



A Hike on Mount Shady
By Chris Owen

"Charlie! Charlie, where'd you get to?" Hank paused next to one of many trees and looked back. He knew exactly where he was and where he was going, but he wasn't completely sure Charlie did. Not yet, anyway. Hank had spent his whole life in that stand of trees; Charlie only had a year or so and not much of it back in the woods. Hank was pretty sure he could blindfold Charlie and put him in their front yard and trust Charlie to find the backyard, but that wasn't the same as going halfway up the mountain in winter, even if the mountain was their backyard. "Charlie!"

"God, I'm right here, Hank. Don't panic." Charlie came up the slope and around a clump of bushes, his eyes rolling. Again. "Don't see how you can miss me." He was dressed head to toe in hunter orange, at Hank's insistence. "Look like a big ball of idiot."

Hank bit his lower lip. "You look like someone who won't get shot by some yahoo out here poaching deer."

"I still don't think that the orange pants were necessary. A vest and hat are reasonable, I'll give you that. But the jacket and pants are just signs that you have an actual sense of humor." Charlie stomped his way up to Hank and looked down at him. "The fact that I actually put them on means I'm a fool for you, I suppose. Don't tell anyone, okay?"

"Your secret is safe with me." Hank nodded solemnly, his insides turning mushy. That secret had safely been the property of most of Shady Ridge for more than a year; they were just lucky that the majority of the town's population thought that it was cute and not vile. There were some bad eggs, of course, but aside from a few letters, a broken window, and one memorable brawl when Charlie got hammered on free beer at the roadhouse, they'd been mostly left in peace.

"Tell me again why we're this far up the hill?"

"It's a mountain," Hank corrected before he could stop himself. Charlie'd figured out about a week into clearing their plot of land that Hank had a pet peeve about tourists calling Mount Shady a hill. He didn't say it often, and it had taken Hank a while to figure out Charlie was pulling his leg, but Hank had yet to learn to let it slide. "Damn it, man."

Charlie grinned and started walking again, careful of places where there was still ice on the rocks, the sun not yet melting it away. "Not much snow this year."

"It's early in the season yet, and we're not really that high up. Hell, our yard likely won't have snow at all, 'cept for a few mornings. My place in town hardly ever had any."

"Not like New York."

Hank sighed to himself. "No, baby. Not like New York." They'd had the same conversation the year before, too, Charlie's first Christmas in Shady Ridge. Hank sort of thought they'd be having it again and again each year until the end of time. Only part of that was a good thing. "Why don't you go home for a few days, Charlie?" He'd said that before, too.

"I am home." Charlie looked back over his shoulder and smiled. "It's just a different home, is all. I'll stop talking about it."

"No, you won't. And I wouldn't want you to." Hank walked with him, going up to the next copse of trees and around to the west. "It *is* different. That's the truth."

Charlie nodded and reached for a pine branch. "Yeah, but I don't want you to think I liked it better there than here."

Hank laughed. "Charles Hise. You spend eleven months out of the year hiking, fishing, hunting, chasing bad guys, looking for your next beer, working out, having sex and grilling steak. For

eleven months you're happier than any man has a right to be and you don't mention New York at all. You haven't said the word 'Albany' in a year and a half. So what if you miss snow at Christmas time? If I could buy you some of the stuff, I would."

To Hank's surprise, Charlie's eyes suddenly grew sharp and bright with tears that were blinked away before Hank could really process that they'd been there. "You would, I know." Charlie gave him a hard kiss, the tip of his nose cold on Hank's cheek when he nuzzled him. "And you're right. I'm freaking happy here. With you, with Shady Ridge, with this damn mountain we're climbing."

"Hey, your idea to be up here. Not my fault that this is where the fir trees around here like to grow." Hank resisted the urge to go back for yet more kisses. "See what you need yet?"

"Not yet." Charlie gave him a long look, up and down. "Well, not the trees, anyway."

"We can mess around at home," Hank said primly. "We can look at the deck and see where we can put that hot tub you were talking about."

"Right in the corner, I think. Shelter on every side -- we can hot tub naked in February. It'll be awesome." Hank snorted at that but Charlie nodded and they started hiking again. "We're not on our land anymore, Hank."

"Nope, haven't been for a good while, actually." Hank knew where they were, though.

"So, can we just take boughs when we find them? That's not legal, is it?"

Hank raised an eyebrow at him. "This is Parker Climson's land."

Charlie looked back at him expectantly.

"Parker. Parker Climson." Parker Climson wouldn't give a god damn if they painted every tree trunk blue.

"Yes, Hank," Charlie said patiently. "I know Parker Climson. I don't see how it's relevant, who exactly owns the land we're tromping on without permission."

Hank rolled his eyes but didn't laugh. Charlie might have looked like a country boy -- well, when he wasn't all in orange like an overly cautious big city goober -- and he sure acted the part, but he hadn't grown up country. Hank pulled his cell phone out of his vest and checked reception. "Only one bar, but it might be good enough," he said as he dialed up Parker.

Charlie snorted and sat on a nearby stump. "Teach on, oh, Great One."

"Yes, Grasshopper." Hank smirked and then pushed the button for speaker phone when Parker picked up. "Hey, it's Hank."

"Know that," Parker growled at him. "My granddaughter got me this new fancy phone; people's names come up. Why do you sound so funny?"

"I've got you broadcasting to the countryside, Parker." Hank grinned. "Me and Charlie are up the mountain, looking for pine and fir boughs for over the doors of our house."

Parker snorted and Charlie looked amused. "That city boy of yours sure does like his frippery. Gotta say, though, that straw man at Halloween was a scary work. Really well done."

Hank nodded. "Yeah, he's good with that kind of thing. Anyway, he's real polite, too. We're up on your land, maybe half mile from your house. Mind if we cut from your trees?" He held the phone out so Charlie wouldn't miss a thing.

First there was the snort. Then the pause. Then Parker demanded, "You serious, boy?"

"Yes, sir." Hank grinned and Charlie sighed, his legs stretched out in front of him.

"Can he hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

Charlie cleared his throat. "Here, Parker."

"Good. You listen to me, boy. I'm almost ninety years old. I pull my own wood in, I split it, I stack it. I cook my meals and sweep my hearth. That land there was Hank's granddaddy's spot and Hank had to make some tough choices. It's my plot now, but I don't touch it. No one does. You're Hank's, and while I don't really agree with that, he seems to agree enough to build a house with you. If you and him want pine and fir on your doors, you take it from where you find it. Don't matter none to me, and it don't matter to none who bought that land in parcels from Hank. Just the way things are here, you understand?"

Charlie nodded, his eyes wide. "Yes, sir. I hear. Thank you, Parker."

Hank smiled to himself as Charlie looked more than a little awed. That was quite a speech and damn near a romantic blessing.

"Now," Parker added. "Hank. What do you mean calling me up and making me say all that? I probably embarrassed the hell out of him and that's no way to run a relationship. Do *you* understand?"

Hank blinked. "Yes, sir," he said, hastily turning off the speaker phone. "Sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize to me. You cut him some boughs and take him home and make it up to him. Honestly, you kids. Don't treat each other with respect any more. What do you think your grandfather would say about this?"

Hank shuddered at the thought. "Gotta go, Parker. Thanks for letting us take your limbs."

Charlie was grinning at him when he hung up, like he was pleased that Hank had been scolded. "I like that he tells everyone just what he thinks," Charlie said as he stood up. "What was that he was saying to you? That you embarrassed me?"

"Did I?" Hank shoved the phone in his pocket and avoided looking at Charlie while he did up the zipper. He had to keep that phone nice and safe, after all.

Charlie laughed softly. "If I got embarrassed every time someone gave me a lecture, I would never have made it out of the academy or managed a full month working under Captain Casado. Hell, the sheriff still barks at me. It was kind of fun to see you blush, though; you're awfully cute when you blush."

"Stop that." Hank looked up, his cheeks still warm and the rest of his body catching up as he realized Charlie was coming a lot closer and that the look Hank had gotten earlier now had a bit of physical presence to back it up. Too bad it was so damn cold up there; Charlie looked intent on getting down to it. "You'd freeze your nuts off if you tried to get action up here."

"You think I can't keep us warm long enough for a fast one?"

Hank considered. He considered the temperature -- cold -- and the terrain -- dirty. "Charlie. Look around. Tell me what you see. Rock, ice, some trees. There's exactly two spots of land up here with enough soil for a garden, and only three hunting blinds. There is nowhere at all reasonable for messing around."

"First time I blew you was up against a tree."

Hank's thoughts crashed like a train leaving its tracks. "Good point," he said weakly. "There's a blind over that way, about a quarter mile. Might at least be out of the wind."

Charlie started walking, didn't even look around or hesitate. "C'mon. I think we can manage better than a little blow job. I brought lube and you saw fit to dress me like the Michelin man. We might even be warm."

Hank followed, vaguely surprised at himself for being so compliant. God, sex outside in December. Up the mountain. "Can I do you?"

"Hell, yes."

Hank hurried up.

A few minutes later Charlie asked, "How much farther? I'm not seeing much of anything other than fewer trees."

"More room for the game up here." Charlie knew that, of course, but Hank pointed up the track and to the right. "There's a blind just around that bend, I think, nice flat spot where the deer like to come."

Charlie flashed him a grin and gave Hank's ass a pat. "Good."

"In a rush, big guy?"

"Always. Not every day I get to break in new orange pants." Charlie headed around the bend, ducking his head to avoid an outcrop of rocks.

"You're just trying to get me to think of hunting clothes as sexy," Hank teased. Then he almost ran into Charlie's back, the man suddenly an immovable wall in front of him. "What?" he whispered. "Deer?"

"Nope." Charlie wasn't bothering to keep his voice down and he started moving again. He took a couple of steps to the side and said, "Hank, what do you see?"

Hank looked and looked around again. "Well. Huh. I see the blind, mostly fallen apart. And I see a hell of a lot of topsoil. What crazy-ass fool would move a lot of topsoil halfway up a mountain?"

"My guess is the kind of crazy-ass fool who knew the blind wasn't being used anymore. Therefore, this nice flat area was just a lovely spot to have a protected garden." He pointed all around them at the ragged rocks and bramble. "This is some creative gardening for profit, I'd say."

Hank nodded slowly. "Yup. Next year's grow op. Great. No one's been here for a while, though." There were no fresh footsteps he could see and the ground was hard. Crumbles of dirt would've shown up if anyone had been by since the deep frost set in.

Charlie nodded, too. "Take some pictures with your phone. Casado will want to see them, and we can open a file. When do you think would be good to stake the place out? May?"

"Maybe. Depends how many plants they put in. If they're growing for the high school and local trade we can grab 'em pretty much anytime. Hell, we might be able to just pick them up for dealing and let them tell us about the plot, instead of having to waste man hours sitting out here watching pot grow." He'd had to do that a time or two and didn't really relish having to do it again. The work was boring as all get out.

"Well, it's not a large area," Charlie said slowly as Hank took the photos. "You're probably right. It would be a pain in the ass to be growing up here for export, and we don't really have anyone who's into that kind of business, do we? We've got users, not producers."

"Shady Ridge is far too nosy to have a big drug business going on and us not know about it. It's hard to have a drug ring in a small town." Hank put his phone away and frowned at the nicely

turned soil, rock-hard in the winter air. "And we haven't had anyone new move in for months. No, I think this is some local jackass. But then, we could be totally off base and come next June this land could be covered in honeysuckle or clover or some such."

"Sure." Charlie shrugged and turned to face him. "But you don't think so."

"No. No, I don't think so." Hank sighed. He hated pot growers; they made his job actual work sometimes. And it wasn't even that he really had any moral objection to occasional recreational use, either; he just had a job to do, and he did it. This time, he at least had a few month's warning. "It will look all different the next time we come up here," he told Charlie. "Warmer. Greener."

"And we won't be able to mess around." Charlie grinned and reached out a hand to hook one of Hank's pockets. "Come here."

"Are you serious?"

"You don't think I can get the mood back?" Charlie lifted an eyebrow at him.

"You want to fuck next to a plot of land where people've been getting ready to make our jobs interesting?"

Charlie stared at him. "You are so weird. Does it honestly matter to you who's been doing what here, in that context? I bet there's been a hell of a lot of drinking here. And some hunting and some drunk hunting, and I'd lay even money that back in the day Parker was up here messing around with one of the town girls. He seems feisty."

"You had me until you mentioned Parker." Hank took a step backward.

Unsurprisingly, Charlie moved with him. His eyes were crinkling up at the corners. "Hank. You're being silly. You were going to fuck me in a hunting blind."

"We can't get to the blind now," Hank pointed out. Damn Charlie for having crinkly eyes. He always looked so freaking sexy when he smiled. "We'd leave footprints. Plus, it's a wreck."

"I know." Charlie was speaking in that patient voice again, and he was still coming closer. He stood right in front of Hank and started playing with the pull tab of Hank's jacket zipper, the fabric slowly parting. "But we're out of the wind here, and there's no one around at all. I'm not cold. In fact, you've got me so bundled up I'm damn near hot."

"So you cool down," Hank said. He didn't move, though, and he didn't mean it. He wasn't cold, either. Of course, he was wearing a normal pair of jeans and good boots, his safety orange limited to his hat and the many reflective stripes on his jacket. "I won't stop you."

Charlie's eyes flashed dark and Hank bit the tip of his tongue. He hadn't meant to give Charlie an idea, but apparently he had. "Charlie. Don't."

It was too late. Charlie started taking off his clothes, right there. The orange jacket went, then the hoodie, leaving him in a wool long sleeved shirt. No wonder he wasn't cold. Then the thick, orange pants, along with the boots -- though he did put them back on instead of standing on the frozen ground in his socks. He beamed at Hank, looking pleased as shit as he stood there in a long shirt and boxer briefs, his hard on pushing out proudly. "Now. Are you going to play or not?"

Hank actually looked around to see if anyone was watching. "Um."

Charlie snorted and crouched down for a moment, getting something from his jacket pocket. Hank was no dummy, and he was far from shocked when Charlie handed him a small tube of lube. He did squeak, though, when Charlie yanked at his jacket zipper and then at the fly of his jeans. "Careful!"

"Oh, please. I don't have time for careful." Charlie batted Hank's hand away, got the jeans zipper down and then started pulling Hank's pants off. "Gimme."

"Oh, for God's sake." Hank tried to grumble, but there he was -- getting his cock out in the middle of nowhere, right there for any stray deer to see. "I'm not going to put you down on the frozen grou--" He yelled as Charlie sucked him in and started going down on him like he meant it. "Charlie!"

A moment later Charlie was standing again, looking pleased. "Okay. You're hard, I'm hard, you taste good and I'm ready to go." He tapped the hand Hank was holding the lube with and gave him a wink. "With me, country boy?"

Hank made a strangled sound. "How you get me in these situations..." His pants were around his knees and his cock was pointing for the sky. Charlie was nearly naked.

"You love me," Charlie said happily. Then he turned around, shoved his own boxers down and leaned forward to put his hands flat on a slide of rock. He looked over his shoulder and added, "And you want me."

Hank couldn't argue with that. Charlie had an amazing ass, a work of art. And it was cold out, there was lube in his hand, and Charlie clearly wasn't reluctant. "If a deer comes by you can explain it to her."

"I'll do that." Charlie's back flexed and he lifted his ass, laughing when Hank made a strangled sound. "Come on, already."

Hank got on. He didn't spend a lot of time on prep, either -- apparently his hands were cold, judging by the complaints. The instructions, orders and protests all died away when he finally managed to shuffle forward, trying not to trip on his jeans, and lined his slick cock up with Charlie's entrance. After that, there were whispers.

Charlie was like that every once in a while; all games and teasing and even a bit of macho bullshit until the loving got going. Then he turned all gooey and sweet, whispering to Hank and telling him how it felt, how special and wonderful and -- once -- how lovely. Of course, Hank just did his thing. His thing, though, had changed from "get it in and get it going" to "slide in and see how many times Charlie will gasp, how long it takes until Charlie is moving back, how many times Charlie can say the word 'love' before he takes a breath."

When Charlie topped, it usually wasn't like that. Sometimes it was -- there was slow and sweet lovemaking when Charlie was driving, sure -- but not most of the time. It was just as likely that they'd get a hell of a lot more wild and crude as it was they'd turn to sweet. But when it was Hank, Charlie usually just couldn't get to crude, couldn't seem to find any words other than the pretty ones.

Charlie was whispering, his voice low, talking about home and how Hank made everything real, more real than the rock he was looking at. "Love you so much," Charlie said, and something inside Hank started dancing, started wishing he could sing.

"Love you, too," he said, reaching around to give Charlie a little help. It wasn't needed; he said the words, kissed Charlie's shoulder and then they were both coming, Charlie first. Hank sometimes forgot to pay attention to his own body when Charlie was talking; sometimes it was even better that way, climax taking him by surprise and ripping out of him like his breath was being stolen.

This time they yelled, and birds flew into the sky yelling back at them, making them laugh.

"You're crazy," Hank told Charlie as they dressed. "Absolutely insane."

"So you keep telling me." Charlie kissed him, everything back on except for his coat. "Does it matter? We found work, we can find boughs for the house, we had a hike, and I got to feel you in me again. If that's insane, I'll take it."

Hank kissed him back. "I like how you do that. Turn teasing into stuff that makes me want to blush. It's a real talent you've got."

Charlie shrugged and grinned at him. "Hey, maybe we should go to New York for Valentine's Day. Do some skiing."

Hank nodded but said, "No way." He was not going to risk his neck that far from home. Not for anyone.

"I'll set it up."

"Okay." Hank rolled his eyes and started looking for fir trees. Life had been good since Charlie moved to Shady Ridge. Maybe New York wasn't that bad. Maybe. "Let's find some boughs and get the house all ready for Christmas. We can deal with February later."

Charlie smiled at him, once more dressed in orange and looking incredibly happy against the backdrop of someone's pot plot. "Okay, Hank."

Hank sighed and hoped that New York wouldn't be too cold. Then he took Charlie's hand and started out for home, keeping an eye out for fir and pine, the things Charlie wanted for their home.

All Hank wanted was Charlie, which made him a lucky man.

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