

# Two Sides *of the* Same Coin

*Jake Mactire*



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Two Sides of the Same Coin  
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# Chapter One

THE last two weeks had been pure hell. It started with a phone call on a Tuesday afternoon telling me my father had passed away. Then there was the rushed trip back to Winslett, the town that I grew up in, in the Methow Valley in north-central Washington, and the funeral. It seemed that I had barely enough time to throw some clothes in a duffle bag, call the airlines, and get home. The reality of the entire situation finally hit me when I got to Winslett. I flew into Wenatchee, and my friend Sandy picked me up. I'd always respected and gotten along well with my dad; after my mom died when I was six, he raised me. Losing him was kind of like losing a good friend. It was also totally unexpected; Dad was only in his early sixties and had never been sick a day in his life. He'd died when a kid texting tried to pass a semi-truck on a blind curve.

I felt a bit guilty about having moved to San Francisco. I had been out as a gay guy since I was sixteen. Dad was always very supportive. I spent a couple of years moving around the country, doing odd jobs and following the rodeo circuit. I met Robert, my boyfriend, when I was bucking at the Bay Area Gay Rodeo. Carried away by a new romance, the lure of the bright lights, and the desire to live as a gay man in San Francisco, I took Robert up on his offer to move in with him. Dad had supported that move also. I'd been back every few months since I'd left. At first Robert accompanied me, but then started begging off. He also seemed more and more annoyed lately by what he termed my "country ways." I really wished Dad was here to talk to about it. I had been able to talk with him about anything.

A fresh wave of grief hit me. I felt empty; the whispered condolences of acquaintances and the talk of heaven and an "eternal reward" by the priest at St. Genevieve's Church at the funeral had done nothing to comfort me. Dad and I were really the only members of our family. I knew I had some cousins in Portland, but I couldn't even recall meeting them. The funeral had been a week ago. I still felt alone and empty. I was, however, finding some solace in looking out from the porch to the valley, river, and mountains. The tall pine trees moved in a barely perceptible breeze, perfuming it with their clean scent. The morning gloaming was giving way to the first rays of the sun coming from the east, shining through the valley. I took a deep breath and felt a bit calmer, a bit more at peace. Dad had taught me to love this place. I breathed a silent prayer to the universe in thanks for having the dad I had and growing up in this place.

I shook my head to clear it and took a sip of coffee. It was good and strong, made cowboy style by boiling the grounds and then settling them with a dash of cold water. Robert hated cowboy style coffee. If our coffee wasn't made in his deluxe espresso-coffee machine, he carried on like the house had just burnt down. I could hear him going on about it. "Jeffrey, (I go by Jeff, Connelly is the last name) how can you drink that stuff? You must have burned all your taste buds off with that nuclear coffee and all the hot, spicy food you eat." I wished again Dad was here to talk to. I guess I'd just have to face the Robert dilemma on my own. I resolved I would talk to him and find out why he seemed to find me so annoying lately. Robert was not confrontational in the least; unfortunately he expressed his displeasure through snide comments.

In finally going over the books on the ranch, I discovered it was barely bringing in enough to pay the bills. I had to make an appointment with Dad's attorney and find out just how bad the picture was. The books I had were the ones about the ranch itself, the cattle and ranch expenses. I'd have to find out about the mortgage and any other debts on the ranch. The only bright spot

was that due to the new “comfort food” fad, the price of beef was going up. Since our beef was organic, free range, and grass fed, we could get a premium price. If we were able to stay in business until roundup time that is. My mind was going from one random thought to another, from the crushing sense of loss I felt from losing my dad, to the problems at the ranch.

The sun rising over the mountains to the east caught my attention again. Although it was early in fall, the high Cascades were snow covered. The cold wind coming from the north seemed to say that here in the valley snow would fall soon. I leaned back in the chair and tried to think of what to do. Sell the ranch? Try and make it work? It wasn’t like my career in San Francisco, where Robert and I lived, was going to make me a millionaire. I was your typical struggling artist. I cast Western bronze sculptures, like cowboys, bucking broncos, and other Western scenes. Sales were picking up, but it seemed that all my buyers came from someplace east of the Sierra or Cascades. There wasn’t much of a market for Western art in San Francisco. That accounted for my other job, a waiter at a well-known Italian restaurant in North Beach. Robert was always nagging me to use my degree in accounting, but I hated it with a passion. I’d only gone into it because Dad had pushed me. I did agree with him though; the accounting would come in handy in running the ranch.

When I was at school, I missed Winslett and the valley so much; I went through summers and took heavy course loads so I got through in three years. A year of looking at screwed-up tax returns and small businesses with shoddy record keeping had bored me to death. Although it did make working with the books at the ranch much easier. I understood why Dad felt it would be a useful skill, but that didn’t make it any more enjoyable. In one of the last conversations we’d had, Dad had told me of how proud he was at all I had packed into my twenty-eight years so far. A fresh wave of sorrow swept over me.

As the sun began to clear the mountains and the morning gloaming began to lighten into clear light, I noticed some activity in the bunkhouse. The light in the common room had come on, and smoke began to rise from the chimney. We had a foreman, Wayne, who had a trailer of his own off behind the bunkhouse. Four cowboys lived in the bunkhouse—José, who had been with the ranch since I was a teenager, Pedro, Josh, and a new guy, Mike. The door of the bunkhouse opened, and José stepped out. He had on jeans and a denim jacket over a red flannel shirt. He was a lean and lanky guy, with olive skin, side burns, a big moustache, and a head of thick black hair cut short. He noticed me sitting on the porch and sauntered up with a smile on his face. It was time to wipe the grief off my face and cowboy up.

“Hey, boss, qué tal?”

“Bien José, y tú?” I answered his “how’s it going” with a standard “okay, and you?.”

“Got any more coffee, boss?” he asked with a grin.

“It’s on the stove in the kitchen; help yourself.”

As he headed into the kitchen, I thought about José. When he’d figured out I played for the other team so to speak, he’d started acting really macho around me and never let a chance to put me down over my sexuality pass. It’d all come to a head one day when we were riding fences together. I’d finally gotten sick of his taunts and had asked him why he was so interested. I’d then added that in my experience there was no one more homophobic than a closet queen. I’d translated that remark into Spanish and saw his temper rise. He’d jumped me, and I’d ended up kicking the shit out of him. The next day had been pretty uncomfortable. José’s horse had stepped in a gopher hole and fallen on José, breaking his leg. It’d then run off. I’d doctored his leg and put him on my horse, leading it the eighteen or so miles back to the ranch. We’ve been friends ever since.

I could hear José in the kitchen adding the half-cup full or so of sugar he used to his coffee. The bunkhouse door opened, and the new guy, Mike, came out. I’d noticed him the first day I’d

gotten back to the ranch and again at the funeral. He was about my height of six feet, slender and lanky but muscular. He had a head of thick blond hair, a red beard, and brown eyes. This morning he was wearing scuffed up boots, jeans, a long-sleeve thermal T-shirt, and a denim jacket. He had on an old straw cowboy hat that had once been white.

José came out of the kitchen and stopped by my chair. He was looking at Mike with an expression on his face that he would also use to inspect something he found on the bottom of his boot.

“Mornin’,” I said as Mike walked by, apparently on the way to his truck. He answered with an unintelligible grunt.

“You want some coffee?” I asked.

“Nope,” he said, and then retrieved something from his truck and walked back to the bunkhouse.

“Sure as hell is a real friendly guy,” I said to José.

“Cabrón!” José swore in Spanish. “He isn’t friends with no one. I thought it might just be because Pedro and I are Mexicanos, but he is mean to Josh too.”

“Any problems with his work?”

“No, he just is real unfriendly. If you keep trying to talk to him, he is mean. He is a really good hand though. You’d be better to ask Wayne, but I had no trouble working with him.”

“Well then,” I added, “his loss if he doesn’t want friends.”

“I’m gonna head over to the bunkhouse; Pedro or Josh probably have some breakfast ready by now. Hasta luego, Jeff!”

“See ya later, José,” I said as I noticed Wayne walking up to the porch. Wayne had been the ranch foreman since I was just a real little guy. He was in his fifties now, stocky and about five-nine with a big handlebar moustache. He’d been around when I got my first pony and when I learned how to cowboy. He had never said anything about my being gay other than asking me if I was happy.

“Mornin’, Jeff.”

“Hey, Wayne, what’s up?”

“Reckon I’m gonna take the truck up to the line camp in the high pasture. It’s about time to start roundin’ up the steers, and I wanna have supplies at the line camp.”

“Okay. You got any cowboyin’ for me to do?”

“Well, Jeff, you’re probably so far outta practice I don’t know what we should give you. You think you can ride fences?” he said seriously, although there was a definite smile to his eyes.

“Hell Wayne, I ain’t found a horse yet I can’t ride. Practice or not, I can still cowboy with the best of ’em. Some work might take my mind off stuff I just don’t wanna think about.”

“We’ll get a good crop of beeves this year.” He used the cowboy word for cattle sold for beef. If it was one cow, the word would be beef. Beeves was plural.

“I hope so,” I answered.

“And by the way, I’m serious about you ridin’ fences. You ride Charlie; he’s always been your horse. I’ll have you ride with Mike, the new guy. Maybe you two’ll get along better than he gets along with the other boys.”

“If he’s such an asshole, why do you keep him?”

“He’s a good hand. Besides, for some reason your dad liked him. Your dad was the only one he’d say more than a word or two to.”

“Well, you’re the foreman.”

“Yep, and don’t you forget it!” he answered with a grin.

Just then angry shouts erupted from the bunkhouse. The door flew open and out sailed Pedro, landing flat on his ass. Pedro was the youngest of the hands. He was only about five-seven, dark skinned with straight black hair. He had a goatee cut real short. He hadn’t been prepared to come outside—he was just wearing jeans and a black Henley shirt, no boots. He jumped up quickly. Mike just as quickly jumped out of the bunkhouse door.

“Fucking asshole!” he yelled. “That was salt in my coffee! I am gonna kick the shit outta you!” He lunged at Pedro again.

“Hijo de puta! You can’t even take a fuckin’ joke asshole!” yelled Pedro. “Come on, you piece of shit!”

Josh and José burst out of the bunkhouse and grabbed Mike, holding him back, while Wayne and I grabbed Pedro.

“Asshole put salt in the sugar bowl!” Mike yelled.

“It was a joke, cabrón. You are too stupid to take a joke?” Pedro answered, glaring back at Mike.

“Enough, both of ya!” Wayne shouted. “Pedro, you go take the salt outta the sugar bowl and put sugar in it. And pour him another cup of coffee. And you,” Wayne said as he looked at Mike. “Unless you’re allergic to salt, there’s no harm done. Put a lid on it now!”

Both Mike and Pedro glared at each other, but walked back into the bunkhouse followed by Josh and José.

“I better go make sure those hotheads don’t start it again,” Wayne said as he headed over to the bunkhouse.

A couple of hours later, Mike and I were ready to head out riding fences. Riding fences was one job that most cowboys just hated. You rode around the fence line on horseback or in a pickup and did any fence repairs that were needed. We’d be going on horseback since Wayne had already taken the truck to the line camp with supplies. Josh and José were getting the pens repaired and in order. Pedro had headed off to locate where the steers were grazing. Since Mike and I expected to be away a couple of days, we had camping equipment as well as the tools to fix fences in the saddlebags the horses carried. Riding fences was without a doubt the most boring job in ranch work.

It was turning out to be quite a tedious day. I’d tried to have a conversation with Mike, but got tired of hearing just “Yep,” “Nope,” or some unintelligible grunt in response to anything I said. He pulled a bit ahead of me after a while as we rode along the fence line, so conversation was pretty well out of the question. That gave me a chance to examine him better. He’d shed his jacket as it was fairly warm with the afternoon sun. His thermal long-sleeve T-shirt fit him like a glove, from his broad, well-muscled shoulders down to where he’d tucked it into his jeans at his skinny waist. There was a pretty impressive V-shape in between. He’d pushed the sleeves up to just below his elbows, showing a tanned set of arms covered in red gold fur. His jeans were also tight, showing off well-shaped butt and long, legs ending in scuffed brown boots. I was getting lost in daydreams about just how sweet that tight little butt might be, when he turned to me. “Up ahead where the property goes up to the tree line would be a good place to set up camp for the night. It’s a ways though, so by the time we get there, it’ll be comin’ on dusk.”

“Sounds good to me,” I replied.

“Okay. Thought you might make some executive decision or somethin’ and head back to the ranch for the night.”

“You thought wrong.” He sure did have a knack for being annoying. “When I work, I work. It doesn’t matter if it’s keeping the books or shoveling shit. Nobody’s ever had to say I don’t pull my own weight. Understand?”

He half turned his horse and looked at me. It was a long appraising look. Then he finally said, “Okay.” A few seconds later he added, “No offense meant.”

We spent the last few hours of the afternoon riding in silence until we got to the site where we were going to camp. I knew the spot he’d suggested for a camp, and he’d picked well. It was sheltered by some low hills and boulders and among the trees. There was a spring, which provided water for the horses and plenty of grass for them. The trees would provide firewood.

We got camp set up pretty quickly. It was just unloading the camping equipment from the saddlebags, scouting out space for the sleeping bags, taking care of the horses, and getting a fire started. Since it was supposed to be clear, we decided against setting up the tent. I cooked up some canned beef stew and noodles. That, some dried apricots and water completed the meal. Conversation with Mike was like pulling teeth.

“So how do you like workin’ on the ranch?” I asked.

“It’s a job.”

“You from Washington originally?”

“Nope.”

“Where ya from?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What, you’re a wanted man?” I laughed.

The answer after a few minutes was a cynical, “Nope, don’t want nobody and I ain’t wanted by nobody.”

I just couldn’t imagine not having any friends, so I asked, “No friends here?”

“Friends’ll just stab you in the back. Those closest to you will screw you every time. I don’t need that shit,” he replied angrily. In fact, it was spit out with such venom it removed any desire on my part to continue the conversation.

“Well, I’m gonna turn in,” I said, pulling off my boots and socks. I stood up, doffed my hat, and began unbuttoning my shirt. I noticed Mike was closely watching me. I unbuckled my belt and unbuttoned my jeans. I stepped out of them and began rolling them to make a pillow. Now, I’ve been told enough times I’m easy on the eyes—tall, olive skin, black hair and beard, with a pair of green, not hazel, eyes. Work in San Francisco, the gym, plus an active lifestyle had given me a good amount of muscle on a lean frame. I stood there in my T-shirt and boxers. From the corner of my eye, I could see Mike trying hard not to stare and not quite managing it. I thought, *hmmm... he might not play for the other team after all*. Either that, or he knew I’m gay and was uncomfortable with it. Just to be a teasing bastard, I turned to face him. My T-shirt was clingy cotton and showed off the muscles in my pecs. Although my boxers were loose, my legs are really muscular, and I’ve seen enough to know I don’t have anything to be ashamed of in the locker room. Enough of a bulge showed to hint at that. I made a show of scratching my belly to uncover the thick treasure trail, which disappeared into the waistband of my shorts. I turned around and bent over purposely to arrange my sleeping bag. I took my time getting into it, making a big show for Mike. I lay down, looked over at him, and said, “Good night.”

I almost chuckled at his confused sounding, “Uh... yeah, you too,” which was probably more pleasant conversation than I’d gotten from him all night.

I’ve never been reluctant to let folks know I’m gay. I don’t introduce myself, “Hi I’m gay Jeff,” but I don’t hide it either. It was common knowledge on the ranch, so Mike must’ve known.



He was still wearing his long-sleeve thermal T-shirt, so he slipped it off, then kicked off his boots and pulled off his socks. I was watching with my eyes half closed. As I'd mentioned before, he sure was nice to look at, and he didn't disappoint me. He was pretty well muscled, too, better than I had thought when I first met him. His red beard seemed to shine in the firelight, which also seemed to highlight the fine film of hair on his arms and legs. He was facing my direction as he rolled up his pants for a pillow, and I noticed he'd been more than a little turned on by my earlier strip show. He looked good enough to lick all over in his blue briefs. He jumped fairly quickly into his sleeping bag. I did see as he crawled in, that his ass was beautifully framed by the thin cotton of his briefs. What I could do with that ass. He looked over in my direction after he was safe in his sleeping bag. I was pretty sure that the red in his face was not due to the reflection of the campfire. I smiled as I drifted off to sleep, hearing him tossing and turning, clearly bothered—or better said hot and bothered—by my actions.

IT HAD been a long time since I slept out under the stars. I woke to a cold fall morning. The day was just beginning, and it was still a dark twilight. The birds were gradually beginning to sing and chirp. I could see a glow over the hills to the east where the sun would rise. The fire was dead and the air was fresh, with a hint of wood smoke. The Methow Valley had to be one of the most beautiful places on God's earth. From the fully wooded foothills of the Cascades to the desert by the Columbia River, the terrain was hilly and had a wild beauty to it. It felt good to be home. I lay in my sleeping bag for a few minutes enjoying the play of light on the hills and mountains around us, the sounds of the place coming to life in the morning, and the clear air which smelled of pine. Mike was softly snoring in the bedroll across camp, but after a few minutes he began to stir. A mischievous thought crossed my mind. If my little show last night had thrown him off balance, maybe if I did something similar this morning, it might keep him off kilter today too. I stood up and made a big deal of stretching. I walked over to the water jug in only my underwear and got some water and began to build the fire and make coffee. I purposely crouched down where Mike could see up the leg of my boxers. I expected him to stare and he didn't disappoint me. I threw a few handfuls of coffee grounds in the pot with water and set it on the fire to boil. I walked over to the edge of camp in full view of Mike and let loose with a long morning piss. About halfway through, I realized that it was cold! I suddenly felt like I was turning blue and hurried to finish and get my clothes on.

Once I was dressed, I got out the saddle pack with some granola bars and dried fruit. As I was adding some cold water to the coffee pot to settle the grounds, I saw Mike jump up real quick like and grab his pants. He was hopping around trying to get his pants on and trying to conceal a massive erection peeking out of the top of his briefs. When he had finished dressing, he came toward me, and I handed him a mug of coffee. He muttered something, which might have been "thanks," and grabbed some dried apples and a couple of granola bars. He seemed to be doing some deep thinking from the frown of concentration on his face. After a few minutes he looked at me and said tentatively, "Jeff?"

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Uh... I um... just wanted to tell ya, I'm sorry about your dad. He was a good guy," he said softly. "He was a good guy, and he treated me real well and real fair. He talked to me and listened to me."

"Thanks. You're right. He was a really good guy. I couldn't have asked for a better dad. I appreciate it, Mike; I'm glad you two were there for each other to talk to."

"Uh-huh." I guess that was the civil conversation for the day. Silence descended once again as we packed up camp and made sure the fire was out. I wasn't gonna make much of an effort at

conversation after trying several times yesterday. Much of the morning was spent riding in silence. I wasn't too upset by the silence as it allowed me to focus on all the natural beauty of the valley. We were riding in an area of the ranch that spread out toward the high Cascades. The pine trees gave the air a natural fragrance, which pine "air fresheners" have never been able to duplicate. The sun was bright and the day was warming up nicely. Occasionally we'd see some deer grazing off to the side. I had counted several eagles and was enjoying the view of the meadows, burned golden by the fall sun.

"Hey, Jeff?" Mike's words broke my period of silent reverie for the beautiful country through which we rode.

"What's up?"

"You don't like me much, do ya?"

"Can't say as I've seen too much to like. You're really easy on the eyes, both face and body, but the way you act and some of the stuff out of your mouth is plain ugly. You don't make any effort to show much likeable."

"Thanks for the honesty." He gave a disgruntled reply.

"Let's water the horses in the creek up ahead in the woods and have lunch."

"Okay."

After getting to the creek, dismounting and pulling some bread and spam from the saddlepack, we sat down on some rocks.

"Ya know, Mike, I'd like to be friends, or if that's not possible at least get along. You make it awful difficult though. Every time I try to talk with you, you don't want to talk, or I get some smart-ass response. How am I supposed to be friendly if you won't meet me even halfway?"

He seemed to consider this for a long while. When he finally looked up at me, his expression was conflicted, almost tortured. It was the saddest, most alone expression I'd ever seen.

"I've been on my own since I was sixteen. I've really been fucked over by people, so it's kinda hard for me to trust anybody. Your dad said I try to drive 'em away before they can get close."

"Seems like you talked with my dad a lot."

"That bother you?"

"Hell no, my mom died quite a few years back, and now that I live in the city, I was worried he'd be lonely. If he saw you as someone he could talk with, that's great by me."

He seemed to think about that for a few minutes before responding. "He was real proud of you. He kept talking about his son the cowboy artist, and how someday you'd be famous. I asked 'im once if it bothered him you was a fa... gay, but he said no, as long as you're happy that's all he wanted."

I was the one who didn't answer right away. I knew my dad felt that way although he'd never said it in so many words. When I came out to him at sixteen, his only response was, "You think you can be happy that way?" Full of teenage rebelliousness I'd shot back a quick yes. His response was, "That's all that matters then."

"Thanks for letting me know that. It means a lot."

He gave me the first genuine smile I'd seen from him. It lit up his face. Even with the constant scowl, he was a handsome man. When he smiled, he was really stunning. He realized I was looking at him just to look. He averted his gaze from mine and reddened slightly.

"The guys would all go into town or into Wenatchee for a Saturday night, and I never felt comfortable goin' with 'em. After a while they stopped invitin' me. Your dad noticed and began

askin' me to have a cup of coffee or maybe a beer. He treated me like a person, not just some dumb hayseed."

"Uh-huh," was about all I could manage. My throat seemed awful tight. The sharp stab of grief hit me again.

"Yeah, he listened to me. I always reckoned that he valued what I had to say. I ain't never had anyone treat me that way before."

"Like I said earlier, I'd be your friend, or at least civil with ya if you'd let me."

The look he gave me was long and appraising. He then gave me a half smile and said, "I don't really know how to act around friends, but I'd like that. I mean, I'll really try. Now, what's your life like in San Francisco?"

"You heard of a starving artist? That's me. I do my bronze sculptures and I'm beginning to sell a few. Most of my money comes from being a waiter."

"Yeah, I'd bet the way you look, you get a shitload of big tips from both men and women." He turned bright red when he said this, and I had to turn away to hide a smile.

"It pays my share of the rent."

"You got a roomie?"

"I got a boyfriend; we been together about ten months now. I moved in with him a couple of months ago."

"Why isn't he out here with you? Your dad just died. He didn't even come for the funeral?" Mike had gotten a bit of an angry look on his face.

"Robert doesn't really like it out here. He's a city boy."

"How'd you guys meet?"

"I was buckin' in the Bay Area Gay Rodeo. He came up and asked me to dance in the dance hall, said he'd noticed me buckin'."

"I'll be damned, a gay rodeo and two guys dancin'? I'm guessing you mean two-steppin'."

"Yep, we started dating not too long after that."

"You guys happy?"

I considered the question. The first few months had been a great deal of fun. At the rodeo, Robert was impressed that I was a real cowboy with shit on my boots. He liked the competition number on my back. If I said "ain't" or used some saying like "ya couldn't swing a dead cat without hittin'... whatever," he'd laugh. After a while it seemed to me I was his personal trophy cowboy. He could parade his butch boyfriend in front of his queenie friends. Lately though, I wasn't sure just why I was with Robert. He was demeaning about my bronze sculptures and was always harping on me to get a job as an accountant and give up my art. It wasn't to his taste he said anytime I tried to show him a sculpture that I thought turned out really well.

God forbid now if I were to have shit on my boots. He'd freak. And there was the constant pressure to give up competing in the gay rodeos. Also the outdoors is one of my passions. I love to ski, snow shoe, hike, canoe, and camp. Robert had no interest in any of that and wasn't really supportive of my doing so. If I even mentioned hunting or fishing, I'd get a disgusted look like I killed Bambi's mother.

He was also constantly correcting my grammar, and every time I would use some saying, he'd answer, "How quaint," in a very sarcastic tone. I was beginning to think that the only thing that was holding us together was the sex. It was good, very good. But happy? I wasn't so sure anymore. It had been exciting and fun when we got together, going places around the Bay Area, picnics, live music, good restaurants, just a good time in general. It was an introduction to a

whole new world for me. Now that world was beginning to seem cold and inhospitable. I wondered what happened.

"Every relationship has its ups and downs," I replied. "So tell me a little about you."

"Jeff, it's really tough for me to talk about myself. I just don't wanna go there."

"You sure I'm not gonna see your face on a wanted poster in the post office?"

A momentary flash of anger crossed his face. I could tell he was trying real hard to control himself.

Finally he said, "No. When I'm ready I'll talk about it, fair enough?"

"Fair enough, bud."

"Jeff, why'd ya leave the ranch for the city? The little I seen of ya, you really seem to like it here, plus it's real easy to see you got friends here." That was a good question, and one I had been asking myself a lot lately. At first it was fun to live in the city, all the restaurants, so much live music, and so many things to see and do. Coming back to the ranch and the valley made me realize just how much I'd missed it, and just how much I really didn't fit in living in San Francisco. I had thought as a gay man, it was someplace I should go and experience, but it wasn't me. The concrete was depressing, and everyone was always in a hurry. I finally answered Mike's question honestly.

"I thought at first it would be interestin' to live in a place with so many other gay guys and so much to do. Now though, I really don't know. I keep askin' myself that same question."

We rode on in silence for the next couple of hours, but this time it was a companionable silence.

It was coming up on dinnertime when we arrived at the highest point of our ranch. The land was all wooded, and water was much more abundant. There were still broad meadows up here and the cattle loved it. This part of the ranch backed up to the Okanogan National Forest. There were forest service roads not too far, but for the most part the recreational vehicles stayed far enough away as to not spook the beeves.

"Looks like part of the fence is down up ahead. I reckon it was a good idea to ride fences."

"Yep," Mike answered in his laconic way.

The break was in a flat place at the edge of a meadow and right by the trees. As we rode up and got closer, it became obvious that this was not a normal fence break. The posts were still standing firm, but the barbed wire had been cleanly cut and pulled back. I dismounted and squatted down to look at the ground. The tracks plainly showed that a group, five maybe six head of cattle had been herded out beyond the fence. I looped Charlie's reins around the fence post and walked along the trail of cattle tracks.

"Somebody cut the fence and drove the cattle out," I said to Mike.

"You able to track too?"

Distractedly I answered, "Nothing much to it other than looking at the tracks left behind. Like here it looks like there were two guys on horseback who drove the cattle out." I followed the trail about one-hundred yards into the trees. I saw where an unimproved track bore the signs of truck tires and a line in the dirt which indicated to me a ramp had led down from the truck. The hoof prints from the cattle ended where the ramp began.

"What the fuck!" I swore in frustration. "It looks like we been hit by rustlers!" I felt like I was in some B Western saying those words.

"I been hearin' reports of cattle rustlin'," Mike continued in an almost condescending voice. "Seems they been hittin' around here lately. With the price of beef goin' up, it's worth the risk to them."

Immediately I began to think about how close the ranch seemed to the break even point. We'd need every head to make a good profit when roundup time came. The random thoughts kept coming back: losing my dad, the ranch close to failing, the questions about my relationship and my living in San Francisco. I felt overwhelmed and very alone. I wished that Dad were here to talk to. The anxiety, grief, and sense of being totally unable to control the situation were channeling into anger, a useless and uncalled for anger.

"Hittin' around here, where?" I asked Mike with some panic and a great deal of anger in my voice.

"Well, your dad told me we'd lost about fifteen head so far. Sheriff has been lookin', but nothin' so far."

"He told you and he never bothered to mention it to me in any of our calls or e-mails?" The anger was beginning to rise, and I felt almost betrayed.

"Lotta good you woulda done off in San Francisco. I reckon he just didn't want to worry ya."

I walked over to Charlie, untied his reins, and swung myself up to the saddle. Mike was watching me. From the expression on his face, it was clear that he'd enjoyed seeing me swing my leg up over Charlie to saddle up. I was pissed as hell about his remark, probably because it was the truth. I was also more than a little hurt that my dad, who I'd considered really close, hadn't bothered to tell me. Unfortunately, that hurt and the defensiveness caused by Mike's offhand remark came out in hot anger and a desire to hurt.

"It's none of your goddamn business where I go, or what good I could do."

He looked like I'd socked him hard in the face, but didn't say anything. I wheeled Charlie around and began the ride back to the ranch, the phone, and the sheriff. I could hear Mike behind me, but I didn't really care. I was riding high on a tide of self-righteous anger, hurt, and panic. It was after a few miles I realized I had acted like a total asshole and began to feel ashamed. I needed to apologize, but worry about the ranch drove me to continue riding. I needed to talk to the sheriff as soon as possible.

## Chapter Two

I SAT in the ranch office with my head in my hands. It must have been about two in the morning. My laptop was in front of me, and my eyes were blurry from going over the ranch financial books. It seems ranchers live from one year to the next, waiting for the cattle to be sold off and get some money. I had enough money to make payrolls and pay on the loans we had out. I wasn't sure that the remaining herd was going to bring in enough to keep up the mortgage for the next year. I needed to get the mortgage information and all that from Dad's attorney. We'd lost a good number of cattle over the last few months. I couldn't help but remember the conversation with the sheriff. Followed by Mike, I'd ridden a good part of the evening to get back to the ranch house and call the sheriff. He got out to the ranch pretty quick and took my report. He said he'd have one of his deputies inspect the site from the forest service road. Apparently the rustlers had brought a truck right up to the fence, herded some cattle into it, drove a few miles down the road

and slaughtered them right there, if they were keeping true to the same method. After that it would be mighty hard to prove just where their beef did or didn't come from.

I needed to get some sleep. A cold front had come over the Cascades that afternoon, bringing clouds, rain, and the end to our nice, mild weather. Fall was definitely here. I had tried to sleep earlier, but just tossed and turned and worried about finances and what to do about the ranch. I had originally thought about asking Wayne to take on a full caretaker position, hiring another foreman and maybe another hand or two. With the current financial situation, unless something changed, that would be impossible.

Part of the reason that I couldn't drift off was, aside from the worries, I was cold. I got up and shucked off my T-shirt and boxers and put on a pair of red long handles. The stereotypes about cowboys in long johns are in part true. They're comfortable and warm.

I also felt bad for the way I'd taken out my frustration on Mike. I needed to apologize, but I'd spent the rest of the day with the sheriff, and later Mike had made himself as scarce as hen's teeth. I went back to bed and finally fell into a restless sleep.

IT SEEMED I'd just closed my eyes when I was woken up by knocking on the door. Looking up at the skylight I was able to see that it was already morning. I threw off the covers and without bothering to grab my pants, went to the door, yawning as I went. I yanked it open to see Mike standing there. He looked me up and down and blushed furiously. I realized that the long handles fit me like a glove, leaving nothing to the imagination, including the evidence, stiffly poking down the left leg of my underwear that I must have been having one hell of a nice dream.

"Come on in and let me get my pants on." I walked back to the bedroom and quickly pulled on my jeans and a pair of thick wool socks and then headed back to the kitchen.

"Coffee?" I asked while adding water to the battered old enamel pot I kept by the stove.

"Uh... sure."

Once the pot came to a boil I added the coffee and left the pot to boil. I turned to Mike, who it seemed had recovered from his earlier shock.

"So what's up?"

"Well, I was talkin' with José and Josh, and we volunteered to work a while with no pay if it helps. We know it can't be easy payin' for a funeral, the cattle gettin' rustled, and all the other shit you're goin' through."

I was blindsided by this. Although I'd known Wayne and José for years, Josh and Pedro were newer. I'd only met Josh a few times when visiting for the weekends or vacation. Mike I didn't even really know other than from the events of yesterday, and the way I'd ended the day with him was pretty childish.

"Hey, Mike, about yesterday, I'm sorry about what I said. I acted like a real asshole. Only excuse I got is I was upset about my dad, the rustlin', the ranch, and all the other shit I'm tryin' to muck though. It's really no excuse though, and takin' out my frustrations on you was a real shitty thing to do. I'm very sorry. Also buddy, I really appreciate the offer about workin' for free for a while, but we're not that bad off yet."

"Don't worry about it. It's hard to be civil when you got all that stuff goin' on."

I extended my hand to him, and he took it in a firm shake. I looked at him and realized he was staring right at me. We just stood there and looked at each other while we clasped hands. As I looked at him, I saw an expression of intense longing in his eyes. I noticed that they were brown

with tawny flecks of gold. His beard was well trimmed and a red gold color. He smelled of good clean sweat and soap, maybe Irish Spring. I pulled his hand, bringing him toward me as our faces moved closer together. I opened my mouth for the kiss and closed my eyes.

All of a sudden, there was a racket at the door. I heard a familiar voice saying, “Yoo-hoo honey, I’m home or here anyway.” Robert was here. Mike and I dropped hands and backed off, acting like two embarrassed teenagers.

“Finish with the coffee, will ya?” I asked as I headed to the other room and the door.

“Did you miss me?”

“I ain’t had too much time to miss anybody or anything. When did you get here? I didn’t even know you were coming. You look too fresh to have taken a red-eye and driven.” I gave Robert a quick hug and kiss.

“I thought it was about time I came up here and brought my big, bad, cowboy stud home. I flew into Seattle and drove to Wenatchee yesterday. I stayed there and was up before dawn to get up here to bring you home.” Robert usually worked out in the morning, so getting up at four for the three hour drive here wasn’t such a stretch. I smiled at him. It was nice to hear some easy banter rather than criticism.

I heard a snort and muffled laugh from the kitchen.

“Come on in. We were just fixin’ to have coffee. Want some?”

“Is it that cowboy style coffee you like so much?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll pass. Do you have any tea?”

“I suppose. C’mon in the kitchen and meet Mike.”

“Mike?”

“Yeah, he works here. We were just chattin’.”

We walked into the kitchen. Mike was slouched back on one of the chairs by the big old wooden kitchen table. His long lean legs stretched out in front of him were encased in tight Wranglers. His scuffed cowboy boots were crossed at the ankles. He had on a big dinner plate belt buckle proclaiming him a champion in roping at the local rodeo. He wore a thick flannel shirt in a green plaid; the sleeves were rolled up and the red sleeves of his long handles protruded down to his wrists. A once white cowboy hat completed his dress.. All in all, he was a pretty hot picture to see. The Wranglers fit him good, real good. He stood up as we headed into the kitchen.

“Mike, Robert; Robert, Mike,” I said in the way of introduction as I searched through the cabinets for some tea bags. Finding some, I turned to put some water on.

Mike was looking at Robert with faint hostility. Robert was looking at Mike like he was an ice cream cone on a hot day.

“Ohhh, be still my beating heart. What a handsome cowboy! It’s too bad I have a cowboy of my own, or you could save a horse and ride me!”

“Fat chance!”

“A feisty one too!”

“I’ll take a rain check on that coffee; I’m sure you two got lots to catch up on.” Mike stalked out.

“Bye, bye, you cute studmuffin you!”

“Robert, we’re not in San Francisco. These guys would kick the shit outta you as soon as talk to you if you get ’em pissed off.”

“Don’t tell me you’re heading back into the closet out here, Jeffrey.”

“No, I just know these people; they are laid-back and they don’t care as long as you don’t shove nothing in their faces.”

“Well, I am who I am, sweetheart. So when are you going to sell this dump and come back to the city?”

“Robert, give me a break! My dad’s funeral was only a few days ago, and I ain’t had too much time to figure out just what I want to do.”

I looked at Robert. There was no denying he was a handsome man. About six-two, he was very muscular from hour after hour spent in the gym. Where I was long and lean, Robert was stocky. He had immaculately coiffed brown hair. His features were regularly shaped and pleasant. He also had one of the most camp senses of humor I had ever seen. It seemed funny in San Francisco, but plastic and overdone here. He was all duded up in a Brooks and Dunn type cowboy shirt, with stiffly ironed creases, Levis, and new boots of something that looked like alligator skin. He was wearing a new felt hat way back on his head, the way a girl would, and a little blue kerchief around his neck. The phrase drug store cowboy came to mind.

“Ain’t is not a word, Jeffrey.”

“Whatever. Your tea’s ready.” I dropped the tea bag in the mug, poured water on it, and shoved the mug toward Robert, sloshing half its contents on the counter.

“Jeffrey, it’s good to see you. I am concerned about you. Can’t you see this place is not good for you? You’ve started speaking hick again after just a few days here. And I bet the nearest gay disco is four hours away in Seattle. I’m sure your little shit kicking cowhand friends can be amusing, but honestly, they are way beneath you.”

I took a deep breath and started counting to ten to keep my temper while I poured my coffee into my mug.

I sat down at the kitchen table and looked across at him. I thought again that at first the relationship was fun, but now all it seemed was that he was trying to change me. As if to reinforce my thoughts, he began to speak.

“Jeffrey, you know the only reason I bring this stuff up is that I want the best for you. You have a perfectly good accounting degree, you’re smart, and you have so much going for you. Yet it seems you are determined to stay a redneck. Come back with me sweetheart, and forget this stupid ranch and that nasty bronze casting. You can get a good job. Just think, with our incomes together, my savings, and the money from this place we could have a house in Marin with a view! Think of the restaurants and the vacation resorts we could visit.”

Just to test him I answered, “I see your point. We could go on a couple of those eco-tour camping trips like a safari in Africa, hiking in Patagonia, or kayaking in Greenland.”

“You know I have absolutely no interest in that! But if you come to your senses and do the other stuff, I certainly will support you when you want to do things like that. However, if you are going all over the globe without me doing that dirty outdoor stuff, I would expect that we would open our relationship. I have needs too. And you have all your little redneck friends.” At first I felt myself softening up at his promise of support for doing the things I liked. Then he talked about opening the relationship. I knew that wasn’t what I wanted.

“Robert, you sure as hell have given me a lot to think about. Now I’m gonna get dressed and head on into Winslett for a supply run. You mind stayin’ here so I can think on what you said?”

“Certainly Jeffrey, I’ll just amuse myself with these hunky cowboys. Maybe one will teach me how to ride.”

“Be careful.”



“Jeffrey, I know what I’m doing. I’ll give the horse a carrot or sugar cube, and it will literally be eating out of my hands.”

“There’s a reason there’s a sayin’ ‘easy as fallin’ off a horse’.”

“I have a way with animals!”

“Whatever.” I realized we were getting off on the wrong track, rehashing old issues as if I was still in San Francisco. I smiled at Robert. “Have a good time learnin’ how to ride.”

“Thanks, Jeffrey, I do want to meet you halfway. Maybe once I learn, we can go riding.”

“I’d like that.”

“I know I have to compromise too. Now go and get your supplies, and I’ll see you when you get back.”

It was late afternoon when I turned into the winding side road that led to the ranch. I had the back of the pickup loaded with supplies—truth be told, there was enough for quite a while—so I guessed in part I had an answer for Robert. I still wasn’t sure what I wanted. I had been thinking hard all afternoon. I was trying to figure out just how in the hell I felt about Robert. We had some good times together, and the sex was fantastic. He could keep his legs in the air for hours and had a very talented tongue. But sex does not a relationship make. It seemed like lately we had nothing in common. At the beginning, I loved his sharp, sarcastic sense of humor. He took me to artsy stuff and new things such as plays, which I did enjoy. But to do stuff together other than a night out or a weekend trip, was not something we did. More probably we’d had nothing in common from the beginning, but had let physical attraction run wild. Opposites attract and we were totally opposite.

Did I really want to go back to San Francisco? I didn’t have any friends there. It was a beautiful city, but you couldn’t see the stars due to all the lights. I hated waiting tables. Frankly, I could sell my bronze sculptures here in the artists’ co-op in Winslett and probably make more money than I did in San Francisco. Being here made me realize how much I missed the change of seasons, cowboying, my friends here, and the ranch.

I did enjoy it when Robert and I would head off to Tahoe, or Calistoga, or the North Coast. When we went though, I wanted to camp, and he wanted to stay in five-star or boutique hotels. We had seen staying in bed and breakfast hotels as a compromise, but I was beginning to wonder just what I was getting in return. At first he was fascinated with everything about cowboys. Now he seemed to hate everything about them, the stuff that made me, me.

As I pulled into the drive in front of the ranch house, there sat Robert on one of the chairs on the front deck. The ranch house was really a log home. Dad had always wanted one and had it built several years ago. It was really beautiful; a deck ran around it, and there were balconies from the bedrooms upstairs. Robert was kind of slouched in the chair and covered with mud. His new hat was beside him crushed, his kerchief was askew, and his shirt was pretty badly ripped. His Levis were a mess, and his new alligator boots were covered in mud and horse shit. He saw me and moaned while holding his ribs.

I looked at him and finally said, “It looks like you were practicing bronc bustin’ for the next rodeo.”

“Ha ha ha. Very funny. Those assholes gave me some devil wild horse, and just as I got on they slapped it.”

“Well, you told ’em you could ride. Not that that justifies what they did.”

“I ache all over.”

I went over to him and began feeling his arms, legs, and ribs. “I don’t think you broke anything. Nothing wrong with you some aspirin, food, a bath, and some whiskey won’t cure.”

“Look at my new clothes! They’re ruined. I can’t believe they did this to me.”

“How about you kick off your boots, and take off all the muddy clothes, and go upstairs and take a nice hot bath. There’s a big Jacuzzi tub in my bathroom. I’ll bring you some water, aspirin, and if you want a shot or two.”

“You expect me to strip down in this cold and parade around in my underwear in front of those troglodytes?” I could hear muffled laughter coming from the direction of the bunkhouse.

“Well, you’re not tracking mud and horse shit all through the house. They’re men Robert. You don’t have nothing they haven’t seen. Let’s get ya inside and take care of ya. They were just funnin’ with ya. Like I said, it don’t justify anythin’, but cowboys love to joke around. The new guy is usually the butt of the joke. It’s happened to me many a time. Just grin and go with it and they move on to the next guy.”

He began to undress, moving slowly and moaning and whining constantly. He was covered with bruises, including one on his thigh that looked like a hoof print.

“You get kicked?”

“Yeah,” he moaned. When he finally hobbled into the house, I went and took the boxes of groceries into the pantry just outside the kitchen. Josh came over from the bunkhouse to help.

“You never told us your friend knew how to fly, Jeff.”

“I guess I was waiting to let you in on that secret when he learns how to land.”

Josh laughed. He was about five-eight and built like a fire plug. He had a full head of sandy hair and a little moustache.

“He was getting pretty hard to take, ordering us around like we was servants and telling us we don’t talk right. Kinda got the impression he looks down on us.”

“I’ll have a talk with him. But in the meantime, take it easy on him, okay? Which horse did you give him anyway?”

“Tornado.” I couldn’t help laughing. Tornado certainly wasn’t a “wild devil horse” and was named because he was about as far from rough as possible.

“Well, he was the one that kicked ol’ Tornado several times yelling ‘giddy up’.”

Realizing that I was fighting a losing battle, I changed the subject.

“What do you and the boys have planned for tonight, since it’s Friday?”

“José suggested that we take turns doin’ lookout duty up by the forest service roads. Pedro pulled first shift. José and I are gonna go into Wenatchee. Haven’t seen Wayne all day, and don’t know about Mike.”

“Well, have a good time. But not too good; I don’t want to come and bail your sorry asses outta jail.” Josh just laughed at that and headed out toward the bunkhouse.

I headed upstairs to where Robert was soaking in the tub, stopping at the medicine cabinet to get some aspirin. I gave it to him and poured him a glass of water.

“How’s about we go into Winslett and go to One Eyed Jack’s for dinner?”

“Okay. As long as none of those assholes go with us.”

“It’ll be just us. It’ll be a nice chance for us to get caught up on the last two weeks and visit.”

An hour and a half later, we were seated in One Eyed Jack’s Saloon.

My friend Sandy, who I went to school with, was our waitress. It struck me again just how pretty and nice she was. She always seemed to have one or two straight dudes sniffing after her, usually without any success. She had one of the most engaging smiles I’d ever seen. We’d always been close through school.

“Hey, Sandy, how ya doin’?”

“Hey there, Jeff, no complaints, how about you?”

“Fair to middlin’.”

“I hear your ranch got hit by rustlers.” Sandy looked at me quizzically.

“Yeah, Sheriff told me we aren’t the only ones.”

“No, the Nelsons got hit also, off Wild Horse Road, and the Flannigans off of the other side of Lucky Jeff Bluff. Too bad they still don’t hang cattle thieves, but they gotta catch ’em first. So what will you boys have to drink tonight?”

“I’ll have an Alaskan Amber Ale. Sandy, this here’s my friend Robert up from California. Robert, this is Sandy; she and I went to school together, and we were always real good friends. Her dad is the sheriff.”

“Hi Robert, what can I get for you?”

“I’d like a hot chocolate.”

“I’m sorry; we don’t have hot chocolate, coffee maybe?”

“*No hot chocolate?* It’s cold out! How do people up here warm up?”

“People up here warm up with beer.” Sandy rolled her eyes at me.

“I’ll have a cup of tea then.”

“Okay, an Alaskan Amber Ale and a cup of tea.” I was treated to hearing Sandy mutter under her breath something about an uppity pansy, and Robert mutter something about cretins. The evening was shaping up to be a lot of fun.

“Well, Jeffrey, just what is good here?”

“They got great burgers, and you can’t go wrong with one of their steaks either.”

“I’ve stopped eating red meat. And don’t suggest the chicken or fish; I don’t want anything deep fried.” Just then Sandy came back, and delivered our drinks, and took our orders—a bacon cheeseburger and fries for me, and a veggie burger and a small side salad with no dressing for Robert.

“So Jeffrey, just when are you coming back home?”

“I told you I’m thinking on it. Don’t push. Are you feelin’ any better after the soak in the tub and aspirin?”

“I ache all over.” I had never realized just how whiney Robert was. He seemed to realize it also. He did backpedal a bit. “Jeffrey, I appreciate your helping me clean up, checking me over, and everything else. I’m grumpy and bitchy because I hurt.”

“I understand Robert; after dinner and a good night’s sleep, you’ll be right as rain.”

I decided to change the subject a bit.

“Hey, look a band is settin’ up.” Robert followed my gaze as several guys in T-shirts or Western shirts and cowboy hats were setting up speakers and other equipment. Once they got started, their first song was an Alan Jackson hit, “Chasin’ the Neon Rainbow.” They weren’t half bad, and I was soon tapping my boot along with the beat. Robert made some obnoxious comment about hick music.

“I thought you enjoyed country music?”

“It’s one thing to have it in a gay atmosphere and quite another in a redneck atmosphere. Jeffrey, you have to understand. This is culture shock for me. The way you were raised was very different from how I was raised. You enjoy all this stuff, but to me it’s very intimidating. I keep

expecting someone named Bubba to come up and try to start a fight.” I reached over and touched his hand.

“I do understand because I feel the same way sometimes in San Francisco. You’ve showed me a different world there. Let me show you my world.”

“Jeffrey, so many people I know disdain your world. I’ve been surrounded by them all my life, and some of it certainly has rubbed off. It’s very difficult for me to accept the hunting and fishing, the tobacco between the cheek and gum, the way men interact here. I don’t understand at all how I should act.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Come back to San Francisco with me.”

“Just now that is not an option. I have to figure out what to do about Dad’s estate, the ranch, and all the stuff here. While you’re here, can’t you try to at least have a bit of a good time?”

Just then Sandy walked up.

“Hey, Jeff, boss asked me to get out on the dance floor to get people started, and I need a partner. You still remember how to two-step?”

Sandy used to occasionally go with me to the local rodeos and dances. We had even gone to our high school prom together. She knew I was gay and had no problem with it. She was actually like a little sister, and we both loved to dance.

“Easy as fallin’ off a horse.” I smiled at her, stood up, and held out my hand. We walked to the dance floor as Robert made a snide remark about “First blond hicks with shit on their boots and now a woman.”

As we got to the dance floor, I put my hand at her waist and began to lead her around the floor.

“So who’s your lady friend back there?”

I didn’t bother correcting her sarcastic remark. “Friend of mine from San Francisco.” I also didn’t bother to let her know we were involved and lived together.

She looked up at me with frank appraisal in her eyes. “You can do a lot better than that. Don’t sell yourself short. That one seems to hate just about everything about who we are. Who you are.” I didn’t answer, and she continued, “What’d he mean by blond hicks?”

“I was talkin’ to Mike at the ranch, and he’s reading all sorts of shit into a conversation. Sandy, he’s really unhappy here. The guys got him on a horse, and he got bucked off. He’s sore, he’s in a bad mood, and he knows he doesn’t fit in here. He doesn’t understand it, and a lot of folks are critical of what they don’t understand. Please try to cut him some slack for me?”

“I’ll try, but like I said, you can do lots better than him. Mike is a good guy, lots of hurt, lots of damage, but he’s got a heart of gold.”

“I didn’t know you knew him so well; you two dating?”

She laughed and said, “You’d have a lot better chance to date him than I would. You’ve got all the right equipment so to speak.” While I was sure Mike was gay, I didn’t make a comment. “He’s helped me with my car a few times. When it was broken down, he gave me rides to work and to the store.”

“Hmmm... he seems real hot and cold to me. One minute he’s friendly, and the next he just shuts down and can make some pretty bitchy comments.”

“Your Dad pegged him right. He is so afraid of getting hurt again, he drives folks away before they can get close to him.” By then the band was ending the song. Several other couples had joined us on the floor.

I tipped my hat to Sandy and said, “Thanks for the dance ma’am.”

She laughingly slapped my arm. “Oh, go sit down and I’ll get your food.”

Robert was pouting back at the booth. Our burgers came, and I ordered another beer and tried to tune him out and listen to the band. We mostly ate in silence. I picked up the check and we headed out. Winslett is a little tourist town in the Methow Valley. It has an old West theme. Despite the lights of the town, you could see lots of stars in the crisp cold air. We got back to the truck and headed on to the ranch. After a few minutes, Robert mentioned he needed to take a piss.

“Why the hell didn’t you use the john at the restaurant?”

“I didn’t think of it then. Stop at the rest area ahead.”

Wordlessly I pulled into the rest area and found a parking place close to the restroom. Robert jumped out and hobbled stiffly to the men’s room. While I was waiting, I noticed a few cars parked strategically with single men in them. I dismissed them as restroom queens, closeted and hidden. I ended up doing a double take; one truck looked like Mike’s. It also seemed someone ducked when I parked; I was pretty sure it was Mike. Not too many guys have that combination of light blond hair and a dark red beard. Not too many that handsome either. None of my business I thought. Robert got back and we headed on home.

NEXT morning, I was laying in bed just waking up slowly when I heard knocking on the door. Robert had stayed in the spare room since he said he was sore. This was beginning to be a pattern. Without bothering to dress, I ran down the stairs and to the door. Wayne was there, a crazy look in his eyes.

“Pedro got *shot*! He was out where the cattle got rustled. Josh rode up there this morning to take watch and found him.”

“Did you call the sheriff and an ambulance?”

“It’s too late for an ambulance.”

I realized I was standing there in just my long johns. “Let me get dressed, and I’ll get some coffee for you and some whiskey. You look like you could use some.”

As I headed up the stairs to get dressed, I heard Wayne echo my thoughts, “Shit, shit, shit!”

## Chapter Three

THE wind whipped across the grassy valley south of Winslett. The trees were fewer here than back up at the ranch, and the trees had pretty much all lost their leaves. It was cold out. The chill in the air echoed the chill we were all feeling at the loss of Pedro. The sky was cloudy; it mirrored the somber mood in the cemetery. Wayne stood to one side of me, and José was on the other. Josh and Mike each stood a few feet away. I hadn’t known it, but Pedro had a girlfriend, Maria, from Wenatchee. Maria was just out of nursing school. She had olive skin, green eyes, and glossy black hair, which reached down to the middle of her back. Although she was short and what a lot of folks would call corn-fed, she possessed an ease and grace that made her shine. She sobbed softly. I tuned in from my thoughts and heard the priest intoning, “...in the sure and glorious hope of his

resurrection. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust....” Most of the onlookers crossed themselves, and the priest turned to speak with Maria.

Pedro was an orphan who had come up from Mexico as a child to live with his aunt and uncle here in eastern Washington. They took the time and expense to get him legal status. Unfortunately, they died a few years later in a car crash. I ended up paying for Pedro’s funeral, as he really didn’t have anyone else. It added to the money worries about the ranch, but it was the least I could do.

“Hey, Jeff,” Wayne asked, “The boys and I are gonna meet at One Eyed Jack’s Saloon and raise a few to Pedro’s memory. You wanna come?”

“Yeah, I’ll stop by.”

“Good. See ya there then.” He clapped me on the shoulder and headed to his truck followed by Josh and José. He turned to Mike and asked, “You comin’?”

“I was gonna ask if I could catch a ride back with Jeff.” Wayne looked at me long enough for me to reply, “Fine by me,” and headed off. Mike came up to me and walked with me to my truck.

“Jeff, can I talk with you?”

“Talk away, Mike,” I said with a smile.

“Uh... maybe we could stop somewheres. It’s kind of personal, and I don’t want no one listening.”

“Sure thing.” I pulled the truck out of the cemetery lot and headed off on a quiet road that ran to the north of Winslett, rather than into town. Mike didn’t say a word as I drove for a couple of miles and finally stopped at a pull-out view area with a couple of picnic tables. This late in the season, I was pretty sure we’d be the only ones up there.

“So what’s up?”

“Well, I guess I don’t know where to start.”

I just looked at him expectantly.

“I guess you know the sheriff talked to all of us about Pedro gettin’ shot.”

“Yeah, he talked to me too. He even talked with Sandy at One Eyed Jack’s to make sure I was there for dinner like I said.”

“I told him I was just drivin’ around thinkin’. And you remember I got into that fight with Pedro cause he put salt in the sugar bowl for a joke?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, the sheriff told me I’m a suspect. I can’t account for where I was, and there had been the fight between me and Pedro. He told me not to leave town.”

“Sheriff Johnston is a pretty good guy, and you were out there driving around weren’t you? I thought I saw your truck at the rest area, so maybe someone else saw you walking into the john or something.”

He was silent for a few moments and then gave me a look of pure, abject misery.

“You hanker after men don’t ya, Jeff?” I nodded. I had no idea why he changed the subject, but he kept hemming and hawing and saying things like “Well, uh....” Given his previous behavior, I was pretty sure we played on the same team, and now I was just about positive. I kept silent, however, to give him the chance to talk.

“I... I uh... I’m like you. I’m a fag!” The pain in his voice was sharp, and I knew he was admitting to something he really couldn’t face himself.

"Mike, there ain't nothing wrong with that. You're the way God made you. It's not the big deal you think it is if you're gay."

"I hate that word gay!" he spat out vehemently. "There's nothing gay about it. I want to be normal; I don't want to be like this. I don't wanna wear dresses, or listen to show tunes, or be an interior decorator. I don't wanna be Michael. I want to be just plain Mike. Not turn into some lonely old man in a dress."

"Mike, I'm gay and I think I'm just a normal guy. I don't wear dresses, or listen to show tunes, and don't know the first thing about interior decorating. You're just as normal as I am."

"Yeah, tell that to my old man."

"Your father has problems with you bein' gay?"

"Yeah, the fuckin' asshole! Piss on him!" The anger he was showing was almost a visible force. The words were not only angry, but had a painful quality as if they were ripping him apart. He took a few deep breaths and calmed down a bit. "Your dad was the only one I could talk to about it. I guess he figured out where the bear shit in the woods as far as I'm concerned and told me about you. You aren't gonna go ape shit on me are you?"

I could tell he was thinking of my reaction to his talking about my dad when the cattle were rustled. "No. I'm glad he was there for you. He was for me. He was a great man. He saw people for who they were, not what color, or religion, or ethnic group, or whatever."

"Yeah, maybe if he'd been my dad instead of the fuckwad I got, I wouldn't be just some dumb hick redneck."

"Buddy, I got the feeling there's a lot more to you than a dumb hick redneck. You're at least a good lookin' dumb hick redneck." I wasn't sure how he'd take my attempt at humor, but I did get a small smile. "Why you so down on your father, Mike?" He paused a minute or two and then began to speak as if he was being drowned in the deepest well of hopelessness and despair.

"Well, when I was about fifteen or so, I began to realize I'd much rather look at other guys than girls. I wanted to be normal, I mean straight, not like that. I thought, well, I'll tell my old man, and he'll know what to do. He'll know how to get me some help and make me right. I don't know if I told you my old man's a preacher. Real hellfire and brimstone, the wrath of God this, and God smites that. We lived in a small town in Nebraska, Broken Arrow, population about three thousand. I talked with my old man on a Tuesday. He asked me to pray with him and we did. I asked God to make me straight and so did my old man. Then on Wednesday prayer meeting, he asked the congregation to pray to deliver me from the sin and evil lifestyle of a homosexual."

Having grown up in a small town, I knew how fast gossip flies. Being gay in a small town, I know you have to learn to fight and stand up for yourself either verbally, physically, or both pretty quick.

"No, he didn't!" was the only response I could make.

"Yeah, the son of a bitch did!" The anger was coming back. There was so much bitterness and hatred in Mike's voice. "A few days after that, a bunch of boys stopped me on the way home from school; they beat me to a pulp, and took off my jeans and put a skirt on me. Then they held me down and put makeup all over my face. They just smeared it on, like I was some type of clown."

"Hell, Mike, I am so sorry you had to go through that. I hope your father backed you up." I put my hand on his shoulder. He seemed not to notice. His laugh was cold and the least funny thing I'd ever heard.

“Not at all. I got a whooping for being a sissy and not standing up for myself. Then on Sunday he asked the congregation to pray for me to deliver me from sin and evil and to make me a man, not a sissy. Even when I stood up for myself, I got beat for fightin’. He kept askin’ me if all the prayers were working and I was startin’ to hanker after women. Like a fool, I said no, and then he and a couple of the deacons of the church decided to beat the devil outta me, for my own good. Can you imagine an appointment at the church three times a week to get the shit beaten outta you?”

I was speechless with horror, but he didn’t really expect an answer. His voice changed to a flat monotone, which I knew he used to hide the abysmal misery he had endured.

“He’d ask every month or so if I had changed. After a year of beatings and public prayer requests, he just started ignoring me. He didn’t want to be seen in public with me, never talked to me, and just acted like I wasn’t there. He also punished my brother or sister for talking to me. By that time, I was pretty much an outcast. I was the town fag and didn’t have any friends. Then on my sixteenth birthday, he told me he had a surprise for me. He’d packed a small suitcase with some clothes and stuff, and gave me two hundred dollars and a one-way bus ticket to San Francisco. He told me my evil and sinful ways were not going to corrupt his family anymore. He said I was the devil’s son, not his. That was the last time I ever saw him or anyone else in my family. I’d never talked about it until I met your dad. Now I told you. Sandy knows too.”

“I am so, so, so sorry you had to go through that, Mike. I told you the other day, I’d like to be your friend and that was the truth. There are a lot of good folks out there who just see Mike, not a gay guy, or a straight guy, just Mike, Sandy for one.”

“Yeah,” he answered. “You know why you saw me at the rest area Friday night?”

Just before he said it, I saw it coming.

“I was there sticking my dick through a hole in the wall to get a blowjob. Hell Jeff, what a fuckin’ loser. No high school diploma, nothing to my name, a fag, and a pervert who has anonymous sex in public places. Maybe prison *is* where I belong. I sure as hell ain’t any good to anybody at all.”

“Mike, I’ll tell the sheriff that we stopped at the rest area so Robert could take a piss. We saw you there for the same reason. He’ll listen to that.”

“Yeah, but that was just a few minutes. What about the rest of the evening?”

“It’s a hell of a long way around on those forest service roads. If you were at the rest area, you didn’t have the time to get all the way to the back of the ranch.”

“Can’t hurt. Jeff, buddy, I am just about all talked out now. I need a drink.” He put his hand on top of mine as it rested on his shoulder. “Thanks.”

“No problem, bud. Let’s go get drunk.”

We entered One Eyed Jack’s and saw a large table off in the bar area filled with somber people. José and Josh were both there as well as Sandy and Maria. There was a bottle of Knob Creek on the table, and a couple of pitchers of beer. Mike and I sat down, and he introduced himself to Maria. She smiled a sad smile at him, one that didn’t quite reach her eyes, red from crying.

“Pedro told me about you. You guys got into a fight after he put salt in your coffee.”

“Somethin’ like that. He was a good guy. I should have more of a sense of humor.”

“Yeah, he told me you said that to him and said you were sorry.”

“Yeah....”

“He told me you were one of the best hands with a rope he ever saw.”



"I am so sorry, Maria."

"Thank you."

"Okay, now let's have a drink." Mike raised his glass and gave a toast. "To Pedro, may he rest easy and know that we will never forget him."

We all repeated, "To Pedro."

"Where's Wayne?" I asked.

"He said he had some stuff to do," Josh answered. "I think he's got a girl in Pateros or Wenatchee. He's not been around a lot lately."

"Why the secrecy then?" Sandy asked.

"Hell if I know, maybe she's married or something."

I pondered Josh's reply. Wayne had been around since I could remember. I really hoped that he did have someone in his life, and I hoped she wasn't married or otherwise attached.

"So Jeff, where's your partner?" Sandy looked at me quizzically. "I know he wasn't acquainted with Pedro, but you'd think he'd be here out of respect and to support you."

José and Maria had been talking, and with Sandy's question they turned to look at me. Both Josh and Mike were staring at me also.

"Uh... he's still sore from fallin' off that horse. Plus he had some proposal for work to get done. He's stuck on his laptop." My excuses for him sounded lame, even to myself. Mike said something under his breath, which sounded suspiciously like "Asshole," and Josh, sitting next to him, nodded. Mike slammed another shot. I thought it was his third.

"Jeff, I've known you since we were kids. He's not for you. Look at the way he treats your friends." Sandy definitely had some thoughts on the subject.

Before I could answer back, José added, "Yeah, he treats us like shit, like we're less than him."

Maria joined in saying, "Pedro didn't like him. He told me your friend treated him bad too. Pedro said you were his friend, but he didn't like him."

"I understand where you all are comin' from, and I appreciate the advice from friends. Maybe I could ask you to cut him some slack. He doesn't understand us, the things we do, how we act around each other, or how we joke around. I talked to him about tryin' to see the other side and laugh at himself a bit. I talked to him, now I'm talkin' to all of you." I looked around and then continued to speak.

"We're here to remember Pedro, not talk about Robert. So to Pedro," I said as I raised a glass of whiskey. Everyone answered and had a shot. I decided I was done for the evening. I saw Mike take another shot and noticed he had finished his first glass of beer. He was on his way to getting sloshed.

"I'm done drinking for the night. So Maria, did Pedro have any brothers or sisters? I know his folks are gone."

"No, Jeff, he was an only child." She started to get tears in her eyes and added, "I remember when I first met him. He was in the hospital for a compound fracture in his arm. They kept him overnight, and I was his nurse. He was so shy, but then he came back to the hospital. He said it was so I could sign his cast, but he asked me out."

"That's sweet," Sandy added.

“Maria has a few days off and is staying here with Sandy,” José commented, and Sandy nodded. “We’re gonna make some posole tomorrow in the bunkhouse kitchen. Wanna join us, boss?”

“Hell yes! You know good Mexican food is my favorite.”

“Posole was Pedro’s favorite too.” Maria sobbed.

We began to tell stories about Pedro, his life and escapades. The evening went on and as it did, Mike got pretty drunk. Knowing Robert was home and feeling a bit guilty about leaving him for so long, I volunteered to take Mike home. He was unsteady on his feet, so I put my arm around his back to support him. He threw an arm over my shoulders and leaned against me as we walked. As we got to the door of One Eyed Jack’s, he began to sing. I was surprised on two accounts: first, he had a nice voice, a rich tenor. Second, the song he was singing was a pretty raunchy cowboy song called “The Old Jism Trail” sung to the tune of “The Old Chisholm Trail.”

Ass in the saddle  
And hand on the horn  
I’m the best fuckin’ cowboy  
Ever was born.  
Whopee tie yai yippie  
Tie yai yay  
Whopee tie yai yippie ai ay!  
I’m sick of pullin’ my peter  
On the old jism trail  
So I’m goin’ to Kansas City  
To get a piece of tail.  
Whopee tie yai yippie  
Tie yai yay  
Whopee tie yai yippie ai ay!

I joined in on the chorus, my deeper voice joining Mike’s.

“We sing pretty good together don’t we, Jeff?”

“You bet. Now let’s get you home.” We’d arrived at my truck, and I helped Mike in. He was pretty far gone, and I had to fasten his seatbelt for him.

“Jeff?” He was starting to slur his words. “Sandy’s right! Why are you with that son of a bitch anyway? You could do better. You’re good lookin’ from what I seen the other day; you got a great body and are hung like a horse. And you’re really smart and a nice guy. So what’s up with him?”

“Let’s not talk about my difficulties okay? And by the way, thanks for the compliments, Mike; you’re gonna make me blush.”

“Ssss true.” Mike slid down and either passed out or fell asleep with his head on my shoulder. He started snoring softly as we drove toward the ranch. When we got there, Wayne’s trailer was dark and so was the bunkhouse as the guys were all in Winslett.

I was gonna carry Mike in there and start the wood stove so he’d be warm, but figured what the hell, and carried him to the ranch house. I took him to a guest bedroom on the first floor. I pulled back the covers and lay him on the bed. He was out, so I pulled off his boots and socks. I reckoned I’d better make him comfortable. I unbuttoned and took off his shirt, and then unbuckled his belt, and unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them off. I folded his clothes and put them on a chair near the door to the bedroom. He lay there, his red long handles unbuttoned to

below his chest, showing a forest of red gold fur. I could see his cock down his left leg, and it was half hard. It was pretty impressive in size too. I sighed, and pulled up the covers so he wouldn't get cold. Then just because it seemed the thing to do, I kissed him on the cheek. I walked softly out of the room and closed the door, then headed upstairs.

I walked into the spare room where Robert was staying. "Hey, Robert, did you finish your proposal?"

"Yeah, I did. I think it will go down really well."

"Great, and how are you feelin'? Still sore?"

"I'm much better thank you, Jeffrey. So are you just about ready to pack up here and come back to the city with me?"

"Robert, I've got stuff to do here. I can't just leave the ranch with no direction."

"What is more important to you? The ranch or me?"

"I don't want to get into this now. That's really not a fair question. I have some responsibilities here. You knew when we started going out, I'm a cowboy. Hell, we even met at a rodeo; you seemed okay with me then and liked havin' me park my boots under your bed. Now let's shelve this discussion."

He looked at me with a guarded expression. "Well, I was hoping you would change and I could civilize you. But anyway, we will talk about this later. So what took so long?"

"We stopped at Winslett and had a couple of drinks in Pedro's honor. Mike got a bit toasty, and I brought him home."

Robert's face darkened. "That blond guy with the red beard? I see the way he looks at you. Are you having an affair with him?"

"Hell no!" I was starting to get angry. "Just what in the hell crawled up your ass and died? The last few months you've been nagging me constantly. Lately you've been really condescending and just plain mean."

"I am getting sick and tired of having to correct your grammar, and tired of encouraging you to take advantage of your education. One would think you want to be a stupid hayseed for the rest of your life and hang around with trash like what I've seen here rather than with civilized people."

"Get the fuck off'n your high horse! This is where I come from. These are my people. Maybe we can be a bit rough around the edges, but we are sure as hell a lot more genuine than your plastic, so-called friends in San Francisco. Stop tryin' to change me!" I shouted out the last phrase, furious now.

"Jeffrey, let's not argue. I just hope you see I am trying to change you for your own benefit."

"I don't understand, Robert. When we first met, you told me the way I talk was 'cute'. You also liked goin' to watch me in the rodeo. Now it seems like you've done a complete about-face. What happened?"

"Your roughness was nice at first, a turn-on. But it grates on one's nerves quickly."

"In other words, you had a cowboy fantasy and found out it just ain't the same in real life. I am goin' in the other room, and I am gonna get some sleep. I don't want to deal with you anymore tonight. I'm me, Robert. And I sure as hell ain't gonna change because you have a different fantasy than the one that started us off. Now good night!" I stomped out and went back to my room. I undressed quickly and got under the covers. Sleep didn't come very quickly though. My thoughts kept going in a circle. I would remember undressing Mike, seeing him in just his long handles and putting him to bed. Then I would think about the long johns I had on, and how Robert used to think they were hot. Then I thought of Mike, and us singing on the streets

of Winslett. Then about Robert and one evening when we went out to the Rawhide II, danced all night, and made love in the back of my truck in front of his condo. The way he used to laugh at what he called my “ranch accent.” My thoughts continued circling, and I finally fell into a restless sleep.

DAWN seemed to come pretty early. Light was streaming through the skylight into my room. I knew I wasn’t gonna get back to sleep, so I pulled on my clothes. I headed downstairs to the kitchen to make some coffee. When I got there, Mike was already up. Coffee was boiling away in the old battered blue and white enamel pot I liked so much. His shirt was open, showing off his partially buttoned long handles and furry chest. He had big circles under his eyes and that sallow, pasty, kind of green look that says hangover.

“Mornin’, bud, how’d ya sleep?”

“Like a rock. Don’t seem to have gotten too much rest though, and my head feels like it’s about to explode.”

“Yeah, well, buddy, you were poundin’ the whiskey pretty hard.”

“It was a tough day for me yesterday. I was just gettin’ to be friends with Pedro. Then I was at his funeral. Sheriff reckons I did it. Tellin’ you all about my hell of a time growin’ up wasn’t easy. I needed the whiskey.”

“I bet you needed someone to talk to also. I hope my listenin’ helped.”

“You know, it did, thanks.”

He looked at me searchingly, and then his eyes drifted down my chest. I had my shirt on, but it was unbuttoned and my long johns were tight enough to show the cut in my chest. The top couple of buttons on my underwear were unbuttoned, but nowhere near as far as his. He looked up at me and turned a bit red. He gave a half smile and turned to the coffee pot, which he took off the heat.

“Coffee’s on.”

“Thanks. If you’ll let me get some coffee, I’ll rustle up some breakfast for us.”

“You don’t have to. I can get some cereal in the bunkhouse.”

“Mike, I don’t cook all that bad. You’re gonna make me feel real inhospitable if you don’t let me fix us something.”

“Well... if that’s the case, I can’t have you feelin’ bad can I?”

“I hope I didn’t interrupt this cozy little hee haw moment.” Robert was standing in the kitchen door.

“Nothin’ to interrupt, Robert. You remember Mike.” Robert moved forward and held his hand out to Mike who grasped it. I could tell Robert was trying to crush Mike’s hand, and not getting anywhere. In fact he looked like he was hurtin’ a lot more than Mike.”

“We’ve already met if you remember,” Robert said sourly.

“Coffee, Robert?” I asked as the handshake contest finished. Robert was trying to rub his hand. He definitely did come out on the worse end.

“Sure, you know how I love cowboy coffee.” I did a double take, but poured him a cup along with one for Mike, then myself.

"Ya like cowboy coffee do ya, Robert? I'm glad to hear it. Seems a lot of guys from the city can't drink good, honest, strong coffee. They need their Starbucks." Mike was smiling at Robert, who was adding spoon after spoon of sugar and half the carton of cream to his coffee.

"Yes. It's one of the things Jeffrey has introduced me to." My mouth was hanging open with surprise. Maybe Robert had thought about what I said last night.

"That's just spiffy," Mike continued. "So maybe we can go ridin' later this afternoon. To be honest with ya, Robert, I ain't got a whole hell of a lot of friends here, and Jeff's one. I sure could be friends with a guy like you too. A guy who rides real well, likes cowboy coffee, hell I wonder just what other fascinatin' things there are to get to know about ya." Robert hemmed and hawed on this; I knew the last thing he wanted to get near right now was a horse. He knew Mike was making fun of him, but he wasn't really sure how. He did come up with a snide comment pretty quick though. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why I was gettin' on his nerves so bad.

"So Mike, I have a question for you. Do all cowboys like to run around half-dressed or in their underwear, or is it just Jeffrey?"

At this, Mike slouched back in his chair. His legs were spread wide apart, long, lean and gangly. He put his hands behind his head as he leaned back, causing his half unbuttoned shirt to fall open and expose his chest and long johns.

"I think it's not so much cowboys as men, Robert. Whaddya think, Jeff?"

"Hell if I know."

"Most men just ain't too modest." Robert who was dressed in chinos, deck shoes, and an oxford shirt got the implied criticism. It looked like world war three was gonna start any minute. He glared at Mike who stared back insolently.

"Chicken fried steak, eggs, and potatoes okay for breakfast?" I asked, trying to get rid of some of the tension. Robert was getting all huffy and prissy, and the testosterone rolling off Mike was thick enough to cut with a knife.

"Sounds great to me, Jeff. You like cowboy food, Robert?"

"I love it. Jeffrey is a very competent cook."

"That's fantastic then! If it's okay with you, Jeff, I'll make some real cowboy food for us. I make a mean son of a bitch stew."

"Um...", I began, but before I could warn Robert away he answered.

"That sounds lovely, Michael."

"Mike," was the laconic answer.

By this time, I had the potatoes in the skillet. I didn't even bother to peel them. I started breading the steaks, and heated some grease for frying them and the eggs. Robert and Mike continued to try to insult each other without really seeming to. Breakfast continued in this vein, interrupted by both of them praising the meal repeatedly. I was shocked as hell when Robert offered to clean up and waived off Mike when he asked to help.

"Well, I am gonna head off to the bunkhouse then. Maria and Sandy are supposed to come over, and José, Josh and me are makin' a big pot of posole for dinner. You guys are comin' aren't ya?"

"I certainly wouldn't miss it for the world," Robert replied.

"Great, maybe I'll make the son of a bitch stew tonight, too, then since you'll be our special guest."

"I can't wait to try it."

"See ya later then." Mike grabbed his boots, put them on, and headed out the door.

"Jeffrey, just what do you see in that cretin? I feel like I was doing anthropological research."

"He's a friend, Robert, nothing more."

"I see the way the two of you look at each other. He may be a friend now, but it's very obvious that you both want to fuck each other."

"Enough of the jealousy. Robert, I'm just trying to figure out what's happened with us. We used to have fun times. We used to enjoy hangin' together. But now it seems that you look down on me and everything about me."

"Jeffrey, at first it was cute, you being a cowboy, your 'aw shucks' way of talking, an occasional dinner of that lard-heavy chicken fried steak with country music, rodeos, and going two-stepping. But rather than just enjoy it occasionally, you make it a lifestyle. Can't you see just how great it would be for the two of us if you could let that go? Let this go?" He gestured around, indicating the house and ranch. "Oh we can go out to the Rawhide II to go country dancing occasionally, or watch the gay rodeo when it comes to the Bay Area. You know I really like it when you fuck me all dressed up as a cowboy, but everyday gets very tiring."

"Robert, that's me though. You're asking me to become someone else. I wouldn't be happy bein' different. I talk the way I do because that's how I learned. I dress the way I do because it's comfortable and practical. I like country music. I like chicken fried steak, and chili, and beef, and biscuits. I like this place, and feel real comfortable here. Can't you see, tryin' to change me is gonna make me miserable?"

He stood up. At first I thought he was going to come over to me and hug me. But he headed off to the office where he'd left his laptop. "I need to do some work before this cowboy fete later. I suppose I should take a couple of Zantac so the grease we're bound to have won't upset my digestive system."

"Might be a good idea."

"Think on what I said, Jeffrey; we could be very happy and good together. And being civilized never hurt anyone."

"Whatever. I'm goin' out to my studio in the shed and design a couple of sculptures." The silence between us was profound as I went to get my shirt, got my boots on, and headed out the door. I could hear the keys on Robert's laptop as he typed.

I had started working on a new model for a sculpture a few days ago. As I molded the plasticine model on which to make the mold, I lost all track of time. Before I knew it, it was already afternoon and time to go join the party in the bunkhouse. I put things away in my studio and headed into the house; Robert had already anticipated me and was dressed in another flashy cowboy shirt and pressed jeans.

"Ready?"

"Just let me wash up. I was out working on a sculpture." He didn't say anything, but his sigh let me know he didn't approve. I quickly washed my face and hands, and we headed out and across the yard to the bunkhouse. The door to the common area was open, and I could hear voices. José had returned with Sandy and Maria.

"Hey, boss! Beer for you?" José thrust a Dos Equis at me and turned to Robert. "What about you, Roberto, a beer?"

"I'm not really fond of beer, do you have anything else?"

José looked kind of startled as if to say how could anyone not like beer, but then said, "The ladies are drinking lemonade with tequila. You like one of those, Roberto?" Mike snickered from the corner at the implication José was making, but Robert didn't catch it.

"That sounds lovely." Robert seemed to be happy that the cowboys were being friendly to him. He was missing the undercurrent though. I'd have to keep my eyes open.

"Hey, Jeff, hey there, Robert, buddy!" Mike sauntered over and clapped Robert on the back. "I'm glad you came. I made the son of a bitch stew I told you about. It's real cowboy chow. I hope you like it. Hey, I got an idea; let's do shots of tequila!" Josh immediately appeared with a bottle, several shot glasses, a bowl with cut up limes, and a salt shaker.

"Hey there, Robert! Nice shirt." Josh was now bein' really friendly to Robert, and the girls snickered. Something was goin' down and at Robert's expense, but for the life of me I couldn't see what it was now. The common room to the bunkhouse was plainly furnished, but it had obviously been cleaned. I could smell the chile and hominy in the posole, and the meaty smell of Mike's stew. "I Got Friends in Low Places" by Garth Brooks was playing on the radio. I took the shot of tequila that was being offered and the lime. I put a little salt on my hand and passed the shaker to Robert who imitated me.

"To friends!" Sandy made the toast. We all answered, "To friends." I winced as the caramel taste of the tequila hit followed by the sour astringency of the lime and then the clean taste of the salt. Josh was refilling my shot glass, and he and I did another shot. Mike came over and draped his arm around Robert's shoulder.

"So good buddy, you don't mind spicy food, do ya?"

"No. I don't care for it as spicy as Jeffrey likes it, but I do enjoy piquant food."

"We didn't figure you was a wimp, but we did tone it down for the ladies. Hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not!"

José approached me with another shot. I took it and we said in unison, "Salud."

"Well, everyone, time to eat! Boys, each of you is gonna have two bowls since the stew is more of a guys' dish." Josh and José began setting out bowls of posole, tortillas, hot sauce, limes, and chopped onion. Mike was serving bowls of his stew. I noticed Josh spend a little time over one bowl, which he gave to Robert.

"Just gettin' you some good lean meat in the posole, buddy!" he said to explain what was happening.

"Robert, try my stew and tell me what you think. It did turn out good if I have to say so myself." Mike dipped into his own stew, and I followed. The meaty taste of son of a bitch stew was tempered a bit by a liberal amount of red chile. I had a piece of the heart and some liver in my stew. It was fork tender from long cooking. There were potatoes in the mixture, too, cooked to buttery softness.

"Mike, this is really good."

"I told ya, Jeff, I make a mean son of a bitch stew. Let's have another shot!"

Mike poured for me. It occurred to me that they were trying to get me drunk. I didn't protest too much, given just what a bitch the last few weeks had been.

"What's in son of a bitch stew Mike?" I noticed that Robert had finished most of his bowl. "I like it."

"Well, buddy, it's a real cowboy dish. Waddies on the range used to make it around calvin' time. You know 'waddie' is just another word for cowboy, don't ya?" Robert nodded.

"You take a fresh killed calf and put in the liver, heart, marrow gut, tripe, kidneys, and some meat, lots of onion and garlic and red chile and cook it all day. I put the balls in too. It's my secret

ingredient.” I heard Josh and José snicker as Robert turned green and pushed the bowl away. He drank a bit of his lemonade and pulled the bowl of posole toward himself.

“So what is posole then?”

“It’s a soup made with pork, hominy, and red chile. I use country style pork spare ribs,” José explained to Robert. “Like Mike said, we did leave out some of the chile for the ladies. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Robert took a spoonful of the broth.

I looked around the kitchen. On the counter where Josh had fixed the bowls was a bottle of hot sauce called Da Bomb. It was a sauce fortified with the chemical which makes chile pepper hot. Robert was turning a shade of red-purple. I could see sweat breaking out on his brow.

José had a very concerned look on his face. “It’s not too hot is it? We made it mild for the ladies.” At this both Maria and Sandy had a spoonful.

“Uh... no, uh... may I have some water, please?” Josh jumped up and got Robert a glass of water.

“Robert, you don’t have to eat it if it’s too hot.”

“Nonsense, Jeffrey!” He took another bite and continued to look tortured. I could see this was gonna be an interesting night, so I asked for another shot. Sandy and Maria did a shot with me. I leaned over and whispered in Robert’s ear.

“They’re funnin’ with ya again. Just keep bein’ friendly back; pretty soon, you’ll all be laughin’ together.”

“Don’t worry, Jeffrey, they’re not gonna get the best of me.”

“Don’t get in a pissin’ contest with ’em, okay?” He ignored me.

By the time we were done eating, I was drunk. I’m a happy drunk, so I ended up singing with Mike, although nothing so raunchy as “The Old Jism Trail.” We sang “Ten Rounds with Jose Cuervo” and “Jose Cuervo (You Are a Friend of Mine).” Robert got this pained look on his face and asked where the bathroom was. Josh directed him, and as soon as he was out of earshot, everyone started laughing. He came back and made his excuses and started to head back up to the house. I got up to follow him, but by this time was pretty unsteady on my feet. Mike jumped up to help me.

“Okay, Jeff, my turn to help you out like you helped me when I was drunk last night.” He pulled my arm over his shoulders and put his arm around my waist.

“Ya know, Mike.” I was slurring my words pretty heavily by this time. “You got a really cute ass. If I was single, I’d be all over it like white on rice. Oh-oh...” Robert had come back for me and was glaring at me. He grabbed my other arm and began almost carrying me to the house.

“Well, buddy, ya ain’t single.” Mike was now glaring at Robert.

“Don’t he got a cute ass, Robert? Oh, I forgot, you just take it, you don’t give. Sorry!” They carried me up to my room. Mike tugged my boots off, and Robert unbuttoned my shirt. About that time I passed out, so I had no idea just who took off my pants.

## Chapter Four



MY HEADACHE woke me up the next morning. My mouth was dry as hell, and it seemed my tongue was glued in place. My teeth felt like they were coated with pond scum. Robert was making a huge racket, and it only made my head throb more. I dragged myself to the bathroom and had several glasses of water.

“For God’s sake, Jeffrey, put some clothes on. The way you run around in your underwear, you’d think you were some type of an exhibitionist or something.”

“Mornin’ to you too,” I said thickly. That much water so fast was making me a bit queasy. I looked in the mirror above the sink. I looked like hell—circles under my eyes, and a hang dog expression on my face.

“Do you remember last night?”

“Bits and pieces, why?”

“I suppose you don’t remember telling that blond cowboy that he has a cute ass.”

I reddened a bit. I didn’t remember, but I ain’t exactly shy, and Mike has an adorable little ass, so I probably did. “Well, he does. You even said it yourself. No harm done, I don’t think. If he’s pissed, I’ll apologize.”

“Don’t bother apologizing to that little cock teasing bastard! About the tenth time I ran to the john last night, I realized they must have spiked my food with something! That’s why they were being so friendly.”

“Remember when I told you not to eat it if it was too hot for you? I saw a bottle of super hot sauce on the counter and figured they might’a put some in your posole. That’s why I also told you they were funnin’ with you. Worse thing you can do with ’em is tryin’ to BS your way through. They’ll respect you if you do say it’s too hot.” Robert glared at me, as I reached into the cabinet in my bathroom and got some aspirin.

“They were all in on it, weren’t they? Even the women! And they were making fun of me all night. You told me, and I finally realized that when I thought about some of their comments, ‘the ladies are drinking lemonade do you want some? We cut the spice down for the ladies. Is that okay with you?’ Bastards! How can you deal with trash like that? Oh, yes, I forgot, you like garbage. You like it enough to lust after that blond cretin’s ass.”

“Robert, I’m sorry if I caused ya any upset. I’m not in the mood to argue right now.”

“That fucking blond guy couldn’t keep his eyes off you when we had to carry you to bed and undress you last night. All he is, is a tease. I told him he was welcome to stay with me, and he told me ‘Nope, you’re in a relationship with a guy I respect’.”

“You came on to Mike last night?”

“You haven’t been sleeping with me.”

“Well, Robert, with the constant put downs you throw my way, and that holier than thou attitude, you sure as hell ain’t been very attractive lately.” I could feel my temper rising, and I didn’t care. “You say you want me to come back to San Francisco with you, but all you do is put me, my life, my friends, and what I like to do down. I am fucking sick and tired of it.”

“As I have repeatedly said, Jeffrey, I am trying to change you for your own good.”

“No, you’re not! You’re tryin’ to change me since you realized that your cowboy fantasy is great when you want a roll in the hay. To have a real cowboy park his boots under your bed is a threat to you. You told me about when you were just a little guy bein’ teased about bein’ a sissy. Well, I got teased too. And I beat the crap out of the motherfucker that did it. That threatens you. Any display of masculinity that’s not fake scares you. And Robert, I am sick and fucking tired of your shit. If you really loved me, if you ever loved me, you would accept me for who I am. All I

was to you was a cowboy fantasy. You need to get the hell outta here and get back to San Francisco. 'Cause I sure as hell don't want you anymore. This is where I belong, and this is where I'm stayin'."

"I can't believe you'd stay here in the middle of nowhere with all these hicks rather than be with me!"

"Robert, I'm a hick too. Just like them. And I'm damn proud of it. Now git! Pack your stuff and leave."

"What about your things?"

"I don't reckon I've got a whole hell of a lot of stuff there. Just box it all up, and I'll send you some money to send it to me."

"So this is it? You're not even going to try to make our relationship work?"

"You think that I haven't tried to make it work between us?"

He looked down. "I don't know, maybe."

"Believe me, Robert, I have tried. For us to work out, we'd have to meet in the middle. You don't seem to be willin' to do that, and to be really frank, I'm not sure if I want to. Can't you see that unless both of us change significantly, we ain't ever gonna be happy together? Look how angry and upset you've been since you got here. You're not happy here. I understand that. Robert, don't you know I'm not happy in San Francisco? I thought it would be great, bein' a gay man there and bein' with you, but I belong here. Yep, this is the end. Just be careful what you wish for next time 'cause when you get it, you just might find out it's not what you really wanted."

"Spare me the cowboy philosophy poetry."

"Goodbye, Robert."

He looked back at me. "You know, Jeff, I guess you're right. We just aren't right for each other. Maybe someday we can be in touch without hurting one another. Goodbye, Jeffrey."

"Goodbye Robert; please take good care."

"You too, Jeffrey; I'm sorry we both want different things."

"Me too, Robert."

I turned and walked into my room and closed the door. I listened for a few minutes as he got his stuff together and headed out. I could hear the car door slam, and then the engine start, rev, and get quieter as the distance increased. When I couldn't hear the car anymore, I became aware of clapping from downstairs. I grabbed a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, and put on a pair of socks, and headed down. Sandy and Maria were at the kitchen table. A pot of coffee was on the stove, and Mike, José, Josh, and Wayne all stood there grinnin' at me. Sandy and Maria both looked happy as hell. I couldn't help but smilin' a bit myself.

"I reckon y'all heard that?" A chorus of yeses answered me.

"Jeff, I am so glad you got rid of him." Sandy jumped up and gave me a big hug.

"Yeah boss, you deserve lots better. He was always nagging on you. He is an idiot." José clapped me on the shoulder.

"Thanks. Just remember, he's hurtin', too, okay? Right now I really need some coffee." Maria jumped up and grabbed a mug and poured a cup.

"Cream or sugar?"

"Just black, thanks, Maria, I appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I think both of you will be happier now."

"You happy, Jeff?" Wayne was lookin' at me all serious-like now.

"I reckon I will be when I feel a bit better. I had way too much to drink last night."

"Well, as long as you're happy." He gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder. "It's time we got a move on. Josh, why don't you take the ladies home? Mike and me are gonna ride up to where the cattle was rustled. If there are any cattle around that area, we'll herd them away from there. José, you want to make sure the cattle pens are in good shape? It'll be roundup time in a few weeks."

"What ya got for me to do, Wayne?"

"You just get over your hangover and work on your art. Your dad told me how good you were, and I aim to see. So you get out there and make somethin' pretty."

"Sure thing, Wayne, and thanks; I do gotta go into town in a bit. I saw Mike on Saturday and need to tell Sheriff Johnston." Wayne stared at me, and then clapped Mike on the back.

"Lucky break for you boy, that's great!"

"After you talk to Dad, if he doesn't throw you in jail, come by and I'll have a burger and a beer for ya at One Eyed Jack's."

"That makes me remember when we were kids. You always used to say, 'my dad is Sheriff Johnston, and he's gonna throw you in jail if you don't stop it'. Are you workin' tonight?"

"Nope, Maria and I are celebratin' with you that you're single, and Mike's free."

"That's right, Jeff. And Mike, I am happy you are in the clear; I knew you wouldn't hurt Pedro." Maria gave Mike a hug, and he turned beet red. She and Sandy filed out, followed by José, Josh, and Wayne. As Mike turned toward the door, I said, "Mike, buddy, a word?"

"Sure, Jeff, what's up?"

"If I was outta line last night, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get ya upset or anything."

"You mean when you told me I have a cute ass?" Mike grinned at me.

"Yeah, that's what I mean."

"Well, buddy, the way you run around in your underwear, I kinda noticed your ass is cute, too, so I guess we're even."

"I hope Robert didn't do anything to get ya mad either."

"Jeff, he's a sorry piece of shit. He came on to me after we got ya off to bed. Said he loves to get fucked by cowboys, and since you were out for the count, he asked me to fuck him."

"I'm sorry, Mike."

"Ain't your fault. I told him I wouldn't fuck him with a pole from ten feet away. Told him you deserved better. He said that you came on to me, and I answered I reckon there's a difference between admirin' someone's ass versus askin' for it. He called me a fuckin' cock tease and stomped out. I know what the two of ya went through this mornin' was difficult, so that's the last thing I'm gonna say about him." I didn't really know what to say, so I didn't answer. We stood there lookin' at one another. Suddenly the air seemed thick, and I couldn't think of a word to say. We started movin' toward one another.

"Come on, Mike, I want to get a move on." Wayne was calling from the porch.

"You take good care out there, buddy."

"Thanks, Jeff. I gotta go." He gave me a longing stare and then turned and walked out the door.

After taking a shower and having some more coffee, I got in my truck and headed into town. The aspirin from earlier had kicked in, and I was starting to feel more or less better. I knew it would be a day or so until I felt completely back to normal. I drove into Winslett and found a

parking place right in front of the sheriff's office. I walked across the wooden sidewalk and up the stairs to the door. It was warm inside, and I could smell coffee. The bright florescent lights made me remember my headache. Sheriff Johnston heard the door and stuck his head outta the back office.

"Howdy, Jeff, no news yet on your missing cattle."

"Actually, I got some news that might help you."

"In that case, grab a cup of coffee and come on back." I went over to the counter behind the desk where the coffee maker stood. There were several mugs; I grabbed one and filled it up and went back to the sheriff's office.

"Sandy tells me you got rid of your outta town guest."

"Yep, I don't reckon he'll be back either."

"She's pretty happy about that. I can't say what I heard about your friend was too good."

"That's water under the bridge now, sir."

"Sandy's not getting in your hair hangin' around the ranch is she?"

"No, sir. She's a good friend and welcome anytime. So are you and Mrs. Johnston."

"Thanks, Jeff, now what ya got for me."

"Well, when we were comin' back from town the night that Pedro was shot, we had to stop by the rest area west of here. Robert needed to go. I saw Mike and his truck at the rest area. He said he was out drivin' around and stopped."

"You sure it was Mike and his truck?"

"Yes, sir. I noticed that the driver door was primer only, no paint. And when we pulled out, I saw his 'Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy' bumper sticker."

"Thanks son, I'm glad to hear it. I didn't want to see him brought up on charges. Both Sandy and Maria would've had me by the balls for that." He chuckled and then got serious.

"Jeff, son, how old are you now?"

"I'm twenty-eight now, sir."

"That's right, you were in school with Sandy, how could I forget? You know your dad and I were best friends don't you, son?"

"Yes, sir. I remember goin' huntin' and fishin' with you two when I was just a little guy."

"Well then, since your dad ain't around no more, I just wanted to tell you be careful about living in the city. It's like a cage there. You can cage a wolf, but it eventually dies from missing the wilderness. You belong here, son; people looked up to your dad, and they'll look up to you too."

"Even given who, what I am?"

"I can't pretend to understand it, but both your dad and Sandy gave me enough reading material on it that I know it's the way you are, not a choice. And hell, son, it don't matter to me. You've always been like a brother to Sandy. You know, Jeff, you got a lot of friends around here."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't mention it. I appreciate your coming in to town to tell me about Mike. Son, this is your home. You'll miss it if you leave again."

"I'm here for good, sir. I missed it already when I was gone. I guess I had to come back, though, to realize how much."

"I'll tell you what, why don't you come over next Sunday for dinner. Sally makes a great roast, and we'd all love to see you and catch up."

"Sure thing, Sheriff, sounds great!"

"Why don't you bring your friend Mike too? Sandy says he's a good guy and gets left behind when the guys go into Wenatchee for weekends."

"I'll ask him, sir."

"Great! We'll see you about noon then. Now get over to the saloon before the girls think I jailed you."

"Thanks, sir, I really appreciate you listening and talking to me."

"Anytime, son, anytime."

I walked down the street to One Eyed Jack's, and a group of five tourists walked by. The two women and two of the men with them were couples. They were older, obviously retired. The other guy was a bit younger, say maybe ten years. The two women and the single guy all checked me out. I tipped my hat as I passed and said, "Afternoon folks." I got a chorus of "good afternoons" in return. As I was about to turn into the saloon, the single guy in the group looked back; I couldn't help myself, I winked at him. He was so surprised, he stumbled over one of the boards in the wooden sidewalk.

I stepped into the bar. It was dark inside, and the wood stove was going in the corner; I could smell beer, grease, and wood smoke. I saw Sandy and Maria in a booth on the restaurant side of the room toward the back. I walked over and sat next to Sandy.

"So you talked to the sheriff, Jeff?" Maria asked.

"Yep, so I reckon Mike's off the hook."

"Great! Like I said, your burger and beer are on me. I don't think the menu's changed since we were in high school. What'll you have?"

"You said you weren't workin', Sandy."

"I'm not, but I don't mind puttin' in your orders and getting you two something to drink."

"Ladies first," I said and smiled at Maria.

"I'll have the chicken strips and fries and a Diet Coke."

"How about a bacon cheeseburger for me, extra mayo, and fries, and a Mac & Jacks to drink."

"You got it," she said and headed to the kitchen.

"So what are you gonna do now, Maria?"

"I got the rest of the week off, and I'm staying with Sandy and her family. They said I could stay as long as I want. I'll head back to Wenatchee and work Sunday night. I hope you don't mind my coming out to the ranch. I can see why Pedro loved it, and it makes me happy to know he was happy there."

"You're welcome anytime. I got plenty of room, so if you, or you and Sandy, want to stay that's fine."

"Thanks, Jeff, I just might take you up on that."

"Please do, anytime." She smiled at me, and then Sandy arrived with my beer, one for her, and a Coke for Maria.

"Cheers!" I held out my mug. We clinked glasses.

As I took a sip of beer, Sandy asked, "So you stickin' around, Jeff?"

"Yep, this is my home. If I can make a go of it after the incident last week, I sure will."

“Don’t worry, Jeff. Dad will catch the murdering bastard.”

“I reckon that there has to be more than one murdering bastard.”

“Why’s that?”

“Tracks around the area where the cattle were rustled, and two different types of trailer tires.”

“You gonna keep on runnin’ cattle, or are you gonna do something else too?”

“Like what else, Sandy? I sure as hell don’t want to be an accountant.”

“No, I mean your art.”

“Yeah, I am gonna keep doin’ that. I need to talk to Mary Grace in the artists’ cooperative here in town. I got a couple of sculptures, and maybe they will exhibit them for me.”

Mary Grace was one of the first people from the outside to move into town. She first came to teach at the high school. She was my French and art teacher. She’d known about my interest in bronze castin’ since I was a kid. Now she ran the artists’ co-op in Winslett.

“Hey, Jeff?” Maria’s voice had a very tentative tone. “You ever think of maybe guiding hunters or fishermen or just tourists? I mean, everyone knows that Winslett survives by tourists. Look at all the old West buildings and decoration here. Maybe you could open a dude ranch. Pedro and I were going to go to one in Texas for our honeymoon.” She got a very sad look on her face. I reached over and patted her hand.

“Maria, I don’t know the first thing about herdin’ dudes. I wouldn’t even know where to advertise, and besides, we’d have to build cabins or something for them to stay in. That costs money, which I don’t have right now.” I used the word “dudes” in the cowboy sense. I used it to mean greenhorns or non-cowboy folk.

“You never know, you might be able to get a small business loan with all that government stimulus money going around now,” Maria stated.

“Yeah, Jeff, I’ll help you research it!” Sandy had bought into the idea, which meant it was time to change the subject.

“I hear Robert came on to Mike last night.”

“Yeah, when we came in the house to go to bed, we could hear them arguing upstairs. Robert was really yelling at Mike, first, about being a tease, then about being after you.” Sandy was never one to mince words.

“I told Mike this morning I was sorry for what happened.”

“Yeah, you did tell him he’s got a cute ass. I will say, Jeff, you do have good taste.”

“What! He told you that?”

Sandy laughed and Maria joined in. “He didn’t say a word. You said it pretty loud.”

“Okay, well, Sandy, you know I was drunk.”

“I am happy for you that you and Robert realized that you were not meant to be together.” Apparently Maria was learning plain speaking from Sandy.

“Jeff, do you run around in just your underwear as much as we hear?” Sandy was enjoying teasing me.

“It’s a guy thing, Sandy.”

“Don’t I know it; my brothers were the same way when they lived at home. I bet Mike likes it when you do it.”

“What makes you say that?” Now this was getting a bit interesting.

"Come on, Jeff, anyone can see the way he stares at you with those big cow eyes." At Sandy's observation Maria started laughing.

"And the way he jumped to defend you when your boyfriend was putting you down. Pedro always thought you two would be good friends."

"Mike's a nice guy; I enjoy his company. And I enjoy yours, Sandy and Maria."

"I think Mike has something we just can't give ya, Jeff." At Sandy's words they both started laughing.

"Give it a rest, ladies! I just broke up with my boyfriend this morning. You think it would be fair to Mike or anyone else to start sniffin' after him now?"

"You do got a point there, Jeff. We just want to see you happy."

"That's right, Jeff!" Maria added.

"Well, I'll be happy when whoever's been rustlin' cattle has been caught, and we have the beeves sold off for the year."

"Jeff, let me get you another beer."

"Thanks, Sandy."

"So are you going to continue with your sculpture?" Maria asked.

"I was thinkin' that maybe they would exhibit some of my work in the artists' coop here in town. God knows we get enough tourists through here."

"Yeah, Pedro said you had real talent. I think so, too, after seeing the bull rider sculpture you gave your dad."

Just then Sandy returned with the beer.

"Hey, Sandy, Maria, you know if Wayne has a girl in Wenatchee?"

"We figured he must, given he disappears on his days off." Sandy looked at me then glanced at Maria.

"Pedro and I both thought so too. Why do you ask, Jeff?"

"I just figure Wayne deserves a little happiness. I can't imagine anyone not bein' real happy for him, so why the secrecy?"

"And they say we women are complicated right, Maria?"

"It's cover, Sandy, just cover."

"Anyway, it ain't none of my business what Wayne does on his time off. Hey, Sandy, I'd mentioned to Maria that you two are welcome up at the ranch anytime. Maybe we can all get together for another dinner or something. Having the posole in the bunkhouse last night was fun."

"You got it, Jeff."

"Great!" I smiled at them. "You know ladies; it sure is nice to be back here with friends. I didn't realize just how much I missed this place until now."

"Well, Jeff, we're just glad you came back and are planning on staying." Maria smiled at me and Sandy.

"Cheers to that!" And with that from Sandy, we lifted our glasses. I was done with my burger and fries. I asked what they thought of my plan for seeing if the artists' cooperative in town would exhibit some of my castings.

"I think that's a great idea, Jeff! With all the tourists visitin' and newbies buyin' land here, I bet you'd have good sales." Sandy was always enthusiastic about new ideas.

We spent the next hour or so reliving high school, talking about the changes in Winslett, and just enjoying each other's company. I finally had to excuse myself to head on down to the artists' co-op. Winslett is an interesting town. It had been a mining and ranching center until the mines gave out in the 1920s. The town started losing population and was down to about ten families or so when they got the thought to develop it for tourism. A town several hours drive away had successfully remodeled itself on a little German town. Our area was a bit more desert like, so someone had the idea of an old West town. With state funds, they built board sidewalks, and false fronts to the buildings. The fact that the river runs right by town and is great for rafting, kayaking, and fishing, helped. So does the fact we are located smack in the middle of a national forest and are only a half hour's drive from the North Cascades National Park. We have extensive cross country skiing and snowshoeing in the winter. We became a year round destination. Following the boom of the '90s, a large number of well to do folk from Seattle bought vacation homes around town and throughout the valley. With the influx of new people, came a good number of artists. Old West type paintings, Native American type art, and stuff made with local materials were big sellers. My bronze castings would fit right in.

I walked out of One Eyed Jack's into the bright sunshine of the street. It was cool enough I was glad I had my jean jacket on, but the bright sun was very welcome. I could smell the dust from the street and wood smoke from the back of the hot dog grill down the street. I walked into the artists' co-op and saw Mary Grace behind the counter. Mary Grace was a local institution. She was probably the first artist to come here to the upper valley. She's gotta be in her mid to late fifties and was a real earth mother type. Her hair fell loose around her shoulders; it was a natural salt and pepper gray. She wore a denim shirt over an artists' co-op T-shirt and an almost floor length denim skirt. Wool socks and Birkenstocks completed her earth mother look.

"Jeff! You're back!" She squealed when she saw me and jumped up to give me a hug.

"Yep, Mary Grace, I had to come by here and say hello to my favorite hippie type lady." She beamed at me. Then a somber look crossed her face.

"I am so sorry to hear about your father. He was a good man. And sorry to hear about the trouble you've been having at the ranch."

"Thanks, Mary Grace. I appreciate it."

"Have a seat, Jeff, and let me get you some coffee. You take it black don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You just stay right there. It'll be good for business having a handsome cowboy sitting in the gallery." With that she scurried back to an office where there was apparently a coffee maker. She returned in a minute with a cup of coffee for me and some sort of herbal tea for herself.

"Mary Grace, how does an artist get to show his work here in the co-op?"

"Well, every artist pays dues for the rent on the space and the upkeep. Most of us volunteer about eight to sixteen hours a month to be in the gallery for the tourists and for sales. Why is that?"

"I was thinking I might want to show some of my bronze castings here if you'll let me."

"That would be a fantastic idea, Jeff! Your dues would come out of the first sale, but it's a pittance compared to what you would sell your sculptures for."

"Okay, how many would you need to show my work?"

"It would be best to have four to six sculptures. Actually, Jeff, I have an idea. We generally do a featured artist if they are having a special showing. Seeing as you're a local boy, we could do a special exhibition on you and your art, a cowboy artist kind of thing. You never know, *Cowboys*



*and Indians Magazine* or *Washington Highways* or *Sunset* just might drop in when your work is being shown!" I could tell she was pretty enthused about the idea.

"Just what would that mean bein' a featured artist?"

"We would take some pictures of you and your art, and tell your story in a set of posters. We could show you working doing your sculpture. It's a way to get you some publicity as an artist and raise awareness of your work. Do you have a website?"

"No, I'd never figured I'd need one. Should I put one together?"

"Yes! That would be wonderful. You can put a website together?"

"I don't know if you've seen the ranch website, but I did that. I gotta put all that schoolin' to work somehow."

"That's fantastic! Now, how many sculptures do you have?"

"I got two here, I am makin' another; the carving for the model is done, so I just gotta wax it, and make the plaster mold then cast it, about three days work. I also got about five more works back in San Francisco that I can have sent up here."

"So it looks like another month or so before we could realistically do an exhibition." She looked at me questioningly.

"That sounds about right to get the sculptures here. I might be able to make one more in that time too."

"I just had an idea! We get a great deal of tourist traffic from Thanksgiving through the New Year, and even afterwards due to all the cross-country skiers. We could do an exhibition on your work over the holidays. I seem to remember one Christmas you were home from college and went around town wearing a Santa hat on top of your cowboy hat. The tourists would love a picture of that!"

"No problem. I could give you some pictures. What else would you need?"

"We'd want to interview you, find out what your inspiration for your work is, how and when do you work, what got you interested, things like that."

"Okay and when do you want to do this?" I asked.

"Ryan, one of our artists who does photography for us in exchange for dues will be in town tomorrow. Would it be okay if I brought him out to the ranch?"

"Sure, Mary Grace, what time were you thinkin'?"

"If it's sunny tomorrow, about ten will be the best light. If it's cloudy, we can come earlier; we'd call before though."

"That's good by me, so I guess I'll see ya tomorrow."

"Bye, Jeff, and thanks! I am really looking forward to having you as one of our artists."

I headed out onto the street. I thought another cup of coffee might be good before headin' back to the ranch, so I stopped at the bakery, which doubled as an espresso stand and sandwich shop. Espresso in a one horse town may seem kinda funny, but we are in Washington state.

"Hey, Rick!" I said as I walked in. Rick was the owner of the bakery. He'd baked for years in Seattle and came out to Winslett to open his own place. He was another of the aging hippies who seem to love to live near nature. His graying hair was tied back in a ponytail, and he wore a tie-dyed T-shirt under his open denim shirt. I noticed he had wool socks and Birkenstocks on too. I wondered if it was some sort of club, or uniform, or what, but thought it might not be too polite to ask. I noticed that there was a smattering of tourists around, including the group to which I had

said hello earlier, and a family with two kids. The oldest of the kids looked to be about eight and was dressed in a little cowboy outfit.

"Howdy there, buckaroo," I said to the little guy.

He eyed me with an incredulous look and asked me, "Are you a real cowboy mister? And what's a buckaroo?"

His mother looked at me apologetically and said, "Harrison, don't be rude."

"He's no bother at all, ma'am. Yep, Harrison, I am a real honest to goodness cowboy. I live on a ranch, I ride horses, and I wear my cowboy hat and boots every day. And a buckaroo is just another name for a cowboy. We cowboys, like you and me, use it for ourselves sometimes."

"Cool! What's your name?"

"My name's Jeff. So are you out here visitin' or you lookin' to find a job cowboyin'?" I sat down at the table next to the family and said, "Howdy folks," to the group I had greeted earlier.

"Coffee, Jeff? I got some good apple pie, too, if you'd like some." Rick was a good guy and made some great pies.

"Sure, Rick, coffee, black and as strong as ya got it, and the pie sounds great."

"I want to find a job cowboyin'!" Little Harrison had scooted up close to me and was looking at me like I was Roy Rogers or Gene Autry or some famous movie cowboy.

"Harrison, you're never going to be a good cowboy if you don't finish your sandwich." Harrison's mother pointed at his plate.

"That's right, son," his dad said. "Cowboys have to be big and strong, don't they?" he added looking at me.

"They sure do, buckaroo. And you know what? We cowboys always eat everything on our plates, 'cause we never know when we're gonna get more chuck. Sometimes on a long trail drive we go hungry."

"Can I sit by you, Jeff?" Harrison asked grabbing his plate.

"If it's okay with your folks, you sure can." I extended my hand to the father.

"Jeff Connelly, pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I'm Tom Sanders, and this is my wife, Ann. Our daughter is Lisa."

"Pleasure, ma'am," I said as I tipped my hat. I also turned to the other table and introduced myself to the two retired couples and the single guy I'd said hello to earlier on the street. The couples were Gladys and Bill, and Helen and Walter. Jonathan was the single guy.

Rick came around the counter with a mug of coffee and a big slice of pie.

"I made you some of that cowboy coffee you guys seem to like so much."

"Much obliged, Rick." I smiled up at him.

"What's cowboy coffee?" The little guy was full of questions.

"It's good strong coffee we boil up in a pot, and then add some cold water to settle the grounds, so we ain't drinkin' crunchy coffee."

Gladys laughed and said, "That's how we made coffee when I was just a girl."

I winked at her. "So I'm guessin' you had some just this mornin'." She giggled and the whole group laughed. Suddenly I became aware that Sandy was standing in the door.

"Harrison, you asked if I was a real cowboy. Well, let me introduce you to a real cowgirl." I stood up and grabbed Sandy's hand, pulling her gently to my table.

"Harrison Sanders, I'd like ya to meet my good friend Sandy Johnston."

"How do?" Sandy extended her hand, and Harrison shook it solemnly.

"So I hear you got a big photo shoot and interview out at the ranch." I'd love to know just where Sandy got her information. She seemed to know stuff almost before it happened. I spent the next fifteen minutes explaining the artists' co-op, my art, and ranch life in general to the folks gathered around.

"Are you two a couple?" Helen asked.

I turned red, and Sandy spoke up. "Naw, we're just real good friends. We went to school together, and Jeff's always been like a brother to me. Besides, I think his heart is taken; he just doesn't know it yet." I'd been takin' a sip of coffee, and it went right down the wrong pipe at Sandy's statement.

"Say what?" I managed to cough out.

"Remember what ya said Saturday when ya had a bit too much to drink?"

Harrison looked at me solemnly and asked, "You had too much to drink, Jeff?"

"Iced tea, buckaroo, it'll get you every time." There was lots of laughter at this.

"What ya doin' Saturday, Sandy?"

"Well, darlin', why ya askin'?" I couldn't help but smile.

"I was figurin' on askin' you to help me with some cookin'. I wanted to invite these folks out to the ranch. I bet you never seen a workin' cattle ranch, did ya, buckaroo?"

"Dad, Mom, can we go, please, please?" Harrison's little sister, who had been quiet until then, joined the chorus of pleases.

Jonathan and Tom asked if it was any trouble, and insisted on bringing something, putting in orders for pies, bread, cookies, and rolls with Rick. Unfortunately, Gladys, Bill, Helen, and Walter were heading back to Seattle tomorrow. We settled on two in the afternoon on Saturday, and I gave directions and my phone number to Tom and Jonathan. I excused myself, and tried to pay Rick, but he said given all the business I was bringin' him, my coffee and pie was on him. I turned to Sandy.

"C'mon, we got a dinner to plan." She followed me as I headed out to the street.

Night was comin' on quick, and we were now in that beautiful northern twilight, which lasts so long. The sun had set over the Cascades, streaking the sky with orange and purple. It was quiet and still in Winslett, and I could smell wood smoke as wood stoves were fired up.

"That was awful nice of you, Jeff. You probably made that little guy's vacation, as well as the rest of the tourists."

"Just a wild hair, Sandy, just a wild hair." We headed into One Eyed Jack's to plan the meal. It went fairly quickly, and we settled on steaks, baked potatoes, corn salad, cowboy beans, and iced tea or coffee. I remembered her comment in the bakery.

"Just what in the hell did you mean by my heart's taken, but I don't know it yet?"

"The way you and Mike look at each other, it's only a matter of time before you end up together."

"Sandy, I don't even really know the guy. Once we talked, he seems nice enough, and he sure is real easy on the eyes and all that, but I ain't ready to date anyone. Hell, I just broke up with Robert, and bein' alone a while sounds pretty good."

"You know, you, me, and your dad are the only folks Mike has ever told about his family life. He looks up to you quite a bit. You're out and proud of who you are, and to him that is amazing."

"That's another thing. He's in the closet so far he's under the linoleum and behind the woodwork. If I get together with someone, I want someone who will go with me to gay rodeos, compete, and not be hidin' all the time."

"I think the way he looks up to you, that closet door is gonna bust open pretty quick." Sandy had a knowing look on her face.

"We're just friends."

"That's a great basis for a relationship."

"Okay, matchmaker Sandy, I heard ya. Now, enough please."

We'd been walking along Main Street and came upon my truck. I was about to head back to the ranch.

"Can I drop ya anywheres?"

"If you don't mind dropping me at home, I'd be grateful."

"No problem at all."

I had dropped Sandy off at home and began heading up the highway toward the ranch. A couple of miles outside Winslett, an ambulance passed me, sirens blaring and lights flashing. We're pretty far out in the sticks, so an ambulance wasn't a normal occurrence. I wondered where it could be going, but didn't pay it too much mind. A herd of deer by the side of the road caught my attention, and I slowed way down. We're on a deer migration route, and it's not uncommon to see over a hundred in a day of driving around. I sure didn't need a deer running right out in front of the truck. I got caught up in the radio. Taylor Swift's "Tim McGraw" was playing. I really like the song, although it's a bit sad, unrequited teenage love. It's a wonder we ever get through our teen years. I started up the turn off which went up to the ranch. As I drove to the top and came over the last rise, I was shocked to notice the ambulance which had passed me was parked in the front yard with its lights still flashing. The sheriff's car was parked over to the side. A group of paramedics was gathered around a prone figure on the ground. I looked around and saw José and Josh. Where was Mike? Where was Wayne? What the hell happened? I pulled over to the side, put the truck in gear, and pulled the parking break. I ran toward Josh and José.

"Guys, what happened?"

"Josh took a long look at me and answered in a flat voice.

"Mike and Wayne were up herdin' the beeves away from the areas which have roads near 'em outside the fence. They had separated, and all of a sudden there were shots. Looks like more 'n one shooter since they were both set up as target practice." I noticed it was Wayne on the ground with the paramedics. He was conscious and grimacing with pain.

"Wayne got shot, but it's not too serious. Must hurt like hell though."

"Where's Mike? What happened to Mike?" I could hear my voice rising in panic.

"He's okay, boss. He didn't get shot or hurt, and now he's talkin' to the sheriff."

"So Wayne's gonna be okay?"

"From what the paramedics say, yep, but he'll be outta commission for a couple of days. It's a shot clean through his side, but didn't hit anything important. Still, they plan on keepin' him in the hospital in Wenatchee for a day or so." Josh had answered this time.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"I'm really happy he's okay." I was also ecstatic Mike was okay, and was feeling just a bit guilty that I seemed to be so much more worried about him than Wayne. By this time, they had Wayne on a gurney and were about to put him in the back of the ambulance. I walked over to him.

“Hey, Wayne, you want me to come with ya?”

“No, I’m a tough old bastard, and it’ll take more than this to stop me. Just wish I could get my hands on the son of a bitch that did it though.”

“You’ll be okay, Wayne, I know ya will.” The paramedics lifted the gurney up and rolled him into the back of the ambulance.

“I’ll come by the hospital tomorrow,” I called out to him.

“You do that. But not too early, I plan on gettin’ a good night’s sleep tonight.”

“You got it, Wayne.” The paramedics closed the door and jumped into the front. In a moment the ambulance was gone. No sirens or flashers, which was a good sign. I noticed the sheriff standing right behind me.

“You get the stuff I asked for?” he asked the last of the search and rescue guys who were getting in their truck. The answer came back positive, and one of the guys handed Sheriff Johnston some bags.

“What happened, Sheriff?”

“Damn rustlers are getting’ awful ballsy. Wayne and Mike musta got too close, so they started tryin’ to shoot them. Hate to tell you this, Jeff, but you lost a few more head of cattle.”

“Shit! At least no one got killed, though.”

“I got a few thoughts on this and some stuff for the crime lab to look at, so let’s keep our fingers crossed we finally have a clue. I’m gonna head back into town now. You might want to take care of your friend. He’s pretty shook up.”

“Thanks, Sheriff, I will. See ya.”

“See ya Sunday, Jeff.” He got in his car, turned around, and began heading back to town. I looked over to see Mike, José, and Josh standing together. Mike glanced at me, and said something to the guys. José clapped him on the shoulder as he headed toward me. He looked pretty shocked, and there was quite a bit of blood on his clothes.

“Hey, Jeff, you remember you said you wanted to be my friend?”

“Remember it and I meant it.”

“Good, cause I need a friend now.”

“Come on in, buddy,” I said, turning toward the ranch house. I could hear Mike following me as I headed up the steps and through the door.

## Chapter Five

WE GOT into the house. I turned and looked at Mike. He looked like he’d been through a wringer. He had a shocked and confused look on his face. His clothes were filthy, and he was covered in mud, blood, and horseshit. I pointed him toward the bathroom off the mudroom.

“Why don’t you take a nice hot bath? I’ll get you something to wear. Just throw your dirty clothes on the floor, and I’ll take care of ’em. Towels in there are clean.”

“Thanks, Jeff. Much obliged.” He started to strip off, and I headed upstairs to my room. I grabbed a clean pair of gray long handles, some socks, and a set of sweats. I headed downstairs.

Mike was already in the bathtub sighing with pleasure. I set the clothes down on the toilet seat and turned to leave. Mike's laugh stopped me.

"What's so funny?"

"You tryin' to turn me into you?" I looked down, the socks were on top and the long handles next. They covered the sweats. I laughed with him.

"Relax cowboy, there's a pair of sweats there too. What in the hell is with everyone talkin' about me walkin' around in my underwear?"

"Let's just say you walk around without your pants on a lot and the view is pretty nice."

"Whatever, I'll be in the living room. You look like you could use a drink. Whiskey all right?"

"I sure as hell ain't gonna turn down good whiskey tonight." I could feel his eyes on my back as I walked out. I grinned, knowing he was looking.

I headed into the kitchen, got a bottle of Maker's Mark, and a couple of glasses. I then went into the living room and started a fire in the big river rock fireplace. After a few minutes Mike appeared.

"Thanks for the clothes, bud. We're about the same size."

"No worries. Want that drink now?"

"Hell yes!" I poured out two generous glasses and raised mine.

"To friends."

"Cheers. And thanks a lot for askin' me in, Jeff. I didn't want to be by myself tonight. It was one fuckin' hell of a day."

"You wanna tell me what happened? If you don't, that's okay too." Mike emptied his glass in one gulp and drew a ragged breath. I refilled his glass for him.

"We headed up to the back of the property where the forest service roads come fairly close to the property line. We got there and it was pretty obvious there'd been some more rustlin'. The fence was cut, and there were cattle tracks goin' out and tracks of horses herdin' 'em. I got off my horse and began to look at the tracks. Wayne suggested we split up and look to see if we could find any sign of the rustlers. The tracks we saw were fresh."

"Why would he suggest something like that? Rustlin' is a pretty serious crime and these guys are murderers." Mike gulped his second whiskey and looked at me.

"I asked the same thing. He said if we was real quiet and kept our heads down, we just might see 'em or maybe their trucks and be able to get a license number. I didn't think it was too smart, but he took off on his own. He's really worried about the ranch and about you. I hadn't gotten too far when I decided to tie my horse to one of the trees. I did that and was creepin' along real quiet like when I stepped on some loose scree. I lost my balance and slid to the side. All of a sudden the tree right about where my head would have been splintered, and I heard the sound of a gunshot. If I hadn't of slipped, my head would be splattered all over the place. I figured the best way to save my ass was to get behind somethin' like one of the big boulders in the area there. I was lucky because there was one only about fifteen, twenty feet away. I think I made it in one jump. Whoever it was shot at me a few more times, but then the shots stopped. I wouldn't mind another shot of whiskey, if it's okay." I poured a shot into his glass. This time he drank only half before he continued. I was still sipping my first shot.

"I heard a few more shots in the distance after a few minutes. It was in the direction Wayne had gone, so I headed over there, tryin' to keep rocks, trees, or anything between me and the direction the shots had come from. I came down into a little hollow that looked as if horses had

been hobbled there. Lots of small steps and lots of horse shit. Then I looked and saw Wayne. He was in the middle of the hollow, lyin' on his back and holdin' his side. I ran over and saw he wasn't hurt too bad, but bleedin' some and in a lot of pain. I used my handkerchief and my bandana to stop the bleedin' as much as I could and then helped get him back to his horse. I left him for a few minutes. I got my horse and we came back. By the time we got back here, Wayne was lookin' pretty bad. I called the sheriff and search and rescue. They got here pretty quick, and about ten minutes later you got here." He gulped the rest of his whiskey.

"Shit, Jeff, that coulda been me! I coulda been shot out there. The bullet just missed my head by a bit." He was shaking now and looked pretty freaked out.

"You're okay, buddy. You're here, you're safe, and Wayne is getting some good care."

He was still shivering a bit. I grabbed a throw blanket from off the back of the couch and tucked it around his shoulders. I could tell the whiskey was starting to hit him. His movements were becoming more exaggerated and slower.

"Thanks, Jeff. You're one hell of a guy. You know that?"

"You ain't so bad yourself, buddy. Don't sell yourself short."

"Thanks. You know, I reckon you're about the first real friend I ever had."

I didn't really know how to answer that, so I just smiled at him. He turned away and stared into the fire for a few minutes.

"Jeff?" Mike turned to me. He was obviously drunk now.

"What's that, buddy?"

"A year ago, if someone had told me I'd be sittin' here after gettin' shot at, drinkin' with a gay guy who I'd told that I was gay and feelin' okay about it, I woulda laughed at 'em. Or kicked the shit outta 'em."

"So what changed for you, buddy?" He leaned back—flopped back might be a better way of putting it.

"I like it when ya call me buddy, Jeff. It makes me feel kinda special. It reminds me we're friends." He drew a long breath and continued. "I guess just seein' you. You're gay and all, but you're a real man. You act like a guy. You don't take no shit, but you can still be real nice. I heard Sandy teasin' you in a good way about bein' gay, and you just laughed with her. That's so cool, Jeff. I wish I was as okay with me as you are with you."

"You will be, buddy."

Mike smiled at me when I said "buddy." He grinned at me. His eyes were unfocused from the whiskey.

"After all what you went through as a kid, I'm surprised you're not really fucked up. You're gonna realize that you're a real guy, too, and a gay guy. The two don't cancel each other out. And you'll realize, too, that sex is a lot more than just stickin' your dick through a hole in a bathroom stall for a blowjob."

"You know, Jeff, I ain't never done anything else than that with another guy."

"Really? You never kissed a guy or fooled around other than letting some anonymous guy suck you off?"

"Nope. I'm a real loser ain't I?"

"No, you're not. When you meet the right guy, things'll just happen for you. Don't worry about it. Comin' out is something we each do individually. It's easy for some people, some people go through hell, and some never can face themselves."

"I'm glad you're my friend." He leaned against me. By now he was slurring his words heavily. He lay his head against my shoulder and chuckled. "Ssss hot."

"Blanket too warm on ya now?"

"No, sss hot wearin' your underwear." With that he took a few deep breaths and began snoring softly.

For the second time in a week, I carried Mike to the spare bedroom and undressed him. My long handles fit him like a second skin, and again he was half hard in them. I pulled up the covers so he wouldn't get cold. I ran my hand gently along his jawline, stroking his beard. He really was a stunningly handsome man. Just like a few days ago, because it seemed the thing to do, I kissed his cheek. I turned off the light, closed the door, and headed upstairs to my bedroom. As I shucked off my clothes before crawling in bed, the old song, "I Don't Like to Sleep Alone" came into my mind. As I jumped into bed and pulled up the covers, I wondered where in the hell that came from. But then this annoying little voice in the back of my head said maybe Sandy had a point in our talk earlier.

I COULD hear birds out my window. When I opened my eyes, the morning was starting in that soft gloaming we have here in the north. The house was quiet, so I figured Mike wasn't up yet. It was hard to believe it was only Tuesday with all that had happened this week. I felt tired and thought about just rollin' over and goin' back to sleep, but I thought I'd better get some coffee on in case Mike got up. I hadn't slept too well. I'd had a couple of dreams about Mike, some of 'em weren't exactly G rated. Others ended up with him lyin' on the ground in a puddle of blood with his head exploded from a bullet. I threw back the covers and thought I'd better get a pair of sweats. All the talk about me always walkin' around in my underwear is partly true. I don't like to wear clothes in the house, just my long johns in the winter and boxers in the summer. But this morning I had this massive hard-on crawling down the leg of my long handles, and I thought the sweats might be a good idea, especially when I was having breakfast with Mike.

Why in the hell was I thinking of him so much? He was real easy on the eyes, buffed from hard work, sports, and working out. I didn't think that was it, or not it totally. There was kind of a hurt defensiveness about him, like a puppy that growls when it sees you just because it's scared. From the bit I'd talked to him, I was sure there was a lot more in that cute head of his than fluff. Maybe it was rebound from Robert; it hurt to realize we weren't right for each other, and there was sadness and a sense of loss, but I knew it was for the best. That relationship really hadn't been satisfying for a while. Since Mike was here, lonely, and hot, maybe I was just trying to recreate something I thought I'd lost. I shook my head and got dressed. I headed downstairs. I put some water on to boil for coffee and thought about breakfast. Biscuits and gravy sounded good, so I turned on the oven and began to make the biscuits. I got them in the oven and continued with making breakfast. All of a sudden, there was a shadow in the doorway. There stood Mike. He was wearin' my sweats and socks; he'd rolled up the sleeves of the sweatshirt. I could see the sleeves of my long johns reaching down to where he'd pushed them a few inches past his wrists. He was close enough for me to make out the golden hair on his forearms. He had a big smile on his face.

"Mornin' to ya, Jeff. Ya sleep well?"

"Fair to middlin'. How about you?"

"Like a log. I wanted to thank you for bein' there for me last night. I didn't know how bad I needed to talk to someone about what had happened. I was scared shitless out there, and you're about the only person I feel comfortable tellin' I was scared." He had gotten a serious look when he said that.



“Hey, buddy.” He smiled again and I remembered how he liked it when I called him buddy. “That’s what friends do for each other. Now coffee’s just about ready, and I made some biscuits and gravy for us. Want a couple of eggs too?”

“If I’m not bein’ too much trouble.”

“None at all.” I pulled the biscuits out of the oven and placed them on a plate. I put the plate on the kitchen table, and got a jar of jam and one of honey out as well as some butter. I put a hot pad down on the table and put the skillet with the fresh sausage gravy on top of it. I put a spoon in it and grabbed a couple of plates, knives, and forks. Salt, pepper, Tabasco, and napkins were already on the table. The smell of fresh baked biscuits, sausage, and black pepper from the gravy wafted up. With the smell of the coffee joining in, it reminded me just how hungry I was. The sun was trying to come out, and the kitchen had a nice bit of light. I keep the house kind of cool, but the kitchen was warm from the oven. If I had to describe the whole scene in one word, I’d call it cozy.

“Ya know, Jeff, you’re gonna make some guy a great wife someday.” Mike had a huge grin on his face.

“Actually, buddy, I’ll make a great husband. I always heard you cook for the ladies and you impress ’em. I can tell it’s true ’cause you’re impressed ain’t ya?”

The first emotion to flash across his face was annoyance, but it faded pretty quickly into a sheepish grin.

“Jeffy, you’ve already impressed the hell outta me. Joshin’ and cookin’ aside. You just seem the perfect guy.”

“Hell, I ain’t perfect—I run around without my pants too much.” We both laughed at that and sat down at the table. I watched Mike take several biscuits and cover two of them with a good amount of gravy. I served myself while he put butter and honey on the other biscuit. We both reached for the Tabasco sauce at the same time and ended up kinda holding hands with the bottle in the center. We just looked at one another. It was a sweet, yet searching look. I let go of the bottle and his hand, and said, “Go ahead.”

There was a bit of sexual tension in the air, and my dick was so hard it was uncomfortable. I was glad I had on the sweats and was sittin’ down. To break the tension I asked Mike, “So what do ya like to do when you ain’t cowboyin’?”

“I really like sports, football and hockey especially, both watchin’ and playin’. I like camping, and the outdoors, and hiking is fun. I’d like to try deer huntin’, and like to fish, especially fly fishin’. What about you?”

“Same stuff here. I also like river kayaking, snowshoein’, and cross country skiin’. There’s nothin wrong with just watchin’ a good movie with a buddy and havin’ a few beers. I also like to rodeo. I compete in the rough stock events and am pretty good at heelin’. I got some buckles in calf ropin’ too.”

“I got some buckles too! I don’t know if you noticed, but I was wearin’ one the other night. So what type of music you listen to?”

“Country. Sometimes I like Mexican music, too, especially norteña. It’s Mexican country. You know how to two-step Mike?”

“Naw, never no one to learn it with. I wasn’t really interested enough in girls to try to learn.”

“You don’t have to dance with a girl. In San Francisco and Seattle they got bars where they have country dance nights and guys dance with guys, girls with girls.”

“You’re shittin’ me! You mean guys like your friend, Robert?”

“Some, and some other guys like me or you. It’s a lot of fun.”

"I reckon it might be."

"Hell, Mike, I'll teach you. Sometime we can just move the couches back in the living room, roll back the rug, and dance. Then if you ever go to a gay rodeo, you'll be able to dance with all the cute cowboys."

"You mentioned them before, Jeff. Tell me about 'em."

"They have 'em all over the country. Best ones are in Phoenix, Denver, and Texas, but they got some great ones in Florida and Las Vegas too. I been competin' in 'em for about six years now."

"I guess I got a hell of a lot to learn about gays."

"You will eventually. We're gonna have to throw a football around some time. I ain't done that in a while and it's a lot of fun. Maybe we can get Josh and José to go for a game of touch football. Straights against gays." Mike got a worried look on his face.

"I ain't never told José or Josh about myself. They're not gonna make fun of me are they?"

"They're definitely gonna make fun of you. They make fun of me. But that's just it. It's all in fun. Think of all the times you heard us jokin' around. Nothin' they ever said to or about me was as mean as the stuff outta Robert's mouth when he was so upset. When they joke around, just laugh with 'em, or ask them out on a date. That'll shut them up pretty quick." Mike's mouth hung open and he seemed speechless. "Years ago I had to kick the shit outta José, but we got over it. We're good friends. He's totally accepting of me. Once he even tried to fix me up with his cousin who's gay too. Josh was a bit mean at first, but then I started goin' overboard and really obviously flirtin' with him. I told him we were gonna have to be friends, or if he wasn't my friend, he'd have to go out with me. He looked like he was gonna shit cinder blocks three at a time sideways until he realized I was kidding him back. Apparently José and he had a talk, cause he's been fine ever since." Mike still didn't look convinced, so he changed the subject.

"I saw in the garage that you got a couple of river kayaks. Would you teach me how to kayak?"

"Sure, I got an extra wetsuit, too, and an extra pair of polypro long johns—this time of year you need to keep warm when you get wet. And we will get wet."

"I don't mind that. Can you do that roll over thing in the kayak?"

"You mean an Eskimo roll? Sure. It's real easy. Oh, by the way, I got two things I gotta ask you."

"You askin' for a date?" He grinned at me. I wasn't sure just how serious he was.

"No, I'm not, at least not now."

"Keep in mind I just might say yes if ya do ask." I figured out he was dead serious from the expression on his face.

"I'll be sure to remember that." I got a big grin in return, but this time he had turned a bright red. "What I wanted to ask was two things. First of all, Saturday I invited a bunch of nice tourists I met in town up here for a barbecue. One's just a little guy named Harrison, who wants to be a cowpoke really bad, so I figured we could get him on a horse."

"That ain't no problem. You need help with the barbequein' too?"

"Yeah, I reckon I do, but Sandy will be here. On Sunday, Sheriff Johnston invited me over for dinner and asked me to bring you along, if you don't got nothin' else to do."

"You sure that ain't a date?" He smiled at me again. I grinned back. I was enjoying having this guy around.

"Nope, 'cause when I do ask ya for a date, I am gonna make sure it's someplace I can kiss that pretty mouth of yours."

"Don't reckon I'd say no to that either."

I stepped over to the stove to get a refill on the coffee. As I stood up, I realized the front of my sweats was all tented out. I figured that the best thing to do was just ignore it and hope he didn't notice. Of course he did notice. He was staring directly at my crotch. I thought a change of subject was a good thing right about then.

"More coffee there, buddy?" I walked over with the coffee pot.

"Uh... sure." He leaned back a bit so I could fill his cup, and I noticed he was sportin' wood to match mine.

"You up to visitin' Wayne in the hospital today?"

"Sure, Jeffy."

I grinned. "I like it when you call me Jeffy; that aside, we can go see him in a bit. Visitin' hours start at ten, and it'll take us a bit to get to Wenatchee. Also, I wanted to know what you thought about my makin' José foreman while Wayne's sick."

"Ya couldn't make a better choice. He knows his stuff, and both Josh and me respect him. You lookin' to hire any more new hands?"

"Nope, not now."

"Okay. We can handle it. Why'd you invite the tourists over? Sandy told me she was gonna mention you should make this place into a dude ranch. You seein' what they think?"

"Ya know, I didn't think too much of the idea when I heard it, but maybe she's got somethin' there. I sure have been thinkin' about it a bunch."

"Ya got my support; whatever you do, I'll back ya up." Just then I heard a couple of sets of boots coming up the porch stairs. José and Josh were about to knock on the door. I walked through the mudroom and to the door just as they reached it.

"Hey, boss! You put Mike up on the couch?" José smiled at me.

"Yeah. He was pretty shook up last night, and we had a couple of shots of whiskey. With all the excitement, his not havin' eaten, and everything, it hit him hard."

"Hell Jeff, I don't blame him a bit." Josh smiled at me, too, but it didn't hide a look of concern on his face.

"C'mon in guys, have some coffee."

"Thanks," they chorused in unison. Josh headed into the kitchen, but José held back.

"Hey, boss, whatever you said to Mike worked like a charm. He is really a nice guy when you get to know him."

"Glad to hear it. Now have some coffee." We walked into the kitchen. Josh was telling Mike how glad he was Mike wasn't hurt. José chimed in on the same theme while I got a couple of coffee mugs.

"Hey, José?"

"Yeah, boss?"

"You're foreman while Wayne's out. Mike and I are gonna go to Wenatchee this mornin' to visit Wayne; I thought if you two want to go, you could go in the afternoon. So what work you got for all of us around that schedule?"

"Thanks, Jeff. I think we'll finish making sure the cattle chutes are in good repair and then the corral. That should keep us busy at least today and tomorrow."

"You got it, José." We finished our coffee. Mike headed off to the bunkhouse, and I went up to my room and got dressed. We met in the yard back by my truck. Mike handed me the sweats I'd loaned him.

"Hope you don't mind, but I still got your long handles and socks on."

"Whatever turns ya on, buddy." He just grinned at me. We headed down the valley and hit the main highway paralleling the Columbia River.

"Jeff, what do you think about this whole rustlin' mess."

"Hell if I know. I just hope we catch 'em pretty quick. They're gettin' pretty ballsy shootin' at you and Wayne. Somethin' just don't seem right though."

"What do ya mean?"

"Well, think about it. They know right where to go, and when they get there, the cattle are there. I can't imagine they drive those roads with trucks all the time just on the off chance some of our cattle are there."

"You think someone's goin' up there and herdin' the cattle toward the roads for 'em?"

"I dunno. I don't see as how it could be one of us who work or live here. Did you notice last night that Sheriff Johnston seemed to think it was weird also?"

"Can't say I did, Jeffy. What makes you say that? Did he mention something?"

"No, but he did ask one of the search and rescue guys if he'd gotten something for him, and the guy gave him a couple of plastic bags. I couldn't see what was in 'em though."

"I was so shook up, I didn't notice too much of anything. I will say one thing. Sheriff Johnston is really good at what he does. He asked about what each and every one of us was doin' every time the cattle was rustled," Mike said.

"You got that right. Let's stop and think just what do we know?" Mike had his face screwed up in concentration.

"The rustlers have hit us twice. We've lost about twelve head of cattle. They've hit a couple of other ranches too. If they take six head each time, they must have a stock trailer to haul 'em in."

"Unless they have a truck that they process the cattle in right there. It'd be safer for 'em. I sure as hell wouldn't want to get caught with a truck full of cattle carryin' someone else's brand."

"Makes sense, Jeff. That'd mean they'd need three trucks, one to process the cattle, a refrigerated truck to carry the meat, and a truck to carry horses so they could herd the cattle."

"I don't know, Mike. Think about how much a beeve weighs. If they were processing the cattle in one truck and keeping the meat in another, how'd they get the carcasses from one truck to another?"

"Good point. I wonder—"

I suddenly cut Mike off, "I wonder if there's been more rustlin' than just around here. Say they were hittin' down by Pateros, or over by Tonasket or Okanagan. You look at that area, and the national forest is smack in the middle of it. Maybe somewheres in the middle of the forest, they have a camp where they process the cattle. They could truck 'em in from the different areas they stole 'em from. They could set up a pulley and generator to run it. That'd explain the lack of any signs of them butcherin' the cattle right where they was rustled." Mike was looking at me open mouthed.

"Yeah, it does kinda fit together. You gonna tell the sheriff?"

"I want to get a real detailed map of the area, including all those forest service roads. I want to make a bit of a case first." We continued conjecturing and talking about what ifs all the way into Wenatchee.

We got to the hospital just as visiting hours started. We checked in at the front desk and headed up to Wayne's room. Wayne was there, propped up in bed watching TV.

"Hey, Wayne, how ya doin'?" I asked as Mike nodded to him.

"My side hurts like hell. Ya know those hero movies where the hero just keeps goin' after gettin' shot? Well, they sure as hell are heroes."

"How long they plannin' on keepin' ya here?" I sat down in one of the chairs and pulled it up close to the bed. Mike sat in the other one.

"They said they're gonna keep me another night. Seems the wound got a bit infected on the ride back." He gave Mike a long measuring look. "I wanted to thank you, son, for keepin' your head and getting me back okay. Seems I was a damn fool to have us separate; either one of us could've gotten our heads blown off. Lucky they missed you when they shot at you."

"No problem, Wayne; yesterday was a bit of a blur. I was just thinkin' of getting the two of us to safety and stoppin' your bleedin'. I was so riled, I don't even remember what we talked about or me tellin' you they shot at me too."

Wayne took another long look at Mike.

"I heard the shots and assumed, son. Ya didn't tell me. So, Jeff, you mind if I take a couple of days off after they let me outta here? I dunno just how much use I am gonna be at work for a week or so."

"Sure, Wayne, take the week off, and don't worry about your pay. You got it."

"Mighty nice of ya, Jeff, much obliged." We chatted with Wayne for another hour or so. I promised to bring him some airline size bottles of whiskey if they didn't let him out tomorrow. He was gettin' cantankerous, so I reckoned he was healin' up just fine. We said our goodbyes, and Mike and I headed out to the street.

"You hungry there, buddy?"

"Hell, Jeff, I can just about always eat."

"Anything special you got in mind?"

"Nah, nothing really comes to mind. We can get great burgers in Winslett, and Mexican don't come no better than when José or Maria makes it. Anything's fine with me."

"How 'bout Chinese then?"

"Sounds good to me." Mike smiled at me.

"Okay, there's a place a couple of blocks down that has great sweet and sour pork." We walked up the street and past the door to the Wenatchee Western Wear Emporium. Just as we came even with the door, Jonathan, the guy who I'd winked at yesterday and who I invited Saturday, stepped out the door with a package.

"Hi, Jeff." He said, sticking out his hand to me and taking an appraising look at Mike. "Remember me?"

"Of course, Jonathan. This here's my good buddy Mike. We were just gonna get a bit of lunch at the Chinese place down the street. Wanna join us?" Jonathan stuck his hand out to Mike, and they shook and exchanged "Pleased to meet yous."

"Sure, I would be happy to join you, if I'm not intruding."

"Not at all." Mike was welcoming, but something told me he had thought lunch might be something special for us. I winked at him when Jonathan was turned away, and he grinned and turned red. I clapped him on the shoulder. I left my hand there just a moment longer than I might of, and he got even redder. His smile got bigger though. We headed into the Great Wall of China restaurant and got a booth. The waitress came almost immediately with water and tea. Mike and I sat on one side, facing Jonathan.

"So, Jeff, Mike, how long have you guys been together?"

"Hell, Jonathan, we ain't a couple. Mike's just about my best buddy in the world."

"Sorry if I was a bit out of line there, just watching the two of you together, I assumed."

Mike had this serious look on his face. I was about to ask him who kicked his puppy, but then he said, "Naw, we ain't a couple, just friends." He did mutter under his breath, "I'm workin' on it though." I smiled.

Jonathan looked at the two of us and asked, "You guys are out though? I know it can be difficult in a small town."

"I been out since high school. Everybody in town pretty much knows about me. Since I grew up in Winslett, nobody seems to mind much. I had to kick ass a few times when I was in high school and even a bit after. After that, my football letter, and the fact I can rodeo, cowboy, and fight with the best of 'em, I ain't had any trouble. Mike's just stickin' his head outta the closet once in a while."

Mike looked down at his menu, but did add, "Jeff's kinda been showin' me there is a life outside the closet. He's kinda hell-bent on draggin' me out."

I punched him lightly on the shoulder and added, "Hell, buddy, you're venturin' out all on your own. No need to drag you. And we all come out in our own time right, Jonathan?"

"That's true. But one thing, you guys just better invite me to the commitment ceremony. I would bet you're going to be together before too long."

"So what do you do in Seattle, Jonathan?" Mike was still a bit uneasy about his sexuality with anyone but me and apparently Sandy.

"I'm the editor of a gay travel magazine called *Out and Traveling About*. What about the two of you?"

"I'm just a cowboy." Mike looked down like he'd said something to be ashamed of.

"I'm a cowboy, too, I just happen to own the ranch," I added. "I also kinda fancy myself as an artist. Artists' co-op is gonna do a story on me sometime. It don't pay the bills yet, but it's fun. I do bronze castings. By the way, Mike's more than just a hand; he makes a mean son of a bitch stew, and he's the best effin' cowboy ever was born. Even if he says so himself." Mike turned beet red.

Jonathan started to ask just what I meant, and the waitress showed up. He asked me to order, and Mike seconded that as I "knew what was good." I ordered sweet and sour pork, almond chicken, beef chop suey, six egg rolls, beef and broccoli, barbecue pork fried rice, and the house special lo mein. I also ordered three beers looking at Jonathan to see if that was okay.

He nodded and then asked, "You sure you ordered enough food, Jeff? That sounds like enough to feed an army."

"You ain't seen us eat. We do a lotta hard work outdoors. We eat quite a bit; it doesn't seem to go to fat." He looked at both of us and let out a small whistle.

"That it doesn't. That it doesn't. So just what is 'son of a bitch stew', and what did you mean by the 'best effin' cowboy' remark?"

Mike jumped in this time. "Son of a bitch stew is a cowboy dish we make most often durin' calvin' season. You take a fresh slaughtered calf, and chop up the marrow gut, liver, heart, kidneys, maybe the spleen and some good choice meat and cook it most of the day with some onion, garlic, salt, and a whole hell of a lot of red chile. You can add potatoes too." Mike had skipped right over his song.

I jumped in saying, "The best effin' cowboy line is from an old cowboy song. It's pretty off color; you gonna be offended if I say the words? Otherwise I can just give it to ya in a nutshell."

"No, I won't be offended." He laughed.

"It's called the 'Old Jism Trail'. It goes, 'Ass in the saddle and hand on the horn, I'm the best fuckin' cowboy ever was born, whoopee tie ay yay, whoopee tie ay yo, whoopee tie ay tie ay yo. I'm sick of pullin' my peter on the old jism trail, so I'm goin' to Kansas City to get a piece of tail, whoopee tie ay yay, whoopee tie ay yo, whoopee tie ay tie ay yo. Cutest little guy I ever saw, he lives on the rim of wiggle ass draw, whoopee tie ay yay, whoopee tie ay yo, whoopee tie ay tie ay yo. I'm gonna get that guy and chase him up the hill, I'm gonna fuck 'em in the ass god damn I will, whoopee tie ay yay, whoopee tie ay yo, whoopee tie ay tie ay yo.' Mike sings it when he gets drunk. I been known to join in." Jonathan laughed.

"I can see why you asked if I'd be offended. Do you guys sing together often?"

"Not so often, but we do sound good together huh, buddy?"

"Yep."

"Why don't you guys sing something?"

"Here?" Mike and I asked in unison.

"Why not?"

"Hey, buddy, you know that song that Blake Shelton and Trace Adkins sing, 'Hillbilly Bone'?"

"Yeah, I'll do Blake Shelton, and since you got the deep voice you take Trace Adkins's part," Mike said.

"You got it, bud." And with that Mike started to sing. I joined in on the chorus and did the second verse.

As we were finishing, clapping from the other tables interrupted us. Just then the waitress brought our order. We'd finished our first beers and she had three more.

"The beer is on us. You sing very good."

"Thanks!" both Mike and I said at the same time.

"Who were the folks you were with, Jonathan?"

"The two women are my sisters, and the guys are their husbands."

"They don't got no problem with you bein' gay?" Mike was interested in families that accepted their gay sons and daughters.

"Not at all. They've been very supportive. Jeff, why'd you invite all of us over on Saturday?"

"You seemed like nice folks. The little guy, Harrison, could be the author of 'My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys', so I thought I'd give him a vacation to remember. I hope I didn't throw you too much off balance when I winked at ya."

"No, actually it made my day. It's not every day, or even every month, a hunky cowboy winks at me. And then having lunch with a couple of hunky cowboys, well, Jeff, Mike, you've made my vacation."

“Always nice makin’ someone feel good.” I noticed that Mike had scooted a bit closer to me when I mentioned winking at Jonathan. His knee was touching mine. It was nice. I reached down, squeezed his knee, and then continued to eat. He gave me a big smile.

“You know guys, I mentioned I’m the editor for a gay travel magazine. Would you mind if I did a story on Winslett and the valley if I included you?”

“Okay by me. Mike’s the one you gotta ask.” Mike had a bit of a panicked look on his face. I squeezed his knee again.

“Yeah, it’s fine with me too. What a way to venture out of the closet.” We all laughed. The food was good and we continued to eat. Jonathan stopped well before Mike and me. We ended up cleanin’ up just about everything. Jonathan insisted on payin’ the bill and would not take no for an answer. We thanked him several times.

“Jonathan, we gotta be headin’ back to the ranch. We got some work to do there.” I had looked at Jonathan’s watch and saw it was almost two. I was gonna have to give José and Josh the day off tomorrow. We said our goodbyes and our see ya Saturdays, and Mike and I headed back to my truck.

As we walked, I put my arm around Mike’s shoulders and asked him, “You up for tossin’ around a football after we’re done with the corral tomorrow?” He looked around nervously, but leaned into me.

“Sounds like fun.” I took my arm off his shoulders and patted him on the back. By this time we were back at my truck. I used my cell phone to call José and let him know we’d be late and he and Josh had the day off tomorrow. He was fine with that arrangement. Then Mike and I jumped in the truck, buckled up, and I pulled out onto the road.

“You’re really somethin’, Jeff.”

“Why’s that, buddy?”

“You’re really good with people. You just go and make friends. And everyone likes you. Me, I ain’t no good with people. I’m always waitin’ for them to hurt me or say somethin’ mean, so I just kind of avoid folks.”

“I hope you don’t mind me sayin’ this, and if I’m stickin’ my nose in somewheres it don’t belong, you can tell me to go to hell. You gotta accept and learn to like yourself before you’ll start likin’ others and be at ease with ’em.”

“I’d never tell ya to go to hell, Jeff; I wanna hear what you got to say.” He looked at me so seriously and with such a hurt puppy dog look I couldn’t help laughing.

I patted him on the knee and said, “Mike, don’t ever sell yourself short. You’re a good guy, from what I can tell sharp as a whip, and as I said before real easy on the eyes. When ya let yourself go and enjoy yourself, you are really someone special. You just need to believe in yourself, buddy. I believe in ya.”

Mike was quiet for a minute or two and finally said, “Thanks. That really means a lot to me. All my life I been havin’ people tell me I’m evil, I’m stupid, I’m never gonna amount to nothin’, I’m the spawn of Satan, and all these put downs. It really means a lot that a guy who has it all together and is as special as you, sees enough in me to wanna be friends.”

“Whaddya mean wanna be friends? We *are* friends, Mike. Besides, who but a good friend would undress your cute and drunk ass and put ya to bed twice in one week?” I added the last line tryin’ to make him lighten up a bit. He chuckled, but sounded a bit nervous.

“That don’t bother you does it?”

“Hell no! You and Robert did the same for me that one time. I get the feelin’ it was actually more you than him.”



“It was. All he was doin’ was tryin’ to get me in the sack.”

“That’s water under the bridge now.” Changing the subject, I added, “I can’t believe it’s already Wednesday and the rest of the week and weekend is already taken up. Next week I gotta work on some sculptures, and really take a good hard look at the books. I gotta come up with a way to make this ranch work.”

“You will, Jeff, you will. I got faith in you too.”

“Thanks, buddy. That means a lot to me too. You’re the first guy I’d pick to have at my back.” Mike laughed at that statement. I was puzzled until he answered.

“I just hope when I am backin’ you up, I notice what’s around rather than focusin’ on your ass.” We laughed together on that one.

“I think it’s pretty great that you’re able to be in an article in a gay magazine with me.”

“Like you said, I gotta accept me for who I am sometime. I guess jumpin’ right in is one way.”

“Ya told Sandy. You ever think of tellin’ José and Josh?”

“I’m kinda afraid they’re gonna make fun of me.”

“They will make fun of you, buddy. They make fun of me. But we’re laughin’ together. They won’t be laughin’ at ya but with ya. They’re a pretty open minded couple of guys. Hell, they may already know.”

“Whadda ya mean?” There was a slight note of panic in Mike’s voice.

“It’s pretty apparent we’re good friends, and we do flirt a lot. They’ve been around me as a gay man for a while. I wouldn’t doubt they’ve developed a bit of a gaydar.”

“You’re right, Jeff. I do need to tell ’em. I want to be friends with them, too, and I’m sick of hidin’ who I am.”

“Good for you, buddy. Go ahead when you’re ready. I’ll be there to back ya up.” We rode the rest of the way back to the ranch in a companionable silence. When I parked the truck, we said good night. We were both tired, so Mike headed to the bunkhouse, and I headed up to the ranch house. It was too early to go to bed, but I had a book I wanted to relax with. Just as we were about to turn away from each other, I said to Mike, “One thing you’re gonna have to learn if you’re comin’ out is gay men hug each other. A lot.” I stepped toward him and gave him a hug. He didn’t seem to know what to do for a second, but then hugged me back.

“Good night, buddy. You sleep well.”

“You too, Jeff.” And we parted for the night.

## Chapter Six

I’D ACTUALLY slept in a bit for once. For the first time since I’d gotten back, I had actually slept well. It looked sunny outside. I threw back the covers and went to my dresser and got a pair of socks. I pulled them on and pulled the covers back up and made the bed. I brushed my teeth and then headed downstairs. As I got about halfway down the stairs, I smelled coffee. I walked through the living room and saw Mike in the kitchen. He was wearing jeans, gray wool socks, and a blue T-shirt. I could see he still had on my gray long handles. He was standing over the stove, and the aroma of bacon hit me. He laughed when he saw me.

"There you go again, runnin' around in just your long johns. Anyway, good mornin'! How'd you sleep?"

"Like a log. And how about you, buddy, how did you sleep?"

"Great. So bacon, eggs, and sourdough pancakes suit ya?"

"Sure does, that's really nice of ya. You didn't have to go through that trouble."

"Ain't no trouble. Besides, you made me breakfast a couple of times, and I wanna show you I can cook too. Plus I get to watch you sit around in your underwear, so I got an ulterior motive." I laughed now. I'm a bit of an exhibitionist, and Mike liked to look, so I thought I'd make it worth his while. I sat in one of the chairs at the kitchen table, and leaned back so it was on two legs. I put my hands behind my head and spread my legs wide apart. He turned around to say something, saw me, and his words got caught in his throat. He finally managed to stutter out, "God damn, Jeff, you are one handsome man."

He picked up steam and added, "Anyway, breakfast is gonna cost ya. You said gay guys hug a lot. Gimme a hug." I stood up and wrapped my arms around him. I nuzzled his beard and hair. He hadn't showered this morning, but he smelled nice, like clean fresh sweat. He smelled like Mike. His hair and beard were soft on my lips and nose. I could feel the muscles in his back and chest. I also felt the blood starting to rush below the belt and gave him a squeeze and let go. From the front of his jeans, he was having the same reaction as me.

"Well, you got your hug," I said as I sat down and pulled my chair up to the table. "So do I get breakfast now?" He poured a mug of coffee for me and set it in front of me.

"You can have anything you want, big boy. For breakfast I mean." I wanted Mike bad. Part of me was ready to grab him, throw him over my shoulder, and carry him upstairs to my bedroom. Another part of me was thinking let's make sure we got a good basis of friendship first. Sex too soon can change things for the worse. It was also in the back of my mind I might be on the rebound from Robert. Truth be told, that hadn't been much of a relationship for a while. I knew if I did pick Mike up and take him upstairs, he sure as hell wouldn't put up much of a fight, if any at all. We were staring at each other, and any fool could see the longing between us.

I finally said, "Buddy, give me some time okay? You're just incredible. I just gotta get my head on straight. I'll be here."

"I ain't goin' nowhere. Now how about breakfast?" He dished up a couple of eggs, some bacon, and three large flapjacks on a plate for me. He'd put ketchup, Tabasco, butter, and maple syrup on the table. I waited until he fixed himself a plate and raised my coffee cup at him.

"Here's to the chef, my best buddy."

He beamed at me and answered, "Cheers." I dug into the food. Like his son of a bitch stew, his breakfast was really good.

"This is delicious! You got me impressed again!"

"Thanks. See, for a dumb hayseed, I can cook."

"Mike, get off of it. You ain't no dumb hayseed. You're a smart, friendly, good-hearted, handsome as hell man. And a real man to boot."

"Thanks. You keep tellin' me that, and I just might start believin' ya."

"I don't lie, buddy. So did you see what needs to be done on the corral still?"

"Since they got the day off, José and Josh headed down to Wenatchee. They got the corral pretty much done. They just left us the two gates to fix. It shouldn't take the two of us more than an hour."

"Good, you still up for throwin' a football around?"

“Sounds like fun.”

“I’m gonna work out after that. You can join me if you want. And then if ya don’t mind, let’s put our heads together. We can look on the Internet to see if we can find out about any other cattle rustlins in north-central Washington. I wanna follow-up on the idea we talked about yesterday.”

“Sounds good to me. How ’bout you go get dressed, and I’ll rinse off the dishes here and put ’em in the dishwasher?”

“Okay,” I said and bounded up the stairs. I pulled on a pair of jeans and an old work shirt. It was cold out, so I put on a fleece-lined denim vest. By the time I headed downstairs, Mike had the kitchen cleaned up and a jacket on. We pulled on our boots and headed out to the corral. All that really needed to be done was fix the two gates, oil the hinges well, and make sure everything was in pretty good working order. Mike was right; it took the two of us just a little over an hour. We then walked around the corral and holding pens. Everything looked shipshape. We were ready for the roundup.

“When we gonna round up the cattle Jeff?”

“I figure end of next week or early the week after. We just gotta herd ’em down here. Trucks come and pick ’em up. Dad had gotten the ranch certified organic, and since the beeves are free range, we can call ’em grass fed. They should fetch a good price.”

“You keep some for yourself don’t ya?”

“Yeah, I’ll cull out a couple of head to take to the butcher in Twisp. I wanna make sure the freezer is full. I’ll head off to Okanogan to get a couple of fifty pound sacks of spuds, some onions, and garlic. I should be able to get some beans and stuff there too. Aside from makin’ sure the freezer is full, I wanna stock up on stuff. If the winter is bad, it might be that sometimes we can’t get out for supplies due to the roads bein’ bad.”

“That’s smart, Jeff. Ya know, the guys head to Wenatchee a lot during the winter. I guess Josh even stays there most of the time. You don’t mind if you and me have dinner once in a while and play cards or some sort of board game or whatever?”

“Hell, Mike, I told you, you’re my best buddy. I’m countin’ on it.”

“Good, ’cause I like havin’ a friend. Now I seem to recall you said somethin’ about throwin’ a football around?”

“Yep, I did. You gotta change or anything?”

“I reckon I could change my shoes. It ain’t fun runnin’ in boots.”

“Great, that sounds like a plan. I’ll meet ya on the front lawn in about ten minutes.”

We headed our own ways, me up to the ranch house, Mike down to the bunkhouse. Once in the mudroom, I kicked off my boots and got a pair of athletic shoes. The day had warmed up a bit, so I doffed my vest and work shirt and got a pull over rugby shirt. A thought hit me. Dad had a wooden hot tub put in on the back deck. I headed out and checked in on it. The heat was set on low, and the water was circulating slowly, just enough to keep it from freezing. Dad hadn’t liked the chlorine stench of most hot tubs and swimming pools, so he had an ozone water filter installed. I turned the hot tub on and set the temperature for one-hundred-five—nice and toasty. I headed to the shed in back of the house and got out a football. All my athletic equipment was there. I headed out the door to find Mike already out on the lawn stretching out. I joined him. I was really looking forward to some exercise and sports play.

“Wanna just toss the ball around for a bit to get warmed up?” I asked Mike.

“Sounds like a plan,” he said while running backward in prep for a catch. I tossed the ball, and he made a good catch. He continued running back and then threw the ball at me. I had to jump for it, but caught it on a dive.

“Good catch there, Jeff!”

“Thanks! I guess I ain’t lost my touch yet. Not bad for an old man of twenty-eight is it?”

“You’re twenty-eight? I’m just twenty-four! When’s your birthday?”

“April eleventh.”

“Mine is September second.” I ran back a bit and threw the ball a bit wide. Mike dived for it and got it.

“You ain’t half bad yourself.” We continued throwing the ball around for about an hour. The throws had gotten wilder, and the catches more spectacular. We were both having a great time. Or I knew I was anyway, and from the grin on Mike’s face, I was pretty sure he was too.

“Hey, buddy, we’re warmed up now; want to have a bit of a game? Touch, not tackle.”

“Sounds like fun, Jeff. We seem to be pretty evenly matched.” We used the four lawn chairs, which were off to the side, to mark two goals. Then we did rock, paper, scissors to see who had the ball first. I did paper and Mike did rock. So I had the ball first.

“Prepare to get your ass whipped!” I teased Mike.

“In your dreams!” Mike grinned back at me and went back to pass me the ball to run with. I stood at my own goal line and began to run forward. He threw a good pass, right to me. I caught it and began to run. He was coming straight at me, so I looked to the left and zagged right. He reached toward me and missed by a fraction of an inch. I pulled further to the left. He moved to head me off, so I stopped, took a couple of backward steps and headed right. I was able to get enough distance between us so I could run straight through the goal. I threw the ball down and did a little dance. Mike was laughing and headed up to me.

“Okay, now that I lulled ya into a sense of false security prepare to get your ass creamed!”

“Really?” I grinned back at him. “And just who is gonna cream it?”

“Your best buddy, Jeffy, me!”

“Actually, that sounds like it could be fun!” I saw I threw him for a loop with that one. “As far as football though, in *your* dreams. And the score is one to nuthin’.” I ran back to pass the ball to Mike and give him a chance to run with it. We played for about two hours. We’d both made some spectacular catches and goals, and both fumbled and gotten tagged. The score was fourteen to fourteen. We were joshing each other all along and having a great time. It was Mike’s turn to run with the ball. I threw a high pass to him, and he caught it about five feet in front of his goal line. He began a long easy lope down the field. I matched his stride, and when we were about fifteen feet or so apart, I could see he was thinking on how best to dodge past me. There was a lot more room on my left side of the field than there was on my right. I figured he was going to feint left and run right, thinking I would reckon, he’d stay where there was more room to maneuver. He did just what I thought he’d do. He feinted left, and ran right. I moved immediately to the right and headed straight for him. We were both running full out now. Rather than just tag him, I put out my arms, grabbed his, and tackled him full on. We both flew through the air. The football went flying, and Mike swallowed his gum. We landed with him on his back and me on top of him. My hands were around his wrists holding them down on the ground on either side of his head and our legs were all tangled up.

“What in the hell are ya doin’, Jeff? We’re playin’ touch football. I oughta get an extra point for that move!” He was trying to push my arms away, but I had leverage.

“Shut up, buddy.” I lowered my mouth to his. As I went in for the kiss, his eyes widened and then he seemed to melt. He picked his head up and met me halfway. I stuck my tongue in his mouth and gently dueled with his tongue. He tasted good, like peppermint from the gum he’d been chewing and something else indefinable, something raw and masculine. He stopped

struggling and I let his wrists go. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders, and we continued to kiss. He still smelled good, sweaty but clean. I caught a hint of something perfumed, like the lightest of colognes or maybe the residue of soap or shampoo. Underlying that was the musky scent of an aroused man. It could have been ten seconds, or it could have been ten minutes when we pulled apart a bit. I rolled to the side and sat up. Mike pushed himself up so he was sitting facing me. We looked at each other, and he was the first to speak.

“Wow, that was incredible. First time I ever kissed a guy. I had no idea it was so fantastic.” Mike had this big grin on his face as he confided that was his first kiss.

“Yeah, that was extremely nice. Uh... you know, if I was outta line there, I’m sorry. I don’t really know why I did that.”

“You wanted to though didn’t ya?”

“Hell yeah, hell *yeah!*”

“You weren’t outta line. I’ve been wantin’ to kiss ya myself.” He hesitated a bit and looked at the ground as he continued, “So, Jeff... where do we go from here... what’s up?” He looked like he was afraid of what he’d hear next. I took hold of his hand and held it. It was a working man’s hand, rough and callused. I smiled at him.

“Let me tell ya what’s goin’ through my mind. I like you. I like you lots. I know that I’m happy when I’m with you, and I just can’t stop grinnin’. I’ll be honest though, I’m a bit confused. My dad was hit head-on in his truck and died a little over two weeks ago. I broke up with my boyfriend a couple of days ago. A ranch hand I really liked got shot a week ago. We’ve been hit by rustlers several times. I’m worried the ranch isn’t gonna break even this year. I wanna kiss you again. I wanna pick you up, carry you into the ranch house, up to my bed, and fuck you silly. I want to show you just how good it can be with two guys. But I’ve seen too many guys hop in the sack right away and fall in lust, or in infatuation. When the sex cools off a bit after a year, they find they don’t have nothing in common. You’re too good for that. And you deserve better. I wanna keep gettin’ to know ya. The more I know ya, the more I respect and like ya. And I don’t wanna do anything to fuck that up.” Mike gazed at me for a few minutes. Then he took his other hand and placed it on top of mine.

“You’re a good man, Jeffy, a sharp one too. Like I said earlier, I ain’t goin’ nowhere. But I do have one thing to ask ya.”

“What’s that?”

“You think we might be able to kiss like that again, once in a while?” He had a sheepish kind of a grin, but his eyes were determined. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, we can. That was awful sweet and kinda special. So don’t worry, we’ll do it again.” He continued grinning at me, and I grinned back.

“Now let’s head up to the ranch house for lunch. Ham sandwich and chips okay by you?”

“Sure.” We headed up to the ranch house, both happy. We couldn’t stop grinning at each other. I felt happy, optimistic, and eager to see what this might bring. I reckoned Mike felt the same way.

We sat on the porch in the front of the house. Each one of us had a plate with a hefty ham sandwich on good thick rye bread from the bakery in Winslett. On a little table between us sat an open bag of Cascade potato chips and a couple of cokes. The day had warmed up a bit, but still had a chill to it. I figured it had to be in the low fifties. The sun was out though, and the afternoon had kind of a golden tinge to it. I could smell pine and fresh cut hay. There wasn’t much traffic on the road, so it was quiet, and then Mike broke the silence, his voice soft and quiet.

"Look off to the left next to them trees about five yards back from the road; that buck must be an eight point."

"Yeah, he's pretty big, couple of does and yearling fawns off in the trees too."

"I see 'em. You said you like to hunt?"

"I do. For me, it's more bein' out in the woods and in nature than the killin'. I won't say no to a freezer full of venison though."

"So, let's go huntin' next month when the season opens," Mike said.

"You got it, buddy!" I leaned forward and took a bite of my sandwich.

"Ya know, Jeff, this is the most beautiful place I ever lived. Even though I been here a couple of years, I still love the view."

"I know right where you're comin' from. I grew up here, but drivin' from the high Cascades down into the valley still takes my breath away."

"Your dad was always tellin' me what a great guy you were, and what a good son, and how proud he was of you. You think he'd be happy we're friends?" I really wasn't sure where that question came from, but I did know Dad well enough to answer it.

"Yeah, Mike, I think he'd be real happy for us both."

"Even if he saw us kissin' like after when you tackled me?" I understood then where he was coming from and why he asked.

"You mean would Dad accept you, me, and the way we seem to be headed?"

"Yeah."

"Hell, buddy, if he came outta the house and saw us kissin' like that, he either woulda turned right around, pretended he didn't see us, and give us privacy, or he woulda told us to get a room and practice safe sex. He'd just want us to be happy and not get hurt."

"You're lucky to have had a dad like that."

"I'm also lucky in the friends I got too." Mike was quiet for a few minutes and then changed the subject.

"So what are you up to tomorrow?"

"Mary Grace from the artists' co-op in Winslett is comin' out here. She wants to take a bunch of pictures of me, my art, and the ranch. She's plannin' to do a showin' of my work around the holidays. Maybe you can hang around if ya got nothin' goin' on. Two cowboys are always better than one to attract some tourists."

"Sure, I'd be happy to help." The deer we'd been watching earlier had moved out into the field in the front of the house. They were all happily grazing away. We sat and watched them for a while in silence.

When lunch had settled a bit, I asked Mike, "You still up for workin' out?"

"Yeah, gotta change first though."

"Me too; workout equipment is in the heated garage off to the side of the house. I can meet ya there in a few minutes."

"I know where it is. Your dad used to let me work out there."

"Great! See you in a few."

I picked up the plates and cups and chip bag from lunch and dropped them off in the kitchen on my way upstairs. I quickly changed into workout shorts and a tank top and went to the garage where I kept my equipment. I had a full set of weights, dumbbells and barbells, as well as a cross

country ski machine, a rowing machine, and a solo flex type machine. I had just gotten there, and Mike showed up in workout shorts and a T-shirt.

“What body parts do you want to work on today?” he asked.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I want a full body workout, then some cardio, fifteen minutes on the rowing machine, fifteen minutes on the cross country machine.”

“Sounds like a good workout to me. We got some good cardio this mornin’ throwin’ the football around.”

“Let’s get on it!” I said, clapping him on the back. It was fun working out with Mike. We would spot each other so we could do heavier weights than either of us would do alone. We took turns on the equipment, moving through the workout at a quick pace. We stopped several times for water. By the end of the two and a half hours it took us to work out, we were tired, well relaxed, and very sweaty. My tank top clung to me like a second skin, and the sweat had dripped down onto my workout shorts too. Hell, even my socks felt sweaty. Mike’s T-shirt had big wet spots under the arms, on the chest, and on the back.

“Hey, Mike, I heated up the hot tub for us if you wanna take a dip.”

“Sounds good to me, but you got an extra swim suit I can use?” I chuckled at this.

“You got a birthday suit don’t ya? That’s all I’ll be wearin’.”

“Uh... okay, Jeff.”

“One thing though, we do need to shower off before we jump in the hot tub; how about you use the bathroom downstairs. There’s fresh, clean towels in there. Ya may wanna use one before ya walk though the house, and then bring one with ya to the hot tub.” He looked at me for a few seconds and then turned. We headed into the house, my following him.

I went upstairs, stripped, and jumped into the shower. I got out and toweled off. I grabbed a big fluffy bath towel and headed downstairs. There was nobody but me and Mike around, so I didn’t even bother wrapping the towel around my waist. I detoured into the kitchen, and grabbed two large bottles of Gatorade. I walked through the house to the back porch and the hot tub. Mike was out there, standing with a towel wrapped around his waist. I set the Gatorades on a little table by some chairs, and hung my towel on a hook set in the back wall of the house. Mike had, in the meantime, sat down with his legs in the hot tub. The towel was still around his waist. I watched, a bit amused, as he took care to slide into the hot water from the little deck and not remove his towel until the last minute. When he was in the water, I walked over, climbed up the little steps, swung my legs into the hot tub, and settled into the water. I sat facing Mike.

“You ain’t bashful at all are ya?” Mike asked.

“Jeff and bashful don’t usually go together in a sentence unless there’s an ‘ain’t’ between ‘em.”

“How’d you get to be so open and not ashamed?”

“This is my home, Mike, ain’t nobody here but us, and you’re a guy. I ain’t got nothin’ you ain’t already seen. I guess I never thought of it as bein’ out of normal. If there were ladies here, I’d wear a swimsuit, but I never thought of it with other guys. It’s the same with walkin’ around in my underwear. I know you guys always tease me, but why not be comfortable in my own house? I guess the way I was raised, I never thought much about it.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“You know my mom died when I was six don’t ya?”

“I knew you was young, but not that young.”

“Growin’ up there were no ladies around. I stopped wearin’ pajamas and started sleepin’ in my underwear when I was six. Even by that time I noticed all the hands and my dad slept like that, and I wanted to be one of the guys. Also, workin’ on the ranch, lots of times I’d come in covered in mud, in horse shit, or whatever. I sure as hell didn’t want to get in trouble for traipsin’ it through the house, so I’d take off my clothes in the mudroom. I spent a lot of time growin’ up cowboyin’ here and on some other ranches. You probably noticed guys in the bunkhouse ain’t too modest. And it’s the same in huntin’ and fishin’ camps. Until you asked me about it, I never really thought about it much.”

“I envy you that, Jeff. In my house any show of skin, a tank top or shorts that came above your knees, was satanic temptation. I had to wear pajamas to sleep in until the day I got kicked outta the house. Even before I told my old man about me bein’ gay, I wasn’t allowed to play sports at school because of the unholy goin’ ons in locker rooms. Any type of clothes that was in fashion was prideful and sinful. When I was livin’ at home, I don’t think I’d ever been naked anywhere outside the bathroom. Not even in my bedroom.”

“That’s fucked up. Is that why you’re so shy?”

“That’s a big part of it. I guess I’m just too self-conscious and ashamed of myself to feel comfortable walkin’ around like you do. I also always been afraid that if I was bare assed around a bunch of handsome guys, I’d get a boner.”

“You’re all grewed up now. If you show wood to me, I ain’t gonna tease ya. In fact, it’s a nice compliment to me. That aside though, you got a beautiful body; don’t be ashamed of it. I can’t understand all these preachers who say we’re made in God’s image, and then tell us to be ashamed of our bodies or our thoughts.”

“You’re right, but sixteen years of habits bein’ beat into ya, literally, isn’t so easy to get rid of.”

“I understand. Does it bother you if I’m bare assed or in my underwear?” I asked.

“No... yes... I mean... I know I shouldn’t feel uncomfortable, but I do. First of all, I’m afraid I’ll get hard, and you’ll get offended.” I laughed at that one, and Mike gave me kind of a sheepish grin.

“Remember a couple of hours ago when I tackled you and kissed you? I was pressin’ right up against you, and we were both hard. I didn’t get all offended or upset.”

“Yeah, I guess ya didn’t.” I got another sheepish grin, and he continued. “Sometimes, too, I’m pretty sure you do things just to throw me off, like the night we spent outside ridin’ fences. You were walkin’ around care free, and I was worryin’ about how to keep you from seein’ I was watchin’ and enjoyin’ the show. Or this morning when you were leaning there all spread out. I don’t know how to react to that. I know you’re teasin’ me, and I know ya don’t mean any harm. But what do I do?”

“Actually, buddy, it’s called flirtin’. I do it because I like you. I’m attracted to you. Hell, sometimes I do it just to get a laugh outta you. I know I must look ridiculous.”

“Yeah, especially when you’re turnin’ blue with cold.” We both laughed.

“See, now that’s a good reaction. I don’t care if you get hard and we’re workin out together, punchin’ cattle together, or doin’ whatever together. It’s a natural reaction. Hell, with me sometimes it just seems to happen with no reason, like gettin’ up in the mornin’. Did it bother you me not takin’ time to get dressed before I came down here?”

“Only in the sense you’re so self-assured, and I’m not.”

“Don’t worry about it. You have every reason to be just as self-assured as I am. Are you uncomfortable now?”



"No, Jeff, for some strange reason I ain't."

"Good. So are ya havin' a good day so far?"

"Yeah, we done things today I've always wanted to do regular like with a friend, but never did."

"Well, you got a friend here, and we'll do that stuff all the time." I pushed my foot forward until I connected with his. He didn't pull away. "Hot tub's great ain't it?"

"Yeah, it is. I am gonna be so relaxed, I probably won't be sore tomorrow from the exercise."

"If ya haven't forgot, I wanna get some mental exercise tonight and see if we can figure out a bit more about those damn rustlers."

"I haven't forgot. What did ya have in mind?"

"I'll explain it when we're about to start researchin'. Mike, you want to have dinner with me? I got some burger meat, buns, fixins, and some cole slaw. I could open a can of baked beans too."

"You got a date, but only if you'll let me clean up. José and Josh ain't gonna be back until real late or early tomorrow morning. There's nothin' to do there other than read or watch TV. I'd rather spend the time here with you. Besides, I wanna hear what you're thinkin' about the rustlers."

"Okay." I slid down and leaned back until only my head was out of the water. It was relaxing and comfortable. After a while, it began to get pretty hot. I sat up, moved around to where the deck was, and pulled myself out. I felt my arm and turned to Mike and said, "Hmm... medium rare."

He laughed. I stood up, went down the steps and over to my towel, and dried off. I moved over to the chairs by the table and grabbed one of the Gatorades and took a big swig. Mike pulled himself outta the hot tub. He grabbed his towel, dried off, and then very self-consciously came over and sat in a chair opposite me.

"Have a Gatorade. It's really easy to get dried out in the hot tub."

He took a swig, looked at me and asked, "Were you serious about us goin' huntin' in a month or so?"

"Sure was. We can start puttin' out oats and corn in the high pasture near the line camp. I know Wayne took some supplies up there. If you wanna take some time to help me, we could build a deer blind or two."

"That sounds great! I ain't been huntin' since I was fourteen. My old man never went, but a couple of guys from church did. I got invited along a few times. I really don't have any gear. I'll have to borrow or buy some."

"Between me and what Dad left, I got plenty, bud. We got stuff that hides your scent and all. You got a rifle don't ya?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Good shot?"

"I hit more than I miss. What about you, Jeff?"

"I can shoot. I'm a bit outta practice, but with a couple of days of target practice, I'll be fine."

"I'm lookin' forward to that very much."

"Me too. Now let's get in the house, get dressed, and get some dinner. I'm coolin' down from bein' in the hot tub, and it is *cold* out here."

"You're gonna have to loan me somethin' to wear. Or I gotta run out to the bunkhouse like this. My workout clothes were soaked with sweat."

"Follow me. I figure I have an extra pair of sweats." We walked upstairs to my room. I walked in and went to my dresser. I pulled out a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt for Mike, and a set for me. "Need socks?"

"Yes, please." I threw him a pair. He had already donned the sweats. I sat down, put on my socks, and then my sweats. Mike watched.

Then we headed downstairs, and I began fixin' dinner. I mixed the burger meat with some onion soup mix, A1, Worcestershire sauce, and pepper, and formed burgers that I browned in a cast-iron skillet. While the burgers were cookin', I fixed the side dishes and put together fixings for the burgers. I put those on the table with ketchup, mayo, and mustard. I toasted a couple of buns, and Mike got a couple bottles of beer and opened them. We sat down to eat. I raised my beer bottle to him.

"Cheers."

"Cheers." We each took a sip. It tasted good, nice and cold after the workout and the hot tub.

"Thanks for the meal. The burgers smell great." Mike had put just about everything on his burger and slathered it with ketchup and mustard. I made mine up the same way, but with mayo instead of mustard. We ate in a companionable silence. We polished off everything I had fixed. Mike jumped up and began to clean.

"You cooked, I'm doin the dishes."

"You got it. I'm gonna go get my laptop and build a fire in the fireplace. Can you bring us in a couple a beers when you come in?"

"Sure thing!" I ran upstairs and got my laptop. I took it down to the living room, and got the fire started in the fireplace. Then I sat down at my laptop and began to search. Mike joined me with the beers.

"What ya lookin' for?"

"I got this idea that the rustlers have been hittin' through the area, usin' the national forest and undeveloped areas for a base. Since a lot of the areas around the forest land are not in his jurisdiction, Sheriff Johnston might not even know about some rustlin's."

"I tried 'cattle rustling' and got 288,000 results. I reckon, I'm gonna have to be a little more specific." I tried "cattle rustling WA" and got only 63,000 results.

"Hey, lookit there." Mike pointed at the screen. "They mention Okanogan County."

We leaned in together and read the article. It dealt with cattle rustling in our area.

"Can you go over to the big desk by the wall there and check in the top drawer. There should be a map of Washington. If you could bring it and a red marker over here, I'd be mighty obliged." He jumped up and got the map and marker. When he sat down again he had a pen and some paper too.

"Good man! We're gonna need those." I spread out the map on the coffee table.

"I'm gonna mark where the rustlins are taking place." We leaned in together to look at the article again. I marked our ranch, and a couple of other places I knew plus the places mentioned in the article.

"Would ya look at that!" Mike was gettin' a bit excited. "They all back up to the national forest." We kept skimming the search results, but didn't find much more relevant in the first five pages.

"Yep, they sure do back up on the forest land, buddy, so what do we try next?"

"How about lookin' in the local papers for Chelan, Tonasket, Ellensburg, Cle Elum, Leavenworth, and Wenatchee?" I tried Chelan first.

“Bingo! Will ya lookee there, buddy! There’s about five more rustlins south of here, all backed up against the national forest.”

Mike leaned in to look at the areas and started marking them on the map. “I got ’em marked on the map. It looks like it’s part of a rough circle.”

“I’m gonna try the *Okanogan Gazette*. A big part of the area we’re lookin’ at is in Okanogan County.” I typed in the newspaper name and cattle rustling.

“You got a couple of hits right off, Jeff.”

“Yeah, this is almost too easy.”

“I wonder why nobody’s done this or thought of it before. Or maybe they have, and just not talked about it.” Mike’s brows were furrowed in concentration. He marked some more spots on the map. Our circle was growing. He turned to me and asked, “So what about the west side, are there any ranches up there, or is it all national forest and national park?”

“I think in the national forest there are a few small holdings, but I’m not sure about any decent size ranches. But there are some holdings that date from before the forest or park. I remember once when I was a little guy, goin’ to one to sell a bull.”

“So what are you gonna search under now?”

“If I remember correctly, the name of the ranch was High Cascade Ranch, or North Cascade Ranch, or something simple like that.” I tried both with cattle rustling thrown in for good measure. No hits. We leaned back and took a couple of swigs of beer. “We were on a roll for a bit there, buddy. Got any ideas?”

“How about tryin’ the name of some of the mountains or creeks or rivers in that area?”

“Could be, let’s try.” We spent about a half an hour on fruitless searches. By that time, we’d finished our beers, so I went into the kitchen and got a couple more. When I headed back into the living room, Mike was doin’ a search.

“Jeff, I got it! It says here that the Cascade Mountain Ranch was hit by rustlers twice.”

“You’re a genius! I can’t believe I didn’t think of Cascade Mountain. Cheers!”

I marked on the map the location of the ranch that got hit. We did a couple of searches on Tonasket, a town to the north and a bit east of us. We scored another hit. Our circle was complete. The map was unfortunately not super detailed. Mike came up with the idea of using MapQuest. We began pulling up the maps and taking them down to the detail of the small forest service roads and logging roads that crisscrossed the national forest. It took a while, but as we got each location marked on the map down to the yard. I marked and saved the maps.

“I think we need to print ’em out, buddy, to get a good idea of what is happenin’ where.”

“We’re gonna have to print the sections in-between, too, or we’re gonna have a partial patchwork that won’t do anyone any good.” Mike looked at me. I stared back, knowin’ what he proposed would take a hell of a lot of work and paper.

“You’re right. A job worth doin’ ain’t worth doin’ halfway. Let’s get all the maps marked and numbered, so we know how to fit ’em together once they’re printed. Then we can take the laptop and hook it up to the printer.”

We began the even longer process of saving and numbering maps to fill in the blank areas. By the time we were done, we had over ninety maps marked. We headed upstairs to my room, and I hooked up the laptop, got some paper outta my desk, and began to print. While I added the ninety some pages to the print queue, Mike looked around.

“I like your room, Jeff. It kinda mirrors you.” I liked my room too. It was one of the two master-type bedrooms in the house. It had its own bathroom, walk-in closet, and a set of French

doors opening on a little balcony set back in the roof. There were two skylights in the ceiling right over the bed. Many a night I'd lain awake looking at the moon and stars. The bed was a queen-size log bed. I was kind of a neat freak, so the bed was made, its Pendleton Indian blanket pulled up over the comforter and flannel sheets. The floor was wood, with some Navajo type rugs placed around. The walls were decorated with a mix of cowboy pictures and paintings. They ranged from photographs by Stoecklein to a stylized painting of the San Diego Gay Rodeo by a California artist named Riccoboni. I also had a lariat curled up on the wall, and on another wall was a shelf holding my rodeo buckles and some trophies. On my desk and on top of my dresser were some photos of me, me and my dad, and several of me at different gay rodeos. Mike picked up one and brought it over to me.

"I really like this one, Jeff. You look really happy, but you still got that cocky grin."

In the picture, I was sitting on the fence of the rodeo arena in Denver. I was looking back over my left shoulder. You could see the contestant number on my back. I was smiling at the camera. My jeans, boots, and brush popper shirt were all real dusty. My hat was pulled low down on my brow.

"Yeah, Jeff, you look really good in that picture. Why ya all dusty? Didn't cover?" Mike was asking if I got bucked off.

"Hardly, it was tinder dry, and no matter how often they sprinkled water on the arena dirt, it dried up and started blowing around right away."

He put the picture back and noticed something else that caught his attention. When we were gettin' ready to go in the hot tub, I'd just shucked my clothes and left them in a pile just outside the bathroom door rather than putting them in the hamper like I usually would. Mike had picked up my red jockstrap and was twirling it around his finger.

"So, when ya gonna model this for me, Jeffy?"

"You're gonna have to earn that, buddy, work for it." He raised his eyebrows, and just then the printer stopped. "Come on, let's put these together and see what we get." I picked up the papers from the printer and headed back downstairs to the living room.

"Let's spread these out on the floor; I think there's too many of 'em for the dining room table." We began placing the papers down in rows. I set 'em down and Mike straightened 'em up.

"I'll be damned, Jeff, you were right; the ranches on the edge of the national forest are all gettin' hit."

"Yeah, it's in several different jurisdictions, so I bet nobody's put this together. It looks to be an organized operation."

"Look here." Mike had grabbed the fireplace poker and was usin' it to trace some of the forest service roads right across the map. "These roads are all interconnected. They wouldn't even have to take a trailer full of cattle out on the highways. With the cuts in forest service staff the last few years, the chances of 'em getting pulled over by a ranger is slim to none."

"Yeah, and if they're processin' the cattle in the middle of the forest, by the time their trucks hit the highway, there'd be nothing but meat. No hides, no brands, no proof. I'd bet they got forged papers showin' a bill of sale for the cattle too." Mike gave me a real serious look and then stated the obvious even though we hadn't brought it up yet.

"What I can't figure is why would they go and kill Pedro? Shootin' at me and Wayne got us the hell away from there."

"Yeah, but they hit Wayne, right?"

"They did, yeah, but..." Mike's face screwed up with concentration. "Maybe they just meant to scare us off and hit him by accident."

"Could be, but it still don't explain why they killed Pedro. He was shot in the back about hundred and fifty yards from the timber. At that range, it's a hell of a lot easier to miss somethin' than hit it."

"It just don't make sense. Could Pedro have seen 'em close enough to be able to identify 'em? They mighta killed him for that." Mike looked at me.

"It'd have to be somethin' like that. But why hit Wayne?" I asked.

"Those bullets were awful close to me. One time I stumbled over a loose rock or tree root or somethin'. It made me move sudden like. I figure if I hadn't moved, my head would look like a dropped melon." Mike had a real serious look on his face.

"Somethin's not right here, buddy. They got a pretty profitable scheme goin' on. It just don't seem right to mix a murder charge in with it. There would be heat on 'em for rustlin', but nothing like for murder."

"How do ya figure profitable, Jeff? I know they wouldn't do it if it weren't, but you got an idea of the math?"

"Sure. Let's figure the average steer is a thousand-two-hundred pounds on the hoof. Processed weight is about sixty percent of that. For the most part the stuff that's processed out can be sold for dog food, fertilizer, that kinda stuff. So let's figure each ranch has lost fifteen cattle. I know I'm bein' a bit conservative here, but this is just to show ya. How many ranches did you say got hit?"

"Twelve."

"Okay, so twelve times fifteen is a hundred and eighty. So we got a hundred and eighty beeves processed. If the processed weight is sixty percent, that would figure out to about seven hundred twenty pounds of meat per beef. Now if they trucked the meat to Seattle, and sold it in good restaurants sayin' it was free range, grass fed, organic, they're gonna get a premium price. Let's say five dollars a pound. So we got seven hundred twenty pounds of beef at five dollars a pound. So that's three thousand six hundred dollars per head; now three thousand six hundred times a hundred and eighty is about six hundred and forty-eight thousand dollars. They probably do the processin' themselves, and that's the biggest cost. If they sell the byproduct at fifty cents a pound, that comes to four hundred and eighty pounds times fifty cents so two-hundred-forty dollars per head times a hundred and eighty is about forty-three thousand two hundred dollars. So before their costs, they got just about three quarters of a million dollars."

Mike's eyes were wide as he looked at me. "And who said crime don't pay?"

"Yeah, they've got a pretty good little business goin'. Maybe that's why they play for keeps and shoot to kill."

"So what do we do now?"

"Mike, I think we'd better let the sheriff in on this. How about after my meetin' with Mary Grace and her photographer, you and I talk with Sheriff Johnston. Let's give him what we got, and then he can get to work on it. If you're up for it, we can have dinner in the cantina after we talk to the sheriff."

"You bet. I love their red chile pork burritos."

"You got it then, buddy. It's a date." I stretched and looked at the clock. It was almost three. Mike saw my glance and looked at the clock.

"I better be headin' out to the bunkhouse, Jeff. I had a really good day today; thanks for it." I walked with him toward the back door.

"I had a good day too."

He turned to say good night, and I put my hands on his shoulders and pulled him to me. We wrapped our arms around each other. The kiss this time was gentle and exploring. I nibbled gently on his lower lip. We broke the kiss and then headed back for more. I grabbed his head and pressed it forward to mine; I could feel the hard muscles in his back and shoulders. He seemed to melt against me.

“You taste like beer, Jeff; it’s good.” I nuzzled my face against him. He continued on. “I know you got a big day tomorrow with the interview and Mary Grace and all. I better get out to the bunkhouse and let you sleep.”

“Good night, Mike. I hope ya have real sweet dreams.”

“You too, Jeff. See ya tomorrow.” He turned and walked out the door. Halfway across the yard, he turned and looked back at me. We locked eyes and gazed at each other, slowly both of us began to smile. He waved at me, and I returned it, before closing the door, turning around, and heading up the stairs.

## Chapter Seven

I WOKE up at about seven-thirty and decided to take a shower right away. Mary Grace and the photographer were scheduled to come around ten. I decided that if pictures were going to be taken, I would get all duded up. I put on a tight pair of jeans, one of my rodeo buckles on my belt, and a flashy Wrangler PBA shirt. I also wore a pair of my good boots, a cognac colored ostrich skin pair. I put water for coffee on to boil, and went to my studio in the spare shed. Like I’d mentioned before, I tend to be a bit of a neat freak, so the studio was clean and in good working order. I had several castings in various stages of development as well as six finished sculptures. Everything was pretty well laid out for a show and tell session and tour. I headed back to the kitchen, took a handful of coffee grounds, and threw ’em in the pot to boil. I got a box of doughnuts outta the pantry for breakfast. Just as I was pourin’ a cup of coffee, I heard the back door slam, and Mike walked in from the mudroom.

“Mornin’. Don’t you look nice? All duded up for Mary Grace?” He tipped his hat to me and sat down at the kitchen table. Without asking, I got him a mug of coffee.

“More for the photographer than Mary Grace, but yeah, I didn’t want ’em takin’ pictures for an exhibition with my clothes all dusty and muddy and shit on my boots.”

“Sounds good, and thanks for the coffee. So how’d ya sleep, Jeff?”

“Not long enough; how about you?” Mike leaned back in the chair, long legs crossed in front of him. He looked up at me. He looked tired.

“Yeah, not long enough for me either.”

“So are José and Josh back at the bunkhouse yet?”

“Yeah, they were there and asleep before I went to bed. They know you got the interview thing with Mary Grace?”

“Yeah, I talked to José about it. He told me he figures that I’m only gonna be able to cowboy about twenty-five percent of the time, so no big deal. Want a doughnut?” I handed the box to Mike. “What’s José got for you to do today, Mike?”

"Dunno. He and Josh are still sleepin'. I reckon they'll be up pretty soon. I shoulda stayed in bed longer, but I wanted to come up here and see you."

"You're just gettin' too lazy to make your own coffee."

"That must be it." We both laughed a bit. He looked at me. "We got quite a bit done on the computer yesterday. I hope it gives Sheriff Johnston something to think about."

"Me too, buddy." Just then I heard a knock on the door. I heard it open, and I heard a cheery, "Hello!" Mary Grace was here. She walked into the kitchen followed by a younger, skinny guy with long hair.

"Good morning, Jeff, Mike. This is Ryan, our photographer."

"How do?" I said as I held out my hand. He shook it and turned to Mike and shook hands with him.

"Coffee for ya?"

"That sounds great, Jeff!" Mary Grace smiled at me, and Ryan nodded. I poured two more mugs. Mary Grace took a small sip and set the mug down.

"Got any milk, Jeff? I forgot how strong you cowboys like your coffee."

"Sure do." I moved toward the refrigerator and pulled out a carton. From behind me, I heard Ryan sputter and turned to see Mike and Mary Grace trying hard not to laugh.

"That stuff would take off paint!" Ryan rasped.

"I can get you some hot water to thin it down."

"No, I'll just add milk too." I noticed as he poured, he had more milk than coffee in his mug.

"So what's the plan today, Mary Grace?"

"I thought we could get some pictures of you here in the ranch house and maybe one or two of you and Mike. Then some pictures of your studio and finished works. After that, you could walk me through your casting process and how you make sculptures. That would be just about it."

"Sounds easy enough." We sat and chatted while finishing our coffee. I noticed Ryan didn't drink much more of his. He then excused himself to go get his photography equipment. We moved into the living room. Ryan got back and was ready to shoot.

"Jeff, Mike, how about you guys stand in front of the fireplace. I always loved your river rock fireplace," Mary Grace said. Mike and I moved over to the fireplace. I put an arm around his shoulders, and he draped his arm over mine. Ryan started clicking the camera.

"That's a great shot! Our buyers love cowboys, so you two should be a great hit."

"As long as my art is a great hit." Mike moved off to the side, and Ryan took some pictures of me. One of my works of a bull rider was on the mantel, so Mary Grace had me lean against the mantel next to it. We then moved out to the yard, got more pics, and finally to my studio where Ryan took several pictures of me pretending to work. I put on my apron, mask, and gloves for some realism. Finally, we were done with the pictures. I began to walk Mary Grace through the process of creating a bronze sculpture.

"First thing I do is make a plastic sculpture of what I'm gonna do in bronze."

"Is it exactly like the sculpture you make?"

"It's pretty close. Then I make a plaster cast around that. I cut the cast in half, and get the plastic out."

"Doesn't that leave seams?"

"It would if I was to use that to make a sculpture, but what I do with that is pour wax in it to make a wax carving. Then I can smooth down the seams, and put details in on the wax."

"Oh, okay! The lost wax process; I've heard of that." Mary Grace seemed excited now that we were talking about something she knew.

"Yep. I make a plaster cast of the wax dummy and heat it up to get rid of the wax. Then I melt the bronze, heat the plaster cast up to the same temperature as the bronze, and pour the metal in."

"Why do you heat up the cast?"

"Couple of reasons: first, I don't want it to crack due to the differences in temperature. Next, I don't want air in the casting from the bronze cooling quickly when it hits the plaster."

"What comes next?"

"I let it cool, break off the plaster, and smooth and polish the metal. Then ya got a bronze sculpture."

"Where did you get your equipment, Jeff?"

"Most of it I made from plans off the Internet."

"When did you first get interested in doing bronze sculptures?"

"When I was just a little guy, we went down to California on a vacation. I remember going to the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum in Los Angeles. There were bronze sculptures there by Remington, and I was fascinated. I began reading about Remington and bronze casting. I got Dad to help me, and we made the first sculpture when I was eleven. At that time, I would do the carving and plaster casting, and he did everything with the metal. As I got older, I took over doing the metal mixing, melting, and casting, first with his supervision, then by myself."

"When did you sell your first piece?"

"About three years ago. Then about two years ago, I thought I would try to get a name for myself. I approached several galleries in San Francisco. It took a while, but I got one to exhibit a couple of pieces, and I've sold a few."

"Great, Jeff, that should wrap up our interview, thanks!" She turned off her recorder.

"Thanks, Mary Grace. If ya got any questions, please let me know."

"I sure will, Jeff. We have to take a couple of pictures of you in the snow with the Santa hat over your cowboy hat too."

"Just tell me when. It's comin' up on the end of September, so it shouldn't be more than a month or so." She and Ryan said their goodbyes and left.

It was after noon, so I wandered into the kitchen and made myself a sandwich. I called the sheriff's office, only to find out that he was outta town until tomorrow evening. I figured I'd see him on Sunday for dinner, so I could give him the map papers and talk to him about what Mike and I thought. I was tired as hell from little sleep last night, so I kicked my boots off, went in to the couch, and within just a couple of minutes, I was sound asleep.

I was having this great dream where Mike and I were riding through a forest, laughing and joking with each other. I looked at him and then at me, and realized we were bare assed naked. Up ahead was a cabin. We rode up to it and started to dismount. Then I stepped on something with my bare foot that tickled. I kicked my foot, but it still kept tickling. I realized something was tickling my foot; I could feel it through my sock. I opened my eyes, and there was Mike, a big grin on his face, running his finger up and down my foot.

"Hey, buddy. You sure know how to wreck a good dream."

"Was I in it?"

"I believe you were." I looked around and noticed it was dusk. "What time is it?"

"It's after six."



“Wow, so I slept about four hours. I guess I musta needed it.”

“Yeah, I was lucky enough to get a nap in too. José, Josh, and me got the scales for the cattle in place and put water troughs in the corral too. Wasn’t much to do, so I headed back to the bunkhouse and got some shut eye.”

“And ya woke up hungry and thought you’d come and see if we were still on for dinner.” Mike grinned at me.

“You got it. One thing though, are we gonna have to stop by Sheriff Johnston’s house to give him the stuff we put together?”

“I called earlier; he’s outta town now. I figure we can give it to him Sunday when we have dinner there. Now let’s go eat!” I pulled on my boots, grabbed a jacket, and we headed out to my truck. As we walked across the yard, I noticed lights from the TV in Wayne’s trailer.

“Looks like Wayne’s home,” I said.

“He musta got here sometime this afternoon. Think we should go say hi?”

“Yeah, let’s do that. He might need something.” We walked over, and I knocked on the door. After a few moments, Wayne opened it.

“Evenin’ boys. What are you two up to?”

“We saw your lights on and thought we’d stop by and say hello and see if you need anything,” I answered.

“That’s real kind of ya. I reckon I’m all set here. I got a bunch of them Swanson TV dinners and beer, so I don’t need to go out. I still got some pain pills, so my side ain’t botherin’ me too much. You boys wanna come in?”

“How about a rain check on that, Wayne? We were just on our way up town to get a bite to eat. You wanna come by for coffee or breakfast tomorrow?”

“Let’s see how I’m feelin’. It would be nice to catch up with ya, Jeff. Seems with one thing or another, we ain’t had much time to visit since you got back.”

“I’d like that a lot, Wayne.”

“Good, I’ll see ya tomorrow then. Mike, you keep out of trouble there, ya hear?” Wayne smiled a big smile at Mike.

“Hell, Wayne, we done had enough trouble to last a long time. I’m done with trouble.” Wayne laughed. It was nice to see him feeling better. I reckoned that the pain meds might have something to do with it though.

“Night boys, have fun.”

“Night, Wayne,” We chorused.

We got in the truck and headed off down the road to Winslett. When we got there, we found a parking spot and ambled down the street to the cantina. We settled in a booth, and the waitress came by right away. She was a girl who was a couple of years younger than me. I remembered her from high school.

“Evening guys, anything to drink?”

“Howdy, Debbie, I’ll have an Anchor Steam.”

“Okay, Jeff; what about you?”

“Make it two.”

“So how are you guys doin’ this evening?”

“Fair to middlin’,” Mike answered and then asked, “How about you?”

"No complaints. So, Jeff, I hear you're gonna be featured in the artists' co-op sometime." Ya gotta love a small town. The news got around before I did.

"That's right."

"I'm glad to hear that. 'Bout time they had a local artist instead of a transplant." You could always get hours of conversation from any local about the pros and cons of the weekenders and tourists coming in from Seattle. One thing they had done is quadrupled house prices here. A lot of the locals resented it.

"We gotta make some money off of 'em somehows."

"Most of 'em do tip pretty well, though."

"That's a good thing," Mike added.

"It sure is for me. You boys sit tight, and I'll be right back with your beers."

She had the beer on the table in a flash, and we ordered. I had the burrito especial, and Mike had the taco and enchilada combination plate. We split an order of nachos to start. I had asked Debbie for extra jalapenos on the nachos. I took a long sip of my beer.

"Sure tastes good don't it, buddy?"

"Yep, I like Anchor Steam beer." Mike leaned back in the booth. In the dim light of the cantina, his beard looked much darker than normal. It was a big contrast with his white cowboy hat. My own hat was black felt. We were both duded up. Myself, still from the morning interview, and Mike, for God knows what reason, but I wasn't complaining. I liked looking at him in his tight jeans, dinner plate belt buckle, and bright striped shirt. We sat back and admired each other until Debbie brought the nachos.

"You guys want a pitcher? It's cheaper than by the mug if you're gonna have a couple."

Mike nodded, so I said, "Bring it on!" We dug into the nachos.

"Ain't nothin' better than beer and Mexican food is there, Jeffy?"

"You can say that again."

"I was wonderin', how many rustlers do ya think there are? Can't be too many."

"I reckon you're right. I'd say three, maybe four at most. Two to drive the cattle to a makeshift pen, one to push 'em into a processing truck, and maybe one to process if the other guys ain't doin' it. I guess at that stage, they all could help."

"Gotta be a local too."

"Either that or someone who's spent a lot of time around here. I'd guess to fly so long under the radar, they'd have to know the forest service roads pretty well."

"That's pretty fucked up though." Mike looked disgusted. "Ya hate to think your friends or neighbors could be in on somethin' like that."

"True. The town's small enough so everyone knows, or knows of, everyone else."

"I wonder if the sheriff has any suspects."

"I doubt it, Mike. Given the fact they murdered one man, shot another, and shot at a third, I think if he did, he'd lean on 'em awful hard."

"It still don't add up to me that they'd shoot to kill."

"Me either, bud." Just then Debbie brought us our dinners and a pitcher of beer. Both the nacho plate and our mugs were empty. She refilled the beer mugs.

"Anything else, guys?"

"We're all set. Thanks!" She smiled at us and walked over to the next table. The food smelled great. Nice and spicy. I looked at Mike and raised my glass.

"To friends. I am really glad Dad hired you."

"I am too, Jeff. I ain't never had a friend like you." I smiled at him.

"You're right there, buddy. I am pretty special, and you are lucky to have caught my eye." He snorted and put his beer mug down.

"Yeah, a nice modest, humble friend like you."

I laughed and continued teasing "Well, Mike, I'm smart, likeable, and best of all drop dead gorgeous." He laughed again and raised his glass.

"You know I will agree with you on that. Even though I can say you got a mighty high opinion of yourself."

"Thanks. All teasin' aside, you're pretty incredible yourself. You're sharp as a tack, and one of the handsomest men I ever seen."

"Thanks. You know, I never been able to joke around with someone like we do. I've never had a friend who makes me feel special rather than some stupid redneck."

"That's a good part of what bein' a friend is about. Friends support each other, laugh together, do stuff together, and if needed, tell each other they got too high an opinion of themselves." He laughed at that one, and then looked at me seriously.

"I remember you sayin' that your dad would be happy knowin' we're friends and hang around together." I thought about that one for a couple of minutes. Dad knew I was gay and had met some of my gay friends. He was always open and accepting. He'd read some books about parents of gays and lesbians, and had even attended a PFLAG meeting or two in Wenatchee. I guess he'd developed a bit of a gaydar. Enough to reach out to Mike, who shared the story of his hurt and horrific childhood, and make Dad take him under his wing. He had said that Mike reminded him a bit of me in one discussion they'd had that Mike told me about. They'd also talked enough for Dad to know Mike and I had a lot of common interests. When I started goin' seriously with Robert, I could tell Dad didn't really like him. His only comment was, "If he makes you happy, then I'm happy. No one should have to be alone." I noticed Mike was staring at me intently.

"Ya know I reckon he would. I really have an inklin' that he mighta been tryin' to set us up."

"Really?"

"Yeah, think about it. Dad knew you're gay didn't he?" Mike nodded. "And he told you all about me, my background, my hobbies, interests, and all that right?"

"Yeah...."

"Do you think he coulda been doin' a sales job on ya? Sellin' me to you?"

Mike laughed. "If he did, he was mighty slick about it."

"And successful, wouldn't ya say?"

"Yeah, I guess I'd have to say that." I felt Mike's boots touch mine under the table. I pushed my feet out, so our boots were intertwined. We sat there and smiled at each other as we ate and sipped our beers. We polished off the food and finished the pitcher.

"Buddy, what do ya say we walk up the street to One Eyed Jack's? Maria will be there. Sandy's workin' and they got a band tonight. I could stand listenin' to some good honky tonk. And their pitchers are cheaper there."

"Okay by me." I insisted on paying since I'd invited Mike. He said okay only on the promise that he could pay for the pitcher in the saloon. We headed out into the night. It was cold. Enough

so that I was glad I wore my jacket. The air was clear, and a million stars shined down on us. I could smell wood smoke, dust from the street, and grease from a deep fryer in one of the open restaurants on Main Street. Mike and I walked down the street. We both had our hands in our pockets and were close enough to bump shoulders. It was nice. One Eyed Jack's was only a block away, and we got there pretty quick. The restaurant side was crowded, but the bar side where the band would play was just starting to fill. I noticed Maria and José in a booth. They saw us and waved us over. José got up and sat next to Maria. Mike and I sat across from them. The band was just setting up, and Sandy showed up immediately.

"No Josh?" I was wondering if he was in the bathroom and we were taking his seat.

"No, he had a date in Wenatchee. The cabrón left us all alone tonight." Maria slapped José's arm at the swearword, but she was smiling.

"Cochino," she chided José. Mike looked at me quizzically.

"Pig," I said under my breath. Sandy smiled at us all sitting together.

"Hey, Jeff, Mike. Nice to see you guys. Are you ready for the big entertainment tomorrow, Jeff?"

"I'll get the steaks out of the freezer when I get back home and put the beans on to soak. We can do everythin' else tomorrow."

"Okay," she said and then asked, "What are ya havin' to drink?" I looked at Mike.

"A pitcher okay, bud?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Okay then Sandy, how about a pitcher of Sierra Nevada Pale Ale?"

"Comin' right up. And it's on me." José leaned over the table as Sandy walked to the bar.

"Are you guys on a date?"

Maria slapped his arm again. She said, "Les dejen en paz. Te van a decir lo que quieren cuando quieren." I turned to Mike and whispered.

"Leave 'em alone. They'll tell you when they want to." Mike had turned a brilliant shade of red. He looked at José, who had asked the question in all seriousness.

"How do you know about me? I never told you." At least he wasn't denying anything.

"The way you look at Jeff. It is no big deal, Mike. If you are together, I am very happy for you both. If you are just friends, I am happy. Mike, I'm your friend, your amigo. I want the best for you." Mike stared at him with an abashed look on his face.

"Thanks. It's kinda new for me to be honest about who I am, okay? If I seem kinda uncomfortable or don't answer or somethin' like that, well, I just don't come from a background where bein' gay was acceptable."

Maria reached over and put her hand over his. "We are your friends, Mike. We want what's best for you." She then got a mischievous look in her eye, smiled, and asked, "So, is it a date?"

Mike leaned over the table, and both José and Maria leaned in. He whispered loud enough for me and Sandy, who'd just brought the pitcher and two mugs, to hear, "I'm workin' on it."

"Workin' on what?" Sandy was eyeing us all suspiciously. Mike took a deep breath, and looked around. Everyone looked back at him including me.

"Datin' Jeffy here." Mike was still beet red, but looked pleased with himself. José and Maria were beaming at him. I guess by this time, I was a little red myself. Sandy's eyebrows went up. She laughed and looked at me.

“Jeffy? *Jeffy*?” Maria and José were tryin’ hard not to laugh. “I gotta remember that one, Jeffy.” She continued laughing.

“Hey, I like it when he calls me that.”

“Can I call you Jeffy too, boss?” José was laughing now.

“Sure you can, if you’re willin’ to do what he’s gonna do *if* he and me get together.” José stopped dead in his tracks at that, and Maria and Sandy burst out laughing. José finally joined in, followed by Mike and me.

“Does Josh know?” Mike was still worrying about who knew.

“Sí, he is not blind.” José looked at Mike. “And he does not care either.” Mike raised his glass.

“My old man made my life hell for bein’ gay. He tried to beat it outta me and all sorts of horrible shit. But now I feel like I’m a really special guy. I just want to toast all of ya for bein’ my friends and carin’ enough to accept me for who I am. You have no idea how much that means to me. Cheers.”

We answered in unison, “Cheers.”

“You are special, Mike.” Sandy had jumped in.

Maria nodded and said, “Don’t let anyone tell you that you are not a very good man, Mike.” José reached over and shook Mike’s hand.

“Now that you stopped acting like a hijo de puta, cabrón, you are a really good guy, and I’m happy to be your friend.”

I leaned into Mike and said, “Mother effin SOB.”

Maria laughingly slapped José’s hand.

Mike said loudly, “You are all gonna make me as cocky as Jeffy here.”

“Thanks,” I muttered dryly, once the laughter died down. Sandy mentioned that she got off in ten minutes, so she’d be right over. The band started, and they weren’t half bad. First song they did was “Toes” by the Zac Brown Band. Then after introducin’ themselves, they launched into “Tequila Makes her Clothes Fall Off.” Sandy wandered over.

“Boss let me off a few minutes early if you and me would dance, *Jeffy*.”

“I’m happy to dance with ya, Sandy, but there’s only one person that calls me Jeffy, and it ain’t you darlin’.” We walked out to the dance floor, caught the beat, and started two-steppin’.

“Actually, Jeff, I think it’s kind of cute he calls you that.”

“Yeah, I do too. I think I got it bad.”

“Have you guys slept together yet?” Sandy did have a reputation for bluntness. She was probably my best and oldest friend, so I bit back the “it’s none of your business” type reply I was about to make, and answered.

“No, I think it’s better if we get to know each other first. I seen too many guys who start on the physical right away, and then when that calms down, find out they don’t have anything in common. I don’t want him and me to be like that.”

“It’s pretty amazin’ how he’s opened up since you two started hangin’ together. He doesn’t seem so angry either.”

“José said the same thing.” By this time, the song was done. The band struck up “Why Don’t We Just Dance?” by Josh Turner. It was a shuffle, so we stopped and caught the new beat. Every third set of steps or so, I’d twirl Sandy around. We were both having fun, and a few other couples had joined us on the dance floor. We finished the song and headed back to the table.

"You dance, Mike?" Sandy asked him.

"Ain't never learned. I'll have to though. You look like you both were havin' fun."

"It is a lot of fun, buddy." I drained my mug of beer. Sandy poured me some more.

"So how did your photo shoot and interview with Mary Grace go?"

"It seemed to go pretty well. Fast actually. She wants to get another picture or three after we get the first snowfall." Sandy raised her eyebrows, and Mike got a curious expression on his face.

"You remember that year I came home for Christmas and we were goin' through town and I had that Santa cap over the top of my cowboy hat? We met uptown for the Christmas at the End of the Road carolin'."

"Yeah, how could I forget that? I remember when we were carolin', you insisted on singin' 'Santa Got Lost in Texas'." She laughed. "But everyone did like you singin' a cappella 'Christmas for Cowboys'."

"Mary Grace wants to get some shots of me with the Santa cap on top of my cowboy hat in the snow."

"Do I get a copy?" Mike grinned as he asked.

"First one."

"You guys are getting too saccharine sweet. I'm gonna get us a refill on our pitcher."

"You're the one who's been workin' overtime tryin' to fix us up!" She just smiled and headed off to the bar. José and Maria got back to the table and sat down. Maria turned to Mike.

"Mike, if you want to dance just let me know."

"I never learned how to dance, Maria. My old man saw it as a Satan-led pastime. But sometime, if you don't mind, I'd love to learn."

She reached across the table and held out her hand. They shook and she said, "You're on for that!"

Just then there was a commotion over near the pool table. A group of bikers was playing pool. Winslett is a popular stop for bikers who do the Cascade loop highway, so that wasn't very unusual. One greasy and heavyset guy was laughing really loudly. One of the girls with them said something, and he pushed her away hard. He looked to be drunk. His black T-shirt was riding up over his beer gut, and his filthy jeans made him look like a plumber. His long greasy hair was tied back in a ponytail. Just then Sandy passed by with the pitcher of beer she was bringing us. The fat biker laughed, leaned over, and pinched her backside, hard, when she passed. Sandy let out a yelp and threw the pitcher of beer at him drenching him. He shook it off his face and started toward her. Brian, the bouncer, was moving from behind the bar. Mr. Dobbins, the owner, had hauled out a pistol from below the bar. I had already gotten there.

I stood in front of Sandy and told the fat biker, "Time for you to leave."

"Get the fuck outta my way asshole. I'll leave after I slap that bitch around good."

I looked at him. He was trying to stare me down, which was difficult as beer was running down his face and getting into his eyes. All of a sudden he blinked, and I threw a straight punch right into his solar plexus. He immediately began wheezing and gasping, since I knocked the wind out of him. I reached around, grabbed his ponytail with one hand and the back of his belt with the other. I pushed him forward and out the door. I shoved him hard enough that he stumbled over the boardwalk still gasping and fell in the street. Brian, Mr. Dobbins, his pistol, José, and Mike, were escorting the remaining bikers. As I turned to go back in the bar, the fat biker had gotten his wind back.

"You're dead you fuckin' redneck asshole."

"Funny, I don't feel dead. I'm standin' here breathin' enough to smell your stink from way over there, Porky."

"I'll kill you!"

"I'm quakin' in my boots here, Porky. What ya gonna do, gas me to death with your stench, or ya gonna sit on me?" By this time, his friends had gotten him up and were dragging him off. He turned back and with a final hate filled glance left. We all turned back into the bar.

"You okay, Sandy?" She looked fine, but as mad as a wet hen.

"Yeah, thanks, Jeff. I was about to knock his teeth out with the pitcher."

"Let's go back to the table," Mike added. When we got there, Mr. Dobbins walked over with a pitcher.

"This one's on me, Jeff. You ever want a part-time job as a bouncer, let me know."

"Thank you, sir, I didn't mean to cause any trouble; just looked like you needed a bit of help takin' out the trash."

"No trouble from my point of view, son. You kids enjoy now."

We all chorused, "Thanks."

"You moved very fast there, boss. That hijo de...", he looked at Maria, "that idiota didn't stand a chance."

"We had your back, Jeff," Mike added and José nodded. "Those friends of his were closin' in on you from behind."

"You and Maria need a ride home or an escort tonight, just in case that trash shows back up?"

"We're stayin' out at the ranch tonight, right, Maria?"

"Right, Sandy!"

"I mean, Jeff, if we're cookin' and gettin' ready for a bunch of dudes tomorrow, I want to be there. Besides, someone's gotta chaperone you and Mike, so ya don't get into trouble." José laughed at Sandy's remark.

Mike turned red, and I just answered, "I can handle trouble."

"See there Mike?" Sandy winked at him. "You're gonna be in good hands."

"I got no doubt about that, Sandy."

"Jeff, for tomorrow I was thinkin' you could make your cowboy spuds instead of baked potatoes. That little guy who wants to be a cowboy so bad, will love 'em. You ever tried Jeff's cowboy spuds, Mike?"

"Can't say as I have."

"You are really missing out, mi amigo. They are very delicioso," José added.

"Okay, I can make 'em, especially as you'll be there to peel the potatoes, Sandy."

"What are cowboy spuds, Jeff?" Maria asked.

"Just some sliced potatoes, bacon, fried onions baked with some milk."

"That sounds really good. I can't wait to try them." Just then the band struck up "Should've Been a Cowboy" by Toby Keith. All five of us started singing. Sandy and José couldn't sing a note, but that didn't stop them. We were loud enough for the guy who was singing in the band to bring his microphone down to us. It was a really fun time.

We stayed around another half an hour or so, planning tomorrow. We had some ideas to make the kids feel really happy, and hopefully something for the adults too. Mike, José, and I walked the girls out to Sandy's truck and made sure they got in all right. José was parked right next to

them, so he followed. Mike and I were walking back to my truck when a couple of shadows stepped out from a passageway between the buildings. It was the fat biker and a couple of his friends.

He sneered at me and then said, "I told you I was gonna get you asshole."

"Like I said Porky, I'm quakin' in my boots." He laughed and flicked open a switchblade. Mike had moved to my side. "I got it, Mike. When I kicked the shit outta this trash earlier, I didn't even break a sweat. It might be a bit more fun this time since Porky feels more like a man with that big, bad ol' knife to hide behind."

"Okay, Jeff, just let me know if you need a hand."

"Thanks, buddy, but I won't." I said to the fat biker, "So hidin' behind that makes you feel more like a man than a pig that just about got butchered earlier, eh Porky? Well, Porky, you just proved how stupid you are. I kicked your ass earlier, and you're back for more, you stupid stinkin' dumbfuck." I'd been trying to get him mad and make him lose any caution he might've had. He was still a little drunk, that was obvious in the way that he moved.

"Here piggy, piggy, piggy, soooney, here pig, pig, pig," I hollered out at the biker. His face turned red with rage, and he charged with the knife held out in front. I moved forward real quick and raised my left forearm from the inside against the arm holding the knife. His arm went wide, and the knife flew out of his hand. With my right arm, I punched him in the solar plexus again as hard as I could. It knocked the wind out of him again. This time though, I followed through and raised my left knee real quick right into his balls. He let out a wheezy squeal and doubled over. I raised my left knee again and grabbed his head and slammed his face against my knee coming up. I felt his nose break. I pushed him back and just for good measure, punched him hard in his broken nose. He went down like a sack of potatoes. I looked at the other three bikers who were just standing there.

"Next?" They looked at me and each other. Mike was standing next to me and cracking his knuckles.

"We don't got no beef with you, dude; it was all our friend."

"Why don't you get him picked up then and head on outta here?" They moved forward, skirting Mike and me widely. They picked up their friend, who was out like a light, and half carried, half dragged him down the street.

"You okay, Jeff?" Mike asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Wish he would have learned after the first time though."

"He didn't seem too awfully bright though, so don't surprise me none."

"Thanks for watchin' my back there, buddy."

Mike grinned at me. "I like watchin' your backside, Jeffy."

"You know what I meant!" I couldn't help but laugh too.

"Yeah, I do. And don't worry. I am always gonna have your back."

"Thanks." We walked over to the truck and headed back west to the ranch. The night was cold, the air clear, and the stars were close enough to touch. "Bring It on Home" by Little Big Town was on the radio. I had my right hand on the divider between the seats. Mike reached over and clasped it.

"You don't mind do ya, Jeffy?"

"Not at all, buddy. It's nice."

"One thing I will say, life with ya sure as hell ain't borin'."



“Would ya rather it would be?”

“Not at all, not at all.” We rode along in silence and finally reached the turn off to the ranch. I headed up the hill and parked in my usual space in the yard. The light in the bunkhouse was on, so José must’ve got there okay. I could see into the windows in the back of the house. The girls were in the kitchen. We jumped out of the truck. I walked around to the passenger side. I put my arms on Mike’s shoulders. We touched foreheads and leaned into each other.

“I had a great time, Mike. Thanks for joinin’ me.”

“Hey, Jeffy, should I consider this a date?”

“Why don’t you just do that? So did you have a good time?”

“Nicest first date I ever had.” I put one of my hands on the back of his neck and slid the other down the middle of his back. I pulled him into me for a kiss. He still tasted like beer. I explored his mouth with my tongue and rubbed the back of his head below the brim of his hat. Our arms and legs were all tangled up in a good way. His beard felt good on my lips, I knew tomorrow, we’d both have a bit of beard burn. The kiss seemed to last a long time. It was slow, sweet, and held a lot of promise. We pulled back and just looked at each other. The look was deep, soul searching, and filled with caring and promise.

“Good night, buddy.”

“Night, Jeffy, you have a good sleep and sweet dreams.”

“You too, buddy.” We hugged again and then set off in different directions, him to the bunkhouse, and me to the house.

## Chapter Eight

SATURDAY dawned clear and sunny. It was a bit cold, but with the sun out, it should take off the chill and make it shirtsleeve weather. It would be a good day for visitors. In the back we had a big wooden picnic table, and that would be a nice place for dinner. The ranch is at the foot of Lucky Jeff Bluff. Supposedly, I got named after it because Mom and Dad wanted me to always be lucky. I jumped up, threw the covers back, and pulled on a pair of socks, my jeans, which I’d left hangin’ over the bed post, and a T-shirt. I pushed the sleeves of my long handles up, and brushed my teeth. My hair was a mess, so I doused it with water, dried it with a towel, and combed it. I ran the comb through my beard, which was pretty short and better behaved than my hair. Since the girls were over, I thought I’d make myself presentable. I headed downstairs to the sound of laughter in the kitchen and the smell of coffee and bacon. Sandy was at the stove cooking bacon and eggs. Mike and Maria sat at the table drinking coffee. I had to laugh when I saw Mike. We were dressed exactly alike—jeans, black T-shirts, and white long handles with the sleeves pushed up. Only difference was he had his cowboy hat on. Mike was entertaining the girls with tales of our meeting the bikers outside One Eyed Jack’s. Sandy looked at my knuckles. I looked down and realized they were cut up. Porky’s teeth had done a job on them.

“You should get a tetanus shot, Jeff. Maybe rabies too.” Everyone laughed.

“I’m up to date on tetanus. That’s part of livin’ on a ranch. I’ll pass on the rabies though.”

“Did you really keep callin’ him Porky?”

“Yep, it just seemed to fit.”

Mike grinned and added, "Porky felt all brave with his knife, but he was no match for Jeffy." He gave me one of them looks that made me want to kiss him right in front of the girls. Instead I just smiled at him. He smiled back.

"I'm glad you did that, Jeff." Sandy smiled at me. "I got one big bruise where that bastard pinched me. Mike says you broke his nose?"

"I reckon so. If nothing else, he'll think twice before insultin' a lady again."

"I wouldn't count on that, Jeffy. He seemed awful stupid." Mike laughed.

I walked over to the cupboard and got a mug, then to the stove and poured myself some coffee. It was good, strong, and thick. Sandy looked at me.

"Mike made the coffee. He figured he knows how you like it. Oh and by the way, he just told Maria and me that last night was your first date." I looked over at Mike. He was red, but had a big smile on his face.

"I reckon it was. So since it's official that we're datin', get that pretty ass over here and give me a good mornin' kiss." Mike turned even redder, but came over and gave me a quick kiss on the mouth. I moved over to the table and sat next to him.

"So how does everyone want their eggs?" Maria opted for scrambled, and Mike and I both wanted over easy. Sandy had made some biscuits too. She got those out of the oven. Within just a few minutes, we were all sitting down to a nice breakfast. Maria was the first to break the silence that had settled over us as we ate.

"Thank you, Sandy, this is really good."

"Yeah, I appreciate it too, Sandy," I added, and Mike nodded, then looked at me.

"So what's on the agenda today to get ready for the dudes?"

"Well, buddy, I was hopin' you could bring over maybe three or four of the horses and put 'em in the little corral in back. If ya could throw the tack on the back porch, too, that would be great. Get the gentle ones too. I'm sure little Harrison and his sister are gonna want to ride. I don't know about the others, but it don't look like they've ridden a lot. I got a bunch of steaks outta the freezer last night. I can coat those with spice rub. Sandy's gonna help me make cowboy spuds, cowboy beans, and corn salad. I gotta taste for coleslaw, so let's make some of that too."

"Do you mind if I go with Mike, Jeff? It's been a while since I have been around horses, and I miss it."

"Of course not, Maria. Hey, buddy, one other thought, I noticed your buckle from the Methow Valley rodeo. It looks like you can rope, so why don't you get a couple of steers also. We can treat the kids to a mini-rodeo, ropin', steer ridin', and we got that horse that Dad bought before... not too long ago. He ain't broke yet, so we can do some bronc bustin' for them too."

"No problem, Jeff, that'll be easy."

Sandy was lookin' at me. "You're a good man, Jeff. Those kids are gonna have a vacation they'll never forget."

"That's the plan. Now let's get movin'. We finished our breakfast pretty quick. Mike and Maria headed off to the barn and horses. I told Sandy to relax a bit, and I'd clean up. She grabbed a cup of coffee, put enough sugar and milk in it to choke a horse. I cleaned up the kitchen and washed the dishes. In no time it seemed Sandy and I had the steaks seasoned with cowboy rub, and we'd made a big bowl of corn salad and another of coleslaw. A big pot of beans was boiling with some salt pork. Sandy peeled the potatoes. She'd suggested cowboy spuds, so only fair she did the peeling. All that was left to do was to add some onions, chili powder, spices, and beer to

the beans, finish the potatoes, and grill the steaks. Just as we were finishing, I heard Mike and Maria come in. Mike was talking.

“You’re really good on a horse, Maria. Did you grow up on a ranch too?”

“Yes, I did. I remember helping with roundup every year. I haven’t done it in years though. It was fun.” We’d been working several hours to get ready, but we figured we had time for a beer before the guests got here. We headed to the front porch and sat down on the chairs out there. We’d also dished some chips and dip, chips and salsa, and some bean dip for snacks. The afternoon sun was bright, and it had warmed up the day. The aspens on the hills were all golden, and the grass was dry and brown. It was a beautiful day. The four of us sat in companionable silence. José and Josh were off for the weekend in Wenatchee. Wayne’s trailer was dark too. He hadn’t stopped by this morning for breakfast. I hoped he was getting some well deserved rest. After the shooting earlier this week, he certainly deserved some time off. I hoped that whoever he was seeing was taking good care of him. I went in and put the potatoes in the oven and the seasonings and beer in the beans.

When I got back out, we started talking about how to make the day real memorable for the kids. Maria volunteered to ride in the corral with Mike and me when we were doing the rodeo events. Her job would be to shoo away any animals that looked like they were going to step on us. Sandy volunteered to do some stake racing, and we thought it would be fun. I suggested she take the little girl, Lisa, with her. Right about two, our guests arrived. They came in two cars, the Sanders family was in one, and Jonathan drove by himself. As soon as Tom turned off the engine, Harrison and Lisa came running toward me screaming, “Uncle Jeff!”

“Howdy there, little lady!” I tipped my hat to Lisa, who giggled and hugged my leg.

“And howdy to you, buckaroo!” I stretched out my hand, and Harrison shook it seriously and then joined Lisa in hugging me. They next ran over to Sandy and gave her hugs too. I greeted the adults. They were really happy to be here. I introduced Mike and Maria around.

Harrison immediately piped up, “Are you a real cowboy too, Mike?”

He’d heard me call Harrison “buckaroo,” so he answered, “I sure am, buckaroo.”

“That’s right, Harrison, he sure is. He’s my partner like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, or like Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp.” Harrison looked like he was in heaven.

“And just for you, buckaroo, my buddy here and I are gonna put on a little rodeo. And if you want, you can ride a horse too.”

Tom looked at me. “A rodeo, Jeff? Isn’t that a pretty big undertaking?”

“Normally it is, but since both Mike and I compete, we practice once in a while. He and I are gonna do some header and heeler ropin’ steer ridin’ and wrestlin’, and bareback bronc ridin’. And Sandy was gonna show Lisa how to flag race. I can show Harrison, too, if that’s okay. We’ll both go pretty slow.”

“As long as it’s no trouble,” Ann added.

“None at all. Now let’s move in back. I got a cooler of beer and soda out there with a couple of hard lemonades for the ladies.”

We headed through the ranch house, and I gave a mini tour. It had been Dad’s dream home. It was a log home, surrounded by a covered porch. You went in through a mudroom, which had closets and a bathroom off it. The living room and dining room were part of a great room kind of construction. Over the kitchen, dining room, and the three downstairs bedrooms was the upstairs which had a loft with a rail, and three more bedrooms, two with bathrooms in the rooms, and one with a bathroom right next to it. Opposite the loft was a high cathedral type ceiling with the river

rock fireplace in the middle. The rest of the wall was pretty much glass with a nice view of Lucky Jeff Bluff behind it. The house was all done up in Western style; both Dad and I liked it and it seemed to fit.

They all looked around, and Ann finally said, "This is a beautiful home, Jeff." Everyone else nodded.

"It's a nice place to hang my hat at night. I like it."

Harrison piped up. "Did you shoot that deer over the fireplace?"

"Nope, buckaroo, my dad did. And that's an elk. They're a lot bigger than deer. But Mike and I are goin' huntin' next month, and maybe we'll get an elk. If we do, you want the skin? That is if it's okay with your mom and dad?" I looked over at Tom and Ann.

"If you don't mind." Tom looked at me.

"I must have at least fifteen tanned deer and elk skins. No problem at all." I looked at Mike.

"Well, buddy, now we gotta shoot somethin' so's we don't disappoint nobody." I smiled at him and he grinned back.

"We'll get the job done, Jeffy." Sandy snickered and Mike turned red. She began leading everyone out through the back door past the hot tub and into the backyard area. Mike clapped his hand on my shoulder and then gestured for me to go. Ann held back as did Jonathan.

"How long have you two been together?" Ann asked. When we both looked at her, she quickly explained, "My younger brother is gay. Just watching you two, it's obvious you're together. I hope I didn't offend you."

"Not at all, Ann, I been out since I was sixteen, so no issues for me. My buddy here on the other hand is just kinda venturin' outta the closet."

"Jeff was lucky that his dad was acceptin' of him. I wasn't so lucky. My old man tried to beat it outta me until he just kicked me out. So it's a bit harder for me to be open about who I am. Jeff is showin' me, though, there's nothin' to be ashamed of." Ann came forward and gave Mike a big hug.

"Don't let anybody tell you that you aren't a good guy, Mike. When I look at the two of you, and at the friends you have, I think you must be a really special guy to have people like that around you. So how long have you been together?"

"Uh..." Mike kinda stuttered out, "We just had our first date last night. We both figured it's best to get a good friendship goin', and everythin' else will fall into place." Mike was beet red, but had a smile on his face.

"I hope I didn't betray you guys, but I told my sister and Bill and Helen and Walter about you two. Walter doesn't believe me."

"Not from my point of view at all. What about you, Mike?"

"It's okay." He looked a bit nervous, but smiled.

"See, buddy, I told you that you was gonna bust that closet door down." I put my arm around his shoulders and pulled him against me for a second.

He looked at Ann and Jonathan, and they were both smilin'. He smiled back and said, "How about we head out there and make the kids' vacation for 'em?" Ann and Jonathan were telling us how nice we were. Ann mentioned that the kids had talked about nothing but going out to the ranch where Uncle Jeff lives.

"I'm glad you came. So, buddy, you wanna do some ropin' first?"

“You got it.”

We headed out to the back porch. I clapped a couple of times to get everyone’s attention.

“Okay folks, we’re gonna put on a little rodeo for ya. Harrison, Lisa, this is how real cowboys practice for the rodeo, and some of the events in the rodeo. First thing that we are gonna do is called team ropin’. When you do team ropin’, you got two cowboys on a team.”

Sandy piped up, “Or two cowgirls!”

I laughed and continued, “Right ya are, darlin’, the rodeos I compete in, both men and women can enter all events. So anyway, ya got two cow-persons on a team.” Everyone laughed at that one.

“One of the persons is the header, ’cause that person ropes the steer or calf around the head. The other person is the heeler, because that person ropes the steer’s back leg. Am I bein’ politically correct, darlin’?” I looked at Sandy, and she gave me the thumbs up. Maria was going to take care of the gate for this event. I continued to explain how it is a timed event, and Sandy had a stopwatch and whistle.

While Mike and I headed over and saddled up our horses, the men moved the picnic table benches over next to the corral. We’d talked earlier about who would head and who would heel. We would work together pretty good, as I’d scored before in heeling and Mike in heading. Maria let one of the steers out into the corral, and we were off. Mike galloped ahead and began swinging his lasso. I was herding the steer toward him. He threw and the loop settled right over the steer’s head and around its neck.

“Okay, Jeffy, it’s up to you now.”

“Easy as fallin’ off a horse.” I twirled my lasso and aimed for the back legs. I got one and jerked the rope up and tight. The steer was spread out in perfect form.

Sandy blew the whistle and said, “Twenty-two seconds! That was great guys!” Mike and I rode up to each other and high-fived. I’m a bit of a showoff, so I got my horse up into a gallop, set the reins on the horn, and stood up in the stirrups with my arms raised up in victory. I was able to guide the horse with my knees, and I galloped around the corral. Everyone started clapping.

“Showoff!” Mike yelled at me. “I ain’t never seen no one as cocky as you, Jeffy.”

“Not cocky, bud.” I winked at him. “I’m just plain good, and I admit it!”

We rode together to the back of the corral. When we were close together, Mike said, “I’ll be the judge of just how good ya are, Jeffy.”

I couldn’t resist telling Mike, “That you will, buddy; just be prepared to have your socks fucked off and to be ruined for other men, ’cause no one can compare to me.” I winked at him and laughed.

“You’re so humble, Jeffy. I like that in a man.”

While I was showing off, Mike had got the steer into the holding pen, and we were ready for the next one. We did four more tries at the team roping. We managed to rope the steer every time, but the first time gave us the best time. We decided that we’d do some steer wrestling next. Maria got on her horse to be the pick up lady, and Mike manned the gate. I rode over to the side of the corral where everyone was sitting.

“Next, I’m gonna do steer wrestlin’. What that means is Mike is gonna let a steer lose in the corral, and I’m gonna chase it down, jump on it, and wrestle it to the ground so all four hooves are pointin’ up in the air.” I rode over to by where the branding chutes were, got my horse in position, and yelled, “Pull!”

Mike let loose of the gate, and the steer trotted out into the corral. My horse, Charlie, was pretty well-trained, and he knew what was expected of him right away. He began chasing the steer and herded it out into the middle of the arena. He pulled alongside of it, and I leaned over. From the saddle, I was able to grab its horns and let myself fall. My body weight pulled the steer down and stopped it pretty quick. It took a bit, but I got the steer on its back.

Sandy blew the whistle and yelled, "Thirty-two seconds!" Maria had caught Charlie. I walked across the corral and jumped up on him. I rode him to the side gate. Mike was already there on his horse, Thundercloud. We changed places, and it was my turn to open the gate. I tied Charlie to the rail, and took hold of the gate.

Mike looked at me and said, "Prepare to be shown up, Jeffy."

"In your dreams there, buddy!" I began to sing, "Seat in the saddle and hand on the horn, I'm the best danged cowboy ever was born," Mike joined in on the chorus, "Whoopee tie yai yippie ai ay, whoopee tie yai yippie ay ai!"

We both laughed, and then Mike yelled, "Pull!"

I opened the gate and out ran the steer. Mike was good, no denying it. He pulled up next to the steer, stood up and jumped right on the steer's back. He grabbed its horns and let himself fall to one side. The steer fought against him and stood there. Mike scooted back twisting the steer's head around and used his legs to knock its hind leg out from under it. The steer fell on its side. Mike had to pull it over to make all four hooves go up in the air.

Sandy blew her whistle and yelled, "Forty-seven seconds!" I rode up next to Mike and clapped him on the back.

"That was pretty cool how you jumped on the steer buddy." He raised his hand for a high five again and we slapped palms.

"Thank ya kindly, Jeffy."

We each had two more rounds. On my second, the steer got away from me, so I didn't get any time. Mike had thirty-five seconds. My third try was thirty-eight seconds, and Mike wasn't able to hold on to the steer that time. We rode the horses over to one of the holding pens and left 'em there. We walked over to the benches and jumped the corral fence together.

"So what'd ya think, buckaroo?" Harrison couldn't take his eyes off of me and Mike.

"That was real good, Uncle Jeff. I wanna be a cowboy just like you when I grow up."

"And I'm gonna be a cowgirl!" Lisa piped up.

"Everyone havin' fun?" Mike was lookin' at the group. There was a whole chorus of yeses.

"I figure Mike and I are gonna take a few minutes rest, then we'll do some steer ridin' and some bronc bustin'. Then Sandy and I are gonna do some stake racin' with Lisa and Harrison, if that's okay." Ann and Tom nodded.

Tom said, "Sandy explained it to us, and Lisa and Harrison are really excited."

"Great. Mike, let's get some water from the cooler." We dusted ourselves off, ambled over to the cooler, and got a couple of bottles of water.

"How ya doin'?"

"I'm havin' a great time, Jeff."

"Me too." We smiled at each other, and walked back to everyone.

"You havin' fun, Harrison? Lisa?" Both piped up yes right away.

"I hope we're not borin' the rest of ya?" I could hear "not at all, no, this is great," and other good comments, so I thought we were in pretty good shape.

I looked at the group. It seemed everyone was having a real good time. Jonathan said to us, "You guys are real adrenaline junkies. Where'd you learn to rope and ride like that?"

"Me, I grew up with it. I've been doing this type of stuff since I was a little guy just about buckaroo here's age." I looked down at Harrison.

He piped up, "Will you teach me to ride, Uncle Jeff?"

"I figure if it's okay with your mom and dad, we can get both you and Lisa on a horse, a nice gentle one that's used to riders just startin' off."

Tom laughed and said, "I'm not going to say no to that. I'd never hear the end of it." We all laughed.

"What about you, Mike, where did you learn to ride, rope, and do that kind of stuff?"

"When I got out on my own, I ended up in San Francisco. I was what they called 'youth at risk', and I was lucky enough to get into a program where I was adopted by one of the police stations, which had an equestrian unit. They needed a stable boy to help with the horses, and I did that. Some of the officers were weekend cowboys, and they taught me how to ride and rope. A couple of 'em volunteered at a camp for youth at risk with horses on the east side of the Sierra. They brought to the camp on weekends and vacations. I loved the camp and went every time I had the chance. I kept practicin' until I got good enough to get a job cowboyin'. I worked at a couple of outfits in California, Nevada, and Oregon. Then I came out here, met Jeff's dad, and got hired at the Lucky Jeff."

I'd never known that part of Mike's past. I had assumed he had to sell himself like many street kids did. He was pretty lucky that San Francisco has programs like the Youth at Risk program.

Ann said, "So you decided to be a cowboy when you grew up, and here you are. Ranch life seems to fit you both."

"Given what coulda happened to me, I guess I'm pretty lucky, and doubly so since I got friends like Jeffy, Sandy, and Maria." He clapped me on the back, and Maria and Sandy both reached over; Sandy patted him on the knee, and Maria patted him on the shoulder.

Tom jumped in and said, "It's obvious you are all very good friends, and a really good group of young people to do this for us. I can't tell you how much we appreciate it."

"Hey, our pleasure; you ready, buddy, let's rodeo!" Mike jumped up, and he and Maria began walking to the holding chutes.

"Next up is steer ridin'. Mike and me are gonna get on the back of a mean, wild steer. Maria's gonna pull open the gate and let the steer do his best to buck us off. Whichever one of us who's not ridin' is gonna be the pick up man.

"What's a pick up man?" Jonathan was the one who asked the question, but everyone else had a curious look in their eyes.

"Say I'm the one buckin' and Mike is the pick up man. When Sandy blows the whistle for time, if I'm still on the steer's back, Mike'll ride up to me and help me jump off the steer and onto his horse. I'll do the same for him when he's buckin'. Is everybody ready?"

Harrison screamed out, "Yes!"

I headed off to the corral. Mike and Maria had got a steer into the holding chute and had gotten a rope around it, right behind the front legs. I'd hold on to the rope with one hand while buckin'. If my other hand touched the rope or steer, I'd be disqualified.

"You gonna buck first, Jeffy, or you want me to?"

"I'll go; someone's gotta show you how it's done!" I grabbed my gloves and winked at him.

He laughed and answered me back, "We'll see if you're still that cocky after your first ride."

"I ain't cocky, just honest." By this time I'd gotten on the steer, got my gloves on, and grabbed the rope. I moved around until I felt settled in, and my hand was firm on the rope, but loose enough to let go and not get caught if I didn't cover.

Mike looked at me, and I nodded. He really quick-like kissed me on the cheek and said, "Have a good ride, cowboy." Then he went, untied his horse, mounted up, and trotted out into the corral.

The steer I was sitting on wasn't happy, and he kept banging against the sides of the chute. I knew my legs and knees would be all bruised up, but I reckoned I'd have plenty more bruises before the day was done. Maria was looking at me, holding the gate, and waiting for my okay to open the chute. I took a deep breath, felt the adrenaline course through me, and yelled, "Pull!"

Maria pulled and the gate swung open. The steer ran out into the corral and began bucking. Now was the critical time. I had to get the book on the steer and get it quick. The book on the steer is the pattern in which he moves and bucks to try and get the rider off his back. Most steers and bulls buck in a pattern or a book. The really tough ones don't have a pattern, which makes it three times as hard, because you don't have that little half second of warning to know what to do to balance yourself. Time around me seemed to slow down, and my senses were intensified. I could smell the dirt, the steer, the cow shit, and my own adrenaline stoked sweat. The world was going by in a blur, but it seemed like slow motion. I kicked at the steer a few times to get him to keep bucking and give a good show. My right hand was high in the air, for balance, and my left held tight to the rope. I was getting thrown around something fierce, but between my left hand on the rope and my knees on the steer's back, I was hanging on. I guessed I was in pretty good form, too, but nobody here other than Mike, Sandy, and Maria would notice if I wasn't. I heard, as if from a great distance, Sandy's whistle. I'd covered! Meaning, I'd stayed on and not touched the steer or rope with my right hand. Time seemed to come back to normal, and I looked around for Mike. In a flash, he was next to me. I leaned over when the bull was about to buck in his direction. I grabbed the saddle horn with my left hand, letting go of the rope. Mike reached back with his right arm; I grabbed it with my right and pulled up behind him. I grabbed my hat with my right hand and waved it above me. My left arm was tight around Mike, and just for fun I found and pinched one of his nipples. He brought the horse over to the corral near the chutes, and I jumped off.

He grinned at me and said, "Good ride, cowboy!" I smiled my thanks at him.

"You ready to ride now, buddy?"

"Yep, somebody's got to show you up!"

"In your dreams!" He tied his horse near the chute, and we headed over. It took a few minutes to get the rope around the next steer. Mike climbed up the fence and settled himself on the steer.

"Can I use your gloves, Jeffy? Mine are in the bunkhouse."

"Sure." I pulled them off and handed them to him. He put them on. It always amazed me that in the gay rodeo, some first-timers will try to do events without gloves. That's where most of the injuries in gay rodeo come from, rope burn. While I was thinking about the rodeo, we got Mike all settled on the steer.



“Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck; you’re good.” I clapped him on the back. “Besides, you already got good luck. You got me.” I jumped down, ran over to Mike’s horse, and mounted up.

Maria nodded at him, and he yelled, “Pull!”

The steer trotted out of the shoot and began to buck halfheartedly. Mike was having no trouble staying on. I could hear Sandy laughing, and then she yelled, “What did ya do, Mike, sweet-talk the steer so it wouldn’t buck?” Mike kicked at the steer, which just stood there. Maria and I both started laughing.

“Did you look at the steer with big cow eyes, Mike, like you look at some others?” Maria laughed and looked at me when she said “some others.”

Mike laughed along with us and swatted the steer on the backside with his free hand and yelled, “Roast beef! Hamburger! Steak!” He finally jumped off the steer. By this time everyone was laughing.

I rode over to him and said soft enough that no one else could hear, “Hell, buddy, I was lookin’ forward to pickin’ you up! I didn’t get that cute ass of yours in the saddle.” I took my right foot outta the stirrup and held out my hand. He stepped up into the stirrup and grabbed my hand. I put the horse into a trot, and we went around the corral. We each did two more steers. None stopped and just stood there like Mike’s first. I didn’t cover the second time and landed flat on my ass in the soft dirt. Mike laughed at me, but then the tables turned when he got bucked off on his third steer. We were having a great time, and so was everyone else. Mike and I were covered in dust. We shook off, and Maria moved the horse into the chute.

“Okay, next what we are gonna do is some bareback bronc ridin’.” Harrison jumped up and started clapping, and Lisa mimicked him. “Since we only got one bronc that’s not saddle broke, I’m gonna do the ridin’, and Mike’s gonna be my pick-up man. Then I figured after I tire that bronc out, we’d put him out to pasture and let you two junior buckaroos do some ridin’. Sound like a plan?” Harrison and Lisa both screamed happily and ran over and hugged my legs again. Mike had already put a rope around the bronc, and Maria had moved him into the chute. I went over, climbed up the rail, and mounted the horse. He started carrying on immediately. It was going to be a good ride! I got my gloves back from Mike, got situated, and yelled, “Pull!”

The gate opened, and I entered that surreal, adrenaline-fueled world where time doesn’t seem to follow normal rules and you don’t feel how much you’re gettin’ shook up until the ride is done. This time I wasn’t so lucky, and felt myself flying through the air. I landed on the soft dirt, a bit shook up, but no worse for the wear. Mike trotted over, and I got up in the saddle behind him. His horse was well-trained and got right next to the bronc. I leaned over, grabbed the rope, and jumped on his back. He began bucking real hard, but I was ready. This time I stayed on. It must have been about ten minutes I held on and got the stuffing jarred out of me. After about five or six minutes, the bronc was slowing down. I nudged him with my boots, and he started bucking harder. Finally, he was tired out. He settled down and just stood there. I reached over and gently pulled his upper mane to the right and tapped his flanks with my heels. He moved to the right. I got him to walk around the corral. I finally jumped down. Maria appeared behind me with a couple of carrots and an apple. I took them, and with a quick thanks to her, began patting the bronc’s neck. I was talking all low and soothing in his ear. I put a carrot in front of his nose. He sniffed and then took it. I continued until he had eaten the other carrot and the apple. I led him over to the holding pen and put him in there. I turned and began to walk over to the side of the corral.

“And that, buckaroo, is how ya bust a wild bronc!”

“Do we get to ride now, Uncle Jeff?”

"You sure do." Mike had saddled up several of the horses with Maria's help.

Sandy had rolled two barrels out into the corral and placed them on opposite sides of the corral. She put a pole at a third end of the corral forming a triangle. Maria placed two five-gallon buckets filled with sand on top of the barrels, one on each. Sandy stepped up and explained what was gonna happen. I was too busy gulping down some water and stretching out on a bench.

"This event here is called stake racin'. Maria, me, Mike, and Jeff are gonna show you how it's done, and then we are gonna ride with you two junior buckaroos. Sound okay?" A chorus of yes answered her. Maria was by the open gate to the corral. Mike ran over and put a stake with a plastic flag attached to it in the first bucket of sand. Maria leaned forward, swatted her horse with the reins and began a gallop. She ran straight for the stake in the bucket of sand and pulled it up quickly without slowing down. The sand bucket wobbled but stayed up. She galloped around the pole and then stuck the stake in the other sand bucket. She then slowed her horse. Mike was back with us, and he continued as Sandy ran over to her horse.

"See that's all there is to it is movin' the stake from one bucket to another. The trick is to not knock over the buckets." Sandy rode next and ended up knocking over the second bucket. I ran over and refilled it with sand while Mike mounted up. Mike was hitting his horse pretty hard with the reins, and he was all hunkered down as he ran. He transferred the stake and got a better time than either of the girls.

"See if you can beat that, Jeffy!"

"This is the first time I even got any good competition from ya." I mounted up and pulled back from the corral gate. I had my horse at a full gallop even before getting in the corral. I was whipping the reins back and forth and using my heels to gently spur my mount on. I got the stakes transferred and kept at a full gallop. I slowed the horse a bit and then stood up in the stirrups and put my arms straight out at my sides. With my knees, I guided my horse around the corral. I finally reined him in.

"You and Mike got the same time, Jeff!" Sandy and Maria were both shouting at us. I looked at Mike and smiled.

"Looks like there is no 'best man'; we're both good men." He smiled back at me.

Harrison and Lisa were jumping around yelling, "My turn, my turn!" I leaned over and whispered in Harrison's ear.

"You know, buckaroo; we cowboys let ladies go first. It's the cowboy way. How about you say to Lisa, loud enough for your mom and dad to hear, 'Ladies first', and let her and Sandy do a stake race; then you and I will do one. Okay?"

"Okay! Ladies first, Lisa!" Tom and Ann were beaming, and Lisa and Sandy ran off to her horse. They mounted up, and she took Lisa around first at a trot, then at a canter. I did the same next with Harrison, but then got the horse up to a gallop as we headed out of the corral. Next, we let the kids up on the horses.

"Okay, buckaroo, here's how you ride. When you want to go straight ahead, just let the reins loose a bit, and the horse will start to walk forward." He did that, and I walked alongside. "Okay, now if you wanna turn, just very gently pull the reins in whatever direction you wanna go. He pulled the reins right and the horse obediently went right. I showed him left, and how to stop. Lisa had gotten the same lesson from Sandy. We let the kids ride around the corral a couple of times on their own. They were having a great time.

It was gettin' on to twilight and gettin' just a bit chilly. Sandy had finished the beans and potatoes while we were riding, and she suggested we eat indoors. I thought that was a good idea. Mike and I put the horses away, while she and Maria set the table. She'd also fired up the

barbecue, so the steaks were ready for the grill by the time Mike and I got back from the barn. We took the steaks out and cooked them all medium. We had a whole big platter of steaks. The table looked great—steaks, cowboy spuds, cowboy beans, corn salad, rolls, butter, all the fixins for the steaks, and pie for dessert. There was beer, soda, wine, and water at the table too. We all sat down and tucked in.

“This is delicious.” Tom was obviously hungry and also liked the food.

“Just who did the cooking?” Jonathan was asking.

“I did, with some help from Sandy on the prep work, and from Mike on the steaks.”

“You could open a restaurant!” I smiled at Ann. I was really happy to have all these folks at the ranch. Tom suddenly changed the subject.

“Sandy was telling us you are thinking about turning this into a dude ranch and taking paying guests.”

“She’s doin’ her best to talk me into that, ain’t ya, darlin’?” She stuck her tongue out at me.

“In all seriousness, Jeff, when she told us that, we all agreed that you have the perfect setup here for that, and that you four are the perfect hosts.” Tom was serious.

Jonathan commented, “You know, Jeff, a couple of years ago, there was an article in our gay travel magazine about a dude ranch that has a couple of gay weeks. After the article, their business went up five times over.”

Tom stared over at Jonathan. “You’re the publisher of a travel magazine? What a coincidence; me too!”

Ann then added, “The entire West Coast is open-minded. I bet if you were to open a dude ranch here with just about everyone welcome, you’d pack people in.” Ann continued, “The valley here is a year round tourist destination. Early in the spring, you have the jazz concert, and a bit later on, the blues festival. Winslett is starting to book country weekends in the spring and fall, and this is one of the primary winter sports destinations in the Northwest. Summer is beautiful here too.”

“Jeff, I heard from Mike both of you like to hunt and fish?” Tom was looking at me now.

“Yeah, we both do.”

“Why not guide hunting and fishing trips? I bet you two know a lot about camping and the outdoors too. You could do horseback camping trips into the North Cascades National Park.”

“You have two editors of travel magazines sitting right here, and we both think you would have a perfect setup here.” Jonathan looked at me, and Tom smiled and nodded.

Sensing she had an advantage Sandy pressed on. “See, Jeff, you have enough support and rooms in the house to start people in here, and then as money comes in, build some cabins. I’d quit One Eyed Jack’s and come work here to help you.”

“I’ll tell you all what, I’ll think on it. Tom, Jonathan, maybe we could talk sometime on e-mail or on the phone about it. Now I appreciate everyone’s opinion, but I want ya to enjoy your dinner, so eat up while it’s hot!”

“Uncle Jeff?”

“Yeah, buckaroo, what’s up?”

“Why do you and Uncle Mike have those rings on the back pockets of your jeans?”

“They’re called Skoal rings, buckaroo. That’s where we keep our dip. The little round boxes make our jeans wear there, like yours do in the knees.”

“What’s dip?”

“It’s tobacco that cowboys put in their mouths instead of smoke.”

“Can I try some dip?” Everyone laughed.

“When you’re all grewed up you can. It’s a grown-up thing.” He looked really disappointed. Lisa pointed at my sleeves.

“Your shirt is all dirty, Uncle Jeff.”

“Yeah. That’ll teach me to wear white long handles with a short-sleeve T-shirt when I’m buckin’.”

“What are long handles, Uncle Jeff?” Harrison was full of questions. Everyone laughed at this too.

“Well, buckaroo, we cowboys spend a lot of time outside all year round. Long handles is what they call cowboy long underwear. Like maybe you seen cowboys in a bunkhouse in the movies.”

“Are they red?”

“They can be.”

“Cowboys really wear those?” Jonathan had a skeptical look on his face. Mike answered this time.

“Yeah, we do. Line camps usually don’t have indoor plumbing, neither do bunkhouses on some old-fashioned outfits. You gotta use the outhouse in the winter, and you’re glad you don’t have to take everything off or down.”

“Can I have long handles, Mom?” Harrison was looking at Ann with an angelic expression on his face.

“We’ll see.”

“Jeff, one last thing about the dude ranch.” Jonathan had a pretty strong opinion on this. “You and Mike are the real thing, real cowboys. People would come just for that. I know my readers would love it.”

“Mine would too,” Tom added.

When we finished eating, Sandy got up and asked who wanted blueberry pie, who wanted apple, and who wanted cherry. When we were done with the pie, we moved into the living room and continued the conversation. The dude ranch idea kept resurfacing. It was actually beginning to sound possible. It was a nice comfortable evening, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Finally, Tom and Ann followed by Jonathan made their excuses to leave, and headed out. We all exchanged contact information and promised to keep in touch. Tom and Jonathan hung back to let me know, dude ranch or not, they wanted to do a story about the valley and include me in it. I said I’d let them know. Funny thing was, I had started thinking seriously on it.

Once they had left, the four of us got the dining room and kitchen cleaned up pretty quick. Sandy and Maria decided to go back to Winslett. We walked them out to Sandy’s truck. After some goodbye hugs, they headed out.

Mike and I walked back to the ranch house.

“What do you think, Mike, about this dude ranch stuff?”

“Hell, Jeff, I dunno, but one thing I do know is I had a lot of fun today. It might be kinda fun to do this sort of thing more often.”

“If I did somethin’ like that, I’d really count on you to be my right-hand man.”

"I already am, Jeffy." We kissed then, a long sweet kiss that seemed to bond us together. After a few minutes, we broke the kiss and just held each other.

"Jeff, I'm pretty sore. I'm gonna head down to the bunkhouse."

"Okay, buddy. I had a lot of fun rodeoin' with you and just bein' around you today."

"Me too, Jeff; seems like we're doin' that kind of stuff more and more. We're joshin' and flirtin' more too."

"Yeah, it's nice though, ain't it?"

"You have a real nice sleep tonight, Jeffy, dream of me."

"Ya know, buddy, I already do. Good night." We kissed again and headed to our own beds.

## Chapter Nine

I WAS sitting in the kitchen with coffee and some oatmeal. A cold front must have gone over in the night. It was cold outside and rainy. I'd gotten up, come downstairs to make coffee, and then gone back upstairs to throw on a pair of sweats. I'd turned on the heat too. I was a bit sore from the rodeoing yesterday. It was as they say, a good sore. It was worth it to see the looks on the kids' faces.

I heard the back door open, then close. I figured it was Mike, and I was right. He was dressed—jeans and boots. He had on a jean jacket over a flannel shirt and long handles. His black felt hat had some fine beads of moisture on it. He grinned at me.

"Mornin', Jeffy. You sleep okay?"

"Yeah, buddy, I did. How about you?"

"Fair to middlin' as you'd say. It sure was nice seein' how happy those folks were yesterday."

"It was, and not only the kids, but the grown ups liked it too. You want some oatmeal and coffee?" He answered by going over to the cupboard and gettin' a bowl and a mug. He got himself situated and sat down at the little table in the kitchen by me.

"I'm surprised you're here so early, bud. I thought you'd be off in church or something." The moment I said it, he glowered. It dawned on me that given his background and what he'd been through, church was not the thing to tease him about. He took a deep breath, looked at me, and his expression softened.

He then got a quizzical expression on his face and asked, "Do you believe in God?"

"You know, I don't really know. I think the message of Christianity is one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard. A loving God, who loves mankind so much he'd be tortured and die for it. A God who loves everyone unconditionally, and asks us to turn the other cheek, who wants us to help one another, who said, 'as you treat the least of your brethren, you treat me'. That's so beautiful. I just can't reconcile it with those who bomb abortion clinics and shoot doctors who perform abortions, those who use that God of love to justify their acts of hatred, killing in his name. Or that despicable trash picketing funerals of soldiers who died overseas and stating their god did it because the US is too easy on gays and 'god hates fags' and 'AIDS cures fags'. Given the hatred that Christians show and the fact that actions speak louder than words, I

just don't see that love in the acts of most so-called Christians. So I can't really ascribe to Christianity. Have you ever heard of the Gaia theory?"

"Can't say as I have."

"It's a theory that the entire world is one living organism. That it is all intertwined and interconnected. I believe that, and that each and every thing has energy, or a life force or power, or whatever you want to call it. I believe that the absolute manifestation of that power is the creative force, the force that created this wonderful, beautiful intertwined earth. That force, if you call it God, or see its different aspects as different Gods, is what I believe in. I don't really believe that the force or energy or God or Gods really mix in our lives as much as we would like. I do believe that force or energy gives us situations, and by how we handle those situations, we make our own luck and destiny."

"I didn't know you were such a philosopher, Jeffy. That's a real nice outlook."

"Thanks. You know if I touched a sore spot with the church wisecrack, I didn't mean to. I understand that after all you been through, how that would bother ya."

"Hell, I know you didn't mean nothin' by it. Sometimes I just gotta stop and think and realize that friends josh around with each other. I know ya'd never hurt me."

"I sure wouldn't, buddy. So what about you? After all you been through, do you believe in God?"

"Honestly, I don't rightly know. I guess I wanna believe, but it's hard. I just don't see the proof of God in the way people act. And it seems like the ones that believe the most, act the least like they preach. I guess I'm what ya'd call an agnostic."

"Makes sense; I got another idea if you're up for it. How about after Sunday dinner with Sandy and her family, we come back here, maybe watch a movie, and in the evening for supper, I'll make us some pork chops or somethin', and if you were serious about learnin' to dance, I'll teach ya."

"Is this a second date?"

"Only if you say yes."

"I reckon it's a date then." We sat there grinning at each other. Mike finally asked me, "You Irish, Jeff? I figure you are with a name like Connelly, but it's just a guess."

"Yep, my dad's side is Irish, and my mom's side is Irish, French, and my grandma was Nez Perce."

"Cool. My family on both sides is Cajun. With a name like Guidry, you could probably tell. Both my parents came from Louisiana. They'd speak French sometimes. I picked up a little, but can't hardly carry a conversation anymore. Where'd you learn your Spanish?"

"Far back as I can remember, we had ranch hands from Mexico. I'd always liked hangin' with the cowboys, and they taught me Spanish. I took some in high school and college. Found out I swear like a trooper in Spanish, but I didn't know it. I'm gonna jump in the shower. I figure we should be at the Johnston's by eleven. They eat between noon and one on Sundays."

"I'll just be right here with my coffee."

I ran upstairs and stripped and jumped in the shower. The hot spray felt really good on my back and shoulders. I stayed under the shower a bit long since Mike was waiting on me, but it did help with the sore muscles from yesterday. I finally got out, toweled off, and headed over to my dresser. I pulled out my last pair of long handles. I was going to have to do laundry pretty soon. I was low on socks too. I wore a pair of Wranglers with a hand-tooled belt and one of my rodeo buckles. I picked a bright Wrangler shirt striped with green, blue, yellow, red, and black. I headed downstairs, and Mike wolf whistled at me.

“Don’t you look handsome all duded up?”

“Likewise, so I guess we’ll look good together.”

“You said it!” We headed out the door to my truck and then off to the Johnston’s. The rain was coming down in a fine misty drizzle. We’d left early just in case we had to slow down due to the visibility being bad, but we got to town early. I noticed the ranger station on Main Street was open, which gave me an idea.

“You know we were talkin’ about huntin’?”

“Yeah, I’d still like to go if you’re up for it and don’t mind lendin’ me some gear.”

“Let’s get our licenses then. Ranger station’s open.”

Main Street was fairly empty, so I parked right in front of the ranger station. We headed in. There was a ranger I didn’t recognize. That wasn’t unusual; the forest service tended to transfer them around quite a bit. He did recognize me though.

“Hey guys, saw you the other night at One Eyed Jack’s. You did a nice job of taking out the trash.” He smiled up at us.

“That fat biker just didn’t know how to treat a lady. I couldn’t let him treat Sandy or anyone else that way.”

“Good riddance to bad rubbish I say. They’ve been around from time to time this summer. I hope we’ve seen the last of them.”

Mike spoke up, “The fat one tried to pick a fight with Jeff here later.”

“Oh really?” The ranger raised his eyebrows. “What happened?”

“Let’s just say, I don’t think he’s gonna try to pick a fight with me again.”

“Good for you! Now what can I do for you boys?”

“How about a couple of huntin’ licenses?”

“You’re locals right?”

“Yep, just live a few miles outta town on Lucky Jeff Ranch.” He started laughing and looked at me.

“Are you named after the ranch, or is the ranch named after you?”

“We’re both named after Lucky Jeff Bluff.”

“Okay. For the licenses, I need to see some ID.” He took our driver’s licenses, looked at mine, looked at me, then at Mike, back at me, and finally said, “Jeff Connelly. I heard of you. You beat the shit outta that fat biker eh? You certainly don’t fit any of the stereotypes about guys like you. And getting a hunting license, too, that sure doesn’t fit the stereotypes.”

I could feel a slow anger rising up, and my back and shoulders were tensing. I wasn’t going to let this jerk off easy though. “Pardon? Just what type of guy, and what type of stereotypes are you referrin’ to?”

He got all red-faced and hemmed and hawed a bit, and finally stuttered out, “Uh... you know.”

“I can’t say as I do. You have any idea, buddy.”

“Can’t say as I do either, Jeffy. Just what type of guys, and what stereotypes did you mean, mister?”

The ranger stuttered some more.

“Ya ain’t callin’ me a redneck, are ya?” I asked.

“Uh... no, look, no offense, I didn’t mean anything.”

I smiled at him. I was certain the smile didn't reach my eyes.

"One thing I will tell ya, for every stereotype, you'll find someone who fits it. The people that do are the ones that just stand out. And for every group that is stereotyped, you'll find hundreds of us who are just normal folks. Now you were askin' if I'm gay since I don't seem to fall into any preconceived notions you have about what gay guys are supposed to do and look like. To answer your question, I am gay. I ain't ashamed of who I am. My private life is my own business, just like yours is your business and not mine. Now no offense taken; if we made you feel a bit uncomfortable, no offense meant there either." I held out my hand. He took it and shook very quickly. I was thinking maybe I should tell him it wasn't catching when he spoke up.

"Let's get those hunting licenses...." He looked a bit scared. He got a couple of forms out of his desk, and filled them out with details from our driver's licenses. He got up and then laminated the forms in plastic.

I pulled out some cash and paid. Mike tried to object, but I just told him, "You can pack my first deer out, buddy." The ranger laughed. "You know our names, what's yours?"

"Mark, Mark Ashton."

"Mark, pleased to meet ya. If you see us again in One Eyed Jack's, say hi. I'll buy you a beer."

"Okay, only if you let me buy the next round."

"You got it!" Mike and I headed out into the street and got in my truck.

"You handled that pretty good, Jeffy. I wish I could do that rather than get all pissed off."

"Buddy, I was starting to get pissed off too. But ya gotta remember, when someone makes a comment like that or worse, they're either, one, a closet case, two, they're some religious fanatic nutcase, or three, uninformed and naïve. From the way he made the comment, I guessed it was the third."

"You sure are somethin' else."

"You are too, Mike. I wouldn't be datin' you, or layin' awake thinkin' about you at night, or smilin' every time I see you, if you weren't." He just smiled and had a real happy satisfied look on his face as we drove the few blocks to the Johnston's. I'd wrapped the printouts of the national forest and surrounding area in plastic and then put them in a leather folder. We got to the door, knocked, and almost immediately Sandy opened the door.

"Jeff, Mike, c'mon in!" She hugged each one of us and took our coats. I kicked off my boots and so did Mike. Sheriff Johnston ushered us into the living room where the Seahawks were playing the Lions on TV. Mrs. Johnston rushed out and offered us something to drink. The sheriff was having a beer, so that's what we had. Sandy and Mrs. Johnston joined us in the living room.

"Jeff, I hear I owe you a thank you for watching out for Sandy."

"No thank you is necessary, sir. I'll always be there for Sandy. And so would Mike." Mike nodded. "I was just happy to be able to help."

"I hear the guy tried to get back at ya later."

"Yes, sir, he did, but he really didn't know what he was doin', so there was no threat."

"Do you want to press charges?"

"No, sir. Other than a coupla cuts I got when he kept hittin' my knuckles with his teeth, there was no damage done to me." The sheriff laughed at that. He turned to Mike.

"And you, young man. I'm happy to tell you that you weren't ever a suspect; I just gotta do my job. How are you holding up after getting shot at? That musta been one hell of a bad experience."



"I'm doin' okay, sir; although it's not somethin' I wanna go through again. Jeff here took good care of me." The sheriff looked back and forth from Mike to me. His eyes twinkled.

"Yeah, I bet ol' Jeff here did take awful good care of you." Sandy snickered; Mrs. Johnston, Mike, and I all turned red. "But boys, that's what friends are for. Sandy here tells me you two, she, and Maria did a real nice thing for some dudes and a young boy who's gonna remember yesterday for a long time." We spent a while talking about our day yesterday. We went over where I'd met the folks we entertained, and the kids. Before we knew it, Mrs. Johnston said dinner was ready. We headed into the dining room. She'd made a pot roast with potatoes, carrots, and turnips. I love turnips. Mike looked at them suspicious like until he saw me eating some, then tried a bite. We also had green beans, a big salad, and some dinner rolls. It was a great dinner, and we spent quite a bit of time complimenting Mrs. Johnston. Dessert was apple pie. Mrs. Johnston is a great baker, and the pie was delicious. Over coffee afterwards, the sheriff looked at me shrewdly.

"So Sandy tells me you gave that guy from San Francisco the boot?"

"Yes, sir. To be honest, I can't see now why I didn't do it before. We made each other unhappy."

"You just needed someone to show you what you were putting up with and that there's a lot better for you out there." He looked at Mike long enough to make him turn beet red. He then looked at me. Sandy and Mrs. Johnston were in the kitchen.

"Jeff, you remember when you came to my office to tell me you saw Mike and vouched for him?"

"Yes, sir."

"You remember me saying how close I was to your dad, and that you're like a brother to Sandy?" I nodded. "Mike, I hope you know Jeff's dad thought the world of you. We talked about it a few times."

"No, sir, but I appreciate hearin' that. Mr. Connelly was a great guy."

"Well, boys, since he's not here and I am, I am gonna say what he wanted to say to you two. Jeff, he'd always hoped you'd see your friend Robert really wasn't the guy for you, and that you'd come back here to stay."

"I am here to stay, sir."

"Glad to hear that. He was also hoping you and Mike here would be friends. In fact, he told me quite a few times Mike put him to mind of you, Jeff. He thought you guys would click as friends real well. And it seems he was right. I know he cared about both of ya. He didn't want either one of ya to be alone. Jeff, you'll remember me saying I really don't understand how you got to be how you are, or you either, Mike, but remember I also said it don't matter none to me?" I nodded. "Watching you two and hearing about you boys together, you should keep that friendship and build on it. You two seem to have a better basis than most straight couples I've seen. If your dad was here, he'd tell you too. Don't lose that."

"Thanks, Sheriff." Mike and I both muttered that. In that moment, I missed Dad acutely. But I was lucky to have Sheriff Johnston in my life too.

"Now let's go back into the living room, boys."

We followed him and took our seats on the couch while he settled into the lazy boy chair.

"Sir, Mike and I were doin' some lookin' on the computer the other day. We knew the Nelsons and Flannigans also lost cattle. We began to think there might be more victims. We looked online and found quite a few ranches here have got hit by rustlers. Those ranches are all clustered around the national forest. We did a printout if you wanna see it."

“Sure, boys, different agencies don’t always cooperate or fill one another in, so there might be more to this than meets the eye.” We spread the papers over the floor, and showed him how the forest was ringed by ranches which had cattle rustled. The forest service roads showed up on the printout like an interlinked web, connecting the ranches.

“You boys might really be on to something. You mind if I keep these?”

“Not at all, Sheriff, that’s why we printed ’em out.”

We spent another half an hour chatting and visiting. When it was time to go, Mrs. Johnston gave us a huge doggie bag with pot roast, veggies, and gravy plus a spare apple pie. It was about four in the afternoon when we got back to the ranch. Wayne’s trailer was dark, and so was the bunkhouse. I’d mentioned a movie to Mike, so he came right up to the ranch house with me. I asked him to get us a couple of beers and a couple of shots of whiskey while I made a fire in the fireplace. After this last cold front, I was pretty sure that our summer weather was over. The forecast we saw on TV at the Johnston’s called for rain for the next week and nighttime temperatures dipping into the thirties. I got the fire started, and Mike was back with the drinks. I had a couple of gay movies I’d gotten from Amazon.com. One was called *Latter Days* about a Mormon guy whose family can’t accept his being gay. He gets brutally outted on his mission trip to LA. I thought that might be a bit difficult for Mike, given his background. I put in a movie called *Big Eden*. It’s a sweet movie about a guy who moves back to his hometown. Everyone is accepting of him and try to fix him up with this guy who has a crush on him, but is too shy to say anything. It was kind of funny. As the movie started, Mike and I were about three feet apart on the couch. About half an hour in, I paused the movie to make popcorn. We were about two feet apart when I started the movie again. By the time the scene of everyone at Thanksgiving came up, we were next to each other. The popcorn bowl was on my lap, and we were both eating from it without having to pass back and forth. By the time the movie ended, I had my arm around Mike’s shoulders and his head was resting on my shoulder. It was really comfortable. When the movie stopped, neither of us moved.

“Comfy, buddy?” I finally asked.

“Yeah, I am. How about you?”

“I gotta say, not only am I comfy, but I really like touchin’ you.” He snuggled a little closer.

“Jeffy, you know how you were sayin’ you wondered if your dad was tryin’ to set us up?”

“Yeah?”

“What do ya think now?” I leaned my head down and kissed Mike’s forehead.

“I think he’d be pleased as punch. Now if you’re still up for it, you wanna learn how to dance?”

“I do.”

“Okay, when ya cowboy dance, ya sorta just slide along the dance floor. I figure with the hardwood floors here, if we move the couches and roll back the rug, we’ll be able to slide just fine in our socks.” We moved the couches and rolled up the rug. We got out in the middle of the floor. The lights were still low from the movie, but the fire was bright and throwing just enough heat.

“Okay, buddy, the two-step is real easy. It’s two sets of two steps. Now face me. I’m gonna take your right hand in my left. Put your left hand on my right shoulder. Now I’m gonna put my right hand down here around your waist like this. You okay?”

“Yep. Do we get to dance closer?”

“All in time. Ya gotta walk before runnin’. Now I’m gonna take one step forward with my left foot. You step back one step with your right foot.” We did that.

“Now I step forward with my right foot, and you step back a full step with your left. So your left foot is behind your right foot, just like you was walkin’ backward. That’s the first set of two steps. Now I’ll step forward with my left foot another full step and you step back with your right. Got it? Now step back with your left, so your two feet are even. I’ll do the same with my right foot. So see we’re now standin’ with our feet together. That’s the second set of two steps. And we just repeat that.” We continued goin’ through the steps at first walkin’, then slidin. After a few mistakes, a few stepped on feet, and a lot of laughter, we had it down.

“You ready to try this with music buddy?”

“I sure am.” I walked over to the CD player and began lookin’ through the CDs. It occurred to me that this was kind of a special moment, so what song to play. I finally settled on “Tim McGraw” by Taylor Swift, a beautiful song about teenage love and loss.

“Okay, buddy, here we go; let’s catch the beat.” We did and off we went.

Mike was doing a great job. We fit together real good, and as the song went on, we got closer. When it ended, we just held on to each other for a while. I was facing out the glass windows. The clouds had blown off for a little while, and the moon was shining on us like a spot light. I could see lots of stars. The fire cast a warm glow. I could smell wood smoke and clean sweat and Irish Spring soap on Mike. I didn’t want the moment to end, but finally said, “You wanna try something just a little faster?”

“That sounds good. This is really fun. Thanks.”

“There is somethin’ about holdin’ a hunky, handsome guy close and havin’ him put his head on your shoulder.”

“You can say that again.” I picked the second song, “Nothing On But The Radio” by Gary Allan. We got into position, got the beat, and started two-stepping. “You’re picking good music, Jeffy. I really like dancing with you. Could you maybe pick another slow one?”

“Sure, that sounds real good to me.” We each took a drink of the whiskey, and then I walked over to the CD rack and picked one of my favorite bands, Little Big Town. The song I picked just seemed to fit. I started it, and we slid onto the floor.

Suddenly we were real close. Rubbing belt buckles was a good way to put it. My arm slid down from his waist to his butt. I grabbed it and pulled him in real close. His arm on my shoulder went around me, and he put his head on my other shoulder. As we moved in close, we ended up with one of his legs between mine and one of mine between his. I pulled the hands that we were holding right up to us. The song seemed to end too soon. We stayed like that, just holding each other for a few minutes. Finally, we pulled back just a little, enough to look at each other. Mike had a half smile on his face. His tawny brown eyes were gleaming. His red beard caught the firelight.

“Buddy, you must be the handsomest guy on the planet. You’re beautiful.”

He smiled at me. “I think you got me beat.”

My hand was still on his ass. I pulled him in close. We kissed. The kiss was a hungry one. We lit into each other with an intensity that was electric. I could taste the sharp bite of whiskey, and a tangy, malty undertone of beer. My hand pulled his tight, hard butt forward. My other hand was running down the muscles in his back. Our legs were intertwined and we were pushed against each other. The hardness below my belt was intense. The way Mike was pushing against me let me know he was rock hard also. We finally pulled apart. I put my head on his shoulder and nuzzled his ear, licking his earlobe and gently bit his neck.

“Buddy, stay with me tonight.” He smiled at me. I continued, “Let’s go upstairs.”

I grabbed his hand, and we headed upstairs and into my room. We fell into an immediate kiss. I was unbuttoning his shirt, and I felt his hands at my belt buckle unfastening it. All of a sudden, my pants fell around my ankles, and I pushed his shirt down his arms, it stuck on his wrists. With my jeans around my ankles, I had to hobble around a bit to get his shirt off of him. He was unbuttoning my shirt, and I unfastened the buttons on his jeans. His pants fell, and his belt buckle caught on a button on his underwear. We both laughed. To be truthful, we were both a bit nervous, and the comical undressing cut the nervousness. We finally stood there, both of us with our pants around our ankles. I felt down the front of his long johns, and began rubbing his cock through the material. He broke the kiss and moaned, and his hands were busy on me. Having him touch me felt so great; I knew everything was going to be okay. This was the right moment to finally get together. Looking at Mike, I could read the same thought on his face. I stepped out of my pants. I turned him around, and pushed him down on the bed. His feet flew up and I grabbed his jeans and pulled. I knelt over him and began unbuttoning his underwear. Each time I undid a button, I'd rub whatever was under there, his chest, his belly, and all the way down. Finally, he was all unbuttoned. I pulled his underwear and socks off, and he lay on the bed. He had more body hair than I did. His chest and belly were one soft mat. The fur continued all the way down to the base of his cock. His cock was hard and lay on his belly pointing up. I shucked my underwear real quick and climbed on top of him. I rubbed my chest against his, just close enough so only the hair touched.

"You don't know how long I been dreamin' of this, Jeffy."

"From that first day we rode fences?" He nodded. "Me too; I just knew somehow that tonight the time was right." We kissed a long slow kiss. This wasn't desperate like the kiss in front of the fireplace, but more of an exploration. We were running our hands up and down each other. I reached down and fondled his balls with one hand and put the other behind his head, pulling him up into the kiss. He mimicked me, rubbing my balls. I started moaning with pleasure.

"Feel good?"

"Hell yes. Just like that. God, I love that."

"Jeffy?"

"Yeah, buddy?"

"Will you fuck me?"

"I'd love that, buddy, but you sure? If you've never done that, it's gonna hurt a bit. I ain't exactly small either."

"Yeah, I'm sure. I want you inside of me. Hell, Jeffy, I've never wanted anythin' so bad." I smiled at him. I could see the longing in his eyes.

"I like it when you call me, Jeffy."

He pulled me down on top of him and whispered in my ear, "Jeffy, Jeffy, *my* Jeffy. You know your eyes light up when I say that?"

"I bet they do. It makes me feel special when you say my name, when you call me Jeffy." I moved down the bed and knelt between his legs. I grabbed his ankles and pulled them up, and then pushed his legs back so his thighs were almost parallel with his belly.

"Fuck, buddy, you look so hot all spread out for me like that."

"I like bein' spread out for you." There was a tender quality in his voice. When I spoke, my voice was husky.

"I am gonna make you feel real good. Put your hands behind your head. Just concentrate on the feelins I'm givin' ya." I bent over him and began to lick his balls. He must have liked it because he kept giving out these little whimpers and squirming. I slowly moved down to the area

just behind his balls. It's a real sensitive area, so I spent some time there licking and rubbing it with my beard. Finally, I moved down to his hole. He was nice and clean, and I began rimming him. I've always heard if you can rim a man, you can fuck him.

Mike was whimpering like crazy; he kept saying, "Oh yeah, Jeffy, that's it, that feels soooo good, Jeffy." He was relaxing quite a bit, so I figured it was about time for step two.

I told him, "Keep your legs like that." I got up and moved over to the nightstand. I took out a bottle of lube and some condoms. While I was doing that, he rolled over and began to suck my cock. It felt fantastic. Just sliding into his warm, wet, soft mouth was incredible. I could feel precum dripping out of me. It felt great, but I finally pulled back and kissed him again. I knelt between his legs and lubed up his ass. I lay down next to him and began to kiss him. I began rubbing his hole and finally inserted a finger. He started whimpering, and his kissing became more intense. I found his prostate and began slowly moving my finger around it.

"Oh my God! Jeffy, that feels so incredible."

"Glad you like it. Now just keep your hands behind your head, and let me make you feel real good. I wanna show you just how good this can be. It's gonna be extra special for me 'cause I'm doin' it with you." He didn't answer me with words, but I could tell by the expression on his face he felt the same way. I continued his prostate massage and then worked another finger into his ass. He was relaxing and opening up nicely. After a few more minutes, I was able to work a third finger up there. I'd been fingering him for a good forty-five minutes, and he seemed ready for the next step. I got back up on my knees and reached for the lube and a condom.

"Let me, Jeffy." He lubed up my cock and stroked it for a few minutes.

"That feels great, buddy." He smiled up at me. He ripped the gold foil packet open and slowly began unrolling the condom on me. He kept stroking as he did, and it was wonderful.

"What do you do with that thing, Jeffy, play baseball? You are really big."

"You didn't get stunted either, buddy. You ready?" He nodded.

I got on top of him, and he spread his legs. I touched the head of my cock to his hole and poured some more lube down there.

"Okay, buddy. I'm gonna put it in nice and slow. Gonna fill you up." I pushed the head in as gently as I could. He winced. "We okay, here? If I'm goin' too fast, let me know." I just held it there, and he took a few deep breaths.

"Go on." I pushed maybe a half an inch more in.

He winced again, and I said, "There we go. I just pushed about three inches in. Are you with me? If it hurts, we don't have to do this tonight. We got all the nights in the world." He smiled at that and pulled up and kissed me.

"Keep goin'. I want you in me." I pushed maybe another inch in. He didn't wince this time, but did take a few deep breaths.

"There's another few inches, buddy." I pushed in some more. By this time, I was a little more than halfway in. "That was another three inches there." I continued to push. "And another three."

He laughed. "You're big, but not that big."

I pushed in all the way. His eyes opened wide. "I'm in buddy, all the way to the hilt. How's that feel?"

"It feels great, fuckin' fantastic! I never imagined it could feel so good." I leaned down and kissed him. It was a gentle kiss; I just held still for a few minutes. He began to push against me, and I began a slow and easy rhythm on his ass. When I ended the kiss, he began to whimper softly with pleasure. He kept his eyes open and focused on my face.

“Guess what, buddy?”

“What’s that?”

“You’re fucked.” We both laughed. “You’re so tight, Mike. Ya got such a sweet ass. It feels so good.”

“It’s yours, Jeffy, whenever you want it.”

“I’m gonna take real good care of it.” I continued with a nice, easy motion. I wasn’t going to last too much longer, and Mike was dripping precum.

“Hold your ankles, buddy.” He reached up and grabbed his ankles. I knelt up, still keeping in him and keeping a nice slow easy rhythm going.

I reached over, got the lube, and squeezed some on his cock and balls. I grabbed his balls and tugged them a bit. I began stroking his cock with the other hand, in the same rhythm as I was fucking him with. He began squirming and whimpering. We moved together for several more minutes.

“Yeah, Jeffy, oh yeah, that’s it. Yeah, keep that up.” I could feel my balls pulling up and my dick getting even bigger and stiffer. I felt an orgasm begin to build up behind my balls. Just then, Mike let out a yell and shot. The first shot came out so hard, it hit him on the chin. He was squirming and moaning like crazy. That and the fact his ass was spasming around my cock made me shoot.

“Fuck, buddy! I can’t hold back. That sweet ass of yours is too much! I’m there, I’m shootin’!” It felt like I was unloading for a long time. I don’t think I’ve ever had such an intense orgasm. I finally pulled out, pulled off the condom, and threw it off the side of the bed. I reached over to the nightstand and got a couple of hand towels. I handed one to Mike, and cleaned off with the other one. I finally lay down on my back right next to him and pulled him over to me. He put his head on my chest. I kissed him gently on the head.

“Thanks. That was incredible. You okay, not sore or anything?”

“I’m a bit sore, but nothin’ I can’t handle. I kinda like it. When you fuck someone, they know they been fucked.”

“Well, I sure as hell ain’t gonna leave ya feelin’ empty.”

“You didn’t. Thanks, Jeffy. That was awesome. I never, ever realized it could be so good. You were right; it was really special.”

“I think it was special because it was us two. We kinda fit.”

“Yep, we do.” We snuggled together. It began to get cold. Mike commented on it. “Ya think we should get up and get our long handles on?”

“Hell no! Let me pull up the covers. We can keep each other warm. Turn on your side. Besides, you said your ass is mine anytime I want it. If I decide I want it in the middle of the night, I want easy access.” I sat up and pulled the covers up. There was a flannel sheet, a down comforter, and a Pendleton wool blanket, so I figured we’d be toasty enough. There was a spare Pendleton blanket at the foot of the bed in case we needed it. After I had the covers pulled up, I lay on my side behind Mike. I put one arm under his pillow and on his shoulder and the other arm around his chest. I pulled him close. He grabbed my hand on his chest and snuggled into me.

“Any regrets, buddy?”

“None at all; you were right, it was time and that was just incredible.”

“It was incredible for me too. Good night, Mike.”

“Good night, Jeffy, sleep well.” I kissed the back of his head and nuzzled into him gently. He sighed contentedly.

“Let’s get some sleep now, Mike; we done used up this day.” We both seemed to drift off almost immediately. Sometimes it’s awkward sleeping with somebody for the first time. It seems you often have to get used to it, but it didn’t turn out that way with us. We got a great night’s sleep.

IT HAD started raining again in the night, and we woke up to a gray murky light coming in from the windows and skylight. It was cold in the house, but I could hear the heat going. It would warm up fairly quickly. The morning began with a long slow kiss. We explored each other with our hands thoroughly, leading to another earth shattering mutual orgasm. Although I could have stayed in bed with Mike the whole day, I needed some coffee. I got up and put on my red long handles and a pair of black socks. Mike watched me dress.

“I’ll make some coffee. You want to sleep in a bit?”

“No, I’ll be right down.”

He was getting up as I went down the stairs. I got the coffee pot filled with water and on the stove. Out the window I could see José and Josh heading across the yard to the house. I went to the mudroom and opened the door. The pantry door was open, and as they stepped into the kitchen, it blocked them from view of anybody in the rest of the house.

“Hey, boss, buenos días! You seen Mike?”

“Mornin’, Jeff.”

Before I could answer their question, I heard Mike running down the stairs. He hit the wood floor fast and began to slide. He was wearing black socks and a white union suit. He was shouting out, “And he rounds third base and begins the run for home! The catcher is ready and the ball flies. Will he make it? He’s comin’, he’s close, he made it! He scores!” Mike slid into view right about then. He looked at José and Josh, and got this sheepish look on his face. The look also resembled a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Well, boss, now I know you have seen Mike. We were worried about you, Mike! Verdad Josh? Is true?” José was grinning like a cat choking on cream.

Josh was grinning too. “Yeah, that is true. We thought, Mike, you might need some help, maybe you drank too much or got locked out or somethin’. As your friends, we were ready to take care of you.”

José chuckled. “It looks like Jeff took good care of you though, Mike. Real good care.”

Mike was looking even more sheepish. I was trying hard not to laugh myself. Josh looked me up and down and then Mike up and down.

“Looks like Jeff is rubbin’ off on you, Mike. You’re startin’ to walk around in your underwear too. I reckon he was rubbin’ off on you all night eh?”

Mike stood up, looked at me, and then said, “So what? I can’t believe you guys would have a problem with us datin’ or bein’ a couple.”

“Of course not, you are mi amigo! I am very happy for you, for both of you. I cannot think of two nicer guys. If you are happy, I am happy. Just take good care of him, Mike. If you break his heart, I will have to beat you. I do not want to do that.” José was laughing.

Josh piped up, “I’m happy for you both, guys!”

José then turned to me. “When did you get the trucks for, boss?”

“Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.”

“Okay, so we will start roundup tomorrow. So then, today is a day off for next Saturday. You two can go back to bed.” He winked. I reached over, put my arm around Mike, and pulled him close.

“We just might do that.” The guys were smiling and laughing as they walked out and back to the bunkhouse. We could hear them singing as they went, both really off key. They sounded like a couple of wet cats.

“I’m sick of pullin’ my dick alone  
The bunkhouse is like a jail  
I’m goin’ up to the ranch house  
Gonna give up a piece of tail.”

“I guess you’re really out now, buddy.”

“You were right about me bustin’ down the closet door.”

“Any regrets?” I asked.

“Hell no! So what’s on your agenda today?”

“Laundry, or I’m gonna be goin’ commando with no socks. I figured if you wanted, we could throw a football around and work out too.”

“Sounds good to me; mind if I throw my clothes in with yours? I gotta do laundry too.”

“Seems to me you’re gettin’ awful domestic there, buddy.”

He looked at me, but when he saw my joking expression, he laughed.

“I figure that José’s gonna put us out in the line camp tomorrow, so we got today to do laundry and just hang around and have a bit of fun, and then a week of really hard work.”

“Bring it on!”

## Chapter Ten

THE rain had let up enough on Monday to let Mike and I throw a football around and get some good exercise. We had a good workout, too, and relaxed in the hot tub afterwards. We fixed dinner together, and Mike ended up staying with me again up at the ranch house.

Tuesday morning was spent planning the roundup with José. Wayne was still off. I reckoned the four of us could handle it without him though, as earlier in the season, no one had planned on me being available. I had been right when I told Mike I figured that José would have the two of us ride up to the line camp and start rounding up the beeves in the high pastures.

We’d end up culling out the heifers and calves, and sending the steers off to market. Old-time cowboys would refer to cattle destined for consumption as beeves, or beef for just one. Ours were all steers. We still had a pretty good crop, so I wasn’t so certain that we’d be destitute. Beef prices had gone up, too, so we just might be in the green.

Tuesday afternoon, Mike and I were riding up to the line camp. It had been drizzling all day. We both had on rain gear—rain coats over our jackets and chaps to keep our legs dry. Even with that protection, there’s no way in hell you’d stay dry riding in the rain. The worst was every once



in a while I moved my head the wrong way, and some water from my hat brim would drip down my neck. Another front was supposed to blow through tonight bringing clear but cold weather. Neither Mike nor I were talking a whole hell of a lot on the ride up to the line camp. It was a ride of several hours. I was lost in my own thoughts, and I reckoned Mike was doing the same.

I first started thinking on just how nice it was having him around. I was glad he'd stayed with me up at the ranch house last night. I really liked making dinner with him, cleaning up with him, and sleeping together. We had a lot of common interests, and working out together and tossing a football around were fun. We'd both spent a lot of time planning a hunting trip and also talked about doing some fly fishing. We were both looking forward to snowshoeing and skiing too. I wondered if we had jumped into the sack too soon. Not that I regretted the sex; it was fantastic.

Although Mike was really inexperienced, he was a quick study. All he needed was me to respond positively to a touch, lick, or whatever he was doing, and he remembered that. He seemed to note what I did to him and tried it back on me. It was incredible. I'm normally not a touchy-feely guy, but we did seem to touch each other a hell of a lot.

My comment about his getting all domestic was pretty spot on. Only it applied to us both. I was wondering if we were jumping in too fast, too soon, but I didn't see any of the warning flags that would make me think so. For example, although the sex was enough to knock our socks off, it wasn't the only part of us being together. We joked around a lot, in a nice way, both in the sack and out. Last night I'd told him to leave his socks on. He did, and when I had hold of his ankles, I worked them off and told him, "See, buddy, I told you I'd knock your socks off." He was comfortable teasing me about being too cocky or running around without my pants. I wasn't too worried about losing friends 'cause of being too focused on each other. We had spent lots of time with Sandy, Maria, José, Josh, and others, and there were still plans to do that. Tom, Harrison's dad, wanted to come up and hunt with us. So everything I could think of was copacetic. I was riding along just thinking about how lucky I was to have hooked up with him, when he rode up next to me.

"Penny for your thoughts there, Jeffy." He smiled at me. He looked like a drowned rat, and I figured I looked the same.

"Actually, buddy, I was thinking about us." He got a bit of a guarded look. I figured he'd probably been let down a lot.

"What about us?"

"Just how much I enjoy bein' with you, and how much I'm enjoyin' gettin' goin' where this might lead."

"Those same thoughts have been runnin' through my head too. I'm a lucky man to have met ya, Jeffy."

"I'm the lucky one. Despite all you been through, you're a decent, smart, carin' guy. That stuff you been through turns some guys into serial killers."

"That's all water under the bridge. I guess we're both lucky we're friends and more, I'd reckon."

"You reckon right there. We must be gettin' close to the line camp; when we get there, you wanna take care of the horses and tack, or you wanna start the fire, get water, and get some coffee on?"

"Horses sound good to me."

"Yeah, I was afraid you'd say that. I hate haulin' water."

"It'll only be two days."

"True. I am lookin' forward to gettin' in outta this rain."

“That makes two of us, Jeffy.” After a few minutes, we could see the outline of the line camp building through the misty drizzle. It was a small cabin, outhouse, and a corral and shed for the horses. There was a well for water. No electricity or indoor plumbing, but with the wood stove and kerosene lamps, we’d be fine. We got there and got the chores taken care of right quick. By the time I had a fire built in the wood stove, water in the water bucket, and the lamps lit, Mike was done with the horses. They were in the corral, watered and fed, and the tack had been dried off and put in the shed. There were bunk beds in the camp, but the bottom one was a double, so we just made that one up.

“What’s for dinner, Jeff?”

“Let’s see what Wayne left us.” We looked through the cupboards. A couple of cans of beef stew seemed to be calling my name. There was a lot of macaroni, so I suggested that to Mike. It sounded fine to him, so I got the water for the macaroni on, while he fixed up a clothesline. For once he beat me gettin’ his boots, shirt, and pants off. As soon as I had dinner started, I took off the outer clothes too. We were both wearing wool union suits and socks, so even though they were damp, they kept us warm. It was warm in the cabin, and we could see the clothes, both on the line and what we had on, steaming. The smell in the cabin brought back lots of memories of roundups. It smelled like wood smoke, horse, wet wool, and sweat. It wasn’t a bad smell. Soon the macaroni was pretty much done. I drained it and added both cans of beef stew to it. It would be breakfast if we didn’t eat it all tonight. After dinner we sat together on the lower bunk, cuddled together, and just enjoyed the time and space.

“Ya know, Jeff, I just love cowboyin’. Even when I didn’t have any friends at some of the ranches, it was great.”

“Yep, even though we don’t have any beer, like the old commercial says, it don’t get any better than this.” He leaned his head on my shoulder.

“I never figured I’d find a boyfriend or partner I could just be me with,” Mike said, “I was always afraid if I did come outta the closet, it would be the end of bein’ a man. I’m really happy you showed me I can be both.”

“The important thing, buddy, is bein’ proud of who ya are. Do you know anythin’ about gay history and the gay rights movement?”

“Can’t say as I do; it’s not somethin’ they teach in schools in Nebraska.”

“The gay rights movement in the US started in 1969, in New York. At that time, it was normal for the cops to go into gay bars, raid the place, kick the shit outta some of the guys, I’ve heard rape some of ’em, but I don’t know if that’s true, and then arrest ’em, publish their names in the paper, and make sure everyone knew they was arrested in a gay bar. At that time it usually meant the end of the guy’s job, reputation, friends, just about everything. In New York, there’s this bar called Stonewall. It was a drag queen bar. One night the police raided it. And the drag queens fought back. They tore off their high heels and beat the cops with the spikes, they really fought back. The neighborhood was gay, and they joined in. And these drag queens beat the shit outta New York City policemen. It caused a riot in New York. The riot spread to San Francisco. And that’s how the gay rights movement started.”

“We’re still fightin’ for rights that everyone else takes for granted, ain’t we?”

“We are. A lotta people don’t understand how important it is to be able to marry, or at least get the same protection for our relationships as married couples get. Remember Terry Schiavo?” He nodded.

“Her husband wanted one thing for her and her parents another. And after goin’ through hell on both sides, the court sided with the husband, since in a married relationship the spouse is the one who makes those decisions. I know people in San Francisco and LA who lost their homes and

everything else after their partner died. If they hadn't made a will and remade it several times over, the survivor would be forced to sell their home and give half to the partner's parents. Even if the parents were never there and hated their kid for bein' gay. Let's use you and me for example. Say we keep goin' like we are, and fifty years down the road, we're co-owners of the ranch. You pass on, and your father is still alive. He could force me to sell the ranch and give half to him." Mike had a horrified expression on his face. "It's just as important when a kid is involved. There've been cases of kids gettin' taken away from gay parents, just for the parents bein' gay."

"That's really fucked up."

"There's a lot of people who have a belief system based on hate. And they try as hard as they can to perpetuate hate against whatever group is up for that sorta thing. Did you know that one of the evangelical churches, I forget which one, just said in the 1980s that slavery was wrong? Their justification on havin' previously condoned it was the Bible talks about how to treat slaves. Those people are the ones fightin' against gay rights like they fought against racial equality, like they fought against religious equality and women's rights."

"Jeffy?" I could tell Mike was a bit upset about our talk and was gonna change the subject.

"Yeah, bud?"

"Do you mind if we just cuddle tonight? I mean, I'd love to play, and bein' together with you that way is way beyond incredible, but I just want to cuddle and hold each other tonight."

"I think you read my mind, buddy. That sounds just great; you about ready to turn in?"

"Yeah." I got up and turned off the lamps. The fire in the wood stove had died down, but it was still throwing off some light. I climbed back into bed with Mike, and he threw the covers over me. We looked at each other for a few minutes before a nice long good night kiss.

"Mike, let's get some sleep; we done used up this day." I think we both fell asleep immediately.

IT MUST have been about two in the morning when I woke up. I'd had a couple of cups of coffee with dinner, and coffee goes right through me. I slowly and quietly pulled out of bed so as not to wake Mike. He mumbled something in his sleep and then turned over and began snoring softly. I like it when he snores. It's not loud, and I know he's there. I got it bad, don't I? I pulled on my boots and my hat. I was dry by now, and the sky had cleared. It was a bit windy and cold, but that's why I was wearing wool. I didn't bother to go to the outhouse, but just walked a few feet away from the cabin and did what I had to do. While I was draining, I looked up. The stars were so bright it seemed like you could touch them. It was a dark moon, and the Milky Way was clearly visible. A shooting star streaked across the sky, then another, and still yet another. We must be in the midst of a meteor shower. I finished up what I was doing and went back over to the cabin.

"Mike, get out here. You gotta see this?"

"What, rustlers?" he mumbled, half asleep.

"No, buddy, get your boots and hat on and bring a blanket. You gotta see this." He joined me pretty quick. There was a log placed next to a fire pit off in front of the cabin. We sat on the log, and I took the blanket and threw it around us.

"What's up, Jeff, we coulda done this in the cabin where it's warm."

"Look up."

“Holy shit! Lookit all them shootin’ stars! This is amazin’.”

“Okay, you seen it. You can go back in the warm cabin now.”

He smiled at me. “Sorry to be a grump.”

“I can deal with it.”

We huddled together for about an hour, watching the show above. It was an amazing sight to watch. Finally the time between the shooting stars was starting to stretch out, and we both noticed it was cold out! A frost had settled down, and the ground was a silver white in the starlight. We got up kind of stiffly and headed back into the cabin. Mike threw the blanket over the bed, and I added a log or two to the wood stove. We both jumped in the bunk and cuddled up to get warm again.

“So, buddy, you wish on one of them fallin’ stars?”

He looked at me all serious like. “I already got my wish, Jeff.” He squeezed me tighter. “What about you? You make a wish?”

“I already got it too.”

“I wonder if we wished the same thing.”

“I reckon we did; good night again.”

“Night.”

DAWN seemed to come way too early. Lucky it was clear and sunny, but windy and cold. Breakfast was cold stew and macaroni, and hot coffee. We both looked tired, but I wouldn’t have traded the shooting stars last night for the most comfortable night’s rest. Mike mentioned he felt the same way. Since we were coming back that night, we didn’t bother to clean up, and we left our rain gear in the cabin. We rode for a couple of hours and finally got to the high pastures. There was a lot of water and meadows with good grass here, but since the frost last night, the grazing would be better at a lower elevation, so we decided to drive all the cattle down. Charlie, my horse, and Mike’s horse, Thundercloud, were both good cutting horses and well-trained. We began slowly moving the beeves out.

I started singing to quiet the beeves. It seems when they hear something soft and soothing, they move along a lot more orderly.

“Come listen to a ranger, you kindhearted stranger,  
This song though a sad one you’re welcome to hear,  
We’ve kept the Comanches away from your ranches,  
And followed them far over the Texas Frontier,  
Your wives and daughters we guarded from slaughter,  
Through conflicts and struggles I shudder to tell,  
So fight your own battles and guard your own cattle,  
For us Texas Rangers must bid you farewell.”

Mike joined in singing with me. We both have good voices and sound nice together. The cattle seemed to calm down and moved along downhill where we wanted them to go. We kept singing for quite a while when we finished the “Texas Ranger’s Lament,” we sang “The Whorehouse Bells were Ringing.” A lot of cowboy songs are pretty dirty, but the cattle don’t know the difference. We continued on with “Sweet Betsy from Pike” and then “Joe Tucker.” The

day never quite warmed up. Lucky it was dry though. We stopped a couple of times just long enough to get some jerky or dried fruit out of the saddle bags. I wanted to take the beeves down nice and slow, so they didn't lose weight. Mike had forgotten his dip, so we shared my Skoal wintergreen. Herding can be a bit boring, but that's good. We didn't want the cattle to get away, run, scatter, or any one of the other hundred things that could go wrong. I figured now that the cattle were out of the area which backs up to the national forest, we wouldn't have to worry so much about rustlers. It was a pretty big load off my mind actually.

As the day went on, I was enjoying watching Mike ride. As I said before, he's real easy on the eyes, and he has a fluid grace when he moves. It didn't surprise me that he knew so little about gay culture, gay history, or anything gay. I guess he just had it rough trying to survive after getting kicked out by his religious fanatic asshole father. I'd decided that I'd ask him to go with me to the gay rodeo in Phoenix. I figured the way we had roped together a few days ago, we had a pretty good chance at a couple of team roping buckles. It would be fun, and it would be a good way to introduce him to gay culture. Although there are a lot of drag queens at the rodeo, doing lip sync shows, the money they get they give to charity. I'd always had a riot at the rodeos. I've never been promiscuous at all, but when I was single, I did seem to hook up with someone every rodeo. They were a lot of fun.

You'd check into the host hotel on Friday night. Then you registered as a contestant. After that it was time to get all duded up and head out to dinner. After dinner you'd head out to the gay honky-tonk in Phoenix, Charlie's. Charlie's has to be one of the most fun bars in existence. No attitude, just cowboys and cowgirls having fun. The music was good, the beer was cheap, and there were a lot of hunky cowboys to dance with. I figure though, now that Mike knows how to dance, he'd be the hunky cowboy I wanted to have in my arms while I waltzed him round the dance floor. Anyway, the bars in Arizona close at one, so you'd head back to the hotel after that. If you were lucky, you had someone with you, so you'd get just about three or maybe four hours of sleep before having to get up and head over to the rodeo grounds. You'd be there bucking and roping until about seven or even later. There was just enough time to grab some fast food, and then get all duded up again and head back to Charlie's. Then you'd repeat the whole thing over. By Monday morning, I was always exhausted. One thing I was thinking about is there are always a lot of souvenir and Western goods sales at the rodeo grounds, too, so maybe if I did do this dude ranch thing, it would be a good place to hand out brochures to the gay crowd. It might be a place to sell some sculptures too. I'd talk with Mike about it.

I was hoping the weather would hold through the week and let us get through the roundup without wrangling in the mud. Wet clothes I can handle, but when you're covered in cold mud and know you're out for a few days, it's not a lot of fun.

We finally got the cattle to where we needed them to be for the night. There was water and good grass here, so there was very little chance they'd wander. Mike and I rode around the herd, singing and just making reassuring sounds. I hoped that the rest of the roundup went this smooth. Of course there was no reason to think it might not, but I'd feel safer once we got the steers sold off.

For the first time since he left, I thought about Robert. In hindsight, I wondered why I thought the two of us might work. We had some good times, and he could be witty, funny, and was pretty smart. I was thinking of sending him an e-mail telling him about the dude ranch thing, and he could have a free room there. I realized I was thinking quite a bit about this dude ranch setup. Sandy had done some research and e-mailed me information on just what dude ranches charge, what they offer, and a whole lot of other stuff. She figured I could use the spare bedrooms to house the dudes until I'd pulled enough money in to build some cabins. I had asked her where would she stay then if she was the cook and cruise director so to speak. She floored me by saying, "In the bunkhouse." I told her I really didn't want to explain that one to her dad, but she said,

“Everyone’s got their own room. Just put a women’s bathroom in there, and you’ll be all set.” There were two bathrooms, so that would be fairly easy. I had a feeling Mike might be moving into my bedroom before we got this dude ranch thing going, so there would be more room in the bunkhouse. I wanted to talk with Wayne too. I respected his opinion, and wanted to keep the ranch a working ranch. So we’d see what happened there. Finally, the cattle started to quiet down for the night. I rode over to Mike and pulled Charlie upside of him.

“You ready to head back to the cabin?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty tired.”

“That makes two of us. Let’s get a move on.” We trotted back to the cabin. It was about eight when we got there. He took care of the horses, and I made some boxed macaroni and cheese and opened a can of spam and cut that into it. Not gourmet food, but it sure as hell tasted good. We’d shucked our shirts, jeans, and boots as soon as we got into the cabin. The fire was going, and even though it was cold outside, it was cozy in. We cuddled up on the bunk together after eating and cleaning up.

“You know, Jeff, it will be great to be back in your bed tomorrow night.” I looked at him trying hard to hide a smile. “Umm... I mean if you want me there; if I was pushy or somethin’, I didn’t mean it.” I had to laugh.

“Buddy, you got a standin’ invitation in my bed. If for some reason I don’t want you there or you don’t wanna be there, we just gotta speak up. Can’t see what those reasons might be, unless one of us is sick though.” He looked really relieved.

“Good. I’m sorry if I seem so jumpy about it all. Datin’ anyone or havin’ a boyfriend or whatever is real new to me.” I pulled him close and gave him a kiss.

“Don’t worry about it, you’re doin’ fine. I did want to ask you though, what do ya think about this dude ranch stuff?”

“I dunno, Jeffy; I’m just a waddie, a hand.”

“Well, you’re my waddie, so that makes your opinion mighty important to me. Mike, seriously, you are one sharp guy. You’re a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for. That’s another reason I value what ya got to say.” He was quiet for a few minutes and then spoke up.

“You’re not usin’ all those bedrooms in the house. And look at all the fun the folks had over on Saturday. Hell, we had fun too. You got a way with people, Jeffy; they just kinda naturally like you. You’d make a great host.”

“And just what would you be doin’?”

“I’ll be your right-hand man. I’ll do the stuff that needs to get done, that you can’t do. And Sandy said she’d be the cook and cleaner.”

“I ain’t gonna put all that on Sandy. Both of us would have to help.”

“No problem by me.”

“So what if we get folks like Robert? They like the idea of a ranch, but when they get here, it’s not their cup of tea.”

“There’s enough to do in the valley here to keep folks entertained. And they really don’t have to do nothin’. They’ll be on vacation; lot of ’em might just wanna sit and read or watch movies or relax.”

“I reckon so. Maybe we could do a weekly little rodeo type thing in the summer and fall. I suppose we could guide pack and huntin’ and fishin’ trips.”

“Honestly, Jeffy, I think it’s a great idea. You’re good with the numbers; why don’t you run some. Do you wanna keep the ranch a workin’ ranch?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’ll need to hire a couple more hands. If I’m workin’ with you doin’ dude herdin’, I ain’t gonna be able to cowboy a lot. You gonna have it gay, straight, mixed?”

“I’d like it mixed. It seems to me, when people mix and see each other as people rather than walking stereotypes, they get along a lot better.”

“Maybe you should try and get a gay hand then. One who can work with gay dudes.”

“What about a lesbian hand?” I asked that mostly in fun, but Mike’s answer surprised me.

“You said there was a lotta gay women in the gay rodeos, why not, when we get to that point. Hell, you may wanna hire her first, since we got two gay cowboys already.”

“See, buddy, that’s why I value your opinion; I can bounce stuff off’n you like this, and you have some good thoughts about it. I got a lady rodeo buddy who cowboys; she’d be perfect. I’m really close to her and her partner.” We were sitting on the lower bunk, right next to and touching each other. I had my knees drawn up, and Mike’s hand was on my knee. He leaned in and rested his head on my shoulder.

“Thanks. If you really want my opinion, I reckon you ought to go for it. I think you’d do a great job at it, and I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

“I reckon the next thing then is to see how much it’ll cost, how much to charge, and to start to look at how much it would cost to build some cabins and furnish ’em.” He turned his head and kissed my ear.

“It’ll turn out just fine.” I changed the subject on him, but my thinkin’ about the rodeo today really made me want to share that with him.

“Hey, buddy, you ever think maybe we should compete together in team ropin’? I can just see those buckles with our names on ’em.”

“Sure, which rodeos though, here in Winslett and Okanogan County?”

“I was thinkin’ of the gay rodeo in Phoenix, and maybe some of the others around the country.” He hesitated a bit. “Nickel for your thoughts.”

“I’m just so used to hidin’ who I am, you caught me up short, that’s all. So we’d go together, and compete together?”

“That’s the idea, buddy; although we’d have to share a room.”

“Only if there’s only one bed.”

“Sometimes I think you can read my mind.”

“Tell me about the gay rodeos, Jeff.”

“They got ’em in quite a few states and most areas of the country. The season starts off in February in Phoenix. Next in April, they have a couple of rodeos, one in Florida and one in Palm Springs. Then there are rodeos in Sacramento, St. Louis, and Detroit. In July there’s one in Calgary. Next are Albuquerque and Denver, also in July; then August is Chicago and San Francisco. In September they have one in Texas, also San Diego, and Kansas City. In October they have a rodeo in Tulsa, and then the finals in Laughlin, Nevada. Some years there are also rodeos in DC, in Reno, in Las Vegas, Arkansas, and Tucson. They’re really a lot of fun.”

“I seem to remember you sayin’ that they’re open competition, women and men both compete in all events?”

“Yep, and some of those women are damned good too.”

“Events all the same?”

“For the most part, there are a couple of events that are just in gay rodeo. Wild Drag Race is one. That’s where you got three folks, a cowboy, a cowgirl, and a person in drag. They let a steer outta the chute, and the cowboy has to wrestle him across a line in the arena. Then the person in drag has to jump on the steer and ride ’em back across another line.”

He gave me a real suspicious look before askin’, “So which one of us would go in drag?” I laughed.

“Hell, buddy, I would. I done it before. Not that it was like real drag. I just bought some old dress I threw on over my clothes and a wig. I must have pictures somewhere.”

“You were comfortable with that?”

I leaned over and put my arm around him. “Mike, buddy, I’m a man. I don’t wanna be a woman, but I got enough balls to wear a costume for the rodeo or maybe Halloween. Sure doesn’t make me less of a man.”

“I gotta stop bein’ so uptight. Sometimes it’s hard though.”

“I understand. One thing, I wouldn’t be with you if you weren’t a real man.”

He smiled at me and licked my ear this time. He murmured into it, “Tell me more about the gay rodeo.”

“They have a couple of other gay events. One is steer decoratin’ and the other is goat dressin’. Steer decoratin’ is with two team members. One dogs the steer, and one ties a ribbon around its tail. The other is a team event where the team members run up to a goat and put some men’s briefs on it.”

“You’re shittin’ me!”

“Nope. Other events are pretty much the same, except for steer doggin’ or wrestlin’. Rather than do it from horseback, they do it right outside the chute. The rodeo grounds always have food, drink, and a dance floor. Lots of drag shows too.”

“I ain’t too excited about that.”

“Ain’t my favorite thing either, but in small doses it can be fun. If there’s no gay honky-tonk near the rodeo, then they have a dance at the hotel in one of the hotel’s ball rooms.”

“Hell, Jeff, let’s do it! The gay rodeo sounds like a lotta fun.”

“Great, so you wanna drive down with the horses, or just fly and risk it with some horse we don’t know and that doesn’t know us. They got stables at the rodeo grounds in case we do drive down.”

“How were ya thinkin’ of drivin’?”

“Since it’s in February, I reckon best way would be go down to the Columbia, and then to the I-5 and take that down, bypass LA, and drive on into Arizona.”

“Don’t make no nevermind to me, Jeffy; I was just wonderin’ about the route.”

“Okay. Lemme check it out; if the stock is halfway decent, we can fly, if not, drive. If we make a respectable showin’, maybe we can continue on through the circuit. I’ll have to win a buckle to give ya.”

“I ain’t no damned buckle bunny. Maybe we both need to win and exchange buckles.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Mike began kissin’ my ear again and then reached between my legs and started rubbin’ me through my underwear.

“I wanna suck your dick, Jeffy. I want to make you feel real good.”

His hand down there on my cock and balls felt so good I just told him, “Go for it.” I reached down to unbutton and then free myself, but he stopped me.



“Let me. You just sit back and relax.” He moved over so he was lying on his belly between my knees. He nuzzled my crotch and then unbuttoned my underwear. I sprung free.

“You smell real good, Jeffy, all musky and sweaty.” I felt his tongue begin to just flick out and explore. Just touching, the piss slit, the head, up and down the shaft, my balls. He began that circuit again with longer licks. Finally after repeating it about four times, he slid his mouth over my cock. He made a valiant effort to take as much of it as possible, and got about half in. I reached down and began playing with his hair. He used one of his hands to fondle and tug my balls, and with the other, he formed a tube and began moving that and his mouth up and down. It felt incredible. I was enjoying watching him almost as much as the feeling he was giving me. Every down stroke with his mouth and hand brought me closer. I could feel my balls tightenin’ up and my dick gettin’ harder and begin to swell.

“You keep that up and you’re gonna get a load.”

He pulled his mouth off of me long enough to say, “Let ’er rip, Jeffy!” He kept busy with his hand, and the moment he had me in his mouth again, I knew I was past the point of no return. I exploded into his mouth for what seemed like forever. He kept a hold of me until I started to soften. I pulled him up and kissed him. I could taste me on him over the wintergreen and tobacco of dip. I also smelled myself on his beard and face. The kiss was a long and sensual one.

“So what can I do for you, buddy?”

“Hell, I’m fine now. I just really wanted to make you feel good. That was enough for me for now.”

“Ya did make me feel real good. Just sittin’ here with ya in my arms feels real good.”

“I enjoyed that, Jeff. I wanted it, I got it, and now I’m fine.” I could feel that post-orgasm relaxation slide over me. Mike noticed it too.

“Let’s go to sleep, Jeffy. You asked me what I want, just hold me while we go to sleep. Okay?”

“You got it, buddy.” He settled down against the wall with his back to me. I buttoned up and slid in on my side and took him in my arms spooning against him. It felt nice, cozy, and comfy. It was starting to get cold in the cabin, but we were nice and warm. I must’ve drifted off to sleep almost immediately. I was gettin’ pretty used to being around Mike.

THURSDAY dawned bright and clear, but cold with another frost. We were hoping to have the beeves down to the holding pens by about two. We gulped some coffee, and had some jerky and dried fruit. That would hold us for much of the day. We cleaned up the cabin, and got the horses saddled, and we were on our way pretty quick. I had an idea.

“Mike, buddy, hows about we go out for dinner tonight? I could use a big burger, lots of fries, and several beers.”

“Sounds fantastic, but this time it’s on me. Do ya wanna go to One Eyed Jack’s or the Schoolhouse Brewery?”

“How ’bout we try the brewery? They got pretty good burgers.”

“That’s a plan. So, is this another date?”

“I reckon so. You gonna put out again?” He looked at me and then laughed at the expression on my face that showed I was jokin’.

“If ya sweet-talk me just right. What about you, you gonna put out after our date?”

“Dunno, can’t have ya thinkin’ I’m some kind of slut, puttin’ out two nights in a row.”

"I don't think that at all, Jeffy. I know it's just that my charms are irresistible."

"Yeah, buddy, they are." We both smiled at each other. It was nice to see Mike grinning and teasing back. He was definitely loosening up, especially around me. He was still overly reserved around others, but he was coming along fine.

We got to the cattle and began herding them down to the holding pens. We circled around them, and Mike started to sing. He started with the "Red Light Saloon," a bawdy cowboy song about the high price of prostitutes. He was singing it soft and slow to calm the cattle. I began herding them from the sides and behind. They began a slow amble downhill. I started to sing with Mike. We finished the song, and then he began "Little Joe the Wrangler," and I joined in. It's a real sad song about a young cowboy who dies in a stampede. The cattle seemed to like it, and I reckoned they felt it was score one for their side.

We kept the herd moving and milling around. The aspens up on the hills had turned a golden yellow, and the grass was golden too. The green of the pines and gold of the aspens against the deep blue of the sky looked like a postcard. The sound of Mike singing was relaxing, and the occasional lowing from the beeves sounded calm. I could smell the earthy scent of the cattle. I realized that I could never sell the ranch. It was part of me as was this life; it wasn't only the ranch, and cowboying or rodeoing, but just the area. The valley has to be one of the most beautiful places on earth. I could see the High Cascades shining under a new dusting of snow. Occasionally I could see deer off by the trees. Living in the city, I had really missed things like watching the shooting stars the other night, or the brightness of the night sky, the ability to enjoy the outdoors almost just outside of my back door. I felt a surge of affection for Mike. He liked that stuff too. It was a bond that we shared. It was funny; I'd never met another gay man who spoke the same language as I did. Mike turned in his saddle and saw me looking at him. He smiled. I grinned back.

The morning moved on, and toward afternoon we came up over a little rise, and I could see the ranch buildings in the distance. As we got closer, Josh noticed us and opened the gates to the holding pens. Mike and I herded until the cattle were spread out a ways, and moved 'em toward the pens. The first cattle entered. Josh and José had put fresh water in the troughs and there was plenty of good hay in the mangers. The cattle smelled it, and it made the herding that much easier. Finally, we had them all in the pens. Josh and José mounted up and joined Mike and me in separating the steers. That took a couple of hours more, but we got it done with no problems. Finally, it was quitting time. Mike followed me up to the ranch house. His laundry was still all mixed together with mine. As we reached the mudroom, I turned to him.

"Mike, you ready for a shower?"

"Yeah, I am. You wanna go first?"

"Hell, buddy, the shower in my room is big enough for two."

He looked at me for a second and then started to say, "I ain't ever..." Then he smiled. We stripped off in the mudroom. Our clothes were muddy, had shit on them, and were a bit ripe. We headed upstairs. It felt great to be in the shower, and we took turns washing each other. I returned Mike's favor from last night. I fingered him and played with his balls from behind while nuzzling, kissing, and biting his neck. He jerked off and came in record time. We finally ended the shower and dried off. We got dressed in clean clothes from the laundry basket. By the time we were ready to go to town, it was about seven.

We got to Winslett and parked on Main Street. The Schoolhouse Brewery used to be a genuine one-room schoolhouse. They have a deck out by the river, and sometimes live music on the weekends. They had open mike karaoke on Fridays. It might be fun to do that sometime. We took seats, and the waiter came by. He was a kid from town who had went off to college a couple of years ago.

“Hey, Jeff, Mike, you guys know what you’re drinkin?”

“Howdy there, Tim. I’ll have a Bear Paw rye ale.”

“Me too,” Mike spoke up and continued, “I think we know what we want.” I nodded. “I’ll have a green chile cheeseburger with extra fries. You up for some appetizers, Jeff?”

“Sure.”

“Okay then, two orders of onion rings and an order of buffalo chicken wings.”

“Sounds good, and I’ll have a bacon cheeseburger with fries also.”

“You guys must be hungry.”

“We are,” I answered. “We been herdin’ for roundup for the last couple of days. I been dreamin’ about the burgers here.”

“Jeff, you have any positions for wranglers? I’d like to get a job cowboyin’ next summer.”

“I just may, Tim. I’ll keep ya in mind. Since it’s so early, don’t be afraid to remind me a couple of times.”

“Sure thing, Jeff.” He headed back and turned our order in to the kitchen and pulled two pints of beer. He dropped them off at our table. Mike and I clinked mugs, and then we started drinking. Mike and I didn’t say too much, we just touched boots and enjoyed the food. We were both pretty tired.

“So, buddy, you gonna stay up at the ranch house with me tonight?”

“I was plannin’ on it.”

“Good. I was too. You’re awful easy to get used to bunkin’ with.” He just smiled at me. We made pretty short work of the food. I thought about ordering another beer, but I was tired, doing the driving, and there was beer at home. Mike paid the tab, and we ambled out the door.

Main Street was quiet. I could hear music from One Eyed Jack’s, but it was faint enough that I could also hear the rustling of leaves by the river. I’d ended up parking across the street from the brewery. As we stepped onto the boardwalk, through the quiet of the night I heard the buzz of motorcycles. We started across the street, and the buzz got louder. Just then from the road which went by the ranch up to the national park, came several motorcycles. We were just about three quarters of the way across the street. The motorcycles didn’t slow down, but I wasn’t worried. Main Street is pretty wide, and they had plenty of room. All of a sudden, I recognized the rider in the lead. He didn’t have a helmet on, so he was easy to spot. It was Porky. He aimed his motorcycle right for us and stepped on the gas. I pushed Mike out of the way and began a dive for the side of the street. I saw him pull out a pistol. He took a shot at me. Either I was real lucky or he was as bad of a shot as he was at fighting, ’cause it missed. I did hear it whiz by like an angry hornet. The window of the souvenir shop in front of us shattered. Luckily it was closed. People were coming out of the businesses, and I heard Mike on his cell phone calling the sheriff. As we sat and waited for the sheriff, I wished I’d been a lot rougher on Porky.

## Chapter Eleven

MIKE and I sat in the sheriff’s office. I was shaky after being shot at, but felt bad ’cause when I pushed Mike out of the way, he’d fallen and scraped up his hands pretty bad on the boardwalk. I looked over at Mike and his bandaged hands.

“Jeff, for the thousandth time, I ain’t mad. I ain’t upset, and I’m glad you pushed me outta the way.”

“I know, buddy, I’m just a bit shook up.” Sheriff Johnston came from the back of the station.

“From what everyone says, they turned around and headed back up the highway toward the national park. No place for ’em to turn off until they get pretty far west. I figure someone will stop ’em fairly soon.”

“I shoulda sworn out a complaint the other day, Sheriff. I just figured after gettin’ his ass whooped so bad, we’d seen the last of Porky.”

Mike added, “He’s a coward, Sheriff. First of all, when he came after Jeffy, he had to come with his friends. Now that he’s figured out they ain’t gonna be any help, he’s gotta be on his bike with a gun.”

“Jeffy?” The sheriff looked at me with a big grin on his face. I was turnin’ red and so was Mike.

“Jeffy, son, just don’t go after him yourself, okay?”

“Sir, I ain’t gonna go lookin’ for him, but I can’t guarantee that if I do run into him, he’s gonna be able to walk away.”

“As long as he throws the first punch; just be careful though. We know he’s got a gun. As tough as you are, son, a bullet’s a lot tougher.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why don’t you boys head on home. You’ve been out herdin’ beeves for the last coupla days. You need a good night’s sleep. You see that fat biker again, you let me know right away, okay?”

Mike and I answered in unison, “Yes, sir.” We headed out into the velvet black of night. My truck was still across the street from the Schoolhouse Brewery. We got in the truck, and Mike slouched back, feet together, knees apart and hands in his lap. He took off his hat and leaned back against the headrest. As I pulled out and turned up the highway toward the ranch, I put his hand on my knee. He looked over at me.

“You don’t mind do ya, bud? I just wanna touch you now.”

“I understand, Jeffy, I felt the same way the day I got shot at, and you were there for me.”

“As long as I’m on this earth, I’m gonna be there for ya.” His eyes got kinda misty, and he took a deep breath.

“I know that, Jeff. And you have no idea how much that means to me.” It was gettin’ kinda mushy here, and as self-assured as I can be, which other folks call cocky, sometimes words just seem to get stuck in my throat. So I changed the subject.

“I reckon it’ll take a few more hours to round up the rest of the beeves tomorrow with all four of us workin’. You up for karaoke in the brewery tomorrow? I reckon Sandy will go with us, maybe Josh, José, and Maria too.”

“Sounds like fun. We’ll knock their socks off.”

“You’re getting as cocky as I am, Mike.”

“Hell, Jeffy, no one’s as cocky as you are.” We laughed. We got back to the ranch pretty quick. I could see the reflection of the TV in Wayne’s trailer. The lights in the bunkhouse were off, so we figured that Josh and José were already asleep. I knocked on Wayne’s door. After a few minutes, he answered. We must have caught him about to go to bed; he was wearing long johns and slippers.

“Hey, Wayne, I just wanted to stop by and see how you’re doing.” Mike called out “hi” also.

"I'm doin' fair to middlin'. Still hurtin' though." He looked at me. "What's up with you, son; you look like someone just walked over your grave."

"Some fat biker pinched Sandy the other night in the saloon. I kicked him out, and he ended up attacking me afterwards. This evening he took a shot at me when Mike and I were comin' out of the brewery up town." Wayne's mouth dropped open and his face clouded with anger.

"What in the hell... Are you okay, Jeff?"

"No damage done. Sheriff called in that the bikers were headed east on Highway 20, so they'll probably get caught goin' through Rockport or Newhalem. There's really no place else to go, unless they take a forest service road."

"I wonder just what in the hell is that stupid fuck playin' at. It's one thing to get your ass kicked, but another to shoot at someone." Wayne still radiated anger.

"I didn't mean to get you all upset, Wayne. I just wanted to stop by and say howdy and find out if you needed anything." His scowl softened.

"I'm fine, Jeff. I'm just upset about you gettin' shot at and feelin' a bit cranky because my side hurts."

"I don't want to bother ya any more, Wayne. I hope you get a good night's sleep."

"You too, Jeff, we'll talk tomorrow." He raised his voice. "Night, Mike."

Mike answered and we headed into the ranch house, kicked off our boots in the mudroom, and stopped in the kitchen for a shot of whiskey. It seemed we were both fallin' asleep as we climbed the stairs. We stripped pretty quick, just throwin' our clothes around, too tired to pick 'em up.

Mike laughed, "Jeff, this looks like a straight boy's room, socks and underwear and clothes scattered everywhere."

"We'll get it in the morning." We got in bed. I lay on my back. Mike turned on his side with his back to me, wanting to be spooned.

"Hey, buddy?"

Mike's response was a sleepy, "Yeah?"

"I know every time we slept together I held you, but tonight can you hold me? I just wanna be held." He turned over, and I felt him scoot against me once I'd turned on my side. He fitted himself against me and put his arms around me. I could feel the hair on his chest against my back.

He nuzzled his beard into the back of my neck and whispered, "Good night."

"Night, Mike." We drifted off to sleep beneath the waxing moon shining through the skylight.

MORNING twilight was coming through the skylight when I woke up. We must have shifted around at night, 'cause Mike was laying on his back next to me snoring softly, and I was on my belly next to him with my arm thrown over his chest. It was a comfortable position, and I didn't want to get up. I figured that we'd better get up though, since we had to continue on with the roundup. I rubbed Mike's chest gently, and he opened an eye and smiled over at me.

"Mornin'."

"Mornin', buddy. You about ready for some coffee?"

"Sure am." I got out of bed and picked up my long handles and stepped into them. I buttoned up and sat on the edge of the bed while I pulled on my socks. Mike watched me dress.

“Okay, I’m gonna get the coffee started ’cause if you keep lookin’ at me like that, I might not let you outta bed.”

“Promises, promises.”

“C’mon! Get that sweet ass of yours up, and I’ll get coffee ready.”

I ran downstairs and got the coffee boiling and thought, what the hell, and mixed up some biscuits. I’d just popped them into the oven when Mike came down. He looked really cute in his red long handles all yawning and stretching and looking sleepy.

“Coffee will be up in a minute. Bacon, eggs, and biscuits okay for ya?”

“Yep.” He went about getting all the condiments on the table, and I continued with the bacon and eggs. This was mighty comfortable. It was funny, I’d had boyfriends before, but no one was really a best buddy. Someone who shared my interests, would joke around with me. I remember before I came out my dad telling me that not to worry too much about not really wanting to date any of the girls from school. I remember him saying that when I found the right “person” I’d know it. That gave me pause to stop and think. Maybe Dad took my coming out so well since he already knew? He certainly thought Mike and I’d get on thicker than thieves, and he was right in that.

A sense of loss swept over me. Now that I thought on it, there were so many things I wanted to ask him. So many things left unsaid. I wished he were around to tell he was right. I had found the right person, and I knew it. It was a deep down gut feeling, not just some flighty thought.

I put my attention back to the stove. Bacon was done and so were the eggs. I dished them up and pulled the biscuits out of the oven. Just then I heard the back door open and then shut. It was José.

“Buenos días, José.” I liked to speak with him in Spanish. “You want some coffee and biscuits?”

“Sure, boss.” He got himself a mug and poured some coffee, then added enough sugar to bake a cake with. He then got himself a biscuit and put some butter and jam on it.

“Boss, Mike? I hear you guys had a close call last night. Digame, tell me about it.”

Mike started on the story before I could open my mouth.

“That fat biker that Jeff beat the shit out of the other day took a shot at him. Fuckin’ coward, he wasn’t man enough to fight, so he felt all macho with his gun.”

“How’d you hear about it, José? You guys were asleep when we got back.” I assumed he must have spoken with Wayne.

“I spoke with Maria this morning on the telephone. She is coming up here for the weekend and staying with Sandy again. Sandy had told her.”

“She probably heard it from her dad. José, Mike and I are goin’ to the brewery tonight for karaoke. You and Josh wanna come? I’m gonna invite Sandy and Maria too.” I was watchin’ Mike outta the corner of my eye. When José came in, he scooted up real close to the table, like he was tryin’ to hide the fact we hadn’t gotten dressed yet.

José answered me. “That sounds like a plan, boss. I will ask Josh. Do you want me to call Maria too?”

“I reckon I’m gonna talk with Sandy, so she can set that up if they don’t already have plans.” I couldn’t help but notice José looked a bit disappointed. *Hmmm... that was an interesting thought, José and Maria.*

“Wayne is back, boss.”

“We noticed that last night. I went up to the trailer, and we talked with him a few minutes.” José turned and looked at Mike with a big grin on his face.

“Miguel, I am surprised you and ‘Jeffy’ noticed anything but each other last night.”

Mike turned bright red at this, but grinned back. “Would ya rather we’d come in the bunkhouse and noticed you?” José wasn’t quite that easy to fluster.

“I would have been very complimented, but I know that would not happen.” José clapped Mike on the shoulder. “You are a good man ‘mano. And you have a good man. He is like a brother to me, and I am happy for you. I may tease you a bit, but that does not mean I am not very happy for you. He brings out the good in you.”

“Thanks.” Mike really didn’t know how to take this, but realized José was sincere.

“Mike, since Wayne is back, he asked that you and me go up and round up the cattle in the back pastures and check around for any more steers to the north side of the ranch. He and Josh will start on the south. When we meet, then we will drive the beeves here to the holding pens.”

“Okay. When we gonna start?”

“We are ready, Mike. When you stop staring at ‘Jeffy’ and get dressed, we can go.” I wondered if I should remind José, only one guy could call me Jeffy and get away with it. I figured since he wasn’t speaking directly to me I’d let it pass.

“So what’s Wayne got planned for me?”

“He says he wants you to work on your art, boss. You need to have esculturas for all the people who will buy then after the articles come out.”

“Sounds good to me.” Mike and I finished eating quickly, and he headed up to get dressed. José grabbed another biscuit and headed out the door. I got on the phone and asked Sandy about the karaoke. She was all for it, so we made plans to meet at the brewery at seven-thirty. We’d eat there and then stay for the karaoke. Mike came down just as I was hanging up with Sandy. He gave me a quick hug and a kiss and then headed out the door.

I went out into the shed where I had my casting equipment. I had made a plaster mold the other day, and I was ready to cast one sculpture, but I had another idea in mind, so I wanted to get the idea down before it went away. When Jonathan and his group were here with Tom, Ann, and their family, he’d taken a picture of Mike and me with his digital camera. I’d noticed it this morning when I checked my e-mail. It was a real nice picture. We were standing together, arms draped across each other’s shoulders and smiling at each other. Looking at the picture, I could understand Sandy’s comments about our “mutual admiration society.” It was a nice picture, and I thought it might make a nice casting. We both had our cowboy hats on, I had on chaps, and Mike had a lasso over his shoulder.

I had printed out the picture, and while looking at it, I began to carve. Once I had the general idea down, I started to work on the sculpture that was ready to be cast. I fired up the stoves, one for the metal, and one for the mold. I got on all my protective gear and started to cast. While the metal was very slowly cooling I continued to work on the plastic sculpture for the model. I was doing pretty well on it when I noticed that shadows were lengthening and we were heading toward dark. I’d put a lot of detail into this sculpture, so I was feeling pretty good about it. I headed back into the house to shower and change. I’d just finished dressing when Mike walked in.

“How’d the roundup go?”

“Pretty good, we got several truckloads of beeves off to market, and Wayne’ll have the paperwork for you. We separated out all the heifers and bulls, so we’re set. Just gotta move the rest of the beeves out. Even with the rustled cattle, it looks like you got a good crop this year.”

"I'm glad to hear that. I talked to José and to Sandy. We're all set for the karaoke tonight."

"I'm lookin' forward to it, Jeffy. You gonna want some company tonight?"

"Depends on whose company."

"Gee, I wonder." He was cute when he was sarcastic. I couldn't help but laugh.

"You got a standin' invitation to be my bunkie. I'm gettin used to it." I slapped him gently on the backside. "Now get that sweet ass of yours in the shower and dressed. If you're lucky, I'll take good care of it later."

"Hell, you're lucky I share it."

"Mike, buddy, ain't a time I look at ya or think of ya I don't know that. Now get!"

He headed back to the bunkhouse to shower and change. I reckoned that just maybe I ought to ask him to move his stuff up here. Jeez, I had it bad. Going from "Let's wait and get to know each other first" to thinking about asking him to park his boots under my bed on a permanent basis. I'd admit it. I was smitten. I couldn't help but smile as I thought that though.

I took my truck to Winslett. José and Josh rode with us. José actually volunteered to drive back afterwards since he wouldn't drink. Josh didn't want to sing, and that was for the best. I'd once asked him not to sing to the beebes because he might cause a stampede. We got to the brewpub, I parked, and we ambled in. Sandy and Maria were already there and had saved us seats.

Sandy gave Mike and me a big smile.

"Mike, I hear you're just about all moved into the ranch house? You workin' on gettin' a raise?"

Josh jumped in with a smirk and said, "Sandy, I don't think a raise is what he's workin' on up there. I do bet he gets a raise outta Jeff here."

Mike was coming out of the closet fast, or he just felt comfortable with our friends, so he scooted real close to Josh, batted his eyes at him, and said, "Well, Josh, darlin', can I get you a beer? Gotta get you drunk enough to join us!" Josh turned about ten shades of red. The rest of us just laughed. Tim was waiting on us again tonight.

"Hey, guys, beer?" We all ended up ordering the rye ale. Mike ordered a couple of orders of onion rings and some hot wings. Tim looked at me and Mike and asked about last night.

"I ain't gonna say I wasn't shook up, but Porky's gotta be the biggest coward this side of the Cascades."

"Porky?"

Mike jumped in and said, "Yeah, that's what Jeff was callin' 'im the other night when he beat the shit outta 'im twice."

"Twice?"

"Yeah, Jeff kicked 'im outta One Eyed Jack's, and then Porky tried to pick a fight later."

"I'd just heard about the later. Jeff, your beer's on the house."

"Thanks!" Tim went back behind the bar and began pouring the beers.

"You up for the weekend, Maria?"

"Yes, I am. I had a lot of fun last weekend doing the little rodeo with you."

"I think a fun time was had by all, right, Mike, Sandy?" They both nodded. "How are you doin' Maria? It must be really hard for you now." She looked at me sadly, and a tear came from the corner of her eye.



"It is. It feels like someone ripped my heart out of my chest. Sometimes I just can't believe that life is going on. Pedro would not want me to be sad though. So I try to appreciate him in everything I do; anyway, how's roundup going, Jeff?"

"Hell, most of it's done. We got the cattle in, and the beeves separated from the rest. Now it's just herdin' 'em onto the trucks." Tim came back with our beers and took our food orders. I had the green chile cheeseburger, and Mike had the bacon cheeseburger.

We'd started eating when Maria asked me, "Jeff, José told me that you and Mike are doing karaoke. I would like to do a song; will you do one with me?"

"Sure, Maria, which song?"

"I was thinking 'Picture' by Kid Rock and Sheryl Crow. If that works and we want to sing again, maybe we can do 'Whiskey Lullaby' by Brad Paisley and Alison Krauss."

"Sounds good to me, I know and like both of those songs."

"What are you gonna sing, Jeff?" Sandy couldn't sing a note herself, but she and José and Josh would applaud and cheer us on.

"I was thinkin' 'Why Don't We Just Dance' by Josh Turner, 'I Like it, I Love it' by Tim McGraw, and 'Friends in Low Places' by Garth Brooks. Then my buddy here and me are gonna sing 'Seven Bridges Road' by the Eagles."

"It sounds like a good lineup. You gonna sing anything on your own, Mike?"

"Yeah, Sandy, I was thinkin' of 'God Bless the Broken Road' 'cause it reminds me of Jeffy, and 'Chicken Fried' by Zac Brown Band."

"That sounds very good, boss, Mike, but why nothing Mexican?"

"You wanna get up with me and sing 'Cielito Lindo', José?" I asked.

"No, boss, people will think there is a wet cat here if I sing." We all laughed. Tim came by again, and we ordered another round. We had just finished our food when the DJ guy came to set up his karaoke machine and mikes. He did his introductions and then asked who wanted to sing. I ain't shy, so I got up first. I told the DJ to play "Why Don't We Just Dance." The music began to play, and I began to sing. I was having fun with it. Sandy, Maria, Mike, José, and Josh were all cheering me on, and the other folks in the bar seemed to be enjoying themselves. I noticed a group of middle-aged women over in the corner who really seemed to like the song. They had that tanned, expressionless look that seemed to say money and cosmetic surgery. When I was done, I tipped my hat. Everybody was clapping, so I figured I didn't bust any eardrums or anything. I had just sat down at the table and was listening to everyone tell me they liked it, when Tim came over carrying a mug of beer and a shot of whiskey.

"This is from the ladies over there," he said with a smile as he set it down. I raised my glass to their table, tipped my hat, and took a sip. I decided I'd better walk over there and thank them properly. I ambled over and sat in an empty chair next to them.

"Thank you kindly, ladies, I'm much obliged." They giggled at this. Their names were Pam, Renee, and Carol. They were tickled to learn I was a real cowboy. Sandy walked over, and I introduced her. We invited them to join us. After some table rearranging and introductions, we were all chatting like old friends. Mike stepped up to the little stage then and took the microphone. It seemed to me he was smiling straight at me when he introduced himself and his song "God Bless the Broken Road." I couldn't stop grinning as he looked right at me when he sang.

When he was done, he gave kind of a shy smile and tipped his hat. When he came back to the table, I gave him a high five. Pam called Tim over and ordered Mike a beer and shot. It turned out they were three friends who were up from Seattle for a girls' weekend. Renee got up and sang

some pop song. I didn't recognize it, but Sandy did. We all applauded, and then Mike and I stood up. We walked over to the little stage and asked the DJ guy to put on the music to "Hillbilly Bone." We began singing it quite loudly. Mike and I do a good job of singing together, and it seemed like we had rehearsed the song, even though we hadn't. We got lots of applause.

When we got back to the table Carol asked us, "Where did you guys learn to sing? We always hear stuff about singing cowboys, and it seems to be true."

Mike leaned into me, and I answered, "I reckon just from singin' to the cattle on herdin' days."

Mike jumped in and said, "Yeah, it keeps 'em calm; they don't stampede."

Pam laughed and said, "Just think of the story we'll have to tell the girls back home, serenaded by two genuine hunky, handsome young cowboy studs." Sandy laughed quite loudly at this. The ladies looked at her quizzically. Maria grabbed my arm and dragged me up on stage. We launched into "Picture." I thought we did a great job. Maria and I were able to harmonize together very well.

As we got back to the table, I helped Maria to her chair. Renee looked from Maria to me.

"Sandy tells us your heart's taken, Jeff. You and Maria sing beautifully together. I can tell you care about each other quite a bit."

"Jeff is a brother to me. I love him just like a brother, but I am not the one who has stolen his heart." Maria smiled at me. In that moment, I realized again just how lucky I was to have her and my other friends in my life.

"Well, if it's not Maria, who's the lucky girl?" I snickered and Mike turned all red.

"That'd be me." He was bright red, but had a huge smile on his face. José, Maria, Sandy, and Josh all clapped and were clapping us on the arms and shoulders.

Renee looked at Mike and at me.

"You guys are really gay?"

"Renee, we're not only gay, we're downright jolly!" I couldn't help myself with that.

She looked a bit unsure but smiled at us.

"If that doesn't beat all. This isn't a place I'd expect to find a gay couple."

"Hell, Renee, we belong here. We both love this place. If you look around, you see the people at this table who are our best friends in the world. Believe it or not, we fit in here."

Sandy had to jump in too. "My dad's the sheriff here, and he was just tellin' both Jeff and Mike to take care of each other and watch out for each other. We'd been bettin' how long it would take them to shack up and then get together once they met."

Mike started coughin' on that one, and I managed to stutter out, "You bet on us?"

"Yeah, boss." José's smile was huge. "I won the pool on when you'd first shack up."

"Hell, no wonder you was so happy." I gave him a sour look. Sandy laughed.

"Yeah, but I won about the getting together. I thought that once you shacked up, Mike wouldn't spend another night in the bunkhouse, and he hasn't." Mike was bright red. I must have been too.

"Well, folks, I'm really happy our personal lives can provide you so much entertainment."

Everyone laughed including Carol, Pam, and Renee.

We sat and watched and listened to the other singers for a while. It was fun and some of the people, both tourists and locals, had good voices. Several young guys who had worked with the

forest service sang “Tubthumping” by Chumbawamba and did a great job. Right after that, Mike and I got up and sang “Seven Bridges Road” with no accompaniment.

Mike and I sang to each other. Our voices seemed to complement one another. We got back to the table, and Pam smiled at us.

“Okay, watching you two together, I can see your heart is stolen, Jeff, and yours too, Mike. Did you guys meet here?”

“Yeah, we did. We just sorta fell together.”

“Although we do have the feelin’ that Jeffy’s dad mighta tried to fix us up.”

Mike had spoken the suspicion that both of us had. Sandy snorted.

“Jeff, Mike, he did hope the two of you would end up together. He told me you two are two sides of the same coin. If you didn’t end up together, you’d both be worse off for it.”

“Then why in the hell didn’t he tell me?”

“Keep your pants on for once, Jeff. I reckon he just never found the right time. And Mike did need some work.” Both Mike and I were speechless. A couple of tourists got up and sang “Bring it on Home” by Little Big Town. Renee, Carol, and Pam had been buying us more beer and whiskey, and we were both feeling a bit toasty.

“You all sounded great, and it was so much fun sitting with you and visiting. I’ve gotta say you have really made our evening. All of you are a very special group of young people.”

We all chorused, “Thanks.”

“Jeff, Mike, Sandy was telling us about how you guys are thinking of making part of the ranch a dude ranch.” Renee was talking now.

“We’re thinkin’ on it.”

“She also told us about what you did for that little boy and his parents and the other guy. Pam, Carol, and I are honored to make your acquaintance.”

“Hell, weren’t nothin’ special. We just wanted to make the folks happy.” I was about ten shades of red. I continued on, “I’ll tell you what, ladies. If you are up for it, when I do start takin’ dudes, you got a friend of the family discount. That sound okay to you?”

They all chorused yes, so we exchanged contact information. By this time, Mike and I were more than just a bit drunk. Josh wasn’t far behind us. Luckily, José was totally sober and so were Sandy and Maria. I had my hand over the back of Mike’s chair. His hand was on my knee. It was nothing overly demonstrative, even nothing two straight men wouldn’t do. I did want to touch him bad. I could see he felt the same about me. Everyone began urging us to sing one final song. Maria and I did “Whiskey Lullaby.” It was a sad song about people who loved each other dearly, but couldn’t get it together, so they drank themselves to death.

It served to quiet the rowdy bar down just a little. Sandy smiled at me.

“By the way, Jeff, Maria and I are comin’ out to the ranch tonight,” Sandy said.

“What?”

“Yeah, we thought we might get to see you and Mike eatin’ breakfast in just your long johns.” She laughed and looked at José and Josh, who had the good sense to look away. She then launched into an explanation for the ladies. That made me figure it was time to go. José and Josh agreed. We bid good night to Pam, Carol, and Renee. Sandy and Maria followed us out. It had been a fun evening. As we walked out to the trucks, I went over to Sandy and put my arm around her.

“I am really happy we still hang together, Sandy. I can’t really imagine life without you.”

“Well, we’ve been friends since the third grade, so I feel the same way.”

The girls got in Sandy’s truck, and the rest of us got in my truck. I was in no shape to drive, so was pretty glad that José had offered to be the designated driver. Mike and I poured ourselves into the back seat. He leaned against me, and I put my arm around his shoulders.

“You have fun tonight, buddy?”

“Hell yeah, Jeffy. You?”

“Most fun I’ve had in a while with my clothes on.” José and Josh snickered, and Mike snuggled into me. Life was good.

“José, Josh, you guys have fun too?”

“Yes, boss, it was very much fun.”

Josh added. “I had a great time, Jeff. Renee told me she thinks cowboys are hot. She gave me her cell phone number.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I guess you and Mike here got her all primed, but neither of you is available. I’ll have to use you guys to help me pick up women.”

Mike chuckled, “It don’t say too much for your skills with ladies if you need a couple of gay guys to help you pick up women.”

“Mike, I am open minded. Whatever works, works. I ain’t gonna look a gift horse in the mouth.” I had to laugh at this. The night was clear and cold. I was looking forward to gettin’ between the sheets with Mike and keeping each other warm. As José was getting closer to the turn off to the ranch, it looked like a motorcycle came from the road to the ranch. It was dark and over a distance, but the rider looked fat. He was long gone toward the mountains by the time we took the turnoff. I could see motorcycle tracks in the dirt of the road in the headlights.

As we got closer to the ranch house, I saw cattle in the yard and trotting back to the pastures behind the ranch house. The beeves in the holding pen were still there, but milling around nervously.

“Shit! That fat son of a bitch Porky knocked the fence to the holding pen where the heifers were down! How in the hell did that fat fuck find out where I live?”

## Chapter Twelve

I SAT at my desk in the office, going over the paperwork and the checks we got from the beeves we sold. I had enough to meet the bills and pay the boys, and a bit more; it could have been a great deal worse though. We made a small profit despite the stock stolen by the rustlers. It struck me that I’d mentioned a while ago to Mike we needed to get supplies. I reckoned we could do that tomorrow. There was enough fresh meat in the freezer from two beeves I kept out, and quite a bit of pork I had gotten from the butcher in exchange for a beef.

It had been a busy week. I still had to laugh when I thought about that asshole Porky trying to cause problems with the cattle. He was so stupid though. He busted through the holding pen with the heifers, calves, and bull on the inside of the cattle guard. Which meant the cattle would stay on my property, and all we had to do that evening was herd them toward the pastures. Every one of us, including Sandy and Maria, got saddled up and herded the cattle toward the pastures. We

had planned on doing that after selling off the beeves, but it just got done early. We had the fence repaired the next day, so no lasting damage was done.

I still couldn't figure out how Porky knew where I lived. It just didn't make any sense. It gave me a cold feeling to think that maybe he'd followed me, but for the life of me I didn't remember seeing him, and I would have heard the noise of his bike, wouldn't I? It was like the rustlers killing Pedro and shooting at Mike and Wayne. It didn't add up. I felt bad for Wayne when he did roll in Monday morning from wherever he spends the weekends. He felt real guilty he wasn't here when Porky did his little attempt at vandalism. Not only did he feel guilty, he was pissed. I grew up with Wayne around, and I knew the signs. I reckoned Porky was in for it bad if he happened across Wayne. I decided it was time for more coffee. I grabbed my cup and walked out of the office and into the living room. Mike was lying on the couch, reading. It was one of those cold rainy fall days. We both had sweatpants on and T-shirts. Mike had a throw blanket across his legs and feet.

"Hey there, buddy. I'm gonna make some coffee, you up for a cup?"

"Yeah, that sounds real good now."

"When I bring you the coffee, mind if I sit down with ya?"

"Only if you cuddle up with me."

"You got a deal. We gotta keep each other warm." I walked into the kitchen and put the water for the coffee on. I looked out the window. It was after the equinox, and the days were gettin' noticeably shorter now. Because of the clouds and rain today, we had that murky kind of twilight that I associate with winter days here in the north. I continued staring out the window. Hunting season was starting in just a few days. Forecast had rain off and on for the next ten days, so I figured Mike and I would end up hunting in the rain. We'd originally planned to take horses into the back country of the national forest, but the more I thought about it the more I thought it was a good idea to bring the truck rather than the horses. First of all, the heater in the truck would make a world of difference if we had some problems. The truck was four-wheel-drive and built for off-road, and we could carry more gear to make camping in the rain more comfortable. The truck was also a lot harder to mistake for a deer than a horse. I poured the coffee and carried the cups into the living room.

"Move that sweet ass of yours over and let me sit down." I set both cups of coffee on the coffee table.

"Thanks, Jeff." Mike leaned against me and threw the little blanket over both our legs. He'd built a fire, so it was nice and comfy in the living room. I was looking out the window at the view of Lucky Jeff Bluff and the river on the other side. The visibility was low because of the rain, but there were misty clouds drifting at the side of the bluff amongst the pine trees.

"Ya know, buddy, a rainy day like this has a beauty all of its own."

"Yeah, it sure does. I like the way the clouds hug the bluff sort of."

"I'm gonna go to Wenatchee for supplies tomorrow. I wanna get stuff for a while, get the pantry filled, and then the only stuff we'll need to go to the store for will be dairy and fresh veggies. You wanna go with me?"

"Sure."

"We can get ammo for huntin' and food for that too. I was thinkin' on takin' the truck rather than the horses on the huntin' trip."

"Yeah, the more I think on that the better idea the truck sounds."

"So you still lookin' forward to goin' huntin' even with the rain?"

"I am. It'll be fun. Besides, we ain't gonna let a little rain stop us are we, Jeffy?"

"Hell no, we'll take rain gear and stuff. I don't think we'll have snow or anything like that though."

"Did you hear from the sheriff about Porky?"

"He said Porky just seemed to disappear. Police in Newhalem and Rockport were lookin' for him to come down off the pass on the west side, and he never showed or they missed him."

"Well then, maybe he's gone for good."

"I sure as hell hope so. If he wasn't so stupid, he coulda done a lot of damage."

"Say, Jeff, did you hear the Flannigans got hit by rustlers again?"

"No, what happened?"

"I guess Sandy told Maria, who told José. Seems they are gonna do their roundup next week. They ain't moved the beeves outta the land by the national forest. Looks like they've lost about ten head over the last few days."

"Sheriff's pretty pissed about lack of cooperation from the forest service on tryin' to track any rustlers through the national forest, seems they are pretty short staffed."

"He shoulda told the feds it was pot growers and meth labs rather than rustlers. They woulda been here thicker than fleas on an old hound dog."

"I'll have to suggest that to Sheriff Johnston, Mike." We both laughed.

"How's the sculptin' comin'?"

"I got two new ones I'm workin' on. Mary Grace wants to do the exhibition in November, December, and January. She said after that, I can keep a couple of pieces on display."

"That's great. I'm really kinda shocked your ex-boyfriend, Robert, sent you the sculptures you did there and your stuff."

"People will surprise ya sometimes. What got to me was the apology letter sayin' he had lots of time to think on the drive back to Seattle and then the plane to San Francisco. He reckons I was right about him tryin' to change me. What he wanted was a fantasy, and when that fantasy became real, it really wasn't what he wanted anyway."

"I guess I'm gonna have to revise my opinion of him."

"He did say he was sorry for comin' on to you when I was drunk that night."

"Really, what else did he say about me?"

"He told me that the way 'that hot blond cowboy stares at you, you had better go for the gusto, Jeffrey. I feel that he is probably much better suited for you and you for him than you and I were.'" I imitated Robert's voice when I relayed to Mike what he said. We both laughed.

"It turns out he was pretty smart. We do fit together pretty well." Mike leaned closer into me and I put my arm over his shoulders. "Day after tomorrow is first of October. That's when huntin' season opens. So when do you wanna go and for how long?"

"What's two days after tomorrow sound like to ya, Jeff? That will give us time to make sure everything is ready. We could go for five days to a week."

"Sounds like a plan. Wanna go and check the huntin' gear? It wouldn't hurt to do that before goin' to Wenatchee. That way if there is anythin' else, we can get it there." We headed off to look at the gear, already looking forward to being in the woods.

We pulled into the parking lot of the Wenatchee Costco. We'd made our shopping list, and checked it twice. We also needed to stop at a sporting goods store and get some ammo. We'd gone through the hunting gear and had pretty much all we needed. Mike had come up with the great idea of printing out the pages of the national forest maps we had put together for Sheriff

Johnston with the locations of the stolen cattle marked. The pages would be the perfect way to decide just where we wanted to go hunting. So after getting supplies, we'd be pretty much set. We grabbed a cart and headed into Costco. I started laughing, and Mike gave me a quizzical look.

"I was just thinkin' of an old episode of *Designing Women* on TV. Julia and Suzanne were in a grocery store and Suzanne was droolin' over a coupla guys. Julia gave her a disgusted look and said, 'Two handsome men, a single cart, and fresh pasta. You figure it out.' It just made me think of the two of us with one cart."

Laughing, Mike asked, "You want me to pick up some fresh pasta?"

"I think we can live without it, bud."

We picked our way through the aisles buying fifty-pound sacks of flour and sugar, spices, and other stuff that'd keep. We got other stuff like canned veggies, cornmeal, candles, soap, cleaning stuff, all the things that are cheaper to buy at Costco. We'd just go into Winslett for bread, milk, fresh veggies, and stuff like that. We ended up gettin' two carts full of stuff. We went through checkout and had just got to the truck when we heard a voice.

"Jeff Connelly. So you're back. I take it you'll be going back to San Francisco soon." It was said as a statement not a question. I looked up and saw reverend John Spencer, a real fire and brimstone preacher from over in Pateros.

"Reverend, I reckon you didn't see all the supplies we're loadin' up. Don't look like a man who's leavin' would buy this much does it?" Mike stiffened when I said reverend. The good reverend himself was staring at me with a distasteful scowl.

"You know, Connelly, we don't need perverts like you around here. There is a special place in hell reserved for you. You're turning Winslett into a den of iniquity." I laughed loud and hard at that one.

"Well, Reverend." I let the sarcasm just drip off my voice on the word reverend. "Winslett sure don't look like no den of iniquity I ever visited. There's no free condoms, closed circuit TVs with gay porn, and go-go boys on stage strippin'."

Mike started laughing at that.

"Don't let this spawn of Satan corrupt you, boy, or you'll end up in hell right beside him!" The reverend spat out at Mike.

Mike continued laughing and finally said, "He's already corrupted me, and it felt real good! Seriously now, it's hypocrites like you that make me agnostic. You go on preachin' about God's love, but nothin' but hate comes outta your mouth. If the choice is goin' to heaven with you, or goin' to hell with Jeff here, I'm with Jeff all the way." Spencer turned so red he was purple with fury. He stepped forward. He was so angry, he was spitting when he was talking.

"I could have quite a few people picketing your ranch with posters round the clock."

"Don't make me no never mind. Property line goes all the way down the road. You can't see or hear the road from the house. And I'd just *love* to defend my property if you trespassed."

A crowd had gathered, watching us. He stepped even closer to me and raised a fist.

"You are pure evil. Those that lie with men as with women shall surely be put to death."

I laughed even harder. "Let those without sin cast the first stone, Reverend." I added in an undertone, "Go ahead and take a swing, hypocrite. Nothin' would make me happier than to have to defend myself in front of all these witnesses. Oh, and get yourself to a dentist. It smells like half of your teeth are rotten."

He glared at me, but did step back after muttering, "You can kiss my ass!"

I laughed again. "I got my buddy's sweet, firm ass to kiss, Reverend. Why would I wanna kiss your saggy, bony, old ass?"

He turned and stalked away with a final shout, "Turn or burn, Connelly, turn or burn." I could hear mutters of "hypocrite" from the crowd that had gathered. Mike and I finished loading the supplies in the truck, covered them with a tarp, and jumped in.

"Who in the hell was that?"

"The Reverend John Spencer; he's the preacher at God's Love Church in Pateros. One time I ran into him in Winslett, and he tried to get me to go to his church. I asked if gays and lesbians were welcome. You can see from the way he acts, we're not."

"He reminds me of my old man."

"Buddy, he's not worth wastin' any more breath or thought on. He's pathetic."

"I reckon so. Still brings back a lot of bad memories."

I put my hand on Mike's thigh. "I got an idea how to make you forget all about those bad memories."

"Horndog!"

"That bother ya?"

"Not hardly."

"I was thinkin', Mike. Why don't you just move the rest of your stuff up from the bunkhouse? Ya ain't slept there once since the first night ya spent with me. I like wakin' up with ya every mornin'."

"You sure, Jeffy?"

"I ain't ever been so sure of anythin' in my life." He grabbed my hand and just grinned at me. We held hands all the way back to the ranch.

Hunting day dawned cold and drizzly. We'd plotted a drive into the national forest and a place to hunt in the forest near to the national park. Methow Valley is a deer migration route, so we were pretty assured of success. We'd prepared for a week or so of backwoods camping. It would be easier with the truck than it would if we took horses, but it would still be a job to keep dry. It was in the thirties at night, and with the drizzle, hypothermia was our biggest worry. But we were pretty well prepared, so it didn't seem like there'd be any problems. We got our gear in the truck, left a note with our itinerary for José, Josh, and Wayne taped to the door of the ranch house, and headed out toward the national forest. I couldn't help but look at Mike. He looked really cute in all his camo gear. He noticed me looking.

"What?"

"Just thinkin' what a handsome guy you are."

"Thanks! I reckon we're in the same boat there, Jeffy." We grinned at each other. We were both excited to be out together and hunting. If I had mentioned deer hunting when I lived in San Francisco, you'd think I was talking about genocide or something. Mike just never had the opportunity or anyone to hunt with. I don't really enjoy the killing part, but the thrill of the chase is fun, and just being out in the woods for that amount of time is real relaxing.

One thing a lot of people don't realize is that anymore hunting is not a bad thing. We've destroyed the ecosystem and killed off all the predators. So the deer have multiplied out of control. Come winter, a lot of them starve, and the number that get hit by cars in the valley is in the hundreds. If I go hunting and I get something, it's my job to make sure that it's eaten. Just hunting to kill is murder. Things may change as we got wolves coming down from the North Cascades in Canada now. The ranching community is pretty much up in arms, thinking that all



their stock is going to get killed. We haven't lost any cattle to wolves, and I hope we don't. In any case, the government has a program that'll pay us back for any losses. With all the deer, I reckon wolves will leave the cattle alone. But hell, what do I know?

"Penny for your thoughts, Jeff."

"I was just thinkin' about wolves."

"You reckon we might see some?" Mike sounded excited.

"Probably not, they're pretty rare and they know enough to stay clear of people."

"It sure would be somethin' to see one though."

"That it would."

"I can't believe just how excited I am to be doin' this. First time in a long time I've been huntin'."

"You'd mentioned that before. Why is that?" I asked.

"Just no one to go with and no opportunity."

"Stick with me, buddy, and you'll have lots of opportunities for lots of different stuff."

"You've already showed me some stuff I never done before." He winked at me.

"Any complaints?"

"Naw. It's funny, I've heard a lot of cowboys talk about all the women they've had and how they use 'em and so forth, but it don't feel like that with us. Ya know?"

"First of all," I said, "you listen to any guy talkin' about all his conquests and probably three quarters of it is bullshit. Next, when we fuck, it's somethin' special. It seems to me when I'm inside you that we're almost like one. We connect. And to me that's really special."

"That it is. We're not just all about sex though either."

"You hit the nail on the head with that one. I just like bein' with you. Hold on, I'm gonna switch it into four-wheel-drive." We'd turned off onto one of the forest service roads about ten minutes before. The roads were gravel or dirt and pretty muddy. I didn't think I'd need four wheel drive, but better safe than sorry. The forest was dark with the clouds and drizzle; it was like the last bit of twilight. The air coming through the vents smelled clean, like it was just washed and given a pine or cedar scent. It was slow going with the limited visibility due to the darkness and the muddy roads. After a couple of hours, we finally made it to the place we wanted to camp. I was able to pull off the road and we went about setting up camp. I had the tent up in no time and put the rain flap on and a tarp over the door so we could take off our boots or rain gear out of the rain. I brought in sleeping pads and our sleeping bags and blankets from the truck. I arranged the sleeping bags and blankets so we had one big bed. We'd end up sleeping in our clothes anyway, but we'd be close enough to keep each other warm. Mike had made a fire pit and gathered some wood. Together we rigged another tarp over some clothesline we'd strung up between trees to have a dry area to sit in, eat in, etc.

"Mike, wanna scout around and see if we can find a good place to rig the camo tarps for a deer blind?"

"Yeah, let's do that." We scouted around for about forty minutes, looking for signs of game. I finally came across a game trail which had some fresh tracks.

"I reckon this might be a good area. We can set up the tarps for a blind in that bunch of trees there. It looks like a lot of deer use this trail." We'd each brought a pack with a couple of tarps in it and some clothesline. We got the tarps set up to form a barrier between us and the trail, and one overhead to keep us more or less dry. We also put tarps around us, so that we were enclosed. The tarp in front had a couple of holes in it so we could keep a lookout for deer, and shoot.

“Jeff, it looks like we’re ready here, what do you think?”

“I think you’re right, buddy. Let’s head back to camp and get somethin’ to eat.”

“How far you reckon we’ve come from camp?”

“I’d guess about a mile, mile and a half at the most.”

“Is that far enough away so the smell of the fire and any light from camp won’t scare the deer away?”

“It’s fine. The only thing you need to worry about is what you’re gonna tell folks when I get a much bigger buck than you do.”

“In your dreams, Jeffy, I got beginner’s luck.”

“We’ll see. Now let’s get supper.” It was starting to get dark. We’d marked the way back to camp with pieces of reflective tape on the trees, so we made fairly good time. We’d brought a lantern and a little Coleman stove, so we had light and a place to cook on. We’d also brought some camp chairs and a small folding table, so we were pretty comfortable.

“What’s for dinner, Jeff?”

“How does steak and fried potatoes sound to ya?”

“You’re shittin’ me!”

“Nope. I brought some good rib steaks, some potatoes, and the camp mess kit. So if that sounds good to ya, that’s dinner.”

“That sounds fantastic!”

“You got it. As far as I’m concerned, nothing’s too good for you.”

“You mean that don’t you?”

“I do. Why?”

“I just never had anyone really care for me and value me for me. It makes me feel like I got somethin’ to offer.”

“Believe me, buddy, you do. You remember what Sandy said that my dad had told her, that we’re two sides of the same coin?”

“Yeah.”

“The more I think on it, the more I think he had us pegged. We like the same kinds of things; we just get along real well. I do value you for you quite a bit actually.” Mike was quiet. I think he was gettin’ a bit emotional. I set about making dinner. I got the potatoes frying and then seasoned the steaks and began to fry them. In about twenty minutes, dinner was ready. I’d even brought a couple of six packs for us to share.

“This is the life, ain’t it?” We were sitting back on the camp chairs after finishing off the steaks and potatoes, sipping our beers. Mike looked real happy.

“Yeah, buddy. Good space we’re in right now.”

“Hey, Jeffy?”

“Yeah?”

“How’d you ever get to be so self-confident? I know I tease ya about bein’ cocky and all, but you seem to be able to do just about anythin’ you put your mind to.”

“It’s funny. Sometimes I really ain’t sure about bein’ able to do stuff. But Dad drilled into me a good attitude is half the battle. I figure why the hell shouldn’t I try for whatever I want to get?”

“Is that why when we were ridin’ fences, the first time we camped you made such a show of paradin’ around in your boxers? Did you want me then?” He had a soft smile on his face.

"I noticed you lookin' a few times. It was cute how ya got all flustered when you saw I'd noticed. You were bein' pretty ornery, and me doin' that kept you off balance. But I reckon so, that was when I first noticed just what a hot man you are, and began to get an inklin' of what a great guy you are under all that hurt."

"Most folks just turned away when I was so ornery. What kept you goin'?"

"I saw the guy I'm talkin' to now. Just bits and pieces, but enough to let me know you're special."

"Can you believe that José, Josh, Sandy, and Maria were bettin' on when we'd have sex and when I'd stay with you in your room?"

"I can believe it. It sounds like somethin' they would do. They didn't mean any harm."

"It was kinda funny though."

"It was. You know, we oughta turn in. We're gettin' up awful early tomorrow. We wanna be in the blind at daybreak. That's the time the deer are the most active. Besides, we done used up this day."

"Okay, I'll just bank the fire." We'd eaten on paper plates so Mike burned those. We'd already cleaned off the pots we used to cook with and the silverware. I got into the little vestibule I'd built in front of the tent, took off my boots and crawled into the tent. I took off my jacket, but left the rest of my clothes on. In a few minutes, Mike joined me. We snuggled together and fell asleep almost immediately.

THE little travel alarm rang real early. It seemed like we'd just gotten to sleep. We got up pretty quickly and got our boots and jackets on. Mike made coffee on the little cook stove, and we each took a thermos. Breakfast was jerky, granola bars, and dried apricots. We headed off in the darkness with our rifles, day packs, and some rope and knives just in case we had to hang and gut a deer. We got to the blind just as the sky was starting to lighten. We had some camp chairs and got arranged in the blind.

We did see quite a few deer that morning, but mostly does and yearlings. Finally in the late morning, a large buck came down the trail. I motioned to Mike that I had the shot. The buck stopped in the game trail and sniffed the air. I wasn't worried that he could smell us. The thermals we had on are the type that masks human scent, and anyways the wind was coming to us not from behind us. I sighted on the buck and began to squeeze the trigger. Just before I made the shot, he twitched his nose and was off. I was a bit pissed, but wondered what in the hell spooked him? Then I smelt it. There was a smell on the air like burning plastic and chemicals.

"You smell that?"

"Yeah, what in the hell could that be?"

"I dunno, buddy. I know you turned off the camp stove, and we didn't start the fire this mornin'. It's comin' from the direction of our camp, so let's go and see. It's time for lunch anyway."

"Okay. Jeff, do we just leave this stuff here?"

"Yeah, let's take the day packs, but we don't need to carry the camp chairs or tarps." We headed back toward camp. As we got near, I broke into a run, and Mike was hot on my heels. I could see flames from the direction of camp!

“Fuck no!” I yelled. Someone had dragged our tent with the sleeping bags in it to the middle of the dirt road. They’d piled the tarps on top and used the white gas from the stove to set it alight. The nylon must have burned almost immediately.

As we ran up to the fire, we realized that nothing could be salvaged. We ran over to the truck. Whoever had destroyed our equipment and camp had done a number on the truck. The food in the back and cooler were gone. So was the white gas for the stove. Worst of all, someone had slashed all four tires, broke the windows, and gone under the hood and grabbed whatever wires they saw and pulled. The battery was pulled out and smashed with what must have been an axe. The truck could be put right, but it would take a lot of time and money. We’d left our cell phones in the truck since we had no signal here. They were both smashed on the road by the truck. Mike and I just stared at each other. Mike got a panicked look on his face.

“What we gonna do, Jeff? What are we gonna do?”

“Walk.”

“How far is it to the ranch?”

“Maybe thirty-five miles, thirty or so to the main road.”

“But that’s two or three days!”

“Yep. We better get started. Let’s go back to the blind. We need those tarps.”

“Okay.” I could see Mike was still a bit panicked, so I clapped him on the back and tried to sound cheerful.

“We have tarps; we got some food; we got waterproof matches, and knives. We’re in rain gear. All in all we’re pretty lucky. Now let’s go and get the tarps and get started on our way back.”

Trying to appear a lot more confident than I felt, I strode off toward the deer blind. We got there fairly quickly. We folded up the tarps and the clothesline, and divided them between us. We then headed back toward the road. We reached it and began the long muddy slog back to the ranch.

“Jeff?” Mike’s voice was quiet and subdued.

“Yeah, buddy?”

“You reckon someone was tryin’ to kill us? I mean, gettin’ caught out here in rainy cold weather with nothin’ is askin’ for hypothermia.”

“Buddy, it did cross my mind; but why?”

“Did you see the motorcycle tracks in the mud, Jeff?”

“No. I was too focused on the truck.”

“There were motorcycle tracks up and down the road. It looks like a bike parked right by the truck.”

“Shit! You think it was Porky?”

“I reckon it was, but, Jeff, that just don’t make sense. How would he know where we were?”

“Not makin’ any sense is right. Do you reckon we mighta got close to the rustlers? Maybe it’s them rather than Porky.”

“I dunno, Jeff. All this shit about dyin’ and feelin’ hopeless and stuff is goin’ through my mind. I don’t rightly know what to think anymore.”

“Buddy, we’re gonna get outta this. You know that, don’t ya?” He didn’t answer, and I said louder and sharply, “Don’t ya?”

“Maybe.”

"Ain't no maybe about it. We're gonna get back to the ranch. Mike, now that I found you, I ain't gonna let either of us die. We got too much to do together, too much to live for together." I stopped and grabbed his hands.

"Mike, I love you. I ain't gonna let nothin' happen to you. We'll make it." He looked at me. The worry seemed to fall off his face to be replaced by a brilliant smile.

"You're right, Jeffy! This is just another adventure. Together we're gonna get through it."

"That's the spirit!"

"And, Jeffy?"

"Yeah, buddy?"

"I love you too."

"See after hearin' from the handsomest man in the world that he loves me, I got too much to live for to let anythin' happen to either one of us."

"Sorry for bein' such a chump."

"No worries. It's a pretty upsettin' situation, but we're lucky to have what we got. We got enough for any halfway decent woodsman to survive well out here."

"Ain't you upset and pissed off?"

"I don't wanna waste energy on that. I wanna put all my energy into gettin' outta here. There'll be a time to be mad and kick things. This ain't it."

"You're really somethin', you know that?"

"What, you're just realizin' that now?" We both laughed. It was great to hear him laugh.

Actually I was a bit worried. I did think that whoever did the number on the truck was either a complete idiot, or they were trying to kill us, but why? I did know one thing though; I was listening for the sound of motorcycles. I had told Mike that it would be easier to walk on the side of the road on grass, stone, and debris, rather than in the mud in the center. In truth, I wanted to avoid making our tracks too visible.

The afternoon seemed to slog on. The drizzle just didn't give up. The walking was also making me sweat, so I was getting wet from the inside too. I wasn't really worried about that since the gear we had on was wicking and hi tech, so it would keep us warm even when wet. Daylight was beginning to fade, and I was about to suggest to Mike we make camp when I heard a faint buzz. Mike had noticed it too. It sounded like a motorcycle.

"Jeffy! We're gonna get rescued!"

"Mike, let's get off the road. Now!"

"But why?"

"You saw motorcycle tracks by our ruined camp. I don't think whoever did that has our best interests at heart. We can always jump out if we need to."

We ducked into some bushes on the side of the road. The motorcycle got louder as it got closer. Then it drew abreast of us. It was Porky. He had his gun out and was waving it all over the place while looking around. It wasn't really a mystery who he was looking for. I wasn't too worried he'd see us. We both had rifles, and I'd gotten mine up and cocked when I heard the bike. Also we were both dressed in camo, and had camo face paint on so the deer wouldn't see our faces. With the murky light, we'd be pretty tough to spot. Sure enough, he continued on. We waited a few minutes before moving.

"Buddy, it's gettin' dark. We better get away from the road and make camp."

We walked half a mile away from the road and found a little hollow between some boulders that would block the sight of a fire from the road. Usin' the boulders and some branches together with the clothesline, I was able to make a frame over which I could drape two of the tarps. I gathered a bunch of pine tips and put one of the tarps over them. The other tarp would be the only blanket we'd have. Mike had gathered some wood, and pretty soon we had a small fire going. We each had a bottle of water and jerky, trail mix, granola bars, and dried fruit.

"See, buddy. This ain't too bad is it?" We were leaning back against one of the boulders. Mike was snuggled against me, and my arm was around him. Just then we heard in the distance the faint sound of a motorcycle passing. "I reckon that means that Porky went back to wherever he is stayin'."

"How far you reckon we come today, Jeffy?"

"Maybe about eight miles."

"Sure feels like a lot more don't it."

"Yeah, it does. Tomorrow's gonna be the day we get a lot of mileage in."

"Sorry I lost my head today."

"Mike, I understand. You don't gotta apologize."

"Here you're plannin' how to get us out and bein' level headed and workin' toward a plan, and I was startin' to panic."

"Enough. We'll look back on this and laugh in a bit." I decided it was time to change the subject. "When we get home, I'm gonna fuck you. How's that sound?"

"Wonderful."

"This time I'm gonna fuck you while you're on your belly. We'll put a few pillows under your hips, so that sweet ass of yours is up in the air, displayed all pretty like, and then I'll get you all primed and ready. I'm gonna slide in and nibble on your shoulder and neck, and you can turn your head to the side so we can kiss. It's gonna be fantastic."

"I'm lookin' forward to that, Jeffy. It's funny. I never imagined that my favorite sex thing to do would be to get fucked, but it is."

"That's 'cause I'm the one doin' the fuckin'."

"You're right on that."

"Let's try to get a little sleep, buddy. Tomorrow is gonna be a long day, and we done used up this one."

"Night, Jeffy."

"Night, buddy." Mike seemed to fall asleep right away. It took me a bit longer. I wasn't about to say I wasn't worried. But what was done was done, and we'd gotten through the first day and made some good progress.

THE sounds of the forest coming to life woke me up. I could hear the birds starting to chirp and sing. I could hear a raven cawing. My grandfather was Nez Perce, and he had told me ravens are lucky if you respect them. I resolved to leave some jerky out. The air smelled clean and fresh, and the fire had gone out. Everything was damp, but not wet. Mike was lying with his head on my chest and snoring softly. We needed to get going. I rubbed his head and said, "Mornin'."

"Hey." We both stretched. I was stiff, sore, and it felt like I already had a couple of blisters. From the way Mike was hobbling around, he was in the same boat. I still had a thermos of coffee.

It was lukewarm, but much better than nothing. Jerky, granola bars, and dried fruit were breakfast. We had the tarps down, shaken off, and folded pretty quickly.

“Up and at ’em, buddy, walkin’ should work all the stiffness out.” We made it back to the road just as dawn was gettin’ a bit lighter. The drizzle had let up a bit. We walked along the side of the road, doing our best to not leave any obvious tracks.

“Jeff, you reckon Porky’s mixed up with the rustlers?”

“It’s crossed my mind a few times. If so, he’s just gotta be labor or somethin’. From what I’ve seen, he doesn’t know enough about cattle to herd ’em. Plus he doesn’t really strike me as smart enough to do anythin’ more than follow orders. I just wonder how they found us.”

“Reckon we could’ve just been in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“Maybe, but we didn’t see anything. Why go through the trouble and risk to ruin our gear and my truck? We were armed, so we certainly could’ve fought back.”

“Could it just be Porky carryin’ a grudge?”

“Very well could be, but I dunno; somethin’ just don’t seem right. When we get home, let’s sit down and write down everything we know about what’s goin’ on. There’s got to be some common denominator we just ain’t seein’.”

“What’s the first thing you wanna do when we get home?” I was glad to hear Mike asking that question since it meant he wasn’t in despair anymore.

“Strip these clothes off and get in the hot tub. I just wanna soak away this stiffness and soreness.”

“Sounds really good. Then let’s sleep for a week.”

“You got it. Just remember, you’re gonna get fucked when we wake up.”

“I’m countin’ on it.”

“What do you want to eat, Jeffy?” We had just enough food for lunch. We were gonna be pretty hungry when we got home.

“There’s some chili in the freezer. I would love to heat that up, make some cornbread, and have the chili with onions and cheese in it. Sound good to you, Mike?”

“That sounds great! And let’s have a beer or three.”

“After drinkin’ half a gallon of water. Hey, you were askin’ me where I learned Spanish?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How about I teach you a song in Spanish? Ever hear of ‘La Bamba’?”

“Ritchie Valens sang it, didn’t he?”

“Yep.” Within an hour, Mike had the words down pat. We began to sing together.

We kept singing and singing, stopping between verses to listen for motorcycles. We were keeping up a pretty good pace. My feet were killing me. I wasn’t going to take off my boots tonight because I was afraid my feet would swell up. We made pretty good time. I reckoned by the end of the day when it was time to make camp, we’d gone another fifteen miles or so. If that was the case, we’d make it home tomorrow. Camp that evening was under a pine tree, which had broken off and fallen over. The branches at the bottom were dry and the ones to the sides formed a roof frame to drape the tarps over. We risked a bit bigger fire since we’d seen neither hide nor hair of Porky or anyone. There was a small stream near where we camped, and we got water from there to drink. I didn’t mention to Mike anything about giardia or any other danger of untreated water. I figured it was more dangerous to be dehydrated. By the time I got back to camp, it was dark and Mike was worried.

“Where the hell were you?”

“Gettin’ water for us.”

“Why didn’t you tell me what you were doin’? All this horrible shit was goin’ through my mind. I was seein’ you dead with Porky standin’ there and laughin’.”

I thought he was going a bit overboard, but we certainly weren’t havin’ an easy day. I just apologized.

“I’m sorry, buddy. I just didn’t think. I wanted to water before it got dark.” I took him in my arms. “I sure didn’t mean to worry ya.”

“No, Jeff, I’m the one who should be sorry. You’re pretty incredible, ya know?”

“Now that you realize that, let’s drink.” After we had drunk a good amount of water, we felt a lot better. “I reckon we ought to make it back to the road tomorrow by early afternoon. I hope we can catch a ride, but if not, it isn’t that far to home.”

“I’m still dreamin’ about that hot tub.”

“And a real bed with sheets and covers.” We drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

WE WERE woken up by a hard rain well before dawn. Despite the tarps forming a tent, and those we were wrapped up in, we got pretty wet. Mike spoke up first.

“This is miserable, Jeff. I’m just gettin’ colder and colder sittin’ here. Let’s break camp and start walkin’. We can follow the road in the dark, and walkin’ should warm us up a bit.”

“You read my mind, Mike.” Actually I was gettin’ worried about hypothermia. We were both shivering, which was the first sign. We got the tarps down real quick. We were both as stiff and sore as hell, but I suggested to Mike we jog to get warm. We kept up a slow jog for a couple of hours until the sky started to get light. By this time, we weren’t shivering anymore, but we were both pretty uncomfortable. We kept slogging along. Finally about mid-morning, we heard the occasional faint sound of traffic. That spurred us on to another slow jog. Finally, we saw the highway. I grabbed Mike and kissed him. We were safe!

The minute we got out on the highway, we both stuck our thumbs out, but continued to walk. I couldn’t blame anyone for passing us up. We must have looked like hell. After about a mile, a trucker slowed his rig down and picked us up.

“Where you fellas heading?”

“Just a few miles down the road. We were out huntin’, and the truck broke down.”

“How far did you have to walk?”

“About thirty miles.”

“Damn! How long did that take you?”

“Today’s the third day.”

“Is there anything I can do for you boys?”

“Just the ride is more than enough.” He dropped us off at the turnoff to the ranch. It was only a half an hour slog uphill to the ranch house. First thing we did when we got in was strip off our clothes in the mudroom. Second was call the sheriff. He said he’d come out and take a report. I told him just come in. We’d be in the hot tub warming up.

We rinsed off in the shower in the bathroom off the mudroom and went to the hot tub. On the way, I got a couple of pitchers of water. We drank several glasses apiece and got in the hot tub to wait for the sheriff. We’d made it!



## Chapter Thirteen

I FELT like a chicken with its neck wrung. Both Mike and I had spent most of the day just lying around. Hell, we didn't even bother to get dressed. Getting back home yesterday afternoon was almost anticlimactic. We were both stiff and sore as hell and in the beginning stages of hypothermia. I'd called the sheriff, and we jumped in the hot tub to warm up. Sheriff Johnston had arrived just after we'd gotten out of the hot tub. He was a lifesaver since he'd stopped at One Eyed Jack's and brought us each two burgers and two orders of fries. We'd wolfed those down before he even started asking us about what had happened. We'd spent a couple of hours going over our experience. The sheriff arranged a tow truck for my truck too. It was going to be as expensive as hell since it had to be a flat bed truck. He asked us to go with him on patrol to see the spot where we were hunting. We were going tomorrow. Both Mike and I had needed a day to rest. We'd spent most of the day on the couch in the living room cuddling together with a blanket thrown over us. We were stiff, sore, and tired. Finally on toward dinner time, I'd made a dish of scalloped potatoes, browned some pork chops and put them on top of the potatoes, and set the whole thing to bake. After doing that, I came back to the living room and back to Mike.

"Buddy, just makin' dinner tuckered me out. I guess I still need another good night's sleep."

"I did go into the mudroom and put our clothes in the hamper. They stunk pretty bad." We'd come in the house last night, stripped off our dirty, smelly, muddy clothes and just left them there.

"Thanks. How do ya feel about goin' back there tomorrow with the sheriff?" I asked because Mike had been close to panicking a couple of days ago when we discovered we were about thirty-five miles from home with only our feet to get there.

"If it helps get whatever asshole or assholes put us in that predicament, I'm all for it. I still do want to go huntin' with you again when this is all settled."

"We will. I'd just about forgotten, I got an e-mail from Dad's attorney about his will. Day after tomorrow I'm gonna go to Wenatchee to meet with him. Do you wanna go with me?"

"Isn't that family stuff? I don't wanna be in the way."

"You are my family." When Mike was getting really upset out in the woods, I told him I loved him. It was certainly true. Although we hadn't met all that long ago, I knew I cared about him deeply. I just wasn't sure how that declaration and his answer back would change things. We'd both been quiet all day, just huddling under blankets, reading and watching TV. I wondered if I should bring it up again or not. I guess we'd just see.

"You about ready for dinner, buddy?"

"Yep. I could eat a horse."

"I understand that. I'm gonna jump in the hot tub again after dinner."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Only if you wear your birthday suit."

"I reckon I can do that."

"Ya know, Mike, when I said I love you out in the woods?"

"Yeah?"

"I want you to know I really meant it. It wasn't just somethin' I said to motivate you." I was a little red, since I do find it a bit difficult to talk about my feelings at times.

"You blushin' there, Jeffy?" Mike was smilin' at me.

"I reckon I am."

"Rest easy, I know that. I see it every time you look at me. Is that why you were kinda quiet today? You thought I might think you was just tryin' to tell me what I wanted to hear to encourage me?"

"Uh... well... yeah."

"Here I thought you was all upset about your truck."

"I am, but I didn't want you to have any misunderstandings."

"I'm here sharin' your house, your bed, and you. We ain't played in several days since leavin' for huntin', yet I still want to spend every minute I can with you. And it seems you want to spend that time with me. Believe me, there ain't any misunderstandings."

"Okay. Now let's eat." I was anxious to change the subject, and Mike laughed at me. I felt like when I got up I was creaking like a door hinge that needs oiling. Mike followed me stiffly. He got plates and forks, and I got the pork chops and potatoes from the oven. The food sure hit the spot. We cleaned up and headed out to the hot tub. I brought a couple of big liter bottles of Gatorade. We took some aspirin, too, thinking it might help with the muscle aches.

As we were undressing to get in the hot tub, I mentioned to Mike, "I was thinkin' of askin' you if you wanted to do a week-long hike on the Pacific Crest Trail, and just that thirty some miles really whooped our asses."

"But we wouldn't do most of the thirty miles in one day either. And I'm sure we woulda worked up to it. This was just off the cuff."

By now Mike was hanging up his clothes and had put his towel on a chair. I still couldn't take my eyes off him. All that lean muscle and that blond and red fur. I was actually feeling a stirring below the belt, or where my belt would be if I had one on. Mike saw me looking, looked me up and down, and laughed.

"I reckon, someone's feelin' better."

"Look at the effect you have on me."

"It's pretty obvious!" We got into the hot tub. It felt great to be in the hot water. I could feel the stiffness and soreness in my legs fading away. We were holding hands; it was nice just to be together and relax. Although my muscles were relaxing, the stiffness elsewhere wasn't. I took Mike's hand and put it on my cock.

"Buddy, you wanna help me out with this?"

"I'll be happy to lend you a hand."

"A hand ain't what I want you to lend me right now. Let's get dried off and go upstairs." We no sooner got into our room when we were all over each other. We were playing dueling tongues, while our hands roamed all over each other's bodies. It felt great when Mike touched me. I wouldn't be surprised if he told me my eyes were rolling back in my head and I was shivering with pleasure. I pushed him toward the bed. I grabbed three pillows and stacked them on top of each other.

"Lie down on those, with your hips on the pillows." He did and caught on immediately. That sweet ass of his was sticking right up in the air. He spread his legs a bit, and I had a full view and full access to what I wanted. Mike had a real furry ass. It wasn't super noticeable because of his being blond, but when I ran my hands over his glutes I could feel it. I dove right in and began opening him with my tongue. That little pink hole of his stayed clenched shut all of about ten seconds before he let me in. I was fondling his balls with one of my hands and rubbing him with the other. He was squirming in pleasure and pushing his butt against my face. I could hear him doing something by the nightstand, and he pushed a bottle of lube and a condom at me. My balls

ached with pent-up need. It had been a few days since we'd played. You put that after a couple of weeks with, for the most part, a couple of fuck sessions a day, and you create a powerful need. I got him and me lubed up, got suited up, and put on more lube. I began rubbing his hole with the head of my dick. He was whimpering and moaning and pushing his ass at me, but I wanted to prolong the anticipation just a bit more.

"Whaddya want, buddy?"

"Fuck me!"

"Who fuck you?"

"You, Jeff. Jeffy, please fuck me. Stick it in, please."

"You're a boy who just loves to get fucked, ain't ya?"

"By you, Jeffy. Fuck me, please." I positioned myself and in one stroke buried myself in him to the hilt. He sighed in pleasure.

"You like that? You like my big dick inside you?"

"Ohhhhhh yeeah. It feels great to have you in me." I began to fuck slowly, gently, really letting him get the feel of it and enjoy it. He was so anxious and wanted it so bad, but he was really tight. He had this way of clenching down with his ass muscles on my cock when I was on an outstroke, which felt incredible. I put my head down in the crook between his neck and shoulder as I continued moving slowly in and out. I started to lick and nibble his neck and shoulder. I finally began to whisper in his ear. I stopped the in and out movement and moved from side to side. He began moaning and whimpering all the more.

"Am I takin' good care of your ass, buddy?"

"Yes, oh yeah, feels great."

"Jeffy's big dick sure ain't leavin' you feelin' empty is it?"

"No, it's wonderful."

"I'm gonna just hold still. You fuck yourself on my dick." He began pushing back against me, wiggling and then pulling forward just a bit. It felt great. I could feel the slow fire in my belly and between my legs gettin' stronger.

"You like fuckin' yourself don't ya? My dick is makin' you feel things you ain't even imagined before ain't it?"

"This is really incredible, Jeffy." I moved my head forward a bit, and he turned his. We were able to kiss like that. He started clamping down harder, and it felt like I was being milked.

"You keep that up, buddy, and I ain't gonna be able to hold off much longer."

"Go for it!" He intensified his efforts in impaling himself and in clenching down. I could feel the intensity building. It started in the area behind my balls; a sort of contracting that brought this incredible feeling of standing on the edge of heaven. Then my balls drew up. It was almost like they were shivering in anticipation. My dick seemed to swell and get harder. It felt like the whole world and every feeling I was capable of having was concentrated right there. I was teetering on the edge for what seemed like minutes. It felt like I was already starting to have an orgasm, but it seemed as if it went on and on. Finally I exploded. I was pumping for at least a minute. I felt like I had reached some sort of other level. I collapsed on Mike. It took a couple of minutes for me to come back to earth. I took a few deep breaths and flipped him over. He was hard as rock, and he had been pumping out precum. There was a big wet spot on the pillow, and the hair on his belly was all plastered down.

"Put your hands behind your head." He did, clasping his fingers. He was so beautiful. Three patches of red hair among the blond, two under his arms, and one at his crotch. I knelt down and

began to rub his thighs. I licked the wet hair on his belly. He was pushing his dick toward my face, but I ignored it. I licked down, bypassed his dick, and licked his balls. He was beginning to squirm and whimper again. The boy liked his balls played with. I put one finger on his hole and gently teased it, moving around the ring. I teased him even more by sticking my tongue in his piss slit, and then gently licking the back of his head. By this time, he was bucking and trying really hard to shove his dick in my mouth. He bucked his hips up, and as he was settling down, I let my finger go up his ass. I immediately found his gland and began massaging it. He was moaning real loud now, so just to intensify the feeling for him, I took him in my mouth. I worked my tongue around the ridge of his head and then down the back side, the most sensitive part. I kept one finger working his prostate, and with the other hand, I formed a tube and jerked his cock, taking it in my mouth on the up stroke. His moans got louder, and I could feel him tensing up. All of a sudden, he shot. He tasted musky, tangy, and just a bit of a bitter edge. I kept a hold of him until he stopped shuddering. Then I pulled up and lay next to him. We shared a long sweet kiss, and he snuggled against me.

After a few minutes he asked, "Jeff?"

"Yeah?"

"I really like it when you fuck me. It feels almost like we're one person. Thank you."

"No thanks necessary, buddy. I like makin' you feel good. It really turns me on the way you whimper when you're gettin' poked."

He started laughing sheepishly and finally got out, "I don't whimper."

"Yeah, ya do. It sounds really nice though. Let's me know I'm doin' my job."

"I can't be whimperin'; it makes me sound like a girl."

I had to laugh at that one. "You're further from a girl than just about any guy I've known. Don't worry, bud, it's a masculine whimper." I managed to keep a straight face, just barely, as I said that.

"I don't really whimper, do I?"

"You want me to tape record it sometime?"

"Not really. You know, I wanted you to fuck me even that first time we was ridin' fences."

"But you'd never done that before right?"

"Right, but there was just somethin' about you; I knew you'd do it well and I would enjoy it."

"Truth be told, buddy, I was enjoyin' watchin' your ass that trip and dreamin' about fuckin' it."

"And who says dreams don't come true?" We laughed at that one, and we drifted off into a peaceful dreamless sleep.

"THEY sure as hell did a job on your truck, Jeff." Mike and I had come out with the sheriff to guide him to our campsite and my truck.

"You're pretty lucky you boys were nowhere near here when the truck got vandalized. You sure that was the biker you saw on the motorcycle?"

"Yes, sir." Both Mike and I answered in unison.

"Sheriff Johnston, do you reckon that whoever trashed my truck was tryin' to kill us?"

“Can’t say that hadn’t crossed my mind, either that or just run of the mill vandals who are really stupid. Now I know you boys are convinced that your biker friend is behind this. That’ll be for a jury to decide when we catch him.”

“Sheriff, you reckon he might be mixed up with the rustlers?” Mike looked at the sheriff.

“If he is, there’s got to be more of ’em, and ones who know cattle. The fact that he broke down the fence inside the cattle guard and the fence on the pen with the heifers, shows he don’t know squat about cowboying.” As we were talking, the tow truck for my truck came up. I gave the driver my keys and watched him load it on the flatbed.

“You boys wanna continue on with me or go on back with the tow truck? I’m planning on following the road around and through the forest to where it comes out near Tonasket. It runs right in back of a couple of the ranches over on the east side of the forest that got hit by the rustlers.”

“Sure, Sheriff.” He’d taken plaster casts of the tracks that were dry enough. We jumped in his cruiser and began to go deeper into the forest. The roads weren’t in good shape. Budget cuts had prevented their maintenance for recreation, and environmental restrictions on logging in the national forest had prevented their maintenance for business reasons. We stopped occasionally to look at tracks and take some plaster casts. The forest was cool; its dank humidity gave off a clean smell—piney, woody, it seemed to be green, the very essence of life. The chatter of birds and squirrels was muted, in a kind of hushed and reverent way. I loved this place. Coming through here was just one more little thing that showed me I’d made the right decision in staying here and not going back to the city.

We spent a couple of hours going around and not really finding anything which could be connected to either Porky or the rustlers. Finally in the late afternoon, we began to head downhill. As we went further down, the trees began to thin and the meadows and grasslands became more prevalent. About a half-dozen miles or so from the main road, I noticed a little turnout. It wasn’t very obvious, but there was a turnoff that had been recently used, and the brush in front of it was dead and wilted.

“Hey, Sheriff, look over there. It looks like somebody was tryin’ to hide another little road.”

“I think you’re right, Jeff.” We pulled over and got out of the truck. The sound of ravens cawing was loud. There was also a stench in the air that smelled like rotten meat. The sheriff pulled his gun out of the holster, and Mike and I picked up our rifles.

“Boys, stay behind me.” Other than the ravens, it was quiet. I could also smell wood smoke, but faintly. We moved slowly and cautiously down the path. There were enough trees here to mask whatever was here from the road. After about two hundred yards, we came on a clearing. On one side was a rough holding pen built of small trees, which were fairly freshly cut. The clearing itself looked like several vehicles had been parked there. I could see motorcycle tracks. On the other side of the clearing was another little holding pen made from brush. There were hoof prints there with shoes. Someone had corralled horses there. I saw what the smell was; in one area, there was a great deal of blood and some bits of offal. The ravens were down there scavengin’. The sheriff looked at Mike.

“You know how to track, son?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“Well then, why don’t you just stay over by the cruiser and keep a lookout. I think they’re gone for good, but who knows.”

“Jeff, you get in here with me. See if you agree with my line of thought here.” The sheriff and I began to look at the scene, trying to put together the story the tracks were trying to tell. We

spent about twenty minutes walking around, squatting down to take closer looks, and following tracks and trails.

"It looks like there were about three trucks here. One of 'em seems to have been pulling a trailer." The sheriff walked around, continuing to look at the footprints and other tracks. He spoke up again.

"One motorcycle too. Unless I miss my guess, it has the same tread as in the other places. Looking at the tracks, I'd guess four men. Three have cowboy boots, one in either work or motorcycle boots. It looks like one set of the cowboy boots has a pretty distinctive wear." I followed him over to the larger holding pen.

"There were two cowboys here, herding the cattle from that direction. One of the ranches that got hit is just a bit away from here. Are you in agreement with me so far, Jeff?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mike, can you bring me the binoculars?" He went to the truck and got them, then walked over, and handed them to the sheriff, who looked up and around a bit and saw what he was looking for almost immediately.

"Here's what I think happened. They had a pretty slick little set up here. It looks like they herded the cattle here from the ranch and kept 'em a few at a time in that holding pen. When they were ready to process, they'd haul a beef outta the pen and bring 'em to the spot where all the blood is. Looks like they stunned 'em and then cut their throats to bleed 'em out.

Mike looked at the sheriff, "How would they move the carcasses around? A beef is pretty heavy."

"If you look up in that tree over there, there's a mark where bark's been rubbed off. My guess is they had a pulley on a rope attached to that tree. When the beef was bled out, they'd probably put a meat hook in it, pull it up, and gut it. Then they'd attach it to the pulley and let gravity take it about ten feet over here to where this truck was parked. I reckon they butchered it in that truck.

"If I'm readin' it right, Sheriff, they probably stayed right here."

"You're on the right track, Jeff. Right there close by is another truck. I'd bet that was a refrigerator truck or freezer truck. You can see a faint trail of blood where the pulley ran into the truck. The truck over there with the trailer was probably a camper. It looks big enough to have fit four men. Nobody around here'd think anything of a RV pulling a horse trailer."

"Slick setup is right, Sheriff."

I scooted over to Mike while the sheriff took pictures of the scene, and picked up all sorts of stuff with tweezers and put them in little plastic bags that he labeled. We both assisted with making plaster casts.

"Jeff, were you able to see the same thing the sheriff described from the tracks?"

"Yep, just growin' up on a ranch you learn how to track; it comes in handy roundup time. When I was a kid, we used to play cowboys and Indians, tryin' to ambush each other. I reckon that was where I started."

"Is there anythin' you can't do?" I liked the way Mike was starin' at me, admiration and appreciation mixed up with a look up and down my body. I grinned back at him.

"Speak Swahili. And my greatest weakness is kryptonite."

"Cocky bastard."

"Yeah, buddy, but just remember, I'm your cocky bastard."

"There ain't a minute that goes by that I ain't thankful for that."

“With all these compliments, you’re gonna give me a big head, buddy.”

“I hate to break this to ya, Jeffy, but you already got a big head.”

“I meant the one on my shoulders.”

He snickered. “Yeah, that’s the one I meant too.”

The sheriff spent a couple of hours bagging things and collecting evidence. We helped him put up a yellow crime scene tape. When we’d first come across the crime scene, Sheriff Johnston had called the ranger station in Winslett. It was only occupied by one ranger, the guy we’d met a bit ago when we got the hunting licenses. He couldn’t close the station, so asked us to come by with a report and copies of the evidence log. The sheriff told him that would take a couple of days. He was fine with that. They’d decide then who had jurisdiction.

The sheriff asked us if we wanted to go back to the ranch or to Winslett. He mentioned that Sandy had asked if we wanted to meet her for dinner in Winslett, and then she’d drive us back to the ranch. We opted for dinner with Sandy. Using the sheriff’s phone, I called her. She would meet us in the cantina. About a half an hour later, the sheriff had parked in front of his office. He thanked us and then said good night. Mike and I headed down the road to the cantina. It was only about a half a block. Hell, anything in Winslett is only about a block from anything else. We got into the cantina and looked around. Sandy had gotten a booth. Mike and I slid in across from her. We exchanged howdys and caught her up on the latest news about the rustling. The waitress came by, and Mike and I both ordered Mac & Jacks Ale.

“You two are morphin’ into one another; it’s freaky.” Sandy commented as we ordered the same beer. Her smile showed she was just joking. “Jeff, have you thought anything more about the dude ranch idea?”

“We talked about it,” Mike answered for me. I added some more detail.

“Not only did we talk on it, but I did some research online. I figure we could try it. I’m not sure how to go about advertising, but I figured I could put up a website, and I was gonna call Jonathan. He’s the editor of a gay travel magazine.”

“You gonna make it completely gay?” Sandy asked the question, but Mike also looked at me with interest.

“No, my thought is to open it to anyone who wants to come, men, women, gay, straight, anyone. I know there’s a hell of a lot of open-minded folks. Think of Tom and Ann. They and their kids would love it.”

“I think that’s smart, Jeff. I had an idea too.”

Mike piped up, “What is it Sandy?”

“Maybe we could invite Tom and Ann and their family and Jonathan up for Thanksgiving. They both have connections to magazines. Maybe we’d get featured in an article. Or at least be able to advertise.”

“We huh? You’re gonna help out then?”

“Yes, I am. Maria, José, Josh, and I have been talkin’. We’re all in on it. Maria has Thanksgiving week off, and I took it off from One Eyed Jack’s. Mr. Dobbins’ daughter and son will be home from college, and they can fill in.”

“And just what are ya all plannin’ on doin’ for the dude ranch?” I asked. Sandy should’ve been some high-powered woman executive.

“Maria and I can do housekeepin’ and help with cookin’. José and Josh are more than happy to wrangle dudes. By the way, I almost forgot. Josh’s friend, Renee, wants to come up too.”

“He’s been spendin’ a good amount of time in Seattle. I reckon if Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher can do it with the age difference thing, so can Renee and Josh. I need to call Jonathan and Tom then.”

Sandy turned red. “I already took care of that.” I stared at her. Mike was trying hard not to laugh.

“Darlin’, I am glad you’re on my team with this. I’d hate to see you opposin’ it.”

She smiled at me. I continued, “So tell me about what is happenin’ with my house at Thanksgiving?” She had the decency to blush a bit again.

“They insisted that we charge them.” I started to object, but she cut in. “If we don’t charge, they couldn’t say anything in their magazines. Renee insisted to Josh she pay too.”

“Okay.”

“We’re charging the adults fifteen hundred dollars each for the week. That includes room and board, horseback ridin’, use of the hot tub, and maybe a tour on horseback of the area. I thought we could go get a permit and cut a Christmas tree in the national forest and put it up one night. Another night we could have a dance in the livin’ room, two-step around the Christmas tree like the cowboy song says. I’ll just have to teach Mike to dance.”

Mike turned red now. “Jeffy’s already done that.”

Sandy smirked at both of us. “I imagine Jeffy did just that. Did you like it?”

“Who wouldn’t like bein’ held in some incredibly handsome, hunky guy’s arms, rubbin’ belt buckles, and goin’ round the floor?”

“You got me there.” Sandy and Mike were starting their own conversation.

I finally decided to break in.

“Hey, you forgot, smart, good dancer, and a lot of other things.”

“Cocky bastard,” Mike said.

“Just remember, buddy, your cocky bastard.” We grinned at each other.

“Okay you two, syrup’s gonna start flowin’ in here it’s gettin’ so sappy. Are you ready to order yet?” Sandy had the chile relleno plate, I had the fish taco special, and Mike had the enchiladas. We got an order of nachos to have with our beer too.

“I want to plan out the entire week, food menus, what to do, and all that stuff. Or do you already have that done too?” I asked.

Sandy smiled back at me. “I thought it would be better for the three of us to do that. I told Dad I was stayin’ at the ranch tonight, so we can put the plan together.” For a second, I really pitied whoever Sandy would marry. She was beautiful, smart, sweet, and fun to do things with, and utterly controlling.

“Good thing your dad knows we’re gay. Else he’d be after me with a shotgun.”

“Jeff, Dad’s known you were gay from the time you were just a little guy. Why do you think when you and I would do things we never had a curfew? Why do you think he let me spend so much time with you?”

“That’s really great, Sandy, Jeff. My old man tried to keep my brother and sister away from me and drive away any friends. He was always afraid that I’d corrupt someone or they’d corrupt me even more.” Mike had a slightly bitter edge to his voice. Sandy put her hand across the table and took one of his. I put my hand on his leg just above the knee. Sandy was the first to speak.

“Mike, I know that stuff is really hard to forget. Remember though, what goes around comes around. I know bein’ abused like that really hurt you, but you came through it more or less okay.



You didn't become a serial killer or convict, even gettin' kicked out at sixteen, you made a life for yourself. You didn't get into drugs or alcohol, you didn't prostitute yourself. You came through it okay. I'm really proud to have you as a friend." I put my hand on top of Sandy's.

"I'm proud to be with you, too, buddy. You're really an incredible guy. You know how earlier you said you were thankful every minute of every day I'm your cocky bastard?" He nodded. There was a sheen to his eyes. I knew what we were saying was really affecting him deeply.

"I'm thankful, too, every minute of every day that I'm your cocky bastard." I tried to put some humor into the situation. "Besides buddy, bein' the cocky bastard I am, I know I got a hell of a lot to offer. And you must be awful special to get me." Both Mike and Sandy laughed at that one. I added, "We're like the three musketeers. We're all lucky to have each other. Okay, now enough of the sappy stuff. Let's dig into the nachos." I leaned over and whispered in Mike's ear, "I love you, buddy, and don't forget it."

Sandy raised her mug and said, "To friends." We returned the toast and echoed her. Our food came, and we continued discussing what we would do for our guests at Thanksgiving.

"How about we teach some cowboyin' stuff? I know we're gonna teach 'em to ride horses, but what about ropin'?"

"That's a good idea, Mike! Jeff, do you remember when we were teenagers that old Mexican buckaroo taught us to make horsehair hat bands, belts, and stuff like that? Do you still do that?"

"Once in a great while. Just hat bands, though."

Mike looked at us. "I work with horsehair quite a bit. I don't wanna sound all cocky like Jeffy, but I'm pretty good."

"We could teach the dudes comin' to the ranch that too. It's a real cowboy craft."

"That's an idea. All three of us are good cooks; we could also teach them some real cowboy dishes."

"Jeff, I think you have to be raised with the idea of son of a bitch stew to like it."

"I like Mike's son of a bitch stew." Sandy smirked at that, and Mike turned a bit red. "But that's not what I meant. I was thinkin' stuff like sourdough biscuits, dried apple pie, beef in red chile, chicken fried steak, that kinda stuff."

Sandy looked at me a little flabbergasted.

"Everybody knows how to make that stuff, don't they?" She asked.

"You'd be surprised. I never saw any of that in the city except chicken fried steak for breakfast," I answered.

"Wow."

"Yeah, it's a whole different world there. That's why folks would pay that much to see how we live and do our kinda work."

"Hey, Jeff, Sandy? What do ya think of this, we could move some cattle into the high pasture and take the guests on a mini cattle drive down to the ranch? We could go slow and the long way and make it a two day thing."

"I think that's a great idea for summer. But I don't know that the dudes are gonna want to be campin' in weather below freezin' at night."

"Makes sense, it would be good for summer."

"Maybe durin' the summer, Jeff, you could lead pack trips into North Cascades National Park. You been goin' there since you was just a little guy."

"I could. It'd be pretty easy to get permits." We continued eating and talking, coming up with all sorts of ideas like gay week, singles week, senior's week, just about everything under the sun. As much as I hated to admit it, it sounded like we had some pretty good plans. Finally we finished up, and Mike insisted on paying the bill. We headed out to Sandy's truck. It was one of those mini pickups. Fine for two folks, but three was a squeeze. Good thing though, I didn't mind squeezing together with Mike. I wasn't complaining. I had it real bad. We got back to the ranch and headed into the house. I noticed that the TV in Wayne's trailer was on. I could see the flashes of light through the window. I thought about walking over and saying hello, but decided it could wait until tomorrow. Sandy, Mike, and I settled in the living room. I got us each a beer. Sandy had a notebook in her purse, and we began planning out meals. We decided right quick that stuff like fried fish was great, but it was a pain to cook for a group. We decided on simple stick to your ribs chow like meatloaf, pot roast, sourdough biscuits, beans, and potatoes. We decided at least once to have a barbecue and/or steak fry. For breakfast we spent a bit of time discussing what would be good to have. I was all for bacon and eggs and biscuits and gravy, and stuff I like to have. Sandy reckoned that was good a couple of times, but thought we should have cereal, coffee cakes, fruit, stuff like that in case some of the guests didn't want the heavy cowboy type breakfast. I was about to jump in and object but she saw me coming.

"Jeff, not everyone likes big breakfasts. These folks don't go out and do a hard day's work like you guys do. You need the calories and energy, they don't."

"Yeah, but they might like it. They're on vacation."

"When you were in San Francisco with Robert, how often did he eat a big breakfast with you?"

"Only on weekends or holidays."

"See? That's what I mean."

"I don't see why ya can't have both. Have cereal, coffee cake, fruit, toast already set out. Then make bacon and eggs, flapjacks, whatever to order."

"Buddy, you are a genius!" Both Sandy and I beamed at Mike.

We'd just started talking about lunch when I heard the door open and heard a voice call, "Hello, you still up, Jeff, Mike?" It was Wayne.

"Howdy, Wayne. We sure are, c'mon in." He walked into the living room and seemed surprised to see Sandy.

"You want a beer, Wayne?"

"Ain't gonna say no to a cold beer."

I went into the kitchen and got him one. "How are you doin', Wayne?"

He looked at me, took a swig of beer, and replied, "I'm feelin' better. Just thought I'd stop in and say hello. It was nice of ya to stop by the other night, Jeff."

"No problem at all, Wayne." I came back out to the discussion of lunch for dudes.

"I think just sandwiches and soup would be good most days. Say we have a steak fry one day, we could have steak sandwiches the next." Mike nodded and added his two cents' worth.

"We could always have somethin' like chili too. Then we wouldn't need no sandwiches. Just have cornbread and coleslaw or potato salad with it."

"You guys are really plannin' on goin' through with the dude ranch huh?"

"We all reckon it's a pretty good idea, Wayne. Hell, Sandy was thinkin' of havin' a singles week. You ever get tired of that little honey you got in Wenatchee, you might find yourself a rich

lady, like Trace Adkins sings about in ‘Marry for Money’.” Wayne looked at me for a second and then smiled.

“Ask me no secrets, I’ll tell ya no lies, son.”

“Hell, Wayne, your business is your business. Like you said to me once, I just wanna see you happy.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

We continued on with lunch, deciding on what types of things to have. Mike then asked about Thanksgiving.

“So you reckon we ought to have lunch for Thanksgiving, or just have snacks and cut ’em off about one or so, and then eat at around four?”

“I like the idea of no lunch and snacks only, Mike; we’ll all sure appreciate Thanksgiving dinner more. What were you thinkin’ of makin’ for Thanksgiving dinner, Jeff?” I thought Sandy was asking a funny question.

“Duh... turkey.” Sandy threw a pillow from the armchair behind her at me.

“I know you’re gonna have turkey, but how are ya gonna cook it? Roast it, barbeque it, fry it, do a couple different types or what?”

“Maybe one roasted one barbecued. You guys figure two will be enough?”

“For eleven adults and two kids, that’s more than enough unless you get real small ones.” I trusted Sandy’s judgment.

Wayne asked, “What’s that?” He was pointin’ at the printouts Mike and I had made for our huntin’ trip.

“That’s just some printouts from the Internet on the forest service roads. We used ’em for our huntin’ trip.”

“Thank God you guys got outta that okay.”

Mike added, “We were pretty lucky, havin’ a good idea of where we were sure helped. We were pretty exhausted the second half of the second day and the third day. It woulda been easy to take the wrong road.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mike. You guys are pretty sharp. I hear you were out in the woods with the sheriff today. Did you get your truck all towed, Jeff?”

“Yeah, we did. Sure is bad luck havin’ the truck all busted up.”

“I’d say you were lucky you guys were out huntin’ and not in your truck when whoever did that shit to it came by.”

“You can say that again, Wayne.” Mike was still a bit spooked.

“You kids reckon that the rustlers are usin’ the national forest?”

“Seems likely, the forest service and old loggin’ roads all interconnect, and since there’ve been rustlings all around the forest, it stands to reason that it’s the center of activity.” Wayne looked at me and then screwed his face up in concentration.

“Sounds reasonable. There ain’t too many folks in there this time of year, just hunters. You boys still plannin’ on lookin’ around in there?”

“Probably not, Wayne,” Mike answered this time.

“If we do go huntin’ again or horseback ridin’ or whatever there and find somethin’, we’re goin’ right to the sheriff.” Wayne looked at me again.

"None of my business, but don't you think you boys better keep outta there? Until they catch the rustlers and whoever trashed your truck, you could be in danger." For Wayne that was a pretty long speech. I'd rarely heard him say that much unless it concerned givin' orders to the cowboys.

"You think they're two groups, Wayne?" I asked this time.

"Can't see how they'd be connected. That biker that knocked the fence down sure wasn't bright enough to herd beeves. I'd reckon he's just usin' the forest service roads to avoid the sheriff."

"You could be right."

"You sound disappointed, Jeff."

"Reckon I am." He looked at me.

"I understand how you want this all to be done and over with. Hell, bein' shot at makes me hope you're right, but I figure they're separate."

"That makes two things we have to worry about then, the rustlers and Porky." Mike didn't sound happy.

Sandy was frownin'.

"Jeff, Mike, I bet you done seen the last of that biker," Wayne said. "What, Jeff, with you whompin' his ass twice and him messin' up when he tried to get back at you here and then trashin' your truck, I bet he's long gone. Rustlers were probably gone even before."

"This time I do hope you're right, Wayne. It'd be nice to be able to get out in the woods and not worry about crazies, and bullets, and stuff."

"I understand. What do you boys got planned for tomorrow?"

"We were plannin' on takin' Mike's truck into Wenatchee. I need to talk to the lawyer about Dad's estate."

"Will you boys be around in the mornin'? I needed you to get some stuff from the feed store, then I wanted to talk to ya about horses and tack for the dudes."

"Sure thing, Wayne, we'll make time."

"Good, I gotta do some errands in the mornin', but I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't wanna mess up you boys' day too much."

"No worries, Wayne. We'll take care of whatever you need. Right, Mike?"

"Right."

"Good." He chugged the rest of his beer and stood up. "Good night, boys." He tipped his hat to Sandy. "Good night, young lady."

"Night, Wayne, I'm glad you're up and doin' again."

"Thanks, Jeff." He headed out.

"Do you know when you'll get your truck back, Jeff? I don't mind drivin' you around or loanin' you my truck if you need it."

"That's real sweet of you, Sandy. Right now I have no idea. They probably haven't looked at it yet. I'll let you know if I need a ride or somethin' and Mike's just too busy." I hid a smile on that one and so did Sandy.

"Jeffy, I hope I'm never too busy for you."

"I hope ya ain't either, bud."

"Will you two quit it with the mutual admiration society?"

"I thought you wanted us to be together?"

“Before Jeffy got back here from California, why were you always tellin’ me how perfect he was and how this and how that?”

Sandy got a bit red on that one. “I’m very happy for you two. You know I’m just joshin’ when I give you a hard time. If I didn’t, you guys would wonder if I still loved you two.”

“She’s got a point there, buddy. A nice, sweet Sandy? I’d think she was inhabited by some alien who didn’t have a clue about the real Sandy we know and love.”

“You’re spot on, Jeff. I’d think it was her nice twin sister if she was decent to us, not the evil twin we hang with.”

“Okay guys! You’ve made your point.” We all started laughing. We began planning the meals and got down a good menu. I then had a thought.

“Does anyone know if anyone has any food restrictions? Or if there’s stuff the kids don’t like?”

“Hell, Jeff, all you’d have to do is say you liked something and the kids would eat it up.”

“I reckon so, Mike, but I want ’em to like what we have.” We finally had the plans complete and called it a night. It had been a long day.

## Chapter Fourteen

THE smell of coffee woke me up. I could tell by the light in the skylight it was well past dawn. I was lying on my side with my arms around Mike. He felt me move a bit and backed up into me. I knew what he wanted and my body responded immediately. I nuzzled the back of his neck and rubbed the fur on his chest.

“You’re gonna have to take a rain check.”

He ground into me all the harder. “Why’s that?”

“Wake up and smell the coffee, buddy. Sandy’s downstairs and from the smell of things she’s makin’ breakfast.”

“What about a quickie?”

I laughed at that one. “I wanna take my time and fuck you right. Don’t ya think I’m worth waitin’ for?”

“Well, since you put it that way.” We got up and got dressed and headed down the stairs. Sandy had not only made coffee, but she’d fixed a breakfast we called campers. She’d taken hash browns, onions, peppers, bacon, cheese, and eggs, and mixed it all up.

“Sandy, some guy is gonna be lucky as hell to hitch up with you.”

“That smells wonderful, Sandy! Thanks!” Mike added.

“I’m just practicin’ for the dudes.”

“Hell, Sandy, you keep cookin’ like this, and they’ll come just for the food.”

She smiled at me. “Thanks, Jeff. So what are you guys doin’ today?”

“Wayne’s got some stuff for us to do, then I’m gonna drive Jeff to Wenatchee to talk to the lawyer about his dad’s will. What about you?”

“I gotta work four to midnight.”

"It's the easy part of the season for us. Not much to do until the heifers come into heat."

Mike perked up. "Jeff, Sandy, I had an idea about somethin' for the dudes. Did you ever hear of the 'testicle festival' in Montana?"

"Can't say I have, you Sandy?"

"Nope."

"It was on TV as one of the wackiest parties in the US. It's outside Missoula, Montana. They put it on right after calf cuttin' time. They have lots of people, lots of beer, and lots of mountain oysters." Both Sandy and I started laughin'.

"So you think dudes would come up here to eat mountain oysters?"

"A hell of a lot of 'em go to Montana, and there's another one in Missouri."

"I'll have to think on that one."

"Well, guys, on that one, I am gonna head home. Let me know if you need a ride somewhere," Sandy said.

"Sure will, and thanks!"

She headed out with a wave. I turned to Mike. "Testicle Festival, eh? You got one thing on your mind, buddy."

"No, Jeffy. Think about it. We all look forward to cuttin' calves because of the mountain oysters. It's a real cowboy thing."

"You're right there, but I'm not sure if dudes would appreciate it. It's kinda like your son of a bitch stew. Cowboys love it, but dudes gag. That's why we have the sayin' 'He's actin' like a city boy in front of a plate of mountain oysters'. I'll tell ya what, let's ask Jonathan, Tom, Ann, and Renee. We can see what they think."

"Okay. So what do ya wanna do until Wayne shows up?"

"Remember we said we was gonna write down all the stuff we know about the rustlin' and the stuff goin' on around here? We ain't done that yet. I think that'd be a good project for us. A lot of that stuff just doesn't seem to fit together. Maybe if we write it all down, it'll start to make sense."

"Sounds good to me; let's put it on your computer, Jeff. That way we can move around the data and see how it fits."

"Good idea, buddy." I gave him a big kiss.

"I'm gonna have to get lots more ideas if that's what happens."

I ran upstairs to get my laptop. In a flash I had it booted up. We began to conjecture on what we knew.

"Mike, we know there are about four guys. Three are cowboys and one rides a motorcycle. One or more of 'em is local and knows the area."

"Jeffy, I still think that they shot at us and killed Pedro because they were afraid of bein' recognized."

"It still doesn't add up, Mike. Murder is a lot more serious crime than rustlin'. I figure that there has to be somethin' else there."

"If Porky is involved, he's after you."

"Yeah, but Pedro was murdered and you were shot at and Wayne was shot before my run-in with Porky."

"So you think Porky is involved?"

"My gut says yes. We don't have proof though. I think that the rustlers were tryin' to kill us when we were out huntin' too."

"It seems we got a whole lot of circumstantial evidence, but nothin' concrete."

"Ain't that the truth." We sat and looked at each other for a while. Just then I heard the back door open and close.

"Jeff? Mike?" It was Wayne.

"Hey, Wayne, what you got for us to do today?"

"I need some help roundin' up the bull and doctorin' him up. Looks like he's got an infected hoof; I want to clean it out and give him some antibiotics so it don't get no worse." This was serious, especially the timing of it. Breeding season was almost here, and we needed the bull or there would be no beeves the next year.

"Jeff, you also need to see about gettin' another bull for stud. Rentin' is fine, but we kept back a good number of female calves last year, so we're gonna need more than the one bull." It was pretty late in the morning, and tending to the bull would take several hours if we were lucky, more if we weren't.

"Thanks for lettin' me know, Wayne. I'll get on it today. I can always go to Wenatchee later in the week."

"Thanks, Jeff." He looked at my laptop. "One of these days you guys gotta teach me how to use one of them computer things." He stepped closer and looked at it then shook his head and smiled. "If that just don't beat all what you can do with them machines nowadays. Let's get goin'; I don't wanna keep you fellers all day."

It took us several hours to round up the bull. It's not easy rounding up or herding a bull. We finally got him in one of the chutes near the holding pens. Wayne was right; there was an infection on his hoof. He wasn't too happy about us fiddling with it; it must have hurt like hell. We finally got the hoof all cleaned, some antibiotic ointment on it, and gave the bull a shot of antibiotics. We decided to leave him in the near pasture for a couple of hours to let the ointment and antibiotics do their job.

By the time we were done, it was after three. There wasn't any time to go into Wenatchee today. I needed to call around and find another bull for stud. We'd end up dividing up the heifers, separating them from the calves that were old enough to be on their own anyway, and leaving them in the pastures with the bulls. Then we'd round up the male calves and cut them to make steers out of them. I started making phone calls, and finally just before five I found a bull, and made arrangements to get him over here and to pay the stud fees. I then went out and threw a bale of hay in the manger in the pasture where the bull was, made sure the water tank was full, and added some oats to the hay. When I came back into the kitchen, Mike was making something that smelled great.

"What ya cookin'?"

"Chili; I reckon we could make some cornbread too."

"How long does the chili have to cook?"

"I like to let it stew for a couple of hours."

"Wanna get a workout in?"

He smiled at me. "Sure, I like workin' out with you, Jeff." We headed upstairs to our room and changed into workout clothes. When I was putting on my jock, Mike didn't even try to make a pretense of not looking.

“You look pretty hot in that, Jeffy.” The way he said it and the look in his eyes left me no doubt I would get a piece of tail tonight.

“Thanks, buddy! I appreciate the compliment, but let’s get the workout done first.”

“Okay.” We headed down the stairs to my little gym. We both stretched out and then began our routine. Since we’d be able to work out tomorrow, I thought just an upper body workout would be great. Mike agreed and we began the series of repetitions to work out our backs, biceps, triceps, chest, and shoulders. It was a good workout. It took a couple of hours. We both felt good and looked good, with the pumped up muscles in our upper bodies from the workout. We went back upstairs and began to undress.

I had taken off most of my clothes and was about to step out of the jock when Mike said in a husky voice, “Come over here.” He was already bare assed and sitting on the edge of the bed. He was hard and looking at me with a hungry look on his face.

“You reckon the chili’s gonna keep, or do we need to turn it off?”

“It’ll keep,” he said as I moved across the room toward him. He wrapped his arms around my hips, feeling my ass and the straps framing it. He pushed his face right into the pouch and took a deep breath.

“You smell great, Jeffy, just like clean sweat and sex, all musky.” He began chewing gently on the pouch and my cock inside it. I began to reach down to take the jock off, but he stopped me.

“Let me enjoy this a while. Like I said, I love the way you smell, clean sweat, clean crotch, and that aroused smell.” I knew what he meant. Men just smell different when they’re aroused. I ground my cock into his face. Between the sweat I’d put out working out, the precum I was leaking, and Mike’s spit, the pouch was wet and hot. I have to admit, it wasn’t something I would have asked for, but it felt great. I reckon a big part of that was I was really turning my buddy on. Finally, he pulled the jock off and lay back on the bed. He looked incredible laying there with his hands behind his head. His legs were spread, and he was hard as rock, his dick against his furry belly. The red of the hair under his arms and around his crotch contrasted with the golden hair elsewhere really got me going. I lay down on top of him, and we began to kiss. He was rubbing his cock against the fur on my belly, and mine was down between his legs. He reached over and got out the lube and a condom. I was really raring to go by this time, so it didn’t take much time to get all lubed and suited up. He put his legs in the air, and I lubed his ass. I pushed in and he sighed.

“Wrap your legs around me, buddy.” He did and I began moving my entire body back and forth instead of just my hips. He was using his legs around my waist as leverage and grinding his dick into my belly.

Finally he said, “Hold off just a second, Jeffy, I got an idea.” He reached over, got the lube, and lubed up his cock and my belly. “Okay, do just what you were doin’ before.” I began moving my body again. “Jeff, that feels so fuckin’ good, so good.”

“Like that do ya, buddy?”

“Hell yeah!” We settled into a nice rhythm and began to kiss again. He wrapped his arms around my neck and pulled me close.

“Jeffy, this is so nice. You feel so good rubbin’ against my cock and my body. I ain’t never felt anythin’ like this before.”

“I aim to please.”

“You do, Jeffy, you do. I love the way you fuck, nice slow and easy, just takin’ your time, makin’ me feel good. I love havin’ you in me, Jeffy buddy. I love lookin’ up at you. This is so hot.”



“Think you could come like this?”

“I could. I’m pretty close now.”

“Me too. That sweet ass of yours is just too much, and that big dick of yours rubbin’ against me. Hot damn, I’m close!” I picked up the pace a bit.

Mike began murmurin’ in my ear. “Cum for me, Jeffy, shoot that big fuckin’ dick. Unload, show me how much you like my ass.”

“I’m comin’!” I exploded hard enough to see stars and bright colors all around. I kept moving back and forth knowing Mike liked it and was close.

“Here it comes, Jeffy, I’m gonna shoot. Fuck yeah, oh yeah!” I felt Mike’s cock pulsing as he unloaded between us. I had pulled up a bit, and his first blast hit him in the upper chest. He continued unloading for about a minute. It was intense. I ground my chest and belly against him, smearing his musk all over us both. The scent we shared was pretty intoxicating, clean sweat, arousal and sex, and musk.

“Thanks, Jeffy.”

“Thank you, that was incredible.”

“Yeah, it was wasn’t it? I really like bein’ that close to you. I never felt for anyone else what I feel for you.”

“I think we’re in the same boat there, bud.”

“I’ll get a towel for us, Jeff.”

“Leave it. It’s hot havin’ this all over us both.” He grinned at me. We pulled on our long handles and socks and went down for dinner.

We were sitting at the kitchen table with our chili. We got distracted from the cornbread, but I had a loaf of French bread in the freezer, so I made some garlic bread to go with the chili.

“This is good chili, Mike, nice and spicy.”

“I reckon chili should have a bit of a kick to it. Chili is based on red chile.”

“Ain’t gonna get any arguments from me there.”

“Thanks again, Jeffy.”

“For what?”

“Everything, the great roll in the hay we just had, all the great rolls in the hay, bein’ my friend, the way you look at me, workin’ out with me, lettin’ me share your bed, just everything.”

“You’re welcome. That’s all part of bein’ in a relationship; I’m sure there’ll be some rocky times, too, but we’ll get through those. We fit together pretty well, buddy. I reckon Dad was right when he told Sandy we’re two sides of the same coin.”

“This is all so new to me. I never reckoned that I’d even have friends, let alone a partner or boyfriend or whatever we are.”

“I’d call us partners.”

“I’m just afraid I don’t know what to do, how to react to you.”

“You’re doin’ fine, buddy. I notice you’re handlin’ stuff better and better. Like when one of the ladies at karaoke asked, ‘Who’s the lucky girl, Jeff?’ and you answered, ‘That’d be me.’ I told ya that closet door would come bustin’ down.”

“I just know I wanna be with you, Jeff, and I know I can’t do that if I’m in the closet. I reckon it’s easier and easier the more people who are acceptin’. Those that ain’t, I’m not gonna worry about ’em. They’re not worth my time.”

“You’re spot on there.”

“When are you gonna hear back from Mary Grace about the exhibit?”

"She's on duty in the co-op tomorrow, so I reckoned I'd head down there. I figured I could call the lawyer and see if we could do whatever business he has over the phone. You wanna go to Winslett with me tomorrow?"

"Sure, it sounds like fun."

"Good, bein' as you're gonna have to drive me. I gotta call about my truck tomorrow too."

"I reckon you're really jonesin' to get it back."

"You can say that again, buddy. I never realized how much I depend on it. I figured we could have lunch there, and after comin' back here, play some football and have a workout. Tomorrow will be an easy one—legs and abs."

Mike was staring at me grinning.

"What?"

"I just like lookin' at ya."

"Well, that's kind of a mutual feelin' there." We finished off the chili and then cleaned up. We headed into the living room. We discussed going to Phoenix for the gay rodeo in February and what other rodeos we wanted to attend. We figured on about five or six including the finals. We spent some time talking about practicing, and finally we decided to hit the hay. We got into bed and Mike cuddled up against me. Neither one of us was really sleepy, so we began to talk.

"Jeff? Did you get picked on as a kid?"

"Yeah, for a while. I started stickin' up for myself, and no one would say anything to my face at least. And Sandy was always there for me to go to a dance with or whatever."

"How'd you stick up for yourself?"

"In about seventh grade, I realized that guys were a lot nicer to look at for me than girls. I guess some of the bullies picked up on that. They'd call me queer, or homo, or pansy, or fag, or whatever. I began to hate to go to school. None of the 'no bully stuff tolerated' existed then. I tried to fight back a few times but just got the shit kicked outta me. I kept tryin', though. Dad noticed and asked me what was wrong. I told him how the kids were pickin' on me and I'd tried to fight back but lost. His response was 'Okay, son, we're gonna teach you to fight.' So that Saturday, Sheriff Johnston came over, and he and my dad started teachin' me. Wayne helped. It was just little stuff, like if a guy's comin' at you, step in to meet him, and he'll lose any momentum he has. Or, don't try to hit in the face, hit in the solar plexus—it'll knock the wind outta the guy gettin' hit. Sheriff Johnston taught me about pressure points and how to make somebody hurt like they felt they wanted to die, but not do any damage to 'em. And they taught me to wrestle. Dad also bought me my workout equipment. I began to lift weights.

"About a month later, a bully started pickin' on me after school. Rick Rolfson. He was a big bully, always pickin' on younger and smaller kids. He had his own little group always following him around. Anyway, one day after school he cornered me. He said he was gonna beat the shit outta me and make me suck his dick since I was queer. I had been workin' out for a month and been workin' with Dad and Sheriff Johnston at least twice a week. I told him, 'Fuck off, Dick. Your cock is probably so tiny you can't even find it in the dark. I guess that's why you pick on everyone, so they won't find out you're a pin dick.' He got all pissed and charged me. I moved forward, blocked his punch, and hit him in the solar plexus. It knocked the wind outta him. Then I grabbed his arm and used one of the pressure points Sheriff Johnston showed me. He was screamin', and he actually started cryin'. I kept up with the pressure point and told him I'd keep it up until he died from pain unless he apologized for being such a pin dick'd little girl with no balls, and also apologized for bullying everyone. He finally started screamin' out, 'I'm sorry I'm a pin dick wimp! I'm sorry I don't got no balls. I'm sorry I'm cryin' like a little girl; I'm sorry I'm a stupid bully.' I finally let 'em up.

“By that time, one of the teachers was out there and grabbed me by the collar and hauled me back into the school. Next thing I know, Dad was there. The principal started tellin’ him how I picked a fight and I really hurt Rick and all this load of crap. Dad just listened real quiet like and finally asked me, ‘Jeff, did you start it?’ I answered ‘No, sir.’ Then he asked if Dick, and by then that’s what everyone was callin’ him, not Rick, was the one pickin’ on me all the time. I answered yes, and he just said ‘Well, son, I guess you finally got sick of it.’ The principal started stutterin’ somethin’ about expulsion and just then the sheriff showed up. Dad said hello and the sheriff looked at me and asked if I started it. I said ‘no sir.’ The principal started yellin’ that he was goin’ to expel me and all this bullshit. Just then the sheriff turned to him and said, ‘I’ve talked to about ten of the kids. All their stories match. Apparently that bully’s been picking on Jeff for months, and none of the teachers have done anything. Now I reckon in the eyes of the law, since harassment is illegal, Jeff had a right to defend himself. Now if I had to bring charges against anyone, it would be whoever didn’t prevent the situation by stopping the bullying. I don’t mean a teacher either. I mean whoever is the head of this school. Are we clear?’ The principal started stuttering again, apologized to me and to Dad, and told Sheriff Johnston he would make sure there were no bullies around. For a week or so, I was a big hero since I wasn’t the only one bullied. I got in a couple more fights, but not without reason. I always won. After that no one bothered me. I reckon maybe Dad knew about me before I came out to him. I was pretty lucky to have him. Not everyone approves of me here, but they accept me and live and let live.”

“You are really somethin’, Jeff.” He was looking at me with something like hero-worship in his eyes.

“Maybe so, buddy, but I’m with you ’cause you’re pretty special yourself.”

“Like I said before, just keep tellin’ me that, and someday I might believe it.”

“Look at it this way, Mike, I am special. I am wonderful. I’m smart, I’m good lookin’, I’ve got a great body, and I’m hung like a horse. In short, I’m irresistible. But you’re the one I couldn’t resist.”

“I dunno if I should say thanks or you cocky bastard.”

“How about, thanks you cocky bastard!” We both laughed at that. “You told me a bit about your gettin’ picked on. Didn’t your mom stick up for you against your dad?”

He was silent for a while, and finally answered, “She was a good Christian housewife. You know the type—be subservient to your man in all things. When he wasn’t around, she’d tell me she loved me just the way I was. I guess that kept me goin’.”

“You’d mentioned you have a brother and a sister. Tell me about them.”

“One younger sister, Evangeline, and one younger brother, Guy. Eve would be about twenty-one now and Guy about nineteen.”

“Do ya ever miss your family?”

“Not my old man at all. Sometimes I think about my mom, but I don’t rightly know if I miss her. She never did nothin’ to try and stop my old man. My sister and brother, yeah, I do miss. They both tried to stand up to him when he sent me away.”

“Ya ever think of lookin’ for your sister and brother?”

“From time to time. I wonder now though, what would I say to them, and what would they say to me. Don’t know that we’d have much in common.”

“You said your parents were Cajun?”

“Yep, fresh outta the bayous; when the old man got the ‘call to preach’ it led him to Nebraska. I reckon, too, they weren’t too popular; my mom said a few times that they caught hell from everyone when they left the Catholic Church. We’d speak French at home, I can’t rightly speak it

now, but I understand most stuff. Tell ya what, Jeffy. How about I make you some gumbo sometime? I make really good gumbo.”

“I like that idea, buddy.”

He chuckled then.

“Okay, what’s up?”

“I was just thinkin’. Remember how I told ya I’d never been naked outside the bathroom before leavin’ home?”

“Yeah.”

“I think every night we been together we’ve slept bare-assed. It was kind of a shock to me that most guys sleep in their underwear and not in pajamas, and now we spend about eight hours outta every twenty-four buck naked.”

“It just seems right with you. You don’t mind, do ya?”

“Not one bit. I like it.”

“What would ya do if ya ran into your father?”

“That one I don’t know either. Believe me, I thought about it enough. Part of me would like to kick the shit outta him. Another part of me would just want to walk away. A third part wonders if he regretted what he did.”

“And if he did?”

“That’s a tough one. I don’t know if I’d throw it in his face how it was his choice, or if I’d listen to why he regretted it, or if I’d just tell him ‘Fuck you asshole’ and walk away. It’d be even tougher if he apologized. You know, Jeff, your dad asked me the same question.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he said it’s really easy to hate and carry all that anger around, and it eventually becomes poison. He said the hardest thing to do is forgive. He went on and told me forgivin’ someone don’t necessarily mean you get close to ’em, but you stop holdin’ on to the anger and hate and just feel bad for them that they did what they did.”

“That sounds like Dad. What do you think?”

“I know since I been with you, I don’t think of my old man all that often. When we’re together, it’s hard for me to hold on to that anger and hate against him. I reckon that’s a good thing.” Just then I heard a loud thump from downstairs like someone fell. We both sat up. Listening a bit more, I thought I could hear muffled footsteps on the hardwood floors below.

“C’mon, Mike, let’s see what’s up. Guns in the gun case in the hall are loaded, but the cabinet’s locked. I gotta unlock it,” I whispered. Mike nodded to show he understood. As I crept out into the hall, I heard him softly call me, but I kept going. I had my keys from the dresser and unlocked the gun cabinet. The hall up here was carpeted and so were the stairs, so I could be really quiet. I got a rifle, took off the lock, and slowly went down the stairs. After a few minutes, I heard Mike behind me. Just as I got down to the bottom of the stairs, I saw a large form in the shadows heading for the back door carrying something.

“Drop it and put your hands up! I got a gun, and I’d just as soon shoot as talk.” I yelled this out loudly and clearly. The figure didn’t stop though, but kept lumberin’ forward. Whoever it was, he seemed so fat he lumbered rather than ran. I was halfway across the living room when I heard the back door slam. I ran through the kitchen and mudroom and looked out the door. Whoever it was, was moving toward a motorcycle. Porky! He didn’t look to have a gun, so I ran out onto the porch and yelled at him to stop. He didn’t. I hesitated shooting him in the back, but then got an idea. I raised my rifle, sighted on my target, and squeezed the trigger. I hit the gas tank of Porky’s bike. It exploded in a ball of flame close enough to him to singe his greasy beard.

“You mother fucking asshole, that was my bike! I’m gonna kill you!” He turned and took a step toward me. I calmly raised the rifle and put a shot in the ground about six inches in front of him. It was close enough to blow dirt up into his face.

“You’re dead, Connelly. You don’t know who or what you’re messin’ with. Bossman’s gonna slit your throat. He don’t like cocksucking faggots. You just won’t leave it alone, so you’re gonna die. And so’s that little blond fuck buddy you got. I’m gonna spit on your dead carcass you fucking queer.”

I half turned to Mike and yelled, “Get some rope, buddy, let’s hog tie this pig.”

Just then I felt somethin’ whiz by me, almost like a bee. It went right where my head had been. Right then I heard the gunshot and saw the wood in one of the columns on the porch splinter. I dove over behind Mike’s truck. From under the truck, I could see that Porky was running down the driveway as fast as his fat legs could take him.

“I’m comin’, boss, I’m comin’”. He’d had my laptop and the Blu-ray player, but dropped them when I shot his bike. All of a sudden he seemed to stop, stagger a bit back. The back of his head exploded, and another shot rang out. I tried to get a look over the hood of Mike’s truck, and another shot whizzed by. Mike was in the house out of danger.

I heard him yell out, “Sheriff’s on his way! Hang tight, Jeff!” Another couple shots flew by, then just silence for a bit. I stuck my head up, and no more shots. I crouched behind the truck until I could hear sirens off in the distance. The adrenaline was wearing off, and I began to shiver. I realized I was buck naked, and it’d been about fifteen minutes that I’d been crouching behind the truck. It was windy and drizzling. Mike peeked out the door and began coming toward me. He had on his sweats and a pair of boots. It was cold out, only about thirty-five, and I could see my hands and feet were almost blue. I started toward Mike, and when I took a step, I realized from the pain that my feet were all cut to hell. Mike came out with a pair of sweatpants, a jacket, and some boots for me. I pulled on the sweatpants and jacket, but the boots were a lot harder to get on. I was shaking so bad that I couldn’t manage. Mike knelt down in front of me and helped me. I leaned back on his truck and pulled my foot up and Mike slipped on my boot, then the other one.

By then the sheriff had pulled into the driveway, followed by two deputies in cars. Mike was holding on to me like he was drowning and I was a life preserver. He felt warm. He’d been in the house when I’d been stuck outside behind the truck. He was beginning to shiver, too, but nowhere near as much as me.

“Boys, either of you hurt?” Mike answered no, and I shook my head.

“Wanna step in the house? I’ll be in there in just a minute.” He looked at me holding my rifle. “You’re the one who shot him, Jeff?”

My teeth were chattering so bad I could barely talk. “N... no... s-s-sir. Sho... ot came from b-b-back th... there.” I tried to point, but was so shaky I couldn’t.

“Mike, get him inside, and get him covered up and somethin’ hot to drink. Jeff, you’re either in shock, got hypothermia, or both. Get inside before I got another body on my hands.” Mike half carried, half dragged me into the house and put me down on the living room couch. He pulled my boots off and put a blanket around my shoulders. He went into the bathroom and got a couple of towels and wrapped them around my feet.

“You just wait there, Jeffy, I’ll get some coffee for ya. I’ll be back in just a minute, okay?” He looked real worried. I nodded. My teeth were still chattering too much to talk. He took a little longer than a minute, but came back with a big mug of steaming hot coffee and two hot water bottles. He situated me so I was leaning back, and put one hot water bottle on my chest and one behind my back. He held up the coffee and let me drink. He’d put a good amount of whiskey in the coffee. He jumped up and into the spare room downstairs and returned with a couple more

blankets. Then he got under the blankets with me and put his arms around me. Slowly the shivering abated. He was whispering in my ear.

"I got ya, Jeffy. Don't worry, we'll get you nice and warm. Now that I found ya, I ain't gonna let anything happen to ya. You understand that? I gotta keep you safe, so you can push my wheelchair with your walker when we're both little old men." He was rubbing my arms, and I could feel life and his warm caring energy flow through my body. We heard the back door open and close. He scooted off me and made sure the blankets were around me before putting one over his shoulders. Sheriff Johnston walked in and sat down on the lazy boy chair half facing us. I took another big swig of the coffee.

"Mike, why don't you go out and talk with Deputy Snyder. He'll take your statement. Jeff, I'm gonna talk with you here." Mike walked off after asking if there was anything I needed. I saw him take a jacket off the hook by the mudroom and walk into the kitchen to talk with Deputy Snyder.

"Did you shoot the biker, Jeff?" The sheriff had turned on a small recorder.

"No, sir."

"Okay then, what happened?"

"We were upstairs. Mike and I had already gone to bed. We weren't asleep, just talkin'. We heard a thump downstairs, and the wood floors creaked a bit. We were both pretty sure someone was in the house. I told Mike the guns in the gun cabinet were loaded, but locked. I unlocked the gun cabinet, grabbed my rifle, and ran downstairs. I saw Porky run out. He had somethin' under his arm, but I couldn't tell ya what it was. I chased after him, and he didn't stop. I reckon he didn't think I'd shoot. He got outside and was runnin' for his bike. I shot at it and hit the gas tank. It exploded. Porky started yellin' at me I was dead and the boss man was gonna kill me. He yelled I couldn't keep outta it. Then someone shot at me. Almost hit me. If I hadn't turned halfway to see where Mike was, my head would be in the same shape as Porky's. I dove behind Mike's truck, and Porky started runnin' down the driveway yellin', 'I'm comin' boss'. Then his head just exploded. Whoever was doin' the shootin' shot a few more times, then nothin'. That was when we heard the sirens."

"Where were Wayne, Josh, and José through all this?"

"We just finished roundup a couple of days ago. José is off with friends in Wenatchee; Josh has been dating a lady from Seattle, so he's there. Wayne, I'm not sure about. We think he's got a lady friend somewheres."

"Okay, how long were you out there, son?"

"Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes."

"You were out there in only a pair of sweats in thirty-five degree drizzle?"

"Actually, Sheriff, Mike brought out the sweats. I didn't take the time to get dressed."

"You're damn lucky we aren't takin' you to the hospital with hypothermia."

"I realize that now, sir." He made me repeat my story twice more. Mike and the deputy came in, and the sheriff and deputy went to look outside. In the meantime, an ambulance had pulled up.

"How ya doin', Jeff? Are ya feelin' any better?"

"Yeah, I am. Thanks, buddy, I really appreciate all you do for me."

"I was kinda surprised you ran out there bare assed, but I reckon even if you had sweatpants or jeans on, you would have been just as cold."

"Uh-huh, I still feel a little shaky and queasy, probably the aftereffect of all that adrenaline."

"Jeff, what do ya figure Porky wanted? If he was comin' here to steal, maybe that's why he picked up the electronics. But that's awful risky. You kicked the shit outta him twice. He musta known we were home."

"He also said I couldn't keep outta it, and the boss was gonna kill me. And then he got shot. I reckon whoever was watchin' either got tired of him fuckin' up, or thought he couldn't get away, so they killed him to keep him from identifyin' anyone."

"What do ya mean by his 'fuckin' up'?"

"Think of it, Mike, every thing he's tried to do he's failed. I kicked the shit outta him twice. So he failed at intimidatin' me. He tried to mess up our operation, but he let the cattle out to pasture a bit early—it actually helped us—if he was tryin' to hurt us, that was a big fuck-up. I still reckon, by trashin' my truck, he was tryin' to kill us. Here we are, so he failed at that too."

"Makes sense; now we do know there are others involved with him."

"Yeah, but, Mike, think about it. He didn't say anythin' that would tie him to the cattle rustlin'. We still don't know if he's involved. Unless...."

"Unless what, Jeffy?"

"What if the bullet that killed old Porky is from the same gun as the one that killed Pedro? There's the tie-in right there. We gotta mention that to the sheriff."

"He and the deputy are goin' over the area with a fine-tooth comb. They got their cars parked to shine light on the area and have their baggies and tweezers."

"Let's keep our fingers crossed that they find somethin' that'll help find whoever's behind all this. It didn't exactly give me warm fuzzies hearin' that the 'boss man' wants me dead. If it ties in with the rustlin', it's gotta be somebody local."

"Remember, Jeffy, your little blond fuck buddy is on the list too."

"We just gotta stick together. I reckon as a team, we're pretty hard to beat. Hell, there's no one more than you, Mike, I'd want watchin' my back."

"Same here, Jeffy. You're still pretty shook up, ain't ya?"

"Yeah, it's not every day I get shot at, and it's happenin' too much lately. If I wouldn't have turned to look at you, it would be my body they were baggin' up instead of Porky's. Just then the back door opened and closed. We could hear footsteps coming through the mudroom. It was Sheriff Johnston. He sat down in the chair half facing us."

"Coffee or somethin', Sheriff?" Mike was the one to ask.

"Thanks, no. You boys holdin' up okay?"

"Just tired and shook up, Sheriff; I'm a little worse off than Mike."

"Son, that was a damn foolhardy thing you did, running outside naked as a jaybird in thirty-five degree drizzle to chase down Porky. I know you had your rifle, but didn't you think he might not be alone?"

"No, sir. I reckon I didn't."

He sighed. "Jeff, you remember me telling you since your father isn't here anymore I was gonna jump in that spot if needs be?"

"Yes, sir." I was beginning to wish I could sink into the floor. The reminding me of our long relationship and my dad was not a good sign. I knew Sheriff Johnston well enough to know that all those sighs were his way of counting to ten to avoid saying something he couldn't take back.

"Son, you need to think. You could have gotten killed there, if not by a gunshot, by freezing to death. In the conditions we have outside now, windy, thirty-five degrees and drizzle, it would only take about fifteen or twenty minutes for hypothermia to get serious. You were shaking so much you couldn't talk, and that was after you got clothes on and something hot to drink. Or you

could have put yourself on a suspect list in Porky's death. You're not a lone wolf anymore. You got someone here who really cares about you. If you can't think about preserving your own hide for yourself, maybe think about him." He looked at Mike.

"If you care about this young man as much as you seem to, then you need to think. You know Sandy thinks you're the greatest thing since sliced bread. She sees you like a combination brother and best friend. If you got hurt, it would kill her. Jeff, I even look at you like another one of my kids. You've been around me and my family since you were just a little guy. If you don't think of yourself, think of all of us who love you."

Now I really wanted to sink into the ground. I felt pretty low and stupid. I didn't doubt for a second that he, Sandy, and Mike really cared about me. It would be a tragedy if Mike and I didn't see where this might lead. I hung my head pretty low and managed to mumble out, "I'm sorry, sir. Like you said, I just didn't think. I know it's not an excuse, but it's the only explanation I have."

"Try and remember next time, okay." He clapped me on the shoulder and finally smiled.

"Yes, sir."

"Are we suspects in Porky gettin' shot?" Mike asked the question I was too shamefaced to ask.

"No, son, you're not, neither one of you. The bullet going into the porch support shows it was fired from down toward the road. It's the same with the one that killed Porky. They look to be a different caliber than your rifle, Jeff."

"Are you gonna do ballistics tests on 'em, Sheriff?"

He looked at me. "What you thinkin', Jeff?"

"I just wonder if the gun that fired the shot that killed Porky and the ones at me was the same one used to kill Pedro."

"We'll see about that. We'll also see if it was the same gun that shot Wayne and shot at you, Mike."

"How long will the tests take?"

"We gotta send the evidence out to Seattle. With all the backups and red tape, it'll take a while. Maybe since there have been two murders, they might move their asses a bit. I'd guess it should take about two weeks. One other thing, I know you don't lock the door, Jeff, but you boys may consider doing that from now on. That biker was able to walk right in. If he wasn't such a screwup, he might have got clean away with your Blu-ray player and computer and anything else he could have grabbed."

"Do you even know what his real name was?" Mike asked.

"It was Mortimer. Mortimer Andrews. He has a record about a mile long. Mostly assault, drunk and disorderly, theft, some drugs, he was never big time. I reckon nobody's got to worry about him any more."

"What a waste of a life." Mike had a real sad look on his face. This was somethin' new I was just noticing about Mike. The guy was out to get us, died trying, and Mike was such a decent guy he felt compassion for him. I thanked my lucky stars again he was with me.

"Boys, it's almost four in the morning. I'm gonna head home. I'll have your statements typed up. Can you stop by the office day after tomorrow and read 'em, make any corrections, and then sign 'em?"

"Sure, we can do that."

"Any word on your truck, Jeff?"

"Not yet, I've got to call tomorrow. I reckon by then, they should have an estimate on the repair and the time it will take."



“Okay. Well, good night, Jeff, Mike. You boys try and get some rest after all you went through tonight.”

“Good night, Sheriff.” We both said that. Mike followed him out and locked the door. He came back with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

“Jeffy, let’s drink enough to get to sleep.”

“Sounds like a great idea. Hey, buddy, I just wanted to say I’m sorry for runnin’ out there like that. Sheriff was right. I need to think of you. I am really sorry.”

“Well, you did look awful cute all bare assed out there crouchin’ behind my truck.” His joking answer really got to me. It made me feel more choked up than I would’ve thought possible.

He handed me a glass of whiskey. I held it up to him and said, “To us, buddy. I must be the most goddamned lucky guy on earth to have you with me. Honestly, Mike, I don’t know what I done to deserve someone as wonderful as you.” I was beginning to get all choked up. I chugged the whiskey quick. Mike did the same and then put his arms around me; I leaned into him. My head was on his chest, and he just kept rubbing my hair and murmuring to me.

“It’s okay, Jeffy. I’m right here. I ain’t gonna let you go. You’re just too damned important to me. It’s okay. If you need to cry, just let it out. I’m here for ya. You got a buddy here who loves you more than words can tell. I’m here.” I was shaking against him. A sob escaped here and there, but for the most part, it was a silent, wordless keening from deep inside. All the fear, the exhilaration, the danger, the anger, the worry of the night just seemed to hit me. He held me for a while, just saying over and over words that soothed and calmed me. I’d always been the big guy, the protector, the guardian, the warrior. Now my buddy was taking care of me; he had been all night. The interesting thing was it was okay. In fact, it felt really nice. For once, I could let go. I could lean on my partner. I finally pulled up and looked at him. The look he gave me was so sweet. I could see his heart in the way his eyes shone at me, the caring in them.

“Mike, buddy. I really love you. I can’t even tell you how much. Words just don’t do it.”

“Shush. I see it every time you look at me, Jeffy. I always thought I needed you. I just realize now we need each other. Like your dad said, two sides of the same coin.” He kissed me gently and tenderly. I could taste the medicinal bite of the whiskey on his breath. It was nice. We broke apart and he reached for the bottle.

“Another shot?”

“Hell yeah, maybe another three.” He poured. We did end up taking three more shots. We’d just gone five rounds with Jack Daniels. We headed upstairs; by this time we were both staggering a bit. We stripped and got into bed.

“Jeff, tonight I’m holdin’ you. You need that.” His arms went around me. Although I was pretty drunk, I was sober enough to know I was a lucky man.

“Night, Mike, we really done used up this day.”

“Sleep well, Jeff.”

## Chapter Fifteen

I HADN’T slept well. I kept having nightmares, seeing bullets flying toward me in slow motion and I was frozen to the spot, I couldn’t move to dodge them. The worst part of the nightmare was just before the bullet hit. I could see a look of pain and concern on Mike’s face that just about broke

my heart. I'd see that look, and then there'd be an unbelievably painful flash of light, and then darkness. That same fucking nightmare kept playing over and over and over. It was like a CD with a scratch that got caught on one little piece. Every time it would happen, I'd wake with a start. Mike said I shouted out a few times too. Great, not only was I keeping myself awake, but I was preventing him from sleeping too. I'd offered to sleep in another room so he could get some rest, and he just told me to shut up and try to sleep. He went on to say, "We're in this for the long haul, Jeffy. For better or worse, don't you remember? What type of a partner or friend would I be to let you go through this alone?" Finally about seven thirty in the morning, I dozed off. It felt real good to have his arms wrapped around me. I woke up about ten. Mike was still holding me. I felt like a chicken with its neck wrung. My feet hurt like hell from the cuts, I had scrapes all over my knees and arms from diving into the gravel behind Mike's truck, and I was so dehydrated from the whiskey my mouth felt like it was stuffed with old sweat socks. Dry old sweat socks. I had a headache to end all headaches. To sum it up, I felt like shit. I tried to stretch, but it just made my head feel like it was hit by a lightning bolt. Mike nuzzled the back of my neck.

"You finally wakin' up, sleepy head?"

"I feel like somethin' the cat drug in."

"You had a pretty rough night. I was beginnin' to worry about you. You kept wakin' up shoutin'. Wanna talk about it?"

"I reckon it might help. I need some water and coffee and maybe some greasy food."

"I'll tell ya what, Jeffy, you go wash up, brush your teeth, and try and drink about three big glasses of water. Some aspirin wouldn't hurt either. I'll make us breakfast."

"You got it, buddy. Thanks!" I got up and walked into the bathroom. After four aspirin washed down with several glasses of water, I brushed my teeth. A shower sounded real good, so I turned on the water and stepped under the hot spray. It felt fantastic. I just let the hot water run over my head and shoulders. Finally when I'd used up all the hot water, I turned it off, and then dried off, got dressed, and headed down to the kitchen. Mike was just finishing up breakfast. He'd made huevos rancheros, cooked up some spicy beans from some leftovers in the fridge, and made strong coffee. I sat down and mumbled my thanks. First forkful of the eggs showed me he hadn't stinted on the jalapenos.

"Good grub, buddy. Thanks."

"No need to thank me, Jeffy. I like doin' stuff for you."

I managed a smile at him. It wasn't too hard. "I can't figure out why I feel so shitty. I reckon maybe I'm a bit hung over, but it ain't only that."

"After I got shot at, I felt all shaky and almost hung over too. It could be the aftereffects of all that adrenaline, or nerves, or whatever. Plus you were pretty cold last night. Both the sheriff and I were really worried. I reckon you'd gone into stage two hypothermia. I remember a class we had at the ranch for kids they sent me to, about the outdoors. Stage two is where it starts getting serious and your core body temperature drops. I had the hot tub all heated up. We were about to carry you in there. Those nightmares last night didn't help ya either. You were tossin' and turnin', moanin', and talkin' in your sleep constantly. Ya even shouted out a few times."

"I am really sorry I ruined your night's sleep, buddy."

"I already told ya, no worries on that. I'm always gonna be here for ya. You take care of me lots. I feel safe with you. For the first time in my life, I feel confident, not like some dumb loser hick. That's because of you. Now, do you want to talk about the nightmares? It might help to get it off that beautiful chest of yours." I just looked at him for a minute. I must've been a saint in a previous life to deserve this man. He grinned at me and waited for me to say somethin'.

"Thanks, buddy. I feel kinda like a wimp goin' all to pieces last night. I'm sorry to dump that all on you."

"Anytime. If you can't share your fears and bad times with me, who can ya share 'em with? It's no good to leave that stuff bottled up inside either. Believe me, I know, so about them nightmares?"

"It was like a tape stuck on one part, just playin' over and over in my mind. It was really freaky." I gave Mike a few more details of the nightmare, but didn't really want to relive it here and now. He understood.

"If ya think of it though, it makes sense. You were pretty shook up last night. You got through by the skin of your teeth twice. It's probably gonna take some time for you to work that out in your head."

"Reckon so."

"About you feelin' like a wimp, as I see it, you're a major stud kinda fearless like, you know? Ain't nothin' wrong with bein' scared, or cryin', or usin' somebody's shoulder to lean on. Somethin' I realized, Jeffy, when we first started explorin' bein' together, you're a strong guy, and I don't mean just physical strength. You're an alpha dude. You look at the two of us. You lead, I follow. You're more aggressive than I am. In the sack, you pitch, I catch. You take care of me. How many times have I cried on your shoulder? How many times have you held me and let me know everything is gonna be all right? I realized right quick that followin' you, takin' good advantage of your bein' there for me, hell, even bein' a bit submissive in bed and gettin' fucked all the time don't make me any less of a man. I come to know you and realized that you need another real man to be with you. Not some metrosexual like Robert. But a guy, someone who isn't afraid of a little dirt, or shit on their boots, or who drinks, cusses, and dips. Someone that you can play football with, hunt and fish with, just to buddy around with; it makes me feel right special to be that man. You're my stud, Jeff. And the fact that I can be submissive to you in bed, and follow you around and let you lead, makes the two of us fit real good. And if you need some comfort, a shoulder, or just a pair of arms to hold you, I'm there for ya. And it sure don't make you any less of a man, any less of a real stud. Hell, even alpha dudes gotta cry sometime."

That was probably the longest speech I'd ever heard Mike make. It touched me deep down. I knew what he was saying was right. I also realized that he was wise beyond his years. I smiled at him and put my hand on his knee.

"Thanks, buddy. You're incredible, you realize that? I probably am the luckiest man on earth to have you."

"Just don't forget that. Now eat up and feel better." We both laughed. I leaned over, put my arm around his shoulders, and gave him a kiss. He responded.

After a gentle minute or so, I leaned my forehead into his and whispered, "Thanks again. You're a good man, Mike."

"Okay now, enough of the sappy stuff, eat!" We both dug into the spicy eggs and beans. I felt so much better.

"Mike, you up for a trip into Winslett?"

"I was gonna suggest that to you. Let's get a workout in, and head out. You can talk to Mary Grace and find out about your exhibition. I'll clean up in here, and you can call about your truck."

"You cooked; I should clean up."

"Nope. Call about your truck. I want to go back to bein' driven around by you."

I headed into the living room and picked up the phone. The shop was in Wenatchee. They'd already contacted my insurance, and I was in luck. I was covered. Sheriff Johnston had faxed the

insurance company a copy of the police report, and they were just waiting on the go ahead from me. I was getting four new tires, a new windshield, passenger and driver side windows, and a whole lot of work under the hood with wires and belts. All the damage made me mad as hell, and not even at Porky, but at the guy he was calling boss. If I could get my hands on him, there wouldn't be much left of him to charge with rustling and murder.

I thought about that for a few minutes and then realized that breakfast, Mike, and his pep talk had done me a world of good. I had to chuckle to myself. Alpha dude, eh? I liked that. And who'd have ever thought Mike, my buddy liked being submissive. That got me going; I felt a stirring below the belt. Trying hard to think about our upcoming workout I headed up the stairs. Mike was already up there changing. As I walked in, he yelled, "catch," and threw somethin' at me. It was a jockstrap. I think they're about the most uncomfortable thing devised, but if Mike got turned on by it, I was happy to wear it.

"Wear that for me, Jeff, please?" I walked over to him and put it right in his face.

"You gonna be a good boy if I do wear it?" I could see he really liked that; his workout shorts tented out almost immediately.

"I will, Jeff, I'll be really good." I stripped and put it on and then pulled on my workout clothes.

"How 'bout I wear it all the time we're in Winslett, too, and then you can give it a good tongue washin' while I got it on when we get back home?"

"That sounds real good, Jeffy. I want it bad." I was so hard it hurt, and I was trying to burst out of the strap, so I tried to think about somethin' really unpleasant. I settled on Porky in a Speedo swimsuit. That knocked the wind out of my sails right away.

"Okay, buddy, get that sweet ass of yours downstairs and into the workout room, or I ain't gonna fuck it later." He moved right quick. We headed downstairs to the workout room. We were doing abs and legs today. We had a good workout. We changed into jeans and shirts, and headed down the stairs, outside, and into Mike's truck. It was coming up on five when we got into Winslett. We parked and went into the artists' co-op. Mary Grace was there in her earth mother outfit: long denim skirt, a work shirt over a tie dyed T-shirt, wool socks, and Birkenstocks. She rushed over when she saw me and Mike come through the door.

"Jeff! I'm so glad you stopped by. I wanted to show you the pictures. Would you boys like some coffee?"

"Sure, Mary Grace, I ain't about to turn down a cup of coffee."

"Mike?"

"Please." She rushed in back, no doubt to triple the amount of coffee she would put in the coffee maker normally. She came back with two steaming mugs.

"Wow, real mugs, Mary Grace, we sure must rate somethin', right, Mike?"

"Yep, you'd think the young lady was happy to see us."

She giggled at this. She went behind the desk, pulled out a portfolio, and brought it over to the table where we were sitting. I opened it and began to leaf through the pictures. They were quite good. As much as I usually hate pictures of myself, I had to say these showed me in a good light. Mike squeezed my thigh under the table and winked at me to show his approval. That made me realize again how uncomfortable the jockstrap was. I turned back to the pictures. She had several good ones of me, and a real good one of me and Mike. She had some really nice pictures of the ranch also. What impressed me though were the pictures she took of my metal casting equipment. She had also handwritten little captions explaining each piece of equipment and its place in the process. She had it spot on, and it was explained very well.

“Mary Grace, this is incredible. You really did a good job explainin’ the process, and Ryan’s pics are great.”

She giggled again. “Thanks! Just don’t give Ryan any more cowboy coffee. He claims he still can’t sleep.”

“It seems that just about everyone but cowboys likes real weak coffee.” Mike grinned as he spoke. Mary Grace laughed again and started talking about the exhibit.

“We’d like to start the exhibit on November first and run it through the end of February. Normally we wouldn’t feature one artist so long, but since you’re a local boy born and bred, the co-op members thought it was a great idea.”

“I reckon I’m the only local artist in the co-op.”

“That’s true, unless you count a guy from over in Okanogan and a lady off in Colville.” She got a serious look on her face. “I hear you had a spot of trouble out at the ranch last night. I was so happy to see you both I forgot all about that! Thank the goddess you’re okay, both of you.” She pulled me into a big hug and then hugged Mike just as hard. Mike and I told her what had happened, leaving out the fact I’d spent a good part of the adventure streaking.

“Maybe you boys will get some peace and quiet now. I wouldn’t want anyone to get shot, but maybe since that biker is gone this whole nasty business will be done.”

“I hope so too.” For a moment I was letting myself think that Porky’s threat about the boss man was just that, a threat, but then I let go of that hope. Somebody had shot him.

Mike was looking at Mary Grace. He finally asked her, “Mary Grace, I do horsehair belts and hat bands. Think you could exhibit somethin’ like that? We can’t let Jeff think he’s the only one with talent in the family.” I almost laughed out loud on this one. Mike had gone from being under the floor boards of the closet to being open about him and me right quick. She smiled at him warmly.

“Do you have a sample I can see?”

“Sure do.” He whipped off his belt, and then pulled off his hatband. He pointed to my hatband.

“This belt and both our hatbands.” She took the belt and looked it over. Then she looked at the hatbands.

“Mike, these are beautiful. You made these yourself?”

“Yep, some old buckaroo from Nevada showed me how. I make this stuff in my spare time.”

“I would love to show these. Maybe we can get a couple more pictures of you and the two of you together. You two wouldn’t mind if I put Mike’s stuff together with yours, Jeff, and billed you two as artistic partners, would you?”

“Hell no, we are partners, so why not? What do you think, Mike?”

“I think it’s a great idea. Why wouldn’t it be?”

She looked kind of shamefaced. “Reverend Spencer was here today and asked me not to exhibit your sculpture, Jeff.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” She was angry, so angry she stamped her foot. “I told the old hypocrite to get the hell out of here. He didn’t leave, so I told him he was a close-minded bigot and an idiot. When I told him the Goddess was going to send back all that hate and negativity on him threefold, he told me I would be in hell with the two of you.”

I walked over and gave Mary Grace a hug. She really did have a heart of gold. “Thanks for stickin’ up for us. I don’t reckon he has too many followers around here.”

“No, and that makes him even angrier. He’s trying to start that old fight between the families who have been in this valley for generations, and those of us who’ve come more recently.”

“Why is that? What’s the difference?” Mike was apparently unfamiliar with local politics.

“The folks who have lived here a long time have always been the ones ranchin’, loggin’, maybe doin’ some farmin’, or raisin’ fruit trees,” I explained. “They tend not to have a great deal of money and to be a bit redneck, real conservative. Not in that holier than thou religious way, but in the ‘don’t tread on me’ way. For example, they’re okay with me or me and you, but they wouldn’t like to see us kissin’ on Main Street. They’re more of a ‘you do what you wanna do and so will I, but we won’t throw it in each other’s faces’.

On the other hand, most of the folks who have come to the valley in the last twenty or twenty-five years tend to be rich, liberal, and college educated from Seattle. Lots of ’em are what we call Microsoft millionaires. They made their money in the tech boom. They move in here, and they are a bit vocal about what they believe in, things like restrictions on guns, no huntin’, stuff like that, which raises a lot of hackles around here. In some cases they’re justified, in others not. Probably the biggest thing is that they came in here and bought up a lot of property. The prices skyrocketed. So people who been here for generations can’t afford the property taxes; their kids can’t afford to buy homes. My way of puttin’ it would be they come from two different tribes or cultures, and sometimes those two don’t sit all too well together.”

“That’s a real good explanation, Jeff,” Mary Grace said. “Every few years there is some issue that causes a lot of bad feelings and mistrust. Those things take years to calm down. People like reverend Spencer like to incite hate and the differences to further their own ends.”

“I ain’t never thought about the things you two mentioned. It’s a mess, ain’t it?”

“It sure can be, buddy.”

“Most of us on both sides believe that people like you boys, Sandy, Maria, José, even Josh are the ones to end it. You two see both sides. Being gay you are in a better position to understand the liberals, but being locals you understand what the longtime families here in the valley care about. I mention Sandy because she’s in the same boat. Josh is dating the older lady from Seattle, but he’s a local, and Maria and José are from Mexico, but hang around with locals.”

“Mary Grace, I reckon that’s why the co-op is so happy to have a local artist or two, since that shows that the co-op is bringin’ money into the town and valley among the locals.” When I said “or two” I put my hand on Mike’s shoulder.

“I ain’t local though Jeff, I was raised in Nebraska.”

“Yeah, but, you’re workin’ as a ranch hand, one of the traditional ways of makin’ a livin’ here in the valley. The folks around here lump you in with the locals because of that.”

“You’re right, Jeff. We do come under pressure to hire local kids to man the store, but we haven’t found anyone who really is that interested in art or wants to learn about it enough to do the job.”

“Do you want me to ask around? There’s gotta be some kid out there who was like me, wantin’ to do his or her art stuff, but just doesn’t know how to go about it, or more likely gets resistance from their parents since they don’t see it as a way to make money.”

“Could you, Jeff? I’d be ever so grateful!”

“I’d be happy to, Mary Grace.”

Mike’s face lit up all of a sudden. “I have an idea. Remember how you said you wanted a picture of Jeff in the winter with a Santa cap on his cowboy hat?” She nodded. “How about you

get one of him, and give him credit for startin' it, but when we all go carolin' before Christmas, we could all do that. That's most of the young folks in town. Jeff's got enough of a followin' that he could easily talk everyone into doin' that. And that would be a way to get both sides together."

"Plus a great deal of publicity for the town and the co-op since we get a lot of tourists that weekend. I'll ask the board of the co-op if we can spring for the hats. When it snows, we can get pictures of you and your friends with the Santa hats on, and then pictures of the group and the lights and everything, just after Thanksgiving!" Mary Grace was on a roll now. "That's a great idea, Mike. You weren't hidin' in a ditch the day they passed out brains." He turned a bit red, but looked really pleased.

Mary Grace showed us around the co-op, and where she was planning on putting my sculptures, and where the photo story would go. It looked fine to me. She also showed Mike where she'd like to put his belts and hatbands. When he mentioned he also did bridles and reins, she got giddy and said that collectors love that sort of thing. Next thing we knew, she was planning on coming out to the ranch tomorrow with Ryan and interviewing Mike and taking some more pictures. It was supposed to be clear tomorrow, so she wanted to get some pictures of Mike in front of the bunkhouse working on a belt. We agreed that noon would be a good time and said our goodbyes.

Mike and I stepped out of the co-op and onto the boardwalk. It was cold. The sky was crystal clear, and the moon was full. There was a big circle around it, so I reckoned that the weather was going to change. We were supposed to get a hard freeze tonight. We headed over to One Eyed Jack's. Sandy was working tonight, so it would be nice to see her. We walked into One Eyed Jack's and headed toward a booth. Before we could get all the way there, Sandy came running toward us and threw her arms around me.

"Jeff, thank God you're okay! You got shot at and almost froze to death. I am so happy you're all right!" She was yelling pretty loud and crying too.

"I'm okay, darlin'. It would take a lot more than Porky to kill me. He didn't have any kryptonite with him." I smiled at her and returned her hug. She kept sobbing loudly. We were the center of attention. I reckoned that in a small town pretty much everyone had heard about me getting shot at and Porky getting killed.

Sandy finally stopped sobbing and pulled back. Then she slapped me. I stood there with my mouth hanging open wondering just what in the hell was going on.

"I can't believe you were such a damn fool to run outside buck naked chasing that fat thief in almost freezing drizzle. Just what in the hell were you thinkin'? Don't you ever do somethin' like that again. If something happened to you, how do you think I'd feel, Mike would feel, José and Josh and Maria would feel? First, you almost get shot, and then you almost freeze to death." She started sobbing again and ran into the kitchen. I was still standing there with my mouth hanging open. A booth right near us was filled with folks I went to high school with. One was a guy named Nick who thought he was the class wit.

"Hey, Connelly, I hear you were off solving crimes last night. Too bad the name 'Lone Ranger' is taken. We'll just have to call you the naked ranger." He hooted with laughter at this and so did his friends at the table.

I was beginning to feel a bit peevish after Sandy's reaction. I turned to Nick.

"Howdy, Nicky. Some of us have bodies to be the naked ranger, and some of us don't." I looked him up and down. He was gettin' a bit thick. He got my insinuation. He really wasn't a bad guy though. He laughed along with his friends.

"I'm just happy you're okay. Don't mind me teasin' you."

I felt like a real ass. "Sorry about the mean comment, Nick. I was just hopin' people wouldn't find out I ran outside bare assed." I was anxious to change the subject.

"Have you met my partner, Mike?" They did introductions all around. After a minute of chatter, Mike and I headed over to the booth.

I could clearly hear one of the girls ask Nick, "*Partner?* Does that mean they're a gay couple?"

"Yeah, Connelly admitted to folks he was gay when we were in high school. Lotta folks learned it don't matter. He's a regular guy." It felt nice to be accepted. Mike had a big smile on his face.

We both turned a bit red when the girl continued to Nick, saying, "I'd pay to watch the two of them go at it. They are both hot!"

Nick answered, "I don't think you have what they want. Besides, if you ever see 'em around town, you'll see just how into each other they are." They then started talkin' about other things. I thought it was kind of interesting to see how others in town saw me, really saw us.

"You were right, Jeffy. It doesn't seem to matter to a lot of people that we're gay. I never realized in my whole life just how accepting decent folks are."

"Decent folks see ya as a person first. It don't matter to them that you're gay, straight, black, white, Latino, whatever." He smiled at me. I loved the way he looked at me. If your eyes are the windows of the soul, Mike had a whole lot of caring, love, and admiration in his soul. It made me start to physically react and remember I had on that uncomfortable jock.

"Buddy, I can't believe you talked me into wearing this jock. It's as uncomfortable as hell. You look at me, I get hard, and it is not pleasant."

"Believe me, Jeffy. It will be worth it for ya when we get home."

"I'm gonna hold you to that."

"You better." We grinned at each other. Sandy came over to the booth.

"I'm sorry. I just got so upset when Dad told me you got shot at and then almost froze to death. I kinda got myself all worked up over it. I didn't mean to break down like that. Now, Jeff, Mike, your food and drink is on the house. What will ya have?" She was smiling shyly. I'd never seen Sandy look that meek before. It was almost worth gettin' slapped.

"Don't worry about it, darlin'. I was pretty upset myself last night. And believe me, after I realized it wasn't the smartest thing to do what I did, I thought about Mike, you, Maria, José, Josh, and all my friends." She started sniffing again, but she was still smiling. I reckoned I wouldn't get slapped again.

"I'll have a bacon cheeseburger and fries, and to drink how about a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale?"

"Okay, and you, Mike?"

"Same for me, can you also add an order of the fried jalapenos?"

"Comin' right up." She turned and headed toward the kitchen.

"Mike, I will never understand how women think. I just don't see how straight men cope."

"We're in the same boat there."

"You gonna get out your belts and hat bands and mccartys and bridles and key chains for Mary Grace? You're gonna have to explain that a mccarty is a piece of tack."

"Reckon so. It would be nice to make some money off of 'em. Then maybe I can contribute some money to us too." I stared at him for a minute or so.



"Mike, money doesn't mean nothin' to me. I don't care how much you make or don't make or anythin' like that. I care about you. You bein' there for me last night was worth more than all the gold in Fort Knox." Just then Sandy came with our beers.

"Other than last night's excitement, what have you two been up to?"

"Jeff and me went to the co-op and saw the photos for his exhibit. Mary Grace is also gonna show my horsehair belts and hatbands and such."

"That's great, Mike. You're really talented at that, and it is a real cowboy craft."

"By the way, Sandy, Mary Grace is gonna ask you and Josh, José, Maria, and others when we go carolin' this year, to all wear Santa hats on top of our cowboy hats. Like I did that one year, remember?"

"That's a great idea. Is she gonna use the pics in your exhibit?"

"Yeah, she wants to feature a local boy."

"That would be fun!" She headed off to check her other tables. I raised my beer mug to Mike.

"To us. May the worst day of our future be no worse than the happiest day we've had together so far. That's an Irish toast. I learned it from my grandfather."

"Cheers. That's nice, Jeffy. I don't got a toast, but I do have a song my grandfather taught me; it's Cajun."

He sang it in his soft tenor, and took my hand as he began to sing. When he was done, the table behind us clapped.

Nick said, "Nice voice, Mike; here we got music and there's no band; it's great!"

"That was beautiful, buddy."

"You understood it?"

"Bits and pieces. It's been a long time since high school French. What was beautiful was you singin' it." He smiled and translated.

The north wind has been blowing  
Sleet has just fallen  
And the leaves are all covered  
Winter is a boring time  
To be at home alone  
C'mon over my dear  
And join me.

"I kinda think of you when I think of that song, Jeff. It has a second verse."

"That's really nice, Mike; thanks for sharin' that." He turned all red.

"It's nothing really; I like what it says, and it makes me think of you."

The fire in the fireplace is lit  
The coffee's done boiling  
And I'm here looking  
At a small picture of you  
Winter is a boring time  
To be at home alone  
C'mon over my dear

And join me.”

Just then Sandy came with two more beers and the fried jalapenos, or as the menu calls ’em “Cowboy Breath Mints.” Mike and I chorused, “Thanks.” We dug into the jalapenos. They were hollowed out, filled with cheese, and dipped in batter and deep-fried. They went perfect with beer.

“Good idea, Mike, I’m glad you ordered these.”

“They seemed like they’d hit the spot. You more or less recovered from yesterday?”

“Yeah, I know you understand, but it sure does fuck with your head to be on the wrong end of a gun like that.”

“It took me a couple of days to get over it when me and Wayne got shot at.”

“I wonder about Wayne. He got shot. He seems okay now, but I hope he’s okay inside. I don’t know that he has anyone to talk to.”

“You think he’s seein’ a lady in Wenatchee, don’t ya, Jeff?”

“I do. I hope she listens to him half as good as you listen to me. Besides, where else could he be spending all that time? He’s always been real closed-mouth about his personal life.”

“Thanks. You’ve listened to me quite a bit though too.”

“All part of bein’ together, bud. You up for goin’ huntin’ again when I get my truck back? It should be next week sometime.”

“I sure am. Hey, Jeff, did you make reservations for the rodeo in Phoenix?”

“I got the room reserved.”

“Well, then let’s spend some time practicin’ our ropin’. We gotta win us some matchin’ buckles.”

“You’re not gonna suggest we start dressin’ alike are ya, like both wear the same hats, shirts, and boots?” I looked right at him.

“Why do you ask that?” I could see that was exactly what he was thinking.

“I just like lookin’ at you dressed like *you*, not like me. You were thinkin’ that though, weren’t ya?”

“I was.”

“I got an idea you’ll like better. I’ll tell ya about it when we get home.”

“Now I like the sound of that!”

“Believe me, you’ll like it in action a lot more, buddy.” I hoped he would anyway. I was finding some stuff about my partner the last day or so that was interesting. If I was reading him right, the idea I had would get him climbing the walls. I’d be the beneficiary, so I did have an ulterior motive, but it was more for him really.

“You gonna tell me?”

“All in good time, buddy.” Just then Sandy walked over with our burgers.

“Jeff, Mike, you guys want to come into town this weekend? We’re havin’ a good country band in here on Saturday, and Maria will be here. So will José, Josh, and Renee.”

“Sounds like fun. What do you think, Mike?”

“I’m up for it, as long as you’ll dance with me, Sandy.” She beamed at him.

“I take it Jeff taught you to dance.”

“Yep, I really like it.”

“You know how to lead?” His face fell on that one.

“I’ll teach you. I know Jeff has no idea how to follow.”

“Jeff’s a leader all right. Lucky we all just don’t follow blindly. Like I’m lucky I didn’t run out into freezin’ drizzle buck naked the other day followin’ his lead.” Mike chuckled. I’d get back at him later.

“Some of us are just leaders and others followers. Some are pitchers and some catchers, some like chocolate and some strawberry.”

“What are you talkin’ about, Jeffy?” Mike was giving me a quizzical look.

“Just a line from a movie I saw once.” We made plans with Sandy to meet her here at One Eyed Jack’s at eight on Saturday. We’d have some time to eat, and she got off work at eight. We finished our burgers and walked out the door. We got into Mike’s truck. He turned up the heat. I grabbed his hand and held it when he started to drive.

“What are ya doin’?”

“I’m holdin’ your hand, Mike. That okay?” He squeezed my hand back.

“It’s more than okay. I really like it. Lots of things you showed me I like. I never thought that I would, like kissin’, holdin’ hands, gettin’ fucked.”

“You just needed to find the right guy, bud.”

“Well, I think he found me, and I’m sure as hell happy about that.” We rode the rest of the way back to the ranch holding hands. We got to the ranch and in the house pretty quick. It was cold out, and it looked like the weatherman was right. We would get a hard freeze before morning. I locked the door and practically jumped Mike. His idea about me wearing the jockstrap was a good one. I was conscious of it every minute I had it on. Also since he’d asked me to wear it and not shower, I could smell faintly on myself the good clean sweat of a man aroused. I grabbed him and had my arms around him and my tongue in his mouth before he had half a chance to react. Once he did react, it was obvious he was as worked up as I was. He was pushing into me, grabbing my crotch, and kissing back like he’d never been kissed before. I was stiff as a board, and reaching down and feeling Mike, he was sporting quite a big bit of wood also. I kicked off my boots and he did likewise.

“C’mon, buddy, let’s get upstairs.” He didn’t need no more urging and galloped up the stairs. When I got to our room, he had already shucked his jeans and shirt and was unbuttoning his long johns. I had my shirt, socks, and jeans off in a flash. I stood there in my jock, the one I’d worn yesterday and the one he asked me to wear today. By this time he was naked and stood by the bed. I walked over and pushed him down on the bed.

As I started to move to position my crotch over his face he asked me, “Jeffy, buddy, why don’t you just kick back and let me take care of you, okay?”

“You gonna do a good job?”

“Hell yes!” I got on the bed, and he was up in a flash. I lay on my back and put my hands behind my head. I spread my legs a bit. The jock was tented out as much as the tight material would allow. I had to admit, it looked hot. He just stood looking at me for a couple of minutes. His hard-on was jutting out from his red bush. He looked like some Greek god come down to earth.

“Jeffy, now I understand why you like lookin’ at me when I’m sprawled out on the bed. It’s hot.”

“Get that pretty mouth down there and take care of me. I been waitin’ on it all day long.” He jumped on the bed and got between my legs. He had his face against the pouch of my jock in an instant. The boy was really turned on by it. He played with the material a bit and got my cock in a more comfortable position. He fondled my balls through the material with one hand while his mouth worked on my jock-covered dick. Pretty soon the pouch was soaked from precum and spit. He moved up and kissed me. He tasted like me; but he was underneath it. That unique mix of Mike, peppermint, Skoal, and beer; I thought it was the hottest taste on the planet. He began to move down my body and stopped and rammed his face into each of my underarms, licking to beat all. Who’d’ve figured the boy liked sweat so much. He was certainly gettin’ off on me. Seeing him all worked up was gettin’ me primed too. All of a sudden, he was back down below the belt. The cool wetness of the pouch was heated by his mouth. It felt good, real good. I loved having my balls played with, and he was working them like a pro. The whole scene was so hot I knew I wouldn’t last too long.

“Talk to me, Jeffy; tell me how that feels. Am I doin’ a good job? Am I makin’ you feel good?”

“Fuck, buddy. It feels great. Even this fuckin’ jockstrap feels good with your hand and mouth on it. Yeah, you got one hot mouth on you. You like suckin’ cock don’t ya, bud?”

“I like suckin’ your cock, my Jeffy’s big cock. Tastes good, just like you. You leak enough precum to float a ship, you know that?”

“Don’t want you to get thirsty or hungry, bud. C’mon boy, let me feel that hot tongue of yours right through the pouch. You been waitin’ for my cock all day. Show me how much you wanted it.” He began working it with his lips and tongue. He’d rub his beard across the pouch occasionally, and it was so hot. I was watching him really getting into it. His beard glistened with precum and spit and he was really in hog heaven. I never would have thought of leaving the strap on, but I had to admit, it was hot. He was so turned on, it was amazing. He was staying rock hard just from what he was doing. And what he was doing was gettin’ me off too.

“You keep that up, and I’m gonna shoot a load in that sweaty jock, buddy.” I wasn’t sure if he’d continue or start sucking on me with no obstruction. He continued what he was doing. I couldn’t hold back and felt that familiar drawing, tightening, and swelling that meant I was about to shoot.

“Buddy, I’m cummin’! I’m gonna shoot, buddy!” I let out a big yell and lost it. He was trying to suck as much cum up as he could through the material. I was squirming and kicking to beat the band. The orgasm seemed to last a few minutes. When I finally stopped spasming, he came up and lay next to me. I drew him close and kissed him deep and long. His face was all wet and carried the musky smell of sweat and sex. He tasted the same way, a way I could only describe as musk, sex, and arousal. I realized it was me on him I was tasting. That was a real hot thought. He kept gently rubbing my wet jock as we kissed. I had to admit it felt great. I was good for another round.

“Just keep rubbin’ me like that, buddy. Get me hard again. I’m gonna fuck you.”

“I’d like that, Jeffy. Did you like what we just did?”

“It was fuckin’ hot, bud. If you’d have described it to me, I wouldn’t have thought so, but you really got me goin’.”

“You think part of it was havin’ that big dick of yours all cooped up in your jockstrap all day? Knowin’ you were all cooped up and feelin’ it constantly?”

“Reckon so. Knowin’ you were turned on helped too. I like it when you get turned on.”

“I hope you don’t think I’m weird, Jeffy, but the way you smell really turns me on. That honest, clean sweat is great, and when you get that musky smell from bein’ horny, it’s like a drug

for me.” We kissed again. He kept rubbing me as we were wrangling tongues, and I responded. The thought of him gettin’ turned on by just the way I smelled primed my pump too. I was ready to go again. I got up.

“Get that sweet ass of yours over on the edge of the bed, and get your legs spread and in the air.” He jumped to respond. By the time he did, I had the jock off, and the lube and condoms out. I wanted to make him feel really good, so I began rimming him. I knew the boy loved gettin’ rimmed, fingered, and fucked. I began licking up and down his crack, each pass spending just a bit more time on his hole. He opened up almost immediately and welcomed my tongue. I groped around on the floor and found the jock. I threw it to where I thought his face would be. I heard him take a few deep breaths and knew my aim was good. I continued eating out his ass, and he was squirming all over the place. He was whimpering to beat the band, and that made me harder. I loved it when he did that. I got the lube, put some on his ass, and worked a finger in. I began to work his gland and finger fuck him slowly. I stood up, keeping my finger in him and working him. I looked down. He was rock hard, and there was a pool of dribble on his belly from his cock. He had a hold of his ankles and kept his legs up and spread. The jock was on his face. He was really turned on. He was flushed, and he was all sweaty. The hair under his arms was matted down. His fuzzy balls were drawn up. I figured I better fuck him before he came.

“Okay, buddy, you ready to get fucked?”

“Yes.”

“What, who?”

“I’m ready to get fucked, Jeffy.”

“You want it bad?”

“I want it bad; I want you to fuck me real bad.”

“I didn’t hear no magic word.” By this time I was suited and lubed up. I was rubbing the head of my cock up and down his ass. He was trying to push into me and impale himself, but I wouldn’t let him.

“Please, Jeffy, please fuck me! I want it so bad. I really *need* to feel your big dick in me. Please, Jeffy; I ain’t never wanted anyone so bad as I want you now and all the time. Stick it in, please?” How could I refuse that? I entered him and went in to the hilt in one smooth stroke.

“Ahhh... that feels great! So good. C’mon, Jeffy, fuck your buddy. You own my ass, use it, please.” I began pumping away, and he was really enjoying it. He was squirming, moaning, and whimpering, and clamping his ass muscles down on me something fierce. It felt great, all warm and tight. He was working his ass to draw the very essence from me. It was incredible. The boy just loved it, and was showing that he loved it with every move, every sound. I grabbed his ankles and spread his legs wide, as wide as I could. He moaned even louder. I knew he was on that cusp, where the pleasure was so intense it was almost painful. The way I was spreading his legs, he’d be sore tomorrow. It’d give him somethin’ to remind him of this time. He was tensing up, and I could see he was about to shoot. His eyes rolled back in his head as he gave in to the pure, unadulterated sexual pleasure.

“Go for it, buddy. C’mon, shoot that big mother fucker without even touchin’ it. Cum now!” With that shouted command, he began to pulse and shot all over. I wasn’t quite ready so just continued to fuck gently. I could tell he liked it. He smiled up at me. I put his feet on my shoulders and continued.

“I love you, Jeffy.”

“I love you, too, buddy.” I was getting closer so picked up my pace a bit. Just looking down at him really turned me on. I started to shoot and didn’t realize I was on the brink until I was

shooting. It felt great. I pulled out and pulled off the condom. I lay down beside him. There was a slow gentle tangling of arms and legs as we melded together. He was the first one to speak.

“That was incredible. Thanks!”

“Thank you, buddy, we really turn one another on, don’t we?”

“We do. I ain’t never met anyone like you. I can tell you stuff that turns me on, like the way a guy smells, and you accept it; you don’t look at me like I was a freak.”

“You ain’t a freak; we all got things that turn us on.”

“What are yours?”

“Well, just seein’ you all horned up by whatever I’m doin’ is one. You’ll find out a few others tomorrow. You wanna shower now?”

“No, let’s just go to sleep.”

“Sounds good, we used up this day.” We were both asleep in seconds.

## Chapter Sixteen

WE WERE just getting out of the shower when Mike asked me about something I’d mentioned the night before.

“Jeffy, what was it you said you was gonna show me that I’d like?”

“Impatient little bugger, ain’t ya?”

“Curious is more like it.”

“Okay, follow me.” I walked from the bathroom into the bedroom. It was attached so it was only a couple of steps. Mike followed. I picked up the socks I’d torn off last night when we were trying to get into bed as fast as we could. I threw them to him. He caught one and dropped the other.

“What’s this?”

“My socks. I wore ’em yesterday; put ’em on.” He gave me a funny look, but he did. I had to admit, he did look awful cute standing there in nothing but a pair of black crew socks. I went to the foot of the bed and picked up the red long handles I’d been wearing before shucking them for our workout yesterday. I balled them up and threw them at him.

“Now put those on.” He still looked at me kind of funny, but did.

“You said you like the way I smell. Well, you’ll have it all day now.” I could see him immediately tent out the long handles. He had a huge smile on his face.

“You’re somethin’ else, Jeffy, you know that?”

“I aim to please. I thought of it yesterday. You said you like the way I smell, and when you needed a pair of underwear and I loaned you a clean pair, I remember you said you thought that was hot. Ya don’t have to wear that stuff, but I thought you’d get a kick out of it.”

“No way in hell I’m takin’ this stuff off.” He was still grinning like a cat choking to death on cream. I picked up the socks and long handles he’d thrown off last night and put them on. They smelled like Mike. Not strong, but enough for me to know he’d worn them. He was still grinning, and I could see he was really excited.

“Get your pants on; Mary Grace and her photographer are comin’.” We both got dressed and headed down to breakfast. I have to admit, I was glad I thought of the idea.

We made coffee, cheese omelets, and fried potatoes. It was a pretty good breakfast. I hauled out a coffee maker and made some drip coffee. We’d just finished cleaning up and making the drip coffee when Mary Grace and Ryan pulled up. I opened the door for them.

“Mornin’, would you like some coffee? I made drip coffee.” Ryan looked at me suspiciously, but both nodded. They walked into the kitchen. Mike was already pouring two cups. He’d set out milk and sugar too.

“Mornin’ Mary Grace, mornin’ Ryan; here’s some coffee for you.”

They answered good morning back. Both fixed their coffees, and then Ryan said, “This is good coffee, thanks!”

“Thanks, Jeff, Mike.” Mary Grace smiled at us.

“Just your regular Starbucks Yukon Blend. We use it all the time. I just made it a little different.”

“This is the same type of coffee you made last time I was here?” Ryan looked shocked.

“Yeah, it’s a stereotype that cowboys like their coffee strong, but I reckon in some cases like ours it’s true.” Mike had brought out some of his horsehair handiwork while I was making breakfast. I had to admit, he did a great job. I was thinking how I could ask him for a belt without seeming pushy. I finally settled on dropping a lot of hints and maybe getting one for Christmas.

Mike, Mary Grace, and Ryan were talking about what types of pics to take and where. Mike wanted to get one still life type of photo with a hat band of his over one of my bronze sculptures. Mary Grace loved that idea so we went into the living room. We finally settled on placing the sculpture on a table in front of the picture window. Mike draped the hat band over it and we were set to go. The setting for the picture was great. Although it would be a bit out of focus, the viewer could see that it was taken inside a Western style log house. The view out the window was of Lucky Jeff Bluff, the valley, and river. Ryan took several pictures of that and then Mike wanted a picture of the two of us. Both Mary Grace and Ryan wanted pictures outside as it was a perfect fall day, cold, sunny, and the aspens were all clothed in gold. The light had that soft autumn quality it gets before sliding into the murky light of a northern winter. I had a thought about the picture of the two of us.

“I got an idea about the picture of the two of us. Why don’t we take it where Mike and I are sittin’ on the fence of the corral? He can be closest to the camera lookin’ at it, and I can be next to him. I can either lean forward or back so you can see both of us.”

“I like it!” Mary Grace was so excited she clapped her hands. “Just like that cowboy photograph by Stoecklein where he took a picture of all the cowboys sitting on an arena fence at a rodeo!”

“Good idea, let’s try it guys.” With that, Ryan and Mary Grace headed outside.

Mike pulled me back and whispered in my ear, “Jeff, can you tell I got a hard-on? I’ve had it most of the mornin’ off and on.” I looked at him.

“Lucky your jeans are tight enough and new enough it really doesn’t show too much. You just look like a stud with a big package.” I smiled at him. He smiled back. “Just try and think of somethin’ else, Mike. Think of Porky naked or something.”

We headed out the door. Ryan and Mary Grace were still looking at all the fences and where they could get a picture with a good background. They settled on a part of the fence where the high Cascades would be in the background. The mountains were all covered with snow, and the view was breathtaking. It’s funny, although I’ve lived here all my life except when I was at

college and in San Francisco, I still am in love with the valley and the views. Finally we walked over to the fence, jumped up, and sat down on it. It was only in the forties, so it was cold; Ryan and Mary Grace both had coats on. Mike and I had both rolled up our sleeves to the elbow and had the arms of our long handles pushed up to mid forearm. Even with the long handles, it was cold. Ryan took several pictures. We finally moved back into the house. They were going to photograph the rest of Mike's stuff, and take pictures of him working on a horsehair belt inside.

As we walked, I asked them, "Mike, Mary Grace, Ryan, do you need me? I gotta talk to my dad's lawyer in Wenatchee."

"No, go ahead, Jeff. We'll be here a while." Mary Grace smiled at me.

I headed upstairs to the room I was using as an office. I called the attorney, Mr. Silas.

"Silas and Son, Attorneys at Law, how may I help you?"

"Good mornin', this is Jeff Connelly. I was callin' about my father's will; it was handled by Mr. Silas."

"Oh, yes. Mr. Connelly, I am so sorry for your loss. I'll get Mr. Silas for you right away."

"Thanks, much obliged." I waited a few minutes, listening to some of the most sterile elevator music I'd ever heard. It consisted of instrumental "soft" versions of the Carpenters and Barry Manilow. I was just about to hang up when Mr. Silas came on the line.

"Mr. Connelly, I am so sorry for your loss."

"Thanks, sir. I appreciate it." He asked me for some identification type details, like my social security number and mother's maiden name. I had the feeling I was dealing with a bank.

"Mr. Connelly, the will itself is straightforward. Your father left the ranch and everything to you, as well as his investments. Mr. Johnston is the executor, but in this case really has little to do as the will is so straightforward. The ranch is paid for, as is the new house your father had built, and all the vehicles on the ranch. Your father had no debt, Mr. Connelly."

"That's nice to hear; I wasn't aware he'd paid off the house."

"Yes, although he took out a fifteen year mortgage on the house, he paid it off in three years."

"Okay. The only books I've had access to are those about the cattle ranchin' end of the business."

"I understand. He had us handle his investments and finances, and he handled the ranch end of the business. Really, in the last ten years or so, the ranch had become more of a hobby than anything."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Mr. Silas."

"Didn't your father ever tell you about his investments?"

"I can't rightly say he did."

"Are you sure you're not able to come in for this? It may be a bit difficult to explain over the phone." I got this sinking feeling in my gut. I just pictured having to sell the ranch to pay off bad investments. I was jolted out of my worst-case scenario thinking by Mr. Silas.

"Mr. Connelly, are you there?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Silas. I got distracted a minute. I can't really make it in to the office for a few days. My truck got vandalized pretty badly, and I won't be gettin' it back for another couple of days. I can come in then to sign anything and for any details. Do I owe any money that needs to be paid?"

"Owe money? Oh, good heavens, no. Your father never told you about his investments?"

"No." I was starting to get a bit impatient. I just wanted to find out how bad it was.



“Well, in a nutshell, your father took some courses in finance, accounting, and investing. Were you aware of that?”

“Yeah, he did that when I was just a baby, when my mom was still alive.”

“Yes, that’s right. Financial research and investing became a passion with your father. About the time you were born, he invested some money in a new startup company called Microsoft. Needless to say, his investment did exceptionally well. He also invested in Pfizer just before Viagra was patented, and showed that type of astuteness in purchasing stock repeatedly. In short, your father’s estate is quite extensive. Although you certainly aren’t the richest man around, your father wanted you to be comfortable enough to pursue your artwork and the ranch. To sum it up, you really don’t have to worry about money for a while. When you come in here, we can go over the details, and I can give you an exact figure.” I was stunned. I had goose bumps all over, and my heart was racing; I was having trouble forming words.

“Uh... um... Mr. Silas, this isn’t a joke, is it?”

“Oh no, my boy, it’s certainly not. One thing also, your father left a letter for you. He started putting a letter in a safety deposit box here when your mother died. He rewrote it every six months. He left strict instructions only you were to open it. He may explain his reasoning for not discussing his financial situation with you there. He updated it about three weeks before he passed away. I’m sure you’ll want to read that also.”

“Okay, you’ve just given me a lot to absorb here. I’ll try and get there on Monday; is that okay? Do I need to make an appointment?”

“Mr. Connelly, your father never needed, nor do you need, an appointment. Feel free to drop in at the office any time you are in Wenatchee.”

“Okay, sir. Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Connelly.” I disconnected the phone. I felt like I was in some surreal alternative world where the impossible happened. There had to be some mistake. How come he never told me anything about investing anything? Both my heart and my mind were racing, and I kept thinking I was going to wake up any minute. I actually pinched myself hard enough to raise bruises twice. I just sat there for a few minutes. I was really in shock. Finally, I heard the door downstairs close. I reckoned Mary Grace and Ryan had left. I wandered down the stairs in a haze. I sat down on the couch in the living room. Mike came in with a bit of a smile on his face. I just sat there. He faltered a bit when he saw the blank look on my face.

“Jeffy? Jeff? You okay there? What’s wrong?” He sat down next to me and put his arm across my shoulders. I looked at him. I must have looked like a deer in the headlights because I sure felt that way.

“I just talked to Dad’s attorney.”

“Is everything okay? The ranch isn’t bankrupt is it? If it’s somethin’ like that, don’t worry, we’ll get through it. I’m here with ya, Jeff, through thick and thin.”

“No, it’s not that. The ranch is paid for and debt free.”

“What is it, Jeff? You look like you had a big shock.”

“I did. I just can’t seem to get my head around this, but the attorney told me Dad had a bunch of investments.”

“That’s good, ain’t it? Are they losin’ money or something?”

“No, the investments are worth a fair amount, he said; Dad never told me nothin’ about investments. I’m kinda in shock.”

“Wow! My God, Jeff, that’s great! I am really happy for you. You’re such a great guy; you deserve somethin’ special like that.” He pulled me into a hug. When he let go, he looked at me real serious like. “Is this gonna affect us in any way, Jeff?”

“Remember last night at One Eyed Jack’s I introduced you as my partner?”

“Yeah.”

“What does partner in that sense mean to you, Mike?”

“I reckon it means we’re boyfriends.”

“Mike, buddy, one of the things you’ll learn about gay culture is since it’s a fairly new culture, English really doesn’t have words to express some of its concepts. Like partner, it’s come to mean one of a gay couple. People used to use lover, but that sounds too purely sexual for many, boyfriends sounds kinda adolescent.

You ain’t my wife, you ain’t my husband, but to me though, partner means the same thing. I kinda think of us as married, Mike, as a team. If I’m off here, let me know, but remember the conversation we had when I said I was gonna push your wheelchair with my walker? I feel that way, buddy. I see us as bein’ together for the long haul. Money or no money, that don’t matter to me. What matters to me is you and our commitment to each other. That we work on bein’ together and work on enjoyin’ the good times and work on gettin’ through the bad.” I looked at him; he looked back and then buried his head in my shoulder.

“Jeff, you are so wonderful. I don’t know what in the hell I did to deserve you.”

“I feel the same way about you, so I reckon maybe we both got what we deserve.”

“I dunno what to say.”

“You don’t need to say nothin’. You still hard from wearin’ my underwear and socks?”

“Now that I started thinkin’ on it, yeah, I’m gettin’ there.”

“How about we head upstairs, and I make you feel real good?”

“Can we leave the underwear and socks on?”

I laughed. “You got it, buddy. Now let’s get to bed.”

A couple of hours later, we threw on sweatpants and headed downstairs for a very late lunch or early dinner. We were both basking in a very pleasant afterglow. The boy was definitely full of surprises in the sack. I was beginning to think of him as “the boy” because he got off on being a bit submissive between the sheets. For having gone through what he did as far as dealing with being gay and his home life, he hadn’t let it affect his sex drive.

We fit together real well. He was creative and imaginative in the sack. We had left the underwear and socks on, and although I never thought that would be anything special, it really got him off, and that made me feel good. We were puttering around the kitchen fixing spaghetti with meat sauce, garlic bread, and salad. Although we both usually prefer beer, we opened a bottle of good red wine. The boy got me going so much, I even put a couple of candles on the table. Mike looked at me with a tender expression on his face.

“Jeff, I feel kinda like I’m bein’ romanced.”

“You are. If you think that a little bit of money would change the way I feel about ya, I must need to work a little harder to show ya just how special ya are.”

“It’s just my own insecurities that made me ask, Jeff.”

“What can I do to make ya feel more secure?”

“You already do make me feel secure. If ya look at me a month ago or so, I was really fightin’ with who I am, kinda ashamed, always feelin’ that people looked at me like somethin’ they’d

scrape off the bottom of their boot. But bein' with you is changin' that. I realized I'm me. And for the first time in my life, I like bein' me. If someone as fantastic as you sees somethin' in me, wow, I must have something good goin' for me. You make me feel special too."

"It's my job as your partner. Do ya like the candles I set out?"

"I do. I never imagined two guys could be romantic."

"Let me show you then, buddy. The candles, they're just a little extra to say you're special. I reckon, maybe we should have some date nights. Ya know, you and me havin' a nice dinner, or goin' out or seein' a movie or somethin' like that."

"How about if we move the furniture back and dance?"

"I'd like that a lot, Mike."

"Me too."

"So, how did it go with Mary Grace?"

"She's a nice lady. She liked my stuff, and seemed really interested about how I braid horse hair. I told her I'd write up a history of the craft. She was surprised to find out old-time waddies used to even make lassos outta horsehair."

"Did you have to explain a waddie is another word for cowboy?"

"I just said cowboy."

"Is she gonna give you a separate exhibit?"

"No. She suggested that we put your exhibit and mine together. I thought it was a good idea. That'll highlight us bein' a team and feature the ranch. That's gotta be good advertisement for the dudes."

"That is a good idea. You got a great head on your shoulders. Cute too."

"Thanks. Now that you know you ain't gonna have to worry so much about money do you have anythin' you want to do?"

"I'm still in shock about the whole thing. One thing that does scare me a bit is I don't want it to change the way I, the way *we*, live. I like the life I got here just fine, and I don't want it to change." He looked at me and nodded.

"There were a couple of things though that had occurred to me. I think we can go ahead and build some cabins for takin' in dudes. Maybe do some upgrades to the bunkhouse and enlarge it. If we're herdin' dudes, we're gonna have to hire a couple more wranglers who not only know how to cowboy, but know how to work with tourists. I'd also like to do somethin' for Wayne. I did have one other thought, but I ain't too sure how to go about it. I saw on Animal Planet, or somethin' like that, this breed of horse that's about to go extinct. It might be nice to see if I can get some and raise 'em here. Hell, with all the factory farms and such, the old breeds of horses and cattle are dyin' out. We'll see though. Like I said, I don't really want to change the way we live too much. What about you? What do you think?"

"It's your money, Jeff."

"We're a team, buddy. I want to hear what you got to say; that submissive stuff and waitin' to be told what to do is for between the sheets; I see you as my equal. You're my right-hand man. Now why don't you use that pretty head of yours for more than lookin' all handsome, and let me know what you think?"

"I like the idea of continuin' on with the dude ranch. I had a lot of fun when we had all those folks over and put on a mini-rodeo for 'em. I know you did too. We've already got a plan together for that. You're really good with numbers and stuff; why don't you put together a business plan? Then you could see how much buildin' cabins would cost, how long it would take to recoup the

costs, and that kinda stuff. I know you also could put together a website for the ranch when you're ready to start takin' dudes."

"Mike, buddy, you are a genius. That makes really good sense. I reckon we could start after the New Year, at least in the house. We could put up some more cabins outside next summer. What do you reckon about more wranglers? I was thinkin' maybe three more since they'll have to herd dudes."

"I reckon two would do it. That would be José, Josh, me, and then two more plus Wayne as foreman."

"Three, buddy. You're with me in the big house. I need you as dude manager."

"I don't know the first thing about bein' a manager. I don't even know what in the hell I'd do."

"That's what we gotta figure out. I reckon I can do the books, orderin' supplies, a lot of the managin' stuff, but I'm gonna need help. You might help with things like overseein' the housekeepin' and entertainment staff or stuff like that. This is new to me, too, buddy, so let's take the time to research it and do this right."

"Yeah, no sense in runnin' off half-cocked. We need to figure out just what we wanna offer, how to do it, what people and supplies we'd need, and how do we go about gettin' to the point where we're ready."

"Yeah, like offerin' horse pack trips into the north Cascades. Do we have the stock? Then do we have the guides and equipment? Also we gotta figure out just how much will the dudes do. Are we gonna do everything for 'em or will they pitch in a bit? It's pretty complicated. I reckon we shouldn't just rush into this. I like your idea of a business plan. That should probably be the master plan for everything." By this time we were pretty much done with dinner. We cleaned up and headed into the living room. I had laid a fire earlier, so I lit it now. The lights were on a dimmer switch, so I turned 'em nice and low.

"Buddy, help me move this furniture aside. This is our date night, and we're gonna dance."

"You got it!" We had the furniture moved in a flash and the rugs rolled back. I had copied a bunch of songs from different discs onto one, so we had a disc full of good dance numbers. It started out with "Should've Been a Cowboy" by Toby Keith. I took Mike in my arms, and we began to slide across the floor. He had the rhythm down really well and was a good dancer. After warming up with a few songs, I twirled him once or twice. He caught on pretty quick. After we danced for about an hour, I taught him the shuffle, or three step. It was pretty simple, just three steps with you feet ending up together. You start one series of three with you left foot, and then the next with your right. You can do lots of twirls and dancing almost like a swing while doing a shuffle. We had it down pretty well after a few tries.

I put the second disc on that I'd made. It was slower songs and love songs. It was nice to dance really close to Mike. He was resting his head on my shoulder, and our belt buckles were really rubbing. We could dance pretty close. We danced another hour or so when I whispered in his ear, "How are ya enjoyin' our date?"

"I'm havin' a great time. I love dancin' with you, and dinner was great. The candles made it kinda sweet."

"Any regrets about movin' all your stuff up here?"

"No. I reckon I'm the happiest I ever been."

"Good, that makes two of us." I drew his face to mine and we kissed. I could taste the garlic on his breath and the fruity deepness of the red wine. I gently nibbled his lower lip. We continued to move to the music, not really hearing it, more feeling the beat and keeping pace with that. The fire had burned low, and the moon outside the huge picture windows was full. Its silver light was

bright enough to cast shadows. Frost had already covered the ground in its white mantle. The world outside seemed to consist of blues and silver, and inside of soft orange and dusky red from the dying fire.

As we kissed, I could smell the soap Mike had used on his face. It was clean and fresh. A deeper breath alerted me to his clean, musky smell, mixed with my own. He felt comfortable in my arms, as if this was something we had experienced in other lifetimes, in other ages. My body was beginning to react to his smell, his touch, and his movements. As I lengthened and stiffened, I felt him doing the same as he pressed against me. I broke the kiss and again whispered in his ear, nibbling at his ear lobe as I did.

“C’mon, buddy, let’s head upstairs to bed. I want you. I need you now. C’mon.”

He moaned in response, and we headed upstairs.

IT WAS late Saturday afternoon. We’d had a good day. We’d practiced our roping, had a good workout, and each one of us had worked on our respective arts. We’d gotten a fair amount done, and had fun also. Now we were all duded up and heading into town. We both had on flashy cowboy shirts. Mine was red, and Mike’s was black with blue, white, and gray stripes. We both had on black felt rodeo hats with headbands that he’d made. I’d stuck an eagle feather I’d found into my hat band. Mike was driving since my truck was still out of commission. I was supposed to get it back on Monday. I was looking forward to that. My truck was fairly new, and I liked all the bells and whistles it had, like heated seats. They were great on a night like this. Looking at Mike and me all duded up, I had to laugh. It made me think of a song by Toby Keith, called “Country Comes to Town.” Mike started singing with me. I was aiming to have a good time and to forget all about rustling, shootings, dudes, and money. When we walked past the bunkhouse to get to Mike’s truck, we saw José had already left. Wayne’s trailer was dark; he was off somewhere. I decided at that time to try and include him more. Josh had been in Seattle the last few days visiting Renee. They were supposed to be up here this weekend, so it would be nice to see them. After roundup, there was less work to do, so Josh was taking advantage of it by spending his time with Renee. We got to Winslett and parked. We walked into One Eyed Jack’s and headed for the table everyone was clustered around. The whole group was there, Sandy, Maria, José, Josh, and Renee. There were already several pitchers on the table, and someone had ordered snacks: jalapeno poppers, hot wings, onion rings, and fried chicken gizzards. We sat down. In a flash, two full mugs of beer were placed in front of us.

“Hey, guys, how ya doin?” Sandy was always the first with a conversation.

“Fine,” Mike and I answered in unison and turned red. Everyone else laughed.

“You have it bad, señor boss! Now you two are talking together. What is next, you will start dressing like cuates?” José was laughing. Mike and I turned even redder with the dressing alike, considering some of our recent play, but said nothing.

“Cuates means twins,” I said to Mike. Then changing the subject, I turned to Renee.

“Nice to see you again, Renee; I hope you’re enjoyin’ your visit so far.”

“I certainly am. We spent some time today out at the lake and just driving around looking at the fall colors. It’s a very beautiful place here.”

“That it is. Every time I look around, I think how lucky I am to be here.” Mike smiled at Renee, but then looked at me.

“You’re just happy to be with Jeff. You can admit it, Mike.” Josh was lookin’ at Mike.

“I got no problem admittin’ that.”

"Let's have a toast, to friendship old and new." Maria looked around the table and smiled at Renee.

"To friendship, old and new!" Everyone chorused.

"Who's the band tonight, Sandy?" Mike asked.

"Some group outta Seattle of all places. They do country music, so I guess that's why they're here. There must not be too much call for that in Seattle."

"Are they any good?"

"I haven't heard 'em yet, Jeff. We'll just have to see."

"Sandy, this time I can dance with you."

"I'll look forward to that, Mike."

"Just as long as you lead, Sandy; I don't know how to follow, so I ain't taught him to lead yet," I said, and Sandy looked at Mike.

"No problem, Mike, I'll start out leadin', and then we can pull you into control."

"Save me a dance, you two," Renee said. I looked at Josh when Renee spoke.

He laughed and said, "I don't know how to dance, and I reckon Renee will be safe with you guys. Not like this old wolf here." He clapped José on the back. Before José could answer, Maria jumped to his defense.

"José is a gentleman except when he swears." José was bright red. *Hmmm... this is interestin', I thought. I'm glad that they are getting close. Maria needs friends after her loss of Pedro.*

"Hey, boss, Mike, I watched you two practicing with your lassos today. Are you planning on competing in a rodeo?"

"We were talkin' about it. First one's gonna be the Arizona Gay Rodeo in February."

"There are gay rodeos?" Renee was intrigued by this.

"Yep, there is at least one a month about ten months of the year. They're all over the country."

"Josh, you'll have to take me to one." Everyone looked at Josh when Renee said this.

"There are plenty of rodeos near here." He was beet red.

"Don't you want to cheer Jeff and Mike on?"

"Of course I do, but...."

I jumped in. "But what, Josh?"

Mike picked up the teasing. "Yeah, Josh, what? I'd really appreciate you there cheerin' me on. I know Jeff would too."

"Damn right!"

"We'll see." Just then the waitress came. I decided to order pizza, and had one with pepperoni, Italian sausage, and ham. Everyone ordered, and I decided to take the pressure off of poor Josh.

"I reckon we're gonna move ahead with the dude ranch idea. Tomorrow I wanna work on puttin' together a business plan and gettin' a website together."

"What are you gonna do, Mike?" Sandy was looking at the two of us.

"I'm Jeff's consultant, and proofreader, and all round gofer."

"That's great!" Sandy had always been enthused about the project. "I am ready to help in any way I can."

"Great, what I wanna know from you, José, and Josh, is just how do you three feel you'll fit in? I still wanna run the ranch, and we're gonna need some new wranglers and a housekeeper."

What do you guys want to do?" We had a lively discussion about that. Josh wanted to work with stock. José was willing to do whatever it might take to make the project a success. We went over how everything would fit together and being ready for Thanksgiving, which was only about five weeks away. The band had been settin' up, and they struck up their first tune, an easy two-step by George Strait. Mike immediately asked Sandy to dance. Sandy looked at me, and I nodded. Renee nudged Josh.

"C'mon, cowboy, get your butt out of this booth. We're gonna dance."

"I can't dance!"

"You're gonna learn. C'mon!" She took him by the hand, and he let her lead him out onto the dance floor. Maria leaned over to me.

"You have been very good for Mike. He has really come out of his shell."

"Sí, boss. You are a very good influence on him. He laughs now and jokes around with us. He does not act like a cabrón any more." Maria gently slapped his hand.

"I reckon he's good for me too."

"I like watching the two of you together. You seem to understand one another and complement each other very well," Maria said, smiling.

I decided to change the subject. "How are you doin', Maria?"

"I try to take it one day at a time. It is most difficult when I am alone in Wenatchee. José and Sandy have been wonderful. And you, Mike, and Josh too. I miss Pedro very much. I am very lucky I have good friends."

"We are your friends, Maria. We are here for you." José said this kind of sheepishly. I raised my glass.

"To Pedro, may we never forget what a great guy he was." They both raised their glasses. The song was ending, and Renee and Josh made their way back to the table.

"You look like you did a decent job out there, Josh."

"At least I didn't step on Renee's feet." Sandy and Mike stayed out on the dance floor. Renee asked me to dance. I looked at Josh.

He smiled at me, "Go ahead, Jeff, don't worry about it."

We stepped out on the dance floor. As we began to dance, Renee said to me, "You don't have to ask Josh. He doesn't mind."

"I know, but it's a cowboy thing. You dance with who ya brung to the dance. If you dance with someone else's partner, you get both folks' permission. It's a good way to keep friendships intact."

"I understand that. It's really nothing to do with regarding a woman as property?"

"No, not at all. You'll find most cowboys are really protective of and polite to women. I reckon it's from workin' around men all the time."

"It seems kind of patronizing to me."

"It works both ways. Did you see Sandy look at me when Mike asked her to dance?"

"No, I didn't."

"She did, and I nodded; that was when she got up and headed out on the dance floor with Mike."

"So you're saying that if Sandy asked Josh to dance, she'd make sure it was okay with me?"

"Yep, that's exactly what I'm sayin'."

"That's interesting. I'd never thought of it as being so equal."

“You’ll find that we cowboy folk are very respectful of where your rights end and mine start. We support each other in bein’ that way. There are certain unwritten rules that we all subscribe to. It keeps the peace that way.”

“Women are just as self-sufficient as men?”

“They have to be. If her husband is off on a cattle drive, or ridin’ fences away from home for a few weeks, everythin’ is up to her. And his friends will be there to help if she needs it. If someone were to insult her or somethin’, the friends would beat that someone to kingdom come. Believe the women protect their men just as fierce.”

“That explains a bit about Josh.”

“I reckon it would. I remember once when I was in high school, we had an exchange student from Germany. He described us as havin’ a whole different culture than the folks there or the folks in the cities here. He was right too. We are different. People don’t understand that, so they tend to see us as backward or hicks or rednecks. That just ain’t true.”

By then the song was ending. Renee was a nice lady. She considered herself a feminist, which was fine by me. I had a lot of respect for her. “Renee, what I said about city people havin’ a different culture is true. Look at Mary Grace and Rick, the owner of the bakery in town, for example. They live here, they have friends, and they participate in the life of the town, but not so much with the locals. Everyone likes them and respects them, but they still are on the outside. People consider ’em hippies and think they’re kinda weird. On the other hand, my family has lived in this valley for over one hundred and fifty years. I’m accepted for who I am because of that. And that acceptance extends to Mike ’cause he fits in and he’s with me. People may not necessarily embrace the fact that we’re an out and open gay couple, but they accept us because we belong here and we know and abide by all the unwritten rules I was tellin’ you about. For example, everyone in town knows Mike and I are a couple. No one says anythin’, but we wouldn’t dance together here in One Eyed Jack’s. Folks would see that as pushin’ it in their faces. There’s a little give and take on both sides.” Renee smiled and nodded.

“You’re right, Jeff; it is a different culture. I’m glad I’m getting to know it.”

“I’m glad you are also, and you’re always welcome here.” She let me pull her chair out for her when we got back to the table. We both smiled.

We were all having a good time. Every one of us danced eventually. I had to chuckle, because when Mike and Sandy danced, she led, but backward, so it would look like he was leading. He enjoyed it quite a bit. Sandy and I made plans to get together next week with Mike to go over the business plan and get started. Although I reckoned we couldn’t start putting up cabins until the spring, we could get the plans, figure out what we wanted, and get it reserved and paid for. She and I danced quite a bit. I was surprised to find out Renee was staying in the bunkhouse with Josh, but she insisted it was her idea ’cause she wanted to see how real cowboys lived. I wondered what José thought about that, but since they each had their own room, I reckoned not too much. I didn’t reckon he’d be too fond of pulling on his pants to walk down the hall to the bathroom, but he wasn’t complaining.

I was sitting at the table after just having finished a dance with Maria, when Mike put his hand on my upper thigh and leaned into me to whisper in my ear, “Jeff, when we get home, you wanna dance with me a bit?”

“I’d love to. Hold ya in my arms all tight, rub belt buckles. Let’s do that.”

“I’m havin’ fun dancin’ with the ladies, but I like bein’ in your arms best.”

“Well, that’s where ya belong.” I leaned real close and whispered in his ear, “I bet you wanna get fucked tonight too.”

“Hell yes!”



“You’re a boy who just loves to get fucked, ain’t ya?”

“By you.”

“You got that right, bud. Your ass is mine, and I’m gonna take good care of it tonight.” I was half expecting him to try to make some excuse to leave right then, but he didn’t. We ended up ordering another round, and Mike asked for a Diet Coke. He was really good about not drinking and driving. It was one of the many things I really respected about him. When I was flirting with him, I’d put my hand on his leg. I kept it there.

It was a real fun time with everyone there. I was kind of surprised to hear last call. I had no idea it was that late. Sandy bought herself, me, Renee, and Josh shots of Yukon Jack. Mike and José were driving, and Maria usually didn’t drink that much hard alcohol. All too soon we were heading out into the cold. We were getting a hard frost every night now, as October was drawing to a close. November can be an iffy month, but I reckoned if it stayed this cold, we’d have snow for Thanksgiving. Mike and I walked close together, bumping shoulders on the way to his truck. He had on a Carhartt jacket, and I had on a fleece-lined denim one. We got into his truck and headed up the road. He was drivin’ like a bat out of hell. I reckoned his mind was on his ass, not the road. My big fear was that a deer would jump out in front of the truck.

“Slow down a bit, buddy, we don’t wanna hit a deer.”

“I just wanna get home and dance with ya and then get some good sack time.”

I put my hand on his. “We got all the time in the world. I’m gonna do ya on your back tonight.”

He grinned at me and took his foot off the gas pedal. We were coming to one of the places where the road crosses the river. Just past the bridge, there was a fairly sharp turn. He put his foot on the brake to slow the truck down to a safe speed to take the curve. Nothing happened.

“Brakes are gone!” I could hear panic in his voice. We were both buckled in. Mike’s truck was an older model that didn’t have airbags. He was slamming both feet against the floor hard enough to break through it, as if that would make the brakes start to work.

“Downshift!” I yelled this out. Mike shifted into second, and the truck lurched but slowed a bit. We were still going too fast for the curve. As we were reaching the bridge, he pulled it into first. Another lurch, and we were going more slowly. We were down to about forty from seventy. We were getting real close to the edge of the curve as Mike tried to control the truck. As we were headed into the curve, he pulled the emergency brake. I heard the squeal of tires, smelled burning rubber, and then the truck lurched hard as it stopped. I flew forward hard enough to hit my head on the dash; everything swam around and went black.

## Chapter Seventeen

I FIRST became aware of the cold—a bone chilling, numbing cold that seemed to seep into every cell in my body. Just as I registered that and felt I would never be warm again, the pain in my head registered. Headache would be the understatement of the century. This was almost a physical presence in my skull, a pounding malignant entity that was so fierce even to breathe hurt. I opened my eyes. Everything was fuzzy. It slowly began to swim into focus. My arms and shoulders hurt, too, but nothing like the pain in my head. Even trying to think hurt.

I began to remember. The brakes failing, my shouting ‘downshift’ at Mike, the edge of the embankment and river coming closer, and then the smell, sound, and violent jerk of the truck as the emergency brake was engaged.

“Mike.” It came out raspy and like a croak.

“Mike.” This time it was louder.

“Okay. Be still there, bud, you’ve had quite a shock. Just lie still, and we’ll take care of you.” It was a paramedic.

“Mike, where’s Mike?”

“Relax, guy. He’s fine. He’s talking to the sheriff right now. Doctor’s here and he’s gonna look at your eyes.” Another man bent over me. He put a flashlight in my eyes. I closed them, and he asked me to leave them open.

“Well, young man, I’d say you’re lucky on several counts. It appears you have no broken bones, and just a mild concussion. I would wager you have one hell of a headache though.”

“Is Mike okay?”

“The guy who was driving? He’s fine. The truck is fine. You two missed the embankment by about six inches. Your friend has been asking about you, so I’ll go over and tell him you’re awake and more or less fine.” He walked away, and I took a deep breath. All of a sudden I heard footsteps. I looked over, and Mike was rushing toward me. The look of relief on his face was almost comical. Sheriff Johnston followed behind and had a worried look on his face. Mike grabbed my hand and just held it.

“What happened after I hit the dashboard?”

“You were out like a light, Jeffy. I couldn’t wake you, and I was afraid to move you in case you were bad off. I went over to the road to see if I could flag somebody down. Lucky for us, the first car that stopped was a doctor and his wife from Seattle heading to their cabin. They’d gotten a real late start, but still decided to come over. She called nine-one-one, and he made sure you were okay until the paramedics got here. I’m so happy you’re okay; I was really worried.” I could hear his voice crack.

“I’m fine other than the mother of all headaches. How’s your truck?”

“Other than no brakes, fine. The doctor said you’re okay to go home, but if you have any dizziness or blurred vision to get to the hospital right away. Sheriff’s gonna drive us home. They’re gonna tow my truck into the gas station/garage in Winslett.” Sheriff Johnston was peering over Mike’s shoulder.

“You okay there, Jeff? Looks like you got a nasty bump on the head.”

“I’ll survive. I just wanna get home, get some aspirin, and get to bed.”

“Give me a few minutes to finish up with all this, and I’ll give you boys a ride home.” It took more than a few minutes. I still felt really cold and a bit queasy. Before too long, a tow truck showed up and there went Mike’s pickup. Finally everything was done, and we piled into the sheriff’s cruiser to go home.

“You gonna pick up your truck on Monday afternoon, Jeff?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll ask Sandy if she can take you two down to Wenatchee if your truck isn’t ready by then, Mike.”

“Thanks, Sheriff.”

"No problem." Luckily, we weren't too far from home, and it was just a few minutes later that we pulled into the drive up to the ranch house. We got out, and the sheriff told us good night. We headed into the house. Mike was hovering over me like a cat with kittens. It was nice, but I wasn't that bad off. We got in the house, and I kicked off my boots in the mudroom.

"You need anythin', Jeffy?"

"Just some aspirin and water."

"Let's go upstairs. You go to bed, and I'll get 'em for ya." I was undressing when he walked in with a glass of water and four aspirin. I took them all and drank all the water.

"Thanks, buddy." He watched me undress. I was tired and in pain, so I just threw the clothes on the floor and let them lay where they fell. I finally managed gettin' everything off. My head was pounding, so I slowly got into bed and slid to the far side. I lay there and waited for Mike. He was looking at me.

"You want me to sleep in the other room so you can get some rest, Jeffy?"

"No. I want you right here to keep me warm. Besides, I sleep better when you're with me." He smiled and began shucking his clothes. He jumped in beside me and reached over and turned off the light. I was lying on my back, and he threw his arm and leg across me and put his head on my chest.

"I was so worried when I couldn't get you to wake up, Jeffy. I was starting to panic. It sure was lucky the doc and his wife stopped."

"Yeah, not too many folks do that anymore."

"When you woke up and was asking for me, I almost lost it again."

"It's okay, bud. You ain't gonna get rid of me that easy."

When he spoke again, his voice trembled. He was on the verge of breaking down from all the excitement and adrenaline. "It made me realize just how much I depend on you and what you mean to me."

"You're just upset 'cause I told you I was gonna fuck you tonight and now you gotta take a rain check." I guess joking around might not have been the best thing since I heard him sob a couple of times.

"I'm such an idiot, Jeffy. If you hadn't yelled downshift, I swear we would have just ended up in the river."

"Hey, buddy. It's okay, I'm all right, you're all right, and your truck's okay. Accidents happen. The important thing is we're both okay and we're right here all cuddled up together. Now let's go to sleep, buddy. We done used up this day." I rubbed his head and arm and tried to drift off to sleep. It was hard to do until the aspirin kicked in. Mike fell asleep before I did. Last sound I remember was his gentle snoring with his head on my chest. It was a comforting, familiar sound.

I WAS sound asleep the next morning when I heard Mike calling me. He must've gotten out of bed and went downstairs to make coffee. The headache had gone from the mother of all headaches to just plain bad. I got up and put on my socks, long handles, and jeans. I headed downstairs. Sheriff Johnston was in the kitchen.

"You feelin' okay, son?"

"Headache's better than it was last night. I suppose I'll just end up taking it easy today."

"I'm glad to hear you're doing better." Mike set a mug of coffee in front of me and another in front of the sheriff.

"Two things, boys, first the good news, Sandy's gonna take you to pick up your truck tomorrow, Jeff."

"Great!"

"Second thing, I stopped by the gas station/garage today to check on your truck, Mike, just a hunch. I got them to put it up on the hoist, and I'm glad I did. Your brake line was cut."

"What?" Mike had a puzzled look on his face. "Somebody sure has a sick idea of a joke." Mike was getting mad. The sheriff's words caused a chill to go through me, like some ghostly finger was tracing a path down my spine.

"You don't reckon it's a joke do you, sir?"

"Honestly, Jeff, I don't. Remember you told me that biker was screaming that you're dead, and the boss man is gonna come and kill you? I reckon he tried last night. One other thing, I got the report back from the lab on the different shootings. The same rifle was used to kill Pedro, shoot at you, Mike, and Wayne, kill the biker, and shoot at Jeff here."

"Porky was involved with the rustlin', too, wasn't he?"

"The tread on his bike matched the tread on the motorcycle tracks we found in the national forest where the cattle were processed. I'd have to say he was."

"So was he shot because he was such a screw-up, or because it looked like he was gonna get caught and could identify the others?"

"Probably both, Jeff. Every time he tried to get at you or Mike he failed. I reckon he didn't have much credit left with the others, and when it looked like he would be arrested, he was killed."

"Sheriff, I don't know the law too well, but here in Washington, wouldn't the murders committed durin' a cattle rustlin' make the rustlers eligible for the death penalty?"

"You're right, Mike, it would."

"So really by killin' one of their own, or killin' someone else, they wouldn't have a whole hell of a lot more to lose."

"I reckon they wouldn't."

"In other words, sir, you're of the opinion that someone's gunnin' for me, or Mike and me?"

"Yes, Jeff, I think that is the case."

"Okay, so what do we do?"

"I'll try and have myself or the deputies drive by once in a while, but we've got a lot of territory to cover. You're locking the door at night now, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. Since we found Porky in here, the door's been locked all the time."

"The hood on your truck only opens from the inside, right Jeff?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then use your truck. Make sure the alarm is turned on also. I'd caution you not to reschedule your hunting trip until we catch the sons of bitches who are behind this. You may want to stick around home a bit too. Best advice I can give is to be really careful."

"Sheriff, I'll be honest, that doesn't make me feel a whole lot safer."

"You shouldn't feel safe, Jeff. Not until these criminals are behind bars."

“That just really grits me, sir. We have to change everything we’re doing, put off things, just because whoever is a coward. If he’s gunning for me, why doesn’t he have the balls to show his face?”

“Could be a lot of reasons, Jeff. First and foremost, you probably can recognize him. We figure it’s got to be a local, and everybody knows everyone in these parts. Second, he still has rustling or thievery he can do and get away with it. Third and finally, you’ve been really lucky. He doesn’t wanna risk leaving you for dead and having you wake up in a hospital to tell who he is.”

I was angry and Mike looked real unhappy.

“Boys, give me a call anytime you need to. We’ll get this maniac sooner or later, and they’ll be behind bars.”

“I hope sooner.” Mike looked at the sheriff.

“Me too, Mike. Sandy should be by around one Monday afternoon. We’ll do our best to keep an eye on you boys.”

“Thanks, Sheriff.” With that we said our goodbyes, and he headed out to his cruiser. By now I was ready for someone to kick, but any movement like that would make my head pound. The day dragged on very slowly. I couldn’t do too much without my head aching to beat the band. Mike and I just read and watched TV.

By evening, it was just like a normal headache. I felt close enough to normal to start a business plan for the dude part of the ranch. I put the cost of ten prefab cabins and some other facilities together, added in some advertising costs, and then balanced out how many dudes we’d need to break even. It wasn’t as bad as I had feared. I started on the website also. That made the time just fly by; I got a rough draft put together and also downloaded an application to the American Dude Ranch Association. I could link to their site, put a mini page on it, and link back to our website. When I looked at the clock, it was after eleven p.m. Mike was asleep on the couch with his feet in my lap. I signed off the computer and rubbed his feet through his black work socks.

He stretched and smiled at me. “Feelin’ better?”

“Yeah, I am; you about ready for bed, cowboy?”

“I reckon I should wake up so we can go to bed.” We turned off the lights and made sure the doors were locked and the heat was turned down. I made a mental note to myself to check out security systems when we were in Wenatchee on Monday. Once upstairs, we stripped and got into bed. Mike and I held each other for a while and kissed gently; he must’ve known my head still hurt because he was being real gentle. Feeling pretty tired from the long night before and little sleep, we fell asleep all tangled up with each other. As I drifted off to sleep, it occurred to me that with anyone else I wanted to be on my side of the bed. With Mike I wanted to be all wrapped up with him. That thought made me smile.

WHEN I woke up, Mike and I were still all intertwined. The sun was coming up; the light from the skylights was a soft gray. I could see clouds above. It was breezy too; I could hear the wind whistling through the pines near the house. My headache was pretty much gone. I nuzzled Mike’s beard and neck. He gave out a contented little growl type of noise and pushed into me. We seemed to find each other’s mouth without even trying. I licked his lips gently before moving my tongue against his. He smelled good. I kept on kissing him while I moved my hand through the thick fur on his chest and belly. I kept rubbing in circles until I reached his red bush. I kept my hand massaging that area for a couple of minutes. He obviously liked it as he was moaning into

my mouth. He had one of his hands on my cock and would stroke it a few times and then fondle my balls. After rubbing him just above the base of his dick for a few minutes, I gave in to his pushing and thrusting with his hips and grabbed his cock. He was dripping precum, so I used that to lube him up and began to gently stroke him. He had been doing the same to me, and his hand was sliding easily up and down my shaft.

After a few more minutes of that, I moved around so my dick was in his face. He got the hint. It felt incredible to slide into his hot, wet mouth. His tongue was doing a gentle massage on the back of my dick. He began massaging my balls with a free hand. I ignored his cock and began to tongue his beautiful ass. I licked around the hole and then began to tongue fuck him. When he'd start squirming, I'd back off and gently rub my beard up and down his crack. When he was good and wet and relaxed, I moved back and stuck a couple of fingers into that tight, slick hole. I swallowed his cock. I heard him sigh in pleasure around my dick. After a few minutes of a very pleasant sixty-nine position, I moved up to kiss him. It was a bit awkward as I kept my finger in his ass. I smiled at him.

"Good mornin', buddy."

"Mornin', Jeffy."

"You about ready to get fucked, bud?"

"I'm always ready for you."

"Why don't you lube me up and put the condom on me?"

He did that while trying to continue kissing me as much as possible. He stroked me both before and after he unrolled the condom on my cock. I was really raring to go by that time. I got up on my knees, and he pulled back his knees by his ears. I positioned myself and slid in. He opened to take me and then got all tight. It felt so incredible. I held still, just savoring the sensation. He had his legs far enough back that I could get in, push up, position, and kiss him while I fucked him. I began a nice easy pumping. After a few minutes of kissing, I whispered, "Feel good, buddy, was this worth waitin' for?"

"It's incredible, Jeffy. I feel so full."

"So you like my big cock? Makes ya feel real good, don't it?"

"Oh yeah. Ride me, cowboy!" I began thrusting a bit harder. He was smiling at me. When he got really into it, his eyes would roll back into his head as he gave himself up to the pure sexual pleasure. "Fuck, this feels good! You could keep this up for hours if you wanted to."

"I dunno, buddy, that sweet ass of yours is pretty hot. You get me goin'."

"You keep me goin' with that beautiful body, that fuckin' huge cock. Fuck me, Fuck me!" He bucked up to meet my thrusts.

"You really love to get fucked, don't ya boy? You crave my big cock in ya, don't ya?"

"Oh yeah, Jeffy. Jeffy, fuck me," he murmured that softly.

"I can tell you love gettin' fucked. And one thing, boy, you know how to fuck back. Yeah, clamp down just like that. Fuck back, boy, show me how much you love it."

"That's hot. You like me clampin' down like that?"

"I love it, buddy. It feels great. I love to fuck. I love to fuck you. Who's your ass belong to?"

"You."

"Who?"

"You, Jeffy. My Jeffy. Fuck me. Ride me hard. I'm so close."

"I'm fuckin' you, boy; feel my big cock slidin' in and out of your sweet ass? You just love me fuckin' you, don't you, boy? Fuckin' your ass till you cum. Cum for me, boy. Shoot all over. Show me how much you love me inside you." He was so excited he was trembling underneath

me. When he was riding my cock and pushing his ass up into me, his cock was slapping against my belly. I started kissing him again. I was close too. I began to fuck harder, and all of a sudden he moaned, and I felt his hot spurts on my belly and chest. He continued to tremble, and that got me off. I shot into him. I kept pumping slowly and gently until I was getting soft. Even as I slid off him, we continued kissing. I broke the kiss and propped myself up on one elbow. I gently ran my hand across his red beard.

“Damn, Jeffy. That was unbelievable. That was far and away the best we’ve ever had. That turns me on when you tell me I’m a boy who loves to get fucked. I was shakin’ so hard when I came. I felt that from my head to my toes. That was fuckin’ intense.”

“I reckon that means you liked it?”

“What a great way to wake up. Where in the hell did you learn to fuck like that?”

“I just watch you. If you seem to like somethin’, I keep doin’ it or sayin’ it. You let me know when I’m on the right track.”

“Fuck, damn, shit, Jeffy! That was incredible. Did you like it?”

“Hell yeah, buddy. We seem to fit pretty well together. I reckon I’ll keep ya.”

We both laughed at that.

“Do you think I’m weird?”

“What in the hell does that mean?”

“Well, like the other day, when we wore each other’s underwear and socks.”

“I enjoyed it too. I wasn’t sure I would, but it got me goin’ too.”

“You didn’t mind it when I asked you to leave ’em on when you fucked me?”

“Not at all, I’m sure as time goes on, we’ll find out things like that about each other, things that turn you, me, or us both on. I reckon it’s only natural. Like I get real hot when you call me Jeffy when I’m fuckin’ you.”

“Thanks, I just wanted to ask since this is kinda new to me.”

“You’re handlin’ it like a pro, bud. Now you ready for coffee and breakfast?”

“Can we just leave this all over us?” He gestured to the sticky, musky stuff covering our chests and bellies.

“If ya want.” I pulled on my socks and then my long handles and then gave him a little slap on the ass.

“C’mon, buddy, it’s breakfast time.” We ran down the stairs. I got the coffee started. Mike started fiddling around in the fridge and turned to me.

“I’m makin’ breakfast for you, Jeff.”

“Okay.”

“Scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, and pork chops okay?”

“Sounds like a winner to me.”

“What do you got planned today, Jeff?”

“I got a couple of sculptures I have to finish up, buff, polish, and get all nice and shiny.”

“I was plannin’ on makin’ a couple more hat bands and workin’ on a belt.”

“Your belts are real nice, buddy.” I was remembering how I’d like one, and trying to think of how to work in Christmas.

“You want one, Jeff? I’d love to make you one.”

“You sure? I don’t want to put ya to no trouble.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way to pay me back.” He winked at me then.

"I've created a monster!" Mike was busy, and I was just watching him at the stove. His jeans were tight, and I had a perfect view.

"Anythin' goin' on for Halloween, Jeff?"

"There's usually a town dance in the community center. Everyone comes in costume."

"We gotta think of some costumes!"

"Any ideas?"

"What about Batman and Robin?"

"I reckon we could do that. Or we could ask Sandy, Maria, Josh, Renee, and José to join us and go as the X-Men."

"That would be fun. I could go as Gambit; he's Cajun too."

"You wouldn't want to be Jubilee?"

"No, I don't reckon I got the right equipment for that. Who would you be, Jeff?"

"Either Wolverine or Cyclops. What do you think?"

"Wolverine, he's hot."

"Or we could go as characters from Star Wars. I could be Han Solo, and you could be Princess Leia."

He got real quiet. "That's the second time you suggested I be a female character. Do you think I act like a girl?" He looked real hurt. I had just been joking. I stood up and put my arms around him.

"Not at all; you're one-hundred-percent man. I'm just funnin' ya. If it bothers you, I won't do it again."

"No, it's okay. I guess it was hearin' my old man call me stupid pansy, or askin' if I want to be a woman. Ya'd think I'd be able to put all that shit behind me, but it's hard."

"Mike, one of the many reasons I'm attracted to you is because you're a guy. I mean, jeez, so many guys in San Francisco act like little girls. You, though, are a guy through and through. I'm gay, buddy. I like men. And you are one hell of a man."

"Thanks. It's been goin' through my head, my old man askin' if I want to be a woman 'cause I like it so much when you fuck me."

"Mike, buddy, I like to fuck you because you're a man. Hell, if you wanna switch sometime, just let me know. Catchin' when your partner pitches doesn't make you any less of a man."

"I reckon I still got a lot of baggage from when I was growin' up."

"Hell, I'd be surprised if you didn't. I'm here for ya though. Ya know, I'd actually suggested Jubilee 'cause she's a bit annoyin', and Leia is great. I didn't do that to make you feel bad or insinuate anythin'."

"Don't worry about it. I like your idea about bein' X-Men. Although, I thought Batman and Robin would be nice. I bet you'd look hot in tights and a little speedo." I was envisionin' him asking me to dress like that for play sometime, but luckily he continued on. "I really like the idea of all of us dressin' up as a group. We can ask Sandy when she comes what she thinks."

"Good idea, bud."

"What kinda party is it?"

"It starts out with kids and everyone in costume. They have candy for the kids and prizes for their costumes. Then about nine, the kids leave, and a band starts up. You can buy beer there too."

"That sounds like a lot of fun."

We finished up breakfast, got all showered and dressed, and waited for Sandy. She came a few minutes early. I suggested that we all go out to dinner at a real nice Italian restaurant in



Wenatchee. Everyone was agreeable, so we piled into Sandy's truck and off we went. The truck was small, and the two and a half hours it took to get to Wenatchee seemed longer. I was crammed in the middle between Sandy and Mike.

First stop we made was at a security company to see about house alarms. I bought one, and they said that they would be out next week to install it, which made me feel a bit better. Next stop was the lawyer's office. Mr. Silas was a slender gentleman who had to be in his sixties. He had bright blue eyes and a full head of hair. In his gray suit, he reminded me more of a banker than a lawyer.

He ushered us into his office. I ended up signing a bunch of papers. Apparently Dad had added my name to everything quite a while ago. That made things a lot easier. I had thought about what to do with Dad's investments. Mr. Silas let me know that Dad had left instructions about some sells and buys he'd researched for the next month or so. I asked him to just follow those instructions, and we could go over what to do next. He gave me the information about Dad's bank accounts and other things. Dad's truck had been totaled in the crash in which he died. It was really a sad thing for me. Everything was so final. It was like we were closing his life out. It hit me then that I had to clean out Dad's room. That was something I really was not looking forward to. Mr. Silas also brought out the letter we talked about on the phone. It was in a manila envelope and sealed. I put it in the inside pocket of my Carhartt vest. Mr. Silas looked at me quizzically.

"It's a lot to go through now, sir. I'd rather get past all the details here and then read the letter."

"I certainly understand, Mr. Connelly. Losing someone you are close to is always a difficult thing, and I remember you and your father being very close."

"I reckon so." I couldn't think of anything more to say that wouldn't get stuck on the big lump in my throat.

"Mr. Connelly, that is pretty much it; I took the liberty of filing your father's life insurance claim for you. If there is anything else I can do, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks, sir. I appreciate all the help."

We said our goodbyes and headed out. Next stop was the garage where my truck was. When we got there, I was happy to see it was ready. They'd even washed and waxed it and vacuumed the inside. I was really happy to get it back. We still had a couple of hours to kill before dinner, so we headed to the mall. Sandy was in seventh heaven to be able to shop. Mike and I were less excited. We did spend some time in the Western wear store looking at boots and hats.

It had hit me when Mike moved in that he didn't have a whole hell of a lot of gear. I knew he wouldn't let me outright buy him stuff, but with Christmas only a little over two months away, I was looking and listening real close. I was thinking maybe for him also a custom-made pair of boots from Rocketbuster Boots, but how could I get the tracings of his feet for the cobbler? I'd run it by Sandy when we were alone. I had planned when the money for the beeves came in to buy a new rodeo type saddle, and now my choice could be a bit more extravagant. There are two things cowboys, no matter how tight, will spend money on, boots and saddles. I was no exception.

We finally headed over to the restaurant and got a table. I decided to go all out and ordered a bottle of Chianti.

"Mike, buddy, I know you always want some appetizers, what about you Sandy?"

"Sounds great, I am kinda hungry." The waiter came over with our bottle of wine. I ended up looking at the cork and tasting the wine. It was excellent.

"We'd also like an order of the fried calamari, the mozzarella sticks, and stuffed mushrooms."

"Very good, sir."

"Jeff, what's calamari?"

"Squid." When I answered, Mike looked aghast.

"Squid? Like those things with tentacles that live in the ocean?"

Sandy was trying hard not to laugh.

"You got it. They're really good; if you don't like 'em, you can stick to the mozzarella sticks."

"I reckon you better ask for another order of the mozzarella sticks then."

"Oh for heavens sake, Mike, just try the calamari." Sandy was giving him a severe look, but her eyes were laughing.

"I'll try 'em, but I ain't gonna like 'em."

"Well then, that's just more for me and Jeff." When the appetizers came, Mike put several mozzarella sticks and stuffed mushrooms on his plate. He took one small piece of calamari, which he pushed around his plate several times. I called the waiter over and ordered Mike a shot of grappa. He looked at me real suspicious like.

"What's grappa?"

"Italian brandy, you can use it to wash down the squid." The shot came. Mike picked up the piece of calamari like it was poison. He dipped it in the aioli sauce and put it in his mouth. He began to chew. He got a look of surprise on his face.

"This is good! I'll be damned, it's real good." He reached over and put several more pieces on his plate. Sandy and I both laughed. Between mouthfuls of calamari, Mike was asking Sandy about Halloween.

"Jeffy and I were talkin' about Halloween. We figured it might be kinda fun if we all went as the X-Men."

"That sounds like fun. I'll ask Maria if you want to ask José and Josh. I figure Josh can ask Renee."

"Sounds like a plan. Which character do you wanna be Sandy? Jeffy's gonna be Wolverine, and I'm gonna be Gambit."

"Hmmm... Jean Gray is too serious for me, so Rogue might work."

"Should be fun; it'll certainly be different than all the folks dressed up like Dracula."

"What do ya mean, Jeff?" I looked at Mike.

"Every year it seems there's five or six Draculas, right Sandy?"

"Right, and three or four pirates." I winked at Sandy and turned to Mike.

"Straight folks just don't got any imagination."

"What do you mean?"

"Every year in San Francisco on Halloween, they block off Castro Street and let the folks in costume wander around. Some of these guys come up with incredible costumes. Last year I went as Hercules."

"I'd love to see a picture of that." Sandy smirked at me.

"How'd you dress, Jeffy?"

"I let my hair grow a bit and wore a leather headband. I went without a shirt and wore a little kilt type thing made outta strips of leather hangin' from a belt. Then I got the sandals that lace up your legs."

"I bet that looked real nice. Weren't ya cold?" Sandy was trying to keep from laughing when Mike asked me that.

"A bit."

She finally broke in and asked, “Was it worth all the admirin’ stares to be that cold?”

“I reckon it was.”

Mike finally took his shot. He started coughing and sputtering and finally choked out, “What in the hell was that stuff?”

“Grappa, Italian brandy.”

“That was rough, gimme good whiskey anytime.”

“Yeah, I like whiskey better myself.”

“You just about all ready for the dudes, Jeff?” Sandy was pretty excited about the dude ranch idea.

“Yep, about as ready as we’ll get. I got all the food ready, and I’ll get a permit to cut a tree in the national forest. I reckon they’ll all think that is really fun. I’ll put outdoor lights on the trees in the front yard, too, so they’ll look like little Christmas trees.”

“I bet they’ll really like that.”

“I hope so. I just thought, I should’ve gotten some games in the mall. Board games that everyone can play. Maybe a few DVDs, too, like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* or *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. I know the kids would love that.”

“I reckon we’ll think of lots of things like that, Jeffy. You might wanna hold off a week or two, and then we can come back to the mall rather than makin’ three or four trips.”

“You’re right as usual, buddy.” We spent the rest of the dinner planning for Halloween and for the dudes. Sandy had looked at the website and had some good suggestions for improvements. I wanted to stop by the co-op tomorrow and get some digital copies of the pictures for the exhibit to put on the website. Things were moving right along.

After dinner, we said good night to Sandy. She was staying in town with Maria. Mike and I began the long drive back to the ranch. We held hands as I drove. It sure was nice to have my truck back. A good part of the drive to the valley goes right along the Columbia River. It’s huge. The country out here is pretty desolate. Along the river most of it is desert, but it has its own beauty. It looked all silvery and seemed to glow with a cold light as we drove along the road. One thing I really appreciate about Mike is he’s in love with this land as much as I am. I prefer the area around home, which is partially forested, to the desert, but I can’t deny that the desert has an austere and stark beauty.

We got to Pateros and reached the turnoff that headed up into the valley and eventually over the North Cascades. Once we got to Twisp, we were in prime deer country. It’s a migration route, and there are signs posted all over about how many wrecks deer cause every year. We started counting the deer. By the time we got to Winslett, it was over sixty. There were even more, west of Winslett. By the time we pulled into the ranch, we had counted one-hundred-twelve; pretty amazing. We were still holding hands as we walked toward the house.

I noticed something in the sky, and told Mike, “Buddy, let’s go around to the back.” He looked at me funny, but followed without comment. As we got to the back porch, we had a clear view north. The trees didn’t start until a fair ways from the house, so we had an unobstructed view of the sky. We sat down on the edge of the porch, and I put my arm around Mike. It was cold, I was sure below freezing, but we were warmly dressed. To the north, in the sky was a shimmering curtain of red, orange, and yellow. It moved as if touched by an unearthly wind. It was crisp and cold and the air seemed to vibrate and hum. Other than that, the silence was all consuming.

“Look, buddy, isn’t that somethin’?”

“Is that the northern lights, Jeffy?”

“It sure is. Have you ever seen ’em before?”

“No, I haven’t. They sure are incredible aren’t they?”

“They are. I’ve never seen ’em this early in the year before though.” We were whispering as if our voices would affect the amazing light show in the sky. The silence around us seemed to be almost in reverence of the dancing curtains of light.

“You know, life with you just keeps gettin’ better and better.”

“Thanks, buddy.” We were huddled together. I could feel the cold in my butt from the cold wood of the porch. My legs were gettin’ cold too. Even though I had long handles on, when it’s cold, if you’re not moving, you get cold. The cold, however, wasn’t enough to make me want to go in and stop watching the aurora.

I leaned over to Mike. With my hand, I gently cupped his chin and pulled him into me. I could taste garlic from the restaurant, over the wintergreen and tobacco of dip. We gently touched tongues and shared. It just seemed like the amazing display in the sky called for a kiss, a tender caring kiss, which spoke volumes without words. We continued to look up at the lights. It must’ve been about an hour, and then they started to fade. We still sat there, just looking at the moonlit fields and woods and the millions of stars in the sky.

“Jeffy, you know I ain’t never loved nobody else like I love you?” Mike leaned into me. I squeezed him with the arm around his shoulders.

“I know that, Mike. It’s the same for me. It’s almost like we’ve known each other for years.”

“It does feel that way, buddy. Let’s get inside before we freeze our asses off.”

“One second.” Mike pulled me into him, and we kissed again. “Okay. Now let’s head in. I just wanted to kiss you once more under the stars.”

“I’m glad you did. It was really nice. Now inside. We done used up this day.” Within fifteen minutes we were in bed, asleep, bare assed in each other’s arms.

## Chapter Eighteen

WE HADN’T set the alarm, and I was shocked when I woke up and looked at the clock on the bedside table, and noticed it was almost eight. I hadn’t slept that late in a long time. Mike was curled up with his head pushing against me. My arm was thrown across his shoulder. He was snoring, not loud, but a gentle snore. I just looked at him. His blond hair was all tussled and messed up. His red beard seemed especially bright against the dark of the hair on my chest. He had a contented little smile on his face. I was content just looking at him. It always struck me anew each time I studied him just how good-looking he is. He always got me going, and this morning was no exception. I could feel a rush of blood and a stiffening below the covers. I looked up at the skylights. It looked like another cloudy day. If it was later in the year, I’d think from the dark clouds out there we were in for snow. Mike stirred next to me. He stretched lazily and moved over and cuddled against me.

“Mornin’, buddy, you sleep well?”

“Like a rock, how about you?”

“Really good; I’m surprised we’re still in bed. I ain’t slept this late in a long time.”

He ran his hand over my chest and belly and down to my cock. He chuckled as he grabbed it.

“Rock is right, Jeffy. Let’s stay in bed a little longer.” He moved up, and we kissed. It started out gently, but we began dueling tongues more aggressively. He was chewing lightly on my bottom lip. His hand moved down to my balls, and he began fondling and massaging them. It felt great.

“Jeff? You know how yesterday you said I could fuck you if I wanted?”

“Lemme guess, you want?”

“I do.” He was looking at me with a mixture of tenderness and longing.

“Let’s go for it then; only one thing, I only been fucked once before, so go slow, okay?”

“Maybe I better not then. I never fucked anyone at all.”

“No. I want to experience you in me. To me fuckin’ is a commitment kinda thing. And I’m committed to you. How about I sit on you?”

“Okay, when you’re ready, just tell me what to do.” He began licking my nipple. Normally I don’t really like that, but it was nice. He moved over me, his tongue in the treasure trail of fur down my belly. He took his time, slowly, teasingly, until he reached my cock. He continued fondling my balls as he licked my shaft. After a few minutes of that, he started licking my balls.

“Yeah, buddy, that feels great. Keep goin’. Oh yeah!”

He then moved down with his tongue to my ass. It felt great. I was the one squirming around and moaning now. I could feel myself relaxing, and he continued to lick and shove with his tongue. He came up for air and asked me to throw him the lube, which I did. I felt the cold of the lube against my hole as he rubbed it with his finger. He then slid it into me. I’d finger fucked him enough that he knew to go right for the gland. He gently rubbed it as he worked his finger in and out. I was still moving around and moaning. I relaxed more, and he worked in another finger. It felt really good. I began to feel stretched when he put in yet a third finger. He gently worked them in and out and around.

“Jeffy, I think you might be ready. What do you think?”

“Get the rubber on and get lubed up and lie on your back.” He did so, and I straddled him. I put some lube on my ass and took hold of his cock. When I did, he shuddered. I positioned it and pushed against him. I pushed a little too hard because I felt a sharp stab of pain. I just held there, waiting for the area to relax again.

“Jeff, we don’t have to do this.”

“Tell me how it feels, buddy.”

“It’s amazin’; you’re all warm and tight. And I like lookin’ at you.”

He had a good view. I’d pulled up so I was squatting on him. My knees were wide apart, and my cock was sticking up and out. He reached up and rubbed my chest.

“Okay, cowboy, I’m gonna ride you.” The pain had subsided, and I began to gently rock.

“Oh Christ! Jeffy, that feels so good. I can’t believe it. I’m inside you!”

“Does feel good, don’t it buddy? Just concentrate on how good. You like fuckin’ me?”

“Hell yes. I love this. It feels so good.”

“Yeah, buddy, your Jeffy’s fuckin’ himself with your big dick. You’re makin’ him feel real good. You’re one hot fucker, buddy.” He was just moaning. I continued rocking back and forth and moving gently up and down. To my surprise, I was enjoying it. I normally didn’t even like my ass played with, but with Mike, it was real nice. We looked at each other as I rode him, both of us taking our time, enjoying pleasuring each other.

“Jeffy, I love the way your big cock moves around when you ride me. You are huge!”

“That big dick is there for you, buddy, for your pleasure exclusively.” He looked around and spotted the lube. He reached over and got it, and poured some on my cock. He began stroking with one hand while he tugged on my balls with the other hand. It felt so good. I wasn’t gonna last much longer.

“I’m close, buddy.”

“Go for it! Cum all over me.” I looked at him smiling up at me; that was all it took. I shouted out loud as the first shot hit the headboard. The second ended up all over Mike’s face, the rest on his chest. I pulled off and then took the condom off his cock. He looked real hot, hands behind his head and those patches of red hair under his arms. I went down on him and took his cock in my mouth. He began moaning and whimpering as well as squirming around. His balls were all pulled up tight, so I figured he was about ready. After about a minute, he began breathing hard, and my mouth filled with the salty, bittersweet taste of him. I kept it in my mouth as he spasmed. When he was drained, I moved up and kissed him, putting some of his own juice in his mouth. We both swallowed.

“Thanks, Jeff. I’m glad we tried that. I’ll be honest, it was great, but I think I like getting fucked better.”

“You’re welcome, and that’s fine with me; I’ll fuck you any time you want it.”

“Last night was pretty special, wasn’t it? I ain’t never saw the northern lights before.”

“I’m glad we saw ’em together, buddy.”

“Let’s get some coffee, Jeff.” We got out of bed and put on our socks and long handles and headed downstairs.

Over coffee, bacon and eggs, and fried potatoes, Mike asked me about the letter from my dad.

“When are you gonna read the letter your dad left for you?”

“I don’t know, buddy. I guess today. I just gotta be in the right frame of mind, ya know. We gotta get your truck and talk to Mary Grace today, maybe after we get home from that. So do you wanna eat here or either in Winslett or Twisp?”

“Don’t make me no never mind.”

“Let’s eat here then. I’ll put a pot roast in the slow cooker. I got a great recipe for pot roast braised in stout. Maybe we could do some more dancin’?”

“I’d really like that.”

“Me too, buddy. I wanna spend an evenin’ with ya, with no one else but us, neither one of us sick or froze or sore. Just you and me.”

“That sounds fantastic. So how do ya wanna work gettin’ my truck?”

“I reckon after breakfast I’ll put the pot roast in the slow cooker, and then we can head to town. We’ll talk to Mary Grace, get your truck, and get a loaf of good bread and a pie at the bakery. Then we can come back here and get a workout in. I wanna put some time in on the cross country ski machine. I also want to work on my bronzes.”

We finished breakfast, and Mike volunteered to clean up since I was cooking dinner. I thawed a chuck roast in the microwave. I put it in the slow cooker with the rest of the ingredients and turned it on.

“Reckon that’s about it, Mike. We can have mashed potatoes with that. You want a salad too?”

“No, the roast carrots and potatoes and gravy should be enough. Remember, we’re gonna have bread and pie.”

“Good man. Come here, buddy.” He did and I put my arms around him and gave him a big hug. I nuzzled into his neck. “You’re special, and I don’t want you ever to forget it.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

“Now let’s go get dressed before we end up stayin’ here all day.”

We were in the truck and almost all the way to Winslett when the clouds opened up and disgorged, not rain as I expected, but sleet. I know Halloween was only a week away, but it usually didn’t get this cold until the middle of November. I usually don’t need to wear thermals until mid-October, and this year the weather was cold enough to put them on in mid-September. Mike and I both had on coats, and we almost never left home without our cowboy hats, so we were fine. It continued to sleet as we got to Winslett and got Mike’s truck. It was melting the moment it hit the ground, but it still was cold. He drove his pickup the block to the co-op. Mary Grace was there and showed us the pictures of Mike and his crafts. I really liked the one with me and Mike sitting on the fence smiling at the camera. I asked if I could get some digital copies of some of the pictures and picked several. She was curious and asked why. I told her about the plans for a dude ranch. She was delighted. She was on half a dozen boards for business and tourism and such around the valley, so I suppose she liked the idea of more tourists spending money. She looked at me, hesitated a few times, and finally spoke.

“Jeff, are you going to the community Halloween party?”

“We were plannin’ on it, why?”

“Well, you know I’m pagan, don’t you?”

“I heard you say ‘thank the goddess’ a few times, but I never thought anything of it.”

“Specifically, I follow a path called Wicca, so I’m a witch. Now I heard through the town gossip that you two have been threatened. I’d like to cast a spell to protect you.”

“Uh, okay... I... uh... Mary Grace, I don’t know too much about this stuff. What exactly do you do?”

“We, first of all, cast a magic circle. It’s a sphere of energy around us. Then we invoke the elements earth, air, fire, and water. You see Wicca is a religion of nature. Then we ask the Goddess and God to join us. We drink a toast to them, and we’ll celebrate Samhain, which is Halloween. For us, it is a time to remember the dead. The gates between the worlds are very thin then, and our dead loved ones can visit us. After that, I’ll do the spell for protection, and then I’ll read the tarot for anyone who wants it. Finally, we thank the Goddess and God and the elements, and that’s it.” I had heard about Wicca before, but didn’t know too much about it. She went over to her desk and got a small book and handed it to me. It was by an author called Cunningham and it was titled *The Truth about Witchcraft Today*.

“Read this, it will explain things to you.” I made a decision then. Mary Grace was a genuinely nice and gentle person. If she was offering help, we’d accept.

“When?”

“It’ll be after the Halloween dance. Like I said, we call Halloween Samhain.” She pronounced it “Sow-in.”

“Thanks, Mary Grace; is there anything we need to do or bring?”

“Just an open mind.”

“Great. I reckon you’ll find we both are pretty open-minded.”

“I know that; I wouldn’t have asked you if I didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you just do a spell for us and not tell us?”

“We believe it’s wrong to do anything to or for you without your permission.”

“That’s interestin’.”

“If you have any questions about the book, please let me know.”

“I sure will, Mary Grace.” We said our goodbyes and headed out onto the street. The bakery was just around the corner. Most of the way was covered, but we had to cross the street. It was still sleeting.

“Mike, buddy, after we get the bread and pie, we probably should head back. I don’t know if the roads are gonna be slippery or not.”

“Good idea. We came close enough to goin’ off the road the other night.” We walked into Rick’s Bakery. I could smell fresh bread and pies. There was also the smell of coffee. It was warm inside; it felt nice and cozy. Rick came out from the back.

“Hey, guys! How are you two doing?”

“Fine, Rick, how about you?”

“Pretty good. Did you see Mary Grace?”

“We just came from the co-op. Why?”

“I just wondered if she’d talked to you about after the Halloween dance.”

“You mean her castin’ a spell to protect us on Samhain?” Mike said, and Rick looked at him.

“I guess she did then. Are you two okay with it?”

“I reckon we can use all the help we can get.” I smiled at him.

“I am really glad to hear that. Let me get you guys some coffee.” I looked at Mike. He nodded. My truck has four-wheel drive all the time, and Mike can put his truck into four-wheel drive, so I reckoned we’d be fine to stay a little longer.

“That’d be great, Rick. What kinda pies do ya have today?”

“Apple, pumpkin, peach, and lemon meringue, can I get you a slice of pie?”

“How about an apple for me. Mike?”

“I’ll have apple too. Peach pie okay, Jeffy?”

“Rick, how about a peach pie to go and a couple of loaves of bread, one of your sourdoughs and one of pumpernickel.”

“Sounds good, guys. Have a seat and I’ll have your coffee and pie out in two shakes.”

“I reckon he’s one of Mary Grace’s group.” Mike looked at me.

“Well, buddy, they’re both good folks. I’d rather put my faith in them than some sorry piece of shit like Spencer.”

“Or my old man.”

“I hear ya, buddy.” Rick came out with a tray with two cups of coffee and two huge slices of apple pie.

“Here you go, guys, enjoy!” He’d made the coffee extra strong, and the pie was great. It tasted of fresh apples, cinnamon, and a touch of nutmeg, with butter in the crust.

“Rick, the pie is delicious.”

“Thanks, Jeff. Just remember, when you get lots of tourists, you can direct them here.”

“You got it. You know the recommendation will be good.”

“Thanks!” I looked out the window. It didn’t look like any sleet was staying on the ground. It seemed to be melting off the road. The ranch was a good five hundred feet higher than Winslett



though, so you never know. Around here, elevation really makes the difference. We finished our pie and coffee and headed back to our trucks. I had an idea and thought I'd mention it to Mike.

"Hey, buddy, let's stop by the ranger station and see if we can get a permit to cut a Christmas tree on national forest land."

"You think it might be too early?"

"Dunno, bud. We're here. It won't hurt to check."

We walked over to the ranger station and went in. Mark, the guy who'd given us the hunting permits, was manning the desk.

"Howdy, Mark. How ya doin'?" I extended my hand, and Mike followed my lead.

"Hey there, Jeff, Mike, nice to see you guys. What can I do for you?" He smiled a welcome. I really noticed him for the first time. He had a plain open face, unruly brown hair, and a stocky build. He must've been about thirty. Although my first impression of him hadn't been the greatest, he seemed to be trying awful hard to rectify that.

"We wanted to see about gettin' a permit to cut a Christmas tree."

"We start giving 'em out November first. One permit entitles you to cut one tree."

"Okay then, Mark, I reckon we'll be back on the first." He looked at both of us for a second.

"I hear you're going to start taking in tourists at your ranch?"

"Yep, news sure does travel fast around here don't it, Mike?"

"That's for sure."

"Reason why I asked is I've never seen a working ranch before. I was, um... wondering if I could come out sometime and take a look. That is if it's no problem."

"No problem at all, Mark. When do you wanna come out?"

"How about I bring your Christmas tree permit on the first after work; I get off at five o'clock."

"Sounds good to me. Since you're drivin' out at dinner time, how 'bout stayin' for a bite to eat?"

"Great! I don't want to put you through no trouble."

"None at all. I'll let you in on a little secret: we gotta eat, too, so we're bound to have food." He laughed.

"How about I bring the beer?"

"Now you're talkin'. We'll see ya about five-thirty or so on the first." We shook hands and left.

I headed out first, and Mike followed me. The roads were clear, so our worrying had been for nothing, but you never know. I remember my dad saying he'd seen snow each and every month of the year. We were pretty far north, so that really didn't surprise me; this winter was looking to be cold. I was hoping we'd get lots of snow. It would be good for tourism, and I loved to cross country ski. Mike really hadn't been, but I was looking forward to gettin' him out on the trails. The valley has an incredible set of cross country ski trails for all levels and abilities. I liked to ski from the ranch to Winslett, have lunch, and ski back, but I only did that after skiing a bit and getting my legs in shape. We got back to the ranch and headed up the drive. It was nice to be home. I knew I had to read my dad's letter, but for some strange reason wasn't really excited about it. I reckoned we could have our workout and then eat dinner before I sat down to read the letter. We changed into our workout clothes. I suggested to Mike we do an upper body workout, and then spend time on the cross country machine and rowing machine. He was game. We went

through the workout and then alternated time on the machines. We did fifteen minute intervals until we had done an hour on each machine.

“Hey, buddy, how about we relax in the hot tub?”

“Sounds great to me.”

We went upstairs, stripped down, and rinsed off in the shower. I had to laugh when we were undressing since Mike and me were so focused on watching each other.

“Jeffy, can I ask a favor?”

“What ya need, buddy?”

“I was wonderin’ if maybe instead of getting dressed in sweats or jeans, we could just hang around in our long handles and socks tonight.”

“From that request, I reckon I’m gonna get lucky tonight.”

“I reckon you are, too, if ya answer yes.”

“You think I’d say no to you?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Sounds like a plan, buddy; now let’s get in the hot tub.” We headed downstairs and grabbed some towels. We went into the hot tub area. It was really cold; when I took the cover off the hot tub, the steam was heavy and thick. Luckily, the sleet had stopped. We got into the hot water pretty quick. Mike scooted right over next to me.

“What do I owe all this cuddlin’ and affection to?”

“I guess I’m feelin’ a bit insecure.”

“Why? Did I do or say somethin’ to make you feel that way?”

“No, not at all, Jeff. It’s just you’re so special and damn near perfect, and I’m kind of a loser. I mean, look at how handsome you are, friendly, outgoing; you’re rich, and I feel like some loser hangin’ on to your coat tails.”

“Mike, look at me. I’ve always had friends, and I’ve had boyfriends in the past. But I’ve never had a best friend who is my partner. Someone I can rope and ride with, throw a football with, hunt with, and work out with. What did we do this mornin’?”

“We played.”

“Let me put that a different way. We made love. Now what specifically did we do?”

“Fucked.”

“Who fucked who?”

“I fucked you.”

“Do ya remember me sayin’ fuckin’ is a commitment thing to me?”

“Yeah.”

“Buddy, I’m committed to you. You’re my partner, my best friend. I wanna grow old with you. It don’t matter to me one bit that you didn’t go to college. Mike, if you don’t understand how I feel about you and just how special I think you are, I don’t know if I can explain it.” He continued lookin’ in my eyes.

“Mike, buddy, you enrich my life more than money ever could. Can you get that through that cute but thick head of yours?”

“I’m sorry, Jeff, I guess sometimes I just let my fears and self-doubts get the best of me.”

“Stop it, or I’m gonna have to put ya over my knee and blister that sweet ass of yours. Besides, I ain’t perfect. I’m too cocky, and I’m allergic to kryptonite.” I hugged him.

“Thanks, Jeff.”

“Don’t mention it.” I grabbed his hand and held it. We sat and enjoyed the hot water in a comfortable silence. We finally got out of the hot water and sat on the deck a couple of minutes to cool down. We dried off and headed upstairs. I walked into the bedroom and grabbed Mike’s black athletic socks. I put them on and reached over for his red long handles. He just stared at me. I pulled the long johns on and buttoned them about halfway up.

“Get that pretty ass of yours dressed. There’s my gear. Wear it.” I pointed to my crew socks and gray union suit. He gave me a big grin and reached for my socks. I could see he was hard.

“You’re somethin’ else, Jeffy. Reckon I’m the luckiest man alive to be with you.”

“No, you’re tied for luckiest, with me.” We shared a long hug and deep kiss. I winked at him. “Buddy, get that sweet ass of yours downstairs. You’re peelin’ the potatoes.”

We both laughed and headed downstairs.

I put out candles for dinner again. I had it bad. I just wanted to make things real nice for Mike. It worked out well; in doing that, I made things nice for me too. We decided on beer with the pot roast. Both of us like it better than wine. As we sat down to eat, Mike raised his beer mug.

“To us.”

“To us!” We grinned at each other. He sure was easy on the eyes.

“Ya like the pot roast?”

“It’s great. I wasn’t sure when you said you was cookin’ it in beer, but it tastes delicious. I like the garlic in the mashed potatoes too.”

“You happy then?”

“Happy as a cow with cud.”

“Good, ’cause I like makin’ you happy.” We had a big piece of pie each and then cleaned up. Mike had set a fire in the fireplace, and I lit it as we moved into the living room. I wanted to read my dad’s letter, but I was a bit nervous. I really didn’t know why. We sat down on the couch. I drew my feet up and lounged in the corner; Mike lay down with his head in my lap. I had the envelope and letter with me. I opened it and began to read.

Jeff,

I have so many things to say to you, and I’m not there to say them. I started writing these letters when your mom died. There were many things I wanted to tell her, but couldn’t. So every six months I update this letter.

First of all, son, I’m proud of you; I have to admire the way you’ve worked for everything you’ve accomplished. You have a great talent with your sculptures; please keep at it. I know without a doubt you’ll be very successful some day.

I love you, too, son. I know I might not have said it enough, or even much at all, but I hope you know that I love you more than life itself. I’ve seen you grow from a little boy to a fine young man. When you told

me about your sexuality when you were sixteen,  
I was a bit concerned. I figured you'd chosen a  
real hard row to hoe. Since then, I've read enough  
to know it's not a choice and you're the way God made you.  
The fact you faced that tough row head on without  
fear or hiding makes me proud. It takes a real man to do that.  
A small town isn't the easiest place to be different, but  
you've been true to yourself and commanded respect here.  
I hope you realize, son, that this is your home.  
I have to wonder if you're really happy in the city;  
it seems to go against who you are. I hope you  
consider coming back here. I told the sheriff the other  
day that you're like a wolf, and you can't cage a wolf.  
I also hope you're happy with your friend, Robert.  
Forgive me my advice, son, but I'm telling you this  
man to man because I care about you.  
Whatever you decide about anything, know  
that you have, and always have had, my full support.  
I'm pretty sure, son, you'll end up back here. If so,  
I have a favor to ask.  
A while ago I hired a cowboy named Mike.  
He's a good man. What he's been through  
in his young life is a nightmare. I'll leave it up to him  
to tell you. Despite his horrific teenage years,  
there's a good, strong man there. In fact,  
son, in a lot of ways he reminds me of you,  
a hurt and less confident you.  
I hope the two of you will become friends.  
The two of you are enough  
alike, I can see the two of you as thick as thieves.  
Just treat him gently. There's a lot of hurt there.  
I do know you, son, and I know you can help him.  
I've told him quite a bit about you.  
If you're reading this, then I didn't live to see the two of you meet.  
You know the ranch and everything will be yours.  
I've left you enough that you're going to be  
able to work on your art. Just don't let that change you.  
I can't see that happening, but I think it's  
a good idea to say it anyway.  
Jeff, I just want to also take the time to say  
that you've made my life complete.  
I'd always wanted a son, and fate  
dealt me the very best.  
I treasure the times we've gone hunting and fishing  
together, as well as the camping trips and riding  
together. In short, I am truly a lucky man  
to have had a son like you and to have come to  
see you as a levelheaded and successful adult.  
Son, I can't say this enough, I love you and  
I'm proud of you. I hope when you look back

and think of me, the memory will  
bring a smile to your face.  
Love, your father.

I felt numb after reading the letter. There had never been any doubt in my mind that Dad loved me. Or any doubt that he was proud of me and gave me his full support. Hearing it in the letter though, made it very poignant; my emotions were going around like a whirlwind. Words failed me. I was afraid if I did try to speak, I'd start balling like a baby.

"Mike, buddy, I gotta get a glass of water." My voice cracked a couple of times. I handed him the letter and walked into the kitchen. I washed my face in the sink and drank my water. I took a couple of minutes to compose myself. I'd always thought I was incredibly lucky to have the dad I did, and that just got hammered home again. I chuckled and that turned into a sob. Dad had been trying to fix me and Mike up. I reckon father really does know best. I walked into the living room. Mike was sitting on the couch, his head in his hands. His shoulders were shaking with quiet sobs. I moved over to him and put my arms around him. He hugged me back. I lost it and began sobbing into his hair while he sobbed into my chest. I felt like I'd lost Dad all over again.

Mike finally said, "He was really special."

"Yeah, between you and him, I am so lucky."

"Reckon he'd be happy now?"

"Happy about us, I reckon so. It's pretty plain he came to care about you too. He was right. We do fit together well."

We held each other for a while, and then I said, "I remember something about dancing. Help me move the furniture." We got everything ready, and I put on some music. We began to dance. Mike was getting pretty comfortable dancing. I liked having him in my arms. We danced really closely for about an hour. I have to admit, my idea of wearing each other's underwear and socks was a turn-on. Our individual scents were all mingled together. Wearing those particular pieces of clothing from each other was intimate too. I just knew as I held him and pressed against him, I was gettin' powerful turned on. I could feel he was reacting the same way.

"Buddy, I seem to remember something about gettin' a piece of tail too."

"I remember that too. I was wonderin'...."

"What, bud?"

"Do you mind just kickin' back on the couch and lettin' me suck your dick?"

"You sure that's what you want?"

"I'm sure."

"I wanna make you feel good too."

"Believe me, Jeffy, that'll make me feel good. You take care of me a lot. Let me take care of you."

"Who am I to argue with such a determined boy?" He chuckled. I leaned over and began to kiss him. It started off slow and built in intensity 'til we were biting each other's lips, and tugging at each other's hair. I had my hand on his ass and was pushing him into me. We were both rock hard and dribbling into our long handles. He finally pushed me on the couch. I slouched way back and spread my legs. I reached for the buttons on my underwear.

"Let me." Mike began unbuttoning from the very top. He was nuzzling my chest and licking me with each button he opened. "Jeffy, I like the way your chest is all hairy, but then ya only got that line of hair straight down, nice treasure trail."

He was rubbing my cock and balls through my underwear as he worked his way down. Finally, he reached in and freed me. My cock stood at attention, a line of clear, thick liquid oozing down the backside. My balls were heavy and loose in the sack. Mike stuck out his tongue and touched my piss slit. He pulled back and a rope of precum stretched from his tongue to my dick.

“Fuck that’s hot, Mike. You like all that precum?”

“Tastes good.” He then dove down on my dick, taking a big portion of it in his mouth. He began moving up and down my shaft with his hand and mouth, and pulling on my balls with his other hand.

“God damn, Mike, you suck cock like a real pro. That’s amazing.” His hot wet mouth and the slick friction of his hand felt incredible. “That’s right, buddy. Suck my cock. Yeah, work that big dick. You look real good with my cock in your mouth, bud. Taste good?”

Mike grunted out a noise, which I took to mean yes. When my dick slid into his mouth it felt real good, being engulfed by this wet heat, and feeling the flutter of his tongue on the sensitive back side of the head. I was just kicking back, enjoying the feel of his tongue. I could feel the muscles in my legs and ass begin to tighten. My balls got more sensitive, and I knew my body was heading toward climax. I focused on just giving in to the incredible waves of pleasure that Mike was giving me. He kept looking up at me with those beautiful, tawny brown eyes. He looked real hot with my cock in his mouth. He took his one hand off my cock and began rubbing my belly and chest. It felt good. I liked it when he touched me. Now I could feel the muscles in my belly and chest begin to tighten along with the ones in my legs and ass. It felt like my dick was swelling. I knew I was putting out more precum because I could feel its tiny little spasms almost like a nonstop mini-orgasm. The feeling was so intense, I almost couldn’t stand it. I didn’t want it to end either. I was literally on the edge of orgasm, but was able to hold off. I sensed though, I couldn’t do that much longer. I’d already spent a couple of minutes on the verge.

“Mike, buddy, you keep that up, and you’re gonna get one hell of a big load.”

He intensified the massage his tongue was giving to the back of my cock. I could feel my balls and the area behind them tightening. My cock swelled even more. It was so hard it was throbbing and was almost painful. The tightening intensified, and all of a sudden, I shot. It felt like I came for a full minute and pumped out a quart or so of spunk. Mike kept my cock in his mouth until I was soft. He then gently let me out. He’d cum all over the front of his underwear, just from rubbing himself while working on me. I pulled him up and cuddled him. We lay together for a few minutes. It felt nice just to be wrapped up in each other’s arms. The light was dim as the fire was dying down. I could smell the smoke in the background and the lingering aroma of pot roast, all covered by aroused sweat and musk, the smells of sex. The sky outside the picture windows was stormy, and sleet occasionally pounded against the house. It was warm inside and comfortable; we just cuddled together enjoying the cozy feeling.

“Thanks, buddy. That had to be the best blowjob I’ve ever gotten.”

“It has to be the best one I ever gave.” He smiled.

“You all right? Can I do anythin’ for you?”

“I’m fine, Jeffy. I could tell you were really enjoyin’ that, the way you were talkin’, movin’ around, and moanin’. Plus you were so horned up. I ain’t never seen so much precum. All that really got me goin’. I barely had to touch myself to cum. I think about two strokes did it.”

“I’m glad to inspire ya so much.”

“Hey, Jeff?” I recognized the tone. He wanted to know if something was normal or had a sexual request.

“What’s up?”

“You know when you said earlier you was gonna take me over your knee and blister my ass?”

“Yeah. Did I upset ya by sayin’ that?”

“No, it made me hard. It sounded really hot. Am I some kind of freak?”

“Hardly. From what I heard, that’s not uncommon.”

“So that is normal?”

“There’s some folks that enjoy that.”

“Could we try it sometime?”

“If you want to, I reckon we could.”

“When?” I had really created a monster!

“I ain’t gonna tell you that. It’d take all the fun out of it.”

“Okay. I’m glad I asked.” He had a big smile on his face. He also looked pretty self-satisfied.

“Let’s see if you’re still so glad after I paddle your ass.”

“That’s a turn-on, Jeffy, when you talk that way. It really gets me goin’.”

“I’ll file that away for future reference, buddy. Now let’s get upstairs and get to bed. We done used up this day.” We headed upstairs, stripped, and got into bed.

“Hey, Jeffy?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, buddy. Now good night and sweet dreams.”

“You too. Good night.”

## Chapter Nineteen

WHEN I woke up, Mike’s side of the bed was empty. I thought he might be in the bathroom, but when I headed in to brush my teeth, he was nowhere to be found. I looked, and my long handles and socks were gone, so I figured he’d gone downstairs. I pulled his gear on and added a pair of jeans. When I headed downstairs, I was glad I’d put on the jeans. Josh and Renee, José, Maria, and Sandy were all in the kitchen. I smelled coffee and some yeasty, sweet cinnamon smell.

“Mornin’ everyone; why didn’t anyone tell me about this party?”

“Relax, Jeff!” I looked at Sandy. “Maria and I decided to come out to the ranch. Josh and Renee, and José were already up, so we came to the main house. We knocked, and in a minute or so, Mike came down.”

“I didn’t wanna wake you, Jeffy; you looked so cute with your hair all ruffled and the drool leakin’ out of the corner of your mouth with every snore, I thought I’d let ya sleep.”

“Thanks, and thanks for that flatterin’ description.” Everyone laughed.

“Don’t worry, boss. Josh and I have seen you durmiendo on roundup many times.”

“Yeah, José, then if you seen me sleepin’, you know I don’t drool.”

“Boy, Jeffy, you really got up on the wrong side of the bed.” I gave Mike a long look and then smiled.

“Whimper, whimper.”

He turned beet red. “I don’t whimper.” Everyone’s head was going back and forth between me and Mike like they were watching a tennis match.

“What do you mean by whimper, Jeff?” Leave it to Sandy.

“Sí, boss, we want to know. We never heard Mike whimper or cry or complain in the bunkhouse. What are you doing to him?”

“Mike, remember, I am a licensed nurse,” Maria said. “If you need medical care after Jeff is done with you, just tell me. I will arrange whatever you need.”

“Thanks, Maria, I think.” Mike was still beet red and looking at me uncertainly.

“C’mere, buddy.” I reached over and pulled him to me. I put my arms around him, and whispered in his ear, “Mornin’, buddy; how’s the handsomest stud on the West Coast this mornin’? By the way, I like it when you whimper. It’s real hot, so that’s a compliment.”

He hugged me back. Then we shared a little good morning kiss. Hell, everyone knew we were a couple, and they were in our home. He whispered in my ear, “I think it’s real cute when you drool too.” I had to laugh. Then he said louder, “Mornin’, Jeffy, I love you. I made sticky buns and coffee for us.” I let him go.

“Sounds great, thanks, Mike!”

“My pleasure.”

“Did you ever feel like you walked onto the set of *Brokeback Mountain*?” Josh said, looking at Renee. She, Sandy, and Maria giggled.

“Josh, just lookin’ at that cute backside of yours, gets us all worked up. We can’t help it. Can we, Mike?”

“Nope. You keep wigglin’ that around, and we ain’t gonna be responsible for our actions.”

“Hey you two, his cute little backside belongs to me!” Renee pretended to give us a stern look before she lost it and started laughing. That got everyone laughing, even Josh, who had turned beet red.

“Josh, when either of ’em says something like that to you, just laugh it off. They only say it to you since you get all embarrassed. José woulda said something like ‘Well, I’m in no danger ’cause you two are too distracted by each other’, or something like that.” Sandy was looking at him with a big smile on her face.

“I know, I just don’t think of things like that as quick as José.” Just then the timer on the stove went off, and Mike got a towel, bent over, and pulled the sticky buns out of the oven.

“See, ladies,” I said. “That cute little rump there is one of the reasons I get distracted by him.” They all made whistling noises and some comments. Mike was blushing something fierce.

“Ladies, you can look and appreciate, but there’s only one guy who can touch,” Mike said.

“Mike, you are startin’ to sound as cocky as Jeff.” Sandy laughed.

“Sí, that is the truth; Josh, mi amigo, you remember the first morning we found that Mike had sneaked up here without telling us?”

“I sure do.”

“Remember we thought that the boss had been rubbing off on him.” He turned and winked at the ladies. Everyone started laughing.

“So he’s still rubbin’ off on you every night, huh Mike?” Josh was laughing now.

“Let’s eat before the conversation goes any further downhill. Those sticky buns sure smell good, buddy.”



"I thought you'd like 'em, Jeff." As Mike spoke, Sandy was making gagging noises.

"So to what do we owe this early mornin' breakfast party?"

"Sandy mentioned we should all talk about our X-Men costumes, and well, we just decided to meet here."

"I appreciate ya lettin' me know, buddy." I winked at him.

"I guess with everythin' last night, it just sorta slipped my mind."

"No problem. Everyone here is welcome anytime." We all got plates and sticky buns, as well as coffee. The buns were really good, hot and buttery, nutty and gooey; they were so sweet, they made my teeth ache, in a good way.

"These are great."

"Thanks." Mike gave me a quick kiss.

"Have you two ever thought of auditioning for *Return to Brokeback Mountain*?" Sandy loved to tease.

"Why audition? We live it." That got me lots of laughter.

"Jeff, Mike, I don't know if Josh told you, but I own a dress shop, which specializes in custom designs. I'd be happy to make our costumes. I guess Mike just needs a duster and some other stuff for Gambit. Jeff, I can make you the blue and yellow Wolverine outfit, Rogue's outfit for Sandy, Storm's for Maria, Josh is going to be Cyclops, José will be Archangel, and I'm going to be Jean Grey." Mike smiled at Renee.

"Wow, you have it all figured out, don't you? That is fantastic!"

"I do need measurements, so I can get my team to work."

We spent the next two hours looking at pictures of the X-Men on my laptop, and working with two measuring tapes Renee had brought. I was happy when Sandy made us all trace the outlines of our feet. Everyone was so agreeable to that, I reckoned that she must've told them about my plan to buy Mike a pair of Rocketbuster boots for Christmas. I'd looked at the website, and I also needed his shoe size, width, and calf measurements, since they were custom-made boots. Renee had gotten the calf measurements for us all. As Mike was tracin' his footprint, I sidled up to him.

"Buddy, what size boots do ya wear?"

"Twelve wide, why?"

"What about waist, inseam, and chest?" He gave me a really curious look.

"Thirty waist, thirty-four inseam, and forty-two chest, why?"

I leaned over and whispered in his ear, "We're the same size, buddy. You know how we wear each other's socks and underwear? I reckon since we're the same size, maybe we can wear each other's jeans, boots, and shirts, too, once in a while." He gave me the dopey, happy, unfocused grin he gets on his face when we're having sex.

"Just tell me when, Jeffy!"

"Horndog!"

"I think we're pretty much the same there."

"You complainin'?"

"Hell no!"

"Okay, what are you two plotting?" Sandy winked at us.

"Nothin', darlin', we were just talkin' about how breathtakingly beautiful you're gonna be as Rogue." She waived that off, but the smile on her face was huge. Renee asked if we would be outside trick or treating, and I told her no. The Halloween bash takes place in the "barn," Winslett's civic center and arena. It would be all heated up nice. Renee mentioned that she could use shiny lycra material then; she had wanted to make sure that the costumes would be okay for the weather.

"Hey, Josh, José, Mike, I told you guys that we were gonna talk to a few more wranglers for when the dudes come. Do you guys wanna talk to 'em too? I reckon it couldn't hurt since you'll be sharing the common room and kitchen in the bunkhouse."

"Gracias, boss. That is a good idea," José said.

"I don't need to, Jeff," Josh said. "If you, Mike, and José like 'em, I'm sure I will too."

"I'd like to be there when you talk to 'em, Jeff," Mike said. "Maybe I can learn somethin' from you and José about managin' the ranch."

"Now all I gotta do is get Wayne."

"Boss, he is not here. I haven't seen him last night or today."

"It seems he's been away more than here lately. I'd really like to hear what he has to say about the new wranglers," I said. "I guess I'm just happy he's recovered from the gunshot wound and has found someone nice."

"You could always tell him he can bring his lady friend around, Jeff. You're cool with Renee bein' here." Josh had a point, but I wasn't sure just how willing Wayne would be to have his friend around.

"Course she's welcome, and I'll tell 'im that. He's been awful secretive about it, so I don't reckon he's gonna open up until he's ready."

"That is the truth, boss. But it is no matter. We can talk to the new vaqueros."

"I trust you guys; I just hope Wayne isn't pissed. One question for you two; are the two of you okay with cowgirls too?"

"Cowgirls? You're gonna hire women wranglers?" Josh asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"And just what's wrong with that?" Sandy was glaring at Josh, and Renee looked mad enough to spit. Maria was the one who broke the silence however.

"Josh, you have seen me ride and rope and take care of stock. I spent much time as a girl on my uncle's ranch. Do you not think I would be able to help out?"

"I didn't know he was talkin' about you, Maria. Of course, you'd be a great addition to the team and a great wrangler to work with."

"See, I am a woman, and I can do it as you say. You need to give other women a chance."

"It's not you?"

"No, Josh. Remember, I am a nurse. I have to be there to help Mike if Jeff is too rough with him." That broke the tension, and everyone laughed. Renee did look at Josh though.

"You're okay with that, aren't you, Josh?" She placed a heavy emphasis on "aren't you."

Josh nodded. "Sure, I was just askin'. I'm fine with women wranglers. I hadn't thought about it, that's all."

"Great, Josh. The woman I have in mind is named Jeanette. I've rodeoed with her in the gay rodeo for years now. She's tough. One year she was bull ridin' and didn't cover. Lucky she was wearin' a flak vest, 'cause after she hit the ground, the bull stepped right on her chest. Knocked

the wind clean outta her, and bruised her up pretty bad. We knew she was fine when she asked for her dip though.” Josh’s mouth was hanging open.

Finally Sandy stuttered out, “Did you make that up, Jeff?”

“Nope. It happened just like I mentioned; she’s tough, so watch your step, Josh. If Renee’s not around to keep you in line, Jeanette will.” Josh gulped and looked a bit worried.

“Jeff, you don’t mind if I have a talk with her and ask her to do just that do you?” Renee winked at me, so Josh couldn’t see.

“That’s between you and her, as long as it don’t interfere with her work or Josh’s work.” Everyone laughed at that, but Josh didn’t look too relieved.

“If it’s okay with you boys, Sandy, Maria, and I will go to Wenatchee and get some fabric and stuff for the costumes. We’ll have lunch in Leavenworth, and my head seamstress is going to meet us there.” They walked out and got in Renee’s car. It was a Lexus.

“When are the vaqueros coming here, boss?”

“Today. One at one, one at two, and one at three.”

“Bien. I will be back at one.” José walked out, followed by Josh.

“Buddy, it looks like we got a couple of hours to kill. What do you want to do?” I grabbed the neck of his shirt and pulled him into me and gave him a hard, deep kiss, while I used one hand to squeeze his ass.

“I’m sure we’ll think of somethin’, Jeff.” We headed upstairs. Mike had asked when we got upstairs, if we could leave our underwear and socks on. The boy’s been really clear that turns him on, and if it gets him going, it gets me going, so I’m happy to do that. We shucked our jeans, and Mike shucked his T-shirt. We fell into bed, still kissing deep and hard. He started rubbing and playing with me through the long johns, and I returned the favor. We kept the lip-lock going.

Finally, when we were both sporting big wet spots from precum, I told him, “Get on your side, back to me, boy.” He jumped to obey.

I got the lube and condoms, and unbuttoned the back flap of his underwear. I unbuttoned mine from neck to crotch, and lubed both of us up. I unrolled the condom on myself and then slid into him. It was the first time I ever did that without rimming or fingering him to open him up. He gasped as I slid in, but pushed back against me. I had one arm around him and was pulling on one of his nipples hard. It seemed the harder I pulled, the more he reacted. I was using the other hand to rub his cock through the material. Just to see what he’d do, I bit down on his shoulder where it joined his neck. He rammed his ass back into me, and began to fuck himself much harder than I had been doing.”

He yelled out, “Hot damn! C’mon, Jeffy, make me feel it. I wanna be sore for a week. Bite me, bite me again!” I did so on his neck and was rewarded with more shouts.

“Fuck yeah! C’mon, ride my ass. Hurt me good. Fuck me, Jeff! Hard! Ram it in!” He was really getting off on my being rough. Just to see how he’d react, I lightly slapped his balls. He let loose a wordless yell. When I moved my hand to his cock, he began humping it wildly. I started fucking him hard, and slapped his balls a few more times. Then I roughly grabbed his cock and bit his neck.

“I can’t take it anymore; it’s too intense; fuck me hard while I cum. Bite me. Use me, Jeffy. I’m yours. Ohhhh—*Fuck! Yeah!*”

With that he started gushing. He let loose with a huge load all over his long handles. He was still moaning and whimpering as I fucked him. I was getting close and made no effort to hold back. I pulled him back to me and wrapped my arms around him. I kissed his neck where he had several red marks and bruises.

“Hot damn, Jeffy, where’d you learn to fuck like that? I love it when you get rough and all dominant.”

“Yeah, that was hot. I liked it too. If someone had told me I’d get off on bein’ real rough with ya, I wouldn’t have believed ’em.”

“We gotta do more of that.”

“Fine by me, just let me know if it’s too rough; I’m dependin’ on you to tell me when to back off.”

“Will do.”

“We better get cleaned up, buddy.”

“Let’s just leave this on.”

“You’re soaked in cum, and we both got real sweaty.”

“I’m gonna leave my gear on.”

“Okay. I ain’t the one drippin’.” We pulled on jeans and shirts. Mike was grinning like a horse with its muzzle in the oat bag. He had this dazed, unfocused look to him. He had really gotten off on that. He was still floating on cloud nine.

“Let’s get a sandwich, buddy, before the wranglers come.”

“Okay. Whatever you say.” We headed downstairs and into the kitchen. I made us a couple of Reuben sandwiches. Mike was still off in his own sex-charged little world.

“Jeffy, you don’t mind if I call you sir, do ya?” That took me by surprise.

“Let me think on it, buddy. I guess between the sheets it’s fine, but remember I said that outside the bedroom we’re equals.”

“I know that, and neither of us would be happy otherwise. I really do get off on your bein’ rough and me bein’ all submissive; I think callin’ you sir would be really hot.”

“All right.”

“I’m kinda sore, my ass, my balls, my chest, and neck.” He still had a dreamy smile on his face.

“If I was too rough, buddy, I’m sorry. You gotta let me know. I ain’t ever done that with nobody else.”

“You weren’t too rough. Hell, I think about bein’ sore, and I get hard again.”

This was kind of interesting. It surprised me just how much that turned him on. The very thought of me knocking him around seemed to make him a walking hard-on. I’d have to file that away for later.

We finished our sandwiches and went into the living room to wait on the folks coming about the jobs. José came by a few minutes later.

“Mike, amigo, what is wrong with your neck? It looks like you have some horrible rash. Should I call Maria and ask her to come and look at it for you?”

“Thanks, José. I’ll be fine.” José was grinning, so I figured he knew exactly what was wrong with Mike’s neck.

“Miguel, I am very worried about you, amigo. The rash looks like bite marks. Perhaps you were bitten by a dog with la rabia?”

“It’s just a rash, José.”

“Are you sure one of Porky’s friends did not come for you? It also looks like strangle marks.” José was having a hard time keeping from laughing now.

"I'm gonna go out by the porch to bring the wrangler in when he gets here." Mike beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen. José finally started laughing.

"Boss, I hope you don't get such a horrible rash."

"Don't worry, José, it ain't gonna happen."

"Who is the first candidate, boss?"

"She's the cowgirl, Jeanette." Just then I heard the door open and Mike greeting someone. He came in the living room in about a minute or so with Jeanette.

I'd rodeoed with her for years. She's a real sweetheart, but butch is an understatement. She's about five-seven and very stocky. Her brown hair is cut very short, and she never wears makeup. She was dressed in old broken down boots, jeans, a flannel shirt, and a down vest. She smiled a greeting at me and held out her hand. I shook it and then gave her a hug. She hugged me back.

"Jeanette, it is really nice to see you. You been keepin' out of trouble?"

"Only when I have to. Are you still datin' that pansy from San Francisco?"

"Not hardly; Mike, who ya just met, and I are kinda hitched up now."

"From his neck, it looks like you two are still on your honeymoon." She looked Mike up and down.

"You take care of Jeff, hear me? He's a good man," she said. "You look good for him; you two put me to mind of two peas in a pod."

"Jeanette, meet José. José is one of our wranglers here. We've known each other since we were teenagers. He's the backup foreman."

"Pleased to meet ya." They shook hands.

"You're planning on heardin' dudes now, huh?"

"Yeah, I also want to keep this a workin' ranch, so I need wranglers who can do both."

"I told ya I've worked in a couple of dude ranches. I'm happy to give you that information if you wanna check. You know from the rodeos, I know how to wrangle."

José smiled at her. "Jeanette. You know we have one bunkhouse. We all have our own rooms, but we share the common area and kitchen. This is not a problem for you, no?"

"No, if one of the other wranglers makes a move on me, I'll kick his ass. Did Jeff tell you about the time we beat the shit outta two redneck homophobes in Albuquerque?" Mike and José both said, "No," in unison.

"We were both buckin' in the New Mexico Gay Rodeo. Me and Jeff was headed out for breakfast at Los Cuates. We was walkin' across the hotel parkin' lot, when some redneck called me a dyke and told me I just need a good man. I told him I'm more of a man than he is, and he jumped me. His friend started runnin' toward us. Jeff knocked the friend out cold right away. I knocked a few teeth outta the first guy, and then Jeff and I left for breakfast." They were both staring at her in a mixture of fear and awe.

"Jeffy, told us about the time the bull stepped on you," Mike said.

"All part of a rodeo."

"Jeff, will your dudes be gay only or you gonna open it to everyone?"

"Everyone."

"Good, I'm pretty good teachin' kids to ride and such."

"Great. José, you wanna show Jeanette the bunkhouse and barn?"

"You'll let me know, Jeff?" She gave me a rib crushin' hug.

“Today. Just keep your cell phone on.”

She turned to Mike. “If you’re Jeff’s partner, you’re okay.” She gave another bone crushin’ hug to Mike, before she and José walked out. As they did José gave me a thumbs up sign behind his back.

“What did ya think of Jeanette, Mike?”

“She’s really sweet. She comes on all rough and tough, but she seems to have a heart of gold.”

“She does, and she’s good at her job.”

“Go for it then. Hire her. I’m gonna get somethin’ to drink before the next one gets here. You want somethin’?”

“How ’bout some of that iced tea you made.”

“You got it, Jeff.” Mike disappeared into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with two glasses of iced tea. José followed with his own glass.

“Boss, she is a very nice lady. We were talking about stock, and she knows how to cowboy.”

“So you think we should go ahead with her?”

“Sí. I also think if you have gay people here, she will be nice for the girls.”

“Good point, José.” We chatted for a few minutes, and then Mike turned to José.

“She can have my old room in the bunkhouse. I cleaned it up good. I can also put a ‘Ladies’ sign on one of the bathrooms in the bunkhouse.”

Just about that time, we were interrupted by a knock on the door. Mike went to get it. He returned a few minutes later with a real tall guy about six-three or six-four. The guy was stocky too.

“Howdy there. I’m Jeff, and this is José. I reckon you and Mike met.”

“Herb Renford.” He stuck his hand out, and we all shook.

“So tell me about your cowboyin’ experience.”

“I’ve worked mostly on dude ranches. I’m pretty good at teaching beginners how to ride, and good taking care of horses. I was a stable boy in a riding school before I started working on dude ranches.”

“How well do you ride, Herb?”

“Okay I guess. Well enough to ride with the dudes and help when we have them participate in roundup. I’m not the world’s greatest cowboy since I didn’t grow up with it, but I’m not bad. I’m happy to show you if you’d like.”

Mike looked at him. “How come you want to work at a dude ranch? Do you have a hotel background?”

“No. I’ve been doing it ever since I dropped out of college. One of my cousins worked on a dude ranch when he was in college. He told me when he was all dressed up as a cowboy, women would come knocking on the door to his room almost every night. I like being around the horses, and I really like the steady supply of ready women.”

José swore in Spanish under his breath. “Híjole, pinche cabrón.”

“Hey, speak English, I don’t speak beaner.”

José smiled, but it was a cold smile. His eyes were like ice.

“I forget sometimes,” José said. “Jeff and I speak Spanish all the time.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. We all screw up once in a while.”

José continued to smile that icy, dangerous smile at Herb. “Herb, tell me, if we had a gay couple or a lesbian couple here as guests, would you have any problems with them?”

“I might be able to convert the dykes. All they need is a good man. The fags better keep away from me. You guys know how it is, them fags prancing around, talking like women. I think they just want to be women. Some fag comes knocking on my door at night, and I’ll kick the shit out of him.”

I looked at him. “What if he kicked the shit out of you?”

He stared back and then looked away. He let out a laugh that sounded more like a bray. “You’re joking, right? No fag could take me.”

Mike had scooted over closer to me. I put my hand on his shoulder and began to rub.

“I could kick the shit outta you with one hand tied behind my back,” I said. “The way I see it, Herbie, is someone who’s so homophobic is hidin’ somethin’. After all, there’s nothin’ more homophobic than a closet case.”

“You’re kidding me. Why do you care about fags?”

I leaned over and kissed Mike. “Mike and I are partners, and in much more than business.” I stood up. Mike and José stood up also. “I think you better get your bigoted ass outta here before I kick it into next week.”

“Fucking fags.” As he turned to stomp out, he spit at me. He missed me, but hit José who was closest. José began to move, but I beat him to the punch. Herb was half turned when I slammed into him. He wasn’t expecting it, and he was on the ground with me on top of him in a flash. I grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back and up.

“Okay asswipe, you need to apologize for bein’ a stupid closet case, or I’ll break your arm.”

“Fuck you, fag!” I pulled his arm further up and twisted it harder.

“It’s gonna break, shit for brains. To get me to let up, all you gotta do is say ‘I’m sorry for bein’ a stupid asswipe closet case’.”

“Fuck you.”

“Herbie, you’re startin’ to bore me. Kickin’ your sorry ass ain’t even made me break a sweat. I reckon I just better break your arm and be done with it. I reckon you’re like all the straight trash that talks big about the women they’ve had. Just they haven’t had any, it’s all talk. I just can’t see anyone, woman or man, stupid enough to knock on your door.” I applied a bit more pressure.

“I’ll call the sheriff!” His voice had gone high and was all panicky.

“You just go right ahead, asswipe. Sheriff Johnston and I are real good friends. Mike and I just had Sunday dinner over there a few weeks ago. You go right ahead and call him. You started this. I’m just defendin’ my home, right, Mike?”

“That’s right, Jeffy, he called you a fag and then swung at you; I saw it. Didn’t you, José?”

“Sí, Miguel. I see him insult and try to fight mi amigo, Jeff. But he is not a man enough to take Jeff. He is a little puta pinche cabrón.”

“Fu... ugh! Stop it! Stop! You’re gonna break it! Stop, please.”

I had increased the pressure. The arm was close to breakin’ or poppin’ outta the socket. “Just tell me you’re not man enough to fight a fag. I’m more of a man than you ever could be. So’s Mike and so’s José; I wanna hear you say that, and say ‘sir’ to your betters.” I applied just a tiny bit more pressure.

“I’m sorry, sir. You’re more of a man than me, sir. Sir, you’re all better men than me, sir please, please. I’m not man enough to fight a fa, a gay person, sir. Please stop, sir.” He was cryin’

like a little baby. I released some of the pressure and half pushed, half carried him out the door. I pushed him down the stairs. He glared up at me, hatred mixed with fear.

“You got somethin’ to say, Herbie?”

“No.”

“You ain’t from around here. Everyone in this town knows about me. I been out since I was sixteen. They accept me. Now, Herbie, we all got our prejudices, but decent folk try to work around ’em. You ain’t never gonna work in this valley. I’ll see to that. Now get the hell outta here.” He slunk off to his beat up old car. Once he had the engine started he gave me the finger. I jumped off the porch and went running at him. He took off so fast he missed a curve on the driveway, went over some rocks, and blew a tire. I just laughed. He kept going. I turned around; Mike and José were on the porch.

“Sorry you had to go through that, guys.”

“Gracias, Jeff.”

“For what, José?”

“I remember at one time I was something like him. I tried to be macho. You kicked my ass and made me see reason.”

“Josélito, you’re one of my very best friends, and you are macho in a good way. Not like that piece of shit. You just needed a lesson and learned it. He never will.”

“I think you are right, but I am still happy you taught me.” He grabbed me in a quick hug. Then he turned to Mike.

“Miguel, you are a good man. I am glad you are my friend too.” Then he gave Mike a quick hug.

“Let’s go back in, and get ready for the next one.” We headed back inside. Just as we reached the door a battered old Ford pickup truck came up the drive. A lean guy about five-ten stepped out. He had sandy blond hair and a big moustache. He looked like a blond Sam Elliott.

“Howdy fellas, you the guys hiring wranglers?”

“That’d be us. I’m Jeff, this is Mike and José.” He shook hands with each of us in turn.

“Pleased to meet you, fellas, I’m Smitty. My first name is Albert and last name’s Smith. I go by Smitty.”

“Pleased to meet ya, Smitty. One thing, we just spoke to a guy who really wouldn’t work out here.”

“That the lump down the road with the flat tire?”

“Yep.”

“Gave me the finger when I stopped and asked if I could help.”

“I’ll be upfront with you. Mike and I are partners, we’re gay. José and Josh, our two hands and Wayne the foreman are straight. We just hired another wrangler today, Jeanette, and she’s a lesbian. Now I don’t wanna dump this all on you, but I do wanna make sure you’re comfortable around all types of folks, gay, straight, white, Latino, black, Asian, and anythin’ else you can think of.”

“The person’s a lot more important to me than what they look like or who they love. My little brother is gay. I found out when I stopped him from hanging himself when he was fifteen. He’s a good man and shouldn’t have had to go through what he went through from ignorant folks.” He smiled at me and Mike and then at José.

“Hablo español también. Mi mejor amigo es de México y me enseño hablar.”



José was busy smilin' and clappin' him on the back, so I translated for Mike.

"I speak Spanish too. My best friend is from Mexico, and he taught me how to speak."

"C'mon in, Smitty, can I get ya somethin' to drink?"

"A Coke if you got one."

"Sure do." I handed him a can of Coke from the fridge. We all headed into the living room and sat down.

"So you worked at a couple of dude ranches before?"

"I did, one in Texas and one in Colorado. I can get ya references if ya need 'em."

"Please. Ya know how to wrangle too?"

"I been cowboyin' since I was sixteen, so that makes it about ten years. I got a couple buckles in some local rodeos. I like working on a ranch and working with horses and cattle. It's fun to share that with dudes too." Mike smiled at him.

"So you're not in it for the women like the last guy?"

"I always thought it was a good idea to get my bread and my meat at different stores."

"What brought ya up here to the Pacific Northwest?"

"My parents moved up to Seattle, and my little brother followed 'em. He's kinda lost, so I like to be near him. I got up here, and he and I went campin' a few times. This is one of the most beautiful places I ever been. I decided to look for a job up here."

"So you have any questions about the ranch?"

"It's a working ranch, right?"

"Sure is. We run cattle, and I've been seriously thinkin' of gettin' some rare horses. There's a breed from Central Asia that's just beautiful."

"That'd be the Akhal-Teke wouldn't it?" I was surprised, not too many people knew about the rare breeds.

"Yep, I was thinkin' about those and Spanish Barbs."

"Both good breeds. I worked on a farm for rare horses in Colorado for a while. The job includes room in the bunkhouse?"

"You get your own room. The cowboys and cowgirl share the common area and the kitchen. You get some supplies from us, but buy some of your own too."

"Any rule against fraternizing with other employees?"

"No, like I said earlier, Mike here's my partner, and José is one of my best friends. The cowgirl, Jeanette, and I go way back, we've rodeoed together. Josh, our other wrangler, is a good friend also."

"Good. I heard you all were a good group and would make good friends."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"There's this real pretty little girl who's a waitress at the saloon uptown. She was telling me when I had lunch." I laughed at this.

"Sandy. She's like a sister to me. We grew up together. She's a great friend."

"Yeah, she said you were like a brother to her. Said Mike here is a great guy, too, and she had some mighty nice words about José and Josh."

We spoke a few more minutes about salary and responsibilities. I finally asked him if he was still interested.

“One last question, Jeff. You don’t mind if my brother visits me here, do ya? It wouldn’t interfere with work none.”

“You mentioned he’s had a rough go of it?”

“He had a lot of trouble accepting himself. He got pretty heavy into drugs and booze. He’s been sober two years. We’re pretty close. It might be good for him to meet you two also. He could use some good gay role models.”

“No problem at all, Smitty.” We made arrangements for him to move into the bunkhouse that afternoon. He’d start work day after tomorrow. I reckoned Sandy would be pretty happy about that. He followed José out to look at the bunkhouse and barns. He seemed a good fit. I was pretty excited about him and Jeanette coming to work here. Mike looked dazed or confused.

“Penny for your thoughts, buddy?”

“I was just thinkin’ about this afternoon.”

“What about it? Jeanette, that doofus, or Smitty?”

“Uh no. How my nipple, neck, and balls are still sore, and I like it.”

“You know we’re not gonna do that every time we play, right bud?”

“I know. I don’t want you to think that’s all I like. I really like it when you take your time and we go at it nice and slow. It’s a nice expression of how we feel about each other.”

“I agree. Now what do ya want for dinner?”

“How about meatloaf? We can use the leftovers for sandwiches.”

“Okay, I’ll get the meat outta the freezer. You wanna peel some potatoes for mashers?”

“You got it, Jeff. Can we have some green beans too?”

“Sure, I reckon I got some in the freezer.” We shared a kiss and a hug before walking into the kitchen. I got some meat from the freezer with a pack of string beans. I mixed it all up good with the seasonings and put it in a loaf pan. I set it to bake and got a couple of packets of gravy mix from the cupboard. Mike had the potatoes peeled and set to boil. We had about an hour to go. We got a couple of beers and sat down and relaxed a bit. Pretty soon the potatoes were ready to mash. Mike did that while I made some gravy and nuked the string beans. I took the meatloaf out and let it rest a few minutes while we finished the other stuff. Dinner turned out really well. Both Mike and I love meatloaf and mashed potatoes and gravy. The beans tasted fresh. We both had a couple of helpings. We had the rest of the pie for dessert.

We cleaned up and headed back to the living room to cuddle on the couch. I read a book by a gay author about a bookseller turned sleuth and his closeted police detective boyfriend in the foothills of the California Sierra. It was a good read. Mike was lying with his head on my lap watching TV. It was a nice and relaxing evening. Finally, after the news was over, we turned out the lights and headed up to bed. We stripped off and got under the covers. I ended up making love to Mike, with a nice slow and easy rhythm. We both liked kissing when I was plowing away at him. It was slow and sweet. We both enjoyed it. It wasn’t rough, and we were both bare assed. I reckon there’s a time and a place for the roughness, and a time and place for the costumes like socks and underwear, or a jockstrap. The space we were in tonight was for a gentle coming together. The moon was just past full, so the silvery light shone through the skylight as we played. Finally we were both spent. We cuddled up together, a tangle of intertwined arms and legs. We were both asleep right quick.

I WOKE up from a sound sleep. I was a bit groggy. I wasn't sure what time it was; I could see that it was later since the shadows cast by the waning moon had moved. Mike and I were all tangled up. I wondered if he'd moved and that woke me. That happens, but I usually don't come awake like this. I looked at the clock. It was three-thirty. Something caused me to wake up. Then I realized what it was. I smelled smoke.

"Mike, buddy, get up, I smell smoke." Mike sat up. I jumped up and pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. Mike followed my lead. I ran downstairs to see the back porch in flames.

I yelled up the stairs, "Mike, there's a fire extinguisher in the loft! Bring it down!"

I ran to the mudroom. There was another fire extinguisher there. The heat from the fire had broken the glass pane in the door and the kitchen window that overlooked the porch. It hadn't spread inside yet. I grabbed the fire extinguisher and threw open the door. I began to spray the fire. I could see Mike run up through the flames. He'd gone out the back and run around the house. He was screaming, "Call nine-one-one," at the top of his lungs.

I continued to use the fire extinguisher, as did Mike. Just then the door to the bunkhouse burst open. Smitty ran out in his white long handles with a fire extinguisher. José came out with the other fire extinguisher; he was in a pair of boxers and a long-sleeve thermal shirt. I could see Josh with his cell phone in the door to the bunkhouse. He was yelling into the phone, dressed in only a wife beater and white jockey shorts. With the four of us using fire extinguishers we had it put out pretty quick. We were lucky that we caught it before the logs in the wall started on fire or it spread inside. I stepped out on the porch to survey the damage. There was a can of charcoal lighter fluid thrown over to one side.

"Guys, we better get dressed, I reckon the fire squad and the sheriff are gonna be here soon. If you wanna come back up here, I'll make some coffee."

We all headed back to our separate rooms to get dressed. After that, I headed downstairs and made a big pot of coffee. José, Josh, and Smitty walked over from the bunkhouse.

"Thanks, guys. I really appreciate your fast thinkin'."

"Glad to help."

"Boss, why didn't the smoke alarm go off?"

"Good question, José." I pulled a chair over and took off the cover of the smoke alarm. I change the batteries every time the clock changes to or from daylight savings time. There were no batteries in the smoke alarm.

"What in the hell, someone took out the batteries."

"Jeffy, we locked the door didn't we?"

"I don't remember, buddy." Just then I heard the sirens. In a minute or so the fire truck was up here, and the sheriff was right behind. I put another pot on for coffee.

"Looks like you guys were pretty handy with the extinguishers. Was someone smoking and didn't put the butt out?" I looked at the fire chief. He had been a Seattle fireman before moving here.

"Nope." I pointed to the lighter fluid can. He walked over and began to look at the charred wood the fire left and the patterns. He called to the sheriff.

"Dwayne, come over here."

"Yeah?"

"Can you smell it?"

"Smells like gasoline."

“Lighter fluid, the can’s right over there.” I was standing right behind them.

“Sheriff, someone also took the batteries out of our smoke detectors.”

“You’ve been lockin’ the door, haven’t ya?”

“Yes, sir. Only thing is that neither me nor Mike is sure about tonight.”

“When are you gettin’ that alarm installed?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“I’ll feel a lot better when that’s up and running.”

“So will I, sir.” The fire truck left, but the sheriff stuck around taking statements from us all. The sun was just coming up when he left. I turned to Josh, José, and Smitty.

“Thanks again, guys. I’m gonna try to get a bit of sleep. C’mon, buddy.” They turned to the bunkhouse, and Mike and I headed upstairs. We fell asleep right away.

## Chapter Twenty

“MIKE, I can’t wear this. Look at it. It’s so tight everythin’s outlined. Hell, you can even tell I’m cut.” I was standing in our room in my blue and yellow Wolverine costume that Renee had made. We were getting dressed for the Halloween party. Mike and I had worked out earlier to get a good pump on. We were both lean but muscular, and every single cut of muscle stood out in sharp relief. Looking in the mirror, the suit’s thin spandex clung to me like a second skin. My ass looked muscular, and no one could say I didn’t have a bubble butt. What made me the most self-conscious though, and remember I ain’t shy, was that my dick and balls were really clearly outlined, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination.

“I like the way it looks, Jeffy. I better not touch ya or anythin’. If you got hard in that....”

“Buddy, it’s one thing to walk around in my underwear or even bare ass in the house or around you or other guys, but this is a Halloween party with kids. It looks like I’m gonna parade up and down Castro Street.”

“What’s Castro Street, and what do you mean by parade up and down it?”

“It’s the main area of the gay ghetto in San Francisco. On Halloween, they close the street off to traffic, and everyone wears costumes. Some of ’em are pretty amazin’.”

“Yours is pretty amazin’ all right!”

“That’s what I mean; this might be all right there, but not here. Besides, you want every gay guy and every single woman gettin’ a show and hanging all over me?”

“You are so cocky, Jeffy, but I do see your point. I got an idea.” He went over to the dresser and rummaged through his underwear drawer. He came up with a pair of yellow bikini style briefs.

“Put these on over the costume. They’re the same color as the yellow in the costume.” That did hide the detail, but my package still looked enormous.

“That’s a little better. People are gonna think I got a wad of sweat socks stuffed down here.”

Mike laughed. “Jeffy, you grew up here, you played sports, and went to gym class. I reckon there have been rumors floatin’ around about you not bein’ exactly small. Hell, even Sandy heard that from her brothers.”

“Yeah, at least now everythin’ isn’t perfectly outlined, and I don’t wanna hurt Renee’s feelings. By the way, buddy, you look awesome.”

“Thanks.” He really did look awesome. He had on these tight black leather pants, which showed off his ass and thighs to perfection. He was wearing a pair of clunky motorcycle boots, to which were attached kneepads painted silver. He had on a skin-tight burgundy shirt with steel blue stripes on the side. It showed off the cut in his abs and chest. Over that, he had Gambit’s signature brown duster. He’d needed a haircut when we started talking costumes and hadn’t cut it yet, so his hair was much longer than usual and sticking up and over a headband. He’d shaved his beard to a really short goatee, and put a rinse in his hair, so it matched his beard. He’d even found a pair of contact lenses that made the whites of his eyes look red.

“You look pretty good yourself. Maybe, um... we can....”

“You wanna fool around in these costumes when we get back.”

“Uh yeah.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Wolverine is really gonna fuck with Gambit, use his ass good.”

“Don’t get me goin’, Jeffy; these pants are so tight a hard-on would hurt.”

“Yeah, I don’t wanna be more embarrassed than I already will be.” We headed downstairs. Maria, Sandy, and Renee had gotten dressed downstairs, and Josh and José in the bunkhouse. Smitty was also there dressed as Zorro. Everyone looked good. As we came down the steps, Sandy, Renee, and Maria let out some wolf whistles.

“Holy Mother of God, how often do you boys work out?” Renee was staring us up and down.

“We work out at least five days a week, sometimes six of seven. Plus we like to throw a football around, run, and do other stuff.” Mike smiled at her.

“It shows. Josh, when are you gonna start workin’ out with them?” Josh scowled at her.

“I dunno if they want me to.”

“The more the merrier, right, Jeff?”

“Yep.”

“So does that more the merrier extend to me too?” Smitty was looking at both of us.

“Sure. Do you want us to let you know when we’re workin’ out? Sometimes for us, it happens on the spur of the moment.”

“I’d be much obliged.”

“Jeff, I guess those rumors are true, unless you’re carryin’ an extra pair of sweat socks!” Leave it to Sandy.

“C’mere, darlin’.” She walked over. I whispered in her ear, “Sandy, I’m self-conscious enough. These little briefs are Mike’s. The costume was indecent without ’em.”

“Comin’ from you that’s sayin’ a lot.”

“There’s a time and a place for everythin’, and confirmin’ rumors in great detail at a party with kids doesn’t seem like a good idea.” She gave me a hug.

“Sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“I ain’t embarrassed, just a bit self-conscious. Anyway you look absolutely beautiful dressed up like that.”

“Thanks. You and Mike look pretty hot yourselves.”

"I noticed Smitty seems to think you're pretty easy on the eyes." She blushed, but smiled at the same time.

"Why do you say that?"

"Just noticin', that's all."

"He's a real nice guy. I'm glad you hired him."

"I am, too, especially after the yahoo we had before him."

"José told me and Maria about him. What a jerk."

"I don't think we're going to have to worry about him." We turned to everyone and started figuring out who would ride with who. Smitty wanted to ride with Sandy, but would need a ride back to the ranch.

"That's fine, but Mike and I are goin' to a Wicca ceremony with Mary Grace and Rick after the party."

"Wicca huh? I always wanted to see one of them. I read someplace a lot of what they do recreates practices from over two thousand years ago."

"I'm surprised you heard of it."

"Jeff, everyone's heard of it. It's also called the craft, or witchcraft."

"I knew that; Mary Grace gave me a book about it. Both Mike and I read it."

"Mind if I tag along?"

"Not at all."

"Jeff, I just want you to know I reckon I'm mighty lucky to count you and Mike as friends." He extended his hand and I shook it.

"That works both ways."

"I better go and try to impress Miss Sandy. She sure is beautiful, ain't she?"

"Yeah, she is, and a really great person. Treat her nice okay? She's just like a sister to me."

"Is this the brotherly warning?"

"Reckon so, although I don't think you need it."

"I don't, but it makes me appreciate you and her more." He gave me a long look and then smiled before heading over to Sandy. It turned out that Josh, Renee, and José were all going in Renee's car. So that left me and my buddy in my truck. I grabbed a sack of clothes to put over my Wolverine costume for the ceremony tonight. I'd shaved part of my beard to have Wolverine's big mutton chop sideburns. I also borrowed some scentless hair gel from Sandy, so my hair was standin' up in a kinda long flat top. As we were drivin' to Winslett, Mike and I held hands.

"What a week, huh, Jeffy? With gettin' the door and windows replaced, and sandin' all the burned wood off the logs and porch, and then restrainin' it?"

"It was a lot of work, but just think how much worse it could've been. Besides, with you, me, José, Josh, and Smitty working together, it went pretty quick. I sure would like to catch the son of a bitch who's behind this."

"Just don't get yourself hurt. I'm sure Sheriff Johnston will get to the bottom of it pretty quickly."

"Reckon so. I just want it to be over. I wanna go huntin' with you, buddy. It really grits me to have to be puttin' stuff with you on hold and always watchin' over my shoulder. I could gladly kill the guy."

"Sheriff get any prints?"

"No fingerprints, but one set of boot prints in the yard was the same as at the cattle rustlin' site."

"Then it is the rustlers after ya or after us. Why ya think they're after us?"

"I reckon they think we know something we don't, or with what we do know, it's so obvious we shoulda figured it out but haven't."

"If that's the case, I hope it clicks soon."

"Me too." We got to the big town center/barn where the Halloween party was being held. It was already starting to get crowded. I saw Wayne's truck, and that made me happy. He had called the day after the fire, all shook up that he wasn't there to help. Wayne's pretty close-mouthed about personal stuff, but he let me know his mom in Idaho was dying. I knew he had a mom and sister there, but didn't think they were particularly close. I guess the fact of her being sick shows blood's thicker than water and explains some of where he's been spending his time. It can't be easy driving back and forth between here and Idaho, so I gave him the week off with pay and told him if he needed another week to let me know. I'd told him about hiring Jeanette and Smitty. I wasn't too sure if he'd think I was walking all over his toes, but he was fine with it. Bottom line was that he trusted me and José. He ended up almost begging me to take care before he hung up. I reckon he was a lot more upset with his family stuff and the goings on at the ranch than he let on. Wayne was like that. It really did make me appreciate him even more though.

We all met in the parking lot and headed into the barn as a group. We did turn heads as we walked in. I guess with the tight outfits some of us had on and the bright colors, we were quite a sight. I saw Wayne and headed over.

"Hey, Wayne, how ya doin? How's your mom?"

"Hi, Jeff, I'm glad to see you in one piece." He clapped me on the shoulder and kept his hand there. "She's not doin' too good. Doc gives here maybe about another week. I had to get outta there. Listinin' to my sister talkin' about religion all the time was gettin' to me. I'm goin' back tonight after the party. I was hopin' I'd see you, the rest of the boys, and Sandy."

"I'm glad to see you, too, Wayne. I been a bit worried with all you got goin' on, your mom, the shit at the ranch, maybe a new relationship."

"Don't worry about me, son. Does the sheriff have any ideas about who the son of a bitch botherin' you is?"

"Not hardly, unless he's bein' real close-mouthed over it. He does know it's all related to the rustlin'. The same boot tracks were in our yard the night of the fire as we found in the camp where the rustlers were processin' the beeves."

"Sheriff Johnston is no dummy. I'm sure he'll get to the bottom of it."

"I was just tellin' Mike, I'm sick of just stayin' around home, bein' careful. We've been plannin' on goin' deer huntin' for quite a while and it really grits me to not be able to do it."

"Maybe, Jeff, I can tag along. Help watch out or somethin', if I'm not intrudin' on you two."

"That's an idea, Wayne. I think it would be a lot of fun. I remember goin' huntin' with you when I was just a little guy."

"Well, if you guys are gonna hunt and want another set of eyes, let me know; I'll try to get back to go with ya. I reckon, I better head on out. I need to get back to Idaho; I just wanted to say hello to everyone."

"I thought you were gonna stay for the party?"

"Now that I'm here, I don't feel too much in a party mood. I reckon I'll go over to say hi to the boys and Sandy and meet the new hand."

“Great to see ya again, Wayne. Please take care.”

“You too, Jeff.” He clapped me on the back, which for Wayne was really saying something. He was just out the door when a little bundle of energy dressed as a cowboy ran in, bumping against Wayne, who stumbled aside off the walk. I saw Wayne say hi to the little guy. All of a sudden he saw me, broke into a smile, and came running over as fast as his legs could carry him.

“Uncle Jeff!” I leaned over and shook his hand.

“Hey there, Harrison, how ya doin’? Did you just get in from Seattle?”

“Yeah, Mom and Dad heard about the party and said we could come up for the weekend. Can I go riding with you?”

“If it’s okay with your mom and dad, sure. You got lots of candy for Halloween?”

“No, not yet. Are you Wolverine, Jeff?”

“That’s right, buckaroo; I’m Wolverine from the X-men comics. I’ll buy you a comic book, so you can read more about Wolverine. Okay?”

“Okay!” Just then Tom, Ann, and Lisa came up.

“Hi, Uncle Jeff.” Lisa smiled shyly at me. I felt a hand on my elbow and looked over to see Mike.

“Howdy folks, buckaroo, Lisa,” Mike said. “This is a nice surprise to see you up here.”

“It sure is,” I added. “How come you didn’t stay with us?”

“Hi, Jeff, Mike. Ann and I just thought about it last night. We decided to rent a cabin to research my article about the valley. We found one near you for a good price last minute.” Tom shook hands with both of us, and Ann hugged us.

“Uncle Mike!” Harrison and Lisa had been waiting for an opening. They gave Mike a big hug and headed off toward the area with the candy.

“It sure is nice to see you both again. Are you all set for Thanksgiving?” I asked.

“We are. The kids haven’t stopped talking about it yet. Harrison has been bringing all his little friends over to show them the pictures on the computer of your rodeo and his riding. You’ve been his main topic of conversation since he met you, right Tom?”

“Yeah, it’s kind of like the song, ‘My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys’.”

“I imagine now he’s going to want a Wolverine costume.” Ann sighed. “Getting him to take off his cowboy outfit and little long handles is a chore. By the way, those are really nice costumes, guys.”

“Thanks, no costumes for you two?”

Tom answered. “We didn’t realize that so many folks here would be dressed up.”

“This is always a big event,” Mike commented.

“You can tell everyone you’re dressed up. Tell ’em you’re dressed as folks visitin’ from Seattle.” Both Tom and Ann laughed at that one. They saw Sandy and Maria and headed off to speak with them.

“Jeffy, you’re the handsomest guy I ever saw. Especially in that costume.”

“Thanks. You’re pretty easy on the eyes yourself, Monsieur Remy LeBeau.” I called him Gambit’s name.

“Let’s go get a beer. They just started servin’.”

We headed over to the drink area and got a couple of big glasses. It was only Budweiser, but hey, it came with the admission. The costume contest for the kids was starting. Lisa was too shy,



but Harrison got right up there. He was wearing a junior rodeo belt buckle they must have found on Ebay. It was a roping buckle, and he had a little lasso over his shoulder. It was really cute. There were four other kids his age, a little girl who was a fairy princess, a boy dressed as a bumble bee, another boy dressed as a vampire, and a girl dressed as Amelia Earhart. It was nice because they gave each kid a prize. Harrison won in the cowboy division, the one girl in the fairy princess division, and so on. The judges were a couple who owned a bistro in town. They were from someplace outside of the valley and were fairly new to Winslett. I'd met them a few times, and I figured they knew my story. I had to laugh because I could hear Harrison telling them that his uncles Jeff and Mike are cowboys. It was kinda fun watchin' them try to figure out the intricacies of Mike and/or I being siblings with Tom or Ann. It occurred to me that gay folks tend to have a pretty broad definition of family. We tend to adopt whomever we're close to and create our own families. Gender sometimes has nothing to do with it. I remember living in San Francisco and calling an older gay couple Ron and Vance, Mom and Dad. It caught on, and two mutual friends started doing it too. Both the mutual friends were named Bryce, so we had big sister Bryce and little sister Bryce. A good straight friend of mine also started calling them Mom and Dad. Her daughter, who's my goddaughter, started calling them Grandma and Grandpa. That thrilled them to no end. It was really funny when she was a little girl telling a teacher she went to "Uncle Jeff and Aunt Robert's house and saw Grandma and Grandpa and big Auntie Bryce and little Auntie Bryce. It must've been clear as mud.

A while later Tom, Ann, and the kids came over to say good night. Harrison was hugging me and asking if he could come out to the ranch for a few days. I told him to ask his parents. They headed out as the band was setting up. It was the country band that plays at One Eyed Jack's occasionally. Maria, José, Josh, Renee, Sandy, and Smitty were all standing together. I noticed that Renee's friends Pam and Carol were up from Seattle. We wandered over to them. Pam came up and put an arm around each of us.

"Renee, your girls did a great job on these costumes. You boys look absolutely delicious."

"Uh, thanks."

"Don't mention it. You two must spend hours in the gym every day."

"Both Jeff and me like to work out."

"Plus we both do a lot of work outside and like sports and stuff. I reckon we get a good amount of exercise."

Carol spoke up then. "Well, it certainly shows. Oh, and Jeff, I heard rumors about you from some of the folks in town. It seems to me they're true."

I turned beet red. I could feel myself blushing. "When's the band startin'?"

"Just a few minutes. Jeff, would you go with me to get a beer?" After asking me, Sandy whispered in Smitty's ear. He smiled at her. We headed over to the bar.

"I thought you might wanna give them a chance to think of somethin' else to talk about other than your crotch."

"Thanks." We got beers for each of us, and I got one for Mike.

"Sandy, will you save me a dance or three?"

"Sure. Why are you askin' me now?"

"I reckon I might not have a chance later with Smitty around." She smiled a big smile.

"He's a nice guy. Hey! He told me you already gave him the big brother talk!"

"Damn straight, although I do reckon he's a gentleman. Do I need to give you the big brother talk?"

“No. I’d guess your datin’ experiences have been pretty different than mine.”

“Reckon so, but they have given me a good understandin’ of men. All jokin’ aside, he does seem like a nice guy.”

We got back to the other folks just as the band started playing. Smitty and Sandy headed off to the dance floor, and Pam grabbed Mike. I saw Carol heading to me, so I went over to Maria and asked her to dance. José looked disappointed, but Carol intercepted him right quick.

“Quieres bailar?” I asked Maria. “Wanna dance?”

“Claro, of course, Jeff; I wonder if Wolverine danced with Storm in the comics.”

“I don’t know. You do look nice in your costume as Storm.”

“Thank you. I understand you’re feeling self-conscious in that costume. I had to put a swimsuit on underneath.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the understandin’. They are good costumes, just a bit revealin’.”

“That is very true. Mike looks very good as Gambit. And Sandy seems to be very happy.”

“Yeah, she does. It’s shapin’ up to be a nice Halloween.”

“It was nice to see Tom, Ann, and the kids. Harrison keeps saying he wants to be a cowboy. I think you make a very good role model.”

“Thanks, you’re gonna make me blush more than this damned costume.” We both laughed at that one. The song was ending, so we headed back to the sidelines. I noticed Mike disengage from Pam and move over to us pretty quick.

“Jeff, she kept her hand on my ass all the time we were dancin’ and kept squeezin’.” He was a bit flustered.

“I understand that. You do look incredible. I wanna squeeze your ass too.”

He was all red, but he had a big grin on his face. “You can whenever you want.”

“Those pants do look pretty good on ya, buddy. I just want to see ’em down below your hips.”

“Stop it, neither of us wants to get hard here.”

“Reckon you’re right.” Several ladies including Pam and Carol asked us to dance, but we thanked them and told them we were sitting this one out. They always had a raffle for a door prize, and when they started calling out numbers, Sandy jumped up shrieking.

“I won!” She ran up to get her prize, which was a bottle of liquor.

“Party at Jeff’s Sunday.”

“Okay by me, darlin’, and by the way, you and Maria are welcome to stay if you don’t wanna drive home. I guess everyone else is already there.”

The band came on for another set. Sandy and I got to dance, and then I did dance with Pam and Carol. I had to politely tell Pam I was flattered, but Mike was the only one who could hold on to my ass like that. We were all pretty happy, just having a great evening.

We stayed there for the last set by the band. Finally, it was time to head out. Josh, José, and Renee headed back to the ranch. Sandy and Maria went back to Sandy’s, and Pam and Carol went back to their hotel. We made plans to meet at One Eyed Jack’s for breakfast tomorrow at ten. Mike, Smitty, and I headed off to my truck to head over to Mary Grace’s place. As we got near the truck, we noticed some people with signs standing just beyond the driveway to the barn. It was Reverend Spencer and his minions. Their signs read stuff like “Halloween is Satanism”, “Halloween will send you to Hell”, “God hates Halloween”, “Turn or Burn”, and all sorts of comforting words to show the love of his version of Christianity. Just as we got near the truck, we began to hear shouts.

“God loves you, Connelly! It’s not too late for you to repent.”

“God can help you give up your evil ways, Connelly!”

“It’s always so fun to be able to stir such emotion in folks,” I said this to Smitty as he was following us to the truck.

“Don’t pay them no never mind, Jeff. They’re just pathetic hypocrites caught up in their self-righteous hatred.”

Reverend Spencer saw me trying to ignore him and his poor brainwashed flunkies, and ran toward us.

“You’re obscene, Connelly. The way you’re dressed, you should be arrested for indecent exposure.”

“Reverend, just cause you’re hung like a mouse with no balls is no reason to take your frustrations out on others.”

“You’ll rot in hell!”

“You sound like a broken record, Spencer. Go talk to someone who might listen.”

“When you’re dying of AIDS and suffering the judgment of God for your sin, you’ll remember this.”

“I see ya didn’t have your teeth taken care of. Your breath’s still as foul as a sewer.”

“You’re an ungodly sinner, and God will judge you.” The reverend was coming closer to me.

“Spencer, you just keep gettin’ closer to me, you hypocritical closet case. You’re after me ’cause you ain’t man enough to face who you are. You just keep gettin’ closer, and you’ll do somethin’ that gives me reason to defend myself. I promise you this, you piece of shit, if you give me a reason, I am gonna use it to hurt you so bad, the rest of your life, you’ll be in more pain than you could imagine. That hell you keep babblin’ about is gonna look awful good after I maim you. Just give me a reason, asshole.” He backed off a bit.

“You filthy sodomite, you dare threaten a man of God?”

“I don’t see no man of God around here to threaten. Now get away from me, you son of a bitch, or I am gonna kick the shit outta you regardless of the consequences.” He scurried away like a roach running to a crack. We jumped in the truck and headed out.

“Why does he hate you so much, Jeff?” Smitty was looking at me. Mike was in the center sitting next to me, Smitty was by the door. Just then, we pulled up to the road. All the supposed Christians were there shouting their vicious hate. I leaned over and gave Mike a good, long, deep kiss.

“Okay, let me rephrase that. Why does he hate you other than you stand up to him and push him?”

“To be honest, I really don’t know. I’m open about who I am, I got the respect of folks around here, and I think his *religion* is nothin’ more than hate. I reckon he’s hidin’ somethin’, and the easiest way to deflect suspicion about whatever it is he’s hidin’ is for him to push blame, hate, and condemnation on someone else.”

“He bugs the shit outta me.” Mike shuddered; the reverend must’ve brought up some powerful bad memories for him. Smitty patted him on the shoulder.

“Don’t let him get to you, Mike. Their opinions don’t count for anything. I’m proud to be your friend and so are the decent folks I’ve met here. He’s the one that’s all fucked up, not you or Jeff, or anyone celebratin’ Halloween.” We’d been driving for a few minutes, and we were coming up to Mary Grace’s. She lived in a small farmhouse on a couple of acres she rented. She tried to grow veggies, but the deer were pretty thick in the valley. She had quite a few chickens also.

I parked the truck, and we got out. I put my jeans on over my costume and put on my jacket. I could see a bonfire with several people near it a bit behind the house, so we all walked over. Mary Grace came over to us.

"Mary Grace, this is our friend, Smitty. He was interested in joinin' your circle tonight. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all, everyone is welcome. Only thing we ask is that anyone who comes in the circle comes in perfect love and perfect trust."

"My pleasure, ma'am." Smitty shook her hand.

"I can tell you're a good person, just like these two." She hugged Mike and me in turn.

"Come over. We'll get started. I'll explain what we're doing as we go through the ritual. That way you boys will know what's happening." We followed her to an area that had a bonfire in the center. The area was set out in a circle with a boundary of four large stones at the cardinal points and smaller stones forming a circle. In the north central part of the circle was a flat stone, which must have served as an altar. It had several candles and incense, along with other things which I couldn't make out.

"What we are about to do now is cast our circle. The circle is really a sphere of energy which surrounds us and creates a sacred space for our rites and our magick." She walked over to a man who was standing by the little altar. I recognized Rick. They kissed, and then she picked up a knife and a bit of burning sage. Rick had a bowl of something in his hands. I found out later it was salt water. They began walking around the perimeter of the circle. Mary Grace started chanting.

"I purify this space with air and fire." Rick followed her sprinkling the salt water.

"I purify this space with earth and water." Mary Grace took up the chant.

By the earth which is her body  
By the air which is her breath  
By the bright fire of her passion  
By the living waters of her womb  
In the name of the Goddess this circle is cast  
A sacred space between the worlds  
For our ritual and our works of magick  
All here within have come  
In perfect love and perfect trust  
Blessed be.

"Okay, now we're going to call the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water." She walked over to the north stone and lit a green candle. It was odd, but after she had cast the circle, the candles flickered much less in the wind.

I call to the spirits of the north  
The spirits of the earth  
You who dwell in the mountains  
And in the fertile plains  
Show us your stability  
Come if you will to our circle tonight  
Hail and welcome

She moved to the east stone and lit a yellow candle and then recited a similar call to the spirits of the air. Then in the south, she lit a red candle and called the spirits of the fire. Finally in the west, she called the spirits of water and lit a blue candle.

“Now I’m going to ask the Goddess and the God to join us in our circle.” She stood in front of the altar and held her arms up. She invited the Goddess in her role as crone to the circle. She also recited a poem in honor of the Goddess. Then she folded her arms across her chest and beseeched the God, calling him the Lord of the Dance and the Antlered One. It was interesting to see, and the poetry and symbolism were very beautiful.

The group then chanted an explanation of their holiday of Samhain. From their words, I gathered that they believed in reincarnation. They chanted some more and then invited the spirits of their dead friends and family who had not been reincarnated yet to join us. I was a bit shocked to hear Mary Grace invite my father. Then she asked the group to listen in silence for any messages from beyond. The feeling in the circle was interesting. It felt warmer and less windy. Other than the crackle of the fire, it was silent. The waning moon shone down on us. It was peaceful, tranquil, and calm. I reached for Mike’s hand. As I took it, I heard a little voice in my head. It sounded like my father. A warmth and feeling of happiness, of understanding, and a knowing that he cared for me, was proud of me, and was very happy for me and Mike, came over me. It could’ve been just wishful thinking, but something did feel very different. After about twenty minutes, Mary Grace thanked the spirits of the dead for visiting us. She then turned to us.

“Jeff, Mike, we know the two of you have been the victims of some horrible crimes, including attempted murder. We are going to cast a spell for protection for you. Since it is a waning moon, we are going to banish the things that prevent you from being safe. Then we are going to do a spell to reflect the bad energy from the attackers right back on them. The things we do in the spells are a way of harnessing the energy from the universe, programming it to do what we ask, in this case to remove the forces against you, and also to reflect the bad energy against them. Then we send that energy out to the universe to do our bidding.” She smiled at us.

“Can you step up to the altar? Oh, and you can keep holding hands, the Goddess and God represent good love in any form.”

“So gay people are okay?” Mike was looking at Mary Grace.

“Of course, the Goddess and God don’t discriminate.”

We stepped to the side of the altar. Rick put some incense on the burner and lit a black candle. He sprinkled some herbs on the candle flame. I could smell pepper and garlic and others I couldn’t recognize. Mary Grace asked Mike and I to put the hands we were holding out and hold them loosely. She put a bit of dried root, and two sprigs of dried plants, which looked like pine, in our hands and asked us to hold them.

“I just put a piece of ginger, a sprig of rosemary, and a sprig of cypress in your hands. All three are powerful herbs for banishing and protection. I want you to close your eyes and visualize the issues and negativity facing you as a foul black cloud. Picture yourselves in a gleaming cone of bright light, a peaceful place where the black cloud cannot penetrate. I’ll let you visualize that for a few minutes.” Mike and I both closed our eyes. I actually began to see in my mind a cone of silvery blue white light surrounding us. Outside of it was a noxious, foul black cloud trying to penetrate the light, but it couldn’t. That picture was firmly entrenched in my mind, and I held it there. Finally, I felt Mary Grace’s hand on my shoulder.

“Well done. Now we are going to chant the spell and raise energy. When I yell, “Go!” throw the ginger, cypress, and rosemary in the fire, all right?”

“Okay.” We stood closer to the bonfire. Mary Grace began to chant.

Shadow of the night  
Protector of all  
Wield your sword  
And guard our beloved friends  
Evil rises against them  
Hidden enemies plot against them  
Evil hides  
Protect them Lady  
Keep them safe

The people in the circle began to chant with her the last two lines. The chanting seemed to intensify. I felt a strange sort of electricity, like I touched something and got a shock, but it was coursing around us. It seemed to strengthen with the chant.

“Go!” Mary Grace threw her hands up. Mike and I threw the herbs in the bonfire. Mary Grace chanted alone.

Protect them Lady  
Keep them safe  
As I will so shall it pass  
As I will so mote it be.

“That should keep you safe! Now what we are going to do is ask the Goddess for justice against those who are trying to hurt you and those who killed Pedro and that biker.” She took a little doll made out of black felt from her pocket.

“This is a poppet or a magick doll. I sewed it and stuffed it with cotton, tobacco, graveyard dirt, and nightshade. All those plants will return harm to the sender. Then Rick and I anointed it with banishing oil.”

She took the poppet and placed it on the altar in front of a little mirror. She put a black candle behind the poppet. The candle was just a bit bigger than a birthday candle. She lit it and began to chant.

Dark Mother  
Lady of the abyss  
Crone  
Horned Lord  
Leader of the wild hunt  
Sage  
Evil is being done  
Evil deeds are committed against our friends  
You! You who commit those deeds are foul  
What you have done shall come back to you  
It returns to you three times over  
Your evil will stop  
Lady, Lord, I ask for justice  
Return the evil to sender  
Sit in judgment  
Dispense justice as you see fit  
I beg of you

To stop the sender of evil and hate  
By your divine justice  
As I will it so shall it pass  
As I will it so mote it be.

I could feel that same buzzing swirling around. As she finished chanting, she threw her arms up. A thunder clap filled the sky. She turned to us and smiled.

"It seems the Lady and Lord will dispense justice." The rest of the ritual went fairly quickly. Mary Grace blessed a goblet of sweet wine she said was mead and poured some on the ground. Then she passed the rest to everyone, who took a sip. She did the same with some cookies. We each took one. She then thanked the Goddess and God and elements. Finally, she took a broomstick and swept counter clockwise around the circle.

"Merry did we meet, merry do we part, and merry shall we meet again. This circle is open but unbroken, blessed be." She came over and hugged us, including Smitty. Rick did the same and so did the other folks. It had been an interesting experience. The black candle on the altar had burned out, and the wax was on the little doll she called a poppet. Mary Grace handed it to me.

"Throw this in the river when you go over the bridge on your way home. That will complete the spell."

"Thanks, Mary Grace!" We got in the truck and headed home.

"That was interesting; thanks for lettin' me tag along."

"No problem, Smitty. I thought it was interestin' too. What about you, buddy, what did you think?"

"It was a whole hell of a lot more friendly than Reverend Spencer's 'Christianity'."

"Ain't that the truth." As we came on the river, I stopped the truck in the middle of the bridge, and threw the poppet over. We continued on home. Smitty said good night and headed to the bunkhouse. Mike and I went into the ranch house. I remembered to turn off the newly installed security alarm. I had just done so when Mike slammed into me.

"Jeffy, you had me goin' all night. I want you bad now." He put his arms around me and began kissing me pretty aggressively.

"Get those contacts outta your eyes. The red makes you look just a bit too freaky. I'll take off my jeans and coat." Mike ran upstairs to the bathroom to get the lenses out. By the time he came back, I had taken off my jeans, coat, and the yellow briefs that covered all the detail. I noticed he brought down condoms and lube. I grabbed him and pulled him into me in a rough kiss. My chin was all stubbly, and I rubbed it against his lips hard. He's have beard burn tomorrow. He moaned and pressed against me.

"You want it rough tonight, don't ya boy? Wolverine's gonna fuck Gambit good, ain't he, gonna use Gambit's sweet ass."

"Yeah, I'm gonna get fucked good. Have you inside me." He came back in for another kiss. I grabbed his hair and shoved his face into mine. His hands found my crotch and began rubbing and fondling through the thin, clingy spandex. I had a hold of his ass in those tight leather pants. He let go of me and started to undo his belt.

"Hold off a few minutes."

"Jeffy, these pants are so tight it's uncomfortable bein' so hard. You really got me goin'."

"I said hold off. You'll survive." He moaned and stood back. He was looking at the outline of my cock.

“That’s incredible. You can see detail.” He dropped to his knees and began nuzzling me. He really got off on me talking to him.

“You’re gonna get fucked, buddy; I’m gonna fuck your sweet ass good.”

“Fuck me, Jeffy. Show me how much you like my ass.”

“You want my dick, don’t ya? You been thinkin’ about it all night.”

“I have. I want it so bad. Fuck me, please, I want your cock in me, Jeffy. Fuck me.”

I pushed him down on his knees. There was a little zipper Renee had put in, hidden in a seam of fabric. Mike had it undone in no time. He reached in and pulled me out. That was a bit difficult because I was halfway down my leg, but he managed it. He began licking and finally swallowed my cock. He was trying to take it in his throat and making himself gag.

“Get it all wet, buddy. It’s goin’ up your ass.”

That only made him go at it harder. After a few minutes of an incredible blowjob, I pulled him up to his feet. I kissed him hard again.

“You ready to get fucked, boy?”

“Yes, sir! I want it, Jeffy. Fuck me, fuck me hard, please.” I turned him around so his back was to me. I reached around him with one hand and twisted one of his nipples. With the other hand, I grabbed his hair and turned his face to mine. We shared a deep kiss. He was grinding his leather clad ass into me. I let go of his head and groped his dick and balls. He was hard. He had arched his back, and his ass was sticking out right against me. I reached around with both hands and undid his belt and pants. I pulled them down around his hips. He moaned with longing and pushed his bare ass into me even harder.

“You ready to get fucked? Ready for my cock? Gambit’s gonna get fucked good, ain’t he? He’s gonna get fucked real good by his buddy, Wolverine.”

I lubed myself up, unrolled the condom, and put on more lube. I rubbed some on his hole; he whimpered and pushed against my finger.

“Please, Jeffy, stick it in. I need it.”

“You been waitin’ on this all night, ain’t ya?”

“I been thinkin’ about you fuckin’ me all night, thinkin’ about your big cock. You got me so horned up. I really need it bad.” I pushed and slid into him. He said my name with a satisfied sigh. We’d moved a bit, and he leaned forward and put his hands on the couch to balance himself. I began thrusting kind of aggressive like. From his reaction, he loved it.

“Yeah, oh yeah. Fuck me, Jeffy, my ass is yours.”

“Damn right it is.” I remembered something he’d said a few days ago, so I slapped his ass hard. I left a red hand mark on it. The red made the blond fur on his ass more visible. He clenched down real hard and thrust back on me. He stood up, arched his back, and turned the upper part of his body back toward me for a kiss.

“Christ, Jeffy, that’s hot. It feels great.” I kissed him, gently this time and contrasted it with another slap on his ass. He was so excited, he was clenching down hard and squirming all around. Having watched him all night in those tight leather pants, I was getting close. I slapped his ass again and thrust in hard. All of a sudden, he began moaning into me and pushing back hard. Both his hands were back holding me. I realized he was shooting without even touching his cock. That was so hot, it caused me to cum right then and there. I held him tight and gently lowered both of us to the floor. I felt totally relaxed and drained, and he was lying in my arms all limp and satisfied. Finally, he broke the silence.



“You were right, Jeffy; Wolverine really did fuck Gambit good. Who’d a thought we’d both get so horned up from these costumes.”

“It’s not only the costumes, buddy, it’s us. You’re the handsomest, sexiest, most incredible man I ever saw.”

“Thanks, Jeff.” He snuggled back into me. I gently kissed and nuzzled the back of his neck. I realized I was gettin’ hard again. He realized it, too, since he was pushing his ass against me.

“Hey, buddy, let’s get outta this stuff and head upstairs. I wanna fuck you again, nice and slow and easy, show ya what ya mean to me.”

“You read my mind. I want more of ya.” We shucked the costumes pretty quickly. He grabbed the condoms and lube, and we headed upstairs for a nice gentle round two.

## Chapter Twenty-One

SATURDAY dawned cold and clear. I reckoned we’d have snow by Thanksgiving. Mike and I were lying in bed all cuddled up and talking. We’d both had a great time at the party last night. Mary Grace’s ceremony was interesting. We both thought it was real sweet of her to try to do what she could to help us. The costumes we wore were fun, and led to two play sessions last night and one this morning.” I was really relaxed and sated. Mike was all cuddled up against me.

“Jeffy, I was thinkin’. Remember how I told you I never finished high school?”

“I do.”

“I want to get my GED.”

“That’s great! I think that’s a really smart move.”

“I started thinkin’ about it when you were talkin’ about me bein’ your right-hand man with the dudes and the runnin’ of the ranch. I reckon that I could be a lot more help with a few more skills under my belt.”

“Buddy, I like what ya got under your belt just fine. All kiddin’ aside though, I really think that is a great idea. There’s never anythin’ wrong with wantin’ to better yourself.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate the support. I was thinkin’ of goin’ on afterwards and takin’ some classes at Wenatchee Community College. I’ve always been interested in photography, and I thought of takin’ some hotel and restaurant management-type classes. Then I could really contribute to the ranch.”

“You already contribute. I just hope you’re doin’ this for you and not because you think it makes a difference to me.”

“It makes a difference to me. You keep tellin’ me I’m somethin’ special and all that, and maybe if I felt a bit better about myself, it would be easier for me to believe. I know I can do well in school, I just never had the chance.”

“I reckon that’s a great idea, Mike.”

“I also reckon that since we’re in this for the long haul, I wanna have some skills that complement yours. Nothin’ wrong with makin’ a good team stronger.”

"You really are somethin', you know that, bud? I reckon they broke the mold when they made you." I realized once again just how lucky I was to have this man curled up beside me and with me every day.

"Mike, it's really good you think on stuff like gettin' ahead, and all that. It's a time of big changes for ya, bustin' outta the closet, gettin' a partner, you're bound to want to spread your wings a bit."

"It's not only bein' out and havin' a partner, Jeffy, it's havin' a real good friend, a best friend. I ain't never had a good friend before."

"I'm honored I'm the first; you about ready to get some coffee and breakfast?"

"Yeah, is oatmeal okay? It sounds good to me now."

"Fine by me." We jumped outta bed and pulled on our socks and long handles. It was cold in the house. I reckoned it had been below freezin' last night. As Mike headed for the stairs, I stopped him.

"Hey, gimme a hug." He did. As his head rested against mine, I whispered in his ear, "You're the best thing ever to happen to me. Don't ever forget I said that." We headed on downstairs and got the coffee and oatmeal on. Just as we were sittin' down to eat, there was a knock on the door. It was Smitty and Josh.

"Are you guys up for a workout today? I'd like to join you if you are, and so would Josh." Josh didn't look too enthused.

"You sure about this, Josh?"

"Renee's been pushin' me pretty hard."

"Just try it for a month. If ya still don't like it, tell her; can't hurt to go along with her once in a while."

"Reckon not."

Smitty turned to him. "You were right." Josh smirked.

"Right about what?"

"About the two of you runnin' around half-dressed all the time."

"Hey, this is a lot less revealin' than that costume from last night."

"You're spot on there." We made plans for a workout at ten; that would give us a bit of time to let breakfast settle.

"Hey, buddy, don't forget, Mark, the ranger from Winslett, is supposed to come over this evenin'. We invited him over for dinner."

"Any ideas on what to make?"

"I was thinking about puttin' a chuck roast in the slow cooker and makin' shredded beef. We can add some chiles and spices, and have it for taco meat. Then we can put out tortillas, taco and burrito fixins, and rice and beans, and we should be all set."

"Okay, and he's bringin' the beer, so we're fine."

"SMITTY, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"What's that, Mike?" The three of us were sittin' in the hot tub after a long workout. I'd suggested to Josh that he join us, but he and Renee were going out for an early dinner, and then she was headin' back to Seattle. I had been kinda surprised when Smitty had asked if he could

join us in the hot tub. I always think that straight guys are uncomfortable around gay guys, but I reckon it really depends on the guy. Smitty was nothing if not self-assured.

“I’ve heard that straight guys are always checkin’ each other out below the belt. Is that true?”

Smitty laughed. “There’s some truth to it. But I think it’s kinda like checkin’ out the competition or maybe assuring yourself, I’m normal, or I’m bigger, or whatever.”

“Well then, do you notice if another guy is good lookin’?”

“Lemme answer that this way, Mike. Do you notice if women you see are good looking?”

“Of course I do. There’s just no sexual feelings, so sometimes I’ll think a girl with a nice smile or pleasant face is real good lookin’, even if she’s real skinny, or chunky, or whatever.”

“It’s the same with guys noticing other guys.”

“You don’t mind me askin’ this stuff, do ya?”

“Not at all. I know the answers ’cause my little brother asked me a lot of the same questions.”

“That’s right, I remember you tellin’ us your brother is gay.” I looked at Smitty.

“Yep. We were always close, and it didn’t bother me. Our parents had some issues with it, but they try their best to be understanding.”

“He’s out and okay though?”

“For the most part he is, Jeff. But he does have some issues. He sleeps around a lot because he has some self-esteem problems. Like a lotta folks, he confuses sex and love.”

“That’s not uncommon.”

“No, it’s not. It just seems to me like a shallow way to try and deal with it.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Are you from a small town, Smitty?” I asked.

“Yep, a fairly small town in Texas.”

“Well, both Mike and I can tell ya, it’s not easy growin’ up gay in a small town. I was lucky. I had support from family and friends, Mike didn’t.”

“Mike, you didn’t turn into the whore of Babylon though, did ya?”

“No, but when I did do anything, it was always anonymous, and I’d feel guilty for weeks afterward.”

“What happened to make you so well-adjusted then?”

“Jeffy; he’s still workin’ on me, though.”

“Hell, I should have my brother meet you two. I can try to be there for him, and listen to him, and help him, but bein’ straight, it only goes so far. Maybe he needs some good gay role models.”

“Well, invite him over anytime.”

“I’ll have to do that. He’s livin’ in Seattle. Maybe I’ll invite him for the holidays or somethin’.”

“Did ya have a good workout, Smitty?”

“I did; I bet I’m gonna be pretty sore tomorrow though.”

“Maybe. I really feel for Josh, though. He insisted he try and do the same weight as me and Mike. He’s not gonna be able to move tomorrow.”

“I wonder if he’s gonna keep it up.”

“Ya never know. With Renee pullin’ his chain, maybe.”

“Hey, Smitty, how’d you get into cowboyin’? Did you do it in Texas?”

"We had a small ranch, so I did some. Mostly what I'm doin' is tryin' to put my fancy journalism degree to work and write a book about the modern American cowboy."

"Really? That's interestin'. I don't use my degree all too much other than doin' the books and taxes for the ranch."

"It actually is interesting, Jeff. Did you know that historically about a third of cowboys were black, and another third Latino? Still have a fair amount of Latino cowboys, but other than that, it's changed a lot. Now it's mostly kids outta college for a few years or during the summer that cowboy. Hell, as you two know, there are open and out gay cowboys. That never coulda happened a hundred and twenty years ago."

"I've heard lots of gay authors claim that quite a few cowboys were gay."

"Really, Jeffy?"

"Really, Mike. Granted it's mostly gay authors sayin' that."

"Do you reckon it's true?"

"I dunno. Part of me would like to think it is. Another part of me thinks it was just a different world back then. Folks just didn't think about others bein' gay then, and most gay men got married and played on the side. Old-time cowboys used to sleep together to keep warm, or dance together since there were few women. I reckon some of 'em did fool around; in some cases I bet they were gay, and in others I bet it was just because it was available. What do you think, Smitty?"

"From the research I done, I'd agree with you."

"That's real interestin'. Jeffy, Smitty, do you guys have anythin' I can read about gay men and women in the old West?"

"I don't, but you could do a search on Amazon.com."

"That's a good idea, Jeff; I don't have any of my books with me," Smitty said. "Not to change the subject or anything, but you guys gonna work out tomorrow?"

"I reckon so. Mike and I are tryin' to get ready for cross country skiin' this winter. Ain't that right, buddy?"

"It sure is. Remember though, tomorrow Sandy said we're havin' a party here."

"Thanks for remindin' me. We gotta make Sandy real happy, right Smitty?"

"She's a real nice lady." He was gettin' a bit red.

"What should we make to eat?"

"How about I do the cookin', Jeffy? I could make chicken and sausage gumbo; we could get some French bread to have with it, rice and potato salad."

"Potato salad?"

"You gotta have potato salad with gumbo. Sometimes we even serve the gumbo over it."

"I'll leave that to the authentic Cajuns then."

"Do you guys mind if I work out with ya tomorrow again?"

"No problem, Smitty."

"Well then, I'm off. Mind if I borrow the towel?" He had just stepped outta the hot tub and dried off. The towel was now around his waist.

"Sure."

"Okay, see ya later. I think I'm gonna have dinner at One Eyed Jack's."

"That wouldn't have anythin' to do with the fact that Sandy's workin' tonight, would it?"

"She's a real nice lady, guys."

"That she is. Enjoy your dinner." He walked out carrying his gym clothes and wrapped in the towel. Mike looked at me after Smitty left.

"He's a real nice guy, Jeff. He didn't seem freaked out to work out with us or even be nekkid in the hot tub with us."

"He's secure in himself. I really believe that guys who are scared of gays either are big closet cases themselves, are so insecure in their masculinity that someone who expresses who they are differently is a threat, or they're so small-minded they are afraid of stuff they can't understand."

"Makes sense."

"Mike, I was wonderin', you like to travel?"

"Ain't had much of a chance. I've never even been on an airplane."

"After the costume party, I was thinkin' it might be fun to go to Mardi Gras next year in New Orleans. We could wear our X-men costumes."

"I heard it's a great city. My old man was always carryin' on about it bein' sin city and Sodom in the swamp. I reckon with that kind of recommendation from him, it's gotta be good."

"That's right, your background is from that area."

"Yeah, it would be nice to see it. So, Jeffy, is this like a honeymoon?" He was smiling at me, but I could tell he was serious.

"Hell, Mike, you proposin' to me?" All of a sudden, he got a sheepish look on his face. I decided to continue. "If ya are, the answer is yes. If not, I reckon I'm askin' you."

"You already know the answer."

"Let's get outta the hot tub, bud. I'm gonna melt." We stepped out of the hot tub and toweled off.

Mike grinned at me as we headed upstairs. "Jeffy?"

"What, bud?"

"Can I suck your dick? I just was thinkin' about you kickin' back and me doin' the work. I wanna make you feel good."

"Well, ya made me feel real good this mornin', but I ain't gonna say no to a blowjob from the handsomest man on earth." My cock was already startin' to rise. He reached over and fondled my balls. He gave me a deep kiss.

"How about you lay down on the bed with your hands behind your head and your legs spread apart, just like you say you like to see me." I did as he asked. By this time, we were both stiff as a couple of boards.

"I see why you like lookin' at me when I'm spread out like that. I like lookin' at you lie that way too." He crawled on top of me, and we began to neck. He felt good on top of me. He moved down and began licking the hair under my arm.

"You smell good, Jeff. You, clean sweat, and a bit of musk." He had his face buried in my armpit. I'd never thought of that as an especially erotic zone, but what he was doing felt good, and his gettin' off on it was gettin' me even more horned up. He moved down my treasure trail, licking gently and teasing me with his tongue. He kept workin' my balls with one hand. It felt great. He pulled back and knelt between my knees.

"You have just an incredible body, Jeffy. I love the way I can see all the cut in your muscles, and the way the hair is thick on your chest, under your arms, on your legs, and above your dick, but not so heavy everywhere else. You gotta be the handsomest man I ever seen."

"I think you're a bit biased there, buddy. You know I think the exact same thing about you."

"I never imagined I'd be turned on by the way a guy smells, but I smell you, and it's like a drug that gets me hard and horny all at once." With that, he pushed his face in the hair on my lower belly and crotch. He was sniffing, licking, and tugging on my balls. He was obviously having a great time. It was turning me on to watch him. I just let him take his time. Finally, he licked the tip of my cock. A strand of precum stretched from the slit to his tongue as he backed off. He looked at it for a few seconds, smiled up at me, and all of a sudden engulfed my prick in his mouth. It felt incredible sliding in. His mouth was warm, wet, and soft. I could feel his tongue explorin' every bit of my cock. It felt so good when he started moving his tongue around the back of the head that I began to buck up and fuck his face.

"Let me do the work, Jeffy. Just lay there and enjoy. I wanna take care of you."

He slid my cock back into his mouth and began that gentle tongue massage that felt so good.

"Hot damn, buddy, you suck cock like a pro." His tongue began to work even harder. He'd begun stroking himself with one hand while the other remained firmly on my balls. He began moving his head up and down the shaft, all the while working it with his tongue.

"That's awesome, buddy. You're makin' me feel real good." He looked up at me. "You look great with my cock in your mouth. You really like that big dick don't ya. Tastes good does it?" He moaned around it. I was feeling that stiffening down there and the tightening that meant I was getting close.

"You want your Jeffy to shoot down your throat, buddy? You gonna eat my cum? Wanna drain your Jeffy's balls, bud? You're gonna get it." He began to suck even harder. It felt incredible. I began to breathe a lot heavier and could feel my muscles contracting; I was right on the edge.

"Yeah, buddy, keep it up, show me how much you love suckin' my cock. Fuck, that feels good. Yeah, use your tongue, just like that. I'm gonna cum. Here it comes!" I tightened and started pumping. He kept gently working me until he drained every last drop. Even then he didn't let my dick out of his mouth. He was jerking off hard, and I could feel him tensing. He shot a salvo, which ended up on his chest and my leg. After a few seconds, he crawled up and lay beside me. We kissed and I could taste myself in him. We lay in each other's arms for a few minutes.

"Thanks, buddy. You really do suck dick like a pro."

"I just like makin' you feel good."

"Ya do, just holdin' you like this feels real good. I think tonight I'm gonna make *you* feel good. How about if I eat that sweet ass of yours out and then fuck it?"

"I love it when you rim me."

"I reckon you like anythin' I do to your ass."

"Ain't that the truth? So, Jeffy, what time is Mark comin' over?"

"He said five-thirty."

"We got some time to just cuddle and snuggle then, don't we?"

"If you want."

"I want." We spent the next hour or so just talking, nothing important, but just chitchat. Finally, we got up and got dressed. The meat in the slow cooker was done, so I took it out, shredded it, and added some chile, cumin, and oregano. Mike chopped up lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and jalapenos. We set out a couple of bottles of salsa and some cheese. I had put a pot of beans on earlier, and now made a pan of red rice. We were all ready for company. About quarter to six, Mark drove up. He had changed from his uniform into jeans and a hoodie.

“Hey, Mark, c’mon in.”

“Hi, Jeff, Mike, here’s the beer I promised.” He held out two six-packs of Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. Mike took them and put them in the fridge, setting aside three.

“Thanks, Mark, this is good stuff!” Mike handed us each an opened bottle.

“Cheers.” I raised my beer.

“Cheers,” they echoed.

“Before I forget, Jeff, here’s your Christmas tree permit.”

“Thanks, Mark. I reckon we’ll cut it the day after Thanksgivin’. The dudes will all be here then, so I’d bet they’ll like that. We can decorate it that night, and then for the kids watch *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.”

“I’ll make some Christmas cookies, too, Jeffy. Who else are you gonna invite? Mary Grace and Rick?”

“Yep, and Mark here, Sandy, Maria, Renee, Josh, José, Smitty, and Wayne too.”

“I wish I could make it guys; I’m going home for Thanksgiving this year.”

“Where’s home, Mark?”

“Los Angeles. I grew up in a suburb called La Canada.”

“How long ya been up here in Washington?”

“Just a few months; I was stationed in the San Gabriel National Forest just outside LA for a couple of years. Moving up here was kind of difficult. I didn’t know anyone, no friends or anything. It’s beautiful country, but it seems a lot of time in the evening I just go home and watch TV or read.”

“Feel free to give us a call anytime, or if ya see us in town, c’mon over and say hi.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

“Too bad about your hunting trip; that must have been a tough walk out.”

“It wasn’t the easiest, but we were lucky. We had the gear to make it out okay.”

Mike looked at me. “I reckon with Jeff around, we would’ve have made it out okay even without that gear. It just woulda been a lot harder.”

“Much obliged for your confidence, buddy.”

“Jeff, Mike, I just wanted to let you know we’re still following up leads on the rustling and all the difficulties you been having.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Mark.”

“Actually that was why I was a few minutes late. Sheriff gave me a call, and we met out at the community center barn. We saw footprints that matched one of the sets of footprints in the camp you guys found.”

“Really, that’s interestin’.”

“Yeah, it looks like the guy stepped off the walk up to the barn door into the mud. He left a clear track. He’s got on cowboy boots with rubber soles and the heel has a unique pattern of wear. We’ll catch the bastard.”

“Unless he thinks to get new boots.”

“Let’s hope not, at least until he gets a pair of prison issued footwear.”

Mike spoke up. “I sure hope you catch him soon. I want to go huntin’ with Jeffy again.”

"It sure would be nice to do the things we want to do without havin' to worry about gettin' shot."

"We'll get him, or them. I just hope it's sooner rather than later."

"We were right, he's a local then. I wonder if there is a list of everyone who went to the Halloween party. That might narrow it down to a hundred and fifty suspects or so."

"You have any suspicions who it might be, Jeff?"

"Not yet. It could be a lot of folks."

"You two still giving info to the sheriff?"

"If we were to come across any, we would."

"The sheriff told me you two have been real helpful so far."

"That's nice to hear. We just had started to track the rustlings online and saw a pattern. Anything new that we learn, we put in the computer too."

"Are you a computer guru, Jeff, or you, Mike?"

"I don't know nothin' about 'em." I decided I would teach Mike a bit about computers.

"I'm pretty savvy with 'em, but I'm not a developer."

"I've always been interested in computers. I just bought a new Dell laptop with Windows 7. What about you, do you have a network or just one machine?"

"Just my laptop." I gestured to it. It was sitting on the coffee table in front of us. "My dad had a laptop, which I reckon I should give to Mike."

"Thanks, Jeff!"

"Don't mention it, buddy. So, Mark, how do you like the Northwest so far?"

"It's really beautiful. Winslett is a fun little town too. You grew up here, didn't you, Jeff?"

"Yep, I left for a while, but ended up comin' back. I belong here."

"It never ceases to amaze me just how in love with this land the native folks are. I never have lived in a place so beautiful before." Mark had sort of a wistful look on his face as he spoke.

"Wait until you see it in winter, Mark. It's kind of magical. Sometimes the snow can be five or six feet deep, and it's cold enough that it stays on the trees. The deer and wild turkeys come down and use the roads to get around. It gets dark real early then, but when it's clear, the moon and stars seem close enough to touch. And we see the northern lights once in a while. We actually sat and watched 'em the other night didn't we, buddy?"

"We sure did! It was amazin'."

"Do you guys ski?"

"I do. Mike never had the chance to learn. I actually like cross country skiin' better than downhill."

"Like Jeffy said, I never learned, but I'm gonna learn this winter!" We'd already downed a couple of beers each, so I thought it was time for the food. We laid it out in a sort of a help yourself buffet.

"This is really good, guys, who's the cook."

"Actually we both cook pretty well. We take turns."

"You know, you guys are the first gay couple I ever met. I wanted to thank you, Jeff, for setting me straight on stereotypes. I hope you know I didn't mean to offend you."

"No worries."



“From what I understand, it’s not a choice.”

“It sure ain’t; think about it, could you function with a guy? I mean get all excited and stuff?” Mike was the one doin’ the talking now; he demolished the closet when he left it.

“I don’t think I could.”

“Did ya ever sit down and say to yourself, ‘Okay, I’m old enough to be sexually aware now, so I gotta decide am I gonna be straight or gay?’” Mark shook his head.

“Jeffy, here, once told me people gotta hate somethin’ or someone to feel better about themselves. We’re just the ones now because of all the hate mongers. They use their religion to justify their hatred.”

“You don’t have a high opinion of Christians, Mike.”

“I reckon I don’t. My old man is a preacher, and the things he did to me in the name of his God were horrible, and illegal.”

“You can’t judge all Christians by the actions of a few.”

“Mark, no offense on this one, but I’m with Mike here. It seems out of every hundred Christians I come across, it’s only a few whose actions show the love of Christ. The rest are just so condemnin’, and hateful, and judgmental. It’s hard to believe that their bible says, ‘God is love’, when what they preach and show is hate. Look at that group of monsters that picket soldiers’ funerals. To do that kind of thing is really cruel. Could you imagine losin’ a son, or husband, or brother, and then to have those things show up shoutin’ their hate?”

“A lot of folks say they aren’t Christians. We also have free speech here.”

“I’ve heard that from folks before, but it seems that their attitude is prevalent. To me actions speak louder than words, and I just don’t see that much action from ’em showin’ a God of love.”

“I understand, guys. I’m not trying to convert you or anything like that.”

“That’s fine, Mark, I enjoy hearin’ your views; I’m sure Mike does too.” He nodded. “I’ve just come to believe there are many paths to the divine. Mine is only one of ’em.”

“How long have you two been together?”

Mike took my hand before answering, “About a month or so.”

“That’s all? You guys seem like such good friends, you must have known each other longer.”

“Not really. Sandy and Jeffy’s dad both said we’re two sides of the same coin.”

“Spending time with the two of you, I can understand that.”

“What about you, Mark, do you have a girlfriend?”

“No, I had one, but she broke up with me when I got transferred up here.”

“That’s tough. My ex couldn’t stand me livin’ here. He hated everythin’ about a small town and never missed an opportunity to tell me.”

“He did try to act a bit better, but only after you broke up with him.” Mike looked at me as he spoke.

“It worked out for the best, bud. It enabled us to be together, so I ain’t complainin’.”

“Are the two of you all set for the tourists?”

“Reckon so, or as ready as we’re gonna be before they come.”

“That’s great. Are you planning on expanding the ranch?”

“I reckon we might build a few cabins. We’ll have to see how it goes with the dudes we get for Thanksgivin’.”

“Wow, look at the time. It’s already past nine. I hope I’m not keeping you guys from anything.”

“Not at all.”

“I gotta work tomorrow, so I should be going. Thanks, guys, for everything. Let’s do this again.”

“Give us a call.” We said our goodbyes.

“He seems like a nice guy, don’t he, Jeffy? He’s kinda talkative though.”

“He said he doesn’t have any friends up here, so I reckon he’s just lonely.”

“I seem to remember that earlier you said somethin’ about eatin’ my ass and then fuckin’ it?”

“I did. How about you get that cute ass of yours upstairs and stripped down.” He practically ran up the stairs. I turned off the lights and set the alarm. When I got to our room, he was just finishing getting undressed.

“Get on your hands and knees on the edge of the bed, buddy. I wanna see your ass hangin’ over.” He did, and I moved over to the side where he could see me undress. I also got out the bottle of lube and some condoms. I know I’ve said this before, but Mike does have a beautiful ass. It’s muscular, hard enough to bounce a quarter off of, and covered in this fine blond fur. I could see his balls hangin’ down and his hard dick thrustin’ forward. I pulled it back like a tail and licked it. He began moaning. I spent some time givin’ his balls a good tongue bath before moving up toward his hole. I began licking around and over his hole, but didn’t put my tongue in it yet. I worked his dick and his balls as my tongue explored his ass. He liked it; he was pushing his ass back and then pushing his dick against my hand.

I finally worked my tongue inside him, and he began to murmur, “That’s it, yeah, that’s good. Keep it up.” I worked my way down to his dick and sucked on that for a bit and then back up to his ass. He was gettin’ all worked up and began to pump his dick.

“Get your hands off your dick; I’ll take care of you.” He gave me a mumbled okay and began to moan, whimper, and squirm more. I kept rimming him. He really liked it and had already just given himself over to the pure pleasure of the act. He began pulling on his dick again.

“Mike, buddy, I told you keep your hands off your dick.” He took them off. I figured I’d tease him a bit. I lubed up his ass and his dick and balls. I worked a finger in his ass and began massagin’ his gland. He was whimpering and pushing back against me and trying to spread his legs even further. I slowly worked his dick. I was stroking it enough to get him all horned up and excited, but not enough to allow him any release. I kept it up for a while. His balls were pulling up, so I let go of his dick and began to work them. I’d been at this for a good forty-five minutes. I was starting to get blue balls from being all worked up, so he must’ve been hurting. He started stroking himself again. Real quick I jumped up, sat on the edge of the bed, and pulled him over my knee. I slammed my hand down on his ass. It immediately turned red, highlighting that beautiful blond fur.

“Jeff, what in the hell...?”

“I.” Slap. “Told.” Slap. “You.” Slap. “Not.” Slap. “To.” Slap. “Touch.” Slap. “Your.” Slap. “Dick.” After the first couple slaps, he stopped squirming and began moaning. His protests began to change until he was almost yelling.

“Holy Christ, Jeffy, fuck me. Please, fuck me now, please.” He actually began yelling the pleases out.

I slapped his ass a few more times, and told him, “Get back like you were. This time keep your hands off your dick, or I’m stoppin’. You understand?”

“Yes, sir!” I dove in and began rimmin’ him again, and very slowly and gently began strokin’ his cock, again not enough to make him shoot, but enough to get him on the edge. His ass was red and hot against my face. I began to finger him again but stayed away from the gland. Precum was drippin’ from him.

“Jeffy?”

“Yeah, buddy, what is it?”

“My balls hurt, Jeffy, sir. I need to shoot.”

“You can take it a bit more.” I continued playing with him. He was squirming and whimpering and really begging.

“Please, Jeffy, please fuck me and let me cum. For the love of God, my balls ache. I gotta cum, I can’t stand this. Please, fuck me and let me cum.”

“You like feelin’ like this, don’t ya? Your buddy, Jeffy, really knows how to play ya. Your balls still ache?”

“Yes, sir. I need to get fucked, sir. I need to cum.” I pulled back and put on a condom. I teased his ass with my cock head.

“Fuck me, Jeffy, fuck me now. Push that big cock in me. God I need it, I need it bad. I got blue balls bad, please. *Please!*” He was shoutin’ out please. I tapped his balls from behind, and he let out a squeal. I kept teasing him, and finally pushed in. He let out a huge sigh.

“Fuck yeah. I need this. I need it bad. Fuck me.” I began to pump slowly and easily. He was squirming more than I’d ever seen and clamping down hard. He was fuckin’ back.

“Yeah, oh yeah, that’s it.” Finally he asked, “Sir, please, can you fuck me harder? I need to cum. My balls hurt. Please, sir.”

“You really want it hard, boy?”

“Yes, sir. Fuck me hard.”

“You want to cum, boy?”

“I need to cum, sir; it’s way beyond wantin’.”

“You like this, bein’ kept on edge?”

“It’s real intense, sir, but yes, sir, I do like it.”

“Maybe I should just stop now and let your balls ache all night.” He sounded like he was gonna start crying.”

“No, please no, sir. I gotta cum. I can’t take much more.”

“You’ll take it if I ask you to, won’t ya?”

“Yes, Jeffy, for you, yes.”

“You want to do this again?”

“Hell yes.”

“Then why do you want it to end so soon?”

“Jeffy, you’ve had me all horned up for about an hour and a half. My balls hurt. I need to cum.” I began to fuck him harder. He was moaning real loud.

“Cum for me, buddy! *Now!* Cum now!” I only managed a few more hard strokes before he was spasmin’ around my cock. His whole body was shaking. I kept pumping away for a couple more minutes. His begging changed to a sound almost like purring. I was gettin’ close, and then all of a sudden, I tensed up and shot. It felt like I came forever. Finally I pulled out, and he collapsed on the bed. I lay down next to him and took him in my arms.

“Thank you, thank you, and thank you. That was so fuckin’ unbelievable. You were playin’ me like an instrument. I’ve never been on the edge like that so long. It just keeps gettin’ better and better.”

“I told ya before, buddy, I aim to please.” We lay there for a while. I finally whispered in his ear, “Let’s go to sleep, buddy; we done used up this day.”

IT WAS pitch black in our room. I couldn’t see a moon or stars through the skylight. I tried to raise my head enough, without wakin’ Mike, to see the clock. It was 3:22 in the mornin’. I didn’t need to pee, and Mike hadn’t moved, so what caused me to wake up? Just then, the burglar alarm started to ring. I jumped up, followed by Mike, and pulled my long handles on without bothering to button ’em. I ran down the stairs. I didn’t see anyone or anything, but I wasn’t reassured. Walking through the living room, I saw the glass window was broken on the back door, and it was open. Mike joined me. He had his rifle. The phone rang; it was the security company wanting to know if it was a false alarm.

“We’ve had a break-in.” I gave the guy who had called our address and answered a few questions. The sheriff was on his way. Mike turned off the alarm.

I could see José, Josh, and Smitty movin’ around by the bunkhouse.

“Everything okay, guys?” Smitty called out. José was behind him and had his rifle too.

“Yeah, whoever it was seems to have been scared away by the alarm.”

We went upstairs real quick and got dressed. I didn’t clean up the glass. I remember hearin’ all about not touchin’ a crime scene. I didn’t see anythin’ missing. The TV, stereo equipment, Blu-ray player, and my laptop were all there. It looked like whoever tried to break in got scared off by the alarm. A couple of weeks ago, I never woulda thought to lock the doors. Now I had an alarm. I put some water on for coffee. Just as I added the grounds, I saw Sheriff Johnston pull up.

“You boys okay?”

“Yes sir. It looks like whoever tried to get in ran off when they heard the alarm.”

“Anything missing that you can see?”

“No, I’m not sure that they even got in.”

Mike looked at me. “That had to be one stupid thief. Why’d they come up here? It’s obvious that we got hands in the bunkhouse and there are people here too.” The sheriff was looking at the glass. He pulled out some powder and dusted the door handle.

“No fingerprints. Whoever it was probably wrapped their hand in cloth, put it through the window, and then reached in to open the door. When they did open it, that musta been when the alarm went off.” I looked at the sheriff.

“Mike’s right, it doesn’t make sense for a thief to hit here. This place is occupied by five guys, all armed. If they wanted to steal, there are plenty of vacation homes near here that are unoccupied. My guess is it must have somethin’ to do with the rustlin’. What do you reckon, Sheriff?”

“If I had to bet on it, I’d bet you’re right.” To give myself something to do more than anything, I poured three mugs of coffee. The sheriff sat down and took our statements.

“Boys, I want to keep this break-in to ourselves. I’m not going to tell anyone, not the other agencies, not Sandy, no one. We know it’s a local; maybe if a rumor gets started, or someone says something, we’ll have some more information. I’m going to tell the guys in the bunkhouse the same.”

Then he walked over to the bunkhouse and asked the guys there if they'd seen or heard anythin'. He came back to the kitchen at about five in the mornin'.

"You boys don't mind if I stay here another hour or so until it's light enough to look for tracks do you?"

"Not at all, sir. Anythin' to catch these guys."

"Good, 'cause after some of your coffee, Jeff, there's now no way I could get back to sleep." I cleaned up the glass while Mike made more coffee.

The sun was finally coming up after we'd finished, so the sheriff headed outside to look. After about forty-five minutes, he came back in.

"Looks like you had another visitor that had been in the rustling camp. I can't say one hundred percent for certain, but it looks like the boot tracks match one set from there. I took a couple of casts, so I should be able to tell you later today." He headed back to his office, and I went inside and grabbed a hold of Mike.

"We gotta find these guys, buddy. I'm sick of dealin' with this shit."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

THE day was cold and cloudy. The drab, gray sky matched my mood. Mike and I had visited the hardware store in Twisp and gotten a pane of glass for the back door. We were just coming into Winslett when I suggested that we get breakfast at One Eyed Jack's. It was still fairly early and not tourist season, so there were plenty of places to sit. We walked in and shucked our coats. In an instant, we had some coffee. Sandy was off today, but we'd see her this evening at the ranch. I had the prime rib hash, and Mike had the chicken fried steak.

"You're awful quiet this mornin', Mike. What's up?"

"I'm just worried about havin' Tom and Ann and their kids and Jonathan and his partner up at the ranch if whoever is doin' this shit ain't caught."

"That's been on my mind, too, buddy. I reckon if the sheriff doesn't have a handle on this by the end of this week, I'll need to call 'em and let 'em know what's goin' on."

"Ya know what I see as the worst of this mess, Jeffy?"

"What's that, bud?"

"I know we'll recover from not havin' the dude ranch part open this Thanksgivin', and they'll come another time, but it's gonna break little Harrison's heart."

"Don't I know it? That's a real shame too. I'll talk to him after his parents tell him, but I don't wanna get to that point. Let's just hope that it doesn't come to that." The thought of having to do that and of being restricted as to what Mike and I could and couldn't do was the cause of my drab, gray mood.

"You were right this mornin' when you said this has gotta get over soon."

"Before I forget, buddy, do you need anythin' for your gumbo tonight? I reckon if you do, we're in town now."

"No, we've got everythin' I need." Just then the waitress brought our food. I salted and peppered my eggs, sprinkled everythin' with Tabasco sauce, and put a big dab of ketchup on my plate.

"You and your ketchup, Jeffy. You use a lot of it."

"Just on fries, eggs, burgers, and hash. We've all got different tastes."

"Maybe next year for Halloween, you should go as a bottle of ketchup."

"Only if you go holdin' a sign that says 'Whimper, whimper'."

"All kiddin' aside, do I really whimper when you're..., well you know when?"

"You sure do. Actually I really like it. It shows me I'm handlin' you right."

"It doesn't sound all wimpy?"

"I ain't ever thought of it that way."

"So you really like when I do that?"

"Sure do."

"Thanks again for last night, Jeffy. That was way beyond incredible. We gotta do that again."

"What specific part?"

"The spankin' and keepin' me on edge like that for a long time."

"I thought you said it made you achy?"

"It did. But the release was like every nerve used for that was magnified twenty times. It still amazes me."

"No problem then. By the way, do you need help cookin'?"

"Naw, I got it."

"Okay. I got two sculptures that just need to be polished up, so I'll do that while you cook."

"How's the hash?"

"Good. You wanna try some?" I put a spoonful on his plate. The waitress came by with more coffee. As she walked away, I noticed Mark walk in. He was in his ranger uniform; I reckoned he must be on break from the office. He spoke to the waitress for a moment and then came over to us.

"Mind if I join you two while I'm waiting for my carryout breakfast?"

"Not at all." Mike scooted over, and Mark slid in next to him. The waitress brought Mark a cup of coffee.

"Thanks again, Mark, for bringin' the tree cutting permit. You getting swamped with folks wantin' 'em?"

"You guys are the first and only so far. I have sold a couple hunting permits in the last few days though."

"How long's huntin' season last here?" Mike had a hopeful look on his face.

"Into December, so you have plenty of time. I really liked the food you guys made last night. I appreciate your inviting me over. It was nice to have somewhere to go and something to do other than just sittin' in my little rental house."

"Like I said yesterday, anytime. You stickin' around for Christmas and New Year's, or are you headin' back to California?"

"California? Oh, you mean to spend the time with my parents. I don't know yet."

"If you are around, you're welcome to come over to our place."

"Thanks. You guys are really nice." Just then the waitress came over with Mark's food all wrapped up in a takeout package. He stood up.

"Before I forget, guys, I'm glad you're okay after the trouble last night."

Mike and I looked at each other.

"Word sure gets around fast, how'd you hear?" I asked laconically.

"Sheriff told me this morning when he was on his way to the office."

Mike and I looked at each other once again. Mark caught it.

"What's up, guys? Did I say something wrong or something?" He studied us.

"We been tryin' to put last night out of our minds, at least for a bit. Nothin' wrong at all, other than all this bullshit. We didn't get too much sleep either."

"Oh, okay. Take a nap this afternoon, guys, I'll catch you later!" He walked out and then turned back and gave us a funny look. We both smiled and waved. He waved back.

"Jeff, we gotta get over to the sheriff's office pronto. Sheriff Johnston said he wasn't gonna tell nobody."

"Let him get to his office first. If the sheriff didn't tell him anything and he is involved, we don't want to tip him off any more than we already did."

"We both sounded kinda lame there, didn't we?"

"Hopefully, buddy, he'll just think we're upset about the attempted break-in."

"If he is involved, Jeffy, we were talkin' about helpin' the sheriff, and puttin' the stuff on your laptop. Do you reckon he was after the laptop?" Mike looked at me seriously.

"Could be. We gotta find out first if the sheriff did tell him. I reckon there's gotta be some sort of information sharin' and cooperation between the agencies."

"After we go to the sheriff's office, we can go to see Mary Grace and see how the exhibit is shapin' up. That way, if he is watchin' us, it's gonna look like we're just visitin'."

"Good idea, Mike." We wolfed the rest of our breakfasts, and paid the bill pretty quick. Then we headed off to Sheriff Johnston's office. We had to pass by the forest service office, and it had a note sayin', 'Be back in an hour' and a little clock. Mark musta put that on the door when he picked up his food. Maybe he was eating in the back. In any case, he didn't see us walk by. We walked into the sheriff's office. One of the deputies was at the front desk.

"Mornin' there, Jeff, Mike; what can I do for you guys?" I had gone to high school with him, like just about anyone else my age in town.

"Hey, Rob, how ya doin'? Sheriff around?"

"Nope. He's off today. He went huntin'. He had some call real early this mornin' and went from the call home and then out huntin' with his son. Oldest one is up from Seattle to hunt with his dad. Anythin' I can do for you?"

"Thanks, Rob, much obliged, but no. I just need to talk to the sheriff as soon as possible. Could you ask him to give me a call as soon as he can?"

"Sure, he got your number?" I was pretty sure he had them, but I wrote down the home and cell phone numbers and handed them to Rob.

"Thanks, Rob, catch ya around."

"No problem, take good care, guys." We walked out into the street. I was beginning to feel a bit paranoid. If Mark was in on this and he figured out we knew it, what would he do to protect himself? I reckoned the best thing to do was let someone know to have the sheriff check on Mark,

and then let José, Josh, and Smitty know we wanted to be on the lookout. We walked across the street and into the co-op. Mary Grace came over to meet us.

“Jeff! Mike! It’s good to see you guys.” She gave each one of us a hug.

“Come and see the exhibit. It looks great. You’ll have to pardon me, some of your friends also contributed pictures.” We looked around the walls at the co-op. There were pictures of me and Mike, Mike working on his horsehair stuff, me casting bronze, and pictures with captions explaining each step of each process. I had eight bronzes on display, and I had two more at home that I wanted to polish up and bring in tomorrow. I thought the display was very well done. I was impressed at how well Mary Grace had put it together.

“Wow, Mary Grace, this is incredible. You did a great job with all the details and explanations of what we do.”

“Thanks, Jeff. I’m really excited about this show, so it made it a lot easier and kind of fun too.”

“Mary Grace?” Mike was standing there looking down at his boots.

“What is it, Mike? Did I get something wrong?”

“No, not at all. I was just lookin’ at the prices of some of the stuff I made. It’s way higher than I woulda charged.”

“I looked online, and those are the going rates for the things you made.”

“Really? I reckon I been sellin’ myself short for a while.”

“Once you get a name for yourself, Mike, you can charge triple these rates.”

He gave her a big hug and thanked her.

“Mary Grace, can I ask you a huge favor?”

“Of course, Jeff, what do you need?”

“First of all, a piece of paper, a pen, and an envelope.” She went to her desk in her office and brought them out. I quickly wrote on the paper.

Sheriff,  
If something happens to me and Mike before we talk to you,  
check out Mark, the forest service ranger.  
He knew about the attempted break-in at the ranch  
last night. He’s got to be involved if you didn’t tell him.  
Jeff

I put it in the envelope, sealed it, and handed it to Mary Grace. “If somethin’ happens to me and Mike, can you make sure the sheriff gets that?”

“I don’t like the sound of that, Jeff.”

“I have an idea who’s part of the whole mess we’re facin’, and they may have an idea that I suspect ’em. I’m pretty sure that with your spell we’ll be okay, but just in case....” Actually I wasn’t sure at all, but she invited us to her group and did what she did from pure kindness and care, so I wanted her to know I appreciated it.

“Jeff, nothing will happen to you and Mike. I imagine that sooner or later, the evil they sent out is going to come back on the perpetrators, and they will be in deep trouble. With the murders they caused, the rebound could even kill them.”

“I just hope that if it does rebound like that, everyone finds out who they are.”



“Don’t worry, Jeff, it will rebound on them. You’ll see.”

“Mary Grace, are you ready to get pictures of Jeff and me with the Santa caps on our cowboy hats?”

“Actually, Mike, I spoke with Sandy and Maria, and they have arranged to go caroling with you two at the Christmas at the End of the Road festival Thanksgiving weekend. I believe José, Josh, and your new hand are joining in also. So they all have cowboy and cowgirl hats and Santa caps. So, we’re going to take the pictures, then, just like you suggested.”

“That’s great, ain’t it, Jeff?”

“It is. I reckon I’m gonna have to teach ’em ‘Christmas for Cowboys’ and ‘Santa Got Lost in Texas’ and ‘Two-Step Around the Christmas Tree’.” Mike laughed.

“Jeff, that’s a very good idea. Winslett is known for being an old West town, and it would certainly be in character. By the way, I hear you two sing very well together.”

I looked at Mike. “‘Christmas for Cowboys’, bud?” He nodded. We began to sing together.

Several people in the gallery started clappin’. Mary Grace smiled at us. “You boys really do sing well together. That was very beautiful.”

“Now you do know about Sandy, José’s, and Josh’s singin’ ability, don’t ya, Mary Grace?” She looked at me and laughed.

“Yes, Jeff, I do. They told me they can’t sing a note, but Sandy and José can both play the guitar, which they are going to do. I think Josh is going to be moral support.”

“I dunno if Smitty can sing, Mary Grace.”

“He can and very well, Sandy told me.”

“You ain’t been castin’ any love spells lately, have ya, Mary Grace?” Mike had a big grin on his face.

“Not since I did the one for you two.” Mike’s mouth dropped open, and I’m sure mine did too. Mary Grace laughed at us.

“Just kidding, boys; I would never cast a spell on or for someone without their knowledge and consent. To do so would be totally unethical.”

“Sometime, Mary Grace, maybe we could take ya for coffee at Rick’s. I’d like to learn more about what you believe.”

“I’d be happy to tell you all about it, Jeff.”

“I’d enjoy that.”

“Me too; Halloween night seemed nice and cozy and friendly, not like that bullshit my old man was always spoutin’ off.”

“I take it you’ve had some bad experiences with Christianity, Mike?”

“That’d be puttin’ it lightly.”

“As you know, I’m pagan, but the message of Christianity, unconditional love and a God who became human and died for us because he cares so much, is very beautiful. But I understand what you mean, Mike. Most Christians today seem to believe something based on hatred.”

“Does your faith believe it’s ‘the truth, the light, and the only way’?”

“Oh Goddess, no!” She giggled. “There are many paths to the divine. Mine is only one of them.”

“That’s what you said the other night, Jeffy!”

“Mary Grace, that is one of my favorite sayins.”

“We’ll have to talk about it in detail sometime. Oh, by the way boys, I have some things for the two of you.” She hurried into the back and came out with two boxes about the size of shirt boxes. They were wrapped in shiny foil wrapping paper and lots of ribbons.

“It ain’t even Christmas yet. Thanks, Mary Grace.” Mike was happy to get a gift.

“Thanks, Mary Grace, you didn’t have to do nothin’.”

“I know I didn’t, but I wanted to. Open them up!” We ripped off the paper and ribbon and found we were each holding a framed photograph. Mine was the picture of Mike and me with our arms around each other’s shoulders. We were both grinning at the camera, and both of us looked really happy. Mike had the picture of the two of us sitting together on the fence, lookin’ at the camera and grinning.

“Thanks, Mary Grace, I don’t know what to say. These are really special.”

“They sure are, Mary Grace. This is real sweet of you.”

“I liked the pictures, and I thought you two would too.” We thanked her again and headed out the door.

“Hey, buddy, we gotta get some bread. Wanna get it from Rick’s and have a cuppa coffee and some pie.”

“Sounds good to me, Jeffy; I reckon we ain’t gonna have enough time for a roll in the hay before folks start comin’ over, what with the cookin’ and all.”

“We still got all night for that, buddy. I ain’t gonna let your ass off too easy. Anyway, let’s see when you get done cookin’.”

We headed into Rick’s. I love the smell in there. You can smell coffee, and fresh bread, and cinnamon, and vanilla, and all sorts of spices. I took a deep breath.

“Hey, guys, it’s nice to see you two. Coffee?”

“Hi, Rick, please.”

“Hey, Rick, what kinda of pie you got today?”

“Pumpkin, apple, pecan, banana cream, and blackberry.”

“Blackberry for me!”

“Make that two.”

“Okay, let me get some of the strong coffee, and I’ll have the pie out in a second.” He headed in back, and after a few minutes, came out with two huge mugs of steaming coffee and two big slices of pie with whipped cream on ’em.

“Thanks, Rick, this is great.” Mike tried to say thanks, too, but his mouth was too full of pie to be coherent.

“No problem, guys. I bet you two are glad that this rustling and murder business is coming to an end.”

“Is comin’ to an end? Do you know somethin’ we don’t?” I looked at him. Could there have been an arrest or breakthrough while we were in talkin’ to Mary Grace?

“It will end soon. The spell Mary Grace did was really powerful. The evil is going to come back on those who sent it out. Given all they’ve done, I wouldn’t be surprised if they dropped dead.”

“Mary Grace said somethin’ similar.”

“Thanks again for what she and you did the other night. It was a beautiful ceremony.”

“You’re very welcome.” Rick smiled at us.

"I'll tell you two what, how about if I send a pecan pie home with the two of you? Mike, a Cajun boy like you shouldn't be able to resist that."

"That's mighty kind of you, Rick, but you gotta make a livin'. We can pay for the pie."

"I know you can. I just want to give it to you."

"If you're sure, then okay. We'd also like two loaves of French bread."

"You got it." We finished our pie and coffee, paid for them and the bread, and headed out.

"Well, I reckon we better get back to the ranch, huh, Mike?"

"I gotta make some gumbo."

We got in the truck and headed back. When we got there, Smitty, Josh, and José were playin' cards in the common room. They heard the truck and looked out.

"Don't worry, boss. We are keeping a lookout on the rancho for you."

"Thanks, José." I went in and made up another letter like the one I gave to Mary Grace and made sure José got it. He promised not to open it and to make sure the sheriff got it if something happened to us. He looked like he was gonna cry.

I went out to the shed and began to polish the two sculptures I had ready for the exhibit. Mike was cooking in the kitchen. It took me a couple of hours to finish the sculptures, but they looked real good. I'd take them to Mary Grace tomorrow. I walked into the house and into the kitchen. I was pretty surprised that Mike was done making everythin'.

"How'd you get done so fast?"

"I asked Smitty, José, and Josh to help. They chopped up stuff and did all the prep work, and I cooked."

"That was nice of 'em, and smart of you to think of that. We've got four hours before anyone comes over. What do ya reckon we should do?" I smiled at him and rubbed my crotch. He was on me like white on rice. We headed upstairs and shucked our clothes. We started necking. I really like the way Mike kisses. He seems to push all my buttons when we neck. Both of us think that beard burn is kinda hot, so we rub against each other a lot. After a while, I sat down on the bed with my legs crossed Indian style.

"Buddy, lay down with your legs across mine, almost like you was sittin' in my lap, and just lean back." He did. I just stared at him. I don't think I'll ever get tired of looking at him with that nice furry chest, that red goatee, his smile. His legs were spread wide apart and draped over mine. He was hard and had a big grin on his face. He knew I was enjoying the sight of him.

"Reach over and hand me the lube, buddy." I lubed up his cock and ass. I slid a finger inside him, causing him to moan in pleasure. I worked it a bit, brushing his gland as I moved it in and out. He was whimpering with pleasure. Every time I'd rub my finger against his prostate, his dick would twitch. Finally, after a few minutes of working his ass, I took a hold of his cock and started to stroke. His eyes rolled back in his head as I slowly worked my hand up and down his shaft. I was hard, and by the way we were positioned, I was poking his balls with my cock.

"Jeffy, that feels so good. I like the way you look at me when you're playin' with me."

"You seem to love it when I do anything with that cute ass of yours."

"Oh yeah, I do. I love it when you're in me. It's turnin' me on the way your dick is touchin' my balls when I move."

"Just lay back and enjoy."

"That's wonderful."

"I like makin' you feel good. It turns me on. Say my name, buddy."

“Jeffy. You’re my Jeffy.”

“That I am. Your Jeffy’s makin’ you feel good, ain’t he?”

“Hell yeah. This feels fantastic. I love it when you touch my cock.”

“Feels good to have someone else’s hands on it, don’t it?”

“It feels good to have your hands on it.” He continued to look up at me, smiling his pleasure, and once in a while his eyes would roll back in his head, or he’d close them, just concentrating on the pleasure I was working to give him. He was moaning louder, and I could see his balls drawing up against his body. “Yeah, Jeffy, make me shoot.”

“Just enjoy, buddy; your Jeffy’s finger fuckin’ you good, jackin’ you good.” I could feel his dick swell. His whole body seemed to tense and he let loose. His prostate throbbed against my finger as his prick throbbed in my hand. I kept up a gentle movement until he sagged back, totally depleted and relaxed. I lay down next to him and just held him. After a few minutes, he lay on his side facing me and started to kiss me. It was gentle, but insistent. He leaned into me as I lay back and explored my mouth with his tongue. I could feel his hand move down my body, and finally grope my balls and then rub my cock. I’d been hard for a while, and it felt real good. I moaned into his mouth, and he broke the kiss. He’d lubed up his hand and began stroking me.

“That’s what you want, ain’t it, Jeff? You want your buddy’s hand on that big dick of yours.” I moaned back incoherently. It felt like my entire body was centered in my dick.

“Your buddy’s takin’ care of you now, makin’ you feel real good. Givin’ ya what you want, what you need.” He was whispering in my ear. He came back and started kissing me again. He was a bit rougher this time, nibbling my lip and pushing his face into mine harder. He kept the same rhythm on my cock, playing me like an instrument. I was so hard it hurt, but it was a good hurt. I wanted to prolong this incredible sensation.

“You like havin’ your buddy Mike take care of ya, don’t ya? Suckin’ your cock when ya need a blowjob, lendin’ a hand and strokin’ that big piece of meat when that’s what ya want, sharin’ his ass ’cause you like to fuck. I’m takin’ good care of ya, ain’t I, Jeffy? Just let me keep strokin’ that big prick. Make you feel good, real good.” I registered what he was saying, but I was so involved in the pure sexual enjoyment of his touch and words, I couldn’t respond.

“We take care of each other, don’t we, Jeffy; you fuck real good, keep me happy. Now I’m makin’ you feel good. You really like me stroking ya. Feels good don’t it? You just take your time. I could stroke your big dick all day.” We kissed more. I felt myself tensin’, gettin’ ready to explode; he picked up on it.

“You gonna cum for me, Jeffy? You want to shoot, don’t you? Your buddy’s drainin’ your balls. Shoot for me; shoot that big cannon of yours. Show me how much you enjoy me takin’ care of ya. Show me.” He started to kiss me again and I lost it. I shot and shot and shot. It seemed to go on for minutes. Finally, I fell back, relaxed and drained. He settled in my arms.

“Thanks, buddy, that was real nice.”

“You like it when I talk to ya, don’t ya?”

“Yeah, it gets me goin’.”

“I’ll remember that. Ya like it when I say your name too.”

“Yep.” We lay back for a while, content just to be all intertwined. Finally, we got up and jumped in the shower.

The sounds of Cajun and Zydeco music floated on the air. I could smell the gumbo. It had a rich spicy smell. Mike had said it was chicken and sausage. He and I had put on flashy rodeo-type cowboy shirts. So had Smitty, and Sandy was actually wearing a skirt and nice blouse. I guess they were trying to impress one another.

"I stopped by the co-op on my way to Sandy's house to look at the exhibit." Maria was looking at me.

"It was very nice. Mary Grace did a beautiful job."

"Thanks, Maria."

"Sí, boss, the exhibit is very good. I went into town last night to look at it. Mike, you are a real vaquero with your horsehair belts."

"I also notice you have two new pictures on the mantelpiece." Smitty was pretty observant. Josh, Renee, and Maria went over to look.

"Those are great, Jeff, Mike." Josh was still looking at the pictures.

"You two look so happy in both of them. It's obvious how close you two are." Renee was standing beside Josh, looking.

"Mary Grace asked me if it would be a good idea to get copies made for you. I told her you would love 'em."

"Thanks, Sandy, we do."

"Then let's do a shot for a successful exhibition!" Sandy raised her glass of Knob Creek.

"Cheers." The whiskey went down smooth; it had a bit of a kickback, a sharp anise bite with a hint of smoke.

"Good stuff."

"You and Mike got enough of it."

"Darlin', you can't ever have too much good whiskey on hand."

"Let's see if you say that next time you're hungover, Jeff."

"Sandy, that was low, real low." Everyone laughed. Mike snuggled into me. He was getting more and more comfortable being himself around our friends.

"Will ya lookit' out there?" Smitty pointed outside. The day had been cold and gray. It had stayed in the low thirties all day. As it got to twilight, the clouds over the mountains grew darker and heavy. Snow was falling.

"I love the first snowfall. It is so beautiful." Maria had moved over to the window. We all followed.

"Ski season, here we come!" I loved the first snowfall too. To me it held the promise of skis, snowshoes, ice hockey, and snowshoe softball, things that made the short, dark days of northern Washington something to look forward to.

"Do you know how to cross country ski, Smitty?"

"Sandy, can't say there's too much opportunity in south Texas."

"Well, I'll teach ya."

"Boss, you can teach me, too, no?" José looked at me and Maria chimed in.

"Me too."

"I reckon when we got enough snow, everyone can gather here, and Sandy and I can teach ya." I looked out the window. We'd had a few nights of hard freezes and cold gray days, so the ground was frozen. The snow was sticking.

"To snow!" Mike raised his glass this time. We all followed. I reckoned that if Sandy and Maria kept drinking, they were gonna have to stay. Mike noticed the same thing, so he went into the kitchen and set everything out.

"Dinner's ready, come and get it before I throw it out!" Mike gave a traditional cowboy call to chow. He explained that you put either rice or potato salad in your bowl (everyone did a double take when they heard potato salad even though Mike had mentioned it before) and then ladle the gumbo over it. He had a couple of bottles of Tabasco for those of us who like hot food.

Mike's gumbo was delicious. It had a thick, dark broth that was spicy and had some undercurrent I couldn't place. The chunks of chicken and sausage were real tender and they floated with little chunks of pepper, onion, and celery. It was a great meal to celebrate the first snowfall.

"This is great, Mike." Everyone was shouting their praise of his cooking.

"You really are a great cook, buddy."

He leaned over and said real soft, "Thanks, Jeffy, good cook, good in bed, good friend, good to talk to and hang with, what more could ya want?"

"Absolutely nothin' more, I got it all." I leaned in and gave him a kiss. Of course Sandy had to comment.

"There they go again!"

"Sandy, I wanted to tell you just how nice you look this evenin'. I mean, you're always beautiful, but I ain't seen you wear a skirt in a month of Sundays. When you're all dressed up like that, you look even more beautiful. Any special reason you got all dressed up tonight?" She turned red. So did Smitty.

"Uh... no, I just felt like it."

"At first I thought there's gotta be some reason; I always think of you like the Brooks and Dunn song, 'Mama Don't Get Dressed Up For Nothing'. In any case, you look fantastic."

"Thanks!" Everyone was tryin' hard not to laugh.

"I hear you're all gonna go carolin' with Jeffy and me on Thanksgivin' weekend?"

"And every weekend until Christmas." Smitty nodded.

"That's great; it should be lots of fun."

"To Christmas At the End of the Road!" Josh proposed a toast to Winslett's Christmas fair.

"Cheers!" we all echoed. After eating, it seemed we all had a nice comfortable buzz going.

"It's too bad Wayne couldn't be here. He's had a tough fall. First of all, my dad passin' away, then gettin' shot, and now his mom dyin'." I raised my glass. "To Wayne."

Everyone echoed, "To Wayne." We drank the round in silence.

I looked at Maria and raised my glass. "To Pedro, a great guy and good friend who we all miss." Everyone drank to Pedro while Maria's eyes shimmered with tears as she smiled a sad smile.

Finally, José mentioned that if Wayne and Pedro were here, they'd be the life of the party, and neither of them would let us get sad on their account.

We started talking about games to play. We decided on charades. It was a really funny round when Josh got up, picked his piece of paper, and thought for a second. He chuckled and then made the sign for movie. His team yelled out.

"Movie." He gave a thumbs up and pointed to me and Mike.

"*Brokeback Mountain*," Smitty yelled it out. José clicked his stopwatch.

"Six seconds, that is going to be very hard to beat." We kept playing, stopping occasionally for a toast, or to go look at the snow. The phone rang at about ten o'clock. I took it in the kitchen.

“Lucky Jeff Ranch, Jeff speakin’.”

“Jeff, it’s Sheriff Johnston. What’s going on?”

“This mornin’ Mike and I were havin’ breakfast in One Eyed Jack’s; Mark the ranger came up to us. After chattin’ for a while, he asked how we were doin’ after the break-in last night. He said you’d mentioned it when he saw you in the office this mornin’.”

“I didn’t go into the office this morning. It looks like he’s involved. I’ll go pay him a little visit tomorrow morning and see what he has to say.”

“Sir, I am really happy to see somethin’ happen with this. I wanna enjoy life rather than hide in the house like a scared rabbit.”

“I understand, son. Sandy and Maria are there with you now, aren’t they?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell her it’s best if they stay there rather than come back into town. Roads are very slippery now. That is if it’s okay with you.”

“I’ll let her know, sir. She and Maria are welcome any time.”

“Thanks, Jeff; I’ll let you know what’s going on after I talk to Mark tomorrow.”

“Thanks, sir.” We rung off.

“Hey, Sandy, that was your dad. He wanted me to let you know the roads are real slippery. You’re welcome to stay here, you, too, Maria.”

“We are very lucky to have good friends like you and Mike, Jeff; thank you.”

“Maria’s right. We are lucky to have friends like you. Thanks.”

At about one-thirty, Sandy looked at me.

“It’s gettin’ pretty late; I’m about ready to hit the hay.” We said our good nights. The girls went off to the spare room downstairs, and the guys and Renee headed out to the bunkhouse. Mike and I turned off the lights and set the alarm before heading upstairs. It was cold upstairs. The fireplace and whiskey had kept us nice and warm in the living room. Mike and I shucked our clothes and crawled into bed.

“Hey, buddy, penny for your thoughts.”

“I was just thinkin’ how lucky I am. Sandy and Maria was talkin’ on how lucky they are to have us for friends; I’m lucky to have them and you. I ain’t ever loved nobody as much as I love you, Jeff. Sometimes it’s so strong, it’s like a separate force.”

“I love you, too, buddy. I said before and I’ll say it again, you’re the best thing that ever happened to me. Now snuggle up, and let’s hold each other and keep each other warm. We done used up this day.” We fell asleep to the softly, silently falling snow.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

MONDAY dawned cold and gray. Mike and I lay in bed looking up at the skylight and out the window. It was obviously below freezing. Everything was quiet, even the birds seemed trying to keep warm. Looking up at the skylight, I could see that no new snow was falling. We were snuggled together to keep warm.

“Buddy, we’re gonna have to put another blanket on the bed, or start wearin’ our long handles to sleep.”

“I got an electric blanket, Jeffy. How ’bout we use that?”

“When we’re up and movin’ around, how ’bout you get it?”

“Okay. I wanna stay nekkid with you in bed. I don’t wanna have to wear underwear to bed.”

“Me neither, buddy, so let’s see if that blanket works.”

We jumped up and got dressed in our long handles and heavy wool socks. Since the girls were here, we threw on jeans and heavy flannel shirts before headin’ downstairs. Sandy had already made a pot of coffee, and she was cooking pancakes. Smitty had an apron tied on and was helping her. Maria was sittin’ at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee. I was debating saying something about Sandy and Smitty, but since they were cooking, I kept my mouth shut.

“Smells great.”

Smitty looked at me real concerned and upset like. “Jeff, you gotta see somethin’ outside.” Given his tone, I just followed him into the mudroom and pulled on my boots, a coat, and my cowboy hat. He, Mike, and I walked out into the yard. I could see the tracks of two sets of boots coming from the bunkhouse; they obviously belonged to Smitty and José. There were a bunch of other tracks in the snow. Tracks that went by Sandy’s car, my truck, and Mike’s truck, and up to the door, as well as stopping by the windows, as whoever those tracks belonged to tried to see inside. The tracks were made by cowboy boots. The heels showed deep wear as if the owner of the boots was pigeon-toed. I wasn’t a hundred percent certain, but I thought it was the same track as one of the rustlers had.

“Shit. I bet the only reason he didn’t try somethin’ is that everyone was here.”

“You’re gonna call the sheriff, ain’t ya, Jeff?”

“Yeah, I am, Smitty, thanks. You wanna tell the folks in the bunkhouse not to track around and to step in your original tracks if they come to the house? I want the tracks clear for the sheriff.”

“Sure thing, Jeff.” I walked down to the driveway. A vehicle had come up in the night, but it seemed that when it left most of the detail in the tracks was obliterated. Snow had fallen on top of the tracks, further masking any tread. I headed back inside followed by Mike. Smitty came in a few minutes later followed by José. I picked up the phone and dialed the sheriff. I got an answering machine both at his office and his cell phone. I reckoned he was talking with Mark. The girls were pretty upset to hear we’d had a visitor. Sandy asked about three times if I was sure I had set the alarm. I kept reassuring her. José told her he’d had to turn it off to let Smitty in.

“It’s no good worryin’ ourselves here. I’m sure the sheriff will have some good leads this mornin’, and this will be cleared up soon. Now, those flapjacks smell great. Let’s eat.”

“Sandy, Smitty, these are great. Thanks!” Mike smiled at them, but his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Jeff, Mike, do you want to come and stay at my apartment in Wenatchee until this is over? You are very welcome.” Maria looked very concerned also. After a second, she started sobbing and said, “I don’t want to lose the two of you the way I lost Pedro.”

I pulled her into a hug as I spoke to her. “We really appreciate that, Maria, but I’m not gonna run like a scared rabbit. We got Mike, me, Smitty, José, and Josh here, and Jeanette will be here soon too. We’ll be fine, better than that sorry son of a bitch once I catch ’im.” Sandy was uncharacteristically quiet. She set a plate of pancakes and sausages on the table for me and then hugged me. I realized she was sobbing into my chest.



“Jeff, you gotta be all right. I couldn’t stand it if somethin’ happened to you. You’re like my brother. Mike too.”

“Nothin’s gonna happen to me or Mike.”

We sat down to a somber breakfast. Nobody wanted to chat, so talk consisted mostly of please pass this, or that is good, or more coffee anybody. Finally, we finished breakfast. Maria insisted on cleaning up, helped by José.

“Hey, everybody!” They all looked up at me. “We’re sittin’ around here actin’ like we’re goin’ to a funeral. There’s been too many funerals lately. We’re gonna be all right. If there’s anything we can do, it’s cheer up and support each other to get through this. So let’s cowboy up and enjoy each other’s company.”

“Well said, Jeff! We’re here for you.” Sandy, José, and Maria nodded at Smitty’s words.

“Let’s not let that sorry son of a bitch get us down then.” Everyone clapped and cheered at that.

Mike and I decided to go into town and see the sheriff. I had to deliver my two newest sculptures to the exhibit also. We drove to town, followed by the girls. The roads weren’t too bad. It looked like the snowplow had gone through this morning. The valley lives by tourism, so the roads are usually kept pretty clear. José had gotten out the pickup with the snowplow in front of it and was plowing the access road to the ranch. We got into town and parked right in front of the sheriff’s office. He was in his office and looked real tired and upset. For a second, I wondered if he’d gotten hurt hunting yesterday.

“Mornin’, boys, grab a cup of coffee in the back, and take a seat.” Once we were settled down, he looked at us.

“I went over to Mark’s house this morning. I thought we’d have a friendly chat, but I was too late.”

“He’s gone?” I reckoned he must’ve figured out we were on to him.

“You might say that. I got there, and his truck was loaded up. It looked like he was on his way to wherever. His front door was open, so I went in. I reckoned he was just about to leave. He was there. Dead in the front room with two shots to his chest. There was no sign of defense wounds, so he knew whoever killed him. Same boot tracks in the snow that we saw in the rustlers’ camp.”

“Sheriff, those same tracks were in the snow outside our house this morning. They walked around the house, up to the door, and looked in the windows. I reckon the only reason he didn’t try somethin’ is too many people around.” The sheriff paled at this. I could tell he was thinking Sandy was there.

“We got some prints from Mark’s that didn’t belong to him. I hope that will give us a break in the case.”

“Us, too, sir.” We stayed there, and the sheriff interviewed us about last night and finding the tracks in the morning. After a couple of hours, we were able to go. We stopped by the truck on our way to the co-op and got out the two sculptures I’d brought. I felt bad about Mark. He seemed like a nice guy, but it was probable that he was involved with the rustling. The question I asked myself was did he try to leave because he thought we had caught on to him, or because he was in over his head? I reckoned we’d never know. We walked across the street to the co-op.

“Jeff! Mikel!” Mary Grace was on us with her big smotherin’ hugs.

“*Washington Highways* is sending someone to look at the exhibit here and cover Christmas at the End of the Road! This will be such great publicity for you boys! And two new sculptures! These are both great!”

“The one sculpture, Mary Grace, the one titled ‘Friends’ isn’t for sale, just for exhibit.”

"I can see why; it looks exactly like you two. Where are my manners, let me get you some coffee." She bustled in the back as Mike and I smiled at her energy.

She reappeared a few minutes later with two big mugs of coffee.

"Thanks, Mary Grace."

"Much obliged, Mary Grace."

"I am so glad you stopped by. I had called Ryan and Sandy. Sandy's gotten in touch with Smitty, José, and Maria. They are all on their way here to take pictures. I even have Santa caps for you all."

"No time like the present, eh Mike?"

"That's right." We chatted with Mary Grace, and she asked if on weekends we could spend a couple of hours on Saturday and a couple on Sunday in the co-op to talk to visitors, answer questions, and that sort of thing. We were both happy to do so. After Thanksgiving, we'd be in town anyway on weekends for the Christmas at the End of the Road festival, as we were caroling in it. Just then Sandy and Maria came in followed by Smitty and José. Sandy and José had their guitars. Mary Grace handed out the Santa hats. We all had cowboy hats, so we put the caps on the crowns. We headed outside. Mary Grace had someone put up a couple of strings of lights on the co-op and the shops around it.

"Okay, how about you really sing; it will look more realistic in the pictures." Sandy looked at José, and they began to play "Silent Night"; Mike, Maria, Smitty, and I started singing. We sang that, "The Holly and the Ivy," and "Away in a Manger." Then Maria and I sang a Spanish carol, "Los Peces en el Rio" and "Two-Step Around the Christmas Tree." Mike and I sang "Christmas for Cowboys," then all four of us sang "Santa Got Lost in Texas." Ryan must have taken about forty pictures. Toward the end of the picture session, Sandy threw a snowball at Smitty. That was all it took for us to have a snowball fight on Main Street. We weren't throwing hard, and it was a lot of fun. It sure helped to dispel the air of hopelessness that had affected us earlier this morning. After about forty-five minutes, we were all covered liberally with snow. Ryan was taking pictures as we threw snowballs, and we all still had Santa caps over our cowboy hats. We decided to go to the cantina for a bite to eat afterwards. Mary Grace even joined us.

Over beer and nachos in the cantina, she spoke up. "Jeff, Mike, I did a tarot reading for the two of you last night."

"I hope you saw that we're both gonna be alive for the New Year."

"I saw that this whole thing should be resolved in a day or two at the most. Hidden issues will come to light, and although there will be some issues and difficulties and a trying time, you both will come through it okay."

"I'm glad to hear that, Mary Grace."

"Me too. Nobody else is gonna get hurt, will they?" Mike gazed at her.

"The person at the bottom of this will be punished. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes." Sandy, Maria, and José were all really interested in Mary Grace's tarot and Wicca. They were asking a lot of questions. I really hoped that there was something to her tarot reading because it would be so good to have this behind us. In all honesty, I couldn't say I wasn't worried.

José turned to me. "Hey, boss, Smitty, Josh, and I were talking. We want to take turns standing guard and watching the house from the bunkhouse." Smitty nodded.

"You guys don't have to do that."

"We know that, Jeff; we want to." José nodded as Smitty spoke.

"Much obliged."

"You are very welcome, boss. We are your friends, yours and Mike's."

"Thanks, guys." Mike's voice was husky. The waitress brought another two pitchers of beer and another plate of nachos. Mike saw they had calamari and asked for two orders.

"I thought you didn't like squid, Mike?" Sandy had that teasing twinkle in her eye.

"I didn't think I would, but I tried it, and I liked it. You'd think I was carrying on like a city boy in front of a plate of mountain oysters the way you talk about it."

"You were."

"I was not."

Just then I noticed we all still had our Santa caps on. I started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Sandy had a real puzzled look on her face. I reached up and pulled the Santa hat off my cowboy hat. Everybody did the same and started laughing.

We finished off the nachos and beer. It had been a fun day. I'd spent a good part of it with the folks who were some of the best friends anyone could ever have. The snowball fight was fun. I was also happy Mary Grace had joined us for the beer and nachos. After the Wicca ceremony, I realized why folks called her the town witch. I understood her thoughts about the new folks in the valley and the folks whose families had been here a while. Mary Grace had been in Winslett about ten years. She still taught art at the school. The kids accepted her unconditionally, but a lot of the older folks thought of her as an outsider. It was very clear why she wanted the show to be a success with the exhibit from a local boy.

We ordered another pitcher and enjoyed one another's company. All too soon it was time to head home. As we were driving and coming up to the west side of town, I got an idea. I pulled in to the barn parking lot where we had the Halloween party a couple of nights ago. I took the broom I used for clearing snow off the truck and a flashlight. The wind had cleared most of the snow from the front of the barn and the walk, and I just needed to sweep a bit. I let the flashlight shine down. Mike had followed me without saying a word, but now he spoke up.

"What's up, Jeff?"

"Remember Mark said he saw the boot from the rustler's camp here. Now I ain't sure if he was lyin' or not or if the sheriff even knows about him sayin' that."

After sweeping, I shone the flashlight around. The mud was frozen hard. There in it, close to the walk, was a single boot track. The sole was distinctive like an old tire, and the heel showed wear as if the wearer were pigeon toed. I looked at Mike.

"I'll be damned. That sorry son of a bitch was tellin' the truth."

"Think that this will bring us any closer to findin' the murderin' asshole behind this?"

"I dunno, Mike. I'm gonna call the sheriff." Somethin' started nagging the back of my mind, but for the life of me I couldn't think of what it was I should be remembering. I pulled out my cell phone and dialed Sheriff Johnston. When he answered, we exchanged pleasantries.

"Sheriff, did Mark ever tell you that whoever is behind this was at the Halloween party on Friday?"

"No. How do you know that? Did he tell you?"

"Indirectly he did. He mentioned he saw the boot track with the distinctive tread and worn heel in the mud next to the door."

"I'll be damned. We'll have to see if we can get a list of everyone who was there. It's a man's boot, so that'll eliminate about two thirds of the guests, if there is a list."

"Can't hurt to check, can it, sir?"

“Not at all; this is the most solid thing we have to narrow it down.”

“Well, sir, we got our fingers crossed. Sheriff, why do you reckon Mark would tell us about the track?”

“Only thing I can think of is that if you did suspect him, it would divert suspicion.”

“I reckon that makes sense. I wonder if he was tryin’ to freak us out, kinda like we’re bein’ watched all the time.”

“That could be it also, Jeff. Who knows; with Mark dead, we sure aren’t going to be able to question him.”

“Mike and I’ve been pretty lucky so far. I hope our luck holds.”

“I do too, son. You boys head on home and set the alarm. Sandy tells me your stockmen are standing lookout.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I just hope they’re not needed.”

“Me too, Sheriff.”

We ended the call. Mike and I got back in the truck and drove home. We got there, set the alarm, and watched TV for an hour or so, and then had some of the pecan pie Rick gave us. We decided to watch a movie, and I pulled one out of my collection of gay movies. It was called *The M.O. of M.I.* short for the Modus Operandi of Male Intimacy. It’s a good movie, and you don’t really figure out the plot until the very end. It has one of those twists in plot, which keeps you thinking. We ended up talking about the movie and the plot for quite a while. It had been a fun and a full day.

“C’mon, buddy, let’s go upstairs.”

We began to neck and undressed each other. I could taste the nachos on him. I was running my hands over his chest, arms, back, and butt. I just wanted to touch every inch of him. He was doing the same to me. His touch felt good. By now, he’d come to know what I liked and did it adding here and there from his imagination. We really took our time. There was urgency, but also a slow sweetness in our joining this evening. We had become familiar enough with one another to know how to push each other’s buttons in a very good way. We spent a lot of time just looking at one another and smiling.

We used our bodies to speak for us, each little touch or movement seemed to speak volumes.

“How’s that feel, buddy?”

“Nice, real nice.”

“What’s it feel like when I’m inside you?” He gave a big sigh and gazed up at me.

“At first, I feel real stretched, real full. I start relaxin then, and it feels fantastic. I feel you movin’ in and out through my whole body. When you push in, it makes my dick twitch. I like lookin’ at you like this too.” I kissed him long and slow. I stopped thrustin’ and moved my hips side to side.

“Oh yeah, that’s good!” I began movin’ again. “That’s intense, the way you’re movin’ against my cock, Jeffy. It feels so good.”

“I like makin’ you feel good.”

“You do. You know how to touch me.”

“You like gettin’ fucked too.”

“I love it, Jeffy. It makes me feel so close to you.” We kissed some more. I moved my tongue against his in the same rhythm my cock was movin’ in his ass.

“You got such a tight ass, buddy, tight but sweet. You just seem to suck me in.”

He clamped down with his ass on my cock. It felt great.

“That’s the way, buddy, ride my dick. Show me how much you like gettin’ fucked.” He was pushing back against me and arching his back to push his cock against me. He was startin’ to whimper and moan more. “Ride my dick, buddy, you know what I like. Yeah, that’s it, fuck back. Make me feel good.”

He was gettin’ more and more excited, bucking all over the bed, almost like he was trying to throw me off.

“How ya doin’?”

“Fuckin’ awesome. This is so good. Feels so good. Fuck me, Jeff; show me how much you like fuckin’ me.”

I picked up the pace a bit, and every few strokes I’d move sideways a bit. Our bellies and his cock were all wet and sticky. He was dripping precum.

“You gettin’ close, buddy?” I could feel him starting to tremble.

“Yeah, Jeffy, that’s it, just keep that up.”

“Your Jeffy givin’ you a good fuck?”

“Hell yes!”

“I’m makin your ass sing, ain’t I.”

“Keep fuckin’, keep it up, oh....”

“You like me on top of ya, don’t ya?”

“Oh yeah, I love it.”

“Yeah, this is what you really want all the time. Be on your back, knees by your ears, feet in the air, legs spread wide, and your Jeffy’s dick reamin’ that tight ass of yours. You just love gettin’ fucked.”

“I need, I really need it.” He started clamping down, and all of a sudden I felt the warmth of his cum, shooting across my belly and chest. I smelled the musky smell he’d just shot out. His thrashing got to me, and I lost it and came. We lay together for a few minutes.

“Jeff?”

“Yeah, buddy, what’s up?”

“You mentioned that you were tested for HIV not too long ago, weren’t ya?”

“Just before I came back. I’m negative.”

“I think I’m gonna get tested in Wenatchee.”

“Good idea. Everyone should know their status.”

“I don’t think I’m positive.”

“If you were only gettin’ blowjobs before we got together, you’re probably not.”

“What if I am?”

“Then we’ll get you a good doctor and manage it.”

“You’d still stay with me?”

“Of course. The way I see it is I always assume that anyone I sleep with is positive. So I always practice safe sex. Besides, if I feel close enough to someone to have sex with ’em, I respect ’em enough to play safe.”

“If I do test negative are we still gonna practice safe sex?”

"I sure as hell don't want to sleep with anyone else, and you said you don't, so we won't need to. We do need to be committed enough to each other and honest enough that if one of us screws up, he's gotta fess up right away and get tested again."

"Do a lot of gay guys in relationships screw around?"

"I'd guess more than half have 'open relationships' where they're free to go play with others. They follow whatever rules they set."

"I don't want that. It hurts to think of you fuckin' someone else."

"I don't want that either. You're my one and only. Besides, you love gettin' fucked so much, I don't have any energy for anyone else." He laughed and swung a pillow at me.

"In all seriousness, Mike, I want to be monogamous just because it makes sex special, an expression of love, carin', bondin', not just gettin' off."

"I agree with that."

"I reckon when we have dudes, we're both gonna get hit on by men and by women."

"You think so?"

"I'm pretty sure, buddy."

"On a different subject, I registered for classes to get my GED."

"Good for you! I can't tell you how proud I am of you. If ya need help with your homework, please let me know."

"So what reward do I get for every A that I get?"

"I'll have to think on that." We cuddled together; Mike was drifting off. I told him my standard good night phrase.

"Let's get some sleep, bud; we done used up this day." He was soon breathing regularly and asleep. I couldn't sleep though. Something was nagging me, hiding in the back of my mind, just outta reach. I kept going over in my mind the last few days. Finding out Mark was involved with the rustlers, and then his gettin' killed, Smitty and Jeanette workin' here, Tom and Ann and the kids coming up here for Halloween, Harrison running up to me and yelling out, "Uncle Jeff!"

That did it! I remembered his running out of the barn on Halloween night. Turning and waving at me and Mike, then running again and bumping into Wayne, who stepped off the walk into the mud to let Harrison run by.

The one track in the mud, the distinctive boots leaving tracks all over. Shit! Wayne was involved. I'd bet on it. But why? The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. He hadn't been around any time when there was an incident except for the time he and Mike got shot at. I told myself, Wayne got shot. The more I thought about it, the more I realized it was not a serious shot, just in loose skin on his side. He could have used the gun on himself.

Other things began occurring to me; he'd seen the map of the national forest up on my laptop, and then Porky tried to steal it. Wayne didn't know I'd had an alarm installed. He sure knew enough about cattle to mastermind the rustling. I kept coming back to why. Why would he do something like that? Wayne was enough of an outdoorsman to know that trashing my truck thirty-some miles from the road could be fatal. Pedro must've recognized him. When it looked like Porky or Mark was gonna get arrested, then they were killed. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why though. What motivation could Wayne have for all the killings and going after me and Mike? I'd known Wayne all my life. What could turn him into a monster? Mike was still sleeping. I slowly disentangled myself without waking him. I kissed his cheek. He hugged the pillow tighter and whispered, "Jeffy."

I needed to call the sheriff. I fumbled around in the dark and grabbed a pair of underwear and socks and then some sweats. I headed downstairs. I called the sheriff's phone, but it went into voicemail. I left a message telling him my thoughts on who was behind the rustlings and why I felt that way. There had to be more to it than that though. Why? Wayne had always been around. He knew he always had a place here, so why would he turn on me? I looked out the back door. His trailer was dark. I had to see if I could find proof. I felt like a traitor to even suspect Wayne, but the circumstantial evidence was strong. I couldn't get my head around the fact that good old Wayne could be a murderer.

Since he was off in Idaho, I thought it wouldn't hurt to look in his trailer. I was really hoping that there would be nothing for me to find. I pulled on my boots and walked past the bunkhouse. I could see Josh in the kitchen, his back was to me, and he was making a pot of coffee. I continued on to Wayne's dark trailer. I knocked on the door. No answer. I looked back at the house. I'd turned off the alarm and left the back door open. I should go back and at least close the door and set the alarm. What the hell, I might only be a few minutes.

I tried the handle to the trailer door. Unlocked. Folks here don't lock their doors, but with more and more city people, it's getting more common. I turned on the light. Wayne kept his quarters pretty neat. On his coffee table was one of the first bronzes I'd ever made; I had given it to him. I started looking around. He had a little filing cabinet next to the couch. I opened it up. There was a folder labeled "Will". I opened it to find a copy of my dad's will. I hadn't read the whole thing yet. I leafed through it. Highlighted in yellow marker was a clause saying if I predeceased my dad, Wayne became the heir. The why got a little clearer. I looked through the filing cabinet. There was a folder that was unmarked. I opened it up. There were receipts from the sale of organic, free range beef to various restaurants and natural markets in Seattle. I needed to get the sheriff. I stood up and turned around. Wayne was standing in the doorway holdin' a pistol on me.

"You figured it all out?"

"Yeah, I did. I called the sheriff before I headed out here, so he knows what I know."

"You didn't listen to the radio, did you? There was a pileup of six or seven cars east of town, with some serious injuries. The sheriff will be there for a few more hours, and you'll be dead."

"Why, Wayne? I never did nothin' to you. I woulda made sure you were comfortable for the rest of your life. Now that the will's probated, why kill me?"

"I worked here for over ten years before you were born. I put my life into this place. You know I started it with your dad. I was the first foreman here."

"Yeah, he told me that."

"Then you come along, and you turn out to be a fag," Wayne said.

"You never seemed to have a problem with that before."

"I seen the light. I started goin' to Reverend Spencer's church in Pateros. He showed me how God hates sin. You don't even try to change, Jeff. You're proud to be what you are. God will judge you. You're a filthy sodomite, and everything you want falls in your lap. I reckon the devil himself is payin' you off. I work my ass off for almost thirty-five years for everything I've done to enrich some cocksucking sodomite." I was thinking I needed to keep him talking. Maybe Josh would see the open door on the house, or Mike would miss me, or the sheriff would come.

"Is your mother in Idaho really dyin'?"

"You've always been way too naïve, Jeff. If you like someone, you trust them. My old lady's been dead for years. I've been stayin' around here, just lookin' for a way to send you off to God's judgment and then to hell," Wayne spat. "You wanted to believe in me, and you did."

“How does the rustlin’ fit in with all this?” I asked.

“If I couldn’t kill you before the will was probated, it was my insurance. It was easy enough to recruit folks. I met Mark at church. When he heard about you bein’ a homo, he agreed it was wrong and helped me with the rustlin’. Maybe we could drive you away. The bible says that if a man lies with a man as with a woman he shall surely be put to death. You’re lookin’ at your executioner, Jeff. The wages of sin is death, and it’s caught up with you. I’m gonna kill that blond asshole you love stickin’ your dick in so much. Maybe I’ll tie you up and tie him up and make him watch me cut off your dick and balls and shove ’em down his throat to choke ’em. Faggot oughta die happy then.

“You both deserve to die, fuckin’ queers. You act like it’s normal. You make me sick, you and that little fuck toy of yours. God hates fags, Jeff, and he’s gonna let me get away with the whole thing for killin’ you and your plaything. Maybe as you’re bleedin’ out from havin’ your dick and nuts cut off, I’ll carve ‘The wages of sin is death’ on your chest. A warning to fags. Reverend Spencer knows your plan. You work so hard makin’ people think you’re normal, workin’ behind the scenes to take over the country and make it a haven for filthy perverts, and discriminate against good God fearing Christians. You’re dead, you scumbag, fucking, filthy homo.”

I hadn’t even been able to get a word in edgewise. His voice was going up and down, and his eyes had a wild and crazy look in them.

“You know what, fag? I am gonna cut your dick and balls off and use ’em to stuff down your little pervert friend’s throat. Then I’m gonna light this place on fire. Burn you. It’ll be preparation for hell!”

“And just how does your stealin’ cattle and comittin’ murder align with your God’s plan? Did Spencer tell you that was okay too?”

“You disgust God, Jeff. I’m doin’ His work in killin’ you and that trash you defile yourself with. God is the one who told me I had to kill Mort, the one you called Porky, since he kept messin’ up. When Mark let you know he was in on it, he failed God and had to die too.”

His eyes had this insane look to them. I could tell he’d gone insane. If he had started foaming at the mouth, I wouldn’t have been surprised. He laughed, a high-pitched eerie cackle that sent a chill up and down my spine.

“That’s what I’ll do; I’ll tie you and that blond faggot you sodomize all the time together and start this place on fire. I’ll burn the two of you to death, after I cut off your dicks and balls and put them in each other’s mouths.”

I understood the phrases “so mad I can’t see straight” and “seeing red.” I was so angry, a red haze was clouding my vision. I could feel adrenaline rushing through my system. His threatening Mike made me angrier than I’d ever been.

“Whatever happened to ‘God is Love’ and ‘Judge not lest thou be judged’?” I was surprised I sounded so calm.

“God hates sin! He *hates* it. That don’t apply to filth like you. God is a just God, and the wages of sin is death. You’re so proud of bein’ sinful, you parade it around.”

I was tryin’ to think of some way to get the gun away from him. I could hear the wind coming up. I was about to get killed, and I noticed the weather. I tried to keep my eyes on him, but scan with my peripheral vision to see if there was anything to help me. I backed up half a step, and my left hand touched the bronze. I had an idea.

I was gonna yell out, “Josh, in here!” in hopes he would look behind him. Before I could speak, a gust of wind shook the trailer. The back door of the house slammed loudly. Wayne



turned his head a bit, taking his eyes off me. I grabbed the bronze and started swinging it forward in an overhead arc. I leapt at Wayne. He turned faster than I would have thought possible, and pulled the trigger on the gun. Suddenly, my shoulder felt on fire. It was the most painful thing I had ever felt. I was dizzy from the pain. The bullet hadn't stopped my momentum. Before he could aim and fire again, I was on him. The bronze swung down and knocked into his forehead and nose. I slammed into him, and we both fell the four or so feet from the door of the trailer to the ground. The forward momentum carried us past the steps; Wayne's gun went flying. He landed on his back, and I landed on top of him. I felt something in him snap. I still held on to the bronze. I lifted it up. It seemed a lot heavier than it did when I first picked it up. I slammed it as hard as I was able right in Wayne's face. I think he was unconscious, but I was too messed up with the shot, the adrenaline, and the anger to care.

His nose flattened and blood began spurting. I picked up the bronze and saw half his lip was torn off and his front teeth were all broken. I picked it up again. It made me tired to do so. I slammed it down as hard as I could. It hit Wayne's jaw, and I heard a satisfying snapping sound. I tried to pick it up again, but couldn't. The world was starting to spin faster. A gray-black film was closing in from the corners of my vision. I swayed and then fell over Wayne. As I fell, I thought I heard steps running near me. I hoped the bastard hadn't gotten up and wasn't getting away. Then everything went black.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

I FELT like I was swimming up through real murky water. It was holding me back and weighing everything down. Everything around me was blurry. Slowly, everything seemed to come into focus. My shoulder was sore, and it throbbed. I had a bad headache too. I felt like a horse ready for the glue factory. I could barely lift my head to look around. Mike was draped over a chair next to the bed. There were monitors and tubes hooked up to me. He looked like he was asleep. His clothes were rumpled, and he hadn't shaved his neck or cheeks in a bit. He looked like hell. Slowly, it came back to me. I must be in the hospital.

"Buddy." It came out a dry, raspy, croak, too soft to wake him. "Buddy." He stirred and looked over at me. "Hey, buddy." He jumped up and pressed a button. He grabbed my hand.

"Jeffy! You're awake. We were so worried." He put his head down so it was against my hand and started crying.

"Ssss okay, bullet wasn't kryptonite." I heard footsteps, but was too sore and dizzy to turn my head.

Mike looked up and over me and said, "He's awake. He knows what's goin' on. He told me he's alive because the bullet wasn't kryptonite." He started cryin' again. Maria was there. She moved into my field of vision. I smiled at her. I suddenly felt exhausted. The gray murky water seemed to envelop me. This time, it was warmer and welcoming. I felt Maria lift my arm and do something; maybe she was taking my blood pressure? The tiredness overwhelmed me; I closed my eyes and slept.

When I opened my eyes again, Mike was there. He looked like he'd cleaned up a bit. I didn't feel quite so dizzy or so disoriented.

"Hey, Jeff, you're awake again?"

"Yep, you're nice to wake up to, Mike. How long have I been here?" My voice didn't sound like me. It was rough. It hurt to talk.

"This is day three. You woke up for a minute or so yesterday."

I looked at him and tried to smile. I realized that part of the dopiness I was feeling was due to the medication. Although I was better than yesterday, I still felt drained.

"You lost a lot of blood. Bullet didn't do too much damage. It went through your shoulder and just missed the shoulder blade; it did nick an artery, which accounts for the blood loss. You hit your head pretty hard, too, when you fell out the door on top of Wayne."

"What happened to him?"

"He's pretty busted up. He broke an arm, a leg, and when you fell on him, you broke four of his ribs. You really did a number on his face too. His nose is broke and his cheekbones too. His skull is cracked in the ridge under his eyebrows, and you broke his jaw, and knocked out seven of his teeth."

"He said he was gonna hurt you. I couldn't let that happen." I could see tears in Mike's eyes. He took a few deep breaths before continuing.

"Sheriff got your message and was on his way. He got there a couple of minutes after you and Wayne flew out the door. I heard the door slam and came down, and Josh heard voices. Everyone heard the shot." I squeezed his hand.

"Although he's real broken up, Wayne is stable. He admitted the rustlin' and killin' Pedro, Porky, and Mark."

"Who else is involved?"

"Some guy from down in Pateros. It seems, though, Wayne was the one that did the killin'."

"I feel like somethin' the cat drug in. When can I go home?"

"Doctor says a day or so. They want to keep you under observation since you were out so long. They wanna make sure you're stable too. We were pretty worried for a while."

"Am I in trouble for bashin' Wayne's face in?"

"Sheriff Johnston was afraid you would be at first. County prosecutor wouldn't prosecute. It was self-defense. You were pretty out of it after getting shot, so they reckoned you didn't know when to stop. Diminished capacity or somethin' like that."

"I reckon the sheriff wants to talk to me."

"You reckon right. He was pretty upset. He was one of the people we had sittin' with you."

"People sat here with me?"

"I was here all the time; Sandy was here most of the time, and Josh, Renee, José, and Smitty took turns. Mary Grace and Rick have been in here several times, and Maria has been here at least half of every day. Jeanette has been here for hours at a time, and Tom and Ann want to bring Harrison and Lisa to visit when you're up to it."

"Mike, thanks."

"For what?"

"Givin' me somethin' beautiful to wake up to." He took my hand. I lay back and closed my eyes. It was amazing, just that short conversation tired me all out. I wouldn't give it up for anything, but just holding Mike's hand was a chore. I felt myself drifting off to sleep.

When I woke up again, Mike was still there. He had a different shirt on, so I reckoned that he had gone home for a little while. Sheriff Johnston was also there.

"Jeff, it's nice to see you wake up. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty out of it. My shoulder hurts, but I don't seem to care. I feel all loopy when I'm awake, too, as if I'm floatin' or flyin' or somethin'."

"I hear you got a few weeks of physical therapy ahead of you."

"I reckon that's better than not bein' around for physical therapy. So the rustlers are all taken care of?"

"Wayne sang like a caged canary after we brought him in. I reckon he's making a plea bargain to avoid the death penalty."

"Mike told me the other guy was someone from Pateros."

"He, Mark, and Wayne all went to Reverend Spencer's church. Course now the good reverend claims that they misunderstood him. Although he's still convinced of God's hatred, he's changed his tune about judgment being God's, not man's."

"Fuckin' hypocritical coward."

"I sure won't argue about that. Are you up to giving a statement?"

"Sure. First of all, is there some way to charge Spencer with incitin' hatred or somethin' like that?"

"Unfortunately not. He never told his congregation that gays should be killed. How did you figure out it was Wayne, Jeff? Nobody ever would have thought of him. He's always been close to you and your father. I'd thought of him as a good man. It's hard to believe that he could be so corrupted by hate."

"When I realized it was him, I didn't want to believe it. That's why I went into his trailer, with the hope of findin' nothin' incriminatin'."

"Do I need to give you another lecture about how stupid it was for you to go into his trailer and not let anyone know what you were doing?"

"I reckon I learned my lesson."

"Jeff, somehow I doubt that. It seems to be the cowboy way, act first and think later. Now for the record, why'd you come to suspect Wayne?"

I went over the story with the sheriff; how I remembered Harrison almost running into Wayne, how there was only that one footprint in the frozen mud and it matched. How I had found the cattle rustling receipts and other evidence in Wayne's trailer. How Wayne was planning to kill me and Mike, and how I'd jumped him and literally smashed his face with the bronze sculpture I'd given him. Mike was there and held my hand the whole time. When I got to the part about Wayne wanting to mutilate me and kill Mike, he squeezed my hand so hard it hurt. I talked for a good half an hour into the recorder Sheriff Johnston had brought.

"Okay, Jeff, I'll get this transcribed, and you can come and sign it. You're lucky that the wind came up and blew the door shut; you realize that this could be your funeral, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"So what was the whole scheme, and why did Wayne's criminal activity change from rustlin' to killin'?" Mike asked.

"Wayne talked quite a bit when I questioned him. The whole thing actually started a couple of years ago. Wayne had started rounding up cattle one or two at a time on his time off. His father was a butcher, and when Wayne was younger, he used to help him, so he knew how to dress and cut up a beef. It was just a sideline for a long while."

"So what changed?" Mike asked again.

“He started goin’ to Spencer’s church. I guess a lady who he’d met invited him there. After listenin’ to the reverend’s message of love and redemption, he began to feel resentful of you.”

I had to jump in here. “I still don’t get why. Wayne had always seemed open-minded and acceptin’ of me. I woulda never done anythin’ to hurt Wayne. When I found out that the ranch was paid off and I was gettin’ some insurance money, I wanted to do somethin’ for him.”

“The hate he was hearin’ began to have an effect on him. Then when your dad died, I think that was the last straw for him. He felt entitled, and he was jealous of you.”

“But a good part of who I am is due to Wayne and his influence over the years. Couldn’t he see that my bein’ gay is only one part of me? Also, it’s no one’s business but mine and now Mike’s.”

“Jeff, I honestly believe that folks who are so filled with hate and evil, like Wayne became, like Reverend Spencer and others, are blinded to the goodness in others. They judge and condemn and fall deeper and deeper into their hatred. They close their eyes to all that is good.”

“It’s easier for me to just think he went insane.”

“In a way he did, son. All that hatred made him crazy.”

“How did Mark fit in?”

“That’s an interesting sideline. The stuff he told you and Mike about California, well that was a crock. He’s really from Texas. He was in some ministry there that ‘changes’ gay folks. He was a really desperately unhappy man. He couldn’t accept himself for who he was, and he couldn’t be what he wanted to be; he just wasn’t wired that way. He was goin’ to Spencer’s church also. I reckon his seein’ you, the type of guy who is on the outside who he wanted to be, and then your bein’ like him on the inside was just a constant reminder of how unhappy he was. It seems that on one hand, he really did want to be your and Mike’s friend. On the other, to do that would mean givin’ up the beliefs he’d held on to for most of his life.”

“So why did Wayne kill him?”

“Here’s the kicker; Wayne keeps sayin’ God said he had to die. Wayne felt he was justified in killing him and the biker because God would pardon him. He also said that Mark was backsliding; he wanted outta the rustling business more and more as he got to know the two of you. He began to question Spencer’s hatred.”

“So, when we figured out Mark was in on it, did Wayne see that as some sort of a sign from God that Mark wasn’t worthy or somethin’?” I asked.

“He did. With the biker, he killed him because of his numerous screwups. Everything Wayne had asked him to do, he failed at, so therefore, he had to die. It was also mighty convenient that with him dead, he couldn’t identify Wayne, same with Mark.”

“Pedro?”

“That’s where Wayne’s insanity defense would fall apart if he were to go that route. Pedro stumbled on Wayne, Mark, and the other guy doin’ their rustlin’. He was shot in the back as he went for help. Dead men tell no tales.”

“Mike said I messed up Wayne pretty bad.”

“You did. He had a pretty bad concussion, several broken ribs, most of his teeth in front knocked out, broken jaw, broken nose and cheekbones, as well as the upper part of both eye sockets broken. He’s gonna be a marked man from now until the day he dies; he also has a broken leg and arm from the fall. You must have hit him with quite a bit of momentum. The two of you flew about ten feet. His cushioning you is the only reason you’re not more broken up.”

“Mike said I’m not bein’ charged with assault or anythin’ like that?”

"No, son, you're not. You might have gone a little overboard in defending yourself, but why you did is understandable. You were in shock pretty bad when they brought you in. In fact, you were in worse shape than Wayne, though he's the one who looked real bad."

"Will I need to testify at a trial?"

"My understanding is that he made a guilty plea and a plea bargain. I'm sure he did it to avoid the death penalty. It doesn't look like there will be a trial."

"I guess that's a good thing. Can I ask the judge to go easy on him?" The sheriff looked at me for a long time before speaking.

"That's real big of you, Jeff. He was trying to kill both you and Mike. Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I am, Sheriff; if I were to forget all the stuff Wayne did for me before goin' bad, and were to want just to punish and have revenge, I'd be no better than Reverend Spencer's Christians."

"I'll talk with the prosecuting attorney. Son, you should be right proud of the way you figured the whole thing out; you too, Mike. You guys ever want to be deputies, just let me know."

"Thanks."

"I am gonna head back to the office now." He shook my hand and Mike's and walked out. Just as he was leavin', the doctor came by.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Connelly?"

"Other than the shoulder hurtin' and a headache, only bad; I get tired just from lyin' here too."

"I imagine so. When they brought you in here, you had lost a fair amount of blood. It wasn't enough to be fatal, but enough to cause you some difficulties. You were in shock and had suffered a mild concussion."

"No wonder I slept three days."

"The fact you did, helped you quite a bit. Also the fact that you're in excellent physical shape was in your favor."

"How bad is my shoulder?"

"The bullet passed clear through. Luckily, it didn't hit any bones. It did nick an artery, hence the loss of blood. We were able to repair much of the damage when we cleaned and stitched up the wound. Your partner here has let me know you guys work out five to six days a week?"

"That's right."

"I've got physical therapy scheduled for you for the next couple of weeks. That'll help you regain full use of the shoulder and arm and allow you to work out without damaging anything."

"That's great!"

"We'll be discharging you day after tomorrow if we can get you up, and you're able to get around a bit, and your vital signs remain stable."

"Okay. Will I be able to take my buddy huntin' once I get out?" Mike smiled at me from behind the doctor.

"After a week or so of rest, I don't see why not. I would caution you not to shoot a rifle with any kickback. It won't keep your shoulder from continuing to heal, but it certainly won't feel good."

"No problems with that."

"I'll also prescribe some pain pills if you need them."

"Is that the stuff that makes me feel like I'm really happy and just floatin' around? The stuff that even though I can still feel the pain, I just don't care?"

"That would be the stuff."

"Don't reckon I need it. I don't like the way it feels."

"I'll write the prescription. It's up to you to fill it. Mr. Connelly, you're a lucky man. Not only in not sustaining major damage to yourself, or due to the fact that you're healing very well, but also due to the number of people who care about you. I've heard that this young man here hasn't been home since you were brought in." He gestured to Mike. "I've had to give one of my nurses some vacation time because she kept coming down here to see you. I've also heard you've had a constant stream of visitors." He shook my hand as he left. "I'll stop by in a few hours."

I looked around the room. There were quite a few flowers. "It looks like the florist is doin' good business off me."

"There's more at home."

"You're kiddin'."

"Nope, and Smitty said, as of today's mail, you've got quite a few cards."

"Still the best thing to me is you bein' here."

"I was so scared, Jeff. I thought I was gonna lose you." He held my hand in a death grip.

"I told ya, buddy, the bullet wasn't kryptonite."

"Cocky bastard."

"The reason I jumped Wayne even though he had the gun is he said he was gonna go after you. I couldn't let that happen no matter what happened to me."

Mike just looked at me, tears in his eyes. He squeezed my hand. Just then there was a commotion at the door.

"Jeff! You're awake and coherent! I told you it was all going to end soon." Mary Grace breezed into the room. She grabbed my hand and held it tightly.

"Thanks, Mary Grace, and thanks for all your help."

"Don't mention it at all. I have something to help your shoulder heal." She opened her big mom-type purse and pulled out a beautiful piece of rock crystal.

"I programmed this for healing." She set it gently on my shoulder. I woulda thought the weight of anythin' on my shoulder would hurt, but surprisingly it didn't.

"Thanks again! You take pretty good care of me and Mike."

"That's what friends are for. Oh, after the news of your solving the cattle thievery and catching the rustlers hit the newspapers, the gallery has been swamped. I expect that it is going to stay that way until after the New Year. Two of your sculptures have sold, and we had a reporter from *American West Magazine* there to see the exhibit. You're a famous man now, Jeff. So when are you able to go home?"

"Possibly the day after tomorrow; I'm really lookin' forward to it. I wanna get rid of all these tubes."

"Mike, how are you doing? Did you finally get some sleep?"

"I did. Actually, I'm getting used to sleepin' in this chair."

"See, Jeff, you need to get better quickly. If you don't, this boy will never get any sleep."

"You can go home, buddy; I don't want you to get sick or nothin'."

"Don't worry about me. Just concentrate on gettin' better."

"I guess Wayne has to be in solitary confinement in prison."

"Why is that, Mary Grace?"

"I heard it's common knowledge that he was beaten so badly by a gay man, even though he had a gun. They don't give him a long life expectancy if he's in with the general population."

"Wow, that's got to be tough; I wouldn't even wish that on him, bein' alone and disfigured for the rest of his life in captivity."

"The evil he sent out reverberated on him. He got what he deserved. The Goddess doesn't mess around when it comes to justice."

Mike and I just looked at each other. I have a lot of respect for Mary Grace's beliefs. Maybe it was psychosomatic, but my shoulder did feel better with the crystal on it.

"Jeff, Mike, I brought the pictures of the caroling and the snowball fight; do you feel up to looking at them?"

"Sure, Mary Grace." She pulled out a folder that contained a bunch of pictures. They had turned out really well. We all looked good singing together, and the snowball fight pictures showed that we were having a great time. Everyone was smiling, and you could tell we were all great friends. Mike leaned over me while we were looking at the pictures. It was really nice of Mary Grace to bring them.

"These are fantastic, Mary Grace. Are you putting them up in the exhibit?"

"We certainly are. We really want to stress the fact that you and Mike are locals." I was beginning to feel really tired again. I started yawning, and Mary Grace made the excuse she had to get some shopping done while she was here in Wenatchee. I closed my eyes, just for a second, and drifted off to sleep.

It was several hours later when I woke up. Mike was still in the room, and he had Harrison in his lap. He saw my eyes open and smiled at me, and then said something to Harrison. Just then I realized that someone was holding my finger, and I turned my head to see Ann, sitting in a chair which was pulled right up to my bed. Tom was standing behind her. Lisa smiled at me and kept a hold of my finger.

"Uncle Jeff!"

"Uncle Jeff!" Mike brought Harrison over to me and set him on the bed in one of the few areas which didn't have any tubes from me to something.

"You got the bad guys, Uncle Jeff."

"I sure did, buckaroo! They're not gonna bother us no more."

"Can I go huntin' with you and Uncle Mike?"

"Did you ask your mom and dad?" He looked up at Tom and Ann with pleading eyes.

"Please, please?"

"You think you're gonna be well enough to go hunting?" Ann looked at me skeptically.

"The doctor said it's okay. I reckon Mike will have to do all the work though."

"I'll help, Uncle Mike!" Mike smiled at Harrison. I had to answer though.

"I bet you will, buckaroo, and that'll make twice the work for Uncle Mike."

"You must be feelin' better, Jeff; you're startin' to joke around." Ann laughed at me and then asked me how old I was the first time my dad took me hunting. When I answered three, she and Tom laughed and said yes.

Just then Maria brought a tray with some food on it. Tom, Ann, and the kids left to give me a chance to eat. I got big kisses from Harrison and Lisa. After they had left, I tried the mystery meat in gravy sauce and imitation potatoes.

“Maria, am I supposed to eat this, or is it for somethin’ else?”

She laughed. “Our hospital food is not the best, is it?”

“That’s an understatement if I ever heard one.” She looked around and then opened a bag she had brought. Inside were three pork and red chile tamales.

“I brought you these. I hope they make up for the bad food.”

“Thanks!” I dug in. Despite not bein’ able to identify just what the hospital food was, I ate it all, even the jello and I hate jello. I was still exhausted and fell asleep right after dinner.

I ended up sleeping the whole night through. Mike was still there when I woke up. He’d shaved and had on different clothes; I found out later he had gone to Maria’s for a few hours sleep and to clean up. Sandy and Smitty were also there. I smiled at Sandy, and she started crying. She grabbed my hand.

“Jeff, I was so worried. Every time I came you were out or asleep.”

“The bullet wasn’t made of kryptonite, darlin’. I’m okay. I actually feel a lot better today.” She slapped my hand and started crying even harder.

“Kryptonite my ass, you could have been killed. Just like Dad said, you acted like a real cowboy, act first and think later. I was really afraid for you. Mike said you were so pale when they got you in the ambulance that you already looked dead. None of us could sleep for worrying about you.”

I glanced at Mike and said, “Thanks, buddy.” He suddenly found his boots real interesting.

“Sandy, I did call your dad. I didn’t mean to upset anyone.”

“I know; I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I do have a favor to ask you though, darlin’.”

“Of course, Jeff, what?”

“Can you explain to me sometime how women think? I mean, you start cryin’ because you’re so worried about me, then you hit me. This ain’t the first time it’s happened either. I just want to understand what’s goin’ on in that beautiful head of yours.” She finally smiled and giggled. Smitty chuckled.

“Jeff, I don’t think we’re ever going to understand womenfolk. Remember men are from Mars, and women are from Venus,” Smitty commented.

“I reckon so. I just wanna understand Sandy. We’re pretty close, and it hurts, especially the gettin’ hit when I don’t understand.”

“Okay, enough you two of talking about me like I wasn’t even here. Jeff, I reckon I was just so upset and worried; all the emotion got bottled up inside, then I got a bit mad that you didn’t think.”

“Okay, I reckon next time, I’ll just stay way back and get you a punchin’ bag or somethin’ so you can hit it and not me.”

“Good idea, Jeff.” Smitty winked at me, and Sandy lightly slapped his arm. She then changed the subject.

“Jeff, Wayne’s arraignment is next week. He’s pleading guilty to take the death penalty off the table. Dad talked to the prosecutor and the judge, and they want to hear what you have to say about the sentencing.”



"I'm glad they're open to listenin'."

"Jeff, that's a right nice thing you're doing for Wayne," Smitty said. "I don't know if I could be that forgiving."

"Smitty, I ain't gonna let myself become corrupted by hate. Hate is what got Wayne in this spot in the first place." Just then José and Josh came in the room.

"Boss, I am very happy to see that you are getting better. Hijole, I was worried." Josh nodded as José spoke.

"So how are you, Mr. Foreman?" I asked.

"Quien? Me?" José looked very surprised.

"Yes you. You've been onboard with every issue we've had since I got back, you ran roundup well, and you've really jumped into this dude thing with both feet. I can't think of a better person for foreman." José grinned and gingerly gave me a hug.

"I am happy to see you are better, boss. You looked very bad when the ambulance took you away. When you were unconscious, you had this gray look. We were very worried." Just about everyone there nodded.

"You guys are gonna get me dizzy if you don't stop with the bobble head imitations." That seemed to break a good deal of tension. Everyone started filling me in on what had happened in the last few days: Wayne, the reward for the capture of the rustlers, dead or alive, and everything else. When I said we had to split the reward as we all worked together, everyone argued against it good naturedly. The doctor came by, and they all went out into the hall as he checked me over. He called a nurse to remove the tubes, which made me feel one hundred percent better. Everyone took turns walking with me the rest of the day to help me get my strength back. The best thing was I'd be going home tomorrow!

A FEW days later, I was home. I still was a bit slow on my feet, but the doctor felt I was making great progress with the physical therapy. I did feel good enough to have the houseful of people we'd planned for Thanksgiving. Both Tom and Jonathan wanted to interview me for their magazines, and so did a couple of other folks. I reckoned the ranch was going to get a good deal of publicity. Mike had built a fire in the fireplace. We were cuddled together on the sofa. It was snowing again outside, and I could smell the chili he had in the slow cooker. It was nice to be home.

"Mike, I got a favor to ask."

"What's that, Jeffy?"

"When we go into Okanogan after the first of the year, let's spend some extra time at the courthouse after Wayne's arraignment."

"Okay, why though?"

"Well, I was figurin' since it's the county seat...."

He gave me a quizzical look, so I continued.

"The courthouse is where we'd register as domestic partners with the state. After Prop 71 passed here in Washington, it's marriage in everythin' but the name. That is if you want to, buddy. I know I wanna spend my life with you. So, I reckon what I'm askin' is will you marry me?"

He leaned over and kissed me. "That's the best offer I've ever had."

"I reckon that's a yes?" He nodded. "Great!" We kissed again. It's funny so many folks have said we're two sides of the same coin. I just know that Mike and I are made for each other, and there's no one I'd rather have on my team to face the future.

## Epilogue

DECEMBER nights come early in north Washington. It was about four thirty in the afternoon, and it was already dark. I was sitting on the couch in the living room, my back to the corner of the couch, and my legs crossed Indian style. Mike was laying with his head on my lap. Snow was softly falling outside. A fire was lit in the fireplace. The Christmas tree was about ten feet tall and was in one corner of the room, giving off a fresh piney smell that really reminded me of Christmas. We both had on red long handles and wool socks. A throw blanket was over Mike's legs and feet; I had another draped over my lap. In the background, Jars of Clay sang "Christmas for Cowboys."

It was only a few days before Christmas. I reckoned I was as ready as I'd ever get. I tried this week making jewelry with my bronze casting technique. I was surprised as hell I was able to do it. I made two rings, one with a header throwin' a rope over a calf's head, and the other a heeler throwing the rope over the calf's hind leg. I reckoned since we had practiced so much team roping and we were now in an official domestic partnership, we ought to have rings. So I made them out of fourteen carat gold. I figured I would put them in the stockings we had hung in front of the fireplace on Christmas Eve. They looked really good. The faces were large enough for the calf roping header on Mike's ring, and the heeler on mine. The rings were a matching set. Like me and Mike.

"You were right, Jeffy; venison chili is really good."

"You doubted me? We gotta use up all that venison from that big nine point buck you got."

"Thanks again; I know it wasn't easy for you with your shoulder botherin' you."

"It weren't so bad. By that time, my shoulder was more stiff than anythin'."

"At least you were able to shoot at the turkeys."

"Yep, I figure everyone liked wild turkey as well as the tame stuff."

"Thanksgivin' turned out pretty well, don't ya think, Jeffy?"

"Little Harrison sure was happy, I think the adults liked it too. It was fun to take Tom, Harrison, and Jonathan out huntin' with us for the day."

"Harrison loved goin' for the tree. I think that was a real smart idea to get everyone to go on horseback, pick out the tree and cut it, and then bring it back to decorate. Ryan sure got some good pictures of it, didn't he?"

"That he did. Jonathan seemed to have a great time and so did his friend. They all seemed to like the Christmas at the End of the Road festival too. They all want to come back again. Between Jonathan's *Out and About* travel magazine, Tom's publication, that piece in *Western Life*, and the article about the rustlin' in the *Seattle Times*, we got plenty of publicity. Did you see the *New York Times* reprinted the *Seattle Times* article?"

"Yeah. I reckon the dude ranch part is all booked up for a while?"

“Buddy, we got folks here for months. Smitty, Sandy, and José are gonna take over for us when we go rodeoin’.”

“I am so lookin’ forward to that, Jeffy, my first gay rodeo. Jeannette offered to drive down with the stock.”

“Uh-huh. We’re gonna have to fly down. By the way, buddy, what was your favorite article?”

“I liked the one in *Out and About* that Jonathan wrote.” He reached over, picked up the issue, and began to read.

## Cowboys and Cattle Rustlers and Rodeos, Oh My!

These guys are the real thing. Jeff Connelly and his partner Mike Guidry are real cowboys. The stuff on their work boots is real, their Skoal rings are real, and they rope and ride with the best of them. In addition, they run the Lucky Jeff Guest Ranch. The ranch is a working cattle ranch in the Methow Valley in north central Washington. I first met Jeff and Mike in September. I was walking down Main Street in Winslett, WA. Walking toward me was this incredibly handsome cowboy: tight Wranglers, boots, the cowboy shirt, and a big cowboy hat, which he tipped to me. I looked back, and he caught me looking. Then he winked. Later we started up a conversation, and he invited me back to the ranch where he, Mike, and several friends put on a mini-rodeo for me and some other folks, including a boy who wants to be a cowboy. That was my first acquaintance with Jeff Connelly and the Lucky Jeff Ranch.

Catering to a mix of gay men and women and straight folks, the ranch is a fun place to stay. My friend Sam and I stayed there for Thanksgiving weekend. The accommodations are currently in the main ranch house, a huge log home very close to the Methow River. Two rooms have an attached bath and two have the bathroom down the hall. There’s a hot tub under the stars and a workout room. The food is great, and there is plenty of it. On Thanksgiving weekend, we cut and put up the Christmas tree in the main house. A friend and his family were staying at the ranch for the weekend, too, and the kids were enchanted with real cowboys and cutting their own Christmas trees.

In staying at the Lucky Jeff Ranch, you’ll feel like you’re guests in a family home. Although they are both only in their twenties, Jeff and Mike are the consummate hosts. Both are artists also; Jeff is becoming well-known for his bronze castings of Western scenes, and Mike is an expert in the traditional cowboy craft of braiding horsehair into hatbands, belts, and various items of tack. Jeff and Mike also are probably two of the most handsome guys I’ve ever met.

The staff members are a great group of folks, both straight and gay. They have been, for the most part, friends of Jeff’s for years, some dating back to grade school. The love and friendship they have for one another makes the place really special. Jeff and Mike also became famous recently for busting a cattle-rustling ring in northern Washington. Although Jeff was shot in the ensuing gunfight, he’s fine now and the good guys won!

In speaking with Jeff, I asked him why a dude ranch.

Jeff: “Well, Jonathan, I reckon I’m the luckiest guy on earth to live here, be surrounded by such good friends, and just to be out here cowboyin’. It seems to me folks always want to know what cowboys do, and how does a ranch work, and that kinda thing. I thought by invitin’ ’em into my home, I could share that with ’em. Also I

really love this area. I grew up here and still think it is one of the most beautiful spots on earth. There's a lot of outdoor stuff here too."

Out and About: "You and Mike are real cowboys, correct?"

Jeff: "As real as real gets. I been cowboyin' here and on other ranches around here since I was in my early teens, and Mike got into cowboyin' in his mid-teens. We both compete in rodeos, both gay and straight, and have won several buckles apiece."

Out and About: "Why the mixture of gay and straight folks as guests?"

Jeff: "I been out since I was sixteen, here. Nowadays for the most part, folks just accept me. They accept Mike too. I think that bein' out and open helps break down stereotypes and lessens discrimination. The friends who help me run the ranch are both gay and straight, and we all are kinda like one big happy family. That's the atmosphere I wanna share with my guests."

Out and About: "What kind of amenities do you offer your guests?"

Jeff: "Three full meals a day, a welcomin' drink, after that alcohol to purchase. We have the workout room and hot tub, and we're buildin' a sauna. We have plenty of board games, DVDs, and books to read. We do trail rides, barbecues, mini-rodeos, and we can guide huntin' and fishin' trips. We have some cowboy poetry, story, and sing along evenings too. We can teach folks to rope and ride, too, if they want. If one of the guests has an idea of somethin' they want to do, all they gotta do is ask, and we'll see if we can make it happen."

Out and About: "Don't you do seasonal events too?"

Jeff: "We sure do. Over Thanksgivin' weekend, we had a big turkey dinner, we went out and cut our own Christmas tree and decorated it, and then had a cowboy Christmas party, with carol singin' and some two-step around the Christmas tree. In roundup season, guests can participate in that. In winter, we are the center of a great area for winter sports."

Out and About: "You're expanding the guest part of the ranch, aren't you, Jeff?"

Jeff: "We currently have four rooms in the house devoted to guests. We're gonna build another four cabins outside."

Out and About: "Will you do groups or special occasions like commitment ceremonies or weddings?"

Jeff: "Just ask and we'll see what we can do."

Out and About: "One last question, Jeff, are you named after the ranch or is the ranch named after you?"

Jeff: Laughs. "Actually, Jonathan, neither. We're both named after the big ridge that runs right behind the ranch house. It's called Lucky Jeff Bluff."

If you want to visit an authentic working ranch run by real cowboys who happen to be gay, visit the Lucky Jeff Ranch.

"I like that one too. Tom also wrote a good article, didn't he?" I began to read Tom's article.

**My Heroes have always been Cowboys**

My son who is eight has a fascination with cowboys. He wants Western clothes and little toy guns and holsters. This fall my family was lucky enough to meet Jeff Connelly, proprietor of the Lucky Jeff Ranch and a real cowboy.

The Lucky Jeff Ranch is a working cattle ranch in Washington's Methow Valley, which takes in dudes. Jeff was in a local coffee shop where we were eating lunch when my son approached him and asked if he was a real cowboy.

Jeff answered, "One-hundred-percent real" and began to speak with my son about cowboying, and life on a ranch. A friend of Jeff's, Sandy Johnston, came by, and they invited my wife and me together with our kids to visit the ranch. We had a great dinner, and Jeff, Sandy, their friend Maria, and Jeff's partner Mike put on a mini-rodeo for us. My son still talks about it. We also spent Thanksgiving at the ranch and had one of the nicest holidays we've had in a long time. We took part in cutting and decorating the Christmas tree, and in some delightful caroling led by the staff of the Lucky Jeff Ranch in Winslett's End of the Road Christmas Festival.

The staff members of the ranch are all good friends of Jeff and Mike's, and that is apparent on seeing them interact. Jeff and Mike are partners, and the ranch is open to all, gay and straight. Some folks might think twice about taking their kids to a gay-owned vacation destination, but kids are welcome and well taken care of here. My son and daughter still talk about the great time they had, and the staff all seem to love kids and to go out of their way to make them welcome.

The accommodations are comfortable, the food is great and plentiful, and the activities these folks put on are great. Ranging from barbecues and storytelling and singing around the campfire (Jeff, Mike, and Maria sing beautifully), to roping and riding lessons, rodeo nights, Western dances, and trail rides, all are well-organized and fun. Other activities, such as horseback camping, hunting and fishing, white water rafting, and winter sports can be arranged. My son and I were part of a deer hunting trip arranged by Jeff and Mike. Everyone had a great time.

Jeff and Mike are both local artists whose works (bronze castings for Jeff and horsehair hatbands and belts for Mike) are featured in the artists' co-op in Winslett. Our hosts were recently the subject of many headlines, not only in Washington, but across the country, for their busting of an organized cattle rustling cartel. There was actually a gunfight in which Jeff was injured. But the good guys won, the rustlers are behind bars, and Jeff is okay.

"After that he started talking about Winslett and the Methow Valley."

"I reckon we're famous now, Jeffy."

"It's shapin' up to be a real good year, Mike, and I'm really glad you're here to share it with."

"Me too, Jeffy. Me too." We ended that discussion with a soft kiss, one that spoke volumes about us and our relationship to one and another.

JAKE MACTIRE's inspiration for his writing is based on some of his experiences in rodeo and travel. He does his best work coming up with storylines when hiking or cross-country skiing. Writing is Jake's escape from his boring day job. In addition to writing, Jake loves rodeo, the outdoors, and travel. He's visited more than fifty countries, ridden the Trans-Siberian Express, taken a riverboat down the Mekong, and hiked the Inca trail in Peru. Closer to home, Jake enjoys hiking, kayaking, and cross-country skiing. He currently lives in Seattle.

Visit Jake at <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100001519012715>. You can contact him at [jake.mactire@gmail.com](mailto:jake.mactire@gmail.com).



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