much of his jumpiness over being in public with Mike, but there wasn’t any need for both of them to be making spectacles of themselves. A man couldn’t be too careful in a big city. He’d have Mike’s back if anything happened, like he’d had once or twice before.

After they dumped their one overnight bag in the room—with two dop kits for toothbrushes and razors, two briefs, two shirts, one half-squeezed tube of K-Y—they went on a determined, let’s-get-this-done search for small equipment, used but in good shape: mowers, generators,

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circular saws, post hole augers, anything Mike might be able to offer from his rental business in the tiny downtown of Elk Ridge. High Country Equipment Rentals was going like gangbusters with city folks pouring in to live among the scenic wonders of New Mexico. Mike's business was pulling in almost as much income as the horse training that was mainly Harry's work. Mike wanted to expand, so he needed more equipment to rent.

They spent that Saturday attending the two auctions that had drawn them two hundred and fifty miles east. The equipment from more than a few ranches was being liquidated at one auction that started at twelve-thirty not far from Palo Duro Canyon, while the other one got going at five o'clock on the outskirts of the fairgrounds.

"It don't seem right," Mike said, surveying a promising-looking stump grinder. "Profiting from their misfortune." It was an inevitable truth that cattle ranching as a way of life was hanging on by its fingernails where it wasn't dead already. Beef prices would never be what they'd been.

"Nothing we can do to help 'em now except buy their stuff," Harry said. "That grinder's in good shape. Best bid on that." Harry stayed in the background most of the time with his hands in his pockets, sometimes in his back pockets when he was feeling a little comfortable and risked being expansive. He followed Mike around from grader to chainsaw to backhoe, offering opinions when asked, and sometimes when not asked.

One of the men helping at the sale came over to them. With him came a tall woman in overalls, clumping across the field in mudboots. A navy blue handkerchief circled her neck. Harry blinked at her.

"You interested in this grinder?" the fellow asked. "It's a good one, a Vermeer model only a couple years old."

The woman added, "Twenty-five horsepower. I used it last month to take out a cottonwood stump when my husband here was tied up with the heifers, and it works fine."

That explained it, then. These folks were some of those who actually owned the equipment spread out around them on the prairie grass, who'd come up against hard times and had been forced to sell out.

Mike pushed his hat back and spoke directly to the woman. "You used it recent? How's it go? Is it easy to operate? I need something that any of my customers can handle."

She put a possessive hand on the engine casing. "It makes a racket, but our fifteen-year-old's worked it fine."

"Then I might put in a bid." Mike tipped his hat to both of them, and Harry did too, before they moved on to look at a tractor. "Hope those two do okay," Mike said quietly. "Life sure can be hard."

The day wore on. The thermometer had busted past the one-hundred-degree mark right after noon, and they both sweated through their shirts. By the end of the second auction the air was hardly cooler even by a degree or two, but they had stocked up to the edge of Mike's budget. Pick-up at each site was extended to the next day, so they agreed they'd load up all their purchases early the next morning.

By that time it was past eight o'clock at night, and they were hungry, hungry enough not to wait while they found a restaurant with chicken-fried steak, Harry's favorite. Instead they stopped at the first fast-food joint they came across, a sad-looking McDonald's that was deserted except for the servers, them, and a mom watching over two kids in the glassed-off play area. Dinner rush must have been over and not expected to start again, because a teenager with an electric polisher was working on the floor already, filling the eating space with its loud hum.

They sat in one of those plastic McDonald's booths where it was easy to slide right off the seat and tackled their food. Harry complained about it being fake and how he'd never eat fast food if he had his choice. "I could make us a roast with potatoes and gravy for what this cost us."

“If you ate more of that stuff you cook,” Mike said, “maybe I could find you when you turn sideways.”

Harry ignored him. “We could eat off what we just spent for half the week, dinners and lunches both.”

“Skinflint,” Mike told him, and then he bit into his second Quarter Pounder.

“Somebody’s got to look at the pennies.”

“I just wrote two checks for more’n a few thousand dollars. I don’t think you got to worry yourself over eating at Mickie Dee’s. We’re doing good, and you know it.”

Harry sent a quick glance to the floor polisher and judged they couldn’t be overheard. “I’m not saying we’re gonna starve, it’s that—”

“You’re bragging on how you’re a better cook than I am.”

One of Harry’s rare smiles emerged. “You don’t mind it.”

“I sure don’t. Consider this your night off. You could have another one if you go to Neil’s wedding next year.”

“Don’t get started on that. Besides, I thought you weren’t so sure he should marry that girl. Or maybe you don’t think you’re ready to be a father-in-law or that he’s ready yet, even though the boy’s almost twenty-five.”

“It ain’t that. Besides, you married when you were eighteen.”

Harry hunched a shoulder, but nothing could ward off the bad memories and the guilt. “I was a fool to do that. Neil’s no fool.”

“I don’t know. Marriage is a big step. Why can’t he just live with her?”

“Like you and me?”

“Yeah.”

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“If he’s gonna do it like you and me,” Harry said, “there ain’t no difference between that and putting a ring on her finger.”

Mike paused in the middle of slurping his Coke, no straw, and looked at Harry over the rim of the cup. Then he slowly returned the drink to the table. “There you go again, knocking me out when I don’t see it coming. You’d think after these years together I’d be prepared. You lay me out flat saying such things.”

Harry was examining a crumpled-up napkin somebody had let fall to the floor. “Well, yeah. There you go.” He cleared his throat. “You were saying ’bout Neil?”

“Marriage is a big commitment. Our way of living is a big commitment. I ain’t so sure Neil’s got it in him for that.”

“You think he loves Courtney?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I’ve never even met the girl, so I’ve never seen them together. Besides, what’s love? And who says how much of it you need to walk down the aisle?”

“Not me,” Harry said. “But I figure folks know it when they see it, and they make a stab at whether it’s enough for marrying.”

“We didn’t do so good with that, did we? We both got it all wrong with our wives.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

Mike contemplated his fries for a while and then with a quick smile looked up at Harry. “But we learned from our mistakes. We’re doing okay this time, you and me.”

“Doing okay so far,” Harry said. “Ask me again in five years. I’ll let you know.”

“Right. I’ll try to remember that if I ain’t pushed you off a cliff in the meantime. I guess none of my worrying’s gonna make any difference. Neil’s gonna do what he wants to do without asking what I think ’bout it.

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Besides, the wedding ain't for another fifteen months, so there's plenty of time for him to know his own mind." Mike looked at him pointedly. "And for you to decide you'll show up."

"At some fancy to-do at a Dallas country club? That's taking more'n a year to organize?" Harry shook his head, hoping that Mike saw how that just wasn't possible. "No way. Every one of those fancy bluebloods there will be talking behind our backs, pointing to the two queers. I ain't putting up with that shit. Nope, you go yourself and then come back and tell me about it. Neil'll understand."

After they balled up the packaging and tossed it, they took themselves off to the biggest U-Haul center in town. The owner was happy to put off closing to take Mike's credit card. They ordered a truck that they'd come back for at seven the next morning. Harry would drive it home once they got it loaded, because he'd won the flip of the coin early that morning.

"I sure could use a beer," Mike said as he drove the F-150 back toward their motel. The city lights not only threw their glare onto the asphalt road, but they leaked up into the sky, obscuring the stars the two of them saw most nights from their house on the shoulder of the mountains. "It's been hot work."

Harry grunted. He was out with his horses most days whether it was cold enough to snap off his toes or hot enough to melt his balls. Mike helped some around the ranch, like Harry tried to help now and then with the equipment business, the way he was doing that weekend, but Mike did take Mother Nature seriously. He wrapped up good in the winter, made sure the AC was on when summer set in, and if there was a rumble of thunder? That man got indoors fast.

"Let's find a bar," Mike said, already looking from one side of the street to the other. "Something that's not too much of a dump."

The section of the city they were driving through was one that Harry knew, some; it was half-warehouse, half-industrial, with railroad tracks

they'd driven over not half a mile behind them. But it was Mike who peered through the windshield like a hound that'd seen the fox. "How about that? Is that a bar? Hard to tell."

Harry saw it too. Who would think there'd be a bar around here? "Think so. Pull over there."

There wasn't any parking lot, but there were enough cars and pickups along the street to prove that the storefront with the barely lit sign reading "JT's" was pulling in the customers. Harry made sure he got to the door first. He pushed it in slowly, but the sound of music and men's voices reassured him even before he saw what was inside. Yep, a bar. JT's looked okay. Nicer than Stubbie's at home, bigger and newer with not-bad lighting, wood paneling, tables and booths, and the familiar yeasty smell of beer overlaying cigarette smoke. There was a small stage tucked to one corner, but it didn't look like it was being used tonight. Straight ahead, a crowd clustered around the bar. The customers mostly wore jeans, and there were more than a few cowboy hats and boots like theirs. Some were well-worn boots, not meant for show but for real work every day.

Harry nodded to himself as he took the first few steps inside. Him and Mike fit in all right here, at what was a country-type bar, and he could handle it. He tried not to show that he was always careful going places with Mike, but he was. Mostly he'd finally got it into his head that they just looked like friends out together, and that was okay because they were that too. But sometimes he could tell somebody got another thought in their head, and him and Mike were looked at cross-wise. That was when he made sure they got out before trouble started. Harry hadn't always walked away from trouble, but that was before he'd set up housekeeping with Mike. He had something to lose now. He'd miss it if he didn't wake up next to his black-haired, pain-in-the-butt fella, miss it like not having air to breathe, so he was gonna make sure nothing happened that would mean he'd ever have to sleep alone.

He would've preferred a stool at the bar, but there wasn't any room, so Harry led Mike over to where a table for two was free by the far wall. The jukebox was playing Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" as they took their hats off and put them on hooks over their heads. He picked up a cardboard advertisement on the table for Coors beer and fiddled with it. There was a picture of the Rocky Mountains on the card that reminded him of home; he always liked it best staying home. Mike bugged him sometimes about how fixed he was to the ranch.

"I should've called Danny this afternoon," Harry fretted.

Mike stretched his legs out under the table and leaned back in his chair, looking like he was in their own back room with a view out the window down to the stream. "He's a good kid. I'm sure he's taking care of the horses fine. Don't worry."

"We should've asked Pete or Lefty to do it, or Floyd, or at least made sure—"

"Floyd's almost eighty, for God's sake, and Pete and Lefty have their full-time jobs in town. Danny's been helping us out all summer near every day. He knows what to do."

"He's only seventeen and don't have much judgment. You remember how you were at that age?"

Mike laughed and scratched his neck. "Young and dumb and full of come, that was me."

That was like every other teenage boy, queer or not, so Harry let that comment go without telling Mike to shut his trap; nobody hearing it could take it wrong. "I guess that's supposed to make me feel better."

"No, it's supposed to get you thinking on other things. I don't want you up all night worrying that Danny's left the gates open and all the horses are running down the highway."

Harry shook his head, put on his frown that he knew didn't fool Mike one bit, and didn't say anything more. Geez, but Mike did like to

flap off his mouth, especially at the end of the day when he was ready to put up his feet and relax. Harry didn't really mind Mike talking, though; he spent too long in his own wordless world of horse's neighs and the wind's howling, of the aspen trees rustling and the creak of the saddle, of his own thoughts that regretted the past and hoped for the future. He liked it when Mike got all wound up.

"Howdy and welcome to JT's." A waiter who filled out his black polo shirt like he was aiming to be the next Mr. Universe stood next to their table. "What can I get you?"

Mike ordered Heineken, and Harry wanted his usual Corona—"with a lime," he reminded, 'cause sometimes it didn't come with. The waiter nodded and tucked the pencil behind his ear with a certain fancy move that caught Harry's eye. Nah.... He glanced away uneasily and saw a couple more guys come through the front door with big grins like they were real happy to arrive. They were greeted with shouts from across the room; seemed like at JT's folks knew one another. Knew one another pretty good from the way they were hugging hello.

"We're getting the crowd early tonight," Chad commented, because that's what his name tag said.

Across the table, Mike was sitting up real straight all of a sudden, and he was chewing on the inside of his mouth. He let go, looked up at Chad, and asked, "You get a good Saturday night crowd?"

"Darling, you wouldn't believe. There won't be space to move in another hour."

Harry was pretty sure he must've heard that wrong, what with all the noise, the new guys being talked to, and the music and all. That wasn't a word he heard much. He didn't even call Mike darling. He sure as hell hadn't ever called Charlene anything like that, though he hoped his wife rested in peace. Darling?

Harry wanted to look at Chad some more, to squint up at him, 'cause there was something not right here. But he didn't. He didn't want anybody staring at him, so he sure wasn't going to call attention to himself by getting into anybody's face.

Chad didn't seem to be in that big a hurry to leave. What, was he aiming for a bigger tip by being friendly? He shifted his weight to his right hip and asked them, "Is this your first time here?"

Mike was the one who answered. Harry couldn't talk when he was thinking so hard. This really did look like an ordinary bar to him, except for.... And that hugging. "Uh, yeah," Mike said, "it is."

"How'd you get word?"

Mike shrugged. "We just drove by."

"Sure, whatever you say. I'll get your beers."

Chad took himself off and Harry watched him take his tight-assed leave, but he quick caught himself and returned his gaze to the table. His thoughts were racing a mile a minute, and his mouth was dry. He risked a quick look up and around, gulped, and went back to studying his fingers gripping the edge of the table. It couldn't be. There wasn't a woman in sight.

Mike leaned in toward him across the table. "Harry, I think—"

"Hold off there," Harry said roughly. He needed to get away fast to where he could think clear. He stood up, pushing his chair back so it scraped against the wood floor. "I gotta go take a piss."

"Wait a minute. You need to know—"

"Gotta go, Mike."

He stalked across the bar, skirting the dance floor as if stepping on it would break his back, but then he gratefully noted the familiar shapes of two pool tables on the other side. He didn't let himself look at the bodies

of the men playing, didn't let himself look at anyone at all. The music had changed to some guy singing "Love's Got a Hold on You."

There wasn't another soul in the men's room when Harry stumbled inside. He went straight to a sink, bent over, and threw water in his face.

Jesus! They were in a goddamn gay bar!

He got a paper towel, wet it, slapped it to the back of his neck, and leaned heavily on his hands, one on either side of the faucet. How'd this happen? They'd just been driving down the street, minding their own business, had a thirst for a beer, and....

Harry didn't know whether he believed in a God or not; some events in his life made him think maybe there was one, though, and now here was an instance that told him God had a quirky sense of humor, to send him and Mike to this place.

Mike. He straightened in a hurry. His Mike in a gay bar, where he was feeling pretty comfortable, no doubt. Harry knew that in the years they'd been apart, Mike had found his way to more than one of these while he'd never stepped foot in one himself.

He stopped by the row of urinals, unzipped, and let it out in a hurry. He was tucking himself in when a young fellow stepped into the bathroom. Harry noticed right then that there wasn't any door closing them off from the rest of the bar, and not anywhere else, either, including across the three stalls. He needed to get out of there. It wasn't his imagination that he heard the young one say, "Sorry I missed the show," as he hurried by.

Journeying back to the table was eye-opening, now that he let himself look. Guys were standing close for sure, and there was one fella over the pool table who was showing another a shot while both of them leaned over the felt, not keeping any distance apart. There was even one couple in a corner with their arms around each other, no mistaking, and in another few seconds they were probably gonna kiss, except Harry ripped

his eyes away from the sight. After years of ignoring, denying, hiding, and then coming to terms with his own hankering for men, after finding a haven and a home with Mike, after knowing for sure that bars like this existed but deciding they weren't part of his world, it wasn't that he was shocked at seeing men like him and Mike so casually putting themselves on display. It was just that... he was shocked at seeing men like him and Mike so casually putting themselves on display.

Harry managed to get himself around the dance floor—where nobody was yet, but he was beginning to imagine there would be some fancy footwork going on soon—and flung himself back into his seat as if it was the only sane spot in the middle of a loony bin. Mike was holding his head in his hands, his elbows propped on the table, and his shoulders were shaking.

“What’s with you?” Harry asked.

Mike lifted a face alight with laughter, and his eyes looked like he'd been laughing so much he'd come close to shedding tears. “Holy shit, Harry, do you know what this place is?”

“Sure I do. It’s a goddamn queer bar.”

“A gay bar. I can’t believe it.”

“You been planning on getting me here this whole trip, haven’t you?”

“What?”

“You stopped here deliberate.”

“Like hell I did. I had no idea. I’ve never heard of a gay bar in Amarillo, have you?”

“I wasn’t exactly listening for one. But if you’d known this was here, you probably would’ve been at it, right?”

Mike didn’t mistake his meaning. “You mean back when we were living in Oklahoma with our families, right? You know I don’t go to—”

“I know you don’t now. But before.” He’d thought he’d got over his jealousy from those days, but seemed like maybe not.

“I’m too busy with life to be thinking of places like this anymore. And too busy with you. You and your six foot two give me more’n I can handle all on your own. Not to mention the other inches you got.”

Automatically, Harry looked around for eavesdroppers.

Mike reached a hand across the table but stopped short of touching him. “You don’t have to do that here,” he said gently. “Here’s where we don’t have to hide.”

He stared down at Mike’s fingers, splayed out toward him. “I know.”

Mike brought his hand back to his side of the table. “But you’re real uncomfortable here, aren’t you? Listen, how about if we finish these up quick,” he nodded to both beers on the table, that Harry hadn’t even noticed, “and go on our way. You don’t need this aggravation.”

If somebody’d given him a penny he’d have taken Mike up on that offer. But he didn’t have a penny, he had his man sitting across from him—the best-looking man in all of JT’s—who’d given up the high life and the men on the side to live with Harry, who’d stayed true to Harry and what they’d decided they wanted to do together. Hell, he had a mortgage with Mike. That’d been one of the hardest things he’d ever done, going to the lending office and sitting next to him signing papers, knowing for sure that the woman across the desk was aware they were together that way.

He looked across to the group in front of the bar, sorting out impressions. There was a bartender like every other bartender in the country, serving up a beer on draft. There was a man drinking a whiskey talking to some other man as they both leaned on the bar. No big deal. There was the youngster from the john, gesturing to another man not much older, but solid-looking, with dust on his boots and a hat on his head. They laughed. Maybe there’d been a joke told. Or something better ’cause, as Harry watched, the younger fellow put his hand on the other one’s waist,

and kept it there, and they were both smiling. No big deal there either. Harry knew what Mike's hand on him felt like.

Sure, it'd be easier to forget they'd ever stepped foot in JT's, but maybe Mike had missed his visits to gay bars. Not for the men he'd met and had sex with on those nights, but for other reasons, right? Life was settled and quiet in the Seguro Valley where they lived, just the way Harry liked it, and he thought Mike liked it that way too, but maybe a steady diet of quiet wasn't so good for a lively, peppery man like Mike. Maybe it'd be a good thing for him to visit one of these now and then, to make him, well, happier.

Harry couldn't have formed that thought seven years before, or even two years before. He figured his heart hadn't been big enough. But him and Mike, they were gonna stick, and he knew Mike wasn't gonna leave him for some jerk he'd pick up on a Saturday night.

But mainly, Harry didn't have any trouble seeing Mike happy, even if it took some effort to make it happen. He had it in him to do that now. He thought.

"Nah," he said, turning back to Mike even as he was wondering if this was a really dumb thing to say. "Let's stay. For a while at least."

Mike sure hadn't expected to hear that. His forehead wrinkled when he said, "A while? Are you sure?"

Harry made a show of picking up the lime and squeezing the juice into the bottle. "Yeah." The beer fizzed the way it should, and he pushed the rind down into it. It tasted the way it should too. He set the bottle down and wiped his mouth. "Say an hour." He looked around and wondered how much would change in an hour.

"Okay, if that's what you want."

"You want that too?"

"Sure, I'm fine."

Even though the music was still playing and there was more talking going on than in any ordinary bar he'd been to—he should have realized that first thing, then he would've known something was wrong—still he felt the silence that dropped between him and Mike. After a minute or two of drinking, he couldn't let it go, or Mike might think he hadn't meant it when he'd said he'd stay.

“Uh, is this.... I mean, I always thought bars like this were... glittery. Fancy-pants and those balls that twirl round.” Awkwardly, he indicated a circle in the air with his finger.

“Some of them are,” Mike said, hunching forward. “I been to one in Little Rock like that, and San Antonio. But there's all sorts, really.” He looked around. “This one is low-key. Not much going on.”

“You're kidding. This is low-key?”

Mike grinned. “Well, it is early on Saturday night. That waiter said—”

“I know what he said.”

“Along about midnight or after, even in a place like this, there might be some goings-on that would... that would lift your dick.” He grinned wickedly. “I was gonna say curl your hair, but here it's okay to come out with the truth.”

Harry shifted in his chair. Just Mike saying that had accomplished the deed, except that since he'd hit the men's room his dick had been paying attention anyway. JT's made him aware of everything. Knowing that the men here wanted to get into another guy's pants—no, the truth, Mike had said—get into another guy's ass was having a certain effect on him.

Chad was right, because over the next half-hour more customers poured through the simple front door, and it seemed to Harry that a party had broken out when all he'd thought he would get were a few Coronas and an eyeful. He was looking; there wasn't any mistaking that. At first he

felt shy. These weren't pictures of men from a porn tape that him and Mike sometimes watched together and got hot over, when afterward they'd go after each other for slam-bam sex. But Mike was looking too, with a soft smile that he turned on Harry now and then, as if to reassure him. So Harry figured it wouldn't be taken wrong if he watched. Besides, he didn't want to seem like some hayseed from the sticks even if that was what he was. Better if he got himself familiar with the way some men like him spent their weekend nights, right?

The waiter emerged from the crowd with two more bottles, set them down, and picked up the empties. Mike said, "How about a shot with this? Harry, you want some Jim Beam with yours?"

"Nope, I'm good."

"Okay, one shot coming up." Chad hoisted his little tray and asked "Having fun yet?" Then he retreated.

Mike chuckled and Harry frowned. Mike picked up his new beer and held it out over the table, inviting a bottle-kiss, so Harry took his own beer and gave it to him.

"You bet I'm having fun," Mike said as the glass clinked. "Never thought this would be how we'd end the day. You doing okay over there, sweetheart?"

Ah, hell. Mike whispered that in his ear now and then in their most private moments, when the lights were off and he was feeling mushy. Harry had got over pretending he didn't like it, when hearing that always made him fiercely glad he was living with Mike and nobody else. Sometimes Mike robbed him of thought and words completely, leaving only feeling so deep he could never get to the bottom of it. Mike made Harry feel like the deepest ocean in the world.

Harry swallowed. Now wasn't the time; besides, Mike knew full well the feelings he pretty much hid from everybody else. "Yeah. I'm

okay.” Which wasn’t exactly enthusiastic, but Mike was used to him and his ways.

Like Harry had thought, soon the music changed, and there was a stampede to the dance floor. Once, years ago, Mike had asked if he’d ever dance with him, and Harry had told him “no way” as definite as he could. He meant to stick by that, but the fact was that he’d never seen men dancing together like he was now. He hadn’t even imagined that two fellows could fit together quite that way or do a two-step so fast and together-like. More important, that they’d still look and act like men doing it.

He glanced at Mike and wondered if he’d ever danced with a man, but he knew the answer to that. Of course he had. Mike’d got to where they were by a whole different route than Harry had traveled. Mike had a fine body, slim-hipped, that would’ve attracted any roving eye. He stripped down good even now in his forties, and he knew how to use that body. Two nights before, Mike’d shown Harry once again he knew how to use it, mounting up and keeping him flat on his back, on the edge, ’til Harry had groaned out his coming, his fingers clenched on Mike’s hips. There hadn’t been anything finer than that, except for when a couple seconds later Mike had given it all up too. Harry’d fallen to sleep thirty seconds later, even before Mike had lifted to pull them apart and taken his place on his pillow. He hadn’t wanted to, ’cause that’d been one of the times he’d had words to say, but there’d been no way he’d been able to keep his eyes open after the workout Mike’d put him through, hands and lips and ass and heart, that dick-riding son of a gun. There wasn’t anybody else like Mike.

He bet Mike was a good dancer. Bet whoever he danced with had got hard and had wanted to screw him right there on the dance floor. Harry glanced at the men gliding and sliding along; nothing like that was going on now, but he could imagine it, some guy grabbing Mike ’til they were crushed against each other, his big hands going down under the belt to

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Mike's ass, rubbing and rubbing together, their breath coming fast, Mike's dick all plumped up and his balls crinkling—

“Earth to Harry. What's got you going? Hey?”

Harry jerked upright. Mike was waving a hand in front of him. Shit! He'd been breathing heavy—he still was—his cheeks felt hot, and it wasn't because of the beer. His eyes fell on the Heineken, half-gone already.

“Where are you going?” Mike wanted to know when he shot to his feet.

“I'll go find your whiskey. I'll be right back.”

He moved carefully, keeping his arms at his sides, his walk steady, his eyes straight ahead, because he didn't want his escape to be out of the frying pan and into the fire. Nobody there was gonna get any accidental signals from him; he wasn't interested in anybody but the man he'd come with. So Harry did his own waltz around the dance floor and eased up to the crowded bar. By that time he had his breath back and wasn't thinking of doing Mike right then and there. Or at least, not much.

It took a few minutes to get the bartender's attention—finally, an ordinary “what'll it be, bud?”—but soon enough he had Mike's drink in his hand. He'd handed over the dollars to pay for it and was stuffing another one in the tip jar when he felt a hand slip around his side.

He whirled around, feeling some of the whiskey spill over his fingers, not able to stop the startled growl that left him feeling foolish when he saw who it was. “Hey! What're you doing?”

“Came to keep you company, that's all,” Mike said.

“I ain't a kid.”

“That's mine, ain't it?” Mike took the shot glass from him and then, as smooth as silk, as if he did it every day, he slid his other hand into

Harry's. "This too." And then he tugged. "Come on over here. Let's watch the dancing."

He could've jerked away from Mike, but he didn't. Instead he grumbled "Just like you to make me spill good whiskey" and let himself be pulled along, following with no fuss. He was rewarded when Mike stopped on the edge of the dance floor and gave him a deliberate, sex-heavy look from under lowered eyelids that said a bunch of things all at once. That Harry better not go wandering far, 'cause he was Mike's. That his blood was burning the same way Harry's was. That even though they'd had a long, hard day and had been up since four in the morning, they were gonna find their way to each other across the mattress waiting for them at the Holiday Inn.

They stood there watching men in motion, one good country song with a snappy beat after another sending everybody around and around with hoots and hollers. Mike sipped Jim Beam now and then. Then he offered it to Harry, and their fingers slid away from each other when he took the glass. After he gave it back, it felt awkward, somehow, standing on his own. All around him there were people who'd found somebody, maybe only for the night like Mike used to do, maybe for a lot longer like the two of them had.

He stole a glance to the side, but Mike seemed to be concentrating on the music. It was hard for Harry to be convinced it was safe here; once he'd been spit at by an old man who'd seen them exchange an innocent hug before they were even together, and a lot worse than that had happened at other times. But it seemed dumb to be here and not join in; besides, if they were the only two guys not dancing, not touching, not kissing, anybody checking them out might get suspicious and think they weren't like the rest of the men here. When they were.

So it was Harry this time who put out his hand and took Mike's. Mike didn't put up any fight. He didn't turn and look at Harry but kept watching everybody else, though he smiled that slow smile Harry had

fallen for long before. That was good enough for him. He went back to watching the dancing, feeling his man's solid, callused hand in his.

One song ended, another began, and Mike's mouth was up against his ear. "What do you say we call it a night? Let's go back to the motel and do what we do best."

Harry turned and came about as close to kissing Mike in public as he'd ever done, that's how close their mouths were. "What we do best? You mean me baling hay? Or you balancing your checkbook?"

If anything, Mike got even closer, as close as could be with their joined hands pulled up between them. "I like it when you're all sweaty and come in from baling hay."

He knew that about Mike, and his body remembered it with a hot, sexual rush of power. He swallowed hard. "Stop that. You got me going something fierce."

"Nobody here cares, Harry," Mike said softly.

"Yeah, but.... Come on. Let's go."

They detoured by the tables, found Chad, and paid up. Got their hats down from the hooks and put them on. Went to the door but stopped, turned, and looked around.

"I never thought this would happen, that's for sure," Mike said.

"Don't go getting your hopes up. This ain't gonna be a regular thing."

Mike raised an eyebrow at him. "It ain't?"

"No way."

"Then I better take advantage of this opportunity right now."

Mike stepped up to him, took off Harry's hat, and kissed him. Right then and there in the middle of Amarillo, Texas. In front of fifty other men who weren't looking, and maybe in front of God who was, who was

laughing at the joke he'd played on them. Mike's lips were sure against Harry's, familiar, and like always his taste got Harry all riled up. Even more than he'd been. Right here, it was okay. Nowhere else out in the world, but here, okay. Harry clutched Mike's waist and pressed against him.

Mike's hat fell off.

A minute or two later a draft of hot air washed over them as the door opened. "Oh, sorry," somebody said, not sounding surprised, or disgusted, or as if he thought they were making spectacles of themselves. But he was enough to break them apart.

But Mike didn't let him go, not completely. He kept them close enough to say, "Wait a minute. I want to say thanks for staying. And everything. Even if it's just this one time."

Harry flicked his thumb against Mike's cheek. "Glad to do it. But now you'd best get your hat. It's time to go."

That night, they danced in their own way in the queen-sized bed at the Holiday Inn. When they finally rolled apart, sweaty all over again, Harry murmured, "You sure you didn't plan all that?" right before sleep pulled him under.

II. *Before These Witnesses*

NEIL, it turned out, didn't understand why Harry was dead set against coming to his wedding.

"It's only one day," he pointed out. "Can't you do it for one day?"

Neil and Courtney had flown into Santa Fe on the Friday after Thanksgiving, rented a car, and driven up to Elk Ridge. They did it so Courtney could meet Mike and Mike could meet Courtney, but Harry had a feeling he was involved in the trip too. He was the father-in-law-to-be's partner, or live-in-lover, or boyfriend, whatever the hell it was being called these days. That couldn't have been the easiest thing for Neil to tell her, that his daddy had taken up with another man. Courtney must've been real surprised, right? And now for sure she'd be checking him and Mike out, to see if they were suitable for her to let into her life. Maybe she was scared of them.

He hated this sort of thing, being looked at and judged. If he could have, if Mike wouldn't have had strong words for him if he'd tried it, he would have spent the whole visit somewhere else, like out in the barns and stables and corrals with his horses, who never cared two flaps of their tails 'bout his sex life.

But Mike wouldn't let him get away with that, so Harry was there at the front door right behind him when Neil and his fiancée drove up in a Toyota Camry in early afternoon. Neil and Mike shook hands, two peas in a pod though Neil really was over six feet tall and Mike only pretended he was, ignoring that quarter-inch he didn't have. Then they fell into a short, definite hug, and Harry was real glad to see that. Neil was Mike's surviving, younger son, and the two of them were still working on

rebuilding trust after a lot of hurt feelings that'd grown up over the years. Then Mike got introduced to Courtney, and they shook hands with all four of them standing crowded in the foyer of the house. Finally Neil said, "And this here is Harry."

Courtney was a pretty girl, though Harry reminded himself not to call her girl to her face, 'cause Neil had told him on the phone that she wouldn't take kindly to that. She was set on being a professional woman and working on her own career in marketing. "She stands on her own two feet," Neil had said with pride.

She didn't stand very tall, Harry thought as he shook her hand, as she probably wasn't even five feet high in her socks. Courtney looked up at him from under her long bangs with big brown eyes, but he couldn't tell if there was fear or worry in them. Neil's gal—Neil's woman—was on the quiet side. Thoughtful, Neil had said, but then you never could believe anything a man said about the woman he wanted to marry. Harry would see for himself, wouldn't he?

A tour of the house came first, and then they spent more than an hour walking around outside showing off the ranch. Courtney was a city girl born in Dallas, Texas, and raised there with plenty of money. Her daddy was some sort of real estate tycoon who had hired Neil into the firm once the boy had graduated from OSU, and that's how the two of them had met. She didn't have a clue about life outside the bright lights and hard sidewalks, so she oohed and aahed just watching old Jigger chewing on some hay. When Neil said they should all go out riding the next day, she did look scared then, but she said real determined that she'd like to try that. Mike said she didn't need to, that not everybody who came to visit them needed to ride, but Courtney said, "Neil says it's not only Harry who works with the horses, but that you do too."

"That's so," Mike admitted.

"And Neil says the three of you always go riding together when he visits."

“Remember the first time I came out here?” Neil asked. “That ride when I wouldn’t even look at Harry?”

“Not one of your finer days,” Mike said.

“I was seventeen. What can I say?”

“Anyway,” Courtney went on as they left one stable and headed toward the covered arena they’d put up the summer before, “I understand that riding is something the three of you do a lot. Whenever Neil’s here. So if you don’t mind, I’d like to learn.”

Harry saw Mike glance over at him. Even though the ranch was where Harry spent his days, this was Mike’s show, so he’d been doing a lot of listening the past hour. He’d let Mike take charge of leading Courtney around.

“Harry? You’re the horse trainer. Would you teach Courtney to ride?”

He got on better with animals than people, and he winced inside to think of spending hours with her, but if Mike wanted him to, he would. Though it seemed to him this gal probably wanted to learn ’cause she wasn’t willing to let Neil out of her sight. She had her fingers dug in deep. Neil was a great catch, the equal of her fancy family and big bucks.

“Suppose so,” Harry said.

“Thanks,” she said. “That’ll be great. And maybe when we have kids,” now she looked a tad shy, “it would be wonderful if you could teach them as well. Can you imagine how they’ll want to come out to the ranch to visit? It’s so beautiful here, and they can run and play outdoors. There’s so much to see. It’d be ridiculous if they could ride and I couldn’t. Please teach me.”

Mike’s smile was about as wide as the valley they were in, stretching from one arm of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the other. Harry figured Mike fell in love with Courtney that minute. And him, well, she was showing them something right there, wasn’t she? With the whole kid

thing, pretty much saying flat out that Mike was gonna be a grandfather with rights. Maybe Neil did show some sense picking her. His smile was even bigger than Mike's.

When Mike and Neil and Courtney came back from a quick run into town so she could see Mike's storefront, Harry had a mare saddled up and waiting. In the fading daylight there was enough time for Neil's gal to get the feel of being on top of the horse and to prove she wasn't scared to go on. A pretty good sport, Courtney was. And she sure hadn't blinked over him and Mike. Probably Neil had prepped her. He must've done a good job.

The visit went on real good. For dinner they ate Thanksgiving leftovers sent home with them the day before by Danny's mom. They showed Courtney photo albums from when Neil was a boy, and they had a good talk over fine wine.

As he pulled back the quilt over their bed that night, Mike told Harry, "I can understand what Neil sees in her."

"You think he loves her?"

"Yeah. I think they got that. Don't you?"

Harry thought over all he'd learned about loving and not loving through the years. He settled back against the pillow and kicked off the sheet to cover only his feet. "Yeah," he said. "They probably do."

Harry spent a solid hour with Courtney in the arena ring the next morning, and she did okay. He put her up on the horse that Mike'd wanted to name Harry's Twin when they first got him. He was thin and rangy with a stubborn streak, and his coat and Harry's hair had just a hint of red left in the brown as the years had faded what might've once been brighter. Only problem, Mike'd said with a smirk, was that the horse was a gelding and Harry was a stallion. Mike had the sore ass and smile to prove it. So Harry called him Buster instead.

After lunch the four of them spent another two hours riding an uplands trail, something Courtney had never done before and liked a lot. The afternoon finished off when they all piled into Harry's truck so him and Mike could show off the peaks and the green swales and where the deer fed at night. It was a fine day. So it wasn't an easy thing that night for Harry to try to explain why he still wouldn't consider going to their wedding.

The four of them were sitting in the back room, the one Mike and Harry tended to spend their time in when they weren't out earning their livings, where the wall of windows brought the Ponderosa pines and the lodgepoles and the aspens right into the house and showed the sparkle of the riverbed when the sun was setting. At night the mountain that rose up past the river got blacker than black, but the stars were there too, bright and constant.

Courtney and Neil were side by side on the sofa where Mike liked to stretch out and pretend to watch TV before his eyelids fell. Mike was across from them in a fine leather recliner with his feet up, and Harry had taken a seat on an upholstered chair that should have been sent to the junk heap. He'd heard Neil whispering in Courtney's ear not to mention how ratty it was, as it was some sort of family heirloom. Well, true enough.

"The wedding's just one day. Can't you do it for just one day?" Neil asked, not sounding much like the big-money executive he told them over the phone he was.

Harry shook his head. "Don't think so."

"But we'd love to have you there," Courtney put in from where she was snuggled up against Neil. "I want you to meet my parents. Besides, Neil would miss you if you couldn't make it."

"And I'll miss seeing you married, but...." Nobody had mentioned the obvious, not in the day and a half the kids had been there. Neil had long since got used to things the way they were, he'd had to, and Courtney

had been treating him and Mike as if they were just another couple, as if meeting two fathers of the groom, sort of, instead of one was normal.

But it wasn't normal, no matter how much they wanted to pretend it was. Harry wasn't pretending; Harry knew about the real world.

Courtney stretched out her little hand toward him. "Isn't there any way we can convince you?"

"Come on, Harry," Neil said. "It won't be that bad. We want you in the pictures. I want a picture of you and Dad together in tuxes."

Harry didn't let his reaction to that show, 'cause he liked the gal and didn't want to let on he thought the man she was gonna marry was an idiot to think anything like that would happen.

"You haven't been to Dallas, have you?" Courtney wanted to know. And then she went on, "You could come a few days early, and we'd show you the city."

"Honey," Neil said, "I don't think Harry is a city kind of person. But you know Fort Worth is right next door, the gateway to the West. They've got historic stockyards and—"

"Let him be," Mike said real definite.

Courtney looked embarrassed. Neil looked pissed off, and Harry didn't know that he could blame him. Mike, he figured, knew better than to push him; he was staring outside the window into the dark as if there was something interesting going on out there.

Harry sighed, and that sure sounded loud since nobody was talking right then. He stood up and asked, "Anybody want anything from the kitchen? I'm getting myself a beer."

Nobody did, so to the refrigerator he went, got a cold one, popped the top, and then carried it to the back room without drinking from it. Nobody had said anything while he was gone. He stood in the doorway

holding the can and said, “Look here. I’m not aiming to ruin your big day by not being there. I figure if I am there, that’ll ruin things.”

“Oh yeah?” Neil asked. “How do you see that?”

“I know you’re trying to be nice. But Neil, we’re queer, your dad and me. Get it?” He saw Courtney rock back as if she’d been punched, but what could he do? It’d taken him a long time to accept that facts were facts. He went on. “What do you think’ll happen if me and your dad show up together at the wedding? This is your day, yours and Courtney’s. Everybody should be looking at how pretty the bride is, at her dress and stuff she’s wearing, and talking ’bout how you’re promising to her and will make a fine husband. They should be appreciating how good you two look on the dance floor together.

“But if I’m there, they’ll be whispering about Mike and me. It’s the way folks are. We’ll steal your thunder, us two who only want to be left alone. They’ll be wondering if we’ll embarrass everybody there by acting like fools or if we’ll be dumb enough to dance with each other, and they won’t take their eyes off us.”

“No,” Courtney said faintly, from deep against the sofa cushions.

“Yes,” Harry said right away. “You’re a sweet gal, but not everybody’s been set up by Neil to take us on the way you have this weekend. The feelings against us on your day might rise up pretty bad, because folks might resent us being there, think we have no right. You wanna turn your wedding into a circus, then you kidnap me and force me there. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else to say, so he left by the side door and went outside onto the deck. Winter hadn’t landed yet as there wasn’t any snow on the ground, but still the wind blew through his shirt with a steady, chilling force. He shouldn’t stay out long, should go right back in, but he wasn’t ready to talk to anybody. And with him up on the deck, they could still see him through the windows, so down the steps he went onto the dirt and around to the other side of the house.

Once under the pine tree that stood guard by their front door, he stopped and was surprised to find he still had the beer in his hand. Well, hell.

He didn't have to look through the dark to know what was around him. Their place, his and Mike's. Bought, some paid for, the rest mortgaged: the house with the three-car garage and the fireplace up in the master bedroom; the fifty-acre pasture in the front with the best forage for miles around dotted with the horses he was raising and training; the workshop where Mike stored and repaired his rental equipment; the memory of when him and Mike had walked the land for the first time and said they were gonna live out their lives there together.

Most of his life it'd seemed to him that the world was beating on him, even before he'd buried the first gut-wrenching thought that maybe he was queer. But when him and Mike had settled in the valley, it'd got better. He'd felt safe there. Maybe it was living within the wings of the mountains, or maybe it was how the peaks drew his eyes up to the sky every single day. He didn't know. Well, maybe he did know. It was mainly Mike, wasn't it? But Neil was right. He wasn't a city man.

The sound of a door opening and a shaft of yellow light on the ground told him he wasn't alone anymore. He'd know Mike's footfalls anywhere and was relieved when he heard him and not one of the others.

"Hey," Mike said softly as he came up to him. "Here, put this on."

Harry gave Mike the beer and shrugged on the quilted flannel jacket.

"Can't hide from nobody around here," Harry grouched.

Mike laughed softly. "Did you know you and me always stand under trees when something's bothering us? You aren't ever hard to find."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, it's so. Don't worry about this. The kids understand."

"Hope so."

“You put a good spin on it, saying you was doing it all for them.”

He looked at Mike full on. The starlight loved his face, showed him like he’d come straight from heaven, and Harry knew pretty well that he didn’t deserve the man. “You think they know I’m a pansy-ass coward?”

“No,” Mike said with some tenderness. “And I don’t either.”

“All those people.”

“I hear you.”

“I’m leaving you to it, ’cause I can’t do that, stand up in front of all them.”

“I know. Shhh, I know,” Mike soothed him, but even the fingers stroking his cheek couldn’t do the job.

“Can you imagine it, that church where they’ll be married, and you and me next to each other?”

His voice broke, and he hardly understood why, except that suddenly that was what mattered to him: not the embarrassment, not the potential danger, and not the risk of ruining Neil’s big day. Somehow, like fire dropped from the sky, he knew what he couldn’t face was standing next to Mike in a church when the kids said “I do.”

It wasn’t that he wanted it for himself. He didn’t. He hated the thought of being married again, ’cause his first marriage had been a long string of the worst things, everything good slammed upside down on its head to make the world spin. What he had with Mike wasn’t that, wasn’t all the bad things. It was something so different that nobody in the whole country had a word for it, not one that said it right, anyway. Partners didn’t cover half of it.

He grabbed Mike’s hand and pulled it away from his face, not ’cause he didn’t want it there, but because he needed something more solid than fingertips. He needed the whole hand and needed to remind himself that he had the whole man too. But he didn’t know what to do and didn’t know

how to say what he was feeling inside. It was all a jumble to him. So he squeezed Mike's hand tight and looked him in the eye, hoping that Mike saw and understood.

Maybe he did and maybe he didn't, but they came together in a quiet kiss that eased him: the wind rustling the pine cones, the cry of a hawk riding the currents and, despite the weight of the world's disapproving eyes, Mike's lips on his.

He couldn't take as much as he wanted—Mike had always drawn instant need from him, body and the nameless ache inside—because the kids were here. So Harry murmured, "I'm okay," and drew back.

"Sure?" Mike asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for the jacket."

Mike gave him a quick smile and lifted the can. "Thanks for the beer."

"I'm gonna go check on the horses."

"I know. Go on."

He left Mike and went to his favorite horse, the pinto Patch, who he'd never sell, taking more comfort from his snuffling and his soft muzzle. Harry stayed in the stable long enough that when he went back to the house the lights were off and Mike was snoring, but his side of the bed was turned down.

III. *Forsaking All Others*

THE second time Mike and Harry had a drink at JT's Bar they ended up there by coincidence.

For years afterward they accused each other of setting it up deliberately, mostly in fun, because they both knew it wasn't true. What'd happened was one of those things in life that nobody could explain, like how mamas loved their babies no matter what, how disease struck some folks and not others, or how sometimes a person just knew when he'd met the man he would love for the rest of his days. Life was mysterious that way.

Right after Thanksgiving, the folks at a big ranch south of Lubbock, Texas, had bought four horses from Harry that they wanted specially trained. By mid-January the mares were ready to go, and Harry was happy to leave the ranch to Mike and load the horses in the van to head east for the delivery in the middle of the winter's coldest weather. If the horses worked out, he might be looking at more business, and word would spread that he knew what he was doing. He put the van in gear before first light, made sure the heater was turned on, and left Elk Ridge humming to himself. He'd be gone only one night.

He drove down the Wolf Ears Ranch road right past noon and spent the afternoon shaking hands with the foreman and the workers, turning over the paperwork, and putting the horses through their paces for the owner. It made for a long day, since he wasn't overly suited to be his own promoter; Mike was the one who did that all day every day, did it real good. But Harry tried his best.

The foreman invited him over to his house for dinner, and for a couple of seconds Harry actually considered saying yes. But there'd been a thought floating in the back of his mind that suddenly shoved its way to the front as soon as Steve mentioned food and drink. Amarillo was only two hours from Lubbock, due north on Interstate 27, and he knew where he could get a good beer.

So Harry said no thanks and took himself back to the van, shocked that he'd somehow decided to go back there. That bar. That gay bar.

A truck stop along the road caught his eye an hour later, and he pulled in to get some meatloaf and mashed potatoes. From where he sat eating, he could see the coin phone on the wall by the restrooms. He thought of calling Mike and telling him what he was doing. It seemed like maybe he should, so Mike didn't get any wrong ideas about what this meant when Harry told him about it later. It didn't mean nothing except that Harry wondered what JT's was like early on a Wednesday evening in winter. JT's had been on his mind on and off since they'd stumbled into the place six months before; it might've been old news to Mike, but to him the bar was about as familiar as downtown Tokyo.

He felt uneasy; Mike would understand, right? Seemed that Mike understood most things, except for those notable times he didn't. Those times generally led to cursing and throwing stuff and gratitude that nobody lived near them to hear the shouting, and then a cool-down time that led to some of their best times on a mattress.

Well, there wouldn't be any need for the shouting, because he wasn't doing anything to cause it. Harry had the man he wanted. It was just that.... Hell, he didn't know what it was. But there was a bar filled with men like him sixty more miles up the road, and he was aimed toward it like a bird dog pointing at a quail.

When he put down money for the check, he went over to the phone and picked up the receiver, but there was no dial tone. He pushed down the plunger a time or two but nothing happened.

“Sorry, that phone’s out of order,” his waitress called to him. “There’s another one over by the gas station.”

Harry didn’t bother to go there. He got back behind the wheel and headed north again.

He parked two blocks away in front of a warehouse and walked through the frigid gloom with his hands plunged in his pockets. He didn’t see anybody else on the streets, but he looked to make sure. Situated where JT’s was, it didn’t seem that anybody else would be around at this time of night except folks headed for that door.

When he pushed it open, nobody looked up from their beers or cigarettes. Nothing much had changed except there was a string of Christmas lights over the cash register in the back, and there wasn’t near the crowd there’d been before. A quick glance around showed that one of the pool tables was in use. There were two groups of men sitting at tables, scattered couples occupied the booths, and a line of four sat with their backs to him at the bar.

Half of him was relieved: *See, nothing going on here*. But the other half was disappointed: *Gee, nothing going on here*.

This time he walked straight across the empty dance floor to the bar, feeling as he did that there was a spotlight on him even though he kept telling himself there wasn’t. He kept his hat on, though, and told himself that he was one dumb fuck.

He made it all the way over and slid onto a barstool at the end of the line, with two empty seats between him and anybody else. He had a view of the entire space behind him if he looked in the long mirror in front of him.

“What’ll it be?” the bartender asked.

Over the next half-hour he slowly got comfortable. His spine relaxed some so he could slump, and his shoulders stopped itching. He’d been half-afraid that he’d get hot and bothered like he had the first time him and

Mike had been there, but that didn't happen. There wasn't much of anything to get hot and bothered about. The bartender exchanged a few words with him now and then, but nothing that any other barkeep he'd known wouldn't say. Nobody was feeling anybody up in the corners, like before, though the couple in the closest booth had moved so they were both on the same side. That was when he realized they were the same guys him and Mike had seen before, the men who'd got such a back-slapping reception when they'd walked into JT's that hot August night. It was just the two of them now, though, and they didn't seem to have any hesitation trading tonsil juice. Seemed they couldn't stop kissing, slow and like they meant it all ways. He looked away from them, not wanting to peek in on something that sincere.

Over by the pool tables, the four men playing all seemed to be friends, even if friends had a different definition than Harry was used to, involving big hugs, slaps on the ass, and arms around shoulders pretty much nonstop. He tried to work out who was with who—that is, if anybody was with anybody, or maybe if everybody was with everybody—but he finally decided they were playing a game that he didn't know the rules to.

Harry looked down into his beer. He felt like he was eleven years old figuring out what went where. It didn't seem right for him to be spying on folks, and he didn't like it. Why'd he come here anyway? They couldn't teach him anything he didn't know, and it wasn't like he wanted to know anything more than what he knew with Mike. There was the life these men led, these guys who could stop by now and then 'cause they probably lived close, and then there was the life that he led. There wasn't any overlap.

"Are you here on your own?" somebody asked behind him.

And then there was this question about what he'd do if somebody besides Stan the bartender gave him words or wanted to keep him company aiming for more. He'd been giving off the *stay away* message

without even being aware of it, he guessed, but not everybody took the hint.

Slowly Harry swiveled around. “Yeah, I’m on my own,” he told the ordinary-looking, middle-aged fellow he confronted. “But I ain’t here for anything but a drink.”

It wasn’t that he was afraid. Here was just another man, even if he was a mirror Harry could look in and see himself. The Lord knew that’d been the worst thing for him for a long time, but not anymore.

It wasn’t that the thought of sex with a stranger didn’t stir him deep down, ’cause he sure wasn’t dead below the belt. It did, the same way the porn him and Mike got now and then stirred him.

It was just that he wasn’t tempted in any way that truly got through to him. This guy—any guy—wasn’t worth it.

The stranger nodded and went away to the other end of the bar where he took a seat, and Harry turned away as he was left to himself again. He slowly swirled the bottle before he drank and then set it down on the wet ring it’d made.

He’d sat in a lot of bars like this, dumps mostly, when he’d lived in Oklahoma with his family. But back then he’d been filled to bursting with a need to lash out at somebody, maybe even himself, and he’d been soul-deep afraid of being found out, and every part of him had hated every other part of him, especially his dick, and especially how he couldn’t pull himself out of the hole he’d dug for himself.

He didn’t sit alone anymore. He went out to Stubbie’s with Mike, and they had a good time there. Back when they’d first moved to Elk Ridge, they’d made sure to go to Stubbie’s together most of the time, in case there was trouble, but now they went together just because. The folks in the valley had figured out about his and Mike’s living arrangement, and past those first difficult months, there hadn’t been problems.

Through the bottles of whiskey that stood in front of the mirror, he scanned the room behind him. JT's was better than Stubbie's, wasn't it? A million ways better than Joe's. Everybody here was like him and Mike. Nobody was gonna judge him; nobody was gonna whisper about him. If he wanted to drink on his own, it seemed that he would be allowed his space. At least on this quiet night he would. And if he wanted to push some man against the back wall and hump against him there, that'd be okay too. Except there wasn't anybody here he wanted to hump.

Stan changed the channel on the TV, and Harry spent some time watching an NBA game. He was on his third beer when the door let in a blast of cold air that made him shiver; some idiot was holding it open and letting all the heat out. Didn't they know it was winter?

Irritated, he turned around.

There was the man who Harry lived with, frozen in the act of pushing open the door, his mouth half-open, staring across the room at Harry with an *I-can't-believe-it* astonishment.

What the fuck? For a couple seconds Harry didn't really believe that was Mike standing there, 'cause how could that be? Mike was back in their house having worked all day in town. He'd spent some time caring for the horses before he ate dinner, and he'd made sure that Patch hadn't slipped out of his covering blanket. Hadn't he?

What the hell is my man doing here? He could tell the same thought was going through Mike's mind about him; the hard line of suspicion that creased Mike's forehead didn't look so good on him. The feeling didn't sit well on Harry, either, a tight fist in his stomach to think that Mike would....

"Hey, buddy, close the door!" somebody hollered.

As Mike let go and the door shut behind him, he never took his sight from Harry, and so Harry saw it: that moment when he decided not to give in to his worst imaginings. Mike moved a step forward and then stopped,

took his hat off, looked off to the side, and scratched over his ear. Then he looked back at Harry, and there was a question in his eyes this time.

There'd been a time when Harry'd worried plenty over all the screwing around Mike had done before they'd got together and moved to New Mexico—with the teacher-guy, and even worse the coach-guy, and plenty of other guys who'd stayed at the Super 8 motel in the panhandle of Oklahoma where Mike had been night manager. For a while Harry's heart-clenched jealousy had done bad things between him and Mike. But he hadn't had thoughts like that in a long while.

Looking at Mike across the room, Harry released his worst, instant worry. Mike wasn't there for hell-raising any more than he was. He did his best to answer the question Mike was silently asking by reaching out and grabbing the back of the empty barstool next to him, swinging it around, and raising his eyebrows. *Come on over and sit next to me.* Mr. Ordinary had wanted to sit there, and now Harry was doubly glad he'd sent that fella on his way. Here was a man who was anything but ordinary.

Harry watched while Mike's eyes lit up, and he couldn't help but smile in return 'cause, damn, if him and Mike weren't about as solid as the Rocky Mountains, there'd be a hell of a lot of explaining to do and hell to pay for it too. But it was hard to pretend he was Sunday-morning-concerned when the two of them were suddenly grinning at each other across thirty feet of space.

Mike got his feet unstuck and started over; Harry stood up and welcomed him by giving him a real hug, not a pool-buddy hug, but one that carried the meaning of years with it.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Mike said at exactly the same time as Harry said the same thing, and in the same half-serious, half-joshing way. Harry couldn't help but let out the chuckle in him at how ridiculous this was. Naturally that wasn't the same as Mike's reaction, 'cause of course that man laughed out loud.

“Been here hoping somebody like you would show up,” Harry said, rolling his eyes to show he didn’t really mean it.

“Then it’s a good thing I came, I guess,” Mike said. He eased himself up to the bar and ordered a Heineken, and neither one of them said anything until it was set before him. Once he’d wet his whistle, he said, “No, really, why’re you here?”

“Not much reason,” Harry said. “I got done with the horses about dinnertime, then decided to drive up here to see what’s going on. I only ever been to a place like this once before, you know.” There. Simple and true.

Mike seemed to get it. “Yeah? What do you think?”

“It’s good,” Harry said. “Real nice.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. It was livelier that weekend we were here before, though.”

“It’s true there’s not much going on right now. So, how’d you find your way here?”

Mike pushed his hat a couple inches from where he’d put it on the counter. “I got a call from Morgan this morning right after you left, saying he’d heard that Bernice was in the hospital and didn’t have but a few days to live.”

Harry sat up straight. “No.”

“Yeah. So I hit the road right away to see her. I know she’s my ex-mother-in-law, but I didn’t feel right letting her pass without, you know, making an effort. After what happened with Marvis and all.”

“So you left the ranch—”

“Don’t worry,” Mike told him. “I let Danny and Floyd both know we were gone, so they’re taking care of things.”

“How’s Bernice?”

“They’re saying she’ll pull through now, and the doctor even said she might go home by the beginning of next week. When I left she was talking up a storm with some old lady friend who’d come to see her.”

“Well, hell. You didn’t need to go at all.”

“No, but I’d been putting off that trip, so it was okay. I kicked around town a little, had dinner with Sadie and her family, and decided I’d come here and see what’s going on. Just like you.”

And that was pretty much that. What more was there to say? It was a shame about Bernice, that she’d been sick, but it was sure like his Mike to go high-tailing it across a couple states to see her. Was there any way that Harry thought Mike’d not done that? That instead he’d abandoned the ranch and drove five hours to sit in a gay bar and have sex with some guy who wasn’t Harry? Nope, he didn’t. He sure didn’t think that any more’n he himself had come here with circumstances in mind other than having a few beers.

The basketball game between the Spurs and the Pistons was still going on, in the third quarter, and those two guys in the booth were still cuddling up a storm, and the same Corona beer was sitting in front of him. Harry drank and sent a sidelong look at Mike, who was reaching for some peanuts on the counter. He wondered if Mike believed those circumstances that Harry’d told him, the same way he believed in what Mike had told him, pretty much all the way... but never knowing the absolute truth for sure.

There never was any hundred percent in this thing they had going between them, what he didn’t have a name for, ’cause he wasn’t a mind-reader now, was he? For all he knew, every lunchtime down in Elk Ridge Mike was having sex with somebody or other behind the counter of High Country Rentals.

And for all Mike knew, Harry was spending his days sneaking down to the shed in the back pasture where he met up with some lover boy he

couldn't do without. It was possible. Neither one of them was with the other every hour of every day.

There weren't any solemn promises between them to keep or to break, except for those that they'd made when they signed their mortgage and on every day that they woke up together in the same bed. Their private promises emerged from Harry's bruised heart and from the way Mike's dreams had been kicked down and tromped on time and again.

Harry grabbed his bottle and drained it. He never did like just anybody keeping him company, but Mike'd been doing it—and putting up with Harry and his ways—for years now. Mike, he was good company. The best.

"You wanna play pool?" Harry asked.

"Sure," Mike said. "Let's play."

There was a table in their back room at home, but it didn't seem like they got a game going as often as they'd thought they would when they'd bought it secondhand in Raton. Besides, there was something different about playing the game somewhere else, when the music was going and other folks might be around to see a good shot or maybe boo a bad one. On top of what everybody could hear with the clack of the balls, with the "good aim, hotshot" they murmured to each other, they could go on with their own silent game. Mike could sight down the cue stick and then glance up at Harry with meaning in his eyes for a second or two that sent a shiver down to all the right places. Or Harry could lean over a ball and say, "Here, now, watch this." He'd draw back all the way with the cue and hit sharp, hard, and firm; he'd send the ball spinning, and it'd dart across the felt and fall with no question into the corner pocket like he'd known it would. Harry only said that to Mike when he was sure of the shot.

They always had great sex after pool at Stubbie's.

There was a table free, so they claimed it and started a game of eight-ball, and they drained one ball after another for hours. Halfway

through game four, which Mike eventually won, two other guys came up and challenged them to some team play, but neither of them was interested. They kept going through to their best of seven.

Along about midnight Harry won that last game. They settled up their tab, shrugged into their jackets, and grabbed their hats. Then, like they'd done before, they stopped before they opened the door to the outside.

Mike said, "Want to stay the night at that same Holiday Inn?"

Harry turned up his collar. It was bitter cold out by now. "Nope."

"Nope?"

"I wanna stop at the first place we come across so I can jump your bones," he said, matter-of-fact.

The look on Mike's face right then—*I can't believe you said that out loud where everybody could hear you*—was worth the five hours of driving they had before them tomorrow.

A rundown Best Western on Imperial Street fit the bill for what they had in mind, and not ten minutes later they were turning the lock on Room 11. Mike dumped a blue athletic bag on the bed right away and reached into it, and then he turned around with his dop kit in hand.

"Take a look."

Harry already knew what he'd find and what he wouldn't find, but he made a show of looking through Mike's toothbrush and toothpaste, his hairbrush and his deodorant, his razor and shaving cream. Nothing else was there.

He handed the kit back. "I knew that," he said. Then he bent and opened up his traveling case.

"Here," he said, and he handed over his own evidence. He hadn't brought any lube either.

“I knew that too,” Mike said, a smile tickling the corners of his mouth. “But damn. That pretty much ruins what I had in mind for tonight. I was fixing to nail you good.”

“You idiot,” Harry claimed, and he tackled him, pushing him down onto the bedspread. Mike laughed as they bounced on the too-soft mattress together, and it was such a good sound that Harry wanted to hear it again. He brushed his fingers along Mike’s ribs.

Afterward, after lovemaking without lube but with hands and mouths and bodies that craved each other—always had, always would—Harry cradled Mike against his side. It’d been a good day. He’d delivered his horses and carried a sizable check in his wallet. He’d been back to JT’s gay bar in Amarillo by himself, proving to himself he could do it, that he could own the truth of what he was.

He ran his fingers through Mike’s thick hair, noting the gray strands.

“Go to sleep, sweetheart,” Mike murmured, and he rolled his head against the pillow.

Harry dropped a kiss on Mike’s forehead that he probably never felt ’cause he was back in dreamland already.

Yep, a good day all around. He’d found out something about Mike and him that he hadn’t known before, that he hadn’t known was important: even though he couldn’t read Mike’s mind, it didn’t matter. He knew his man’s heart.

Life sure was mysterious that way.

IV. *In Good Times and In Bad*

WHEN the call came from Neil that late March evening, Harry was passing by the phone in the kitchen on the way to a slice of Mrs. Smith's lemon meringue pie. Mike, who normally answered their calls, was upstairs doing something and hollered down, "Get that, would you?"

So Harry picked up and did the *hello, how are you* with Neil and then found himself being pushed into a corner.

"I know you don't want to come to the wedding, and that's okay," the boy told him. "But you still like Courtney, don't you?"

"Sure I do," Harry told him, eyeing the closed door of the refrigerator where his pie was. "She's a fine woman."

"She likes you too."

"Okay." Harry squinted up at the light fixture. They needed to stock up on some more hundred-watt bulbs.

"So the two of us are inviting you and Dad to come to Santa Fe to spend a few days with us."

"What?"

"Don't let me down, Harry. You know Dad won't go unless you go with him."

Oh, yeah? What version of Mike was Neil remembering? "I don't think—"

"Come on, Harry. Courtney wants a chance to get to know her in-laws a lot better."

“Then come on up here to the ranch and—”

“Without infringing on your hospitality again.”

“I don’t know, Neil.”

“Please, Harry. You know how women are. She’ll think you don’t like her or you don’t approve of us getting married.”

Harry knew when he was beat. Besides, he didn’t feel good about missing the wedding this coming November, so here was a way he could maybe make it up to the kids. “When’d you say you want to do this?”

“Next weekend, April third and fourth. For two days. Will you do it and bring Dad with you?”

“I been gone too much lately. Seems I’m always paying somebody overtime to come and—”

“Maybe it’s time you thought about getting some full-time help. Dad says the ranch is really successful and that your horse training is in high demand.”

“He said that, did he?”

“Yes, he did. It’s probably time to expand so that you can take off with Dad on the weekends now and then without worrying so much. You’re the owner. You shouldn’t be tied down by what you’re doing. It should free you up.”

“You want me to hire somebody so I can spend a couple days in Santa Fe with you and your girlfriend?”

“Fiancée, Harry. Soon-to-be wife. Who doesn’t want to think you don’t like her. What do you say?”

Neil was as persistent as a bee buzzing around a flower. “Okay, okay, we’ll come.”

“Great. Now, we’re going to treat you both to a fancy dinner Saturday night, so bring suits, all right? And we’ve already got you a room booked at the Hilton resort.”

“The Hilton?”

“It’s not going to break the bank. We got you a good rate.”

“I suppose Courtney’s used to fine places like that,” Harry said gloomily.

“She is. I can’t very well ask her to spend the weekend at a Motel Six. We’ll be staying at the Hilton too.”

“Okay, okay. I got the picture. How ’bout I go get your dad now so you can—”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll talk with him in Santa Fe. Come on Saturday, and we’ll meet you in the lobby of the Hilton at noon, okay?”

“Okay, we’ll—”

“See you then.”

Harry looked at the suddenly silent phone in his hand as Mike wandered into the kitchen. He went straight to the pot of decaf coffee that they put on each dinnertime and poured himself a cup. “Who was that?”

“A steamroller.”

“What?”

“That boy of yours.”

Mike didn’t take kindly to Neil calling and not wanting to talk with him, but then everything changed when Harry told him that the two of them would be on their way to Santa Fe in a week. He might be excused for thinking Mike’d been handed the key to a bank vault when he heard the news.

“I suppose you don’t want to go, and we should call him back and tell him so,” Harry teased him. His hand settled on the phone.

“Hell, no!” Mike said. “Give me that, you asshole.”

“Nope. I know you want to keep working since it’s your busy spring season with the rentals and all...”

He did like seeing Mike get all worked up.

Seeing how happy Mike was at the prospect of spending time with the lovebirds helped Harry look past his reluctance to leave the mare he was working on for a rancher down by El Turquillo and helped him not mind so much the extra he’d be spending for Danny to take over most of the weekend. Though it seemed to him, he told Mike one morning as he stuffed their sheets into the washing machine before they each took off for the day’s work, that they should just go ahead and adopt the boy or maybe take on responsibility for his college tuition come September, the way he was always hanging around.

“You’re gonna miss him when he’s gone,” Mike said.

“Yeah, ’cause I’ll have to find somebody else to come work out here.”

“You need a ranch manager. A foreman,” Mike told him as he kissed him goodbye. “See you tonight. I’ll pick up our suits from the cleaners on my way home. You think I should get a couple bottles of wine and bring them with us? Courtney liked that chardonnay we had when they were here.”

“Why don’t you get one of those Mercedes-Benz cars they got for sale over in Taos while you’re at it?”

“You ain’t no help at all. I’ll get chardonnay and some cabernet. We can have the kids to our room for drinks before dinner, don’t you think?”

Off they went the next Saturday morning to Santa Fe, and Harry was sorry to see the week end because of all the amusement he’d got out of seeing Mike looking forward to the trip. The weather was fine, the sky blue, the grass greening up for all the animals, and the drive, as always, went fine. He liked being cooped up in a truck with Mike, and the two

hours on the road went by real fast. They'd flipped for the wheel and Mike'd won, which was fine with Harry, 'cause he had a feeling they'd get there faster with Mike driving.

"We got to do this more often," Mike had said the night before, his elbows planted on either side of his dinner plate. "But just for us next time, travel somewhere 'cause we want to. We aren't getting any younger, you know."

When Harry peered out the windshield at the Hilton hotel on the north side of the town, he whistled and then made himself a promise that he wasn't gonna let folks with more money than sense make him feel like less of a person just because he'd never stayed at a Hilton before. But the place sure was a sign of the big bucks Neil was making in his good job in Dallas. Well, he hoped that went on forever. The boy'd had some hard knocks in his life, not least the day when he was seventeen and his dad had told him he was queer and was gonna be living in another state with Harry Sanderson from then on, while Neil stayed in Oklahoma. Neil'd squawked and kicked pretty much like any young colt would, and Mike had put out a lot of effort to smooth things over. Harry had too, but it'd taken time before the boy had felt comfortable around them and they'd felt comfortable with him.

Things had been okay with the three of them for years now, almost like a family, and if Harry was pushed up against a wall with a gun to his head and forced to admit it, he'd say he was looking forward to seeing Neil and maybe even to this time away from work.

The Hilton, though, that was another thing. As Mike took the pickup down the long drive that curved around banks of flowers to the front door, the spot between Harry's shoulder blades prickled. It couldn't be helped, could it? If this was where the boy wanted them to stay, this was where they'd be. He frowned away the fellow in uniform who seemed to want to open the passenger-side door for him and got out on his own. The fella said, "Welcome to the Santa Fe Hilton, sir." Harry got their one suitcase

out of the truck bed and slung the garment bag with the suits over his shoulder while Mike went on ahead to check them in. He went inside through the revolving door and stayed by the bank of elevators, trying to look like he was comfortable.

The mirrored elevator took them up to the ninth floor with a whoosh and an easy upward glide that felt like a jet engine at work. Their room was nice, not worth whatever they were paying, he was positive, but clean with everything looking brand new. Mike ran a brush through his hair in the gleaming bathroom, Harry changed his traveling shirt for a nicer one—one that Mike liked, white with pearl snaps and thin brown lines—and in five minutes they were ready to go back down to the lobby and meet the kids.

The lobby was a lot more than that. It curled around the elevators and opened to a sit-down lounge with upholstered sofas and armchairs around coffee tables. A big TV with CNN going was up against one wall, and the sun was shining through the sheer curtains that showed a garden outside. Though there were a couple of fellows in suits talking over at one end and an older man and woman sitting on a red sofa, there wasn't any sign of Courtney and Neil.

"We're on time," Mike said, checking his watch. "They're late."

Mike settled on a sofa, and Harry took the armchair near it, and they waited. A waitress came by and asked if she could get them anything, and they said no. Harry started counting the suitcases that rolled by the marble floor on the way to registration.

"Dad!"

That was Neil. Mike and Harry stood up. Mike got a hug and Harry a handshake.

"So, where's Courtney?" Mike asked. "Still putting on her makeup?"

But Harry spotted her across the lounge in navy blue pants and a fluffy white blouse. She was hugging the man and woman who'd been waiting on somebody like they'd been. Mike must've seen her too.

"Now don't get on your high horse, either one of you," Neil said. "There's somebody over here we'd like you two to meet. Come on."

Neil put his hand on Mike's elbow and steered him in Courtney's direction, and Harry didn't have much choice but to follow even though he had a sick feeling in his stomach. What had Neil got them into? From the looks of the people with Courtney, they were wondering the same.

When they got close the three of them stopped, and it was about the most stupid Harry'd felt in a long time, staring at those folks, not being in the know, and waiting for somebody to say something.

"Mom, Dad," Courtney started with, and those two words explained a lot. "I'd like you to meet Mike Pruitt, Neil's dad, and his partner, Harry Sanderson."

The words came out of her mouth real easily, like she'd rehearsed them. In those strange seconds that followed, when it seemed the world had come to a standstill, Harry thought that she probably had. He liked to live quiet. He liked to live without making a fuss and without throwing the fact of him and Mike being together in anybody's faces. That was a big part of the reason Mike was going to Dallas for the wedding and he wasn't. Didn't Courtney get that? He hadn't signed up for this, and he sure as hell wouldn't have come to Santa Fe if he'd known they were gonna be made fools of.

And then Neil said, "Dad, Harry, let me introduce Courtney's mom, Julia Maddox, and her father, Charles Maddox."

A roaring rose up in his ears. The way Harry was taking them in, he saw them taking him in, looking at him and Mike together, their flickering glances measuring, wondering, and judging. His face burned. He felt like they were cutting him open with their eyes and peeling back his skin.

What this Charles guy must be thinking: *He's a homo? Of course. I should have known. He looks it. I wonder if he's the man or the woman? Filthy, what they do together. How did my baby girl ever get involved with these people? Why couldn't she have met and fallen in love with somebody with a normal father and mother, so we wouldn't have to pretend to be polite to these two? Ungodly, disgusting perverts.*

God, he was gonna puke.

He wanted to get out of there. He wanted to strangle Neil for doing this to him, for putting him and Mike on show when Harry'd made clear that he wasn't some horse to be put out in the ring to be gawked at. Sure, Courtney had to know about him and Mike, but that didn't mean the knowing had to go any further, to these city people from Dallas who'd gone way past the grades in high school, who'd never sweated for the food on their table, who'd for sure never met anybody like him and Mike before, and who must be thinking of them as freaks.

He saw Charles look away and take a quick breath; he was pale white, like his hair.

For an endless span of seconds, Harry balanced on the edge of walking out, because he was so fucking mad at Neil and shamed to be tricked like this, and he hated how he was put in the role of the unnatural man with the unnatural lusts. It would've been easy to walk out. One turn on his heel, and he could show the kids and these people his back; he could walk past the doormen and out into the Santa Fe spring air.

If he could have, he would have, but there was no way he could do that to Mike.

He couldn't look at Mike now, no way, but he didn't have to. Harry knew Mike's heart, didn't he? Knew how much it meant to him that Neil was on good terms with them and that Courtney had said there'd be grandchildren shared with them, and Harry knew what a relief it was to Mike that his son had found somebody to love. Love, that was important to Mike.

Harry took a breath and kept his feet planted solidly on the carpeted floor. There were things he'd signed up for without even knowing it those years ago when they'd made their plans, and it seemed to him that he was still finding out what they were and what kind of man he was. He wasn't a man who turned his back on the fellow who was counting on him. At least, he'd grown into that kind of man, the kind who stayed when he wanted to run.

Now was one of those times, he guessed. He'd get Neil back someday, put salt in his coffee since he couldn't really murder the boy who he thought of like a stepson, taking the place of the son he'd lost. He stayed where he was, behind Mike's right shoulder.

Courtney's mother said, "Oh, my, this is a pleasant surprise. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Pruitt," though it was hard to tell how much effort that cost her. Even so, she put her hand out like it was no big deal and she didn't mind that Courtney was marrying into a family like theirs. Maybe she was a good actress. Mike took her hand with one of those smiles of his, so it could be he wasn't feeling things the way Harry was. That'd be good. He didn't want Mike to be tied in knots inside.

"And Mr. Sanderson, how do you do?"

Everything about this little bird of a woman shouted money and easy living, including the feeling of her soft fingers against his, but Harry did what he knew he had to do and shook her hand. It was a lot harder to take Charles' hand, but he did it right after Mike did, the briefest sliding of palm against palm and then away, Courtney's father probably as relieved to get away from Harry as Harry was to get away from him. He was a John Wayne type, big-boned and slick, who no doubt had the back of his neck powdered when he got a haircut.

"I know this is unexpected," Courtney said, an understatement for sure, "but Neil and I have something to talk to you about, and we thought it'd be easier if all six of us were together to do it."

“Is everything all right?” Julia asked right away, with true mother-feeling in her voice.

“It’s fine, Mom. Why don’t we all sit down here, and we’ll let you know all about it.”

Harry sure didn’t like one bit not knowing what was going on. What the hell kind of trouble could those two have got into? But this Courtney, she seemed to have things in hand, directing her mom to the chair next to her when she and Neil sat down on the sofa. Julia was the only one who did what she was told, though. Harry and Mike and Charles stood over the other three. Harry sure as hell wasn’t sitting first.

Courtney looked up at them. “I’m not saying a word until we all get comfortable, so sit down, why don’t you?”

“Come on, Charles. Nobody’s going to bite,” Julia said, and she nodded to the other sofa. He gave in right away and sat closest to her, their knees almost touching. Mike took the cushion next to him, the two of them feet apart, though Mike’s eyes were on the kids, worry showing no matter what Courtney had said to reassure. That left one chair, the one opposite Julia. Harry would’ve preferred to stay upright, but he wanted to not call attention to himself even more, so down he went. He felt like a zebra in a herd of mustangs and sat back against the cushion. He pulled his feet in too, trying to make less of himself than was really there.

“First off,” Neil said, “thanks for coming today. I’m sorry we had to pretend to get you here, but it all worked.”

“All you had to do was ask, Neil,” Charles said. “You know we’d do whatever we can to help the two of you.”

“Same here,” Mike added. “You know we’ll lend you a hand whenever you need it.”

“Thanks,” Neil said. “We know that, and Courtney and I are both so lucky to have your support. But we don’t really need it right now, at least not the way you mean.” He reached next to him and took Courtney’s hand.

She looked about fit to burst from excitement. “What we wanted to tell you was.... Go ahead, honey. You tell them.”

“We’re getting married this afternoon,” she said, the words tumbling out one after the other. “At four o’clock in the garden here at the hotel, and we want all of you to be there.”

“What?” her mother gasped right away. “What about our plans? The ceremony by the lake, your dress, your attendants, all the people we planned to invite? What—”

Neil held up his hand to stop her. “There’s more,” he said.

“The dress is upstairs,” Courtney said. “Really, in a way this is all about the dress. I’ve always dreamed that I’d wear Grandmother’s dress for my wedding, but if I don’t wear it now, I don’t think I’ll fit into it for a while.” Her dimples showed.

It was like being whipsawed, being pulled from the hole he was hiding in with his anger and then out into the sunlight with this news. Hell, a baby. It must be early days since Courtney wasn’t showing at all. Harry heard Julia gasp, but his eyes were on Mike, who looked like the sun was dawning. But Charles was saying, “What? What? What do you mean?”

“You’re going to be a grandfather,” Julia told him. Then she jumped up and hugged Courtney, who by now was squealing like a kindergarten kid. Mike got up, and Harry wasn’t gonna be left alone down there, so he was on his feet when Mike pounded Neil’s shoulder and said, “You rascal. Not very good planning, but congratulations.”

Harry got swept up in a hug that he didn’t expect from Neil—“You’ll make a good daddy,” Harry managed to get out—and then got another hug from Courtney, who seemed to be a hugging machine, the way she was going. There was a lot of rapid-fire woman talk he didn’t even try to follow, about when the baby was due, and when did they know, and how was she feeling, questions that Courtney seemed fine with answering. But then there came a pause that Neil filled right away.

“The wedding’s all set,” he said, “except for a few details. For instance, I don’t have a best man.” His eyes fixed on his father. “Dad,” Neil said, “would you do it? Be my best man?”

Harry wished he had some sort of bottle he could pour Mike’s look into, or he wished for once that somebody was taking a picture. But his memory would have to do, to recall what it looked like to have Mike’s difficult, painful years of being a father rewarded in one question. Right then, Harry managed to forgive Neil more than one small part of what he’d done that day.

“Sure, son,” Mike managed to choke out. “I’d be real proud to do that for you.”

And then there was a handshake, long and vigorous with both Mike’s and Neil’s eyes glistening, and finally another hug.

That was nothing compared to what happened when Courtney asked her mom to stand for her. “Matron of honor” was what she called it, and for sure her mom was a matron ’cause she had to be close to sixty. The two women bawled as if they were sadder than they’d ever been, when it was just the opposite, one of many things he never had understood about women.

It was a lot of fuss, all this telling and asking and love being thrown around. Harry stood back from it as best he could without actually leaving, not knowing his place and feeling almighty uncomfortable under the stares and the fond smiles that folks passing by dropped on them. Weird thing was how Charles stood back pretty much like Harry, with his right hand in his pocket.

Once all the news was sorted—“Only the six of us for the wedding?” Julia wanted to know, and that was the truth of it, something she seemed hard put to believe—Neil said there was a table waiting for them in the restaurant. The plan was to have lunch together, take a break to get dressed for the wedding, and then do pictures, because a photographer was

coming an hour before the ceremony. And then, he said with a grin, “We’ll go outside and get married. So let’s get going with lunch.”

The hostess led them toward a round table next to windows looking out onto the garden, where in a couple hours there’d be a wedding going on, hard as that was to believe. Harry sure hadn’t come to this town expecting that. He’d been dead set on avoiding that wedding, certain his decision was the right one even though it wasn’t easy, and now here Neil and Courtney were, taking that decision out of his hands. His throat tightened at the thought. Anger wanted to surge up from his clenched belly, but he wouldn’t let it. There was no need for him to act like those women, feelings all over the place.

Neil sat next to Courtney, and Charles held the chair for Julia to sit down in and then took the seat next to her. That left two chairs for Mike and Harry, side by side, the way they were in truth, but the way Harry hadn’t ever figured would be shown in public before people he’d never expected or wanted to meet.

“Harry?” Mike said.

He picked the seat next to Courtney and left the one next to Charles for Mike.

Courtney’s glowing eyes. Neil’s arm around her shoulder. The waitress coming with menus. The water being poured into goblets. Mike next to him, talking pretty normal to everybody. Harry swallowed. He had to make an effort, and he did, ’cause he told himself that this was a good day in some ways, one him and Mike were always going to remember. They’d have a drink and ask each other, “Hey, remember when Neil dropped his bombshell?” The wedding bombshell, anyway. The other bombshell was growing in Courtney’s belly right now, and someday would be running around their house in Elk Ridge. Harry would have him up on Buster soon as could be.

“You know if it’s a boy or a girl yet?” he asked Courtney real quiet.

“Not yet,” she told him.

“Bet you a dollar it’s a boy,” he said, pulling up a smile.

“You’re on,” she said, and then she offered him her hand to shake on it.

After that it was easier, maybe because he tuned in to Courtney and Neil’s high spirits on their special day. A double special day, and though he knew this baby hadn’t been planned on, he sure was gonna be welcomed and loved. If blowhard Charles had his way, the kid would be crowned King of England right off. Julia, though, she seemed to have more sense.

And Mike, well, Mike waited ’til the waitress was taking their orders before he turned to Harry and said, low-toned, “This wasn’t what you wanted, I know. You all right?”

“Yeah,” he said right away. “I’m fine. Can’t believe you’re gonna stand up for your boy.”

That brought out the pride and the plain happiness in Mike, pretty much what Harry had aimed for, and that was a real good thing.

The lunch ended, and they all left to go to the elevators and then their rooms. Neil caught up with him in the lobby and slung an arm around Harry’s shoulder, what he didn’t want much, but he didn’t shake him off. “You should be grateful to me, Harry,” Neil said as they walked along.

“Oh, yeah?” Grateful wasn’t the word Harry would have used. Unless it was that Neil should be grateful Harry felt so strong on Neil’s daddy that there was no way he was gonna spoil the day by giving his kid a black eye that minute.

“That’s right. Courtney really wanted to get you and Dad tuxes to wear for the wedding, you know, same as I did for the pictures, but I talked her out of it. You get to wear your suits instead.” Neil fake-punched him in the side. “You owe me for that one.”

Thank God for small favors.

In the short hour before the photographer showed, while him and Mike took showers, shaved, even got rid of the wrinkles in their suits with the in-room iron, Harry worried about what he was supposed to do at this wedding. What he should say, where he should stand. Plus he was gonna have to find something to say to Charles sooner or later, especially afterward when they all went out to the fanciest restaurant in Santa Fe for the wedding dinner.

Right before they were set to leave their room, Harry stood in front of the bathroom mirror, fussing with his tie. Mike came up behind him.

“You look good,” Mike said. He rested his chin on Harry’s shoulder and wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist. Harry put his hands on top of Mike’s.

They stayed like that for a bit, looking at each other in the mirror, not saying anything, swaying some, and that little while went a long way to calming Harry down. He turned around, took Mike’s face between his hands, and kissed him. Then he patted him on the ass and said, “Come on, Granddaddy. Let’s go.”

When the time came, Courtney’s dress was beautiful, and Harry didn’t have to fake it when he said that. Neil messed up saying the “I do” part and even left out a word or two, but Harry told himself he wouldn’t bring that up until they’d been married at least six months. Harry didn’t have to say or do anything except stand next to Mike and watch him hand over the rings.

He was able to do it, standing next to Mike, which was the most important thing because he hadn’t been sure he’d be able to do it at all. Maybe it was because he was real careful, holding himself apart, the way he knew how to do too well but tried not to do these days, ’cause the whole point of being with Mike was not being apart but being together.

Maybe it was because a garden wasn't a church, and there wasn't a herd of people watching for him to make a false, queer-like move, and there wasn't some four-hundred-person reception waiting for him to endure. Maybe it was because Harry couldn't remember a time when he'd been so young and flat-out joyful as the bride and groom were. He was glad for them, real glad now that he'd got over most of being pissed.

Or maybe it was because the vows that Courtney and Neil exchanged—*I take you to have and to hold from this day forward*—were simple and traditional. Mike and him, they weren't either one of those things. They were complicated and messy, the two of them and their long history.

When the justice of the peace asked “Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?” Harry made sure that he didn't look at Mike, and he was pretty sure Mike didn't look at him, which was the way it should be. No wedding had anything much to do with them, did it?

Afterward, though, when the photographer was taking still more pictures and Mike was talking with puffed-up Charles, Julia came over to stand next to Harry. She didn't say anything for a while, just watched the man tell Neil to tilt his head this way and ask Courtney to hold her flowers that way. Then Julia turned to him and smiled. Her lips trembled a bit, and he figured this day had been something of a shock to her. Maybe she'd been counting on that big to-do at the country club and even getting a grandbaby wasn't enough to make up for it.

But what she said to him instead was, “I hope they're blessed with years together.”

Yeah. That was it. What was important. Years together.

V. To Cherish You for as Long as We Both Draw Breath

THE third time Mike and Harry had a drink at JT's Bar, it happened because they both wanted to go. It was planned, looked forward to, and then when it came about, never forgotten.

But they didn't talk about it over the many years that followed. Oh, they joked about all sorts of things, but not about that. They talked seriously about the trials and troubles that came their way and the blessings that showed up too, but some things didn't need rehashing. They were felt too keenly: in Harry's mostly unspoken feelings and in Mike's unwavering devotion.

As Harry went through his days at the ranch, spring took firm hold of the high plateau where they lived. The snow melted from the sides of the mountains, and water gushed along the creek that ran through their property. His three mares that he owned himself and wasn't just keeping for others all dropped fine foals; they were money in the bank, and he felt pretty good on how things were going that way. What him and Mike were trying to do here, carving out good lives, it was happening. The days when he hadn't been able to hold onto his job at the processing plant, those black days in Oklahoma he was ashamed of, they felt like some sort of bad dream. He wanted to forget them, and the best way was by looking ahead and making something of his life, him and Mike, the way they were doing.

With the air freshening, the sun brighter each day, the grass and the trees coming all new again, with the hawks winging their swift flight overhead, Harry felt an itch in his bones. To do more, to grow better, even to get moving—him who was the one who was always satisfied where he was. He was surprised by his restless feet and didn't mention anything to

Mike, but got to thinking on it one day while he was watering the horses and then that night when he was sitting in the back room watching TV. He was reminded of how he'd thought his lively Mike maybe needed more than the day in and day out of their jobs and the way they lived. And he remembered how Mike had said that they should travel someplace just for them and that they didn't need an excuse like Neil tricking them to get them outta their routine.

"You want that last piece of cake?" Mike asked as he hauled himself out of the recliner and headed for the kitchen.

"Nope, it's all yours," Harry said. He watched Mike leave without really seeing him, 'cause now he was set to thinking how and where and what since he'd pretty much just established the why. He picked up the latest news magazine, put on his reading glasses, and pretended to read while he thought.

Over the next few days he pondered the possibilities. Someplace with Mike. Not too far, though, because he still hadn't got around to getting any full-time help. He'd need to rely again on paying Danny extra. So, one night. Not Santa Fe, 'cause they'd just been there, and besides, he didn't know that he favored that town. Not Albuquerque. That was just another big city. What the hell did Albuquerque hold for him and Mike? Maybe Denver. He'd passed through there once or twice.

But why a city? Why not someplace else like those Indian ruins he'd heard of, the big pueblos? There was one north of Taos still being lived in. But once there, what was the big deal, anyway, climbing around old buildings or butting in on where folks had their homes? Nope, not that.

"Bet you ten bucks the Cardinals have a better record than the Yankees this season," Mike said over supper one night in early June.

"You're on," Harry said, and right away he got up and stuck a ten-dollar bill from his wallet under the sugar jar on the counter, and Mike did the same. Mike had hope undying for his Redbirds, and it was good to have a little money riding on the teams. They both favored baseball, the

best sport for them. It was one of those things they'd shared from the beginning of knowing each other, years ago when they drank beer together lots of Saturday afternoons in Harry's living room while they watched games.

Baseball. Yeah. It'd been too long since they'd seen a game for real. Denver had a new major league team, but they weren't any good and the crowds, he'd read in the paper, filled the stadium to overflowing. Harry didn't like crowds much.

But he did like baseball, and so did Mike.

He mentioned that early one morning as he shaved in their bathroom when Mike was drying off from his shower.

Mike paused with the towel held over his shoulders. "Yeah. So?"

Harry shrugged, worked the razor around his chin a bit, and then looked at Mike in the mirror as he said, "There's a new independent league going in Texas, and they got a team in Amarillo. How about if you and me take in a game?"

Mike's eyes got wide. "You mean it?"

"Sure. Wouldn't of said it if I didn't."

"You're volunteering to take time off from the ranch?"

"Ah, come on, Mike, it's not like I'm—"

"Married to the ranch, you bet it is, instead of to— Yeah, let's go to a game."

"I was thinking, while we're there...."

"We should take in JT's again, that what you were gonna say?"

"Yeah. We should."

Mike dropped his towel over the bathtub, took three quick steps to where Harry was only half-done shaving, and grabbed him.

“Hey there!” Harry managed to get out before he was pushed against the bathroom door—*thud*—and pretty much kissed to within an inch of his life. He kissed back, and by the time he managed to get a breath the shaving cream was everywhere, even his hair. Mike did like running his fingers through Harry’s hair.

Hell, he didn’t care. Harry carried a smile with him the rest of the day, though not everybody could see it. Mike could, though, maybe ’cause he was the one who’d planted it deep inside.

On Saturday, June nineteenth, Harry woke up before six like he usually did and then reminded himself that this day didn’t belong to the horses and High Country Rental, it belonged to him and Mike instead, ’cause they’d took it and made it so. He rolled over and closed his eyes again. By eight-thirty Mike had them both in the shower and then back to sleep they went. Good loving, even done standing up, did take something out of a man.

By ten-thirty he was behind the wheel of his old Chevy pickup that was inching close to two hundred thousand miles on the odometer. He headed due east. Mike—with a thermos of coffee, Lindy’s Baseball Preview for 1992, and the voice, the smile, the body, and the heart that had caught Harry well and good—was beside him. There hadn’t ever been a better day, not that Harry could recall. It was sunshiny, there was hardly any traffic on the road, and the whole world spread out from under their spinning tires.

It seemed that with every year him and Mike spent together, the road they traveled through the world did get smoother. All those potholes that Harry had feared would swallow them up, they’d either been able to drive around them, or the holes hadn’t turned out to be as axle-breaking as he’d thought. Sometimes him and Mike had taken a different route than they’d planned, but they’d still managed to get where they were going, hadn’t they?

Where they were going was pretty much where they were right here and now. He looked over and caught Mike looking at him. Harry sent him a smile, got one in return, and had reason to reach over and run his hand down Mike's thigh. Yeah, real. Strong, solid, a man's body. Just spreading his palm so every bit of it touched Mike made him breathe deeper. A tingle went through him, not one that ended in his dick, though that surely took notice, but one that looped around his dick and his balls and then went back up into his chest, filling him in the same way that the day was drenched with the sun.

Back when he'd been eighteen and scared, mad at the world, halfway to killing himself 'cause of what he'd feared about his needs, he'd never thought a man like him could be happy. But this road they were on: it was lined from beginning to end with that feeling.

He shook Mike's thigh, not gently, enough so there wasn't any mistaking his touch, and said, "Glad we're doing this."

Mike settled his hand on Harry's knee, and Harry liked that. "Me too," Mike said. They held on to each other for a couple seconds and then let go.

The miles rolled by fast and the hours even faster. Neither one of them dozed this time. Mike read from the magazine out loud, and they argued about pitchers and third basemen and catchers. About halfway there they'd exhausted about all that could be said about the players, so they talked about this, that, and the other thing. Harry always had been able to talk with Mike. Mike and once upon a time his second-born daughter, though that hadn't happened in a long while. But these hours with Mike, they were better'n he could've hoped for. Harry didn't even mind it when Mike got wound up about Bill Clinton running for the White House.

Mid-afternoon they checked into a Comfort Inn close to the ballpark. They put their bag in the room but remembered to keep the baseball caps they'd brought to wear for the game. Then they spent a couple hours

visiting truck dealerships. Harry knew his Chevy was on its last legs. He favored getting a Dodge Ram next time, though Mike argued for another Ford like his. Mike and his Fords. He liked those trucks even though the brakes never were any good. This time around Harry walked away without putting any money down; they weren't serious, just looking 'cause it was something they could do together. Mike did know a thing or two about buying new vehicles.

The game started at six-thirty at the Potter County Memorial Stadium, which could've held ten thousand in a pinch. Harry figured that him and Mike didn't get to see a game like this often, so he bought Mike a ticket for a seat close in on the first-base side of home plate, and Mike bought him a ticket right next to that seat, which was pretty much how they took care of the money thing between them most of the time. It was more than fine sharing the game with Mike. It was plain fun, something he didn't normally think of connected to him. When Mike jumped up to yell at the umpire in the third inning, Harry was right there next to him hollering the same. When a foul ball came their way, he tried to catch it bare-handed and would have done it except a guy with a glove two rows in front of them jumped straight up about six feet and snagged it first. Mike made him eat two hot dogs slathered with relish and mustard, and they shared a huge tray of nachos between them without Harry worrying that anybody would think they were anything but two guys who were friends, 'cause after all, this was baseball. It was good that the Amarillo Dillos edged out the Corpus Christi Barracudas in the ninth inning, but it hardly mattered, really, 'cause the night was made up of a whole lot more'n what was going on down there on the field.

When they got to JT's just short of ten o'clock, there were considerably more vehicles parked up and down both sides of the street than had been there the other two times. As they walked close, Harry could hear the thump-thump of live music and feel it through the soles of his boots. He imagined that the building itself was breathing in and

breathing out, the walls moving with all the men inside. Even so, he didn't hesitate to open the door and walk on in.

The third time was a charm, he guessed. Even with a live band playing up a storm on the small stage, JT's was what he remembered: the black-shirted waiters, and the men with hands in each other's pockets, and the smoky-beery smell of the place.

"Come here," Mike said, and fingers tugging on his shoulder turned him straight into a hungry kiss. Mike's lips on him moved with purpose, and his arms came around Harry to hold him tight. Even though he'd been taken by surprise and wasn't so sure about doing this just two feet inside the safe zone, Harry wasn't any fool; he kissed right back.

"There you go," Mike gasped as he released him. "Been wanting to do that ever since we left the motel."

That did something to Harry, knowing Mike'd been thinking on him through the day. Harry grabbed him again and growled, "I want to do that every time I see you."

"Yeah?" Mike challenged, 'cause they both knew it wasn't exactly true. Life made sure it wasn't, what with long days that tired them out, and bills to pay, and telephone calls to answer, and everything else that made up the hours and the years.

Harry felt something inside him soften as he stared into Mike's eyes. There was the way things were on the outside, and then there was the truth of what was on the inside. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I really do."

He kissed Mike then, thorough, using lots of tongue. He took in Mike's taste, what he liked more'n anything else 'bout kissing, except maybe the best way Mike moved his tongue around, claiming everything. Kissing Mike where they were, knowing he didn't need to worry even though they were surrounded by people, that put him off and turned him on at the same time. Anybody looking could see Mike was his, and he was Mike's, and that they were hot for each other. A weird sort of thrill shot

through him, something new that clutched at his chest. *Yeah, this is us.* Harry groaned, and Mike's fingers spread in his hair.

He didn't come up for air for a while. There was a different song going when Harry was of a state of mind to notice such things again.

"Damn," Mike said, wiping his hand across his mouth.

"I need a beer," Harry said, 'cause he couldn't hardly believe he'd said what he had, and that they'd done that too. He grabbed Mike's hand and hauled him over to the bar.

They got lucky because two guys were putting their money on the counter as they came close, so they got two stools side by side. Mike started out with a beer and a shot, Harry decided he'd stick with a beer, and they turned around to check out the dancing. Mike put his arm around Harry's waist for a while, and after a moment's thought he didn't shrug him off. Mike already knew there wouldn't be any dancing between them, on that Harry'd been definite, but this little bit, that was all right.

JT's was jumping, with the band doing a lot to make it all lively. Half the men were on the dance floor. "Hey, look it," he said to Mike, nodding at one couple in matching Stetsons who'd just twirled by. One was wearing a black vest, the other a white one. "That's those two fellows we saw here both times before, remember?"

"Who?" Mike asked, craning to see.

"Remember how they walked in that first time, and everybody seemed to know them?"

"Yeah, you're right."

"That's Chris and Ronnie," the guy next to Harry put in. Harry wasn't any too pleased that what he'd said had been listened in on, but he'd about shouted to Mike 'cause of the music.

“They’re dancing fools,” his next-door neighbor said. “I think they met here a year ago and haven’t hardly left since. Speaking of which, would you like to dance?”

Being asked to dance by some guy in public would’ve blown Harry’s head off if it’d happened a year before, but since he’d got introduced to JT’s, he was even able to keep from frowning. “Nope,” he said.

The fella asked Mike next, who Harry was glad said, “No.” He didn’t know what he’d do if Mike wanted to dance with somebody besides him. He drank about half his Corona in one gulp.

When the guitar players and drummer took a break and the canned music came on, the place exploded with voices. Some guy came along the line of the bar selling raffle tickets. Harry didn’t pay him much mind until Mike pulled out his wallet and nudged him.

“Come on, Harry,” he said.

It turned out the guy was collecting money for some AIDS center somewhere or other. The bartender leaned toward them and said, “It’s legit,” which was what Harry needed to hear. He gave up twenty bucks. The raffle was for a hundred-dollar gift certificate from JT’s, which would come in handy so long as it didn’t expire soon, but as the seller moved through the place and collected money hand over fist, Harry didn’t figure he had much chance of winning. It didn’t matter. Him and Mike had sweated it out the first years after they’d got together, ’cause there wasn’t any denying Mike could’ve had the disease. They’d got tested regular after Harry’d got over his rage about the whole thing, but now they were way past that.

Harry took a swig of his Corona and thought about it, all the guys playing the field and using rubbers, always looking over their shoulders. It was the way of the world for those men, one reason he wanted no part of it except for this, being at JT’s now and then. Using a rubber when he was buried inside Mike’s ass? His dick gave a twitch as he considered that

with something like horror. Damn, but he was glad they didn't have to do that. 'Cause it was just him and Mike.

He looked over at the fellow who'd picked him to settle down with, the man who stood out from all these other men at the bar even if he was just barely on the shady side of his forties, even if he did have gray in his hair. Mike was talking to the man next to him, listening close without being too close. If Harry'd walked into JT's without knowing anybody, he'd have aimed straight for him and wanted to take him home. Not just for the night but for all the nights after too. Look at anybody else when Mike was here? No way.

Harry leaned in so he could hear Mike's conversation, casually putting a hand on Mike's shoulder. It wouldn't be taken amiss, he didn't think.

"You here for the show tonight?" Harry caught the fellow saying.

"What show?" Mike asked.

"You don't know? It's been advertised here for weeks," the fellow said. "JT's doesn't do this all that much, but when they do, they put it on big. Drusilla's in town. She's got a new show."

"Drusilla?" All of a sudden, Mike slapped the counter. "You're kidding. Drusilla's still around? No wonder there's a crowd here. Hey, Harry." He turned around quick. "You'll never guess."

"What's that?"

Mike's mouth opened and then snapped shut. He seemed to consider for a couple seconds and then said, "I think I'll let you see for yourself. You know about drag queens, don't you?"

Harry hitched his right shoulder. "What do you take me for? Course I do." In truth, he hardly knew much, and for sure hadn't ever seen one with his own eyes. He wasn't so sure he was ready for an education.

"When does she come on?" Mike wanted to know.

“Close to midnight.” The bartender was the one who told them. “You guys ready for another round?”

Right before the band came back, JT’s proved it sure was different from the bars Harry was familiar with. Some guy with a microphone announced there’d be a dance contest over the next half-hour. Anybody dancing who wanted to be part of it got to stick a number in their back pocket—“’cause we know that’s half of where you’re all looking anyway,” he said to a lot of laughing out loud. Anybody who wanted to vote had to do it by buying a drink and saying what number they liked best.

Harry wanted to roll his eyes, ’cause it all seemed childish to him. He wasn’t used to this sort of show-off scene. But Mike got right into it. He dragged Harry closer to the floor and spent some time deciding. Harry couldn’t hardly not join in, and when it was time for him to get a new bottle in his hand, he murmured “fourteen and fifteen” to the barkeep. That was those Chris and Ronnie fellows. They might not have the fanciest footwork, but it seemed to Harry they danced pretty good together, in rhythm with each other. And he liked what he’d heard, that they’d met a year before. He didn’t have a clue if anybody else in the bar was like Mike and him that way, together with nobody else getting between them. From some of what was going on that he saw, plenty weren’t. But he’d bet good money that Chris and Ronnie were.

His two didn’t win when the prize was announced, but Mike’s picks did.

After that there was a biggest belt buckle contest, as a warm-up, the announcer said, for Drusilla.

“Everybody’s buzzing about this guy,” Harry said. “I’m starting to get real curious about him.”

Mike flashed him a smile, and then came close and said in Harry’s ear, “Have I thanked you yet for coming here?”

“There ain’t no need.”

“Sure there is.” Mike was still at his ear, nibbling on it. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat, ’cause he liked it, liked it enough to start getting hard.

“Her,” Mike whispered. “Her, not him.”

“Huh? I thought—”

Mike pulled back but then came close again for a real kiss this time, mouth to mouth, the best kind except for mouth to dick. Sometimes, like now, with Mike putting meaning into it, it was the best kind period. Mike tasted like the beer and whiskey he’d been drinking, and Harry sure appreciated that taste. He was tempted to grab the back of Mike’s head and keep him there, but he didn’t. He’d have to be falling-down drunk to repeat what him and Mike had done when they’d walked in, and he was a long ways from that. So he let Mike keep it short and thought of the bed waiting for them at the Comfort Inn.

“Yeah, she’s a guy. Probably named Drew or Andrew or something like that in real life.” Harry couldn’t take his eyes off Mike’s lips moving. “But most of these men want to be called she when they’re in costume.”

Harry filed that away to think on later. He was glad Mike’d talked low and nobody’d heard him not knowing the right word to use. It didn’t much matter, though. Him and Mike wouldn’t be back here anytime soon. They weren’t gonna be regulars like he had the feeling most of these men laughing and drinking and dancing and flirting were. Starting tomorrow, it’d be just him and Mike again, and that suited Harry down to the ground, so long as every once in a while they had this too.

Drusilla wasn’t any spring chicken anymore, that was for sure. When she finally came out from wherever she’d been hiding a good twenty minutes after she’d been announced—long enough for everybody to get one more drink—Harry saw that she was maybe close to sixty. Not even a good-looking sixty. She wore a crazy costume, all sequins and feathers on

her long pink gown, with a blonde wig that looked to be three feet high. How'd she even walk balancing it? No woman he knew would be caught dead in her makeup: real wet, real big, real pink lips; fake eyelashes out a mile; and genuine, honest-to-God penciled-in pink eyebrows. It was the eyebrows that caught him. Well, those and the 48 triple-D boobs; he knew that 'cause Drusilla proudly announced her proportions to the crowd of hooting and hollering men.

"Can you see okay?" Mike asked him.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Him and Mike had good views from where they were standing in front of the bar. Everybody wanted to get closer, so bodies pressed in until it was more crowded than the dance floor had been. Harry couldn't help it when an elbow brushed against his side or somebody pushed against his back. He supposed those touches were accidental, but then again maybe not, 'cause it was Saturday at JT's, and there was a different feel to the air here, like all bets were off and anything could happen.

Harry planted himself next to Mike and silently dared anybody to try to slip between them. He got set to watch and listen to what he'd never in his life thought he'd ever see or hear. He didn't understand why everybody around them was excited or why Mike was smiling fit to split his mouth. This was just an older guy prancing around on stage, cracking some jokes and then singing some songs. No, not even singing, but pretending to sing, 'cause that was Judy Garland's voice coming through the speakers, he knew that for sure. If this was a guy pretending to be a woman, and all the guys he was showing off for preferred other guys, then how come....

He had to admit he really didn't get Drusilla. But as her show went on he also had to admit that she knew how to play the house better'n George Strait played guitar. She even got to him, 'cause one time he laughed so hard he had to put his hands on his knees. Mike was all worked

up in the best way too; once he had to hold onto Harry until he caught his breath, and Harry didn't mind those hands on him.

"She's not bad, is she?" Mike asked while some clapping was going on. "This is the fourth time I've seen her, and she always cracks me up."

After that Drusilla stopped doing the lip-syncing and came out with two of her own songs in her own voice, and they were pretty good. After the second one she called out, "I need some volunteers, dearies. Come on now. Don't be bashful."

Seemed like twenty guys fought for the honor of jumping up on the stage with her, but she picked four, all of them husky fellows with muscles. "Follow me, chickadees," she said to them and then to the crowd, "Back in five."

It was more like ten than five, but when Drusilla showed up again she was something to behold. She was dressed all in white, in a bride's gown that would've turned Courtney green with envy or maybe red with fury. She wasn't walking back to the stage. She was being carried on a pallet held up on their shoulders by all four guys who'd volunteered. Drusilla laid herself out like she was the Queen of Sheba, on her side with one leg sort of stuck up in the air, and she was eating grapes.

Now that, Harry thought to himself, wasn't a sight he would forget anytime soon. Mike saw her while he was swallowing, and he choked on his beer, so Harry banged him on the back to make sure he was okay.

Once back on the stage, Drusilla got to her feet with some help. She looked like a drunk albino Hereford as she staggered to get her balance. She grabbed the microphone from off its stand and boomed into it, "You know what they say, don't you?"

Half the crowd hollered, "No, what do they say?"

"They say that all men are born free and equal, but some of them get married."

Harry let out a pained chuckle. He'd been scarred deep by his time with Charlene.

"And you know what else they say?"

Next to him, Mike joined in with, "What do they say?"

"A man doesn't know happiness until he gets married...." Drusilla did a drumroll with her hands and made sound effects by vibrating her lips. "And by then it's too late!"

The audience was well lubricated and would've appreciated Drusilla reciting the alphabet, Harry figured, 'cause most everybody thought that was drop-dead hilarious.

Drusilla spread out her arms. "And despite all this, I still want to get married!"

Most everybody in JT's had something to say about that. Some of them hollered, "Marry me, baby, marry me!" A guy in front of him yelled, "No way, I'm gay, I wanna play!" Somebody else from across the room had a deep voice that carried. "We're too good for marrying!"

All of a sudden, Harry's thoughts were turned upside down. He'd been to a wedding recently, a real one, where he'd seen the love in Neil's and Courtney's eyes. He hoped their love lasted for a long time, as long as him and Mike already had lasted and longer, 'cause in truth with them it'd not just been the years since they'd moved into one house, but it was more than twenty years since he'd first laid eyes on Mike Pruitt.

Next to him, Mike wasn't saying anything either, but if he did open his mouth, Harry wondered what would come out. He knew Mike's views on this. As much as Harry had always said that he didn't think what him and Mike had was anything like a marriage, and he didn't want it to be, Mike had said the opposite: that what him and Harry had was what his marriage with Marvis should've been.

Maybe Mike would say, “Damn right you should get married, Drusilla! I want to get married too!” It would be like him to holler that, Mike who felt things so strong and always let them out.

Drusilla was going on with the show. She swooped low toward the audience, showing off her boobs that Harry could hardly believe weren’t real, ’cause they sure looked like they were, and she said again, “I want to get married! But not to just one husband. I want four husbands all at once!” She straightened and strutted. “Only one husband would never be enough for me.”

Harry blinked to think of Drusilla in bed with four guys at the same time, especially the four studs up on the stage with her. Even when he’d been young and ready to go any minute, even when him and Mike had done it seven times in one day, like they had once, he’d never wanted more than one man.

“But they won’t let me have these four lusty gentlemen!” Drusilla proclaimed.

One of the guys stepped forward and said, like he’d no doubt been coached to say, “Who won’t let you?”

“Johnny Straight won’t hear of it,” Drusilla said in a suddenly high, falsetto voice. “But we’ll do it anyway, won’t we, dear?”

The music struck up, and she went into a song-and-dance number where she chucked each of the four guys under the chin to start, then slapped them on the ass, then wriggled her own behind in their faces, and finally gave each of them a definite squeeze up front, down low, for good measure. The bartender even got into the act, pretending to be a preacher doing the marrying with the drinks menu serving as the Good Book. If Harry hadn’t had a few beers, he didn’t know what he would’ve thought, but with everybody around him laughing fit to bust their guts, he got carried along. Mike was snorting some laughter too.

“I take you and you and you and you!” Drusilla ended with. It seemed she’d already picked husband number one, ’cause the two of them went into a clinch and some serious humping that lasted a while with the audience egging them on.

It had to be the strangest show Harry’d ever seen. It took some time for the crowd to calm down, but when the four volunteers jumped down from the stage, he figured it was over.

Mike turned to him and draped one arm over Harry’s shoulder. He asked with a grin, “How’d you like her?”

“She’s a funny gal.”

“Gentlemen and jerk-offs! Stop feeling up your neighbor and give me your attention!” Drusilla said. She stood with a spotlight on her, and all of a sudden the rest of the lights in the bar went low. Harry looked up at her, and when Mike turned to do the same, without hardly thinking on it, Harry pulled him in to his side. Mike’s arm slipped around his back, and he kept his hold around Mike’s waist. There they were, hip to hip, no mistaking their togetherness with the warmth of Mike’s fingers spread against his shoulder blade, but the past couple hours had gone a long way toward making Harry be okay with standing with Mike like this.

Mike was looking at him and not Drusilla. “You are the best thing, Harry Sanderson,” he breathed against Harry’s cheek. “I think I’m gonna keep you.”

Harry smiled shyly at him and gave him a quick kiss, just a peck. “That’s good,” he said quietly. “Don’t have any other way of getting home if you don’t keep me.”

“Thank you for your kind attention.” Drusilla’s voice through the microphone boomed at them. She gave a sweeping bow. “We all are living proof that there is more than one answer to every puzzle.” She was still talking in a voice that he guessed wasn’t really hers when she was wearing pants, but she was serious now, what he hadn’t heard from her before.

From the way the men in the bar put down their beers and turned toward her again, he guessed nobody else had either.

“You just so kindly received my one interpretation of marriage that’s fit for the likes of us, but there are other versions, aren’t there?”

She paused as if she expected an answer to that question, but nobody shouted anything. Mike shot Harry a glance with his eyebrows raised, but Harry shrugged without moving away from how they were pressed together; he sure didn’t know what was going on.

“We can’t marry the men we love,” Drusilla said, “but we can make promises to each other when we want to. In the house tonight—”

“You’re kidding,” Mike whispered. Harry’s mouth went dry. What was going on here?

“—want to make those promises before you all. Chris Woodson? Ronald Suarez? Come forward, please.”

“Find a church!” somebody yelled, but right away a bunch of men silenced him, with the deep-voiced man saying, “Shut up. You don’t have any soul.”

In the quiet that followed, Harry agreed. If he’d been near that loudmouth he would’ve slugged him.

Next to him, within the curve of his arm, there wasn’t any shouting coming from the fellow who’d only ever really wanted the two of them to be together. Mike was quiet and still. Harry could tell that Mike’s feelings went deep right now, in that connected, unexplainable way that had come to be between them.

He heard Mike draw in a breath and then let it out. If they hadn’t been plastered together, he wouldn’t have heard it at all. He wasn’t sure what it meant, except he did know it meant something.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Sure.” But Mike’s voice wasn’t real strong.

Ronnie and Chris, in their sharp-looking vests and creased pants but without their hats, climbed up onto the stage, looking awkward but determined. Maybe they knew Drusilla? That was the only way Harry could figure they'd trust her for something like this, 'cause JT's had gone as still as any church. The two men stood before her as if they really were in front of an altar, or a justice of the peace, solemn and with their hands at their sides. Harry couldn't hardly believe it. He'd been right when he'd voted for those two for their dancing, at least right according to his own reasons. They really were like him and Mike, set on each other with nobody coming between them. Except these two had different thoughts on marrying, apparently, than he did and were gonna do something about their feelings in front of all these people.

"Ronnie and Chris," Drusilla said, "even though love is one long sweet dream, and marriage is the alarm clock, you still want to go through with this?"

"We do," the two of them said pretty much together.

"Even though a newly married man always looks happy," she pressed, "but when a ten-year married man looks happy, we wonder why?"

Mike leaned over to whisper, "Twenty years less one month, you and me."

Harry whispered back, "Only eight years really together."

"Ah, come on, Drusilla," the black-vested one said. "Cut it out."

"All right then." She rested one hand on each head. "By the power vested in me as the queen of stage and screen, I give you permission to make your vows." Then she stepped away and faded into the dark at the back of the stage.

The two men looked at each other, and then black-vest said, "I've got something to say first." He turned to the crowd. "Hey, out there. For those who don't know us, I'm Ron Suarez, and this is Chris Woodson.

We're going to keep this short and sweet, because we've made up our own promises. You can get back to your drinking and dancing in a minute or two.

"I met Chris one year and two weeks ago right here. I'm thirty-two years old, so I've seen a lot, if you know what I mean. But that first night with Chris, those ways were all over with. I felt like I was hit by a lightning bolt.

"I always knew I was gay and never thought about marrying. But every week with Chris made me want something like it, as close as we can get, anyway. He wants the same thing. When we tried to figure out how to do it, and where, the only place we knew where people would understand was right here at good old JT's."

A voice rang out, "Hey, I don't understand!" There were sounds of a scuffle. Though Harry craned his head to see, he couldn't make out what was happening until somebody else said, "I'll sit on him if he says anything more. Go ahead."

Ron up on the stage gave a twisted sort of smile. "At least we thought more people would understand here than anyplace else. Anyway, that's it. Chris, you want to say something?"

Chris, who was a redhead, shook his head. "No. Let's do it." He came up to where Ron was and took both his hands. "Me first, okay?"

Ron seemed to settle himself more firmly in his own shoes, and then nodded. "Go ahead."

There was a breathless couple of seconds where neither one of them on the stage moved or said anything; they just looked at each other, that same look that Harry knew because he gave it and received it every day. He could only imagine, though, what they were feeling, to be taking this step. Or maybe.... Maybe he didn't really have to imagine. He remembered that day he'd knocked on Mike's door and Mike had let him in. He'd never left. They'd never truly separated since then.

Mike's hand behind him moved up, and he gripped Harry's shoulder. Harry got a better hold on Mike, and he turned his head to look at his man. His.

Got you. Ain't letting you go. Got you for a long time.

Chris started to talk. "I'm Christopher Woodson, and I make these promises to you, Ronald Suarez. I promise to always be your friend, to live with you and love you and cherish you. I promise to go with you to places that make you happy, even if I'm not interested. I promise to forgive you when you make a mistake or you're a little crazy, like you were when you really didn't want to go to Atlanta to meet my parents. If you tell me something's so, I'll believe you, because I put my trust in you. From this day on, you are my first consideration, and I'll never deliberately do anything to hurt you. These things I promise you, but most of all, I'll keep dancing with you for as long as we both shall live."

It was so quiet in the bar that a man could've heard the pages of a bible being turned.

Ron reached up to touch Chris's face. "That's beautiful. Mine's not nearly so good, and it's short. But I mean it." He swallowed and took Chris's hand in his again. "I, Ronald Henry Suarez, do take you, Christopher Thomas Woodson, to be my constant friend, before these witnesses, forsaking all others. Whether in good times or in bad, I will cherish you for as long as we both draw breath."

Behind them Harry heard somebody say, as prayer-like as if they were in a cathedral, "Amen." That felt right. Just because they were standing in a place that sold booze, where men got together to have a good time, just because there were two people each with a dick and balls giving each other promises, that didn't mean those promises were any less than what Neil and Courtney had given each other.

He knew about promises different from the normal kind. Drawn up from pain. Denied for years. Bounded by fear. Finally given because there wasn't any other way to take breath. Fed with a sense of wonder day by

day, then month by month, then like some miracle from heaven year by year, grown bigger than imagined. Promises acted out in the field and in the store, with a leg up into a saddle and with a can of oil bought at the gas station. Promises made real through Thanksgiving shared with friends, with grocery lists made from favorite foods. Promises acted on with a hand on a swollen dick, with a mouth on a nipple, with an ass raised, with constant need.

Between him and Mike, promises were real but unspoken. Not like these two men, who'd said their vows out loud.

All around him, men were clapping and cheering. Up on the stage, Chris and Ronnie were smiling and waving to everybody. Harry wanted to... he didn't know what he wanted to do. Pull Mike to him and kiss him, like they'd been doing all night long it seemed, but he wanted it to mean something different this time. The same as what he'd just heard? Yes, yes... no. Him and Mike, they weren't like anybody else, damn it, they weren't. And Harry sure as hell never wanted to be married again. He wouldn't do that even if somebody gave him the opportunity, as if that would ever happen. Guys like them didn't get married....

Mike turned and looked at him.

...except they did.

Mike reached for him. Tangled his fingers in Harry's hair. Breathed against his lips. "Light of my life," he said.

Harry answered, "Mike." He wasn't much good with words, but he knew what he felt. He felt pretty damn near everything. Mike gave him that. He gave himself up to Mike in turn, to his arms and his sweet mouth, and to anything else that being with Mike brought him.

THEY couldn't get home quick enough. On Sunday they pushed the old Chevy as fast as they could across the high plains of Texas and then across

the hushed New Mexico landscape that finally took them to the uplift of the Sangre De Cristo Mountains. Through Cimarron, through the state park, through Elk Ridge without stopping at the rental shop to check on things like they would have normally, and then the treasured turn north toward the ranch on Highway 38. Only twenty minutes to go.

They'd fallen into bed at the Comfort Inn at two-thirty in the morning, reaching for each other.

"Tomorrow," Mike had whispered against Harry's neck.

"At home," Harry had agreed, because he couldn't imagine making love with Mike in some motel room after the night they'd just shared. Besides, though he was filled to bursting with stuff he had no name for, all of it circling around Mike, the booze and the long day were working against them coming together. He turned Mike around so they were spooned, his back to Harry's front, and soon enough the contentment that wrapped around his thrumming excitement sent him to sleep for a solid eight hours.

Harry turned left down their dirt and gravel road. Him and Mike hadn't said a word to each other since Ute Park. In truth they hadn't talked much at all during their mad rush to where they belonged. Their house came into view, nestled within the grove of pine trees; Harry's heart thumped in his chest at the same time that his dick lifted, a mix of soul-feeling and body-feeling that should have felt peculiar to him but didn't, not one bit. It was an everyday feeling he hadn't focused on before. Next to him, Mike made a sort of rumbling sound in his chest and leaned forward as if he could urge the truck on. Harry let himself get distracted and put his sight on Mike as they jounced down the road. There was a bulge in his jeans like the one in his own, and he was breathing quickly, and there was that body Harry wanted to strip bare, wanted to feel up against his own skin, wanted to make part of himself.

If they weren't almost there he'd pull over and do the deed right in the cab of the truck. He had a feeling Mike wouldn't holler.

But they were almost there, so he kept driving for another minute. Harry didn't bother to pull up into their garage; instead he brought the truck to a sudden stop by their front door. Mike's feet hit the dirt an instant later. He laughed as if he was a kid set free from school for the summer. He dashed up the path, turning around and dancing half the way backward as he watched Harry charge up behind him.

"Wait for me, Mike!"

Like good country folks everywhere, they hardly ever used the front door, so Mike had trouble finding the right key on his key ring—"Where the hell is it?"—and once he had it, the lock wouldn't take it easily. "Come on, Mike. Turn it. No, the other way." Harry pushed up against him. He'd been hard for the past hour, or maybe since they'd woke up, or maybe since the day in 1971 when he'd set eyes on the handsomest man in Oklahoma who, by God, was right there in front of him. Every part of him wanted Mike; it felt to Harry like there was a core of something-or-other inside him, right at the center, that was vibrating with need, and if he didn't get what he needed soon, he'd explode. He buried his nose in Mike's hair—smelled so good—wrapped his arms around him from behind—felt so fine—and tugged, trying to pull him even closer.

Mike came up off the ground as Harry lifted him—closer, closer—though only an inch or two, 'cause Mike was near as tall as he was and weighed twenty more pounds.

Mike laughed out loud again, and Harry thought he'd never heard any sound as good as that. It almost sounded like it was the first laugh ever, anywhere. He humped once, twice, pushing against Mike's ass, but not exactly where he wanted to be.

"Put me down, or we'll never get inside," Mike said. "You wanna screw out here on the doorstep?"

"Got lube in our case in the truck," Harry murmured, but he wanted a bed, their bed, that big bed in the big bedroom that he'd taken for granted, the same as how he'd been so close to Mike that he hadn't been

able to take in the whole picture of what him and Mike made together. He saw it now.

The door gave way five seconds later to Mike's determined work, and they tumbled inside, Harry pushing Mike forward. The staircase was right there in front of them. Mike stopped short of it, though, and turned around to take Harry's face in his hands. Harry let him; he didn't have a choice. Just feeling Mike's fingers on him—seeing his eyes—stopped him in his tracks.

"You should see the look on your face," Mike said slowly, his thumbs tracing Harry's top lip.

"What?"

"You're smiling. Just enough, like you really mean it."

"I got reason to."

"Yeah, me too. You got the best smile, you know, when you let it out. I love it when you smile."

"Up!" Harry insisted. "Up we go, or I ain't gonna be responsible for what I do, not with you saying things like that to me."

Up the stairs they went, Harry letting Mike lead like he so often did and, besides, he loved Mike's ass. He put both hands out and pushed him up each step of the way, licking his lips at the warm flex of the muscles against his palms. Damn, how Mike moved. Harry might've started at the bottom step hard, but by the top step he was hard and leaking. His dick throbbed in his jeans.

At the top of the stairs, Mike turned the tables by getting behind and doing the same to him, pushing him down the hall to the back of the house with his fingers spread on Harry's ass. Harry wanted to move those hands around to where they'd do a hell of a lot more good, but the bedroom was only ten feet away so he concentrated on getting from here to there as quick as he could.

The bed was the way they'd left it, not made up because they never did that, with pale blue sheets and white pillowcases. The white summer quilt that Mike's mother had made for them was wrinkled, tumbling over the foot of the mattress where they'd pushed it back the morning before. Harry whirled around, thinking to grab Mike and shove him down onto the bed, but Mike's hands went to his belt buckle and his button, and then to his zipper, and then Mike was pulling his aching hardness out into the air over his shorts and going down onto his knees, and there wasn't hardly any other thought in Harry's head except to make sure Mike sucked him.

How many times had they done this? Twenty years minus one month they'd been having sex, including the years that Harry had gone crazy after the accident, but still Harry had to fight to stay upright because the first touch of Mike's mouth taking him in made him weak in the knees. He swayed and grabbed the only thing in front of him that was steady, that could hold him up the way a man needed to stand tall, and that was Mike, so he threaded his fingers into his hair and held on tight.

Jesus, but Mike had a mouth on him, the best mouth, warmest mouth, dang-fool-suckingest mouth that took him in complete. Mike reached around and grabbed Harry's butt with both hands, pulled him in so his nose was buried in Harry's short and curlies, and then he swallowed. Harry gasped, heard that sound fill the room as if it was happening over in Arizona, 'cause mainly his world had narrowed down to the miracle going on between his legs. Mike swallowed once, twice, a bunch of times, lashed his tongue around, and then pulled back, real slow, until he was holding just the tip of Harry's dick between his lips. Harry watched the whole thing, and he didn't know whether to jam himself back where he'd been or be grateful that Mike hadn't got him off in about thirty seconds.

He blinked as Mike looked up at him, still with his mouth on Harry's dick, and he tried to hold that sight in his mind, to put it in memory where it would never change: Mike like this. This moment.

“Come on up here where I can kiss you,” Harry growled.

Or maybe where Mike could kiss him, 'cause that's what happened, the two of them going at each other like they'd been separated for weeks and were sick with longing for each other. It was like that first time they'd had a big fight and had stormed away and parted, and Harry'd been miserable afterward, not knowing if what him and Mike had would stick through the hard times. They'd come back together then with the force of a tornado, wild and unstoppable.

That was how Mike went after his mouth, and that was how Harry used his teeth and tongue. The salt taste of blood erupted between them, though he didn't know who'd bit who, and it didn't matter. He shoved his bare dick poking from his fly against a dick-in-jeans, inching one hand down the back of Mike's waistband and feeling Mike doing the same to him. They were as together as could be with clothes on, standing up, and it was good, holding and being held by this man he'd been living with, this man he'd pick out today and tomorrow and every other day, this man who put up with him and his ways, this man who loved him.

“Mike,” he whispered.

He kissed Mike like the feeling blooming inside—certain, oh, so certain he was about this feeling. It was always there, sure, but the trip to Amarillo had been an eye-opener in all ways.

Mike pulled back and offered him his fingers. Harry didn't hesitate but took the tips in his mouth and sucked, 'cause he knew Mike liked that. It was the strangest thing, but to see the crazy light come on in Mike's eyes, he'd stand on his head and sing like Drusilla, if that's what it took.

“Oh, shit,” Mike said, with hardly any breath behind the words. “You're driving me nuts. Can we get these clothes off and hit the sheets?”

Harry was partway there already, and Mike helped him by pushing his open jeans and his shorts down to his ankles and then tackling his shirt buttons. Harry made quick work of what was keeping him separate from

Mike's naked skin. They each kicked off their shoes and pulled off their socks, and then, together, they tumbled onto the bed and wasted no time meeting in the middle, front to front, dick to dick.

"Damn it to hell!" Harry swore as he grabbed Mike's hips and pumped, because no real words could come close to this body-over-everything feeling. This need he had was like pure water, or pure air, that's what it was, something he had no chance of fighting against. He'd tried. If anybody looked down from heaven, they knew he'd tried, and that his fight had led to misery and nothing good. How the hell does a man turn away from breathing? Nothing had gone right with him until he'd admitted he needed to breathe Mike. Needed to suck him and fuck him and kiss him. Needed to lay down with him at night and sometimes not do anything except hold him. Needed to buy him cake. Needed to protect him when his dumb generosity got the best of him. Needed to be the one Mike cried with when life dumped cruelty on him, the one Mike laughed with, and the one Mike settled down with. He needed to be the man Mike called "light of my life" when the reality of what they were was reflected back on them. Last night hadn't been the first time Mike'd said it. Harry knew he was the luckiest dumb bastard in the world.

Harry needed to roll Mike onto his back, climb over him, swaying over him on hands and knees, and look down on him. Mike let him. The late afternoon sun poured light into the room, and everything about them glowed gold.

"I fucking love you," Harry said.

Mike smiled up at him. He didn't say anything, only ran his hand down from Harry's shoulder to his elbow and gripped him there tight. But Mike's eyes were saying enough to fill Harry up for twenty more years. *I take you to be my constant friend.*

If he'd been some sort of angel, that would have been enough, and him and Mike would have stayed right where they were, with Mike pouring so much stuff into Harry's open heart that it was pretty much full

to bursting. But he sure wasn't any angel. He was a man with a throbbing dick and balls, and Mike was who he wanted.

Harry checked him out, from the curve of his lips, to the slash of his collarbone, to his chest, to the dimple of his bellybutton, down to the dark explosion of pubic hair and beyond.

"I love your dick too." His voice was raspy, but he said it, what he hardly ever said because he wasn't any woman and neither was Mike. They didn't need the flowery words.

"Show me," Mike said through his smile. "Don't make me wait, you good-looking son of a gun. I've been waiting all day. Suck me."

Harry pretended to frown at him. "I'll get around to it."

"You're gonna kill me if you don't. I'm dying here."

Mike made a grab for Harry's dick, half-lifting up and reaching between them, but Harry pulled back abruptly and swatted his hand away. "You stay still now."

He bent over Mike and attacked his neck, licking at the salty moisture there, sucking at the yielding skin, feeling Mike running his hands over his back. It was just like Mike not to pay attention to what he'd said, but he wasn't gonna waste any time getting to where they both wanted him to be. He moved down to Mike's chest, remembering like he always did that first time the two of them had done it and the pure-sex bolt of gladness, of rightness, that had shot through him not to feel a rounded, yielding breast against his palm. He rubbed over and over the flatness that he craved, breathing hard, pressed his nose through the wiry hair and took in the scent of no-shower that day, of cigarette smoke from the bar the night before, of Mike. Mike's nipples always got hard first thing, and they were stiff against his tongue as he sucked first one and then the other.

"Damn," Mike whispered, and Harry heard his legs move restlessly against the sheet. "Harry, come on..." He shifted some more, and a second later Harry felt a knee press against him. Hell! This was getting

kneaded in the best way. He pumped against it and threw the slow route he'd intended to travel out the window. It wasn't easy ripping himself away from the grinding that was sending sparks through his belly, but first he needed to take care of Mike, and then he'd get what he wanted.

The next second he wriggled farther down on the mattress. Mike spread his legs, and Harry dropped between them. He plunged his tongue into the bellybutton, smacked a kiss right next to it, and then moved down to slide his mouth over what had drawn him there.

If he could have, he would've swallowed it complete. He wanted this dick in his mouth that bad. He heard Mike take in air in a rush, and that only made him want it more: to do this for Mike, to make him feel that good. Harry drove his lips down past the fat head of Mike's dick, all the way down until he was holding all of it in his mouth. Then he went back up the length of it, as slow as he could, listening as a sigh turned into a grunt, and then into a louder grunt, and then into a low moan.

Mike tangled his fingers in Harry's hair. "Christ, you got the best mouth," he gasped.

The best mouth for Mike, the best dick for Harry, the only dick. Pre-come salted his tongue, and he licked it off the swollen top like the hungry man he was. Then he set out to give Mike Pruitt the sucking he deserved.

Up, down, and over again, over the head even slower this time, loving how this part of Mike slipped against his tongue, and then down further he went. Best taste, oh, yeah. Soft skin with the hard steel at the core of it, like Mike was himself, 'cause he wasn't any pushover, he was a good man, the best man, not easy to fool, a man who felt strong in all the best ways. Again and again Harry went up and down, getting into the rhythm now. The only sound in the room was the wet rush of his lips and the way they were both breathing so heavy now. As Harry went down for what must've been the fiftieth time, Mike arched up. Harry tried not to gag and hummed instead.

Mike stiffened all over and shouted at the top of his lungs. "Harry!"

Close, close, Mike was getting real close. Harry spared a hand to wrap around himself. He jerked fast, fighting to breathe around Mike and resisting the temptation to pull off completely. No, he was gonna give Mike what he wanted. He squeezed himself to cut off his own coming and took in air with his mouth wide around the dick's base, with Mike tickling the back of his throat. "Uh, Uh."

Then he swallowed like Mike'd done to him, knowing it would drive him crazy. It sure did. Mike's head thrashed on the pillow, and his sound of pleasure was so loud the horses could have heard it down in the far pasture.

Suddenly Mike tugged at him. "Stop, stop! I'm gonna come if you don't stop."

Harry pulled off and straightened onto his knees, panting, and he couldn't help it, he went at his own dick right away. "I thought—"

"I'm coming with you. You, in me, right now." Mike stretched across the bed to the nightstand and yanked the drawer open. The next second he came up with a tube of K-Y, waving it around like a man desperate to get fucked.

Harry hadn't taken his hand off his own dick for a second, so when Mike went up on his elbow to put the lube on, he was ready, with plenty of pre-come already spread to make him slick. Mike didn't stop at his hardness. He went down and under to Harry's balls and slicked them up too. Harry threw his head back, 'cause how the hell could a man resist this? It felt great. Nobody could possibly know how to roll balls the way Mike did, but Harry was thinking of how it would be when he shoved into....

He leaned forward and went after Mike's mouth like it was the first time, would be the last time, like his life depended on it, and Mike gave him back every part of it. A tongue in his mouth with Mike's hand on his balls was enough to make him dizzy, but he needed more.

He tore his lips away from Mike's, grabbed the tube from him, and squirted out some K-Y. It didn't take but a few heartbeats for Mike's legs to be up and bent over his shoulders, with Harry's fingers making sure he was stretched and lubed.

Was there ever such a day? His dick poised and ready, with him knowing he was gonna get the hot joining he needed any second now, with his finger already gripped by Mike's greedy ass, with Mike's arms flung out to either side of him, as open as he could be, with Mike's mouth wide and gasping.

He didn't need to ask if Mike was ready or if he was gonna still be in bed next to Harry tomorrow when he woke up, or the next day or the next year, and he didn't need to know how near Mike was to coming or how he wanted it, hard and fast or soft and slow. He knew all that like he knew his own name. *I, Harry Sanderson, make these promises to you, Mike Pruitt.*

He pulled his fingers out, hefted Mike higher, aimed true, and slid home.

He could hear himself breathing hard, and his heart pounded so fierce it hurt to draw in air. Finally, Mike's tight ass gripped his dick all over.

He pushed in as Mike pushed up to meet him, and then they were moving together like they knew how to do. Pleasure shot up Harry's spine, exploding in sparkles before his eyes. It was so good to be inside Mike that he wanted to throw his head back and laugh at the whole world. But instead he set his sight on his man, on how the whole world was in Mike anyway, in how his face was alive and his eyes were wide, and how in the middle of their lovemaking and Harry fucking him as furiously as he could, Mike was smiling way more than he'd done last night at the show.

"What...." Harry fought for breath and kept moving. "What's so funny?"

"You. Us. That we're here, and how much I love you."

“That ain’t funny. That’s serious.”

“Sure it’s funny. Do you fucking love me, or do you love fucking me?”

“You asshole. Both. Shut up.”

He reached for Mike because Mike had said he wanted to come with Harry, and he wasn’t far off. Mike’s dick seemed to leap against his palm. Harry knew the shape of it, knew how to make Mike moan by flicking against the head of it and then jerking him the way he liked best. Mike’s expression changed in a heartbeat, and Harry matched his thrusting to the thinning of his mouth, to how his mouth moved without sound. He wanted to shout something, something that would tell Mike how he felt this instant, that his dick was on fire, that the weight of Mike’s legs on his shoulders was the best thing, how every part of him had come alive right down to his toes, and maybe he did see the point of it all being funny. It was all ’cause of Mike, all ’cause of what they had. He wanted to somehow make every thought and move permanent, but he couldn’t, like he couldn’t hold back the sudden rush from his balls.

“Oh, hell,” he groaned. He pumped three, four, five more times, and then cried out with no words as he gave up all he had, and Mike took it in.

Right after Harry finished, as he worked to keep his hand on Mike moving and himself from collapsing straight down, Mike shook all over, panted, “Here it is!” and splashed his coming up onto his own chest.

In the moments after he pulled out of Mike and rolled down to the bed to lay spread out, as the after-sex exhaustion closed his eyes, Harry felt as if he hovered on the brink of understanding everything. Drusilla and her four strutting peacock husbands, Neil and Courtney and their sweet young love, Chris and Ron and how they weren’t content ’til they’d said their promises in front of other people. It all made so much sense. Everybody was after the same thing, but everybody had different ways of going about it.

And then just as quickly his sure knowing was gone.

He dozed for a while like he usually did after lovemaking. When he opened his eyes Mike was getting up and headed for the bathroom. Harry put his hand behind his head and watched him take his bare-assed leave with the kind of appreciation he'd hardly ever admit to.

When Mike came back, Harry took his turn cleaning up. When he came out with a towel over his head, he saw that Mike was back in bed. The burgers they'd got hours ago in Raton were still enough for him, and the clock told him he hadn't slept even thirty minutes, so Harry forgot for the moment about heading for the kitchen, threw the towel behind the door, and got back in next to him instead.

"Hey," he said and offered his mouth for a kiss. Mike took him up on it.

They settled down with their heads on the same pillow, pressed up to each other, but it wasn't near enough. Harry rolled onto his side and rested his head on Mike's chest, liking the way Mike's arm came around him, and the way he could hear his heart beat. Him and Mike, they weren't exactly the snuggling type, though they did it more, it seemed, as the years passed. Maybe 'cause this was a good way for talking.

A horse made its presence known by neighing loud and long from the big field out front. "Who's that?" Mike asked. His fingertips trailed along Harry's biceps.

"Probably Ginger."

"You sure do know your horses."

"Been working at it half my life, so I should. Hey, Mike?"

"Uh-huh?"

"That sure was something last night."

Mike didn't pretend he thought Harry was talking about the drag queen. "Yep. It was good to see those two so happy."

“I bet their feet are sore today. They danced ’til the place closed down.”

“That’s their way, I guess. I hope they know how to be together when they aren’t twirling each other around.”

“There’s a trick to it, ain’t there?”

“Yep. We got it.”

“We sure do.”

“After working at it half our lives, just about, we should,” Mike said.

Harry smiled as he lay there pressed against Mike’s chest. That was true. They never would’ve lasted if they hadn’t had the knack of togetherness. Or, more true, if they hadn’t had the want for togetherness that had drawn them close to begin with.

Or if they hadn’t had that need.

He would never be the kind of man who would want to stand up in front of strangers, or even friends, and tell out loud how he loved Mike Pruitt. It just wasn’t in him. He’d always held his feelings deep. Mike understood that. But since they’d already said “I love you” this day, which they didn’t often do....

Harry shifted around so he was on his belly and went up on his elbows. “If...”

“What?”

Frustrated, he couldn’t find the words. “If things were different.... Never mind.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it ain’t.”

“Sure it is. I get it. Do you get it?” Mike’s eyes got almighty soft, and he pushed Harry’s hair back from his forehead with a touch as gentle

as could be. His voice was low when he said, “Do you know you’re exactly who I want to be with?”

Harry took in a breath, and with it so much good feeling. “You get it, don’t you, that you’re the one for me? I ain’t interested in nobody else.”

There wasn’t any other way to finish what he’d said except to kiss Mike, so he did. Mike’s lips suited him. They were just right.

They settled back down the way they’d been, Harry within Mike’s arm.

“I want to be with you,” Mike said, and his voice was teasing, “even though you were such a dumbass that you weren’t gonna go to Dallas for the wedding.”

“That was the smartest thing I could’ve done, and you know it. Besides, you’re the one for me even though you tricked me into going to JT’s that first time.”

“You really think I did that? You should know better.”

“You had it all planned, I bet.”

“Don’t you need to go check on the horses? Ain’t that Ginger calling you?”

“Nope,” Harry said, and he reached for the sheet to pull it over Mike. He didn’t much like to get under coverings, especially in the summertime, but Mike did. “There’s plenty of time for that. First, what do you say we get a little more sleep in?”

Mike smiled at him and kissed him again, and Harry shut his eyes carrying that sight and that touch with him.

When they got up in a little while, they’d get dressed and go downstairs. Mike would probably get their suitcase from the truck and start a load of wash. Harry would put on his outside boots and go see what kind of job Danny had done with the horses. Mike would call the married couple who’d been holding the rental shop open this weekend for him and

see how things had gone. After that, Mike would make them some big salads, and Harry figured he'd cook some pork chops, 'cause they were easy. Tonight maybe they could catch the end of *60 Minutes*, or there might be a good movie on.

And tomorrow they'd wake up and start the day over again. Maybe they'd talk some more about the things they'd seen, and Mike would make a joke about Drusilla, and Harry would pretend he was jealous of her and Mike and never wanted to see her again.

Damn, but it was a good life they had going here. They hadn't ever had any wedding and never would, but somehow or other, when Harry hadn't been looking, it turned out that they'd been married for years.

And that was okay with him.

JENNA HILARY SINCLAIR is married to a man she greatly loves. She has two kids. She lives in the suburbs. Dutifully, she has been a room mom, a theater mom, and a band mom. As seems a prerequisite for anyone who got her start in writing through fandom, she shares her home with two cats. She's been a commercial banker wearing starched suits and has sold Tupperware to the Ladies-Who-Lunch (please, forgive her).

Boy, is she ever vanilla...to the uninformed outsider.

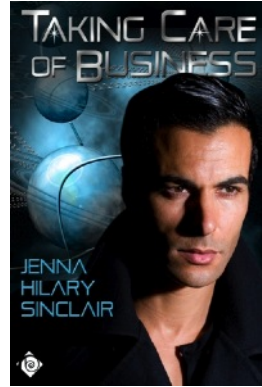
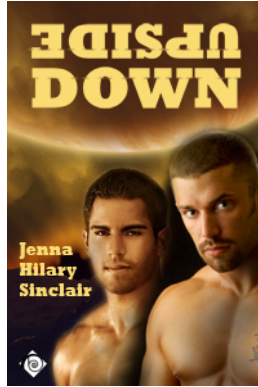
On the inside, though, Jenna is a seething cauldron of passion; her imaginative interior life sets off firecrackers in her stomach. Over the last nineteen years of her writing life, all done strictly for the pleasure of it, she has dedicated herself to defining the elusive emotion of love...as seen through the lens of two attractive men having sex, that is. Just when she thinks she's almost got it, it's almost within her grasp...it slips through her fingers, requiring her to write yet another male/male romance. Darn.

Jenna seeks equality for all beings under the law, including green-skinned fellows from Mars and, oh, yeah, all peoples of non-hetero-norm sexuality. She recently attended her local Marriage Equality march and is anxious to start shouting at another. She believes in honesty, loyalty, effort, intensity, the search for truth, and the desire to do good in a capricious universe.

And she loves writing sex scenes.

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