

A muscular man with a hairy chest and a tattoo on his left arm is shown from the waist up. He is wearing blue jeans and has his hands on his hips. The background is a blurred field under a blue sky.

FORGOTTEN FAVOR

Angela Fiddler

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by Angela Fiddler

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CONTENTS

[Part One](#)

[Part Two](#)

[About the Author](#)

[MLR Press Authors](#)

[the trevor project](#)

* * * *

Forgotten Favor
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Part One

When Mark closed his eyes, he felt the fall. It hadn't been Butter's fault. Mark should have seen the change in the ground, but the early morning gallop had felt so good. They had been on the road for almost a month, placing well in the money in several of the small town rodeos. After all that time living in the front sleeping quarters of his horse trailer and riding about in finite spaces, he was home on the ranch where the earth seemed to stretch on forever and there didn't seem to be an end to the sky. He'd felt free.

He remembered looking down. Just as he was about to pull back on the reins, he felt Butter trip. For a second, he thought that she would recover. Then she stumbled again, and for another heartbeat they both were weightless. He grabbed the reins, his feet kicking free of the stirrups as though on autopilot, and he knew, even as he saw the ground hurtling up towards him, that this was going to hurt. And his next thought was a prayer that Butter would not be.

He hit the ground hard. That was a given. He remembered the sickening crunch from the shoulder but he had no memory at all of Butter coming down on his leg. He supposed that was a blessing, though in his dreams he still imagined the snap.

And also in his dreams, he saw the hooves. Black as night, as death, as sin. The ground was soft, the rational part of his mind knew that, but when the hooves struck it, sparks flew. He also heard Butter's frantic breathing just a few yards

away. His own pathetic attempts at drawing air into lungs too stunned to remember their most basic function was just as hard. There was more than just the two of them in his dream. No matter how hard he had tried to look up, to ask the riders on the horses for help, or for somebody to check on Butter and find out why she wasn't attempting to get up on her own, he couldn't breathe.

Through the pain, and stress, and anxiety, he was terrified.

Mark woke up in the hospital. Not for the first time, but for what seemed like the hundredth. He was alone in the semiprivate room, and the television overhead was muted. His leg ached dully, almost resentfully, and he knew from how high the sun was in the sky that it would be another hour before the nurse came with more painkillers.

To distract himself, he stared at the walls that no amount of bleach would ever get truly white again. The washed out green curtains matched the green summer weight blankets on each of the three beds. The get well cards on the table beside him—the last of the accompanying flowers had been thrown out a couple days ago—were buried beneath insurance forms, half finished crossword puzzles and magazines that predicted the outcome for the last set of Olympics.

The worst of the damage was not on the femur, which by itself would have kept him in traction. When Butter had fallen, she had rolled over him. It could have been worse; other than his spleen, there had been no other internal damage. One of the ranch hands had seen him fall and called an ambulance. If Mark concentrated hard enough he could feel the metal plates

holding his pelvis and thigh together under his skin. The fiberglass cast kept him from touching the surgery scars, and they woke him at all hours of the night with unholy itching.

Though if he had died, if he was being perfectly honest, hell would not be too different than a semiprivate room that lingered with the smell of dead flowers.

A shadow crossed the door. Mark looked up. As much as he hated being poked and prodded, at least the nurses on their frequent rounds were some break from the monotony of his life. His father had visited, twice, his stepmother more often, but she'd just been there the day before helping him move from the hospital room to the rehab center for the extended care he couldn't get at the ranch. He still had a stack of books she'd brought him as well. Some of the ranch hands and a few of his roping buddies had stopped by in the beginning, but they tapered off by the time the flowers they'd brought had wilted. He didn't blame them.

And his father ... he didn't want to think about his father, Edward McCoy. He would use the ranch as an excuse not to come more often, and on the surface Mark accepted the excuse for what it was. Though Edward did own one of the largest cattle ranches in southern Alberta, he also had more managers than some fast food chains and accountants up the wazoo. The fact was they did far better as employer and employee than they ever had as father and son. Up close and personal ... well, that wasn't so good. He had moved out of the big house to the apartment over the new stables when he was eighteen, the disgraced heir apparent. A good year was measured by how many conversations they didn't have.

Things had gotten slightly better once Edward had remarried, but Sunday dinners were still frosty.

The door opened. The man who walked in was familiar, aching so, but it took Mark an extra second to recognize him. He sat up as much as the traction would allow and swallowed. "Jake Alastair," he said, and was glad his voice didn't break. When he thought about the strained relationship he had with his father, he had to think about Jake.

Jake hadn't changed all that much over the past five years, since the hayloft. He was taller, more tanned, and broader across the chest. He was dressed in Sunday go-to-meeting jeans, and a white western shirt that had obviously never fallen off a horse, but the hat he held nervously looked as though it had survived a stampede of wildebeests once or twice. His blond hair had been recently combed and his blue eyes, always a bit too wide and a bit too deep, were exactly the same. Mark swallowed again.

"Mark," Jake said. And despite his boyish looks, his voice was low and comforting. Mark couldn't help but think of the loft again, the smell of the hay, the dust dancing in the sunbeams, and the way Jake's lips had felt on his throat. Not that anything more had happened. It was bad luck his father had come home so early. Mark had been eighteen, just finished school and hadn't found Butter yet, and if he hadn't had his father's support, he would have had nothing at all. It was a lame excuse to cave in to his father's threats, but he had. After an awkward year of avoiding Jake for fear of his father finding out they'd had contact, Jake had dropped out of the rodeo circuit entirely.

Jake looked him over, and his mouth twitched when he saw the lump in the bed the cast made. Mark shrugged, though it hurt his shoulder to do so, and motioned to the chair on the other side of the bed. "You can sit if you want," he said, knowing the words were awkward. There had been long, hot nights in his life where he would imagine what he would say if he ever saw Jake again, but sitting arrangements had never been one of the topics of conversation.

Jake nodded, but didn't come any closer. "You know my dad got sick," he said. His mouth opened and closed a couple times. The awkwardness between them was wrong.

"No," Mark said. "I didn't. I thought you fell off the planet. Is that why you stopped riding?"

A flash of pain crossed Jake's face, and he bit his lip. "Mostly," Jake allowed. "My dad needed help at his ranch. It was a rescue center. Is a rescue center, I mean."

"Okay." Mark realized his mouth was dry and reached for one of the plastic cups, the same washed out green as the rest of the room. The water inside tasted plastic as well, but he gulped down half of it. His leg throbbed as though punishing him for not making the pain the center of his attention for the past couple minutes, and he rubbed the cast with the palm of his hand until he could manage the pain again.

When he looked up, Jake's face was pale despite the tan. He swallowed with a mouth so dry Mark could hear the clicking sound his throat made, and he offered what remained in his cup to Jake. "The pitcher has ice in it, or it did an hour ago."

Jake took it gratefully, filled and emptied the cup up twice before putting it down. The room was air-conditioned, but he was sweating. Mark frowned. "Are you okay?"

Jake waved his hand and shook his head. "No. I hate hospitals. I never liked them, but after dad got sick, well..."

Mark didn't ask him to finish. "You didn't have to come."

"Yes, I did. I told you, I run a rescue center now." Jake hesitated. "So when I saw her in the kill pens, I had to save her. I didn't think you would ... I knew you wouldn't..."

Mark felt sick, like he'd just had an overdose of morphine, and the room started to spin. He gripped the blankets and where he touched it he left damp handprints. "Who's she?" he asked, forming the words carefully. But he knew the answer. He just needed to hear Jake say it.

"Butter," Jake said. "She'd been sold on with her papers but I knew it was her the moment I saw her. She was hurt, her knee was pretty banged up, but she's okay."

Mark shook his head. "No. That's not possible. My dad told me she was fine. She was back at the ranch. He wouldn't—" But he would. Mark felt cold inside. He looked up. Jake continued.

"I have her. The vet says it was just a bone bruise. The x-ray didn't show anything broken or chipped. We've been keeping her pretty immobile and she's recovering."

"Thank you," Mark said. He knew he sounded distant. "I can't ... thank you."

"You don't have to," Jake said. He approached the bed like a marionette controlled by a rank beginner. The hand holding his hat tightened, crumbling the straw brim, but he made it

without falling over. He took Mark's hand, the one attached to his bad shoulder, but Jake's touch was so gentle that Mark didn't fear the potential pain. "I missed you."

Mark cleared his throat. "I missed you, too." It was an understatement that burned his throat with all the words he wanted to say. "After..." Mark waved his hand over the cast helplessly. Jake nodded, telling him he understood, and Mark relaxed.

"Of course you can come," Jake said.

The door opened again and a nurse came in with two pills in the tiny paper cup. Her scrubs, with the bright balloons and teddy bears, were the only real colorful thing in the room. She smiled at Mark, a genuine show of affection, and tipped the paper cup so that the pills rolled into his palm. "Your friend can stay, but these will make you really drowsy."

Jake stepped back from the bed. "I really have to go, ma'am."

Mark wanted to say something, to be perfectly honest he wanted to ask Jake to stay, but Jake looked so uncomfortable Mark couldn't do it. "Thank you," he said. "For everything."

"Weren't nothing," Jake said, sounding double his age, and made his escape. Mark would have given anything to join him. Instead, he took his pills.

* * * *

There was a strange disconnect between what was happening in the cities and what was happening in the dusty rodeo grounds and racetracks that made up so many hot summer weekends. Despite the victories in court and the

acceptance Mark saw on the television, "gay" was still a synonym for all things inconvenient, and "faggot" was the ultimate putdown above all other putdowns. Mark learned quickly to keep his head down, to fake interest in the buckle bunnies that hovered around even the smallest rodeos, and to never show emotion over words that were used for posturing. It was hard.

But then Jake was there, they were both in the roping events, and the thing about rodeos was that there was always a hell of a lot of hurry up and wait. They had to wait for their event, wait for their turn, wait in the box, wait for the string to snap, and then wait for the gratifying way the rope floated down around the calf's neck. Jake made the waiting better.

There is no world smaller than that of the infield of the chuck wagon racetrack, where cowboys set up camp between the days of the show. For long hours there was nothing to do but shoot the breeze—though in any other world it was straight gossiping. There was so much Mark wanted to talk to Jake about, or just touch skin on skin in a way that wasn't covered with denim, leather, or dirt. But that just wasn't possible. And from the cryptic looks Jake gave him, Mark only hoped it was reciprocal.

Mark honestly could not remember the excuse Jake had made to drive up that fall day six years ago. It could have been a saddle, either to sell or buy, or a forgotten something left over the last weekend. That part of the day was a complete blank.

It had been a hot day and even with the sun parallel to the earth, the ground itself radiated heat. Rodeo season meant

two and a half if not three days away from the ranch, which meant all the work from eighteen-hour days seven days a week had to be compressed into five, sometimes less. And the sun going down on Edward McCoy's ranch was never an excuse to pack it in if one was related to the man.

Mark was working on a tractor. It was less than three years old, the green paint still shiny, and yet the engine had stripped something and huge bellows of black smoke kicked out whenever it started. It was only two months past the warranty, as was always the case. He and Devon, the boss hand, were up to their elbows in grease and little specks of metal that were never a good sign in any type of gear work when Jake's red truck came barreling down the road.

Devon saw Jake through the windshield, looked at Mark's face, and understood. Jake came out of the truck holding a bridle—that had been the ruse. They had talked about it in one of the few seconds they'd had alone. Mark remembered now. Jake looked almost sheepish, dressed in clean jeans and a clean white shirt. Mark glanced back to Devon, his tongue tied like a teenager trying to come up with some excuse that would give him and Jake more privacy, but Devon just nodded and squeezed Mark's shoulder.

The smell of the anti-grease soap had been particularly offensive in the work sink of the barn. The hair on the back of his neck prickled with awareness of Jake standing right behind him. They were alone, and would be for a while. Only one horse was missing from the stables. His brother, Peter, had taken his gelding out to try to find what had happened to a lost steer in the northern field. Mark's dad was gone for the

day, as were all the paid day employees, so Mark took the extra second to take off his shirt and wash away some of the day's grime that had worked up his sleeves and down the waistband of his jeans.

He remembered turning to Jake, half naked, yet feeling completely exposed, and if it were possible to feel a gaze on his skin, he felt Jake studying him. It didn't feel wrong. Still, they were right out in the open. Anyone glancing through the huge open doors would see them beside the sink. Jake knew it too. He glanced up to the hayloft, a Motel 6 for any ranch hand, and waited for Mark to nod before heading up the old ladder.

It was early fall, and the second cutting of hay was still on the field. The small square bales made comfortable surroundings. Both their shirts made the lowest pile an okay bed and it was Mark's turn to be able to look at Jake. He traced Jake's clavicle with clean, if slightly raw fingers and was amazed at the sinewy strength Jake had over his shoulders and down his arms. Mark would've kept going, to feel his way down Jake's chest, over his belly, and further down to places his sudden shyness wouldn't allow him to think the names of, but his overactive imagination had great plans for, when Jake kissed him.

It was soft, in a way that Mark did not think possible. Devon probably knew what was what the moment he saw that Jake had shaved at five o'clock at night. His cheeks were smooth. Mark pulled away, knowing that his own cheeks weren't, but Jake didn't let him go free. Nor did Mark truly want to be free.

Jake parted his lips, an open invitation, and slid his hands around Mark's hips to pull him closer. This was the part with the buckle bunnies that had always disgusted Mark. It was like his mouth was a box of cereal and whoever had their tongue in his mouth was looking for the special prize. He had to have been pretty drunk in order to have gotten that far, and more times than not he'd pushed the poor girl off of him and stumble away to sleep off his too high blood alcohol level.

This wasn't that. It almost seemed two completely different acts. Mark awkwardly parted his own lips, hesitantly following Jake's lead in his hand placement in relation to buttocks, and felt a jolt shoot through him the first time their groins were aligned. This was very, very good and he had been stupid to wait this long.

The next bit should have been automatic. The jeans were to come off, they were to lie down over their shirts naked and ... be together, however that was supposed to align itself. He'd been somewhat fuzzy on the mechanics at the time, and in this dream state Mark only had a tenuous grasp on the line between present-day knowledge and memory. It would be so easy to insert the memory of an orgasm on that day ... the sweet hay, the smell of dust that perpetually tickled the back of his throat, the sun soaked smell of the old wood, the calming, reassuring smell of the horses beneath them. Floating in his hospital bed, it seemed the easiest thing in the world for Mark to be able to rewrite what had happened that evening.

But he couldn't. He had unbuttoned Jake's jeans, but hadn't yet managed the zipper when he heard the clatter of

hooves below them and outside. It wasn't possible. There were no pavement or cobblestones for that particular sound of shod horses clattering against a hard surface, but he heard it nonetheless. He wondered, there in the hospital room, what would've happened if he'd kept to the task at hand, but instead he'd gone to the single, grimy window that let in the filtered orange light of the sunset, and looked down to the yard.

It was a posse. They were dressed all in black, on big, black horses, and their faces were covered in black bandannas that hid all but the too large black irises in their white eyes.

Jake wasn't looking at him. He was adjusting the shirts, a dozen feet away, and didn't stop making the nest that they had created more comfortable. He couldn't have seen the riders. He didn't see the way the riders had looked up almost the instant Mark had come to the window, and he didn't see the way the leader dipped the rim of his hat at him all cordial like.

Mark had taken a breath to call Jake over, but the words died in his throat when his eyes locked on the leader. If he could have, he would have curled up under the window, hugged his knees to his chest and hid his face until whatever terrible thing that was below them rode on without ever acknowledging them again. But he couldn't. He couldn't look away, and even under the bandanna, Mark knew the rider was smiling. And if he raised his hand and beckoned Mark down, Mark knew he would go. He didn't have to look away

from the leader's face to know there would be at least one horse without a rider, waiting for him.

But the man didn't beckon. Probably because the motion from the front gate distracted him. It was only when the man looked away from Mark's eyes that Mark was able to follow his gaze and see another riderless horse trotting down the lane with the saddle it still wore, stirrups swinging back and forth. It was Camper, his brother Peter's big sorrel gelding. And it was alone.

The leader looked back up to him, again touching his hat, and if ever Mark had been told, "another time then," it would never be as clear. And Mark would have screamed, but all that was left from that initial breath he had taken before seeing the black riders was a tiny little squeak. And even that was too loud. The leader smiled again, the action visible only in his eyes, and he motioned his riders to follow.

More clattering of hooves. Sparks shot up where the black horses struck the ground and it wasn't until the last rider had passed through the gate welcoming visitors to Bar Nunn that Mark was able to pull himself away.

Jake looked up, and Mark realized how few seconds had passed between him going to the window to him stumbling away from it. "What's wrong?" Jake had asked. Mark remembered the words five years later because it seemed so ridiculous that the only concern Jake had at that moment was that Mark had developed cold feet. But there were no words to describe what he'd seen and he knew he couldn't even attempt it. So he didn't. He went down the ladder, still half naked, and Jake followed, calling his name.

Mark supposed, distantly, that if Jake had taken the time to put his shirt back on, it might have changed at least some of the events that evening. But he hadn't. It was easy enough on a hot summer's evening for one young man to be shirtless. But when his father had driven up and found Mark trying to catch a still spooked Camper half-naked, with another half-naked young man behind him with his jeans unbuttoned, well, there was no explaining that. Especially when Mark was, in his father's words if not his own, the younger, more delicate son, the conclusion his father leapt to was not altogether off base.

And when the younger, more delicate son was found half-naked with another man on the same night that his older, more rugged son was found dead in a ditch a quarter mile from the gate, well, those sorts of nights are never really forgiven, forget forgotten.

Mark opened his eyes back in the hospital room. The euphoric part of the drugs had worn off, leaving him in a pain-free, if restless state. Now that Mark was awake, the black riders became a distant memory, like something he'd been told rather than something that had terrified him.

He'd been young enough that his father's good will had meant everything to him. And if swearing he would never look at another man again, or have anything at all to do with Jake Alastair, meant that the two of them could sit down at dinner across from each other and discuss nothing more personal than whether to allow a field to lie fallow the next year, then at the time Mark considered it to be a fair deal.

Things got easier two years after Peter died. Edward remarried, to a blond haired will-o-wisp of an ex-barrel racer. Her name was Mitsy, and within a couple months she brought civility, and not just forced politeness to the table. She didn't involve herself much between Mark and his father, but she was always willing to brew a cup of strong coffee in the big house's kitchen. They didn't say much, they didn't have to, but it was good just to sit at the table until the frustration of dealing with the block-headedness of his father passed. Mitsy was there for him, but she also loved his father for reasons Mark never really understood.

The cast had come off before Mark's father visited him again. The skin under the fiberglass had gone fish belly white, and when he stood there wasn't a single part of him that trusted the leg to hold his weight. An old wheelchair and a pair of crutches stood by the bedside, but when his physiotherapists weren't watching he used the cane the most, despite their dire warnings of its inefficiency.

Even though it clearly made him nervous, and the rescue center was at its busiest in the middle of summer vacation, Jake had visited him twice. Not for very long, but Mark didn't mind. He enjoyed Jake sitting with him—even when he was too doped up or in pain to be much of a conversationalist, it felt good to have him there.

They spoke of inconsequential things, but that was okay. Their empty conversations had nothing to do with the thick silence Mark had always associated with dinnertime. Finally, Mark approached the topic of getting out of the hospital with all the caution of approaching a wild bull in the chutes.

Forgotten Favor
by Angela Fiddler

It had been in the late spring, and he was able to sit in the chair facing the window. The sun was bright, and the world outside was full of so much early color that when he had to look back into the room and see the washed out greens and dirty whites again, it made his head hurt. Bar Nunn bred its cattle for an early spring delivery to maximize growth, which meant by mid-May even the most stubborn of young heifers had finally given birth. The crops were already planted. The spring showers—if they were very, very lucky—turned the riverbed and most of the back forty into green blankets of new growth that never lasted but spurred what seemed to be new growth everywhere.

If he were on the ranch, he would have more chores than hours to do them in. His father had never really replaced Peter, which somehow gave Mark four times as much stuff to do, but it kept him busy and too exhausted to think that life could be anything else but work. He hadn't had this much time to think in his entire life and he was almost sick from the monotony and exhaustion healing seemed to take.

So when the door opened, and Jake walked in, Mark embarrassed himself by how eager he was to get the hell out of the hospital room and into some place that didn't smell like antiseptic and recycled air. Dressing was something he could not quite manage without help, but once he made it down the stairs and out the door, and into the park, there was a strong enough wind to make the bathrobe he wore over his pajamas—which he was going to burn later—acceptable.

Jake looked good. It was only late spring, but he was already starting to tan. The constant exposure to the

elements had left him with lines around his eyes that showed just how much of his day he spent smiling. It was a ridiculous thing for Mark to notice, but he did.

He must have been comfortable enough with Mark because he was no longer wearing his dress blues. The old pair of jeans he wore hugged him in places no brand new pair ever would, though the new shirt had obviously just come out of plastic.

He had a distracted look in his eyes that kept him from being all the way with Mark, and when Mark asked about it all he said was there was a special place in hell for developers and their like.

Jake then told him, in a deliberate act of changing the subject—a faux pas Mark allowed him—of the first spring auction he had gone to. It was an easy time for him, spring was full of hope and more people came down to the local auctions to buy riding animals than at any other time. They quickly priced out most of the meat merchants who could not go above a dollar a pound and still make money. It was the fall that was hard, Jake said in his quiet way that broke Mark's heart. The cost of hay inevitably rose over the winter, and too many perfectly healthy young horses were sold to the auctions. Almost no one else bought for the same reason they were selling and the meat buyers made a killing. Literally.

Mark swallowed. It took him three attempts to broach the topic, and when he did the words piled out unceremoniously like rodeo clowns out of a barrel.

"I'm not going to be here forever," he said.

"I should certainly hope not. It's rather an unbearable thought." Jake leaned against the handles of the chair, and his hat shaded them both from the sun. Despite the wind, it was getting too hot. Mark felt naked without his own hat, despite the almost four months he had been without it. But if there was one person he felt comfortable being naked around, it was Jake.

From across the street, the school bell rang like it did every school day. A moment or so later the first of the kids riding bikes came pouring out of the park. Mark wanted to go inside, not wanting to be seen as yet another freak being aired out like his mother's hall runners, which she beat off the back porch every Sunday like clockwork when she was alive. He was about to open his mouth and asked Jake if they could move when Jake reached down and touched the line of his spine.

Mark jolted, but then got control and leaned back into the touch. "You're not going to be here forever," Jake repeated.

Mark hesitated, but then realized Jake was trying to encourage him to continue.

"I don't want to go back." Mark would have given anything to have been able to watch Jake's face for any kind of reaction before continuing on, but that would've required a significant amount of flexibility he no longer had. Jake stroked his neck again, this time using both his forefinger and his thumb, and Mark knew it was going to be all right. "I want to stay with you."

The touch on the back of his neck hesitated, but didn't stop. Mark felt his heart beat on the roof of his mouth but he

didn't say anything else. He had said quite enough, thank you very much.

"Okay," Jake said.

Contracts were sealed with less. Mark relaxed into the wheelchair, and Jake didn't stop petting the back of his neck. Suddenly, Mark could not think of a better way to spend the afternoon.

Now it was high season. The park outside the window of the hospital had a string of bicycles moseyed up to a bike rack as though it were a hitching post, but it was so hot the kids they belonged to sat listlessly on unmoving swings or in what shade the slides provided.

Mark was listless, too. The scars from the operation itched in a way no mosquito bite ever could. He was to be released the next day, under dire threats from the physio department not to do anything stupid. What they considered to be stupid took up most of a binder currently sitting on the end of his bed. Mark already hated its rusty red cover. Arrangements had been made for his truck to be waiting outside, and he had even gone out illicitly during the day to check if the familiar blue Ford waited for him. Seeing it in the long-term parking lot, he was much more pleased than the situation warranted. It took a second to gather up his courage, but when he looked in the cab behind the seats, the suitcases were there just as Devon had promised they would be.

So when the door opened, Mark honestly expected it to be Jake, despite the fact Jake had told him there was no way he could get away from a fund-raising event. From the tone of his voice over the phone Mark knew exactly how Jake felt

about fund-raising events, but to use Jake's words they needed every freaking dime.

It wasn't Jake.

His father walked into the room, his cowboy boots making a click that echoed down the halls. For the past four months, Mark had been accustomed to the silence that came from the hospital where even the muffled coughs of other patients seemed loud. Just standing there, Mark's father filled the room with noise and Mark knew he no longer wanted any part of it.

"Why did you sell Butter?" Mark said instead of a greeting. It was rude—he had meant it to be rude—but his father did not react to the challenge. He did not even look surprised that Mark knew he had passed Butter on.

"I don't keep dangerous horses in my stable. You know that."

Mark definitely knew. He hadn't sold Peter's horse, Camper. Despite Mark's protest, he had taken the handsome gelding out to the back forty and shot it as crow bait. It was yet another thing Mark could not forgive.

After that, to Mark at least, they did not have much more to talk about. They had long since given up their relationship as father and son and it was a lot easier to tender his resignation to his boss rather than his father.

Again, there was no recognition or surprise. His father nodded, once, and Mark was glad he'd asked Devon to pack up his things. At least there wasn't a question of back payment owed. Without a goodbye, not that Mark expected

Forgotten Favor
by Angela Fiddler

one, Edward McCoy spun on the back of his heels and walked out of the room.

That was that. The sense of discomfort left and it seemed the easiest thing in the world to wait until morning.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Part Two

The GPS told Mark in a clipped voice to turn down a rural road that seemed to lead into a farmer's field. Mark almost didn't do it. The gravel road he was already on wasn't much better, yet still he passed the fresh cut wood bones of houses. The lots were barely staked out, yet the stone wall that surrounded the gated community was completed. The gate that was to separate the owners of the huge monstrosities from the rest of the rabble was elegant in its warning to stay away.

For the hundredth time, Mark checked the crumpled piece of paper where he'd written the address down. His left leg cramped up, shooting pain up his spine, half real, half imagined. He slowed down enough to take the turn one handed and rubbed the scar tissue along his hip. It was far too early to link the pain to a change in the weather, but the heavy black storm clouds chasing him didn't make it any easier. The real source of the pain was probably the hour it took to get out of the city and the other hour and a half on bouncy, dirt roads after months of hospital and rehab living.

The sky to the west was certainly growing dark, and prairie summer storms were the worst. There was nothing to stop the clouds from gathering for miles and miles. He licked his lips, knowing the hard packed dirt road here would look like a mud bog after the deluge, but he was committed, and he wasn't planning on leaving anytime soon. He shifted up to

third, but didn't dare take it up any faster for fear the truck might rattle to pieces.

The air stilled. With his window open, the cicadas in the ditch were deafening. Mark took off his hat long enough to scrape his hair off his forehead. Another turn, and out of nowhere—or as much out of nowhere as could be in a landscape with almost a zero gradient—the ranch was ahead. It was obviously built in the only dip for miles to cut back some of the wind. The two red barns, painted the same ubiquitous red of all red barns everywhere, grew in the distance. The house beside them had yellow siding on it. The rest of the outbuildings were in various stages of care, but there was none of the elephant graveyard of equipment that most of the farms and ranches Mark had passed had in their front yards.

The horses in the first field had the glossy sheen of all well taken care of beasts. The two sorrels were neck to neck, scratching each other's shoulders, and their penny-colored tails switched lazily in the still air. They both turned at the sound of his truck. One started trotting, the other ran to catch up, and that became a gallop to the narrow human gate that separated their field from the barn. When they reached it, both of them turned on a dime and set off in the opposite direction, their tails streaming out behind them.

Mark parked next to the two trucks in the gravel patch in front of the barn. An eight-horse trailer rested off to the side with its hitch on the ubiquitous stump that all ranchers used for that purpose. Nothing new here, but everything was in good repair. Mark shut off the engine, hearing it ping in

protest, and he took a moment before opening the door. His leg twinged again, but he ignored it. Sometimes it felt as though he could feel every screw that had gone into both metal plates.

He got out, and to his credit didn't limp. Jake came out of the barn and leaned against the sign that announced this to be the Sweetgrass Rescue Center.

Jake was different here. He stood taller, his shoulders were wider. The desire Mark felt for him, and it felt good to put a word onto the emotion he'd felt the first moment he saw Jake, all but exploded from the box and had the calf on its side and double hitched in under seven seconds. It wasn't admiration or respect for his skills, which was the justification he'd been hiding his need behind for so long. It was desire, and he wanted Jake. And he was going to have him.

There wasn't anything inherently sexy about the jeans and shirt that were more washed out and dusty than any particular color, and the boots looked as though they were at least, in part, duct tape. A wife or a mother would have thrown them out years ago, but Mark understood.

A boy had come out of the shadows with Jake, no higher than Jake's shoulders. Jake handed him two halters and leads and pointed to the two horses still trotting after other each along the fence line. "Billy, go get the girls," he said.

The boy nodded, glancing to Mark curiously, but trotted down the path and hopefully out of earshot.

Jake straightened, uncovering the sign that said Mark was arriving between visiting hours. Mark supposed that was when the real work was done. The back door to the small

house had 'office' printed in the same neat handwriting. The ranch had been Jake's father's labor of love, Mark knew, and the reason why Jake had stopped competing in rodeos on his father's death to take it over. But studying Jake, perfectly at ease in the middle of his land, Mark saw that Jake didn't miss competing.

Jake didn't say anything as Mark approached, but the way he looked down to Mark's left leg showed concern he would never talk about.

"Jake," Mark said. His voice didn't crack even though it was the first word he'd said since he'd left the rehab. There was so much he wanted to say, the gratitude, the need to push Jake back into one of the empty stalls and do all the things he'd meant to on that hot day so long ago, or even simpler, to kiss Jake where he stood and be kissed back and to have everything, finally, fit into its place. He almost forgot about Butter in that second, but all things considered, he could forgive himself that.

"Mark." It was just one word, and his inscrutable face hadn't changed, but Mark knew Jake heard him. And it was okay.

Billy returned with the two horses, but hesitated at the unspoken conversation hanging between them. Jake's eyes remained locked on Mark's for another second, then he stepped out of the way. "Put Queen and Tick away, Billy. Do you need a ride back to town?"

"No, sir," Billy said, but stared at Mark as though trying to categorize him. When he came up blank, he decided to ignore him entirely. "My dad's coming to pick me up."

"If it starts to rain before he gets here, you can wait in the office."

"Yes, sir," Billy said, and clucked to the two horses he led. They entered the building without complaint, and Billy had no problems putting them both away.

Jake hadn't turned around. Mark got the impression he wasn't watching the boy, but looking through the other open door to the field beyond. There was a distant smaller stable, surrounded by a seven foot pipe fence that still looked new. Mark was going to clear his throat, to catch Jake's attention again, but instead he said Jake's name.

Jake turned back. "Yes?"

"May I see her?"

Jake nodded. Billy passed them on the way back to the office, again shooting a worried look at Jake, but Jake shook his head and headed for the office. The storm was almost on them, but before Billy reached the red painted door of the office a blue minivan pulled up and Billy hopped into the passenger seat. The driver made a four-point turn and was gone before Mark spoke. "Where is she?" All the horses visible in the big barn were various shades of sorrel and bay. There wasn't one single cream Palomino.

"She's not here—these are the horses up for adoption," Jake said. He motioned with his head to the smaller red barn that was visible from the road. "Come on."

The other barn was a hundred yards or so away. Mark tried again to prepare himself—he'd been told she was injured, he reminded himself. But his throat was tight and his leg throbbed as Jake threw open the second barn's door. As

though reading his mind, Jake exhaled, sharply. "Most of the swelling's gone. But you know how knee injuries are. My vet's been looking after her, and she's pretty confident she'll make a full recovery."

Mark nodded. This barn only had ten or so stalls, five on each side, and a much smaller tack shop. Only half of the stalls had horses in them.

Butter whickered when she recognized Mark, a deep-throated mare's call that was half welcoming, half demanding, and Mark barely heard Jake say, "And she says Butter's pregnant."

"You got my mare pregnant?" Mark asked, turning to him.

"Well, not personally." Jake's didn't crack a smile, but Mark could see in his eyes that he was fighting it.

The rain, this close to the open doors, swept in, cooling Mark's skin where it touched. After the long hours in the truck, it felt good. The familiar smell of horse, wet grass, and old barn was heady. Mark opened his mouth, wanting to speak, but he had nothing to say. Nothing at all.

The rain also made Jake's skin slick. Mark touched the side of his face, and his fingers slipped down to the corner of Jake's mouth. Jake looked at him, and Mark just couldn't bear a single question as to whether he really wanted to do this, or if he was okay with it. So when Jake opened his mouth and drew in a breath, Mark kissed him hard, pushing him back so that his shoulders hit the door frame. There was a wall of rain inches away from them, and the smell of the ozone the rain brought was everywhere. But it couldn't hide the smell of Jake's wet skin. He smelled of the sunshine in the rain, of the

horses he loved, and though he didn't match exactly the way he had in the hayloft, Mark didn't care.

Shirts with snaps were the best invention Mark had ever heard of. He yanked open Jake's shirt just so that he could feel more skin, and Jake didn't protest. Mark kissed his way down Jake's throat, sucking the last bit of salt off his skin that hadn't been washed away, and he nuzzled his way across the line where suntan met the white skin of Jake's chest.

Jake put his hands on Mark's shoulders to steady himself. Mark found Jake's nipples in the fine dust of blond chest hair and when he gave them each an experimental lick, Jake groaned again. He was exceptionally sensitive and quite responsive.

Mark looked up. Jake's mouth was open and his eyes were closed. He had turned his face to the rain. "I would definitely ride you with a snaffle bit," Mark said, and watched Jake lick the droplets of water off his lips.

"We can discuss choice of tack later, I'm sure," Jake said. "But for right now..."

Mark cupped the bulge in Jake's jeans. He let his fingers slide along the hot length he found. "Task at hand. Got it."

"Good." Jake arched his back and stretched, clasping his hands over his head. It revealed a whole new set of muscles between his pectorals and the waistband of his jeans, and if Mark had the patience, he would have been pleased to investigate each and every individual muscle with his tongue and fingertips.

Instead, he kissed his way down the well-defined line of Jake's abdomen. The jeans stopped him for at least thirty

seconds as he fought with the wet denim to slide it down Jake's thighs. Roping cows was easier, but he finally succeeded. The boots had to come off first. Jake was naked but for the modest pair of white boxer briefs growing increasingly wetter and, as a consequence, translucent.

Jake looked down at Mark on his knees. Mark felt the gaze and tore himself away from Jake's cock pressed against the white material, and looked up to meet his eyes. He didn't open his mouth to speak. Nor did he need to tell Mark he didn't have to do anything he didn't want to, and Mark didn't have to tell him that his hesitance was not reluctance.

He shifted forward so that he could easily kiss the crown of Jake's cock through the cloth. He rubbed his cheek up and down the length, and took the time to suck on Jake's balls. Again the rain had robbed him of most of the taste of skin, but there was enough to be a promise for things to come.

He peeled the thin wet cloth from Jake's skin. It had revealed a lot, and Mark felt a shiver of pleasure down his spine and straight to his groin at the naked sight. He had to be at least seven inches, cut, and when Mark reached up, hesitantly, to wrap his finger and thumb around it, his fingers could barely touch.

"Getting cold," was all Jake said.

Mark didn't want that. He shifted forward again, lifted himself off his ankles despite the protests from his new hip—he was so going to feel this tomorrow—and took Jake into his mouth. The slippery feel of pre-come on his lips was interesting. So was the reaction he got when he slid his

tongue all the way around the crown and then flicked the small hole with the tip of his tongue.

Jake dug his fingers into Mark's hair, but didn't try to force his cock any further down Mark's throat. Mark didn't think he could handle that strictly from the gag reflex point of view, and Jake apparently agreed. Jake did, as a compromise, wrap his free hand around the base of his cock and began sliding it up and down to keep pace with the bobbing motion Mark gave him.

It couldn't have been ideal, with the rain and the saliva Mark smelled on Jake's palm being the only lubrication, but it was enough. Jake tensed, his entire body rock still, and when he groaned one last time it was pure desperation. Mark cupped Jake's ass with both hands, and felt him start to shoot in his mouth. Both of Jake's hands were now on Mark's head, but he still didn't try to force Mark any further down.

Salty, thick and warm semen filled his mouth. Mark took over, releasing Jake's ass reluctantly and sliding his fist up and down Jake's cock and let the last little bit inside him. He swallowed, but didn't let the cock out of his mouth until Jake pulled away and helped him to his feet.

Jake tried to kiss him, and for the first time Mark hesitated out of reluctance, but Jake caught his chin easily. "It's okay. You don't have to run inside and brush your teeth quite yet."

"My toothbrush is in the truck," Mark said, knowing he sounded stupid.

"See, impossible. Now shut up and let me kiss you."

There was no arguing his logic. Mark shut up and let Jake kiss him.

It became impossible to ignore how cold the wind was, and small rivers of rainwater began to cut paths through the cement they stood on. Jake made a face, pulled up his soaking wet clothes until he could once again move in them, and together they closed the two doors, instantly turning the day into twilight.

"Okay, come with me." Jake let him pass the stall with Butter. The one right next to her was empty but for half a dozen square bales and it only took a second to make a half decent bed out of them. Mark was grateful to be able to sit down, then lay down at Jake's insistence. He closed his eyes, and liked the haphazard way Jake touched him as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt one by one.

When he finished, Jake stood up but only long enough to pull Mark's boots off. Mark bit his lips, not wanting to say anything but knowing there was such a difference between removing enough clothing to get the job done and being completely naked. Jake was obviously not going to be satisfied until Mark was stripped, but he couldn't have been more delicate when it came to working the jeans. They were baggy after all the months of hospital food, but he was still gentle. He pushed them down Mark's hips, down his thighs and then off completely. A second later Jake's clothes joined them.

Mark was more touchy about the puffy pink scars from the surgery than he was about being completely naked. He almost covered them, but Jake saw and caught his wrist before he could. He kissed the palm of Mark's hand before putting it by his side. Jake bent down, but didn't kiss his

cock like Mark had been expecting. Instead he touched the first long scar that went up and over his hip bone.

"Don't ever be ashamed," Jake said. He looked up, and Mark couldn't look away from his blue eyes. "Never again. Promise me."

"I promise," Mark said. He would've said anything, spread out naked as he was for Jake that instant, but he was surprised to feel that he had meant it. Jake finished kissing his way down the longer, uglier scar and then straddled Mark's thigh so that their groins were aligned.

"You've done this before," Mark said.

Jake shifted, took Mark's cock in his right hand and his own in his left, and smiled. "A couple times."

"Do you want to tell me what happens next?" Mark asked.

"Oh, I would so much rather show you."

The grip on his cock was loose, much looser than Mark liked when he was alone. But when he was alone, he didn't have Jake over him, moving his hips and keeping perfect rhythm so that Mark was fucking Jake's hand. He looked up, eyes wide, and Jake smiled at him, picking up the pace. He'd been practically hard since leaving the hospital, definitely hard since pulling up into Jake's yard and achingly hard on his knees in front of Jake taking what he could into his mouth. It didn't take much of Jake's wild ride to pull the orgasm from him, and when he came, his insides felt raw from the over stimulation and intense need. Jake didn't slow down as he was coming, but let him ride out each of the aftershocks that shook him. His come shot up over his belly and almost to his pectorals. Jake licked him clean an inch at a time and then

curled up next to him in the warmth and safety of the barn while the worst of the storm passed over them.

There were worse ways to spend an afternoon.

The sound of the rain slacking off on the roof of the barn woke Mark from his light nap. His body told him more than the watch on his wrist that it was time for another pill, but he ignored the pain as he sat up. Jake was already awake, if he had been napping at all. He was still naked, leaning back against the stall wall. Mark couldn't help dropping his gaze downward to Jake's cock.

It was nestled in blond pubic hair, and it was beautiful even flaccid. He forced himself to look back up to Jake's face, and then couldn't help but smile just because Jake was smiling. "Good afternoon. Sleep well?"

Mark sat up, and stretched. After so many nights in the hospital and in the rehab center, if he spent the rest of his life sleeping on hay bales he would've been happy. There was something else in the question, something deeper. If he was going to freak out afterwards—though why he would freak out when he had just found that thing he was missing—it would have been the time to say something. Instead, Mark reached his foot out and stroked Jake's leg. "Yes."

Jake relaxed. "Good. If you put some clothes on, I'll show you around the center. Not that there's much left to show you."

Mark nodded. Together they got up and dressed.

The rain had let up and the sun burst through the dark clouds brilliantly, bathing the world in light that seemed to magnify the colors remaining in the hot autumn day. The

barns seemed more red, the hay waiting to be cut more golden and the blue sky poking through ahead of the sun even more sapphire. The world smelled of wet, but also of promise. Jake glanced up at the sky as though to decide if the dark clouds had truly finished, and then nodded.

"Right, then. I'll show you around."

Mark nodded. Jake showed him the different pastures; he had a quarter section, and while most of it was used to grow enough hay so they didn't have to buy any on good years, he also had fifty head of Black Angus cows. The small barn away from everything was the quarantine area.

Lastly, Jake showed him the office, a small add-on to the house. The room was big enough for a desk, a couple filing cabinets and spare helmets that probably belonged in a tack-shop.

"That's the grand tour?" Mark asked.

"It is. I would show you the house, but I want to check on the herd before we lose any more light."

Mark was going to nod, but stopped. A huge truck, black at one time but now as muddy as the road, roared into the compound. It slid as the driver slammed on the brakes, and came dangerously close to hitting Mark's truck. Jake's jaw clenched, once, the only sign of displeasure from him, and then his face returned to the bland politeness he'd kept around the nurses.

The man getting out of the oversized vehicle just this side of a monster truck struggled to get his belly out from behind the wheel. His face was red, despite the cool breeze the rain

had created, and he took the time to hitch up his pants before slamming the door closed.

"Alistair," the man called, with the raspy voice of a chain smoker. Mark came down the step of the office. Jake followed him. Even though his face was nothing if not polite, there was a tight line around his mouth.

"Mr. Rendell," Jake said.

"Did you get my paperwork?" He glanced to Mark, standing just off to the side, and then he looked back to Jake. He nodded to himself, and while the self-satisfied smirk only lasted a tenth of a second, Mark knew Jake had seen it as well from the way he tensed.

"Who's your friend?" Rendell asked.

"My friend," Jake said.

"If he's here to give you a better deal..." He didn't finish. But something hung in the air. Just because Mark couldn't see it or understand it didn't mean it wasn't there.

Jake crossed his arms over his chest. "I got the papers. But as I told you the half dozen times before, I am not interested in selling. I need the land to grow my hay." Another minivan pulled in beside the monster truck, and a mother with three girls piled out. Jake nodded to them, motioning to the first stable, and turned back to Rendell. "Is there anything else, Mr. Rendell?"

"That section has the best view of the river. I need it. And I'm going to have it."

"Good evening, Mr. Rendell."

Rendell crossed his arms, a mirror of Jake's body stance, but if he assumed Jake was going to partake in the stare-

down, he was wrong. Jake simply stepped past him and followed the girls into the barn. The girls led out three of the smaller horses. "Are you coming?" Jake called, speaking to Mark alone. Mark shrugged his shoulders at Rendell, and followed Jake into the second barn.

"Damn fool," Jake said, under his breath so the girls couldn't hear him. "I told him that stretch is a flood plain, but he won't hear me. He says his developers gave him to go ahead, but it's flooded once every ten years or so since my dad bought the land."

Mark nodded. He didn't like the look Rendell had given Jake at all. "Has he threatened you?" He followed Jake back to the private barn, where he was more than a little pleased to see Hank, Jake's champion roper. When Jake had stopped competing he could have sold the big gunmetal gray gelding for twenty grand, easy. Hank took up the slack faster than even Butter could.

"Of course I kept him," Jake said, ignoring the asked question and answering the unasked one. "It was the least I could do to give you an unfair advantage as to not having to compete with the greatest cow pony in Alberta, if not western Canada."

The cow pony stood at least sixteen hands at the shoulder. "The very least, eh?"

Jake nodded and gave him a big boned dun Appaloosa mare named Chancey. They saddled up and then joined the girls in the yard. He mounted on the wrong side, using his right leg to pull himself up. Getting his leg up and over the

saddle probably wasn't in the rusty red binder, but it had been too long since Mark had sat in a saddle.

"Is that okay?" Jake asked, and put a hand on Mark's upper thigh. It was tight, and muscles he'd had his entire life felt atrophied, but it was okay. And the hand on his leg was even better. He nodded.

"Good." Jake slapped Chancey on the ass as he walked behind her. Chancey swished her bob of a tail good-naturedly.

The girls waved to their mother, who was in the office at work with the door open and the fan on. "She does the books," Jake explained. "And the girls volunteer with the horses. They seem to think I'm doing them a favor by letting them muck out stalls."

"Do you have help year-round?"

"Mostly. The money isn't tight, most months it's nonexistent. If we didn't raise the cattle, some months there'd be no money to pay even utilities."

Mark got down at the first gate and opened it then closed it behind them. The girls took off on ahead, their blond ponytails streaming out behind them, but Mark kept behind with Jake.

"You didn't answer the question. Has he been threatening you?" It wasn't his place to pry, Mark knew it, and Jake knew it. It fell under the sacred realm of "personal business," and if Jake didn't answer this time, Mark knew he could never ask again.

"Not exactly threaten," Jake said quietly. "A gate gets opened. Was it left open or did it get opened? A dead animal falls into the drinking water. An accident? Little things. Things

that happen all the time. It's just a hay field, but the way the price of hay skyrockets so quickly in a bad year, if I can't feed the herd I'd have to cull it and how ironic would that be?"

Then he hesitated. "And there was a dead calf," he said. "With the herd. It could have been wild dogs, or an accident and they just found the corpse, but I swore around the edges of the throat where the most damage was, it looked cut, like with a knife. He probably just came by to see if it spooked us."

"Did you call the cops?"

"They came out. Even if its throat had been cut, there was no way to prove Rendell had done it. He's been nothing but just another polite good ole boy. And his offer for undeveloped farm land that floods is really quite generous, but not enough to keep me in hay for the rest of our lives here. We owe the bank so much for back taxes on the land, and it would be so easy to agree to it. It just seems I'm going to lose this place either way."

Ahead of them, the girls slowed, spun around and came barreling back. The horses that they rode were sleek, healthy and happy. That they had been sold for their meat price was an abomination. Mark looked to Jake. This hadn't been his life. It hadn't been his fight. But he knew, the same way he knew just how fiercely he loved Jake, he loved this world, too.

And when Jake looked back at him, he smiled. And he knew. He raised an eyebrow, already lifting his reins to give Hank his head, but Mark's hip was hurting. He reined Chancey in. "You go. I should head back."

"Are you sure?"

Mark nodded. One of the girls shrieked ahead of them, a joyous sound, and Jake really did have to check on the herd. He reached over, touched Mark's cheek. The evening had chilled thanks to the sudden rainstorm, and the touch was hot enough to burn. The thought of even more skin being pressed up against him turned the slight heat to his skin into a full flush, and Jake smiled as though he could read his mind.

"Tonight," he promised. He turned Hank away, not even having to kick his flank, but just leaned forward in the saddle. They took off, kicking up wet clods with the just turned smell of grass and dirt as Hank dug in for those first couple bounds. Despite the ache in his hip, Mark was home.

Chancey fought with him, just for a second, wanting to take off after her buddy, but when Mark turned her away, back to the barn, she sighed and ambled back. Mark took the time to rub his hip, taking deep breaths to help manage the pain, and by the time they got back to the gate the pain had settled to a constant ache.

He carefully slung his right leg over to the left side, over the pommel of his saddle, and slid down Chancey's side slowly so that his right leg took all his weight when he landed. He undid the gate, led Chancey through and closed it again. He was a hundred yards from the barn, and chose to walk it rather than mount up again.

Behind his truck, though Mitsy's little Fiat could have hidden behind a Shetland pony, was the familiar green two-seater. Mitsy herself was in the office, chatting with the office lady, but the moment she saw him leading Chancey into the yard, she was down the stairs in a flash.

She wore jeans that shouldn't have been flattering on her, considering she was ten years older than Mark, but she pulled them off. The men's work shirt she wore was loose enough, and her blond hair, all natural if the almost ghostlike eyebrows and eyelashes were any indication, was tied back in a ponytail. She was an aging beauty queen and she knew it, but she kept her makeup to an absolute minimum, and time was, and would probably always be, kind to her.

"Marcus James McCoy. You did not just ride that horse," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Tell me you were not that stupid."

"Would you believe me if I said no?" Mark asked, keeping his face innocent.

"For the sake of our relationship, I suppose I'm going to have to. Just this once, you understand."

"Just this once," Mark promised, but had obviously crossed his fingers. She eyed him critically, then nodded to herself.

"You look better. How's Butter?"

"Jake says she'll make a full recovery."

"Good," Mitsy said, and took Chancey away from him. Mark lamented the fact that his cane was still in his truck; he really could have used it right about then, but Chancey didn't seem to mind him following and throwing his arm over the saddle for support as Mitsy walked her back to the second barn. Mark leaned against the doorframe, trying not to flush at the thought of Jake leaning against the exact same spot, but Mitsy didn't look up from stripping Chancey down and brushing her out. After Chancey was put away, they both

moved to Butter's stall. "She's looking good," Mitsy allowed. Mark said nothing.

Mitsy, of course, noticed. She held up her hand. "You can blame your father for selling her on," she said. "Lord knows I tore a strip off him for you, but he didn't do it to punish you. You should know that."

Mark shrugged. He didn't believe her, but felt it impolite to argue the point. She turned to him angrily. And when Mitsy got angry, it was best that everything light enough to throw was firmly tied down. "You don't think he turned pale as a ghost when he saw Butter come back alone? Who do you think found you out there first? It wasn't Devon. You were passed out and bleeding from your damn fool head, and your father held your hand until the ambulance arrived. He even rode back with you. You don't remember that part, I'm sure, but he was there."

Mark stared at her. He shook his head, not remembering much at all after the crash and being too afraid to look up and see the black riders. But he did remember, if he stretched out the memory as far as he could, the feeling of his hand being held was there. "That was Dad?"

"And he was pretty sure he'd just lost his second son. He needs you, Mark."

The ride back had obviously taken far less time than the ride there, because just as Mitsy finished, Jake appeared at the door, leading a sweating Hank behind him. The sweat turned Hank's gray sides black, but there was still plenty of pep in his walk. Mitsy glanced at him, then looked back to

Mark. "Your father still loves you. And he'll accept you, after a fashion."

"I'm not asking him to accept me after a fashion or not," Mark said. Jake had frozen where he stood, shifting his weight from foot to foot in embarrassment, but obviously pretending he couldn't hear them. Mark didn't care if he did. "This is what I am," he said, quietly. "And if it took the fall to get me here, I'm glad I did. If Dad needs me to go home, tell him I already am."

Mitsy tsked, then dusted some imaginary dust off Mark's shirt—or more like smacked it off, but in a kind, loving way. "You two boys are going to give me wrinkles. I should be getting back, daylight's wasting, and I need to shower before work. Emergency phones don't answer themselves."

Mark knew she didn't need to work at the dispatch for the local RCMP detachment. He suspected she did it just to get out of the house. She picked up the graveyard shift, every other day, and was damn good at being that calming voice on the other end of the line. Mitsy smiled at him, brilliantly. "According to the sign on the wall, visiting hours are almost over. I'm sure your man over there will help you move the rest of the books I brought you."

He looked over to his man over there, and couldn't stop the smile. "I reckon he will." Mark kissed her cheek. "Thank you for coming."

"You don't be a stranger," Mitsy told him. She walked past Jake, eyeing him up and down appreciatively, and touched his arm as he bowed his head to her.

"Ma'am," he said.

"Indeed I am," Mitsy said, and jumped into her little car. The girls finished their own chores, their voices carrying on the new wind, and all piled back into their mom's car. She drove off as well, albeit at a much slower pace, and Jake and Mark were alone again.

"Well?" Jake asked.

"Well what?" Mark hurt. He had the fine grit under his clothes that happened when rain-wet denim dried without being washed, and after days and months of a busy day involving two trips to the communal television room just to get out of his eight-by-ten cell of a room, he was exhausted.

Jake took his hand. "Dinner's cooking on the crock pot on the counter. Another hour or so won't hurt it one bit."

"Well," said Mark. Together, they wedged off their boots on the corner of the step on the porch and went inside the small yellow house.

The house was small, and the main hall—what there was of it—opened into the kitchen. The living room was off to the left through an open arch and the two doors to the right, both of them closed, were probably the bathroom and bedroom.

Beneath the aromas of dinner, the house smelled like home. It couldn't have been just the smell of the slow cooked beef and onions simmering in the small crock pot beside the sink. His mother had been a fine cook, despite her wealthy upbringing, but Mitsy sure wasn't.

The living room was an untouched museum display. Mark could almost see the card missing off to the side. In neatly typed letters it would say "living room, late 1950s setting." A plastic dust cover swathed the huge flowered chesterfield and

dark wood was used in everything from the coffee and end tables to the crystal display cases. Jake obviously kept the room dusted, and the pale pink carpet was in pristine condition.

The kitchen looked much warmer. The stove was a huge gas beast and the green enamel finish came from another era. The fridge matched. The kettle rested on the back burner of the stove, because that was where all farm kitchens had kettles. Unlike Bar Nunn's decorative pot that got moved every decade or so, this one looked as though it got some regular usage.

Mark glanced to the second door, the one that probably led into the bedroom, and glanced at Jake. "Shower, first," Jake announced and took Mark's shoulders. He propelled Mark into the bathroom, which turned out to be the first door after all. The green sink and tub were both scrupulously clean but had long since lost their shine.

"Strip," Jake ordered.

"You're putting on airs now?" Mark asked, but couldn't keep the smile, despite how much he wanted to pretend a scowl. "Big words for a man who has a doily collection."

"Those were just the everyday doilies. Wait until you see the company coming chest."

There was a chest Mark wanted to see, but it didn't involve any frills or lace. He put his hands over Jake's heart and the even beats calmed him.

Jake put his hand over Mark's. "I said strip," he said. His low voice was barely more than a growl. Mark looked up and saw the slow curl of the smile that touched Jake's lips. He

undid his shirt buttons, one by one, and remembered how it felt to have Jake do it for him.

"Is this the way it's going to be?" Mark's own voice felt thick. His shirtsleeves caught over his wrist and he had to pull them off one at a time.

"Unless you have any objections," Jake said. As he spoke, he stepped forward and pinned Mark against the sink. He moved his hands up Mark's thigh. He waited, and Mark held his breath before Jake finally cupped the palm of his hand against Mark's already mostly hard cock. Mark had to fight with himself not to grind against it. "Are there, Mark? Any objections I mean?"

And Jake looked at him, his blue eyes intense. There was a time Mark could have stared in them for hours, but right that second there was a burning heat between them, and Mark had to do something before the moment passed. He was going to get fucked. This man was going to put him on his knees and stick his dick into Mark's ass. Mark found in the second he had to think about it that he had no issue with that whatsoever.

"No objections here," Mark said. His now fully hard cock ached for more than just a touch. But Jake stepped back and Mark felt cold with the absence.

"Good. Then can you finish stripping for me?"

Mark found that he could. His jeans came off, his socks, his shorts, and his wristwatch. He was completely naked. Jake looked down to Mark's bad leg. Mark wished he could stop the tremble, but Jake saw it. "It hurts?"

"Yes," Mark said. He couldn't lie. Jake nodded.

"Do you think you can step up into the tub?"

"Yes," Mark said, and there was a bite in his voice he hadn't intended. "I'm not a complete invalid."

"Begging pardon," Jake said. "But you are, in fact, in pain. Do you need help?"

"Yes," Mark said reluctantly.

Jake kissed him softly, and pressed their foreheads together. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Asking for help, or your dick against my leg?" Mark asked, as innocent as he could.

Jake laughed. He pulled away but held Mark up against the sink with a look. He stripped down himself. There was so much naked flesh for Mark to touch. Instead, they got into the shower. Mark used Jake's shoulders for support and even with that, his bad leg twinged again as he stepped in.

For how old the rest of the house was, the water pressure and showerhead were both wonderfully modern.

Mark braced himself against the tiles, letting Jake slide slippery hands up and down his body in places no one else had ever touched him. He flinched when the soapy finger slipped between his ass cheeks, but Jake was there, whispering things to make him relax and assure him that everything was going to be just fine. As soon as the tension left Mark's shoulders, Jake tried again. This time, Mark let him. It stung at first, though that could have just been the soap. Jake took the showerhead off the hook, snaking the metal hose past Mark's shoulder, and held the warm stream of water over the small of his back. All the while, he kept pushing his finger further into Mark.

It didn't feel good, not at first and especially not when Jake slipped a second finger inside him. But Jake added something from a bottle, conditioner, probably, and that took away most of the burn. It left Mark feeling uncomfortably full for another second, but then the pressure that was building suddenly became pleasurable. He groaned, and leaned back into Jake's body.

Jake had to lean forward to kiss the back of his shoulder. "There you are," he said.

Mark closed his eyes. There he was, indeed.

They moved to Jake's double bed. The blue sheets were clean, and the pillows were surprisingly soft. Mark's leg hurt too much to kneel down on it, and the edge of the bed was not high enough. They settled for Mark on his side, with the pillow supporting him. Mark didn't watch the preparations. There was something else in a bottle, the tinfoil crackle of a condom wrapper, and Jake's fingers went back inside him working through the first amount of discomfort with something cold that seemed to melt. He waited for Mark to start pushing back to get the fingers deeper inside him before he even lay down.

"Ready?" Jake asked, and held onto his hip. Mark hugged the pillows under him and nodded.

Jake was much bigger than his two fingers, but there was so much lube inside of Mark and on Jake's cock that Mark felt too slippery to clamp his muscles down and stop Jake, not that he wanted to. Jake pressed against him, his chest to Mark's back, and kissed the nape of Mark's neck.

"Still good?" Jake asked.

"Yup," Mark said, and then groaned again as Jake pushed the rest of the way inside. He moved his hand to Mark's cock. The lube had warmed to his body temperature, so when Jake closed his fingers around Mark with just the right amount of tightness, Mark gasped. Jake jerked Mark's cock a couple of times, deep and hard enough that it worked from the base of his cock to the very sensitive crown. It took Mark's attention away from the pressure in his ass, and the next time Mark thought back to it, the discomfort had passed. "You're a tricky bastard," Mark said.

"Yes." Jake licked his way down Mark's neck. "You should see me get a colt into a trailer for the first time."

"I hope you don't use this exact technique." Mark got the lobe of his ear bitten, but he supposed he deserved it.

Jake began to fuck him, slowly at first. It took Mark a little longer to get to like the in and out feeling. Jake's hand kept pace so there was always sensation. Jake shifted, and moved into long, slow strokes. It just about drove Mark to push away, the sensation was so much it was almost easier to pull back than take it all, but Jake didn't let him go.

Jake laughed, again, and Mark wanted it harder, thrusting into Jake's hands over and over as sparks he didn't even know he had the plugs for began to fly. He tried lifting himself off the bed to get his dick deeper into Jake's hand. His whole body flushed as the orgasm pushed him with hot dizzy strength.

Jake growled, pinning him down and four hard, quick strokes later, his whole body tensed and he was coming, too.

The bed shifted, Jake had collapsed behind him, and against his shoulder blade he felt how fast Jake's heartbeat was. It matched his almost perfectly. Mark grabbed Jake's hand, pulling it over his side, and curled up to it. Jake didn't pull away. Mark just meant to close his eyes just until Jake turned over to the other side, but when he opened his eyes again, it was dark out and the smell of food made his stomach clench hungrily.

The tray Jake carried was made of the same old wood as most of the living room, and if it were any less quality it would have bowed under the weight of all the food it carried. The stew filled two cereal bowls, the egg noodles were on the side and smelled of butter and chives. There were green beans, still steaming, and a huge salad made of iceberg lettuce. Two long-necked beers, a jug of water, and one small pill bottle completed the meal.

Mark grabbed one of the small white pills and swallowed it dry. "If I thought I loved you before, I'm certain of it now." He looked up, swallowed again, and felt the burning trail the pill had left. "Or are we not at that stage yet?"

Jake adjusted the pillows behind Mark's head and sat down cross-legged on the other side of the tray. The pill in him reacted quickly in his empty stomach. "I've pretty much loved you since I saw you at the rodeo," Jake said. He touched Mark's thigh, now under a blanket, and Mark wondered when or how that had happened. The world was in a gentle fuzz, and it just seemed right as he reached over and touched Jake's cheek.

"That's so sweet," Mark said.

Jake kissed his hand. "That's nice, but I know it's just the prescription talking."

"I wish you'd fucked me in the hayloft," Mark said. Jake gave him a bowl of the food, and put the beer he'd brought for him out of reach on the floor.

"Me too," Jake said.

Mark pointed his spoon at Jake. "Just think how many spectacular orgasms I've missed. I bet you can do things with your tongue I've never even heard about."

Jake picked up the pill bottle as well, read it, and put it out of reach, too. "I can teach you tongue tricks," he said, soothingly.

"I learn best by being shown," Mark said. The drug made it hard to form the words properly, so he tried extra hard. He pointed the spoon again, but then distracted himself with the swooping motion it made at the end of his finger. "Bet you never signed up to be a nursemaid." He was fairly certain he'd gotten all those words right. At least Jake's face looked pained.

"I signed up for you. On lay-away, but you were worth the wait. Go to sleep."

That suddenly sounded like an excellent idea. Mark closed his eyes and felt the tray beside him being lifted. He didn't hear Jake leave the room.

Mark dreamed. The drug-induced sleep was a tenuous one at best, and he felt himself pushed up against the line between waking and sleeping a dozen times. Yet still he slept and dreamed.

He walked down the path from the house to the barn. He'd walk that path a million times, knew every bump, every rock. His head was down, and he was tired. It had been a long day, not that the fact narrowed down the time frame much. He could still smell the hot plastic fake leather of school bus seats in the summertime, so he must have been elementary school aged at least, and the horse he was going to collect was really just a pony named Smokey, now over fifteen years dead. They had never really gotten along; he'd been Peter's pony for years and had grown stubborn and mulish in a way that only old cantankerous ponies could become.

Time in the dream passed, or maybe he just came back to being aware of the fact that he had been dreaming. He was on Smokey, on the dirt road between fields. And he remembered what day this was. If he could, he would have shaken himself awake, but he was deep asleep now, and the gossamer strings that had seemed so thin and so close to waking were gone. He was stuck in the dream, riding shotgun in a younger version of himself.

The sun beat down and the crickets sang in the safety of the long grass. His very important task was to check the depth of the watershed in the cow pasture and record it in the book he swore no one else had opened but him. But at least he got to ride Smokey and all his other tasks were far less pleasant.

Except today. A grader had passed in the night and the road that was usually packed dirt, perfect for horses, now had more small stones that took forever to be covered and made safe again for shod hooves. So for today, Mark had pushed

Smokey into the soft cut grass shoulders of the road. It wasn't as good as the dirt, there would be no galloping at least, but it was okay.

Until Smokey kicked the ground wasp nest. Mark felt Smokey flinch, shaking his whole body the way horses did, then he started to cow hop, bucking with his back legs in quick succession. Mark stayed on for the fifth or sixth hop, but after that he lost count and his stirrups at the same time. Luckily they were still on the soft grass, and falling from Smokey meant that there wasn't much distance between him and the ground. He landed on his ass and his dignity and bounced up quickly.

The adult Mark who was watching this in the young Mark's head closed his eyes. He didn't want to see this next bit, but he had no ability to block out the memory. Smoky had taken five or six steps forward and had gotten distracted by the bright yellow flowers that grew next to almost every road Mark knew. Mark called to Smokey, and made it almost close enough to step on the fallen reins and get back on before anyone knew he had fallen, when Smokey crowded him, swinging his ass end towards him in a deliberate threat.

And Mark knew he should have been more careful. But instead he slapped Smokey's dusty brown coat with his hand, making a cracking sound that echoed over the prairie.

Then Smokey kicked him. Mark saw it, saw the hoof with the perfect V-shaped frog heading toward him, he felt the wind on his face, but even as he tried to turn and get away it was too late. A new cracking sound echoed over the prairie, but it was his skull that made the sound.

In the dream he woke again, still on the side of the road. The sun was still hot, Mark felt it on his cheek, but when he opened his eyes the world was black and white.

The adult Mark knew that any child growing up on a farm or ranch had more than half a dozen *almost died* stories. It was a true triumph of human spirit that any boy or girl survived their childhood growing up where so many things could—and did—go horribly wrong.

The dirt road was no longer graded. It was no longer what could be exactly called dirt, either. It was a wagon trail. Two of them really; he was on an old crossroad. Neither one of them looked well traveled. He touched his temple, and felt the blood. It was a good thing Smokey's hooves had been far too hard to shoe.

A man ran past him, holding his side. And if the blood Mark had on his fingers was black in the manner of old movies, the man's side was red. Blood red. Ruby blood red that ran down his side and coated the hand that held him together. It wasn't the wound that scared him—Mark had seen blood before—it was the look in the man's eye. Even wounded and obviously running for his life, he still looked at Mark possessively, like there were things, bad things, the man wanted to do to him and only the time constriction kept him from doing them. The man took his good hand, or the clean one at least, and pressed it against his lips. It wasn't done as a co-conspirator like Peter had done so many times before when he was up to the fun kind of no good, but as a dire warning.

Mark shrank back. The man took off, slower this time and not east or west, but through the field of long grass southwesterly. The grass around him shimmered once and stilled.

The silence didn't last. Hoof beats like an oncoming storm shook the earth and seconds later the black riders were all around him. The leader, the same man who had nodded to him when they waited (would wait?) to collect Peter, looked down at him. He didn't ask the question, but his eyes were cold and expectant. Mark pointed into the long grass. This close he felt the horses' breath on his bare arms and it was hot enough to burn. His teenage self had seen compassion in the man's eyes, and the nod to him then was not a threat, but a promise: Mark knew Peter would be quick, and he wouldn't suffer.

None of those promises were here now. The man nodded a second time, or first if Mark was to count it chronologically, and the black horses with their black riders rode into the tall grass. And even on the soft grass, the hooves cracked like thunder.

Mark woke to the same sound. He remembered now, waking up with a splitting headache and a goose egg. Smokey had been waiting a half-dozen steps past where he'd been the first time. Getting up made Mark sick enough to throw up, and thinking back he'd probably had a severe concussion, but he got back up on Smokey and continued on, forgetting there ever had been black riders.

Mark was wide awake, as he often was once the euphoric part of the painkiller had passed. Jake was asleep beside him,

naked and on his back, his mouth open, and if it wasn't for that sound, Mark would've gotten up for a completely different reason. He got dressed—Jake had left out a clean pair of jeans he must've gotten from Mark's suitcase—and he pulled them on commando style.

The porch had a bunch of stuff for the kids lying about. An old saddle, the chewed up leather latigo only good for securing it to an old hay bale, an old harness bridle for a draft horse the length of Mark's arm, the bit itself a good nine inches across, and an old lasso still coiled correctly. He looked up. "You've got to be kidding me," he said.

No one answered him, thankfully. He took down the rope. What he had taken as thunder was actually the crack-boing sound that was unique to old gas cans. The darkness hid him. He didn't need the thin crescent of the moon. The man who worked by the private barn did so with a bouncing ball of flashlight light that gave off more than enough light to see.

The smell of gas filled the air, and Mark knew there was no more time to waste. The lasso in his hands, even after the months of absence, belonged there. Before the arsonist could strike his first match, Mark had him roped around the waist and was yelling for Jake to call the cops.

The arsonist took a run at him, bound as he was, even as the bedroom light snapped on. Mark saw it coming and stepped aside—his night vision hadn't been ruined by the flashlight. He tripped the man, and let him drop hard without his arms to break his fall, and used the end of the rope to tie off his ankles. It wouldn't have broken any world record, but it was still neat work.

Jake was outside a few seconds later and they secured the man to the hitching post together. They took the time to evacuate the stalls before the police arrived.

Pictures were taken, evidence bagged, and the arsonist, who hadn't said a single word, was carted away. Emergency crews were called to deal with the gasoline clean up, and Mark went to the station with the constables to make the formal statement. Jake went in the house just before they left and brought back a shirt for Mark. The RCMP constables all looked away in the second it took him to dress. He didn't think that Mitsy would have been the one to take Jake's call until he saw her worried face through the window of the dispatch room. Another woman took her headset, squeezing her shoulder at the pass off, and she stood up and went outside.

Mark sat down in the gray interview room and wrote down his statement on the yellow legal pad. He signed it, watched it being witnessed, and answered what few questions the constable had. Mark didn't know what had woken him, he'd just woken up. The horses were fine, there was no property damage other than the gasoline spill that had to be treated like hazardous waste, and the horses, including poor Butter, would be just fine out in the pasture for the night. He didn't say anything about Rendell, other than to confirm the fact that he'd been out to the center the day before, and after that there were no more questions to answer. His leg hurt, in a dull kind of way, but he promised himself he would never take another one of those little white pills.

The constable, Jackson was his name, a bald headed black man who smiled and nodded encouragingly without giving Mark the feeling he was being coached into what to say, gave Mark a refill of his coffee. Mitsy came in and sat down on the table, and Mark was suddenly very tired. She rubbed his shoulder, leaning forward to do so. Jackson came back in with his coat on.

"If you don't mind, Mr. McCoy, I would like to drive you back to your house," he said, his hat in his hands.

Jake would come and get him, if Mark was to ask, but Mark wouldn't wake him. "I would appreciate that," he said and stood.

"I'll tell your father," Mitsy said.

"You don't have to do that," Mark said, and meant it. His first night of being a full-on fag, and someone tried to burn down his barn. His father would just love that.

As though reading his mind, Mitsy slapped his shoulder. Not hard, of course, but enough. He supposed she didn't have to read his mind, he was tired enough that his face probably gave away what he was thinking.

"Your father loves you," she said. "And I'm sorry it's so tough for him to accept this, but he will because he loves you. You moron."

Mark stared at her, wondering whose kitchen table she had sat at during all those awkward meals. But then it did seem his father followed his roping, and was more supportive when he was not in the money than when he was. He nodded.

"What was that?" Mitsy demanded.

"You can tell my father." Mark didn't even mumble.

She grinned at him, and Mark saw why she had won so many pageants in her career. It was all in her smile. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Mitsy, don't push it."

She fussed with his hair, though she had to stand on her tiptoes to do it. "Silly boy. If you don't push a McCoy, you don't get nothin' done."

He supposed she would know. He wondered if his father knew what exactly he had married. Johnson opened the door and led the way back to the patrol car. Even in the front seat, Mark felt weird, like he'd done something wrong. It was a quiet drive, and they didn't pass another car the entire way. After all that darkness, it was strange to see the house fully lit. The cleanup crew had left, and it was only Jake sitting on the porch with a cup of coffee, waiting for them.

Mark got out of the car first, but hung back not really knowing why. Constable Johnson came around the car as well and walked up to the porch. He stuck out his hand, and Jake stood up to shake it. "Thank you for bringing him back," Jake said.

"It was nothing. We appreciate his willingness to come in and make a statement. If you don't mind, I'd like to arrange a time when we can come out here and discuss this unpleasantness with you. We do have a few questions as to who would want to burn down the barn."

Constable Johnson looked as though he wanted to say more, but then glanced at Mark. Mark was a potential witness, after all. Mark shrugged, letting Jake know he was

willing to go inside if they needed privacy, but Jake shook his head.

"I'm here all day tomorrow. If I'm not at the house, I'll be in one of the barns. You're welcome to come find me."

"I do appreciate that. Again, thanks so much for your trouble."

"I could say the same to you," Jake said. They shook hands again, and Mark went up the stairs to the porch as Jackson returned to his car. They both watched and waited for the unmarked police car to turn around and drive and head out, the two angry red eyes growing distant, until they were completely alone but for the crickets.

"The horses okay?" Mark asked.

"Don't change the subject," Jake said.

"I hadn't been aware we were talking."

Jake looked angry, or at least terrified masquerading as angry. "He could have had a gun," Jake said. "He could have shot you dead."

"Yeah, and he could have had a Zippo. With wood that dry, it would've gone up in seconds."

"I don't want to ... I can't ... I'm not going to lose you again. Not to your own stupidity, not again."

"You would've done the same thing." Mark looked at him. "Gun or not, you would've done the exact same thing."

Jake looked at him, willing to argue, and shut his mouth. Just for a heartbeat. "No. I would have done it a second and a half faster."

"Oh, you think so, old-timer?" Mark said. He pulled off his boots, using the corner of the step as a wedge.

"I know so," Jake said. Mark made a rude noise, and Jake shut him up with a kiss. "Get inside, you idiot."

For a day that Mark had been called a moron and an idiot, almost had his mare burned to death, and spent several hours in a police station, it was still one of the best days of his life. In the bathroom, he found a large jar of no-name aspirin and downed three of them. Jake was waiting for him in the bedroom, and it seemed the most natural thing in his life to strip off and join Jake in bed. He ran his hand down Jake's chest, played with a few of the curly hairs on Jake's lower belly and fell asleep, his hand on Jake's cock.

The sad part about living and working with animals was that no dispensation was ever granted on the basis of what time one has gone to bed the night before. Jake's alarm went off what seemed like twenty minutes after they had gone to bed, and both of them, lifelong ranch workers, got up without hitting snooze. They got to grumble, that was okay, and so was bumping into each other in the kitchen when they made coffee and toast and searched around for a frying pan. Mark kissed the back of Jake's neck, because he could, and when Jake reached around him to grab milk from the fridge, he cupped Mark's ass on the way by.

By the time they finished, the first of the volunteers had arrived for the morning hours, and Mark took care of the private barn while Jake oversaw the controlled chaos of five overeager teenagers. Oddly enough, Mark had finished first, so he went into the office. The filing cabinet was unlocked, the account receiving book out in the open, and it didn't take

long to see how much in the hole the rescue center really was.

Jake brought him a coffee halfway through, and leaned against the doorway. "I can't charge an adoption fee that even comes close to how much it costs the vet and the amount of food the horses consume. The fundraisers help, but it's constantly begging with my hand out and I have to keep five or six thousand dollars in ready cash to keep some of the finest horses I've ever seen being turned into dog meat. We do what we can, but it's month-to-month, and I just can't see a way out of it."

Mark nodded. "I see that." He looked up. "You can go back to the show. Hank's still young enough, and the purses are getting bigger and bigger. One good season and you can bankroll this place."

"It's something to look into. But this isn't the kind of place you can bugger off and leave three or four days of the week. It's a twenty-four/seven, three hundred sixty-five days of the year kind of gig."

Mark stood up. "You're not alone anymore."

"I know." Jake took another sip of coffee. "Just don't think I'm not going to work you to the bone."

Mark looked at the shabby numbers in the books, and then out to the small window to the barns and the fields beyond. It would be work, ridiculous amounts, but he was okay with that. "Deal."

"You drive a hard bargain."

Mark was going to take the coffee cup from Jake's hand, and take his first payment, formulating in his head some

crack involving the words pound and flesh for what was owed, when he heard a truck pull up. Jake had already turned, and frowned to see Rendell's black truck stop in the middle of the yard. Mark got a bad feeling, and out of the clear blue morning he heard the distant thunder of hooves. He was already picking up the phone when Jake told him to call 911. He nodded, and punched in the numbers.

The kids were all in the field. He could hear them whooping and hollering from a long way away, so Mark wasn't afraid for them. Jake walking up all alone to the huge black beast made every inch of his spine crawl. The woman on the other end of the phone asked him what the nature of his emergency was, and Mark almost told her that the black riders were coming.

Instead he shook his head. "There isn't one, not yet but I think there's going to be."

The almost bored tone in the woman's voice ended. "Could you be more specific?"

Mark watched from the doorway. Rendell was wearing a thick leather jacket despite the warm morning, and he and Jake were still exchanging stony-faced pleasantries. "I think the man who tried to burn down our barn—" *Our barn*, Mark thought. *Already it's our barn*. "—is on the property. And I think he's going to try something."

"My name is Sherry, whom I speaking with?"

"Mark." He gave the address, and didn't try to explain how he belonged here.

"Has he said or done anything threatening?" She asked. He could hear her typing in the background. He only hoped she was sending somebody.

Mark glanced out again. Rendell was trying to force a stack of papers into Jake's hands, who was refusing to take it.

"Yes," Mark said. It was only a small white lie.

"I'm sending somebody right now, Mark," Sherry said. "I want you to stay on the line with me."

Mark agreed, but if he saw the riders, all bets were off. A second truck rolled into the yard. The Bar Nunn crest had been repainted since Mark had seen it last. He looked over, back to Jake and Rendell. They were shouting at each other. Or Rendell was shouting, Jake had opened up the black truck's door and was trying to get him back inside. Mark's father was out of the truck now, looking slightly smaller than Mark remembered now that he wasn't so afraid of his opinion. Mitsy was at his side, grim-faced and immovable, regardless of her height.

Sherry had asked him a question, but it was all just white noise. The black riders stood patiently by the hitching post, just as tall and dark as he remembered, and the second to last horse was riderless. Through the doorway, the leader found him and nodded his head a third and final time.

Rendell had pushed Jake back, and Jake had lost his balance. He was falling down on his ass just as Rendell was taking an old Colt revolver out of his pocket. He either hadn't seen Mark's father approach, or he didn't care, but Mark knew with one hundred percent certainty that Rendell's warning shot, to show Jake that he was serious, was going to ricochet and go straight through his father's heart.

Jake let the telephone receiver slip from his hands. It clattered to the floor and he took a giant leap out of the small

office, and nothing he saw moved. It was like a painting. A horrible, true to life rendition of his father's death. Mitsy had seen the gun, and was trying to pull Edward down, but it was going to be too little, too late. None of them were fast enough to avoid this.

"Stop," Mark shouted. He looked at the leader, saw the black eyes and wasn't afraid. "Stop this right now. You owe me. You know you do. Stop this, let him live, let Jake and Mitsy live, and we're even."

The leader stared at him, but that smile was back behind the bandanna. His horse struck the ground, sending sparks out where the gasoline had been, but even if it had still been there, Mark doubted it would have ignited.

"Please," Mark said.

What seemed like an eternity passed. The leader kept his level gaze on Mark, and if it hadn't been for the hours and hours of staring games he and Peter had played as children on long snowy days, Mark would've looked away. But he didn't, long after his eyes stung in his mouth went dry. He kept the leader's gaze, and didn't let him look away. This wasn't right. It wasn't fair. And Mark wasn't going to allow it.

Finally, the leader lifted his hand off the pommel of the saddle. He twisted his wrist and one by one the riders slipped away until it was just Mark and the leader. This time there was no doffing of the hat, no nod, no smile. One instant he was there, the next he wasn't. Mark dropped to his knees, his eyes stinging although they were plenty wet enough, and the crack coming from the gun wasn't a bullet, it was a misfire. Mitsy finished knocking Edward out of the way, Jake regained

his footing and knocked the gun out from Rendell's hand, and Constable Johnson pulled up in his unmarked in time to see it all. Or most of it at least.

But when Edward looked across the yard to Mark for the first time, it was as though he knew what had been avoided. And if it were possible, how it had happened. Edward touched the rim of the big white cowboy hat he always wore, and bowed his head. Mark bowed his head back.

The squad car that the 911 operator had called for arrived about ten minutes later, once Constable Johnson had Rendell in cuffs. He said tersely that he couldn't talk about an ongoing investigation in front of witnesses, meaning Mark, but Mark read between the lines and figured that the arsonist had already rolled on the man who hired him. Mark stayed outside as Jake and Constable Johnson went into the house for Jake's statement, and that left Mark alone with Edward and Mitsy. He looked at them both. With his dad and Mitsy, he corrected himself. The words instantly felt better.

"So this is you now?" Edward said. He looked around the yard and the barns. He'd said nothing about Jake, but Mark had watched him study Jake carefully as he led the way into the house.

"This is me."

A muscle in Edward's cheek twitched. But he nodded. "And your leg?"

"Getting better. Not there yet."

"And this place."

"Needs a lot of work. And time. And money."

"Mitsy said." Mark had definitely not discussed finances with his stepmother. And he doubted Jake had either. But he supposed looking around the center showed there was no hiding how much of the work was done with a spit and a promise. Mitsy looked ready with a well-timed slap, should the situation have called for it, but Edward willingly reached into the inside of his jacket. "Your mother was quite wealthy," Edward said stiffly. "She would have hated to see you struggle." Mitsy smacked him for his efforts. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I would hate to see you struggle," he tried again, and Mitsy beamed at him.

Mark didn't know what to say. Edward handed him a check for a hundred thousand dollars, and then quickly crossed his arms over his chest. "We only wanted what was best."

"Thank you," Mark said. It was woefully inadequate, but Edward nodded. The matter was now officially closed. Mark folded check and put it in his pocket. "If you want, for dinner sometime? It would..." He didn't finish, but Mitsy responded as though she'd been handed an engraved invitation.

"Why, Mark, we would be delighted. How does next Thursday sound?"

Mark looked quickly at his father, willing to keep the invitation as an indefinite sort, if that was what he wanted, but his father shook his head. "Next Thursday it is," Mark said, and that matter was settled as well.

Mark showed his father the operation, as much as there was of it, and by the time he finished the grand tour, Jake had finished with his questions. Jake came back outside, walked Constable Johnson back to his car, and then went and

stood awkwardly behind Mark. Edward, this time without any prodding—or physical violence—from Mitsy took the first step and offered his hand. Jake shook it somewhat hesitantly.

"Mr. Jake Alastair. I saw you in Calgary. 6.95 seconds, with a double tie to boot. That was a beautiful thing."

"It was another lifetime ago," Jake said. "But thank you."

Edward looked around. "And you do good work here. Are you a registered tax-deductible charity?"

"I am. Do you want to see the paperwork?"

"I do," Edward said and together they walked back to the office. Mark hoped one of them noticed the phone was off the hook.

"I had to almost drag your father kicking and screaming into the truck this morning," Mitsy said, and put her hands on her hips. "He kept going on and on about this bad feeling he was having. That misfire..." She didn't finish, and Mark didn't want her to. "Things will get better."

Mark listened for the sound of thunder, but heard nothing but the morning birds. "Yes. I think they will."

Jake and Edward came out of the office together. Jake was only slightly taller, his father was only slightly thicker around the waist. They shook hands again, and Mark and his father shook hands, and when that felt woefully inadequate, Edward hugged him, stiffly, but it was the first hug Mark had gotten in years. "Thank you again," Edward said. He looked Mark in the eye, and though Mark wanted to ask if his father saw the riders too, it seemed like a far too personal question to ask at the moment. Edward and Mitsy got in the truck and drove away.

"Your dad took almost all the information I had about the place. It would've been nice if he had left a check," Jake grouched.

Mark reached into his pocket. "Say, like this one?"

Jake unfolded it, looked at all the zeros, and went very white. "You're kidding me."

"Nope. Not kidding."

The kids were coming back, it was time for lunch and Mark was both surprised that it was only noon and very glad they were going to be very alone very soon.

"You ... I..."

Mark figured Jake was going to be speechless for a while so he made sure the adoptive horses were put away and all the kids had rides back to town, marveling at how easily this responsibility thing came to him. When he took Jake's arm and led them back to the house, Jake went willingly if still a little stunned.

Mark locked the door. He wished he could have dropped to his knees, but overcoming death in a staring contest didn't exactly heal all wounds, and he was still stiff from the ride the day before. So instead, they went into the bedroom. They took off their clothes, one article at a time, until they were both naked, and standing braced against the dresser didn't hurt Mark as much as he thought it might. Jake kissed his way down the line of Mark's spine, starting from his hair line, and took extra special care working the small of his back. Each kiss was a heartbeat of wet tongue and soft lips, and each kiss dragged slowly from one spot to the next.

Mark could smell Jake behind him but every time he tried to turn around Jake must have seen his weight shift, because he got a stinging slap on his ass that should have annoyed him to hell and back, but instead was strangely erotic. More than erotic. His cock had gotten hard by the third slap, and he found himself shifting over from foot to foot just to feel it again. Jake laughed, biting down on his ass, and reached around to take his cock in his hand. "Now you're doing it on purpose."

"Is there a problem with that?" Mark asked, jerking forward, but Jake just pulled him back.

"No. I just want you to know I know."

"So now I know you know?" Mark asked, leaning to the left, and got a hard smack on his right cheek. The good sort of pain went right to his cock, and Mark groaned.

Jake laughed again. He kissed Mark's tailbone, then moved to his bad hip and kissed every quarter inch of skin. By the time he finished, Mark couldn't stop gasping. If Jake had plans to go down his bad leg, Mark didn't think he could bear it.

But Jake stood up, and Mark almost sighed in relief. His shoulders slumped and he leaned further over the dresser. He heard the now familiar tube open up, the condom wrapper, and tried to adjust his legs even further apart so that his bad one was just this side of not hurting. Two fingers at once, more painful than one, but after the slaps that heated up his skin, Mark didn't mind it much at all. He was going to embarrass himself by coming just from the way Jake moved his fingers inside him; he knew exactly where Mark's prostate

was and he pushed it, sliding his fingers over it time and time again.

Mark arched up to his toes. "Keep doing that and I'll come," Mark warned, not able to stop the sparks inside him. He tightened his muscles, hoping by sheer will alone he could stop the amazing heat from building up much too deep inside his cock, but it only made the screaming need to just come already worse.

"So come," Jake said.

Mark felt him shrug against him. He relaxed, as much as he could when his whole body was in lock down. He came hard against the wood of the dresser, and slumped forward. "That wasn't fair," he said, when he could.

Jake kissed him. He gathered up Mark's come with his fingers and licked it off. "Pull yourself up," Jake said. The dresser was a good two and a half feet deep and the only thing on it was a glass display case for all Jake's old championship buckles, which was easily pushed aside. The only problem he had with turning himself around was that his legs had gone boneless on him. But he managed it, and on the second attempt was able to lean with his back against the wall.

"Like this?" Mark asked.

"Perfect." Jake got up beside him, his knees on either side of Mark's hips, and sat up off his heels so that his cock was now at the perfect height.

"Is there a manual for this kind of thing?" Mark asked. "I mean, how do you just know your parts will line up with mine?"

"I have a good eye," Jake said. "And you have a great mouth. Will you open it for me?"

Mark did. Jake leaned forward so that he was all Mark could see, and his sun-baked skin was all he could smell. Jake was already starting to smell different, and Mark realized with a start it was because of him and the way they mixed.

Jake took hold of his head, carefully. Mark wrapped his hand around Jake's dick, leaving as much exposed as he felt comfortable swallowing. Jake pushed inside his mouth carefully, just until Mark felt his own fingers against his lip. Jake began thrusting, but regardless of how hard his cock was, or the sounds that came out of the back of his throat, he never pushed past Mark's fingers. Mark pulled his mouth free, gasping for air, but used both hands on Jake's cock to make up for it. Jake gasped, his fingers tightening in Mark's hair as Mark rubbed his cheeks against the crown before popping just the head in his mouth. Jake went rigid, letting Mark choose the pace, and with both hands in constant motion, his saliva producing all the lubrication needed, Jake only had to hold onto his head and keep his shudders under control.

"God, Mark," Jake whispered, and cupped the back of Mark's head as he came. This time Mark swallowed it all and kissed the head of Jake's cock before Jake collapsed beside him. Mark was semi-hard again, but that could wait. He put his head on Jake's shoulder, and Jake swung his arm over his. Naked, sitting on a dresser, Mark had never been more comfortable.

"I want a bigger bed," Mark said.

"I think that can be arranged."

Forgotten Favor
by Angela Fiddler

Mark looked around. "And closet space."

"Sure."

"And room in your buckle display case for mine."

Jake stiffened.

Mark laughed, though it was soundless and really nothing more than his shoulders moving up and down. "Just kidding."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

About the Author

ANGELA FIDDLER lives with her wife in Alberta, Canada. She got her first pony the same Christmas she got a six-foot high inflatable Godzilla and the complete Narnia series. It was the Best. Christmas. Ever. Her vampire "Masters of the Lines" series is available through Loose Id and has several books through MLR Press. Horse rescue centers, like the one depicted in *Forgotten Favor*, try to save even a small portion of the thousands of completely healthy and sound animals who would otherwise be sold for their meat. Angela can be found on the internet at: www.angelifiddler.com

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: www.thetrevorproject.org/
the gay men's domestic violence project

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: gmdvp.org/

the gay & lesbian alliance against defamation/glaad en español

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (glaad) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: www.glaad.org/

glaad en español: www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php
servicemembers legal defense network

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (dadt). The sldn provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by dadt and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal dadt and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of dadt.

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Washington DC 20035-5301 e-mail: sldn@sldn.org

On the Web: sldn.org/

the glbt national help center

The glbt National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the

gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The glbt National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the glbt community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can't talk about anywhere else. The glbt National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: www.glnh.org/

e-mail: info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US Local GLBT college campus organizations

dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html

GLBT Scholarship Resources tinyurl.com/6fx9v6

Syracuse University lgbt.syr.edu/

Texas A&M glbt.tamu.edu/

Tulane University www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm

University of Alaska www.uaf.edu/agla/

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University of California, Davis lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/

University of California, San Francisco lgbt.ucsf.edu/

University of Colorado www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/

University of Florida www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/

University of Hawai'i, Manoa

manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/

University of Utah www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/

University of Virginia

www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/

Vanderbilt University www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/