



the
Blacksmith

AND THE EX-CON



FARTHINGDALE RANCH BOOK 2

JACKIE NORTH

THE BLACKSMITH AND THE EX-CON

A GAY M/M COWBOY ROMANCE

JACKIE NORTH

Jackie North

M M Romance Author

For all those who know that love is love...
And to Fran S, who had not a doubt in her mind.

*“Love posses not, nor would it be possessed;
For love is sufficient unto love.”*

~~ Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

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About the Author

ELLIS

The drive to the ranch, where his parole was to take place, felt a lot like the drive to the prison had two years earlier. Only now, under the warm sun of late June, the fact that they were moving away from civilization rather than toward it made Ellis feel as though he was headed into the abyss. A vast empty wasteland, not much different than his life had been in Wyoming Correctional.

Given the opportunity of empty scrubland zooming past the dusty windows of the prison van, it wasn't a sure thing that Phil, his PO, wouldn't take it upon himself to tell the driver to stop the van. Then Phil could drag Ellis out of the van and shoot him in the head with the gun from his holster, leaving Ellis to die behind a green-tinged sagebrush where no one would find the body, not for years and years, possibly not ever.

Perhaps with the driver as potential witness, Phil wouldn't dare go that far, though he'd gone plenty far so far, tying Ellis' zip ties too tight, being rough with Ellis when he'd loaded him and his prison-issued string tie bag into the van.

"You ought to talk to the warden again," said the driver, a nameless fellow with Elvis sideburns and a squinty-eyed look behind his aviator sunglasses.

"I did that," said Phil, growling from beneath his white-streaked goatee and mustache. He wore aviator sunglasses as well, though they were orange-tinted, too big for his face and, oddly, seemed to be propping up the brim of his felt cowboy hat. "The fucker said I had too many abuses on my record.

Said I needed to clean up my act. Said I needed to take that damn course on prison reform. An' I said—”

“And you said, aw, hell no.” The driver snickered and did a little jig in celebration of Phil’s rebellion, causing the steering wheel to hitch back and forth, which sent the van swerving on the blacktop road as they raced down a hill into a small gully.

Watching through the front windshield, Ellis felt like he was falling into a hole. Besides, he knew Phil was lying, even though he’d just met him two weeks back. Phil’s mouth was moving, for one. And for two, nobody swore like that at the warden of Wyoming Correctional. It just wasn’t done.

By all accounts, the warden was a stand-up guy who made the inmates just enough afraid of him so they’d fall in line. Ellis had met with him precisely twice. Once when he’d been admitted after he’d been arrested, charged, and convicted of drug dealing, and once when the parole board had stamped his parole application so he could be released into the wild.

Well, not the wild exactly. He’d had one option for rehab, and that was the wild horse program the prison ran, only he’d messed that up, just like he’d messed everything else up.

He wouldn’t have messed up, though, if they’d just allowed him to go to Mom’s funeral.

The approval for parole with the wild horse program had been quickly followed by the phone call from Cheyenne General that his mom had passed away. After almost four hard years of chemo, two full years on her own without Ellis to help her, she’d succumbed. The doctor sounded very sorry, though maybe that was because he wouldn’t be raking in the money for her treatment for a seemingly untreatable cancer.

In the beginning there’d been hope, of course, there always was. Ellis had taken his first job out of college teaching English at a local high school, Sand Creek High. He’d wanted to pay bills and take care of Mom that way, but without good insurance, the bills had piled high. And since he was working full time, teacher’s hours, Mom had often been in the care of the indifferent staff who sometimes left her waiting for

treatment for hours at a time in the wide, cold, grey-painted corridors.

Things had changed one day when Ellis had detained two students in a stairwell who were obviously dealing drugs and flashing wads of cash to their school chums, like it was something to be proud of. Almost two thousand dollars had fallen out of one student's pockets, and he'd bragged he'd made that much in an afternoon. He also pointed out that even if Ellis and the principal confiscated what he had on him, he'd make that back and more right quick.

There was no stopping the flow of drugs in that school, and nobody stopping Ellis when he decided that the thing to do was to tap into that flow. He first watched a great many badly done cop dramas and googled for hours late at night to get an idea how to go about becoming a criminal. He then found the higher-up dealers, frightfully easy, that, and made himself available. Dependable. Honest. Hardworking. Inside of two weeks, mid-October, he was able to quit the teaching job and start delivering drugs and money full time.

He never let on what he was doing. He had a special set of what he called his teaching clothes and switched into them out of his bad boy clothes before visiting the hospital. Mom never knew. She was amazed and pleased when he was able to move her to a well-run local clinic that specialized in lung cancer and, with better treatment, she brightened. Seemed to improve. Then she got worse, and Ellis got desperate. Heightened his intensity of work and threw money at the clinic.

That's what got him into trouble. Even cash was traceable if there were large enough amounts of it flowing between institutions. Ellis had been smart enough not to use his own bank account, but as he couldn't carry piles of actual cash into the clinic, he'd had to set up a second account and pay through that, using their online system. That the feds hadn't been on to him from the first wasn't a sure thing, but that they caught up with him eventually was.

His time in Wyoming Correctional had not been a cakewalk, but neither had it been the nightmare of rape-you-in-the-butt-don't-pick-up-the-soap horror that had been joked

about on SNL and other late-night comedy routines. There was violence and the electricity of danger around every corner, though. Ellis had learned to study the room every time he walked into one. He studied the cafeteria, studied his variety of cellmates, studied the exercise grounds, bare beneath the shifting, wild, Wyoming skies in the middle of nowhere. He studied as hard as he'd ever done for a college exam and, most times, he aced it.

Sure, he'd gotten into it with the skinheads when they stole his basketball, and yes, he'd had a week-long threat from Ruiz and his pals, who had suddenly decided he should supply them with extra cigarettes. He'd managed that and then some, and then had to turn his attention to the skinheads again who, he was able to figure out with some amusement, were *jealous* he wasn't helping them with *their* cigarette supply.

All of it became too much. His mom was getting sicker, and he needed parole, so he cleaned up his act and distanced himself from anyone the warden might deem trouble.

Sex came at night, furtive couplings when the lights switched off all over the prison and the dark was lit through with stabs of safety lamps that made full darkness impossible. The bunk beds were narrow and made full-on fucking almost impossible. The metal frames squeaked, and Ellis had fallen off more than once.

The shower was a good place to get off, as the thunder of water masked any sounds, and other inmates turned away and simply didn't care. The exercise yard was good for hand jobs, or a blow job from a guy on his knees who would do it for tokens to the prison commissary if you asked him nice.

It was the guards who would get you, yank you out of line, and fling mean words, as though mere sounds could keep any convict from getting his rocks off when and where he wanted to. Being slammed into a wall hurt plenty, though, and Ellis learned to be circumspect, just like he'd learned everything else.

When the opportunity came to apply for parole, he'd shelled out from his supply of unsmoked cigarettes for a

gently used Bic pen and spent a good long hour in the prison library filling out the form. He even gave up his computer time to a large guy named Bob, who made sure nobody bothered Ellis or jiggled his arm. The application had been as tidy as a new hatbox, and the meeting with the parole board had gone as smoothly as a debutant's cotillion.

The board stamped his application approved, and even recommended him to the wild horse program instead of regular parole, which was fine with Ellis. He'd had a pony when he was young, and though those days, and his youth, seemed far behind him and long ago, it sounded like a good fit to him.

He wasn't a bad guy. He wasn't a criminal. He'd taken a wrong turn for the right reasons, though nobody had believed him all this long while. But the parole board did. They even smiled and shook his hand and congratulated him on his chance at turning over a new leaf.

The new leaf had turned brown, flaked to dust, when, only days after his approval, he'd gotten the call from Cheyenne General, where his mom had been transferred halfway through his prison sentence, after the money for the expensive clinic had finally run out.

The doctor had sounded sorry, and Ellis had gone cold, holding the plastic receiver of the communal phone in one hand, his other reaching out into the air as though he could yank time back, turn it all around. Call Manny, the drug lord he'd worked for, and beg him to send more money to Mom and the clinic.

But it was too late for that. The only thing he could do was hang up the phone and ask the guard on shift for an application for a grievance furlough so he could take care of Mom's body and bid her one last goodbye.

He filled out the furlough application with his still newish pen, and waited in his cell, going through his things, even starting to pack, sure they would let him go. After all, he'd just been granted parole, right? He was due out in less than a

month, so what was a few weeks early going to hurt? Maybe they'd move his parole up and just let him go—

That was not to be. The hubris of his new PO who, Ellis had found out through the prison grapevine, had been denied *his* application for a promotion, had determined, somehow, that Ellis and his problems were to blame. While his parole had not been withdrawn outright, the fact that Ellis had attacked a guard and started a small but intense riot in the cafeteria over being denied a grievance furlough had gotten him three days in solitary and his membership card to the wild horse program revoked.

Parole was still a possibility, but by the time Ellis had gotten out of solitary—

Three days in the semi-dark, robustly quiet narrow room with only a sink, a toilet, and a hard bed—no window, no clock, only three plain meals to mark the passage of time—had driven him half mad. At least he felt half mad, his grief for Mom soaking into his pillow, shuddering his body, sharp wails unanswered, the pain of it driving into him with hard blows, moment by moment.

When they let him out of solitary, the world echoed with a low hum, like there was a machine just beneath the floor or behind the walls, churning away. Loud enough to annoy, but not loud enough, it seemed, to be heard by anybody else. Not that he could ask the question: *can you hear that?* For every time he opened his mouth, no sound came out. Not a word. Not a peep.

He was panicked at first, his heart racing as to how he was going to communicate. But the cell block guards didn't seem to notice, nor the parole board, who yanked him in for another hearing to determine whether or not he was violent enough to need to stay behind bars for another year.

Not that he'd last that long. He knew how to make a shiv. He knew who to hand it to. Knew who to piss off so they'd use it on him. There was nothing worth living for if he couldn't say his goodbyes to Mom. Nothing on the planet worth caring

about if he couldn't stand in front of her state-funded plaque in the ground and tell her he was sorry for letting her down.

The parole board, less enthused by him and most certainly less supportive than the last time they'd all met, eyed him as he sat across the table from them. They stared at the partly done tattoo on his neck he'd begun while waiting for his furlough to be approved.

He'd looked at himself in the mirror and used the blue ink from his pen, sucked out from one jagged, plastic end, inserting the ink beneath his skin with a thin straight pin he'd come across in the exercise yard. The tattoo was supposed to be a dragonfly or maybe even a hummingbird, but it looked more like a mangled ribbon and, half-done, marked him for what he was. A drug dealer. A hard-ass. A convict. Nobody they'd want to be associated with should they meet him on the street.

His hair was still greasy from solitary, as he couldn't find his shampoo in his kit box once he was back in his cell, and the prison soap simply couldn't be rinsed out. Now the strings of that hair had to be constantly pushed back from his face, drawing attention to the shitty tattoo over and over again as he listened to the head of the parole board. She was a prissy woman in a sweater set and shiny, curly hair, like she'd stepped out of a magazine and decided that helping the poor and the destitute were what was going to get her noticed by a Hollywood agent.

He was hungry, that's what it was, a hunger deep enough inside him that he couldn't bear to eat, and now that hunger was blowing up, leaving crazy, twisted ideas swirling around in his head.

“—do you think, Mr. Bowman?”

“What?” asked Ellis, squinting, as if that might help him focus. Only the word didn't actually come out. His mouth moved, though, in the shape it was supposed to, but the word was soundless: *What?*

Mrs. Hollywood probably translated his attempt into what he'd meant it to mean, for she nodded as if he'd just proven all

of her suspicions about him not being worthy of her time.

“The wild horse folks don’t want you any longer, Mr. Bowman, which I’m sure you can understand.” She looked at her fellow parole board members, and they nodded at her. “But there’s a guest ranch that wants tax dollars, I guess, and so they’re willing to take you on for the rest of the summer. Three months. Hard work. Simple food. You will be watched and they might even want you to wear a tracking anklet—”

Where. He wanted to know where the ranch was. He had to make a face to ask the question, and his heart started to hammer. What if they couldn’t understand him? What if they took his silence for surliness?

“It’s near—” She looked at her paperwork, and rolled her eyes. “The middle of nowhere. Farthing, Wyoming.”

Ellis’ eyes widened, and he held his breath for a quick second. He knew his geography, knew exactly where Farthing was. It was probably a podunk town, and the ranch was probably second rate, otherwise, why would they want someone like him hanging around?

More importantly, leaving the rest of the thoughts in his head behind, was the fact that Farthing was only half an hour from Cheyenne. If he could get in at the ranch, he could bide his time and steal a car, or more likely a truck, and visit Mom where her ashes were buried in Iron Mountain Cemetery.

“Well, Mr. Bowman?” asked Mrs. Hollywood, her lips pursed. “We don’t have all day. Are you interested? Or should I write down that you’d just rather stay behind bars until your next parole hearing rolls around?”

The whole of the parole board stared at him, their eyes hard, their pens at the ready. Mrs. Hollywood, though he might remember her name was really Mrs. Purdue, even had the rejection stamp in her hand. Rejection was inked red. Approved was inked green. He could see the red ink, sharp like blood on her fingers from when she’d patted the stamp against the ink pad.

Yes. He nodded as fiercely as he could, mouthing the word widely, like he was shouting, though no sound came out.

Down came the red stamp, and up came the green to be slammed down on the form in front of her so hard it shook the table. The board didn't care, not really. They just wanted to be rid of him and his greasy hair, his pale face, his prison-skinny frame, his mangled tattoo of a hummingbird, or maybe a dragonfly, that looked like a torn ribbon.

"In two days," said Mrs. Purdue. She was already shuffling his papers inside his folder, stamping the green Approved stamp on the outside of it so there'd be no question: he was now the ranch's responsibility. "Your PO will go with you in the van. And I suggest you refrain from fighting, public drinking, drugs, and any theft, or you will find yourself back here again, behind bars, doing five years. Understood?"

Yes, ma'am. He tucked his chin down, submissive, contrite. If they didn't care, he never did. All he wanted to do was visit Mom's grave. After that, none of it mattered.

The only thing that mattered now, as the van hurtled down the road, was how hard Phil was looking at him as the van's wheels hit a low slope, churning up dust as they came up to a set of wooden poles arching over a green-metal gate.

"Get out and open the gate, asshole," said Phil to him, irritated as though he'd been shouting at Ellis for hours. When Ellis didn't move, confused as to how he'd manage the gate with his hands zip-tied as they were, Phil backhanded his face and shoved him hard enough to slide him along the bench seat and against the wall of the van.

Ellis licked the inside of his mouth. He knew he was wearing his best don't-fuck-with-me face, well-learned and practiced in prison. But Phil wasn't warned off and smacked him again, and kicked him in the leg. All the while, the driver looked out the driver side window as if none of this was going on and, if it was, it was nothing that need concern him.

"Now," said Phil, growling.

Tasting blood, feeling it pulse through the side of his face, Ellis moved forward in the narrow space between the bench seat and the door and slid it open. Once he was outside the van, he could have run, but Phil had a gun and wasn't shy about using it, obviously. Besides, Ellis was now closer to where Mom was. The ranch had a truck, probably more than one. It was a ranch, after all.

They'd be watching him, but they couldn't watch him all the time. And, at least so far, Phil hadn't snapped a tracking anklet on him, so that probably meant there wasn't one. All Ellis had to do was bide his time.

As Ellis stepped out into the blazing afternoon sun, the sweat beneath his armpits grew, and his hair lay lank against his neck. He squinted up at the sign, a simple affair of two rough wooden poles, topped by another wooden pole, above which curved an ironwork sign that read, in simple rustic letters, *Farthingdale Ranch*. Below it, the green-painted metal gate sagged a bit on its hinges, but, for the most part, both the sign and the gate looked well-tended to.

Ellis undid the chain latch, waited till the van drove through, sending up a cloud of dust, then redid the latch, and clambered back into the van, which waited for him, rumbling its displeasure.

Phil smacked him again, seemingly just to remind Ellis who was boss. Well, in about ten minutes, Phil would no longer be the boss of Ellis. Somebody else would be, though who, Ellis had no idea.

This new boss, as yet unmet, would probably be an asshat, like all the guards at the prison were. He'd be able to abuse Ellis just as he pleased because nobody cared what happened to an ex-con. None of that mattered. He'd wait for the first opportunity, steal a truck, and be on his way to Cheyenne, free as a bird.

Free, that is, until they caught up with him. Which they would. But at that point, it wouldn't matter. They could do with him what they liked, as long as he got to say goodbye and sorry to Mom. She'd hear him, even beneath the dirt.

JASPER

Jasper scratched under his jaw and thought about trading in the plastic grocery store razor for a good, old-fashioned straight razor. Then he could strop it when it got dull and have the closest shave anybody'd ever seen.

Then again, if he had an ex-con around the cabin, the ex-con might take it upon himself to use that straight razor for reasons it was not intended. Not that Jasper actually thought he'd get his throat sliced in the night, but maybe he did think that. Maybe.

"Are you listening to me, Jasper?" asked Bill, throaty and gruff with his displeasure.

"I've been listening all along, Bill," said Jasper, calm as could be. The more riled other people got, the calmer Jasper got. He'd learned that technique in the army, and it always worked like a charm. "But I'm still not sure this is the right thing to do. And I'm sure as heckfire not reading that file. It's full of red tape and bureaucratic thinking and I don't give a damn about anything that's in it."

"The file has good information about him, what he went through," said Leland.

Leland, the ranch's manager, arms crossed, was leaning against the door jamb of the open doorway that looked out into the parking lot from Maddy's office. Leland, Bill, the ranch's owner, and Maddy, the ranch's admin, were all waiting for the

prison van to arrive. The prison van was late, and now they were all on edge. At least Jasper knew he was, at least a tad.

The ex-con, Ellis Bowman by name, had been convicted of dealing drugs, that much Jasper knew. So surely he'd be shifty eyed and furtive. He'd slink around trying to get out of the things around the shop that needed doing. He'd misuse all of Jasper's fine tools. He'd leave a mess. He'd be mean to guests, and he'd refuse to wear the turn of the century blacksmith's garb Maddy had ordered for him. He'd run off, too, first chance he got, since Bill had nixed the prison's request for a tracking anklet.

All of this spelled a disaster in the making, and Jasper knew a disaster when he saw it. The army had taught him a bunch of things, and that was one of them. Not that he had a lot of combat experience, no. But he'd been a machinist in the field, and heard the chatter amongst the guys on the front lines. Not to mention Milton Reed—no, he wasn't going to think about Milt, fellow machinist and several year boyfriend who'd determined out of the blue that he wanted a promotion and that he needed to throw Jasper under the bus to get it.

Sure, the army had a *don't ask don't tell* policy, but some units held to that policy more than others. The unit Jasper and Milt had been in together was of the kind that used the policy to their benefit. If they liked you, they would ignore that you were gay, and for the most part, the 44th had done so with regards to Jasper and Milt and a few others.

More were in the closet than could be known about, Jasper had been sure of it. But then the 44th had gotten a new commander, who'd taken a shine to Milt and started whispering in his ear. Jasper should have seen the signs of the disaster to come when Milt had stopped wanting to sleep in Jasper's bunk, stopped wanting to find a nearby bar to hang out and drink warm beer and find an alley to fuck and fondle in.

The sex had been gritty and fast, and Jasper liked it that way. Milt liked it that way, as well. But then Milt stopped liking it. And then had come the day when Milt got his advancement papers, departing with a flip of his middle finger.

Jasper had been yanked into the commander's office, and the questions had come: Was he a homosexual? Did he still want to be in this man's army?

Jasper said yes to both of those questions.

Black marks started appearing on his record for no reason, marks that kept him from getting advancement, bonus pay, or even more training. After a time, a few months maybe, he was asked the same question again, but in a different way: Did he want *out* of this man's army?

Head spinning, heart torn in shreds, Jasper had signed in agreement on his honorable discharge papers, packed his green army duffle bag, and shuffled off to home. To the states. Where he started driving a delivery truck across the country, looking for the prettiest spot he could find to live out the rest of his life in. To die in.

One day he'd delivered a shipment of boxes to Farthingdale Ranch, and then again another day. The second time, after he'd closed the green-painted metal gate behind him, he'd fixed the sag on the hinges, for nothing, because he liked fixing things.

Upon learning of the repair, Bill Wainwright, the owner, had offered him a job. *You're right handy, I'd say. Iffen you can be a blacksmith and a farrier, iffen you could get some training, I'd hire you in a quick minute.*

Those words still rang in Jasper's ears because he'd gotten that certificate at a blacksmith school in Berthoud, Colorado, came back, certificate in hand, and Bill had hired him. Introduced him to Leland Tate, a man Jasper had quickly come to respect as well as admire inside of two seasons.

The best part of being blacksmith and farrier to Farthingdale Ranch was the cabin that came with the job. It was located a quarter mile from the main part of the ranch. Snuggled in a little flat spot by the slow moving and glassy Horse Creek, it sat in the lee of a small hill all on its own.

Sunsets and sunrises could be seen from the deck out the back. The view from every window was nothing but grass and

sky and river and a slope scattered with pine trees that scented the air when the nights grew cool.

The shop was a marvelous mix of old technology and new and had all of Jasper's tools in it. As for the cabin itself, it'd been built in the summer of 1892 by some guy, maybe an ancestor of Bill's, who'd determined to create a ranch empire for himself. The result was that the cabin was made of rounded river stone in places, and stucco and logs in others, and was topped with a fine tin roof, a patchwork affair.

Though the footprint of the cabin was tidy and small, it was all Jasper's. He would sear with a hot fire-red poker the first person who tried to take it from him. Except Bill, of course, as it was really his cabin. And Leland, who treated everyone with dignity and respect. And Maddy, the ranch's administrator, who always made sure to let Jasper know he could always eat at the dining hall, and didn't need to keep on cooking for himself. But really, he would take that poker to *anyone* else—

“Jasper, maybe you and I should step outside,” said Leland, drawing himself away from the door jamb. “Y'all can just give us a minute, I think.”

Now Jasper was in trouble with the principal, at least that's what it felt like. Leland would treat Jasper fair, though, even as he was giving him a stern talking to, because that's how Leland treated everyone. The ex-con program, dreamed up by Bill and still in its infancy, would bring in dollars the ranch sorely needed to keep running. Jasper already knew that, and he also knew that Leland was going to put the screws to him to get Jasper to go along with the whole mad plan.

Of course, Leland being Leland, the screws started very, very gently. The end result was already a given: Jasper would give in. But he was not going to go quietly.

“I think Bill's idea is a good one,” said Leland, his voice quite soft as they stood in the shade of the porch to Maddy's office. Part of Leland's attention was on the road leading from the gate to the gravel-and-dust parking lot, while they waited for the prison van to appear from beneath the shade of the

aspen leaves. The other part of his attention, well, most of it really, was on Jasper. “I know how I felt when he first brought it up. I was hesitant to agree, as I’m sure you can understand.”

Leland took off his straw cowboy hat and ran his fingers through his fair hair till it all stood up like the feathers on a baby duck’s behind.

This gesture was meant to disarm Jasper, and he knew it in his gut. Why was he even spending energy trying to say no when the deal was already in the bag? Maybe a part of himself, a slightly sadistic part, wanted to go through the motions just to see what Leland would say to make it happen, make Jasper back down and agree.

“We need to make sure this works. And we need to make sure it doesn’t cause any upset amongst the guests, hence we need you to host Ellis in your cabin, set off by itself. There’ll be a stipend to pay for his keep, so it won’t come out of your pocket.”

Jasper did not nod. He made himself not nod even as he was kicking himself. He should just agree and capitulate and get this over with. But he didn’t. What’s more, Leland had referred to the cabin as his, as Jasper’s, as if he knew, which surely he did, how much the place meant to him.

“Frankly,” said Leland as he put his hat back on and settled it, as though preparing to walk through a fierce sandstorm of opposition. “I’ll be true with you, right? The ranch is so near the red these days, on account of Laurie Quinn’s disappearance at the end of last season. Remember?”

Jasper nodded.

“This has caused the number of reservations to go down, and this is bleeding into everything else. Our credit score is down. We have no ready liquid cash, so if something were to happen, we wouldn’t be able to get a loan to cover the cost.”

Part of this Jasper already knew, but the idea of the credit score and lack of ability to get a loan was new and frightening. These weren’t things he normally thought about in his workaday world.

“We’re all working hard,” said Leland. He paused to run his thumb over his lower lip. “We’re all taking on extra work. I had to let our accountant go—”

“Who does the accounting then?” asked Jasper, unable to restrain himself.

“I do,” said Leland simply, looking at Jasper with calm blue-grey eyes. “In the evening, I do the books. Make sure all the numbers add up.”

Leland worked hard, harder than anyone at the ranch, Bill included. He took on all the extra tasks, as anyone at the ranch knew, but the accounting too? That meant Leland was working 14 or 16-hour days. Day after day. Now Jasper felt like a heel, a solid, black-booted heel, and he’d just kicked himself in the ass with it.

“Listen, Jasper,” said Leland, his voice lowering to a level that imbued it with a confidence about to be shared. “I know this isn’t ideal, and I wouldn’t ask if it didn’t matter. But it matters. If this program works, it’ll bring in good hard cash and help the ranch get back on its feet. We need to get back from the brink, we need to recover from Quinn’s disappearance—”

Jasper knew all about the kid that went missing at the end of the prior season. Knew how hard the event had rocked the ranch, how the guest ranch community had responded, some kindly, some not so kind. Knew that Leland thought he himself was to blame, and that Bill continued to spout off some wild idea about how Iron Mountain took Quinn, that and a story about wishes and shooting stars. Bill was a romantic, that was his problem.

Jasper had never even met the kid, as he’d been kicked hard in the leg and laid up the week Quinn had been a guest at the ranch. Hence the horses had to be taken to Chugwater to be shod and were out of commission for longer than they would have been had Jasper been able to shoe them.

Guests had complained about the chuck wagon being dragged to the fire pit by a couple of ranch hands rather than actual horses. Yes, the last week of last season had been a real

shitshow, and that was a fact. But was bringing a drug-dealing thief and liar amongst the beauty that was the ranch the way to fix things?

“Tell you what,” said Leland, in the voice of a man laying down his final cards, behind which was a wall of aces. “We test drive this for two weeks. If at the end of that it doesn’t work? We put our heads together and think of another way.”

That was like Leland all over. To make the idea, to make the ranch’s struggles, everyone’s problem. Everyone had a stake. Anyone could come up with a solution. And, currently, the solution was this.

Jasper didn’t know how much the ex-con program could bring in, and he didn’t want to know. Right now, Leland was using the *voice*, the one he used to make things go his way, but which left Jasper feeling that he’d crawl on broken glass for Leland if it would help. It wouldn’t, and besides, Leland would never ask Jasper to do any such thing.

“Okay,” said Jasper. “But I’m going to do this my way.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Leland with a smile as he held out his hand to Jasper.

They shook hands. Beneath Leland’s smile and in the warmth of the handshake was the solid message that told Jasper that Leland knew, for a solid fact, that Jasper had been going to agree from the start, and that Leland had let him resist simply because he knew that sometimes a man needed to be seen to stand his ground, on the principle of it.

“And yes, do it your way. You’re good with kids and animals. You’ll be fine.”

The ex-con, Ellis, wasn’t an animal, but that wasn’t the point. Jasper knew what Leland meant there, too. In spite of himself, in spite of trying to push everyone at the ranch away, the kids who came to his blacksmith demos adored him. And though he pretended he disliked those kids, when they clamored to get closer to the anvil or the smallest ones would come up and hug his leg, leather apron and all, he kind of just melted inside.

He couldn't pick them up, never did, because he was covered with grease and soot. But he could tousle their little heads, and yes, maybe, sometimes, he'd pull out the cork-stopped cut-glass jar full of old-fashioned horehound candy to pass around. Sometimes he had butterscotch, when the horehound ran out. Sometimes, he had those little raspberry-shaped, raspberry-filled hard candies. Sometimes.

"The van's here!"

The excited voice was accompanied by the scratch of boot heels on gravel. Out from beneath the shade of the trees ran Jamie, curly-haired beneath his cowboy hat. His eyes bright, he ran right up to Leland, bumping into him with excitement.

Jamie was a ranch hand, first off, but second off, he was Leland's partner, and a more unlikely partnership Jasper had never seen. Leland towered over Jamie by at least a foot, had almost ten years on him, and serious and steady seemed unlikely to be what Jamie, bright and young and excitable, would want. But perhaps that was how they worked. They filled each other's empty places, making a perfect fit.

Jasper clamped down on thoughts of envy and instead concentrated on how much he didn't really like Jamie or, at the very least, couldn't bear being in his energetic company for more than five minutes at a time. He'd secretly dubbed Jamie the Pert One, and referred to him that way in his own mind when complaining to himself about Jamie's antics.

"Thought I told you to stay back from here while this was goin' on," said Leland, stern, his eyes hard as he looked at Jamie from beneath the brim of his cowboy hat.

"Couldn't," said Jamie, bright, his expression like a naughty minx who knew he'd never really be in trouble when he was adored so.

At the same time, Jasper agreed with Leland wholeheartedly. Jamie was too kind, too gentle, to be exposed to the likes of Ellis Bowman, and should be removed from the vicinity as soon as was humanly possible.

“I’ll take him back,” said Leland, nodding at Jasper, as if he could read Jasper’s thoughts from his expression. “Let me know how it goes, all right? Call if you need anything.”

“Maddy’s got the blacksmith clothes on order,” said Jasper, looking through the open doorway into the office where Bill and Maddy were deep in conversation and Bill was pointing to something on Maddy’s desk. “We’ll be fine. I’ll update you.”

With a nod, Leland led Jamie across the parking lot to the trees, where the road led through their shade to the main lodge, where guests stayed, where the dining hall was. Maybe Jamie’d get a scolding, a gentle one, like Jasper had gotten. And then they’d get to work, the two of them, showing everyone how to put their shoulders to the grindstone. Jamie’d be chattering like mad, and Leland would nod and listen, delight glowing in his eyes as he looked at Jamie.

That’s how love should be. That’s what Jasper always thought it was. But then Milt had happened, and any thoughts of love had imploded in hot shell-fire, leaving his heart a tattered flag of defeat. Never again, not if he could help it.

The low growl of an engine with a worn out carburetor and perhaps at least one spark plug missing the beat shadowed the air. A second later, a white walled van, complete with rust spots and the Wyoming Correctional emblem on the side, churned up the gravel road from the gate.

The bright June sunshine, bold in the afternoon, free of clouds, glinted off the chrome around the windows, off the dented grill, and a bit of Jasper’s heart glinted along with it. Somebody should fix that grill. Somebody could tune that engine, get it a new fan belt, clean those spark plugs with an old toothbrush. Somebody could—

Well, that somebody couldn’t be him, now, could it. The prison van wasn’t his responsibility. The occupant inside of it was. At least for two weeks.

Of course, of *course*, he was going to give it his all, put his shoulder to the grindstone, do his best, all of it. He’d never half-assed anything in his life and he wasn’t going to start now.

His heart jumped when a young man got shoved out of the van with such a lack of ceremony, Jasper felt his eyebrows go up in surprise.

Prisons didn't treat inmates like animals anymore, did they? Or maybe this particular ex-con was a rascal as well as a handful. Jasper didn't doubt it, though when another man, taller, older, more broad-shouldered, got out of the van as well, and grabbed the younger man by the back of the neck and *yanked* him—

“Hey,” said Jasper, going down the wooden steps at a fast trot, stepping out of the shadow of the porch, hatless, squinting in the brightness of the sun streaming down. “That Ellis Bowman? I'm Jasper Nash.”

“And I'm Phil Singleton, PO.” Phil gave Ellis a shake. “But I can't sign him over to anyone but Bill Wainwright.”

Jasper looked over his shoulder. Both Bill and Maddy were standing on the porch. Maddy was a little bit back, using Bill as a shield, it seemed like. She obviously didn't want to come anywhere near Ellis and, in response, Jasper felt an urge to protect her from what she saw as a dangerous man getting too close to her.

Snatching the clipboard from Phil's outstretched hand, Jasper raced it to Bill, waited while Bill signed it, and then raced it back to Phil. All the while, Ellis Bowman, lank-haired, narrow-eyed, waited with hunched shoulders, sweat forming beneath his armpits, hands in plastic zip ties that looked, to Jasper's practiced eyes, a bit too tight to be comfortable. The thin rope to a small cloth backpack was looped around his neck. And was that a tattoo there? But of what?

“Can I take him?” asked Jasper, responding to the hard glare Phil was giving him from behind a pair of fake-looking, filmy-lensed aviator glasses. “There's the signature. Can I take him?”

“Yes, take him,” said Phil, almost spitting the word from beneath his white mustache. He was just about sneering as he lifted his chin and looked down at the top of Ellis' bowed head. “I'll be back to check up on him at regular intervals. If

he breaks parole, let me know and we'll take him back. His bunk is still warm.”

“Breaks parole?” asked Jasper. He reached for his folded buck knife and, yanking it out of the pocket of his jeans, switched it open with his thumb.

“Fighting, drugs, alcohol, associating with known criminals,” said Phil. “It’s in the file.”

“I’m sure it is,” said Jasper. “C’mere, you.”

Phil shoved Ellis forward, and Ellis stumbled but kept to his feet. Even as Jasper raised the knife to cut the zip ties, Phil got back in the van, acting like he couldn’t give a damn what happened to his convict charge, and the driver zoomed off, leaving a cloud of dust in the van’s wake.

As gently as he could, Jasper clasped both of Ellis’ hands in his own, holding them still.

With a small jerk of his whole body, Ellis seemed to be tensing against whatever might come his way. When he looked up at Jasper, his eyes were a pale grey, almost devoid of life. His face was prison-pale, skin pulled against the bones, giving him the look of a starved prisoner of war, rather than what he was, a regular prisoner, surely who’d been fed three squares a day. Not starved. They didn’t starve prisoners these days, did they?

With a flick of the blade, Jasper cut through the plastic zip ties, then let go of Ellis’ hands and bent to pick the ties up to put in his pocket to recycle later. Which was probably a dumb thing to do, put his bare neck open to anything Ellis might care to do with it. But when Jasper straightened up again, Ellis was standing there, as still as a deer that has been spotted by a hunter and hopes to escape the bullet zinging its way. And maybe the look in Ellis’ eyes really meant that he was a fawn in the grass, waiting for its mother, rather than a fully grown young buck.

But no. Jasper shook himself mentally. Ellis was a drug dealing ex-con out on parole. As to how dangerous he was, only time would tell. In the meantime, even though it was

Saturday afternoon and there were no guests around, he needed to get Ellis out of sight, needed to separate him from the rest of the ranch so nobody complained about the look of him or the potential danger of him. He didn't look dangerous, right at that moment, but Jasper had been fooled by Milt, so he could be fooled again, hard as he tried to stop it.

"I'll take him to the cabin," said Jasper to Bill and Maddy, still on the porch, watching all of this with wide eyes. "I'm sure he won't be any trouble."

But even as he touched Ellis' shoulder to get him to head out of the parking lot in the direction of the dirt road that led around the hill and to the cabin, he wasn't sure of that, not at all. Danger came in many forms, even quiet, shoulder-hunched, silent ones.

ELLIS

“*I*’m Jasper.”

Ellis already knew that, so he nodded and shook Jasper’s hand when he offered it. The zip ties had cut off the circulation to his hands and he could barely feel Jasper’s touch, but he could see it. Jasper’s hand swallowed his, and he was sure, quite sure, that Jasper’s grip was crushing his bones.

The knife Jasper had used to cut the zip ties was back in his pocket, but it too had been huge, sharp-bladed, the blade a dull, useful grey. As for Jasper, he was snarly and hard-eyed, and towered over Ellis like most of the prison guards did.

Jasper wore a rumpled dark t-shirt over his broad shoulders; his sunburned forearms showed a length of muscle that he probably wouldn’t be afraid to use on Ellis. Taut, hard-boned hips moved into long, hard legs.

Jasper also wore lace up work boots that looked to be the steel-toed kind that would hurt when Jasper kicked him. Which he most assuredly would once the newness wore off, and handshakes and greetings were a thing of the past. Ellis didn’t have a watch, but he could probably clock it to the minute when the current civility between them dispersed into regular and frequent harassment: definitely within the next twenty-four hours.

“That all you got?” Jasper pointed at the string around Ellis’ neck from which dangled the mesh bag with his few

belongings in it. “And what’s that supposed to be? A mangled duck?”

Throat tightening, Ellis opened his mouth and scrambled to think what shape his tongue should be in, how much breath he needed. Whatever it took to answer this fierce, towering, dark-haired man so he wouldn’t take it in his head to clout Ellis for not answering him.

“Never mind,” said Jasper.

The shrug of Jasper’s shoulders, a broad rolling of muscle and bone, made Ellis want to step back and keep stepping back till he was out of reach. But he didn’t. He still needed whatever vehicle the ranch could supply. And he was tired and hot. The sun was beating down like it meant to melt him and wherever Jasper was taking him might have cool water, cool shade. A moment to get his bearings.

“We’re this way.”

Dutifully, like he was obeying an order from a prison guard, Ellis followed Jasper up the road, going back toward the green-metal gate, but turning down a narrow dirt road well before they got that far. After a few minutes of walking in mutual silence, without Jasper seeming to remember that Ellis was with him, they passed beneath the shade of a copse of cottonwood trees.

Ellis inhaled, grateful for the cool, dusty spice of the air, the dappled quiet. When they stepped out of the copse, the dirt road curved down a slope along a wide, slow-moving river, next to which was a small, jumbled cabin, a large outbuilding with its double doors wide open.

There was an old beige and white striped two-door pickup truck parked at the end of the road, where it rounded into a small parking lot. Beyond the lot and the cabin, the river curved through the grass before widening into a cool blue pond that circled around itself in a comfortable way, glinting silver at the edges, before spilling into a larger river below it.

Jasper was saying something, but Ellis could hardly hear him. His eyes were on the truck, his brain wondering if Jasper

was foolish enough to keep gas in the tank and the keys in the ignition, like so many did when Ellis had been running drugs. You could always depend on people, not only to be honest, but to imagine that everyone else was like them and couldn't possibly want to steal their car.

Ellis had never actually *stolen* a car, but he'd *borrowed* a few from time to time, usually rifling through the glovebox and trunk for anything valuable like money before abandoning the car in a location far from the scene of the original crime.

"This is my shop," said Jasper. Then he added, as if it was an afterthought to him, "And my forge."

Ellis had no idea what a forge was, but he dutifully followed Jasper into the outbuilding, which turned out to be a workshop. When Ellis laid eyes on the chimney stack and the large leather and wood bellows and the heavy iron anvil in the middle of the room, that's when he knew. He'd been given over to a blacksmith, which was not what he'd had in mind at all. No, he'd thought he'd be working in the barn with the horses, grooming and raking corrals and stuff like that. Not this.

He could open his mouth to protest, but nothing would come out. Even if it did, Jasper would mark Ellis for the troublemaker he was said to be, probably written in his report, which Jasper had no doubt read.

He needed to bide his time, so he kept his mouth shut and nodded at appropriate intervals as Jasper pointed out this tool and that thing over there, this wall of nails and horseshoes and shoeing supplies, that tool bench in the corner. Where the leather aprons were. Where the cloth aprons were. What clothes Ellis was to wear during the blacksmith demos Jasper did.

On and on he went, the words coming in short, clipped sentences, like Ellis was supposed to be taking notes and would be expected to remember where everything was located.

He had no desire to work with a blacksmith or a farrier, either, didn't want to be surrounded by metal or that smell of

hard burning that he couldn't quite place. There was a sense of grease in the air, of grime, and of energy and hot fires.

What surprised him, though, was the fact that as Jasper talked, his compact gestures grew more generous, the words coming from his mouth slowed down, and his eyes brightened. Maybe Jasper was proud of all of this, though for the life of him Ellis could not figure out why. All he wanted was the keys to that truck and directions to Cheyenne and Iron Mountain Cemetery.

"We'll go in the back way," said Jasper. "Be sure to kick the dust off your feet before you enter the cabin."

Rules already? Of course. It was to be expected.

Ellis followed Jasper through the shop and out a back door next to the tool bench to cross over to the back door of the cabin. There he dutifully kicked his sneakers against the mat, took the string bag from around his neck and stepped into the dim, cool air of the cabin, breathing a grateful sigh.

"That's the bathroom there," said Jasper, pointing to his left. "There's plenty of hot water for baths each night but the water pressure is for shit, so I don't have a dishwasher and have to take my dirty clothes to the laundromat."

The cabin being so far off the grid, Ellis could understand the issue with the water pressure, but the idea of taking a bath instead of a shower was throwing him. In prison, the water was plenty hot, almost scalding, and one of his few pleasures had been to stand under the stream like he was in a rainstorm waiting for the water to wash him away. Then again, being submerged in equally hot water would permit him to live the dream so many prisoners talked about, that of being submerged up to their necks in water, floating, weightless.

"This here's the main room," said Jasper, waving his hand expansively to encompass the compact living room, which had a long, battered couch beneath the window along one wall, an easy chair at one end, and a fireplace at the other. Along the wall opposite the couch was a small square kitchen table and two old-looking wooden chairs.

Except for the braided rug in the center of the room, and a bookshelf full of books, a laptop, and other gear, that was it. There was no TV that Ellis could see. How was he supposed to entertain himself in the evening without a TV? Even the prison had a TV that worked, at least most of the time.

Jasper lived like this? It was nicer than prison, sure, and more colorful, with patched stucco walls and paint jobs that seemed to have started and stopped in different colors: pale blue on the window wall, sage green in the corner, a butter yellow elsewhere. But it was small and cramped, and Ellis couldn't imagine spending any time there without wanting to run for the hills. At least it was sunny, as sunshine was coming through the tall windows above the couch.

“An' here's the deck.”

With a click and a shove, Jasper opened a sliding glass door that led out to a flat wooden deck with no railings. It looked as though the deck was suspended in air, though Ellis figured there were pylons beneath holding it up. The effect was that the deck jutted over the glassy blue, grass-banked river.

Beyond the river, the land sloped down and went on and on in a patchwork carpet of waving green tall grass, red speckles of some kind of flower dotting amidst that, and more open empty green-grassed land than Ellis could ever remember seeing, all of which ended in a wide ribbon of blue, blue sky.

All Ellis could do was blink. The view from the deck explained a whole lot as to why the cabin was so bare. Why be indoors when you had this to look at?

“That there's the plateau where the ranch takes folks for trail rides, and beyond that—see that jut of rust and dark stone? That's Iron Mountain. It's what guides the cool winds our way.”

Jasper was standing way too close as he pointed. Ellis couldn't care less about the mountain, though as he'd noticed there was no air conditioning unit, he might become grateful for any cool winds it sent.

“I like to sit out here, come sunset,” said Jasper. “There’re no trees to block the light for sunrise, either, if you’re up that early.”

The only thing Ellis was going to be up early for was to steal that truck.

“I’ll show you the kitchen, then the upstairs, where your room is, where you can put your stuff.” Jasper ushered Ellis back inside the cool dimness of the cabin, which grew bright as Ellis’ eyes adjusted to the different light. “You don’t have much, so I’ll get Maddy to order you clothes and gear and suchlike. I had no idea the prison would send you with so little.”

Ellis had no idea either, but what did he care? After he visited Mom’s grave, they could roll him in some battered old carpet and dump him in a landfill, and that would be the end of it.

“This here’s the kitchen. It’s small, but useful.”

The kitchen was a straight galley behind the brick backing of the fireplace, which kind of, now that he thought of it, echoed the layout of the workshop, where the fireplace there, the forge, as Jasper called it, was in the middle of the room, rather than at the edge.

It took Ellis a moment to realize it, but the walls of the kitchen were newer than the other walls, as if the cabin had been expanded from its original layout, and someone had decided that this was the best place for a kitchen.

It was a comfortable place, set off by itself, and was lined to the ceiling with plain wooden cupboards. There was a wrapped loaf of bread on the well-scrubbed counter, which made Ellis crave a sandwich, though he wouldn’t dare ask for it, a regular coffee maker with a glass beaker that had coffee stains around the bottom, and a gas stove. And more windows, the brightly patterned curtains pulled back by what looked like old red yarn.

“If you’re hungry, at all or ever,” said Jasper. “Just come get what you need. I expect that in prison you ate by the clock,

and we do here, as well. But sometimes, if you get a hankering, there's peanut butter and jelly or whatever. I do all my own cooking, except when Maddy forces me to eat with other folks at the dining hall—but anyhow, your room's this way."

Ellis followed Jasper back through the cabin to the stairs that led up from the front door. Maybe Jasper never went through it, for it was locked tight, and there was dust on the small curtains over the window in the door. The stairs along the wall were steep, and at the top was a small landing, off of which were two curtained doorways. Jasper slung back the curtain on the first room, the muscles in his upper arm flexing only inches away from Ellis' face.

"This one's mine," he said. Then he let the curtain fall, and tugged on the other curtain. "This one's yours."

Curtains for doors? Ellis would have expected an actual door, at least. Even in prison, you were behind a door of sorts at night, and could tuck a t-shirt into the webbing of the bunk above you and block out some of the eternal lights that were always on in prison. But a curtain? Anybody could get in, could sneak in the darkness to where Ellis lay sleeping and do what they wanted with him.

The bedroom was narrow, with two windows along the wall. By the view, Ellis figured his room was above where the couch was on the floor below. Along the other wall was a single bed, covered with an old patchwork quilt. There was only one pillow, though Ellis couldn't expect more.

Beyond the bed, on the far wall, was a tall narrow dresser and another curtain, which might be hiding a closet, though he wasn't sure and didn't want to start poking around to find out. Not when Jasper was watching him.

"I tried wallpapering the room, but that was for shit," said Jasper unexpectedly. "I'm not good with delicate things. I'm good with hard things, so—"

Ellis was a hard thing. Hardened by prison, which was why, no doubt, he'd been given into Jasper's care, which was sure to be less than tender. But, to keep the peace, he looked

where Jasper was gesturing, which was the wall around the windows, where he could clearly see the remains of patterned wallpaper, the small pink rosebuds looking tattered and tired despite their sweetness.

“It’s early, but you might be hungry,” said Jasper.

He was still too close, his presence too near. Ellis could smell the day’s sweat on him, see the moisture on the curve of his mouth, see up close the dark blue of his eyes, the bit of black-brown hair stuck to his forehead. “You could wash up and have a lay-me-down while I cook us some dinner.”

At the moment, Ellis had no desire for any of these things. There was still plenty of daylight to be had. Enough daylight to steal—*borrow*—a truck and figure out how to get to where Mom was buried. He didn’t have a cell phone; the prison had confiscated it, and the contract that came with it had probably expired anyhow, so he didn’t have Waze or even Google Maps to help him out. He’d drive to Cheyenne, which was south, southwest from Farthing, and then stop at a gas station, first one he saw, to ask. It would be as simple as that.

But Jasper was still talking, saying something about baths and clothes and rules, there were always rules, and what he expected from Ellis by way of obedience. Only that’s not what he said. It was more like a stream of ideas that Ellis couldn’t follow, not when the air blackened around him, like his whole body had decided that now was the time to pass out. But he wasn’t a passing out kind of guy, so he tightened his legs and nodded at what he hoped were appropriate intervals and wished, real hard, that he could use his voice and tell Jasper to back the fuck off and give him some space.

He couldn’t do that, of course, though he was unbelievably grateful when Jasper did step back as he gestured vaguely at the bed in Ellis’ new room and said something about phone calls and meatloaf and rest.

Rest Ellis could do. Meatloaf he could manage, at least in a little while.

The second Jasper went down the stairs, thumping the whole way in his huge, thick soled, ass-kicking lace-up steel-

toed boots, Ellis flung the bag on the floor and flung himself on the single bed, and closed his eyes as his head hit the pillow.

He was done for the day. Just done. Maybe he'd wait and get a hot meal and a bath and some rest. Then in the morning he'd not so much resemble an ex-con as a guy just driving a truck he'd borrowed, just wanting to find where his mom was buried. That's all he wanted. That's all.

JASPER

The meatloaf was resting on a cutting board while Jasper heated the stewed tomatoes and gave the mashed potatoes one more stir. Added some dots of butter for good measure, and then carved up the meatloaf and laid generous portions on two plates to take to the table, which was too small, really, for more than that.

He'd already placed out salt and pepper, two glasses of water, and a cut-glass dish of butter. The paper towels within easy reach. All he needed to do now was to wake Ellis up.

The floor above had been perfectly silent for the last hour and a half, as if Ellis had lain down to rest and had not moved. The floorboards were plenty solid, but there wasn't much insulation there, just enough to cover the boards and keep any dust from shaking down when the floors were swept.

The cabin was old, but it was sturdy. Even so, sounds crept about, and Jasper knew every one of them. When the roofline creaked in the wind. When someone was on the stairs, going up or down, though, as he lived alone, that wasn't very often. When someone came up the wooden steps to the front door. All of it told him about the condition of the house and where someone was, if there was someone there.

But Ellis? So massive a presence in Jasper's mind was now a still, silent void.

Had Ellis run off already? Scooted out the back door when Jasper had been busy at the stove? No, he would have heard the back door open and shut. Would have felt the whoosh of

air as the door moved. Would have heard the tread on the wooden stairs at the very least. But no, there'd been nothing.

Wiping his hands on a cloth towel, one of a stack he'd bought at the thrift store in Chugwater, Jasper went to the bottom of the stairs.

"Ellis," he called, feeling very domestic in that moment. "Dinner's ready. You want to come down and wash up?"

He waited a full, silent minute, apprehension growing as the silence continued. Then he felt the cabin shift, as if Ellis had sat up in bed to rub his eyes, to come awake. He could almost picture it for some reason, maybe because Ellis' presence was so new.

Even if he'd been expecting Ellis, and had resisted his coming up till the very moment of his arrival, he'd stocked the cabin, put clean sheets on the bed. Made sure the old dresser was wiped clean of dust inside and out.

The cabin felt aware around him while he'd made his preparations, as though it knew what he was embarking on: the care and feeding of an ex-con until the prison system deemed him worthy of full and unattended freedom.

Jasper didn't know anything about the prison system other than what he'd seen on TV or in the movies, but he'd seen, in some of the lighter fare, that prisoners, when they came out into the world, could sometimes be gentled by clean sheets and hot food and steady work. Well, time would tell, wouldn't it.

"Ellis," he said again, louder. He did not want to climb those stairs like an angry parent, no he did not.

Without a word, Ellis appeared at the top of the stairs, standing there in his sleep-rumpled clothes as he stared at Jasper. Jasper stepped back, which seemed the right thing to do, for Ellis came down, slowly, one tread at a time. Like he was advancing on the enemy and wasn't quite sure what weapons Jasper might be carrying.

"You can wash up in the bathroom," said Jasper. "Hurry now, food's getting cold."

The look Ellis gave him as he slunk past Jasper to go around the easy chair to the bathroom was pure venom, like a cat who's been caught doing something it shouldn't.

Jasper most definitely did not deserve that look, but maybe that's how it was going to be between them. With Ellis always on guard, and defensive, and full of lank-haired ingratitude. Leaving Jasper no recourse but to respond in kind, with hardness, and definitive lines, and more rules than he cared to come up with. The ones he had were good and reasonable and helpful. If he could get Ellis to understand that, they might make a good beginning.

The food was still hot as Jasper sat down and, a moment later, chin dripping water onto his dusty t-shirt, Ellis slid into the chair opposite him. But then, instead of picking up a fork and digging in, Ellis just stared at the food, wide-eyed and perfectly silent.

And that was the thing. Up to that point, Ellis had not said a single word. Not a peep, not a sound, had escaped him. He'd not said *how do you do*, the way people did when they met, but neither had he said *yes* or *no* or even *fuck off, I hate this place*.

Ellis' pale silver-grey eyes held expressions of ideas Jasper couldn't even begin to translate. Couldn't make a start at. And especially, it'd be extra difficult if Ellis couldn't talk.

Maybe Ellis was speech impaired. Maybe he was that *and* hearing impaired, and Jasper had gone on like Ellis could hear him. Or maybe Ellis had been reading Jasper's lips this whole time. But if so, why hadn't Phil, his PO, said anything about it?

All the information as to Ellis' condition was probably in the file in Maddy's office, but Jasper most definitely did not want to read it. He wanted to form his own opinion of Ellis and work with him like he was a clean slate. Wasn't that the best way to rehabilitate an ex-con? Give them a chance to do their best, rather than forcing them to drag their past behind them?

"Listen," said Jasper, kicking himself for using that particular term as he picked up his fork, prepared to start

eating. “I don’t know why I didn’t notice this before, but you haven’t said a single word since you got here. So I have to ask. Are you speech impaired? Hearing impaired?”

The look Ellis gave him was a cross of surprise and also of pity, as if Jasper was the worst idiot for thinking this. But if Ellis didn’t talk, wasn’t talking, what else was going on?

“I don’t know ASL, but I figure I could learn it, if you’re patient with me.” He tried on a smile in response to Ellis’ stern frown. “I’m not much good with words, but I could try.”

There was a long minute of silence, and then more silence, filling up the area around the small table, expanding to the ceiling of the cabin, pushing against the bright windows, curtains drawn back. Then, quite imperceptibly, Ellis shook his head, looking at Jasper the whole while, shrinking back in his chair as if waiting for a violent reaction.

“So you can hear me, right?”

Ellis nodded.

“And you can speak; you’re not speech impaired?”

Ellis nodded again.

Jasper had himself a think, fork still poised above his plate of fast-cooling meatloaf and stewed tomatoes. The butter on the potatoes was starting to congeal, but that wasn’t the most important thing right now.

In the army, sometimes a soldier would come back from a scouting tramp, AK-47 in hand, soaked in his own sweat and, without a word, would start cleaning his weapon. The silence would continue, and the soldier would remain mute, even in the face of his CO demanding answers. Then somebody would figure it out, and whisper in the CO’s ear, and ta-da, the problem was explained.

Sometimes a soldier just needed space to come back to his own voice. Sometimes, they needed a psych eval and some kind of specialized therapy.

In this case, Jasper stood in place of Ellis’ CO, and it was up to him to determine what Ellis needed. In the back of his

mind, he knew he needed to let Leland know, in case someone else took it upon themselves to start chatting to Ellis, expecting answers they would never get. On the other hand, Ellis had been placed in Jasper's care by Leland himself. Jasper was the man in the field now, and would make these decisions until he needed to take it up the ladder.

He hated to think about what Ellis had gone through to cause this to happen. But he wasn't going to ask, not right yet. And he still wasn't going to read that damn file, not until he had to.

"This is how we'll do it," said Jasper. He took a bite of meatloaf and stewed tomatoes together and chewed, enjoying the burst of flavors in his mouth. "Nod for yes. Shake your head for no. Raise your hand if you have a question. Right?"

He looked up. Ellis was sitting there looking at Jasper like he'd grown three heads and was spouting nonsense. Then Ellis slowly nodded. Progress.

"Go on, eat." He pointed with his fork at Ellis' still untouched plate. "We'll make up more gestures as we need 'em."

Ellis' eyes were wide and he was pale beneath his prison-sallow skin. His shoulders were hunching forward, and it looked like he was tightening his whole body in preparation for flight. But from what? There was no danger that Jasper could see, and he'd certainly not raised his hand to his new charge. Not that he'd ever strike a child or an animal or even an ex-con. That was not his way.

"You all right?" asked Jasper, too late realizing what a stupid question that was.

Ellis was not all right. Had not been all right from the moment he'd stepped out of that prison van and onto ranch soil. Besides, it was obvious that an answer to Jasper's question could not be, in that terse moment, a simple nod or head shake. It was time for Jasper to step up his twenty questions game.

“Yes or no,” he said, scooping in a huge bite of mashed potatoes. “Are you a vegetarian? A vegan?”

Ellis shook his head and there was a twitch near the corner of his left eye that seemed to clearly say, if Jasper wanted to hazard a guess, *Why the delay, asshole? Why not smack me while the smacking is good?*

“Okay, so—” Jasper looked at his plate and then Ellis’. “You like meatloaf?”

Nod.

“Mashed potatoes? Butter?”

Nod.

Everything on both plates was covered with stewed tomatoes, which Jasper adored. He wished he had the time or the skill to make them from scratch, but the kind out of the can was plenty fine.

“Is it the stewed tomatoes?” he asked. Which was impossible. How could anybody not like stewed tomatoes?

He was just thinking that he could serve Ellis up another plate with just meatloaf and mashed potatoes when Ellis’ whole body shuddered and he lurched to his feet, scraping the feet of the chair against the wooden floorboards.

Ellis held the back of his hand to his mouth, like he was trying not to throw up. His breath, hard sharp gasps, sounded like it was choking him. Or like he was trying not to choke. But over what? He’d not eaten anything.

Or—maybe it was the mere idea of the stewed tomatoes. Jasper wasn’t a fancy eater himself, not picky at all. He could eat Spam straight out of a can, if need be, and call it a good meal. But he wasn’t everyone.

Ellis was now covering his mouth with his forearm, staring hard at Jasper, watching his every move. Sweat beaded on his pale forehead, his stringy hair sticking to his temples, as if he was about to be genuinely ill and about to barf all over Jasper’s clean, newly swept floor.

“Hey,” he said, jerking his chin up to get Ellis’ attention. “You do *not* have to eat that. Here.”

He stood up, reached across the table, and snatched the offending plate, taking it into the kitchen, dumping everything into the trash.

The whole while Ellis watched him, almost goggling at Jasper with astonishment. As if nobody had ever before saved him from himself. And maybe they hadn’t. There was a long, rocky story in Ellis’ past, and it included a pure horror at the idea of eating stewed tomatoes. Maybe it even disgusted him to watch while someone ate them, but that was too bad. Jasper was going to enjoy his meal, and Ellis could eat something else.

“You want honey and peanut butter on toast?” Jasper asked as he stood there with the empty plate in his hand. “Or a grilled cheese?”

Ellis’ eyebrows went up just a fraction, and Jasper nodded.

“Grilled cheese it is. I’ll just stick this in the oven to keep it warm.” He picked up his plate and looked at Ellis. “You okay with me eating this in front of you? Or do I need to dump it?”

That was both a yes and a no kind of question, which was foolish of Jasper to have posed. To his relief, Ellis waved his hand in front of him and shook his head no.

“I take that to mean it doesn’t matter.”

Nod.

“Okay then.” Jasper turned on the oven and stuck his plate inside. The food would be hot enough to eat in a little bit, and in the meanwhile, he needed to feed Ellis so he would stop looking so pale, like a gust of wind from Iron Mountain could blow him away. “You can sit and wait while I cook this and help yourself to a glass of water—it’s pure well water, cold and sweet—or you can come into the kitchen and watch me make your grilled cheese. Learn how for yourself, for next time.”

Again Ellis looked at him as if he could not quite believe what Jasper had just said. Or like he was some casual observer dismayed over the prospect of an ex-con standing in Jasper's kitchen while he cooked.

Well, Jasper wasn't anybody's servant to wait hand and foot on them. Also, everybody should know how to make a grilled cheese the way Jasper made it, which was to slather the outside of the bread with real mayonnaise before the grilling started.

"Have to wait till it gets hot," he explained to Ellis as he set a cast iron frying pan on a burner and turned the heat to medium.

He ignored Ellis as he crept into the kitchen, sidling in like he was curious, but didn't want to get too close. Propping himself against the wooden-topped counter, he looked at Jasper with wide, expectant eyes, his mouth a little way open as if he was on the verge of saying, *Well, get on with it. I'm hungry.*

Not that Jasper could imagine Ellis saying any such thing, even when he did get to speaking. Not that Jasper was used to someone standing in his kitchen, silent as a ghost, watching him assemble the parts of a grilled cheese as only Jasper knew how to make. Plenty of mayo on the outside, real mayo, not that fake crap. Plenty of sharp cheddar, real, of course, on the inside. Salt and pepper over the cheese. A small circle of yellow mustard. Then fried on hot for a minute, covered, then slowly melted. That was the way.

Involved in this, engaged in the idea of the taste of it, thinking he'd maybe make one for himself and save the meatloaf for another day, he almost forgot Ellis was there.

"Eh?" he asked, looking up, feeling as though Ellis had asked him a question.

Ellis' brows were furrowed low as he looked at the pan.

"No, not in butter," said Jasper. "Mayo spreads easier. Adds a nice tang. You'll like it. And those bits of cheese

melting into the pan?” He pointed at the pan with his spatula. “They’ll be nice and crispy.”

When the sandwich was done, smelling of grease and cheese, he sliced it in two on the cutting board, then placed it on a plate and handed it to Ellis.

“Just eat. I’ll make myself one.”

As Jasper took his plate of barely warm food out of the oven and turned it off, Ellis tore into the sandwich, inhaling half of one slice in one huge bite, like he’d not eaten in days. Which, given how his PO had treated him, might actually be the reality of it.

Jasper couldn’t abide cruelty, not to anyone, not even a silent-mouthed, wide-eyed, ex-con with a messed up, half done tattoo on his neck. Which Jasper still couldn’t make out. Was it a dragonfly or something else? Maybe they’d get to the point where he could ask and Ellis could tell him. In the meanwhile, he made himself a grilled cheese sandwich, extra mustard on his, and together they ate standing in the kitchen, silent, catty corner from each other, Jasper at the stove, and Ellis at the counter.

When they were finished, Jasper made two more sandwiches, shifting the bread around in the pan to make two at one time, and then they ate those in shared silence.

There was nothing better than a full belly to ease the way when things felt new and strange. Time would tell if Ellis would actually work out being his assistant, though, and Jasper would keep a good watch. In the meantime, he opened the freezer and pulled out two pints of Cold Stone ice cream.

“Which would you rather?” he asked, holding both out. “Eat ‘em right out of the pint. Chocolate or butter pecan, take your pick.”

Ellis’ jaw dropped, and his eyebrows flew up. Maybe he was surprised at being offered a treat, him being who he was, being there for the reason he was. Or maybe, just maybe, he loved ice cream like Jasper did.

“Seriously,” said Jasper, when Ellis hadn’t moved a muscle, as if he suspected once he made his choice known, he would be denied it. “I could eat either, and there’s plenty more where that came from. Pick. They’re starting to melt in my hands.”

Tentative, like a ribbon floating from a ghost’s hand, Ellis pointed at the butter pecan.

“Fine choice,” said Jasper. He handed the pint of butter pecan to Ellis and pulled open the cutlery drawer to hand him a spoon, and grabbed one for himself. “We can eat on the deck and watch the sun go down.”

As Ellis shuffled to follow him, Jasper knew that normally he’d be doing the dishes and cleaning up after dinner before settling in with ice cream and sunsets. But needs must, and if ice cream helped tame Ellis, then he’d pile it on with a backhoe.

ELLIS

If Ellis sank down far enough, the water in the large tub came up to his neck, and his knees didn't even poke through the surface of the water. It was plenty hot, too, and besides that he felt like he was floating in a sea of forgotten dreams. The memory of the pleasure of bathing alone, without being watched, was so many miles away from the communal shower at Wyoming Correctional, it was like being on a different planet.

The soap smelled nice and was soft on his skin as he sat up to bathe, and the towels on the rack looked soft and white, as though they were brand new. The air above the tub swirled with a faint mist, sweet-smelling without the fug of twenty sweaty men trying to get clean, get their rocks off, and avoid the attention of the prison guards all at the same time. Plus, there was a large bottle of shampoo and conditioner propped in the wooden rack over the tub, which meant he could finally get the sticky prison-issued soap out of his hair, though it was tricky to use the sprayer hose to rinse off with rather than ducking his head beneath a stream of water from a shower head.

The only thing wrong was the fact that the door did not have a lock. It was just a regular doorknob. There wasn't even a bolt or even a small hook-and-eye latch to keep the door shut for privacy's sake, something to make the first bath he'd had in years a perfect experience. Not that any lock could have kept Jasper Nash out. Not with those boots and muscles of his. Not if he thought Ellis was up to something he shouldn't be. Not if he wanted in.

Jasper was as solidly built as a brick house, certainly not someone Ellis wanted to mess with. Certainly not someone he'd ever disobey or talk back to. Not that he could talk at all. Not that Jasper had seemed to mind.

That was the strangest part. First there'd been Jasper coming up to him with that giant-sized switchblade of his. Ellis had been pretty sure that when Phil handed him over, Jasper, with his size and bulk and angry face, would have stepped right in to continue the abuse. Only instead of that, Jasper had cut Ellis free of the zip ties and yanked him out of Phil's reach. Tucked the blade away.

Then had come the realization for Jasper that Ellis wasn't talking. Ellis' had gone a whole week at the prison not speaking, and nobody, not even his soon to be erstwhile cellmate, had noticed or, if they noticed, had not said anything. Had he another nickel to serve, he could have gone that whole long while without ever speaking and nobody would have cared.

Jasper, on the other hand, had sussed this out within the first afternoon of them being together under the same roof. Then, upon learning how Ellis' problem had laid itself out, had done a mental one-eighty, it seemed, and come up with a solution. *We'll do it this way and this way and this.*

Then had come dinner.

Ellis had worked in the prison kitchens on and off, and the memory of the prison guard who'd force fed Ellis an entire can of generic stewed tomatoes floated to the top of his head every once in a while. But it was when those tomatoes were on the menu in the cafeteria that he struggled.

Mostly, he pushed the tomatoes around and pretended to eat them, or hid them beneath an uneaten slice of bread, a worthy sacrifice. Sometimes it made him gag, but most times he unfocused his eyes and simply didn't think about it.

At Jasper's table, though, the stewed tomatoes, no doubt lovingly heated on Jasper's stove, had covered *everything* on the plate. There was no scraping it off or hiding it beneath a

slice of white bread. No getting away from the smell, the sight of them.

With Jasper sitting across from him, big shouldered and watchful, Ellis had simply been unable to eat, and the harder he'd thought about trying, the worse it got. His belly churned and bile came up his throat, and in the end, he'd had to get up from the table without asking. In prison, that would get you a black mark. In Jasper's cabin, the result of refusing food had been, for a hot five minutes, an unknown.

Then Jasper had done the most unexpected thing. He'd taken the offending meal, without a speck of judgment on his face, and scraped it into the trash.

Then, like a small miracle, he'd offered to make Ellis a grilled cheese. Then he made himself one, and then he made two more, which they ate standing up in the kitchen in silence. As if it was perfectly ordinary for two men to eat that kind of dinner that way. As if Ellis wasn't an ex-con who couldn't talk, but instead was a known associate of Jasper's and had come over for dinner, and this was what they liked to eat together.

The whole situation had been, was, surreal and strange, like a calm day in the midst of an unusually violent storm. Ellis was still waiting for the hammer to fall, waiting all afternoon, ever since he'd been placed in Jasper's care. But except for Jasper's gruff manner, which grew softer the longer Ellis was there, and his sense of order and those rules he'd rattled off earlier, which Ellis hadn't even the vaguest notion of—all was not terrible.

Weirdest of all was the whole pint of ice cream he'd had for himself. It'd been fresh ice cream, too, and tasted like it had real ingredients, rather than the ersatz flavors the prison served on a Sunday night. As Jasper had led them out to the back deck to watch the sunset, he'd muttered something about also enjoying a nice fudge sundae at the Dairy Queen in Chugwater, the expression in his voice sounding like he wanted forgiveness for liking the taste of ice cream that was mostly air.

As for the sunset, it blew Ellis' socks off, and that was no lie. Not that he could explain it to Jasper, but maybe he didn't need to.

The sun started going down behind a ridge of mountains that sloped into foothills, above which towered the jagged shoulders of Iron Mountain. Behind that danced lacy clouds, turning and bowing into flowers of purple and deeper purple, and blues and orange, all at the same time. It was as though the sunset had a profound need to show off to Ellis on this, his first night out of prison, and wanted to make it memorable.

As for Jasper, when Ellis turned to look at him, having scraped out the last of the butter pecan from his waxed paper pint, Jasper's mouth had been open, his face soft, the colors of the sunset glinting in his dark blue eyes. The moment stilled and slowed and it was as if the whole world took a breath all around the cabin in anticipation for when the last round edge of the sun would slip into darkness, turning the clouds darker and darker still.

Then the air grew dark pretty fast, and a chill rose from the river, and that's when Jasper said, *It's time to go in. As the summer gets warmer, we can sit out as long as we please, but we've both had a long day—*

Jasper's words had rippled over Ellis as calmly as the slow river beneath the deck. He didn't know if Jasper knew what he was doing or if that's just the way he was or what. But it had been a nice treat, the whole afternoon a series of pleasant surprises.

Too bad he'd be dashing all of this to shit when he stole Jasper's truck and rifled through his wallet for some money so Ellis could buy flowers to lay on Mom's plaque. Too bad Jasper would know Ellis for what he was, a thief and a liar and everything bad. But that was the price he was willing to pay.

"You drown in there?" asked Jasper from the other side of the bathroom door, accompanying the words with a small knock. This, when he could have busted in easy as you please. "Maddy had Clay deliver some clothes from the shop for you. They're upstairs in your room. You can try them on, see if they

fit. We can change ‘em out if they don’t, and if they do, we can take them to the laundromat to soften ‘em up.”

As if anybody at the prison ever would have cared whether the clothes issued to Ellis fit or not. As if anybody at the prison ever cared whether the clothes were soft on his skin, or whether they scratched, or were stiff with soap, or left marks behind.

In a minute.

But of course Jasper couldn’t hear him. He couldn’t even hear himself.

Unable to think of anything else, he made a fist and, with his knuckles, knocked on the shiplap wall beside the tub.

“All right,” said Jasper, as if he understood everything Ellis was unable to say. “Don’t forget to brush your teeth after all that ice cream. And there’s a packet of disposable razors, if you’ve a mind to shave.”

All of this kindness would not last forever, but then, nothing good ever did. He might as well take advantage of it while he could, so after he finished his bath, he got out, drained the tub, and spent a good five minutes drying off with the towels that were even softer than they looked. They also smelled nice, a little like flowers, maybe, or something else clean and sweet.

He had to get dressed in his grubby clothes, but he wiped the mirror with a bit of toilet paper, also quite soft, and shaved with one of Jasper’s plastic razors, slowly and carefully, like he was preparing for his own execution.

By the time he stepped out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam into the chilly air of the cabin, he almost felt like a new man. Except he was the same man who had let his mom down, who had taken the low road, short and steep, for quick gain, and would pay for it forever and forever.

From the kitchen he could hear a low sound, like someone was whistling without knowing they were.

Crossing the cabin, curling his bare toes into the braided rug, Ellis found Jasper in the kitchen, wiping everything down

from dinner. The dishes were stacked in a wooden dish drain, the floor swept, everything in readiness for the next day.

Those were the kinds of tasks assigned to him in prison too, but here the floor was cool and friendly, the counter shone, and it all seemed more personal, somehow, than the industrial kitchen in prison. He didn't quite know what to make of how that made him feel, but in the next minute, Jasper turned to him, wiping his large hands on a dish towel.

"I'll take my bath now, I think," said Jasper.

Earlier, Jasper had gone on about the water pressure and the water heater and something about daily baths, but now Ellis couldn't remember.

"Oh," said Jasper, as if he'd just translated Ellis' confused expression into a question. "I'm always working, and the harder I work, the grimmer I get." Jasper smiled in a tired way, as if the day had been as long for him as it had been for Ellis. "Besides, when I work in my shop I come out covered with grease and flakes of metal. You don't want to sleep in that, you know? Besides, it saves wear and tear on the sheets."

Ellis nodded.

"I usually go to bed pretty early," said Jasper, in a conversational way as he laid the dish towel on top of the dish rack so it could dry. "Unless there's a movie I want to watch on my laptop, and sometimes if there's a meteor shower—" With a sigh, Jasper pressed the heel of his palm to his temple as if he meant to stay an oncoming headache, or, perhaps, as if his thoughts about his activities in the evening were simply too overwhelming. Or maybe he was already tired of Ellis and wanted him gone. "Well, I'll have my bath now."

With that, Jasper brushed past Ellis on his way to the bathroom, where he shut the door behind him. In another moment, the water was running. And it was strange, in a way, that Ellis could hear the cabin sigh around him, as if it too was winding down from a long day.

Ellis' whole body was too tired for anything much, and he couldn't bear the thought of trying to concentrate on a book,

which he might read in bed, something he'd not done since he started running drugs.

On the other hand, Jasper was occupied. The truck was in the driveway. Ellis could take off right that very minute and be on his way to Cheyenne.

On the other-other hand, it was getting quite dark out, and he didn't have proper directions. Any ex-con in his position would have taken that truck and not cared a damn about getting into an accident. But Ellis was not truly criminal, and he sighed along with the cabin because just in that moment, he didn't have to be anything other than who he was.

Going over to the glass sliding door, he found the latch was undone, which was typical for people who simply weren't worried about their houses being broken into. He slid the door open and stepped out onto the deck. The lights from the cabin were bright, so he went inside and turned them all off, leaving on only the small light over the stove. Then he went back out into the rich darkness, folding in velvety waves all around him.

The air was rich with scent, damp from the river wending slowly past, thick with the perfume of grass and shrub growing cool. He felt almost heady with the idea of it, that all that darkness existed without a single speck of light to mar it.

At the far horizon, just dimly, he could see the line that marked where the horizon ended and the night sky began. He'd never been in a land so open, and now so dark, in a way quite unlike the city or the prison.

Taking a deep breath, he went to sit at the edge of the deck, swinging his bare feet in the air below him, imagining it to be miles and miles down to the river, and if he jumped, how long it might take him to hit the water.

The river was surely only a few feet below, and the splash might be loud enough to alert Jasper something was up. So he didn't do that and only breathed the sweet, dark air, and listened to the rush of the water. Gradually, quite gradually, he started hearing high-pitched coyote cries that echoed in his

bones, a cry so lonely, so wanting of something it could never have.

He might have been out there a good long while, breathing slow and deep, feeling the coolness sink into him, when he heard a scuffle of bare feet behind him. When he turned, Jasper's large silhouette marked where he was, and Ellis could sense clean skin, and was aware, also, as to how near Jasper was.

"I do have folding chairs," said Jasper as he came to sit beside Ellis on the edge of the deck, letting his bare feet dangle. "Can't leave 'em out cause the wind'll take 'em, so they're stored in the shed. It's a hassle to get them, so sometimes I sit like this. At night."

Ellis nodded. Something in his throat vibrated, a ribbon of energy in a low wind, and he released it and heard a sound come out. It sounded like *Mmmmmm*. Like a soft grunt of agreement.

He sensed Jasper looking at him. Could see the edge of his face against the darker dark, the single light over the stove glinting on his eye. Jasper was calm and still, not reacting at all, but he'd heard Ellis, just as Ellis had heard himself.

"I figure we'll go to the laundromat on Monday to wash your new clothes," said Jasper. "Gets too crowded on Sundays."

Ellis took a breath, and eased that breath out, letting it turn into that *Mmmmm* sound again. Agreement. Acknowledgement.

Jasper nodded, not making a fuss over it, and then turned his attention to the darkness beyond the river. And together they sat there while the nighttime air grew chilly and deep around them, and way off in the distance, coyotes sang to the moon.

ELLIS

Ellis' first night in the cabin was fraught with cut-edged sleep, dark dreams, and the uncertainty that loomed when he thought of his plans for the morning. Night seemed forever long, the darkness beyond the windows across from his bed somehow eternal and never ceasing. His eyes grew dry watching for the sunrise long before it came, and when it did, he had to blink hard several times before he could believe morning had come.

He'd not undressed, so all he had to do was take his sneakers in hand and push back the curtain-door. The keys to the truck were stored in a little china bowl on a table next to the easy chair downstairs.

As for money, Jasper probably had taken his wallet out of his jeans, the way Ellis himself did. So, putting the sneakers on the landing, Ellis softly drew back the curtain to Jasper's room and looked in.

Jasper was asleep, naked from the waist up, stretched out on his belly. His dark hair was messy on the white pillow, broad shoulders and long back visible beneath the rumpled white sheet. It looked like he was sleeping hard, as well, like his sleep came naturally to him, like he hadn't a care in the world.

On the far side of Jasper's bedroom, at the very end, on top of the dresser, was a folded pair of blue jeans and a brown lump that was, most assuredly, a wallet.

Tip toeing the way he'd learned at Wyoming Correctional, Ellis was almost to the dresser before Jasper stirred and sighed, freezing Ellis right to the floor. But when several minutes passed and Jasper remained still, breathing low and steady, Ellis moved the last few steps to the dresser.

Grabbing the wallet, he rifled through the layer of bills. While part of his mind questioned the amount of money Jasper had on hand, the other part of his mind told him to grab the first twenty he came across, and so he did.

Going down the stairs and stopping to lace up his thin-soled sneakers was almost mindless, as was stuffing the twenty in his pocket and grabbing the keys to the truck. It was when he stepped outside and went through the narrow passage between the workshop and the cabin that he had to stop.

The truck was right there. He could just hop in and go. But the sun coming over the trees to the east sparkled like a pinwheel, turning and turning in bright light. The air was sweet and fresh and new and green. The morning was everything it had never been behind the tall walls of the prison, and completely unlike what it had always been in the long, grey-painted corridors of the hospital in Cheyenne when he would take Mom for her treatment.

This was a world unlike any he'd been in before. Only rich folks had acres of land with nothing on it. Only the privileged few had air so fresh it felt newly born. Was he going to throw it all away, his chance at a new life, and steal a truck—*borrow*—just like he'd taken money from Jasper's wallet?

Yes, he was. That was the plan, and he was going to stick to it, not looking left or right. Mom deserved a last goodbye from her only son. He'd let her down so badly, failing to earn enough money by teaching, and then failing at being a drug dealer. He owed her this. His heart owed her this. He was going to do it.

Looking neither left nor right, ignoring the pang in his belly, the muffled thud of his sneakers on the gravel, he got in the truck. He put the keys in the ignition and started the engine.

The truck was an older model with a bench seat, but like everything at Jasper's place, it was well cared for. The fuel gage said he had three-quarters of a tank. Enough to get to Cheyenne and Iron Mountain Cemetery. After that? He had no idea.

He drove the truck as quietly as he could up the gravel road from Jasper's cabin to the main road. From there, he went along the wider gravel road to the main gate, stopping to unlock, drive through, and then lock the gate behind him. Everything felt normal, as if he might be headed on an errand for Jasper, should Jasper trust him enough with the truck and his freedom away from the ranch.

From the gate he bumped along another mile of blacktop road till he reached Farthing and, driving silently through the morning-quiet town, headed to the main highway, I-25, and barreled south along it as fast as he could to Cheyenne. The highway was empty, for the most part, wide and curving among the green and brown early summer hills, and he pulled into a gas station, Ranchette's Stop 'n Go, on the outskirts of Cheyenne, way before he was ready.

Going inside, he purchased a bundle of cheap gas station carnations, all pink and red petals and damp green stems wrapped in plastic, and held in place with a rubber band. Handing over the twenty, he got three cents in change, which he stuffed in his pocket. Then, taking his receipt, he grabbed a pen without asking and wrote down his request for directions on the back.

Dir to Iron Mountain Cemetery?

With much sympathy and some discussion between the two clerks, he received those directions.

He was able to get an idea of how far he had to go, too. Twenty miles up Highway 211.

One clerk, with a shrug, said, "There's not much there. It's just where poor people are buried."

This was not a surprise to him, not at all. Mom had no money, and he'd been in jail. The county cremated her and put

her ashes in a cheap plot without any thought as to what her wishes might have been. Certainly nobody asked him what he thought might be nice.

With a wave of thanks, he put the receipt in his pocket, tightened his grip on the flowers, his fingers damp as water dripped from both the petals and the bottom of the plastic cone, and went out to the truck. Then he drove the twenty miles up the narrow highway, the old blacktop faded to grey and bumpy from weathering. He went as fast as he dared, his hands on the wheel, knuckles white.

Iron Mountain Cemetery was at the far end of a wide flat valley and, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but grass and sky and the little chapel with a plain wooden cross on it.

As he drove through the open gate and along the circle of driveway, someone came out of the chapel to look at him. He waved the bundle of flowers and kept driving because no way did he want to discuss what he was doing there. Why he was there.

The flat markers for paupers, flush to the short grass and laid in a row at the far edge of the cemetery, were made out of cheap granite that showed signs of wear. He went to the newest looking one, the one still shiny, still clean of dust, and there he found the remains of his mom.

The marker read: *Beloved in God's Hands - Emma Bowman.*

Standing there, holding those flowers in his hand, was like looking at a doorway into the past he could not possibly step through.

There was no admittance, not for him. No joyful reunion between him and Mom. No tears of happiness that now she was well, now they could go forward together. No dreams of the future, he teaching high school English, she entertaining herself by playing bridge with her friends, and baking pies for Sunday, and fussing over him as she told him stories about Dad.

None of this would happen, and the water dripping onto the plaque from the cone of cheap flowers was joined by the tears he'd not known he'd been crying. Nothing hurt. He was numb all over, frozen in the moment now that he'd accomplished what he'd sworn he'd do.

"Goodbye, Mom," he said, though the words came out in that same low *Mmmmmm* sound.

But she knew, surely she did, what he meant. What was in his heart, the swirl of regret and broken promises, memories of hospital visits, and that horrible Pine Sol smell that permeated everything and everyone.

He had a sharp memory of the kiss he'd given her as he'd pretended to head off to school, but he was really going to see Manny to set up another deal. After that it was a blur, but that one sweet moment, that last kiss, was as clear as could be.

Everything was broken, and there was no taking back the past. No knowing how to navigate the future, either, now that he'd done this.

Jasper would probably call the police first thing he woke up and saw that Ellis was gone and his truck was gone. The police would call his PO, and Phil would head to the ranch to drag Ellis back to prison. There he'd stay behind bars for at least five years for breaking parole. More, probably, if Phil could manage it.

The person who'd been standing in the doorway of the church was now coming into the cemetery, crossing over to where Ellis was. Ellis scrubbed at his face and laid the flowers on the plaque. He was leaving, *yes sir, no sir. Didn't mean to bother anyone. Sir.*

The man was older, dressed in simple black pants, white shirt, and a tie. Maybe he was a pastor of the church. Or maybe he was a nosy busybody. At any rate, he was now between Ellis and the gate, between Ellis and the truck.

"C'n I help you, son?"

Ellis couldn't answer the question, at least not out loud. His one humming sound wasn't going to cut it, not for a

question like that, which had neither a no nor a yes answer. He needed help, sure, but he needed, specifically, directions to Farthing.

He could go back the way he'd come, but that'd take too long. By the lay of the land, the constant presence of the jagged mountains to the west, he had a sense he was currently closer to Farthing than to Chugwater, except he couldn't be sure. So he made a writing motion and pulled out his bit of receipt.

"Oh," said the man. He made motions with his hands in the air.

Ellis shook his head.

"Oh, don't know sign?" said the man. "Here. Here's a pen. Tell me what you need."

Ellis took the pen and, holding the receipt against his palm, wrote: *Dir to Farthing?*

"Sure," said the man as he read the note Ellis held out and took the pen from Ellis. "This here's Highway 211. Goes straight up to Farthing. Forty minutes or so. Right?"

Right. Ellis nodded. How was he supposed to say thank you when all he could do was hum? The pastor had overwhelmed him with a kindness he didn't know what to do with, either, and it was choking his eyes, making his chest tight.

"That's okay, son," said the pastor. To Ellis' gratitude, the man didn't move closer or try to touch him. He just stayed where he was, looking at Ellis with kind eyes as the sun shone down on them both, glinting on the flat markers in the cropped grass. "You just pay it forward, okay? Be kind to those you meet along the way."

Ellis couldn't even begin to make sense of how he was supposed to do that, but the man's words made him think of Jasper, who must surely be furious that Ellis had run off and stolen his truck. Maybe he'd even discovered the twenty dollars missing from his wallet. Or maybe he was shrugging it

off and couldn't care less, like Ellis had been a shadow passing by.

With a nod, the man went out of the cemetery and back into the little white chapel. Leaving Ellis alone with his palm drying in the ever-present breeze, his face tacky with tears, dust on his tongue.

What was he supposed to do now? He had nowhere to go, no one who would miss him.

Except Jasper.

Thoughts of Jasper swirled around him. Jasper in his kitchen making Ellis a grilled cheese sandwich because Ellis couldn't abide stewed tomatoes. Jasper handing over an entire pint of butter pecan ice cream. Jasper knocking on the bathroom door instead of barging in. Jasper showing Ellis his workshop, his forge, pointing out everything with a low, quiet pride.

Maybe he'd not welcomed Ellis with open arms, and who would, really. But he had made a space for Ellis in his little rickety-packety cabin.

Maybe Jasper was doing that because he had to. But he certainly was under no compulsion to come out to the deck in the darkness of night and sit there, silent at Ellis' side, and listen with him to the coyotes howl beneath the stars.

There were no rules for this, no guidelines. The only thing Ellis knew for sure was the openness of the ranch, the groves of trees, the dappled shade, damp scents from the river.

He was going to head back. Even if he only had one more minute on the ranch, one last time to look out over the valley behind Jasper's cabin, he was going to head back.

Not to hand himself over. No, he'd never do anything like that. He'd let them take him, yes, but only after he had one last long mournful look at what he'd lost by stealing Jasper's truck so he could say goodbye to his mom. Some things were worth every sacrifice, and as he looked down at those cheap flowers already wilting in the sun, he knew this was one of them.

*Goodbye, Mom. I'm sorry. See you in heaven. Someday.
One day. Maybe.*

All that came out was a low *mmmm* sound, but even beneath the dirt, he knew she could hear him.

JASPER

Morning came with a sugar hangover that Jasper tried to ignore as he dressed and went down to the bathroom to brush his teeth and shave. He didn't hear a sound from Ellis' bedroom as he splashed water on his face and rinsed the soap off, dried himself with a towel.

What should he make for his new guest? Pancakes, maybe, or oatmeal, which might be nice since the weather wasn't yet too warm for such a thing.

As he trundled into the kitchen, he opened the sliding glass door to the deck to let the fresh breeze come in off the river. The cabin seemed to sigh appreciatively around him as he bustled with a frying pan and looked in the tall cupboard along the wall.

There wasn't enough flour for pancakes, and no oats, alas, but he had plenty of eggs and fresh bread, so scrambled eggs it would be. Nobody knew how to make them as good as he could and, besides, they might make a nice change from the scrambled eggs served in Wyoming Correctional.

By the time he'd beaten the eggs into submission and made sure to add enough cream, the toast was in the toaster, ready to go, and there was the cut-glass dish of butter and two glasses of orange juice on the table. Except he still hadn't heard Ellis moving around.

Maybe if he started frying some bacon? Nobody he'd ever met could sleep through the smell of that. Except he was out of bacon. Coffee then, made in the automatic coffee maker,

which had, over time, lost the function to be set to brew at a certain time each morning. He turned the coffee maker on, and leaned against the counter while the smell of the warm, bitter brew filled the air.

Still no Ellis.

Feeling like a parent about to get his son up in time to catch the school bus, he went to the bottom of the stairs.

“Ellis.” His voice echoed loud in the silence, like it had entered an empty space and only had enough energy to bounce back to him. “Blast.”

Going up the stairs to the landing, he swept back the curtain to Ellis’ room. The clothes that Clay had delivered were still on top of the dresser, looking untouched. The bed was rumpled, and the curtains were wide open.

As Jasper went over to them, the first thing he saw was the driveway, lined with pine trees—and *no* truck.

“Damn it,” he said, and headed down the stairs.

His keys were missing from the bowl beside the easy chair, and it was obvious what had happened.

First chance he got, Ellis had lit out for places unknown, taking Jasper’s truck. There had been three quarters of a tank in the truck, so Ellis could get pretty far. He’d have to gas up at some point, though, since the truck, an old ’71 Chevy that, while good enough for what Jasper needed it for, was less than fuel efficient. Which meant that Ellis would need money.

Going back upstairs, Jasper grabbed his wallet from the top of his dresser, unable to remember the position he’d put it in the night before. Thumbing through the bills, as he always kept one hundred dollars on hand in various fives and tens and twenties, he quickly saw that there was a twenty-dollar bill missing.

That’s when he grabbed his cell phone from the dresser and scrolled through his contacts. He was going to call Leland and tell him what happened. He was going to apologize because the ex-con program was a bust even before it’d gotten up to speed.

He couldn't imagine Bill would want to continue with the program, regardless of potential future tax breaks. The fact was, Ellis had hit the ground running, which meant the gentleness Jasper had witnessed the night before had been all a big farce.

Ellis had been biding his time until he could get away. He'd been watching Jasper's every move, had probably scoped the room to find where the keys were, which had been, really, in plain sight. As had been Jasper's wallet. As had been—

Everything else. Everything Jasper owned that was valuable had been in plain sight.

There was eighty bucks still in the wallet, not to mention his two credit cards. Jasper didn't even need to count the money to know. And he'd seen his laptop in its cubby along the back wall downstairs, too. That was worth some money, being almost brand new, should Ellis care to find a pawn shop to take it to.

Cell phone in hand, Jasper put his wallet in his back pocket and went downstairs. Everything was in place, just as it always was. High-speed router, high capacity hard drive, almost-brand-new laptop—not a thing was missing.

Quite casually, he strolled out to the workshop. The back door was unlocked, as it always was, and the double doors in the front were open. He should have closed them the night before, just to keep dust and debris out, but he never locked them. Had never found a need to.

The workshop was in shadow, so he flicked on the light and surveyed everything. Valuable tools on the wall were still in their proper, outlined places. The pile of copper pipes in the bin? Still there. Wrench set? Still there. Leather aprons? Still there. Everything was still where it always was.

Ellis had only taken twenty bucks and the truck.

A more criminally inclined sort of guy would have taken everything he could get his hands on, as well as all the money in Jasper's wallet. A true thief would have taken the copper, for sure, as that was quite valuable. Not to mention Jasper's

phone, which had been sitting right next to the wallet. Jasper did not lock it, not even with a thumbprint.

At the ranch, there was no need for high security. The ranch was its own universe, and nobody would think of stealing something that did not belong to them.

Turning off the light, Jasper went inside the cabin, poured himself a cup of coffee, doctored it well with plenty of sugar and a splash of creamer, and leaned against the kitchen counter to drink it.

He'd arrived at a crossroads he'd not thought to encounter. At least not so quickly. He had no idea where Ellis had gone or why.

Of course, if he'd read the file, as Leland had urged him, he might have some inkling as to what was going on with Ellis. Except that if he wanted to read it now, he'd have to wake up Maddy to get it from her office and potentially have to explain why he was so moved to read it, when before he'd wanted nothing to do with it.

At this moment, Jasper was, in a way, Ellis' CO. He was the man in the field, the man in charge of the mission. Ellis had taken nothing but the bare essentials for some type of errand, perhaps, the purpose of which was known only to Ellis.

If Jasper called Leland, which surely he should do, then Leland would call the police. Then Ellis' flinty-faced PO would yank him back to prison for breaking parole. Which seemed a heartbreaking continuance of what must have already been quite the slog of getting through his time in prison.

The time he and Ellis had shared on the deck the evening before had not been, in any way, a remarkable transformation of prisoner into citizen, though Ellis had seemed to appreciate the ice cream and the view and had gone back out to the deck, all on his own.

Surely if Ellis had a plan of escape in mind, he would have grabbed the keys and taken the truck while Jasper had been taking his bath. Except he'd not taken off the night before.

He'd gone out to see the darkness and hadn't seemed bothered that Jasper had joined him.

Finishing the dregs of his coffee, Jasper rinsed out the white china mug and unlocked the front door to go out and sit on the steps. Like he was going to wait there for Ellis' return. Which would be foolish. The sun was already rising above the trees and the front steps were made of rose-colored flagstone and were always bathed in the strongest of sunlight and he'd be broiled within the hour.

He'd be better off fixing the broken hinge on the portable bleachers and make sure they were ready for the blacksmith demo on Wednesday. He might give Maddy a call to see if the apprentice outfit he'd ordered for Ellis had arrived yet. Except that would mean that later, when questioned, Leland would want to know why during his phone call with Maddy Jasper had not mentioned Ellis was missing.

Jasper was better off not calling Maddy, then. Better off waiting until it was quite clear Ellis was gone for good. Then he could make an all-out confession and admit he'd been hoping Ellis would come back.

It'd be an honest mistake, him imparting goodness to an ex-con who seemed to love ice cream as much as Jasper did. Anyone might have been fooled by the convivial interlude of the night before, by Ellis' seeming gratitude to find himself where he'd found himself.

Or was all of that merely Jasper's continual hopeful belief in the goodness of his fellow man? Except Milt, of course, he didn't believe in *his* goodness anymore. Nor did he believe in the goodness of anyone who failed to take care of their animals properly. Or anyone who was mean to kids. And he especially didn't believe in anyone who made fun of the ranch because they failed to understand how unbelievably beautiful it was.

Jasper made himself go out to the shop. There, he made himself go around to the little lean-to against the workshop and pull out the portable steel bleachers, the rubber wheels scudding along in the dirt, rather than rolling.

If he had an assistant, then they could install a brick or flagstone floor for the lean-to so the bleachers would be easier to store and so the rubber wheels wouldn't become coated with dust and debris while they were being stored. If he had an assistant, he could fix the broken hinges, as it was a job that needed two pairs of hands.

In the meanwhile, he could wipe down the bleachers and tamp down the dirt beneath the lean-to with his shovel and clear away the leaves and debris. All of this absorbed him for a good hour, then he rolled the bleachers away, after which he checked the farrier tools he had stored along the wall.

The tools didn't really need to be cleaned of rust, but he always liked his tools to be shining clean when he did his demos, and doing this particular chore would help him pass the time. He'd give Ellis till noon before he called Leland. Which was how long Jasper needed to keep himself occupied before the real-life events following that particular phone call would start rushing over him.

He set out a large plastic bin in the shop, filled it with a gallon of vinegar, then laid his tools in the bin one by one: the rasp, the pinchers, the clincher, the clinching block, the pullers, anything without a wooden handle. Those, the farrier's knife and his nailing hammer, he cleaned all over with vinegar and a rough cloth, then polished the metal with a baking soda solution, afterwards drying them off and putting them in their outlined spots along the wall.

When the tools in the plastic bin had soaked long enough, he changed out the solution to baking soda and water, and cleaned himself up with a spare cloth, having forgotten to put an apron on, absentminded in his worry over Ellis.

Finally, the tools were ready to be wiped off, and, one by one, he applied a light coating of WD-30 oil to keep the tools free from rust. Then he swept the shop, and oiled the anvil, and stood there in the open doorway, wiping his hands free of oil with yet another cloth. He'd soon have to make a journey to the laundromat in Farthing, and pay the owner extra to let him wash his extra greasy stuff in the industrial washer, which he was always glad to do.

All of this was make-work, he knew that.

Just as he knew the sound of his old '71 Chevy coming down the gravel road through the trees. Sunlight sparkled off the polished grill and on the chrome of the rear-view mirror. Showed Ellis' hands white on the wheel.

Jasper could just see Ellis' profile as he pulled up in front of the shop. He parked where the truck shouldn't be parked, but Ellis didn't know that. He had obviously seen Jasper standing in the sunlight between the open workshop doors and decided to stop right there and get it over with.

Waves and waves of relief pounded over Jasper, tumbled with the sparks of fury that Ellis would be so foolish as to steal a truck on his first day out of jail. Did he have no sense? He didn't, which was what had gotten him into trouble in the first place.

Ellis turned off the truck, filling the air with a sudden silence. When Ellis got out, he came directly around the truck and stood there near the tailgate, head down, hands at his sides, shudders rolling slowly up and down his whole body.

He seemed ready for any punishment Jasper cared to dish out, like he expected a volley of hammer blows, after which would surely come years and years of additional prison time. Ellis knew it, as surely as he was standing there, and Jasper knew it. He should call Leland that very minute.

Except. Ellis had brought the truck back. He'd returned to the ranch when surely he could have driven off to parts unknown. He could have slunk into the background of his old life, never to be seen again. But he'd come *back*, back to the ranch.

"Care to tell me where you been?" asked Jasper as he tossed the used cloth in the plastic bin with all the other used cloth, unable to keep all the anger out of his voice. Which was bad. Anger wouldn't help this situation, not at all. So he began again in a calmer tone, as if he and Ellis had already had a discussion about borrowing the truck and Ellis had forgotten to mention he was going to borrow it before taking off. "Any particular reason you needed the truck?"

With a shaking hand, Ellis reached into the pocket of his prison-issued jeans to pull something out. Three copper pennies landed in the dust, and between Ellis' trembling fingers was a small rectangular piece of paper. Ellis held the bit of paper out but seemed unable to move from where he was by the truck.

Moving forward, closing the space between them, Jasper took the piece of paper and looked at it. It was a receipt from Ranchette's Stop 'n Go outside of Cheyenne. Jasper knew the place, had stopped there sometimes on his way in and out of the city.

Receipts were sometimes unintelligible, but this one said, quite clearly: *Flowers - \$19.97*. Which explained the three pennies, as well as what the twenty bucks had been spent on, but didn't quite explain everything else.

Ellis made a *mmmmm* sound. Jasper looked up. Ellis twisted his hand in the air, like he was turning something over, so Jasper turned the receipt over. On the back was a jumble of words, the letters scribbled as though they'd been written on an uneven surface.

One set of scribbles was written in black ink: *Dir Iron Mountain Cemetery?*

The other set of scribbles was written in blue ink: *Dir to Farthing?*

Jasper chewed the inside of his lower lip, thinking all of this over. Flowers and cemetery could only mean one thing.

Another idea marched up and stood solidly next to the idea of Ellis coming back to the ranch. He'd not only come back, he'd specifically asked for directions as to *how* to come back. This wasn't Ellis floating around in his own life, mired in foolish decisions. This had been Ellis following a well-defined path. Flowers. Cemetery. Ranch.

"You visit someone?" asked Jasper. "Perhaps to pay your respects? Can you tell me who that was?"

Jasper was about to go into the shop to grab a pad of paper and the pencil he kept on the tool bench to sketch his ideas on,

but then Ellis made a sudden sharp movement, like he was trying to take a deep breath to say all the words in the world.

What came out was that *mmmmm* sound. That wasn't much helpful, except for the fact that Ellis' mouth moved in a very specific way, one that Jasper, even without knowing how to read lips, could understand: *Mom*.

"Oh." Jasper could feel Ellis' grief as if it had stabbed him in the heart.

The death of Ellis' mother was probably in the file somewhere. Jasper still didn't want to read that file, but he was inching closer to the idea, especially if it would help him help Ellis.

"You could've asked," said Jasper, quite softly. "I would have taken you."

Except Ellis obviously felt he could not have asked, and would not have been driven anywhere, not on his first day.

As near as Jasper could figure, Ellis did not feel the world was on his side and so did not expect handouts or help or assistance of any kind. He was acting like a man on his own. Only now he wasn't, and it was up to Jasper to make sure Ellis knew that.

"Did you get anything to eat along the way?" Jasper asked this, and then shook his head and scratched the back of his neck. "No, you only had a twenty, and you spent that on flowers for your mom."

Jasper bent to pick up the pennies, hesitated a moment, then stuffed the pennies and the receipt in his pocket. The twenty bucks was gone, but that didn't mean the two of them needed to stare at the remains of the morning.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the heel of his hand, then, as kindly as he could, he looked at Ellis.

"Can I fix you something? I've got plenty of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and I can fix green beans instead of the tomatoes. Okay?"

A shudder ran through Ellis' frame. There were circles of sweat beneath his armpits and his hair lay lank against his temples. It was as though he'd put himself through the wringer that morning, and now only expected more of the same.

"Listen, now," said Jasper. "I'm going to give you a literal get-out-of-jail-free pass for this morning. But in future, if you need to go somewhere, just ask. If you need something, just ask. Something wrong? Just tell me. I might not always be able to fix it, but I'll do my best."

Ellis just looked at him, silent, a tremble ghosting along his jaw. He did not believe what Jasper was saying, and probably thought Jasper was just messing with him. Horrible shit must have happened to him in prison for him not to have an ounce of trust in someone who'd been nothing but kind to him. Which meant Jasper was going to have to try harder.

"I wasn't all too keen on this ex-con program," said Jasper, prepared to fully unveil the truths in his heart if it would help. "And I'm still not quite sure about it. But Bill believes in it and Leland believes in it. And I believe in *them*. To me, the fact that you brought the truck back, that you came back? That means a lot. It proves the kind of man you are, beneath the layers of hardness the prison laid on you."

When Ellis wrinkled his brow, Jasper nodded. "Yes, it's true what I'm saying. You seem like the kind of guy who would respond well to being on a ranch like this. The kind of guy who might like it here. The kind of guy to sit watching a sunset with—"

Jasper stopped himself, unable to go on through the mire of feelings that rose up at the memory of sitting side-by-side with Ellis on the deck, their legs dangling over the edge as the cool air from the river perfumed the air and the darkness enfolded them both with kind, gentle arms.

"You like the ranch, right?"

Ellis nodded, looking at Jasper with wide eyes, almost as if he couldn't believe they were having this kind of conversation, rather than the one he'd been expecting.

“You like ice cream, that much is obvious.”

Again Ellis nodded.

“Those are good things to like,” said Jasper. “They mark you for the kind of man you really are, deep down inside. The kind of man who would go to visit his mother’s grave. So what do you say we give this a try. For Bill. For Leland. And especially for yourself.”

Ellis looked away, and it seemed he was looking at the river and at the blue circle of pond, its normally glassy surface scattered by cat’s paws as the wind tossed the tops of the pine trees. When he looked back at Jasper, in his eyes was a small glow of hope that Jasper wasn’t lying, that this might be the start of his new life, a good life.

“Let me fix us some lunch, then we’ll get to work, okay?”

There was nothing better than a good meal and hard work to settle a man, and that Jasper knew personally.

ELLIS

Jasper had instructed Ellis to wash up and to change his shirt, and by the time Ellis sat at the table, lunch was waiting for him. Sure, it was meatloaf and mashed potatoes and green beans, as promised, an ordinary meal. And sure, it was the same kind of meal he'd eaten in Wyoming Correctional. But the way Jasper cooked it was a revelation.

Everything tasted good, and the food was piping hot. Plus, there was plenty of brand-name ketchup to put on everything, plenty of fresh, sweet butter to put on the potatoes. Jasper had made iced tea, and between them they drank almost all of the pitcher.

When they were finished, Jasper stood up and wiped his mouth with his fingers. Ellis stood up too and echoed the gesture, and realized Jasper had been watching him.

"Help me with the dishes," said Jasper. "Then I need you to help me fix the hinges on the portable bleachers."

The surreal feeling that had sifted over him when upon his return Jasper had not yelled or hit Ellis or called Phil stirred around him all over again, ebbing and flowing with the beat of his heart. Hope furlled, a tiny ribbon unbending beneath the surreal feeling that Jasper was going to give him a second chance. That he would not be sent back to prison.

Jasper had not liked it that Ellis had taken the truck, but he'd understood the reason why. Evidently, the reason was good enough for Jasper to give Ellis a second chance. There

might even be a third and fourth chance, as Jasper seeming to be that kind of guy, but Ellis didn't want to push it. He was lucky to have gotten this far, to have done what he set out to do and still be at the ranch.

At the same time, as he helped Jasper wheel what turned out to be a foldable three-tier set of bleachers from beneath thin plywood lean-to set against an outer wall of the shop, part of him knew it could not last. The easy-going way Jasper explained what he needed Ellis to do could not last, nor the casual way Jasper pointed him in the direction of a snazzy new-looking drill bit hanging in a precise spot above the tool bench. Nor the way Jasper showed him how to use it, and especially not the way Jasper let Ellis drill several slightly larger holes into the steel with this dangerous, someone-could-get-hurt piece of equipment.

At no time did Jasper rush the process, at no time did he hurry, nor express any irritation at the way Ellis had almost dropped the heavy tool on Jasper's booted foot. He simply reached to adjust the tool in Ellis' slightly tenuous grip and showed him again. And then again after that.

By the third hole, Ellis was getting the hang of it, but his wrists were tired, so Jasper took the drill and quickly made all the holes they needed, then sent Ellis to fetch the box of new, heavy-steel hinges.

This was the kind of work Wyoming Correctional had wanted to teach Ellis in the shop in prison, in small classes arranged by do-gooders who felt that if they showed criminals how to work they would actually want to go out and do that kind of work.

Problem was, the shop was the place where inmates made shivs and where they might promise to hold a weight steady, but then would drop it. Or they would use the drill, but not in the way the manufacturers had intended.

Ellis had preferred the library, assisting the do-gooders there in teaching inmates how to read, how to fill out a form properly, how to study for their GEDs. Yes, the do-gooders, all women it seemed, were entirely too upbeat, preferring to see

the good in everybody to the point where it became nauseating to Ellis to watch them try to be cheerful and kind.

Not that rapists or serial killers were allowed in the library with the female tutors; the only inmates allowed were low-level ones, non-violent ones.

There had been one time that during a lockdown when they were all in the library, one of the inmates, a violent man with a string of assaults and rapes to his record, had determined that one of the do-gooders would be good enough for him. It was only through the combined efforts of the other inmates and the two other do-gooders that the woman had been saved from all out rape, but she'd been a shaky mess, had left Wyoming Correctional, and never come back.

The prison became more savvy and vetted inmates before allowing them the privilege of expanding their brains. Most only went to the library because it was quiet and relatively safe, not because they wanted to learn anything. The alternative was the shop, so that only made sense.

Enough. He needed to stop thinking about that and concentrate on where he was. Which was holding the hinges steady over the newly drilled holes while Jasper inserted screws and changed out the drill bit to drill them in. One by one they assembled the new hinges, then, with Jasper at one end of the bleachers and Ellis at the other, they folded and unfolded the portable bleachers until Jasper was satisfied.

“That’ll hold much better,” he said, nodding as they rolled the bleachers back into place. “Thank you. That was definitely a two-man job.”

Ellis nodded and felt his throat try to move over the sounds his tongue wanted to make. *Mmmmm*.

“I mean I could have done it myself,” said Jasper, with a wry grin. “But it would have taken me ages, so I really do appreciate the extra pair of hands. Now help me put these tools away, would you?”

Jasper asked as if Ellis actually had the power to say no.

Saying no would mean he wasn't contributing, which would mean Jasper might complain, and Phil might be dispatched to take Ellis away in the prison van. Except—Jasper had not acted, not for one minute, like calling Phil was his first option. Or even his second.

If Ellis didn't want to do a certain thing, Jasper was likely to suggest something else Ellis *did* want to do. At least it seemed that way. Not that Ellis wanted to test that particular theory. Not that—and he found this to be the most amazing development thus far—not that he wanted to let Jasper down. He found he most certainly did not want to do that.

Not even now, when Jasper was looking at Ellis and wrinkling his nose, as if he smelled something bad and didn't want to say anything about it.

“Why don't you take a bath while I make dinner,” said Jasper. “Baked spaghetti, I think.”

Ellis looked at him, feeling surprise wash over his face. It was late afternoon, and the sun was now cutting shadows and light amongst the trees, stirring the clouds along the ridge of mountains beyond, but surely it was not time for a bath. Those were, as had been explained to him, taken in the evening, before bed.

“You still kind of smell like a prison,” said Jasper, and he looked a little sorry he had to say it. “You had a rough morning as well, I'd say, so a bath, some clean clothes, a hot meal, and you'll feel like a new man. I promise.”

Jasper didn't seem the kind of man to make promises lightly. So dutifully, even though he didn't fully believe Jasper, Ellis trotted upstairs to grab some of the clean clothes that had been waiting for him almost from the moment of his arrival, and went back downstairs to the bathroom to fill the tub.

Hot steam soon filled the air as he shed his clothes, filthy from two days of hard wear. When he slid into the tub, it was like a blessing he most certainly could not believe he was getting.

All of this civility was short-lived and certainly would not continue. Except the ribbon of hope in his heart seemed to be getting longer, curling around his heart in an insistent way.

Hope was a dangerous thing; prison had taught him that. Yet here, in this gentle place, hope was gaining a foothold. If everything continued the way it had started, that foothold would become real and strong and ever present.

He shouldn't believe, shouldn't. But as he washed his hair with sweet smelling shampoo and used the soft soap and white washcloth and scrubbed himself all over to get the prison smell off him, as requested, he knew he wanted to. Wanted to believe in the man Jasper seemed to be, someone calm and kind, even when he looked strong enough to throw his weight around, to demand he get his way.

As Ellis drained the tub, dried off and got dressed, he eyed the doorknob that had no lock.

From somewhere, not too distant, he could hear Jasper whistling while he cooked in the kitchen, preparing baked spaghetti, which would probably be a damn sight better than the baked spaghetti the prison had served. But then, it was really no contest. Prison food was a tasteless mess at best; everything Jasper had made had been miles better. First class. As if Ellis deserved first class. He used to think he did, before he'd started running drugs. As for now? He did not know.

He tugged on the waistband of his white cotton briefs. They were too big and bunched against his skin, but he didn't want to ask for more than he'd already gotten.

“Ellis.”

Jasper's voice came from the kitchen; he'd not come up to the door to knock, as if he knew that had startled Ellis badly the last time.

“Dinner's ready.”

Ellis' throat felt thick. Mom used to call him to dinner like that—he stopped himself. He would grieve in time, in his own way. Now, however, he did not want to let on to Jasper about how shitty he still felt about letting his mom down. How the

trip to Iron Mountain Cemetery had barely started to ease the pain in his heart over missing her last days. And missing her memorial service, if there had been one, which there most certainly hadn't been.

After dressing in new clothes that while being simple, jeans, a t-shirt, regular white briefs, still felt freakishly new and sturdy, he went out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam, carrying his dirty clothes.

“Just put those in the hamper with mine,” said Jasper, pointing with the glass of water in his hand.

As if it was okay that the clothes of an ex-con mixed with those of an honest man.

Ellis did as Jasper asked, putting the dirty clothes in the hamper in the bathroom. Then, inside of a heartbeat, he was at the table, looking at Jasper, wanting to help, but not wanting to be in the way either.

“Just sit on down,” said Jasper. “As we go, we'll trade off cooking and doing the dishes and suchlike—do you know how to cook?”

Ellis nodded. His ability to cook was limited to basic items, as his mom had done most of the cooking.

He opened his mouth, wanting to explain that he made a mean macaroni salad, and the best brownies on the planet. Only no words came out. Only that low *Mmmmm* sound. Frustrated, he thumped the table with his fist, then instantly regretted it as a fork bounced to the floor and Jasper's eyebrows went up.

“Don't worry about it,” said Jasper as he bent to retrieve the fork and place it in the sink. “Later we'll make a list for our grocery run tomorrow. We're out of flour, for one, and if we finish the ice cream, we'll be out of that as well.”

We. Our. Jasper flung those words around like he'd always wanted an ex-con to share his home with and, now that he had one, he was over the moon with joy to share chores and shopping with him.

“Might as well make a laundry run while we’re at it,” said Jasper. His sudden smile as he laughed under his breath was unexpected, a pleasure to see. “Maybe I’ll send you on your own in future. Otherwise, it’s me spending hours twiddling my thumbs watching my socks go around.”

Ellis nodded. Yes, he could do that. He’d bring a book. It would be soothing to sit and read in the low din of a laundromat. Not something he’d ever thought he’d be thinking, but there it was. Jasper was willing to give Ellis something he’d not known he wanted.

When the baked spaghetti was ready, Jasper drew the square glass casserole dish out of the oven and plated two huge helpings. There was plenty for seconds, if either of them cared for it, and Ellis ate with some slowness, enjoying every bite.

After dinner, Jasper divided the last pint of ice cream into two bowls, and they sat on the deck and ate the cool treat while the sun went down, spinning the clouds first into pink, then into purple, then into dark blue, and finally to black. The wind started to come cold.

“That’s rain in the air,” said Jasper, taking in a huge lungful. “That’s the smell of rain in the air.”

Ellis took in a huge lungful, as well, and closed his eyes to remember the moment of breathing non-prison air, non-hospital air, next to a man who could have pounded him flat as soon as look at him but had not. And very well might not, if Ellis kept his nose clean. Didn’t run off again.

“I need that bath,” said Jasper, getting up. He held out his hand and Ellis took it and Jasper hauled him to his feet in one fluid motion. “Will you get the dishes?”

The question was asked as if Ellis had the right to refuse.

He nodded. *Mmmmm*.

“Thanks.” Jasper nodded and ran the knuckle of his thumb across his forehead. “We’ll get an early night and run some errands tomorrow. You in?”

Nod. A slightly enthusiastic *mmmmm*, though he wished he could say more.

As Jasper went off to take his bath, Ellis hurriedly filled the sink so a drop in water pressure wouldn't affect the hot water running into the tub. Then, taking his time, he scraped the dishes and put the leftovers in the fridge, carefully wrapped with the plastic wrap he found in a drawer. Then he washed the dishes one by one. First the greasy plates, then the cutlery, then the pot, and the casserole dish. Lastly, he washed the glasses under running water with plenty of soap, rinsing everything twice.

All of this was done with more care than he could ever remember doing dishes.

He'd not been careful in prison when he'd run the Hobart. Even when at home and Mom had asked him to do the dishes, he'd been hasty and quick, not realizing and not thinking, perhaps not until this very minute, what a graceful act helping out was. How wiping down the counters and the table so carefully might be an act of thanks. How sweeping the floor was a gesture of gratitude.

It calmed him in a way he'd not expected, slowing down his heartbeat, easing away the rabbitly scared feeling that at any moment things would all go back to the shitty way they'd been before he'd come to the cabin. And maybe they might, the way his life always seemed to go. But for now, the kitchen was tidy, his belly was full, and he was so grateful, so *unbelievably* grateful—

Jasper came to the table. Though it appeared he'd toweled off, water dripped from his hair onto his neck, running small ribbons of dampness down the front of his t-shirt, gluing it to his chest. Little furls of dark chest hair peeked from the neck of the t-shirt, the hem of which skewed sideways at the waist of his blue jeans, showing a bit of hair and skin, the curve of his belly.

He did not seem to know the image he presented, that of a free man, fresh from his bath, hastily dressed, looking so hale and healthy, Ellis suddenly wanted to take a bite out of him.

Quickly, he pushed the thought away, and gestured at the kitchen, at his accomplishment, his masterpiece, his gift of goodwill.

“Good job,” said Jasper, giving Ellis a thumbs-up. “In the morning we’ll write down everything we need from the grocery store. You’ll be sure to write down your favorites, yes?”

Nod.

“All right then, bedtime.”

Ellis glanced at the clock on the stove. It was not yet ten o’clock. Early, quite early. But then, Jasper liked to get up early too, as though his greatest desire was to not waste a moment of daylight getting things done, making sure everything was ship-shape.

For some reason, this idea, the image of Jasper hard at it from the moment the rays of the sun broke the horizon, made Ellis smile.

“Yeah?” asked Jasper, seeming to ask what Ellis was thinking without really expecting an answer, but rather simply enjoying the feelings streaming between them, ribbons of good, furls of satisfaction, of pleasure.

Nod. *Mmmmm*.

“Bed.”

Jasper turned off the lights, and Ellis followed him upstairs.

In his own room behind the thin calico curtain, he undressed and cracked open the window to let in the fresh air, as he was becoming quite addicted to it. Then he crawled into bed, and listened with careful ears to the sounds on the other side of the wall, of Jasper undressing, the long sigh, the kind a man makes when scratching his own belly, relaxing at the end of a long day. The creak of the bed. A thump on a pillow. A sigh. Then quiet.

There wasn’t a lot of light in the small room, but there was a whole lot of quiet as the night settled down around his ears.

In prison, it was the other way around, with safety lights always coming through the bars, and the constant hum of air conditioner or heater, the low chatter of those inmates who simply could not sleep, could not shut up. The clang of pipes. The grunt of an inmate getting his dick sucked, making the inmate on his knees in front of him swallow it all.

This was a different place. It might take getting used to. Only days ago, Ellis had been sure his time on the ranch would be a disaster, that he'd never get used to being outside the tall, razor wire-topped walls of Wyoming Correctional. Yet here he was. His head on a pillow all his own, in a room that, while it only had a curtain for a door, was certainly his own space, his own darkness.

Maybe it would all work out. His only worry was what would happen when Phil drove up to see the two of them, him and Jasper, working in the workshop.

The second Phil saw Ellis was happy, he'd have something to say about it. But that was days away, right? In the meantime, Ellis was going to do his best to get into the routine, something inmates always swore was the best way to survive. Only now, here, he might be able to do better than merely survive. He could make his life anew.

If only he could talk. If only the words would come, so he could explain to Jasper what his kindness meant.

JASPER

*A*fter a quick breakfast in the morning, and a quick sweep of the kitchen, Jasper got them each a pad of paper and a pencil so they could make a list of what they wanted in town. At the last second, Jasper realized he'd given Ellis the pad of paper he'd recently been sketching his ideas on. Only it was too late to grab it back, and all he could do was hold his breath.

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Ellis tucked the stub of the pencil in his fist, and flipped through the pad of paper with his fingertips, looking at each drawing, immersed as if he'd almost forgotten Jasper was standing there.

The sketches were outlines only, rough ideas in pencil done in the evening after his day's work was done: a trivet with curled feet that could easily be used over an open fire. Curved hangers for pots that might be hung over an open fire. A hand-forged horse's head wall hook. Dinner triangles with the ranch's logo stamped on them. A fire iron, poker, and shovel, all done with twisted handles that would easily balance the tool when in use.

On the gentler, more artistic side were smaller drawings of a rustic keychain and bottle opener. Or the pounded-out shape of a heart that might be woven into a leather bracelet, made from a nail from John Henton's cabin after it had been torn down, and he had a whole box of these given to him by Maddy. A triskelion pendant that could be hung on a leather thong. A tiny iron pine tree that could be made to wear as a

necklace, based on the bit of brass jewelry he'd created for Jamie, at Leland's request.

All of it was what could be, should he get up the gumption to walk up to Leland and show him the sketches, and present the idea that they might sell these handmade objects in the ranch's store and bring in more income that way. Not to mention, ranch guests could then take home a bit of the ranch to remember their vacation by.

Leland would probably say no, as the making of such items and jewelry would take Jasper away from his real work, that of making repairs on the ranch and shoeing the ranch's horses.

Leland might think such dreams foolish, as no doubt Ellis did as his eyes lingered on the very faint sketch on the last page of sketches, a delicate curved ring that might be made from an old horseshoe nail.

Mmmmm, said Ellis as he traced the curl of the drawing with his pinkie. With a nod, he looked up, then held out the tablet to Jasper, taking the blank one from his hands.

Jasper could only blink at him.

Mmmmm, said Ellis again. Then he nodded at the pad Jasper held and raised his eyebrows, nodded again, as if for emphasis.

"You like 'em?" asked Jasper. It was the first time anyone had seen his sketches, seen the ideas in his mind that he'd put to paper. Years back, he'd shown some early concepts to Milt, drawings of items made from what could be found on an army base or while out on a mission, but Milt had turned up his nose. To him, such images of trinkets were a waste of time.

Nod. Double nod.

"Thanks," said Jasper, with a sigh. He opened the pad to a blank sheet, put pencil to paper, then paused. "I've not shown them to anyone. I figure I'll get all my ducks in a row, then bring the ideas to Leland. Right?"

Ellis made a motion of zipping his mouth shut, and both of them laughed at the same time.

“Write down your list, and we’ll get on the road to the store before all the good bread is gone.”

They made their lists and discussed the fact, Ellis writing, Jasper asking out loud, that Ellis could make damn fine brownies from scratch. Between them they determined who would get the corner piece and who the middle. Jasper wrote down extra pints of ice cream in all flavors, and Ellis wrote down his request for soda, specifically orange soda.

“Soda will kill you, son,” said Jasper with mock seriousness as he jingled his keys in his pocket, handed both lists to Ellis, and herded them out to the truck, bags of laundry and laundry detergent to be stowed in the truck bed. “Boss man loves his locally brewed root beer, but man, that stuff is way too sweet for me. Might taste good in a root beer float, though. What do you say? Should we get fixin’s for that??”

Ellis nodded, eyes glinting in the sunlight.

“Let’s go.”

Jasper drove them to Farthing, where they did their laundry at the laundromat. While they waited for their three loads to wash and dry as they sat in the hard, curved plastic seats, Jasper gave in, dug into his pocket and pulled out a dollar so Ellis could get himself an orange soda from the soda machine. Which he drank with great relish, as if he’d been parched in the desert for years, which perhaps he had been.

Who knew what stance the prison system took on soft drinks, or if they stocked them at all. Probably they only bought the off-market brand, rather than the more swank Orange Crush Ellis polished off with a gulp and small, rather adorable burp.

When the laundry was done, they stowed it in the truck bed, tied down with bungee cords to keep it from flying away. Then Jasper drove them to Chugwater, since Farthing only had a small bodega, and wouldn’t have the groceries they needed. The drive was longer than the one to Farthing, and maybe Jasper found himself driving a little bit slower than he usually did.

Ellis had the passenger side window down and was leaning on his elbow, up on one knee, his body almost halfway out. The wind was in his hair, pushing it straight back, and the sunlight cut across the sharp edges of his nose, his cheek, showing how thin his face was, how gaunt and pale. But he was smiling, mouth half open with it as he breathed in the wind, the fresh air, eyes streaming with joy.

This was good for him, then, this outing. Jasper didn't know what Ellis' other parole options might have been, or even if Ellis had had any choice in the matter. Probably all of that was in the folder Jasper was reluctant to read, though he was quick figuring out that he would soon need to read that file if he wanted to help Ellis succeed. Which he found, as he looked at Ellis and Ellis looked at him, scraping the hair out of his eyes, pleasure curling around his features, that he did.

When they arrived in Chugwater, Jasper drove straight to the hardware store.

"We'll make a quick stop for some WD-30 and some absorbent clay. Then, before we hit the grocery store, what you say you and I swing by the Dairy Queen and see what's up?"

As the truck was going slower and they were inside the town limits, Ellis slid back into his seat and did up the seat belt and nodded his agreement.

"What flavor sundae you like?" asked Jasper as he parked away from the building so no one would ding the doors of his truck. "Me, I am a classic guy. It's hot fudge all the way for me."

"Caramel," said Ellis, clear as a bell.

Jasper paused, turned off the ignition, then nodded, doing his best to be casual about it, as if mulling it over, comparing Ellis' favorite flavor to his own. All of this to avoid acting surprised that Ellis had spoken.

"Well, maybe we could trade bites," said Jasper. "I don't think I've ever had caramel."

Ellis' eyes were a little wide as he followed Jasper into the single story brick building of the local hardware store. The

smell was as familiar to him as his own forge; he made the trip so often, the truck probably knew the way.

Together they rambled through the store, Ellis close at his side as Jasper picked up a 50-pound bag of clay, a spray can of WD-30 oil, and some mineral oil to coat his shovels with.

All the while, Ellis was as silent as he ever had been. That is, until they were in line, and out of the corner of his eye, Jasper saw someone accidentally bump into Ellis.

Ellis turned and growled, teeth bared, fists at the ready. His fierce stance told Jasper Ellis was used to fighting over the least offense, which he'd probably learned in prison.

In another second, Ellis would have smashed the guy flat, but Jasper reached and grabbed him around his waist and yanked him back.

"Easy there," he said. "Sorry," he said to the other guy. "He's been through a lot, an' he's a little jumpy."

"A *little*?" said the guy, his voice full of doubt.

"Sorry," said Jasper again, then paid for their stuff as fast as he could, handed the plastic bag to Ellis, and slung the clay over his shoulder. "Let's go."

Ellis was still shaking by the time they reached the truck.

Jasper threw everything in the truck bed, then gestured Ellis to come close. Ellis did, but not until a long, slow minute had passed. Jasper was beginning to think he might have to change his tactics, get a bit more firm.

As Ellis came close, almost sliding along the door of the truck to where Jasper waited, his shoulders were as hunched as they'd been the first time Jasper had seen him standing by the prison van. His eyes were down, and he was avoiding looking at Jasper like he thought Jasper might bite him.

"I don't know what happened back there," said Jasper, making his tone easy. "But not everyone is out to get you. You're not in prison now, so sometimes you have to give the other fellow the benefit of the doubt."

The idea was not new to Ellis, as he didn't look at all confused by this, but his brows lowered, as if he could not for the life of him figure out exactly how he was supposed to do that.

“You ever read a room?” asked Jasper.

Nod.

“You must have done, in prison, except out here—”

Jasper paused to wave at the parking lot. Across from them the guy Ellis had almost gotten into a fight with was getting into his own truck, much fancier and newer than Jasper's, and was shaking his head as he saw them talking.

“Out here, the read needs to be different from what you were used to in prison. You follow? People have different things they want, and that guy?” Jasper jerked his thumb in the direction of the truck as it left the parking lot. “All he wanted was his little bag of nuts and bolts. Wasn't going to hurt you. Just wanted to buy his stuff and get where he was going. Maybe pick up some fancy Starbucks with his name on it along the way.”

When Ellis didn't say anything and still wasn't looking at him, Jasper ducked his head down and tapped Ellis gently on the shoulder to get him to respond.

“Right?” he asked. “It's something you need to learn. I'll help you, all that I can. But you need to think about this and try to read the room a little differently moving forward. Promise me you will.”

Nod. *Promise.*

The word came out a puff of air followed by a hissing sound, but Ellis' mouth made the shape of the word so Jasper knew he understood.

“Let's go get that ice cream.” Jasper got in and started the truck, as if he'd not just rescued Ellis from a very bad decision. As Ellis got in, he nodded. “Don't forget, you promised me a bite.”

Nod. *Mmmmm.*

The Dairy Queen parking lot was almost empty by the time they got there, but then it was mid-morning, and few were interested in ice cream at that time of day. Jasper was up for ice cream any time of day, any time at all, and he was pleased when Ellis seemed to be up for it as well.

At the counter, where they were met by a bored-looking older teenager in a rakish paper hat and bright red apron, Jasper perused the menu, though he knew exactly what he wanted.

“I’ll have a chocolate sundae,” he said. “With extra fudge sauce, please.”

At that moment, Ellis stood on tiptoe and cupped his hand around Jasper’s ear to whisper, “Caramel. Extra. Too. Please.”

The words, so carefully enunciated, spoken so close, Ellis’ breath across tender skin, made Jasper shiver. He had to contain his body’s reaction as he smiled at the teenager.

“He’ll have a caramel sundae with extra caramel, please.”

“That your kid?” asked the teen, seeming to be quite confused as to why a man would order for another man.

“No, this is *not* my *kid*,” said Jasper, making his disdain at such a mistake known. “He’s my assistant, and he’s got laryngitis, if you must know. Could we just get the sundaes. Please.”

With a huff, the teenager, who was the only one working behind the counter, went to make their sundaes. Ellis stood close by, his hands in his back pockets, looking around as if it was his first time in a Dairy Queen. And though it most certainly could not be, it’d probably been ages.

The Dairy Queen was overly air-conditioned, as most Dairy Queens were, so by the time the sundaes were presented to them, and Jasper paid, they were both shivering.

“C’mon, kiddo,” he said, handing Ellis his plastic-capped sundae and long, red plastic spoon. “Let’s go outside to eat.”

They went outside to the concrete picnic tables topped by hard plastic umbrellas. Jasper sat half in the shade, half in the

sun so Ellis could sit fully in the shade. Instead, Ellis sat down next to him on the plastic bench. Their shoulders brushed and Ellis smiled up at Jasper as if he was enjoying the warmth of the morning and the anticipation of the treat.

“Idiot thought you were my kid.” Jasper chuckled low as he spooned a large amount of ice cream and fudge into his mouth, shaking his head. “How old are you anyhow?”

Ellis swallowed and licked his lips, drawing Jasper’s eyes to him in an almost involuntary jerk.

“Twenty—” he said, but then his voice broke off. He lifted four fingers and shrugged as if to apologize.

“Twenty four, huh?” Jasper nodded. “I got eight years on you, kiddo, surely not enough to make me your dad. Never mind.” He bumped Ellis’ shoulder with his own, his skin reacting with pleasure at the contact.

Together they ate their ice cream, till Jasper remembered they had agreed to trade bites.

“Hey,” he said. “Give me some of that, and here.”

He held out his spoon, dripping with ice cream and slippery just-about-fake fudge, and Ellis took it. At the same time, Ellis held out his spoon.

After a brief second, as Jasper tried to figure out what angle to grab the spoon from that wouldn’t send the contents of the spoon spilling on the concrete table, he ended up taking the spoon into his mouth, with Ellis’ hand at the other end.

Ellis looked at him, his pale grey eyes solemn, almost silver in the sunlight. The moment shivered between them, then Jasper took the spoon out of his mouth, handed it back to Ellis. Licked his thumb, and cleaned the bit of fudge dappled along the edge of Ellis’ mouth.

It was a mutual exchange of care, of spoons. Of the sweetness in their mouths, spinning between them, taking that still moment and making it something more.

Jasper focused all of his attention on getting the last bits of fake ice cream and chocolate fudge topping gone rubbery. It

was all good, just the same. He licked his spoon, caught Ellis' eyes with his, and looked away.

Together they threw out their trash and got a drink at the fountain inside the Dairy Queen to wash away the sugar coating in their mouths. Jasper drove them to the grocery store, where they piled the shopping cart with way too much food and enough ice cream to feed three truckers for a month.

The receipt Jasper received as they checked out was larger than normal, but then he had two mouths to feed now. The ranch would reimburse him, and, besides, eats and treats were the order of the day. As well, he was looking forward to doing more cooking for someone other than himself. And, thus far, Ellis had liked what Jasper liked. It was a promising start.

ELLIS

*A*fter a dinner of what Jasper referred to as poor man's stew, which turned out to be macaroni with creamed corn and cut up hot dogs, they had more ice cream. When Ellis wrote on the pad of paper that his stomach hurt, Jasper brought out the good pink stuff, not the off-brand stomach medicine the prison grudgingly allowed you to have.

Ellis slept hard, falling asleep quite fast. Then in the morning, after breakfast, Jasper growled at Ellis that he'd no more sense than a newt and sent him back upstairs to grab his boots.

"They're in a box by your dresser, where I put 'em," said Jasper. "Got to have serious footwear for serious work, now go grab 'em. Daylight's burning."

Brand-name stomach medication? Sturdy new steel-toed boots? Jasper even knelt at Ellis' feet to lace up, then showed him how to roll up the hems of his new blue jeans to make nice cuffs to keep his jeans from dragging in the dirt.

Ellis thought anew how broad the spectrum of Jasper's moods were. Though he might be cross at Ellis for not having the correct footwear on, beneath that swam an ocean of care, of thoughtfulness, that Ellis should be comfortable while he worked.

The steel-toed boots were heavy on his feet as they strode beneath the shade on their way to what Jasper had referred to as the fire pit. He'd shown Ellis the scythe that was to be his, now, and how to carry it as they walked, over his shoulder, the

blade and tip pointing downward. Ellis also sported a new straw cowboy hat, and had worn his new long-sleeved snap-button shirt, as directed.

“You can see a bit of the ranch from the fire pit,” said Jasper. “Eventually I can give you a tour of the place, once you’re settled in.”

Ellis wasn’t as settled in as he’d like to be, as his unease at stepping out of the shade and into the light scattered across his skin. He’d begun to like the cozy, off-grid feel of the cabin, of being alone with Jasper all the time with no other thoughts or actions to intrude but their own.

As well, he could still feel the tug of Jasper’s mouth on the spoon he’d held out, each of them equally surprised, it seemed, when Jasper had let Ellis feed him. Could still see the whisper of surprise in Jasper’s dark blue eyes, feel the faint stream of breath over his knuckles in that pause of a moment when their bodies had been connected by the spoon. Then Jasper had taken the spoon out of his mouth, handed it to Ellis, and the moment had been over.

Except Ellis couldn’t stop thinking about it, his mind still twitching around the idea of it, honing in on it, over and over, till everything else seemed a blur. By the time they reached the fire pit, lush with tall spring-green grass that circled the stones and grew up alongside the large logs and bales of hay, he’d almost forgotten how they’d gotten there or what he was supposed to be doing.

“Set your blade on the grass,” said Jasper. “And remember, a gentle back-and-forth motion is all you need. Let your hips and thighs be the power that moves the blade. Let the blade cut the grass, not you. The blade knows what to do.”

Pulling the scythe from his shoulder, Ellis set his blade in the grass as instructed. It was a dangerous tool, as Jasper had thoroughly explained, and could cut you to the bone if you were foolish with it. And it seemed, at least to Ellis, it was the last thing you would want to put in an ex-convict’s hands. But Jasper did. He plainly trusted Ellis to behave with it as he should do: a reasonable man with a dangerous tool.

Just as he was about to start the back-and-forth motion, Jasper tapped him on the shoulder. The touch of Jasper's fingers brought his attention to a tall man in a straw cowboy hat, much like the type he and Jasper were both wearing.

The man was walking over the road, then headed down the path to the fire pit. He had long legs and a hard jaw, and as he got closer, Ellis could see his steel-blue eyes, the sweet curl of blond hair in front of his ears.

It was all Ellis could do not to back up as the man came up to them. Not only was the man way taller than him, he was as handsome and overwhelming as if he'd stepped out of a cowboy movie.

"Boss," said Jasper, lifting his hand in greeting, keeping the scythe cradled in his elbow, the tip and the blade pointing away from the man. "Leland Tate, this is our new employee, Ellis Bowman. Ellis, this is the ranch's manager, Leland."

Ellis opened his mouth to say *hello* but his throat closed up. No words were coming out. Not today. Not anytime soon, it felt like.

"How do," said Leland. He held out his hand, and Ellis shook it, feeling his whole hand, fingers, palms, everything, swallowed up by a large, warm grip. "Sorry I missed greeting you properly the other day, but needs must, sometimes."

Leland's voice was deep and sure, the words coming out like he knew what to say, like he *always* knew what to say. And though Ellis swallowed and tried again, he could not respond in kind.

He watched Leland's eyes track the movement of his mouth, saw his puzzlement as to why Ellis hadn't said anything.

"Ellis has trouble speaking from time to time," said Jasper, his tone making the issue a casual one, nothing to be worried about. "Doesn't have speech problems at all. Just sometimes the words won't come."

"Do we need to get a speech therapist out here?" asked Leland, fully focused on that. "Maybe Wyoming Correction

will send one.”

Before Ellis could even begin to worry about what would happen if word got back to Phil about the request for a therapist, and why one might be needed, Jasper shook his head.

“I’ve seen this before in the army,” he said, sounding quite sure of himself. “Sometimes a fellow would come back from an outing and be so stressed out he just couldn’t talk for a while.”

“For a while?” Leland took off his hat, scratched at his fair hair, then put his hat on, setting it back on his head. “How long is a while?”

“Ellis here wouldn’t say a word when he arrived, on Saturday,” said Jasper. “Now it’s Tuesday, and I have it on good authority what his favorite flavor of ice cream is because he told me so. He can talk, all right, he just needs some time.”

“You’re the man in the field,” said Leland after a careful moment of thought. “Let me know if you need any help, though, okay? In the meantime, I need you two to come to the dance tonight.”

“Boss, no,” said Jasper with a groan. “You don’t need us.”

“I do, I surely do,” said Leland. He smiled as if he was used to Jasper’s grouching and knew full well Jasper was going to be unable to get out of the required task. “There are too many ladies without gents to dance with tonight, and I’d like to make sure our guests have a good time. Ellis,” said Leland, suddenly turning his attention to Ellis. “You know how to dance the two-step?”

“He most assuredly does not, boss,” said Jasper. “Leave him be.”

“He’s part of the ranch now,” said Leland, scolding, his attention going to Jasper. “Needs to learn. Besides, you didn’t much know how when you came. We taught you. We can teach Ellis here.” He nodded at Ellis. “It’ll be fun, you’ll see. Dance starts at seven.”

With a touch to his hat brim, Leland strode the way he'd come. Leaving Ellis trying not to laugh as Jasper fumed and scuffed the grass with his steel-toed boot.

“Damn it all,” said Jasper. “And don't you laugh, either.” He shook his finger at Ellis, mouth twisting into a frown that turned into a smile. “I don't mind it so bad, but sometimes those guests get to twittering so loud I cannot hear myself think. Those ladies do love to be held by the waist and twirled about, and that just makes me dizzy. Line dances aren't so bad, but—well, you'll see.”

Ellis was completely willing to see, just to see Jasper get riled up, laughing even as he tried to stay mad about it. On the other hand, he'd much rather spend the evening with just Jasper.

Maybe he'd take a chance and hold up a spoon full of ice cream to see if Jasper would take it. To see if the tug of Jasper's mouth on the spoon would create an echoing tug deep in his belly. And from there to see where that might lead them. After all, they were alone in the cabin, the two of them. They were alone *all* the time—

“Take that patch over there,” said Jasper, pointing. “It's nice and flat and wide so you can practice. Don't forget—”

“Blade,” said Ellis, meaning, *Let the blade do the work.*

“That's right. The blade knows what to do.”

They worked the morning through, building up a sweat in the mid-June sunlight. After a time, Jasper made them put the scythes down, propped up on a bale of hay so nobody would trip over them unawares, and go to the main lodge to grab bottles of water from the ice chest, and sit in the shade.

Nobody who went in or out of the lodge paid either of them much mind, making Ellis feel like he was invisible. Or, perhaps he was inside of Jasper's wake, and nobody wanted to bother Jasper. Who sat with his legs stretched out in the way of people passing by, a scowl on his face as he grumpily sucked water from the plastic bottle.

“We need to finish that patch before the rain comes,” said Jasper, crumpling the plastic bottle in his hand before tossing it in a blue recycling bin at the end of the porch.

Rain?

“Yeah,” said Jasper. He pointed at the blue sky over the ridge of mountains. “See that little hard puff of cloud right over Iron Mountain? That’s a storm cloud rising. It might not hit till tonight, but it’ll be a damn sight easier to cut that grass now rather than after it rains.”

A rainstorm might just be that. Rain coming down, soaking the earth. Or it might be a thunderstorm, which might cut the power.

In prison, when the power was cut, it got dark all over, every nook and cranny full of shadows and danger. Other inmates would howl just to add to the atmosphere. Ellis would have hidden under his lower bunk if his cellmate had been the least inclined to keep the fact that Ellis was hiding to himself. He hadn’t been, so Ellis usually suffered through nights like that with just a blanket over his head.

“After we’re done, we could eat lunch here at the main lodge if you’d like.” Jasper shrugged like it wouldn’t matter to him, then added, “Or we could finish the baked spaghetti from the fridge.”

Eating baked mud with Jasper was much preferred over eating anything else with a dining hall full of strangers. Some of Ellis’ worst moments in prison had come when he’d get out of the food line, tray in hand, and had to spend anxious minutes scanning the room to see who would let him sit with them. If you sat alone, you were a target for the guards or other inmates out to cause trouble.

Ellis took a breath. Held it. “Spaghetti,” he said.

“Sounds good to me.”

They finished scything around the fire pit, leaving a thick cropped carpet of green grass that sparkled in the sun. Then they had lunch at the cabin, after which Jasper took him out to the workshop where he showed Ellis how to carefully wipe

down the scythes and put them on their proper hooks on the walls. Then Maddy came by with a handful of clothes.

“I’m glad these came in time,” Jasper said smiling.

“You bet,” said Maddy. Her eyes flicked to Ellis, and she looked like she was making sure to keep Jasper’s body between her and Ellis. “The Frontier Girls are coming in costume for the demo tomorrow, so I wanted to be sure Ellis had a costume, as well. So he wouldn’t feel out of place.”

Ellis swallowed hard at this kindness and did his best. “Thks,” he said, giving her a little wave. And maybe she’d not realized that the middle half of the word was missing, for she smiled at him as she went out of the shade of the workshop, headed back to her office.

“Costume?” he asked Jasper.

“Yep.” Jasper seemed to be laughing at Ellis’ surprise, but he patted him warmly on the shoulder. “I got a blacksmith’s costume, well, most of one, to give the demo some atmosphere. It can be kind of boring watching a guy pounding away at an anvil, so Leland and I dreamed up this idea to make it like a little old-time show. Mostly it was Leland’s idea, but anyway. You’ll be the foolish apprentice, messing things up to make the kids laugh. You in?”

“Sure.” The word came out as easy as could be, and when Jasper smiled at him and didn’t make it anything remarkable, just how things were, Ellis felt a flush of pleasure.

“After lunch, we’ll make sure it fits,” said Jasper. “Then we got to get spruced up for the damn dance with those fools hopping around like they’re having a good time when none of them knows how the hell to respond to the caller up front.”

Though Jasper sounded irritated about the dance, there was laughter in his eyes, and Ellis already knew this was how Jasper was. Things must be scoffed at or mocked, it seemed, and maybe it was a way to keep people at a distance. Except Ellis, because he felt included in the mocking, rather than being the target of it.

ELLIS

*A*fter a quick dinner of fried egg sandwiches eaten while standing next to the sink, they each took an early bath and got dressed in their dancing clothes.

“I’d rather have a straight razor, truth be told,” said Jasper as he handed over the plastic razor to Ellis. “Seems a waste to throw this out when it grows dull, but there it is. Don’t use all the hot water now.”

Ellis took a quick bath and shaved, looking at himself in the fogged mirror, at the way his face was warped by the moisture on the glass. It was his fourth day at the ranch, and while everything was starting to feel more normal, a good sign, the fact that they would be out of the cabin for a whole evening was unsettling him to the point where he nicked himself, even though it was a safety razor.

Dotting the spot with a bit of toilet paper, he finished drying off and got into his newest jeans, his fanciest snap-button shirt. The clothes had been softened by the washer and were soft now as he put them on. Dressed this way, he felt like he might just not stick out at the dance. Even so, he was going to stay as close to Jasper’s side as possible.

When he came out of the bath, Jasper gave him a thumb’s up and then went in to bathe and spruce up. Ellis spent the time waiting, pacing in his new, stacked cowboy boots, trying on his straw hat, both with his hair tucked behind his ears and without.

He was starting to sweat by the time Jasper was ready, and together they walked up the road, silent, side by side as they went beneath the long shadows of trees. There were no stars, not that Ellis could see, as the clouds, unseen, had blotted them out.

“Don’t you worry, now,” said Jasper as they approached the main lodge. “These are just regular people wanting to have a good time. And we’re here to help them have that good time.”

Ellis had never been asked to show anyone a good time in prison, though the offer had been made *to* him more times than he could count. He’d usually taken up on that offer, as it was easier, safer, than trying to refuse. Plus, the encounters had turned into something more mutual, rather than the other inmate taking what he wanted and tossing Ellis aside afterwards. Going along to get along had taken its toll, but it was either that or getting messed up so hard he could barely walk.

As they approached the lodge, Ellis could see that poles had been set up with little lights strung between each one, creating a dirt dance floor that was a little wider than it was long. A three-member band was playing a low tune on the shadowed porch. Guests were starting to congregate, their excited chatter filling the air, the brims of the cowboy hats most were wearing bobbing as they talked.

Ellis wiped his hands on his jeans and stuck close to Jasper. They were both immediately pulled into a line dance, and the woman up front, dressed in what was obviously meant to be frontier clothes, started calling out the moves as the music became bright and loud.

The quick dancing, the bright music, reminded Ellis of the long-ago days when he was forced to participate in square dancing class in elementary school. Never in his life had he thought that sort of training might turn out to be useful, but it was. He was able to keep up, and when enjoined to smile by the dance caller, he was easily able to obey orders.

The caller announced a small break and that the next dance would be a couples dance.

Ellis stood at the sidelines with Jasper and watched as guests started combining into couples, watched as they swirled as the dance caller called out instructions in a sing-song voice. Everyone was good natured, laughing, and it looked like fun.

On the far end of the dance floor was Leland, hatless, dancing, smiling down at a young man in his arms. Nobody seemed to be paying them any mind, and Ellis was a little shocked. Not that two men were dancing with each other, but that nobody cared. Oh, sure, there were a few smiles thrown the couples' way, but their reaction was like it was a done deal, an ordinary thing.

When he looked up at Jasper, he could see that Jasper saw the couple, but wasn't paying them any particular attention. In prison, you'd get made fun of, openly mocked, for behaving in the tender way that this couple was.

He tugged on Jasper's sleeve, already rolled up, as though Jasper was preparing for a great deal of hard work rather than a simple dance.

Jasper bent down so Ellis could ask the question in his ear.

"Who?" He pointed across the dance floor.

"What? Oh." Jasper straightened up, settled into his prior stance, arms across his chest. "With Leland? That's Jamie. That's his partner."

Ellis' eyebrows went up as he looked at Jasper. Leland was gay?

"Yeah," said Jasper. "So? You got a problem with that?"

No.

Ellis shook his head so hard he felt his neck crack.

"Better get dancing, you two."

Turning his head, Ellis saw Maddy standing there, grey-white hair in a neat braid down her back, straw cowboy hat with a large fake sunflower in front firmly in place.

She was wearing a pink and white checked snap-button shirt, and was so bright and shiny he almost didn't realize how close she was standing to him. Like she was testing the waters. Like she didn't want to go on being afraid of him.

Hi, he mouthed, giving her a small wave, eager to make it easier for her to be near him.

“Go and dance with that lady over there.” Maddy pointed, tugged on his sleeve. “You see the one? The lady with the straw hat dyed blue? Hideous, but she bought it before she got here, so what can you do.”

“Give it a try, Ellis,” said Jasper when Ellis looked at him.

His arm felt warm from where Maddy had just touched him. He'd rather cut it off than refuse her polite request, even if it scared him to death to go through the mingled dancers to step in front of the blue-hatted woman to get her attention. He half bowed to the woman and was relieved that he didn't have to say a word as he held out his hand to ask her to dance.

“You're sweet, dear,” she said to him, as if she had no idea, which she didn't, that he was an ex-con out on parole. “But I don't know any of these steps.”

Putting his hand on his own chest, Ellis took a breath. “Me either.”

The words were mostly mouth movements with a bit of sound behind them, but perhaps she thought the sound of the music had drowned out the sound of his words because she nodded. Then he gestured at the dance floor and gave her hand a tug.

With a laugh, she joined him in the center of the dance floor. With his hand gingerly on her waist, and her hand in his, he thought of the days when he and Mom would dance together to New Year's Eve music while they waited for the ball to drop in Times Square.

Those days were faded and seemed long ago in comparison to this moment as the two of them, he and the blue-hatted lady, did their best to follow the dance caller's instructions. The blue-hatted lady laughed kindly at Ellis'

mistakes, not making any, or at least not many, mistakes of her own, and together they swirled around the dance floor.

He was sweating beneath his arms as he tried to keep up with her. For all she professed not to know any of the steps, she was able to keep up much better than Ellis was. His feet felt too big, his cowboy boots too slippery, and he found himself looking for Jasper so he could get tapped out, so he could get a reprieve.

What happened was he backed into someone and lost his grip on the blue-hat lady. Ellis let go of her, turned and shoved that someone hard: a young man about his age with blue eyes and a square face. He was pretty to look at, but that didn't matter because he shoved Ellis back, and down Ellis went on his ass in front of everybody.

A second later, his face burning hot, he was on his feet, swinging hard. The guy's head snapped back and down he went, leaving Ellis standing over him, fists still clenched, breathing hard, shirt ripped, elbow bleeding.

The couples closest to Ellis went still and the dance caller stuttered. As the music jarred, some of the brightness of the evening lost.

Leland came striding through the dancers, signaling to the dance caller to keep going. Jasper was close behind, helping the other young man to his feet.

"You okay, Clay?" asked Leland to the blond-haired guy. When Clay nodded, wiping the blood from his lip with the back of his hand, Leland gave Clay a gentle pat. "Care to tell me what went on here?" He seemed to be asking Clay this question, but he was looking at Ellis.

"A misunderstanding," said Jasper, waving his hand between Ellis and Clay.

"Didn't look like a misunderstanding to me," said Leland, his mouth a straight line. "Whatever else happened, the only thing I saw is that Ellis punched Clay. I will not stand for that kind of behavior on my ranch."

Jasper and Leland were standing almost chest-to-chest, as if they were about to square off and take up the fight from where it had stopped. Not that it'd been much of a fight, not really. Just one guy punching another, making sure the other guy knew exactly where the line was drawn.

In prison, the whole incident would be shrugged off as soon as a guard noticed it and started walking over. Here, it looked like Leland was about to dish out his displeasure, his broad shoulders tight, strong jaw hard.

Heart pattering like a rabbit's, Ellis moved between Jasper and Leland, and shoved at Leland's chest with his palm.

Don't. Touch. Jasper.

No words came out, of course, but at least Leland was looking at Ellis now with that scowl of his, eyes narrowing, brows lowered.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked Leland. His mouth barely moved. "Did you just *push* me?"

Beneath the jaunty music was a line of tension so thick Ellis could almost see it. He couldn't catch his breath, couldn't explain. All he could do was stand there and make sure Leland had to go through him to get to Jasper. Jasper was too nice a guy, had been too nice to Ellis, to get smacked around by the boss.

"He's protecting me," said Jasper.

Warm hands landed on Ellis' shoulders, a comforting weight. Jasper's presence close behind him was a shield against the world.

"He thinks you're going to hurt me. Doesn't want you to."

"*What?*" Leland's voice rose above the energy of the dance, drawing more than a few eyes their way. "Like I'd ever raise my hand—"

Ellis scowled harder and didn't move.

"He just clipped me, boss," said Clay, stepping up as he licked traces of blood from his lip with his tongue. "I barely felt it."

That was a total lie. Ellis' knuckles were still ringing from the blow he'd delivered. Yet Clay was looking at Leland, calm as could be, as if what he'd just said was the complete truth. His lip was swollen, but the expression Clay delivered Ellis' way was steady.

"You boys shake hands and apologize to each other," said Leland. "Jasper, get him home. I'll be by tomorrow to have a little chat with Ellis, and see what's what, and what we can do to help him adjust. In the meantime—" He gestured to Clay and Ellis at the same time, hands spread wide. "Go on now. Shake hands."

Clay held out his hand for Ellis to shake. Ellis took it, did his best to hide the trembling in his arm. They shook hands.

Was it over, then? Or did Leland's visit in the morning mean that it wasn't over and that Ellis was in deep shit trouble and he'd be made to pay for what had happened to Clay?

Clay stepped back into the dance, and Leland wheeled to greet Jamie, who'd run up to him, curls flying, a worried expression on his face.

And then there was Jasper. Gesturing Ellis close, leaning down to whisper in his ear.

"Don't worry about it. He ain't mad. Just wants to make sure things run smooth, is all."

Jasper might believe what he was saying, but Ellis knew well and good there were no guarantees in this world. Bosses, guys in charge, especially ones that ruled their whole world, weren't always inclined to be forgiving. Especially not when the transgression had happened in front of a crowd of shocked witnesses.

As they walked down the road and under the trees to the cabin, Jasper slung his arm around Ellis' shoulder for a brief second, then took it away. The air felt cold after his touch, the night scary and dark. Ellis was still trembling by the time they reached the back door of the cabin.

Once inside, Jasper bent to take off his cowboy boots and gestured at Ellis.

“Take off them boots,” he said. “I’ve got first aid for your elbow in the bathroom. Sit on the toilet. Wait there.”

Doing as he was told, Ellis shivered, clenched his teeth against it, then shivered again.

Jasper came back with a bag of frozen peas for Ellis’ knuckles. Then he took a pair of first aid scissors from a cardboard box beneath the sink, and cut away the sleeve of Ellis’ left arm.

“You got yourself scraped up,” said Jasper. He was on his knees next to the toilet, looking up at Ellis with serious, dark eyes. “Don’t want it to get infected, and the shirt sleeve is all ripped up anyhow.”

Gently, quite gently, Jasper cleaned the long scrape on Ellis’ elbow, daubed it with antibacterial cream, then placed gauze over it, and wrapped it.

“It’s *not* overkill,” said Jasper, as if Ellis had expressed his doubt over such attentive care. “Not when you’re working in a workshop and there’re metal flakes and debris flying around. I’ll check it in the morning.”

I’m sorry about what happened. Ellis’ breath shuddered in his chest as he tried to say the words out loud.

“I know you are,” said Jasper. “He bump into you? Unexpected like?”

Nod.

“And it startled you and you reacted. Without thinking.”

Nod. Another shuddery breath. *Sorry, sorry, sorry.*

“That’s what I meant about reading the room.” Jasper stood up and reached out and gently cupped the back of Ellis’ neck. Ellis closed his eyes and wished the touch would last forever. Except it didn’t. Jasper pulled his hand away. “Look at me.”

Ellis opened his eyes.

“You think anybody at that dance was looking for trouble? You really think that?”

Ellis shrugged.

“Look at where you are.” Jasper made a gesture as if to gather all the energy of the ranch in his arms. “People are here to have a good time, not to get into fights. Now, if you were in the Rusty Nail, and someone sasses you? Still not a time to start a fight. But if they lay into you, or try to hurt you or one of your friends? That’s when your fists should come out. Not that you’d ever want to hang out at the Rusty Nail, like Clay does. Don’t know why he does, either. It’s a crap-hole and Eddy Piggot, who runs it, is an asshat. And that’s the kind of world we live in. But like I told you, the ranch is its own world. See?”

Ellis nodded, though he didn’t really see. Except maybe he could. His life started to change from the moment the van had driven through that green-painted metal gate. If only he could keep it together long enough to keep his life from changing back to what it had been.

Jasper backed up, unbuttoning the shiny white pearl-snap buttons on his shirt, as if he was glad to be rid of it. He wasn’t wearing a t-shirt beneath it, so Ellis could see the slight sweat gleaming on his collarbone, the bit of sweat on his neck.

“Now, while I don’t think this little incident will keep Leland from asking us to the dance again—” Jasper sighed and stretched his neck this way and that, put his hands on his hips. “One can always hope.”

“Hope,” said Ellis, agreeing.

Not for one minute did he think he was not still in hot water. The only thing allowing him to slow down his breathing and stop shaking was the fact that Jasper didn’t seem to hate him. Was giving him another chance. Ellis appreciated each and every one, but the question remained: how many more chances was Jasper going to give him?

“Want some ice cream?”

Ellis shook his head, sorry to say no in the face of such kindness, but he didn’t think his stomach would take it.

“Bed, then.”

Jasper reached out to tuck the hair behind Ellis' ear. Maybe he didn't know he was doing it or realized it too late, for he snatched his hand back and began putting the first aid things away in the cardboard box.

"It'll look better in the morning," he said, as earnestly as if it were a vow made to someone he cared about. "We'll have a good breakfast before Leland gets here. We'll be ready. And there's the demo in the afternoon."

Even if he'd wanted to, there was no way Ellis was going to ask to be let off from participating in the demo. As casually as Jasper talked about it, there was a fierce, passionate light in his eyes whenever the subject was mentioned. Jasper liked doing the demos, for all he seemed so dismissive of them. The fact that he was willing to wear a costume spoke volumes.

"Breakfast. Leland. Demo."

"That's right, kiddo," said Jasper. "Up you get. Go to bed. I just need a minute."

When Ellis hesitated, Jasper made shooing motions with both his hands. Ellis scooted out of the bathroom and up the stairs, glad for the darkness and the quiet. Glad he had his own room. Glad for Jasper and everything he was, did, and said.

JASPER

Trouble seemed to follow in Ellis' wake as if he dragged a chain of it behind him, a chain of his own making he couldn't seem to shake. Jasper could understand a fellow getting riled if he was unexpectedly bumped. But typically that fellow assessed the situation, took the other person's apologies, expressed his own, and then went on his merry way. Ellis, though, not so much.

Jasper had seen the incident while watching Ellis enjoy the spin and whirl of the dance he was glad to not be taking part in. When Clay had accidentally walked into Ellis, head turned as he looked at the dancers, Jasper had fully expected that Clay would help Ellis to his feet. Then Clay and Ellis would use that chance to apologize and meet each other, a platonic meet-cute you might see in a romantic comedy.

Instead Ellis had not only turned on Clay, he'd leapt at him, *growled* at him, showing his sharp teeth. His raised fist had not paused, not for one second. Ellis was all sinew and bristle when he'd punched Clay, a wild, out-of-control animal whose territory has been disturbed.

Clay had been surprised, and Jasper had been surprised. He'd been walking over to separate the two young men to keep them from coming to more blows, trying to save both of their honor while stopping the fight. Except, as Leland, all-seeing, all-knowing, had entered the fray and started to lay down the law, a funny, not-so-funny thing had happened that turned Jasper's heart around and around, even to this very moment.

Jasper had been getting into it with Leland, trying his best to defuse the situation, when Ellis, shaking, fists still bunched, ready for battle, had stepped *between* him and Leland.

It had been a long, long time since anyone considered Jasper vulnerable and in need of protection. But Ellis, fresh out of prison, still adjusting to a life without bars, still leery of every new situation, every new person, had stepped between him and Leland. He'd even, and this was the strangest part, *pushed* Leland hard enough to almost make Leland step back.

Almost, because Leland was almost two heads taller than Ellis, and outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. There was no shoving Leland, yet Ellis had tried. Shoved the boss man of Farthingdale Ranch, and all to save Jasper from what Ellis had seemingly feared might become an full-on smackdown.

Ellis had protected Jasper, risking himself, his parole. That this was the second time Ellis had almost gotten into a fight was troublesome, and yes, Jasper needed to follow up on that. Whether he needed to tell Leland about the almost-fight in the hardware store was another matter, but as for now—

Jasper stood on the deck overlooking the glassy river, dark beneath the clouds that had been bunching out from Iron Mountain all afternoon. Lightning flickered from far away, a silent silver and gold dance, coming closer as the wind blew chill, the air scented by petrichor, damp sage, high-prairie roses. Wildness.

Taming Ellis would be like taming a storm, something one man, let alone a thousand, could never do.

With his fingers laced behind his neck, Jasper turned his face up to the rain, feeling the wind shifting, tugging at his shirt-tails, the shirt's pearl-snap buttons undone so he could catch a breeze. So he could cool off. So his heart would slow down from the memory of it, Ellis' silvery eyes, almost lavender in the bathroom light as he looked up at him.

There'd been trust in those eyes, and a kind of—a kind of what? Something almost otherworldly, something Jasper didn't have the words to define. Only that he knew he wanted to save Ellis from more accidental bumping in crowded places.

That he wanted to feed Ellis and put meat on his bones. That he wanted better than a bag of frozen peas for bruised knuckles. A fix for the mangled might-be-a-hummingbird tattoo on Ellis' neck.

Leland had mentioned to Jasper a time or two that he didn't mind if young folk sported tattoos as long as it was done right. *Respect the artist*, he would say, *respect the art*. That kind of thinking made Jasper feel like Leland was talking about him, which in turn made him want to do his best, to do better.

When Leland had politely asked Jasper to make a trinket for Jamie out of a bit of brass that looked like a pine tree, he'd left it to Jasper to make what he liked. Jasper had spent several evenings, even going so far as to pull out the Adirondack chair to put on the deck so he could sketch ideas as the sun went down. The final result had been gratefully received, and Jasper appreciated Leland's profound thanks.

Metal could be flattened and bent to a man's will with enough heat from the fire, enough muscle from the bone. But while Jasper knew he was probably strong enough, could be forceful enough, to bend Ellis, to make him fit into the shape that freedom wanted him to have, he didn't want to do that. It was almost like looking at the difference between iron and brass. Iron could be pounded, should be pounded, to make it stronger. Brass, on the other hand, needed to be tapped gently, tap tap tap.

Ellis wasn't brass either, though. He was more like a whirlwind of nervous energy, a wall of water, uncapped, untapped, unfocused. Jasper wanted to help Ellis, but he wasn't a watersmith. He was a blacksmith. He worked with metal and steel. He didn't coax something into being, he *forged* it. Pounded it with sparks and fire and will and muscle and bone. He made things.

He also fixed things, using a gentler hand. Whispered to the hinge or the leg of a chair or the cap on a water hose leading to the ice maker as he made repairs, whistling under his breath the whole while.

Ellis needed whispers and tugs and slow pets to soothe his shivering. Needed a gentle, slow hand, a touch to the tender skin on his neck to point him in the right direction. A good direction. A better one. You couldn't direct water to go where you wanted it to go. You couldn't force it, but you could ask it. Gently.

Jasper pulled his hands away from his neck, shrugging his shoulders of fanciful thoughts.

All Ellis probably needed was time and food and rest and good work to keep him occupied. What Jasper needed to do was get to bed so he'd be perky in time for Leland's visit tomorrow. So he'd be fresh-faced and ready behind the forge when the Frontier Girls showed up, wearing their little calico sunbonnets and freshly starched aprons above their gingham checked skirts.

The fact that they all typically wore gym shoes beneath those skirts didn't take away from their collective cuteness, their attentive faces as they patiently watched him go through the demo, waiting till the moment it was over so they could collect their Industry Badges. The last time they'd come to the ranch, the demo had been more about horsemanship, but they'd specifically asked for this demo to be all blacksmith-based.

He went in and closed the sliding glass door. Washed his face in the basin in the bathroom just as a force of wind and a shimmy shiver reflection of lightning in the mirror announced that the storm, promised since yesterday, had arrived.

He checked the back door was properly shut, arranged both pairs of cowboy boots by their work boots by the door, and went as lightly as he could up the stairs to his room. By the time he stripped to his briefs and slid beneath the sheet, his head on the pillow, the storm was in full force.

Jasper liked storms, liked the way the weather would unleash itself, swirling around the cabin, careening into windows. Thunder juddering the foundations. Lightning lighting up his room in an eerie, silvery way, building fey

shadows along the walls before sending the room back into black darkness once more.

As he was taking a long, slow breath, closing his eyes to the storm, he heard it. A short sound, high pitched, like it was coming from far away. When he heard it a second time, his eyes snapped open, fingers spread on the cotton sheet in anticipation of pushing it back so he could get up and check out what it was.

The workshop door, maybe. Or the latch on the lean-to. A folding chair from one of the cabins that got blown in the wind and landed in the river to bang against the rocks below the deck. Maybe even a hazard sign from a road repair somewhere in the mountains. That was a long way to go for a hazard sign, though.

When the sound came again, he heard a thump. A cry, like a pup lost in a well. Close by. Very close.

The sound had come from Ellis' room. He might be all strung out from the day and letting off steam, yet the sound was from a lost soul searching for a safe place to harbor.

Jasper shook his head as he pushed back the sheet and sat up. He was getting way too fanciful about all of this. What he needed to do was go into Ellis' room and assure him that everything was going to be okay and that Leland's expected visit would not end badly.

Jasper knew Leland pretty well, and the way the boss had talked about Ellis getting the help he needed not once but twice, told Jasper how it would go tomorrow. But Ellis didn't know that. Jasper needed to tell him.

Except when he pulled back the calico curtain to Ellis' room, Ellis wasn't in the bed.

Jasper didn't have to turn on the light to know this, as the curtains were open on the wide windows, and the lightning showed him the empty bed. The next bolt of lightning, followed by a hard thump of thunder rolling down from the mountains, showed him Ellis wedged between the tall dresser and the wall.

It was the only place in the room that the lightning didn't illuminate, but Ellis' eyes, glinting silver, gave him away.

The closer Jasper got, the more he saw. Ellis with his arms wrapped around his knees, hair in his face, head tucked down. Just one baleful eye threatening Jasper harm if he came one step closer.

Had this been days ago, when Ellis was newly arrived, Jasper might have heeded that warning and stayed back, knowing no better.

Now he knew. Knew that even when Ellis had had the opportunity to pound Clay into the ground, he'd only punched him once. That he'd pushed Leland and then stopped when he could have continued. That Ellis smiled when he ate ice cream, and worked hard, echoing Jasper's motions as they scythed the grass. Also, Ellis hadn't tried to kill Jasper in his sleep.

A truly bad man would have done things differently. Ellis wasn't a bad man, not by half. Not at all.

"Ellis," said Jasper, softly. He hunkered down and reached out to touch Ellis on the knee. It was rather like putting his hand in the Mouth of Truth, though he'd never been to Rome. "Ellis."

In the next minute, Ellis barreled into Jasper's arms, his arms around Jasper's neck like a vise, his legs straddling one of Jasper's thighs. The motion was quick, breathtaking, tumbling Jasper back on his ass.

In a heartbeat Jasper's arms, all on their own, went around Ellis' shaking form. Ellis' t-shirt was rucked up and Jasper's hands were on fright-cooled skin, calloused fingers curving around the jut of a bare hip.

Bare hip? Jasper reached his hand, just a fraction, to encounter the elastic waistband of the new briefs Maddy had purchased on Ellis' behalf. Except, as it seemed, Maddy had estimated the size wrong, and Ellis must have been swimming in them from the moment he'd put them on.

Why hadn't Ellis said anything about it? And what was he saying now, his mouth close against Jasper's neck?

"You afraid of the storm?" asked Jasper, not surprised when Ellis nodded and hissed. That meant *yes*, of course it did. Ellis was shaking too hard for it to mean anything else. "Don't be afraid. It's just a storm."

He stopped himself from saying any more than that. It was foolish to tell someone not to be afraid when they most obviously were.

The thing he needed to do was get Ellis calmed down so he could get some sleep. Only the window in his room was quite large, letting in each shard of lightning, vibrating from the drums of thunder, quite close, it sounded like. Jasper's room was equally loud, equally bright, but the bed was bigger and his curtains were drawn.

"I'll protect you," he whispered, his mouth almost kissing Ellis' temple. "The storm won't get you, not while I'm around."

Ellis pressed himself closer, fully on Jasper's lap now, his body tucked against Jasper's body, his arms snake-tight around Jasper's neck, crotch jammed up against Jasper's hip. He could feel Ellis' erection within the too-large briefs, and that Ellis was not just hard, he was grinding into Jasper, as if that relief could distract him from his fears. And maybe in prison, it had. Maybe in prison, sex had taken the place of comfort, and brief, hurried encounters had kept inmates from tipping over the edge of insanity in a world they could not control.

Storms were a force of nature that could not be controlled, but here, in the cabin, the walls were sturdy and the storm could not get through. Ellis did not seem to realize that. Jasper needed to make sure he did.

"Here," he said, tugging on Ellis' arms to get him to let go. "Stand up with me. We'll go into my room. The bed is big enough for two. I won't let the storm get you, I promise."

The tugging was to no effect. Ellis wouldn't budge. Something else then. Something gentle.

“I’ve got you,” he said, sweeping Ellis’ hair back from his cheek, kissing him there. “C’mon, I’ve got you. Stand up now. Stand up with me now.”

He was able to get Ellis off his lap and on his own two feet and shakily they stood up together. Ellis’ arm was an iron band around Jasper’s waist, and he could feel Ellis’ heart pounding through his ribs.

“This way,” he said.

Though the words were hard to hear in the storm, he thought Ellis heard him, for Ellis walked close at his side the few feet it took to cross to the next room. He urged Ellis onto the bed and crawled in after him, pulling the sheet and summer quilt over them both.

He tried to give Ellis one of his pillows, but Ellis insisted on sharing Jasper’s, his head tucked close, pushing his way back into Jasper’s arms.

Jasper let him stay. Not because it was easier than the alternative of dragging Ellis off him, but also because with Ellis tucked into the curve of his body, he knew Ellis was safe. And maybe Ellis could sense this, for he began to relax, his urgency to fade, and Jasper could draw a breath.

“All right now?” asked Jasper gently as he brushed his fingers across Ellis’ face to wipe the tears away. “Feel safer now?”

That’s when Ellis bit him. Not hard, but firm, right into the muscle of his armpit. Not breaking skin. Ellis’ tongue moved, licking him. Then Ellis pulled back, tracing just his tongue down the length of chest to Jasper’s nipple. He licked it, then latched on tight and began to suck.

Jasper froze, feeling the suction, the sensation of Ellis’ mouth drawing him in. The ripple shooting down to his belly, his groin.

He could either yank Ellis off and risk losing skin, or he could coax him off, gently, so he’d let go.

“Ellis.” The word came out more breathy than he’d intended, as if he was on the verge of saying sweet nothings to

try and describe how he was feeling. That his cock was getting hard, balls drawing up between his thighs. “Please stop.”

For a moment, Ellis sucked harder, then with a sweep of his tongue, he released, kissed the curve of Jasper’s chest, and pushed up to tuck his face into Jasper’s neck. His mouth was wet against Jasper’s skin, breath coming hard, his eyes damp.

“It’s okay,” said Jasper. And maybe it was and maybe it wasn’t. But there was only him in that room, only him to determine what Ellis needed and to give it to him. He reached down to tug on Ellis’ briefs, pulling them up, making them secure.

Ellis was hard against his hip, and his shivers were starting to make Jasper feel cold, as if the two of them were out in the storm together.

“What do you need?”

Mmmmm came the answer, though Jasper had no idea how to interpret it.

Ellis reached down between their bodies. Jasper’s eyebrows went up as he thought Ellis was going to try jerking him off. Surely their erections weren’t unknown to each other—but Ellis reached past the elastic waistband of his own briefs, and slowly, soft sounds from his mouth like whisper kisses against Jasper’s neck, began stroking himself.

Oh.

Jasper’s last encounter with another man had been over two years ago, before Milt had betrayed him. Two years was a long time in some respects, but the memory of being with another man while he pleased himself was as clear as it’d ever been. As was the memory of being held in such a way as he stroked himself off, because even Milt had been a gentle lover when he wanted to be.

“Take a breath now,” he said, low, lips moving against Ellis’ hair. “We don’t know how this is going to look in the morning, but you’ve had a long day, so take it nice and slow.”

“—low,” said Ellis, agreeing with this sensible suggestion. “—looooooow.”

Inside of a heartbeat, Jasper felt Ellis stiffen in his arms, felt the warm pulse as Ellis came in his fist. Inhaled the scent of Ellis' cum, the salt of it.

Ellis wiped his hand on the sheet, and shuddered in Jasper's arms, as if he dared not come any closer but needed to, desperately so.

"C'mon now," said Jasper. "I've got you. Get some rest, okay? The storm'll pass soon, and in the morning we'll figure everything out."

In the morning, they'd look at each other. For Ellis, the moment they'd just shared might be a passing fancy, nothing remarkable or significant. But Jasper knew he'd remember the tender weight of Ellis' body against his, the silky slip of Ellis' hair across his shoulder. The spread of breath from Ellis' mouth as he relaxed into sleep.

A good sleep, hopefully. Jasper would guard him against the dark as long as it took.

ELLIS

Face smashed in the pillow, Jasper blinked, then lifted his chin and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Ellis was gone from the bed, but Jasper could hear sounds from the kitchen, a cupboard being opened, the fridge snicking open and shut. He turned on his back and swept his hand over his morning erection through the cotton of his briefs, then closed his eyes and sighed.

Tucking his chin, he opened his eyes to examine the slight mark in the curve of his armpit. The hickey-suction marks around his left nipple.

Rubbing both, as though to ease an imaginary ache, he had no idea how to handle today, not after last night. Again he was the man in the field to determine best what Ellis needed, but how was he supposed to find his way through this morass of uncertain feelings, unexamined actions, unknown *everything*?

The air was a little damp as it came through the slightly open window, fluttering the cotton curtains, scenting the room with rain and possibly more rain to come. The rain, the storm, actually, was what had pushed Ellis over the edge to where he sought comfort in another man's arms. No problem there, as Jasper was willing to offer comfort where needed, but the way it had happened—

When Ellis had asked about Leland and Jamie dancing together, Ellis had seemed shocked, and Jasper had felt disappointment bubbling up in him that Ellis might be anti-gay. Except, as it had panned out, Ellis seemed to have been

merely asking who was the fellow dancing with the boss. So that was settled.

What had also been settled was the memory of Ellis in his arms, holding on as though Jasper was the last mooring in a wild storm. And then—

From below came a hard bang and then a crash, and Jasper was up and running downstairs in bare feet, in just his boxer briefs, bare skinned.

In the kitchen he found Ellis, also bare-footed, in a sea of glass, holding up the waist of his white briefs in one hand, and the remains of the coffee pot beaker, handle only, in the other.

The beaker had been old, the coffee maker past its prime in that it couldn't be set in advance. Ellis must have realized this and snuck downstairs to make coffee for them both. A nice gesture that had obviously turned to shit when Ellis had very likely only banged the beaker very lightly. Now it was smashed.

The expression on Ellis' face once again told Jasper that Ellis feared the worst. Prison must have been shit-hard for Ellis to expect that every misstep would be met with the harshest recriminations, the worst consequences.

Just as Ellis moved to come forward, Jasper held out his hand.

“Stop,” he said, voice firm. “Do not move. Understand? I'll get my boots and come get you.”

Pointing his finger at Ellis to make sure he obeyed, Jasper hurried to get his boots, lacing them up far enough to stay on, and thumped back into the kitchen. He walked up to Ellis and grabbed him around the waist.

“Put that in the sink,” he said, jerking his chin at the handle of the broken beaker. “I'll put you on a chair and then clean up this mess. And don't worry about it, okay? The coffee maker was old, and I've got a metal percolator in the cupboard. The coffee'll taste better made that way anyhow.”

Reaching, Ellis placed the handle of the beaker gently in the sink, then wrapped both arms around Jasper's neck as

Jasper carried him out of the kitchen to place him on the nearest chair. Ellis' body was warm all up and down Jasper's body, and he gave himself a minute before he pulled at Ellis' arms to get him to let go.

“Just sit there a minute, while I clean this up.”

Ellis obeyed, sitting there on the chair with his bare feet tucked to his backside, arms wrapped around his knees. With his chin tucked down, he watched Jasper's every move from beneath lowered lashes.

Sunlight from the window above the couch streamed in, limning the angular lines of Ellis' face, the shadow beneath his lower lip. The hollows beneath his eyes.

“I'll sweep first,” said Jasper. He grabbed the broom and swept up all the glass he could see. “Then I'll take a wet paper towel, like this—”

He stopped, feeling a bit foolish explaining what he was doing to a grown man, but he wanted to ease the moment by talking about practical matters. Wiping down the floor with the wet paper towel, he felt around with his hands.

He liked to cook barefoot, so it was important to get all the small unseen bits of glass. As he reached, stretching his arm, he realized he was mostly naked on his hands and knees on the floor and that Ellis was watching him with careful eyes.

Jasper stood up and took off his boots one by one, brushing their soles in the trash.

“We might find a stray bit with our toes come dinnertime.” Jasper smiled because now he was on his feet, and Ellis was looking at him with such gratitude it pulled at his heart. “Don't worry about it, okay? We'll have breakfast and get ready for Leland to come by—he's an early riser, so we'll get that over quick. Then we'll run to Farthing or Chugwater to fetch you some underwear that fits. Then we need to get ready for the demo.”

“Coffee,” said Ellis, clear as a bell.

“Yes, coffee first, before all else.” Jasper swiped his forehead with his fingers. “Let's get dressed, and I'll show you

how to make it in the percolator. You ever make it that way before?”

Ellis shook his head, eyes wide, as if he couldn't believe it was all that simple. Break a coffee beaker, clean it up, make coffee in something else.

“I'll show you how,” said Jasper with a solemn nod.

They got dressed, Ellis hogging the bathroom to shave, peeling off his bandage to throw it in the trash. After which, Jasper took out another bandage, smaller this time, and wrapped it around Ellis' elbow.

Jasper felt much more normal by the time they were ready for breakfast. He figured Ellis must feel the same way, for they were able to stand side by side in the kitchen so Jasper could show Ellis how to put the ground in the metal basket and fill up the pot with water before assembling it all together.

While the coffee brewed, he made them eggs and toast, all the while conscious of Ellis' watchful eyes. Then they ate at the table while silently sharing the view of the river, turning green and blue as the sun came up fully. After which, they sipped coffee and waited for Leland to arrive.

“Don't you worry about him,” said Jasper over the brim of his white china mug. “You worried? Don't be. He's strict, but he's fair. He's not going to toss you back in prison without a damn good reason. Besides, he needs this program to work, and the ranch needs the money. Maybe I shouldn't have told you that, but it's true.”

“Sorry—the fight.” Again Ellis' spoke as clear as a bell in a voice that was straight and sure, like he was the kind of fellow who didn't say what he didn't mean, and didn't talk at all unless he knew what he wanted to say, knew all the words in advance.

“I know,” said Jasper. He heard a truck's engine and then a knock at the back door. “That's him.” He lifted his head. “C'mon in, the door's open.”

Leland strode in, hat in hand, cowboy boots clonking on the wooden floor. Jasper was facing the back door, so Ellis had

to turn to watch Leland advance.

“Enough for me?” asked Leland as he saw the coffee mugs in their hands.

“Sure. Here.” Jasper got up so Leland could sit down while he delivered his lecture and any sage advice he might have on hand.

As Leland placed his hat on his knee, Jasper poured Leland a fresh cup of coffee, then placed the sugar bowl on the table so he could get at it. And then remained close by, propped up against the kitchen counter so Ellis could see him there. See that he was right there, that he wasn't going to leave Ellis alone, on his own, to face the music.

“This is good,” said Leland, taking a sip from his mug. “Only coffee this good is on a trail ride.”

“We made it in the percolator, on account of I broke my carafe.” Jasper jerked his thumb at the empty coffee maker on the counter and ignored Ellis' eyebrows rising at the lie.

“I bet I could convince Levi to change out the glass carafes in the dining hall,” said Leland. “What do you reckon?”

“Bet you could,” said Jasper. “Bet the guests would like it if we served cowboy coffee out of those big metal coffee pots, all rustic and everything. We'd have to order extra hot pads, maybe blue and white checked ones. Not the greasy ones Levi uses for his stoves, but ones only for pouring coffee. You know?”

Jasper could picture it all in his head, and was gratified as Leland nodded, thinking it over.

A silent moment fell as Leland took another sip of coffee. Ellis looked like he was about to come out of his skin. If Leland didn't start real quick, then Jasper was going to step in and make him.

“So,” said Leland. He put the white china mug down and looked at Ellis. “Fighting is against the rules, and I know you know that, because Jasper gave you the speech I give to all my new hires. Right?”

Ellis nodded. Jasper could see the thready, quick motion of his heartbeat, the pulse beneath the muscle along his neck. Another lie, because Jasper had given no such speech. He'd figured Ellis would know better than to start a fight, let alone punch another employee or, heaven forbid, a guest.

Evidently Ellis hadn't. But here he was lying to protect Jasper, who'd neglected that particular task. And there was no way Jasper was going to inform Leland about the encounter at the hardware store, just no way.

"Boss, maybe I didn't make myself as clear as I ought to have." Jasper scratched behind his ear and wished heartily that it was just the two of them, him and Ellis, enjoying the length of the morning before heading out into the day.

"And I shouldn't have asked Ellis to attend a dance, not when he was so newly arrived at the ranch," said Leland. "That's my fault."

Ellis swallowed so hard Jasper could hear it. Could see the tension in Ellis' shoulders as he took a breath and opened his mouth to speak.

Jasper wanted to jump in and explain it all to Leland on Ellis' behalf. How he'd been startled into action, how the small bump from Clay had felt like a threat.

Only he knew better. Ellis deserved the chance to speak for himself, so Jasper waited. He sensed Leland was waiting too, waiting to hear what Ellis had to say. Which, again, showed to Jasper what a straight up good guy his boss was.

"Sorry," said Ellis. He took a deep breath and licked his lips. "The fight. Clay." Ellis shook his head and raised both palms as if he meant to gather his confusion over what had happened and present it to Leland. "Clay? Okay?"

"Yes, he's fine," said Leland. "He's such an easygoing fellow, I'm sure you surprised him. And he's worried about you as well. Asked after you this morning."

This information seemed to upset Ellis to the point where he had to turn to look out the window, a sheen in his eyes as though he was on the verge of tears. But his cheeks remained

dry and the angular lines of his face were firm as he looked back at Leland.

“Something?” he asked. “Anything? Clay?”

Jasper’s mind raced to translate this into: *Is there something I can do? Is there anything I can do to make it up to Clay?*

Leland must have translated in the same way, for he nodded.

“You might have something nice to say to him when he brings Starlight down to get shod during the demo this afternoon. Sound good?”

Ellis nodded, silver-grey eyes wide, as if he was shocked that it would be that easy. But then, Ellis didn’t know Leland the way Jasper did, didn’t know that Leland always wanted to make doing the right thing as easy as he could.

Yes. Ellis didn’t say the word, but his mouth made the shape of it, and that seemed to satisfy Leland, for he got up from the table, hat in hand.

“Well, I’ll let you fellows get back to it,” he said. “Maybe, after you carefully explain the rules to Ellis, our next step is to have you both come eat at the dining hall some night. That work for you, Jasper?”

“Yes, boss,” said Jasper, agreeable, for it seemed the timeline for that particular next step was in his hands, that he would be the one to decide when Ellis was ready.

Leland strode to the back door, opened it, and stepped out. Through the glass, Jasper watched as he put his hat on his head and steadied it before walking out of sight.

“That’s that, then,” said Jasper, brushing his hands against each other as if dusting them off after a long day’s work. “We won’t eat in the dining hall till you’re ready.”

Ellis stood up and walked over to Jasper, barefooted, trusting that Jasper had cleaned all the glass from the floor. He was looking down at the space between their bodies, and it

took Jasper only a heartbeat to realize what Ellis wanted. What he needed.

“Here.”

Jasper opened his arms, fingers on Ellis’ arms, pulling him into a hug. He tucked Ellis’ body against his own, feeling Ellis’ heartbeat slow and then slow, holding him the whole while, not intending to let go until Ellis signaled he was ready to be released into the day. Sometimes, there were no words for such a need, but sometimes the need was clear as daylight.

ELLIS

Ellis could only smile as Jasper grouched while they set up the bleachers, grumbled while they lit the coals in the fire pit, and sighed as they arranged the leather-and-wood bellows just so. Then Jasper showed Ellis how he wanted the air pumped in across the low flames. How to feed the fire. How to act the foolish apprentice without hurting himself.

As they changed into their demo garb in their rooms, Ellis could hear Jasper muttering to himself the whole while, words that indicated this was the last demo he was ever going to do. But with the care Jasper had taken with every step so evident, this was obviously not the truth. And as he and Jasper both stepped out of their curtained rooms and onto the landing, Ellis' mouth dropped open and he wished they did demos every single day until the end of time.

Instead of blue jeans, Jasper wore leather pants, tight on his hips, and a large brass buckle, like the kind a pirate might wear. He wore a white open-collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his upper arms, tight across his biceps. The shirt of the collar had no buttons, and the gap revealed the dip at the bottom of Jasper's throat, a furl of dark hair, like a secret, peeping out from the v of the shirt.

Jasper had not shaved that morning, either, so there was a fine shadow of beardgrowth along his strong jaw. Also, Jasper had done something to his hair, with bear grease for all Ellis knew, to make it swirl across his forehead and in front of his ears in an old-fashioned sweet way.

If Ellis had chanced to see a man on the street wearing his hair that way, he might have laughed out loud. However, at that moment, Ellis was not laughing. All Ellis could do was stare.

He'd been so enmeshed the night before, his own fears about the storm taking over, that he barely remembered falling into Jasper's lap, wasn't quite clear on what all had gone on between them. But he should remember. It should be as clear to him as the surface of a summer lake, for how could he forget muscled arms like that, the broad expanse of Jasper's chest beneath the simple linen cloth. The width of his shoulders, the tender curve of his eyes as he smiled at Ellis.

"Fancy, huh?" Jasper asked, as if completely unaware of Ellis' reaction. "Turn around," he said, making a spinning motion with his forefinger. "Let's have a look."

Obedient, Ellis turned in a small circle, hoping he'd laced up the back of his canvas trousers right, that his white linen shirt, similar to Jasper's except it was collarless, looked okay, even though it felt like it was hanging off his shoulders in the wrong way.

Ellis stopped. Jasper tugged on Ellis' collar to pull it into place.

"There," he said. "Let's go put on our leather aprons and check the fire before the Frontier Girls arrive."

As they went downstairs, Ellis' heart was pounding, but it wasn't with fear, it was with anticipation. For all he'd messed up practically every day, Jasper and Leland were trusting him with guests.

Evidently, as Jasper had explained amidst all his grouching, the Frontier Girls were a local group, kind of like Girl Scouts. But instead of general arts, crafts, and skills, they focused on the late 1800s, when the world was young.

According to Jasper, these young ladies, ages nine to twelve, practiced skills and crafts of the old days. They sewed garments to resemble what girls their age on the prairie would wear. They knew how to cook over a cast-iron stove, how to

milk a cow and make butter. How to use a spindle or a spinning wheel to spin wool, how to color the wool with onion skins or strawberries and cherries or whatever.

Had they been cast back in time by a time machine, they would have survived and possibly even thrived. At least, that's what Jasper had said. And this afternoon, even though they might not become expert blacksmiths, they were going to get a demonstration to get the rudiments.

Rudiments? Ellis had mouthed, enjoying the feel of a word he would never have encountered in prison, and had not heard since his teaching days.

"The basics," said Jasper as they reached the shop. He handed Ellis his leather apron, and put one on himself, tying the string tight behind his back, which pulled the front quite tight against his middle. "Put that on. And remember, every time I tell you something, look around like you have no idea what you're doing. And only pretend to touch hot metal, but don't really touch it. Then, you can hop around like a fool who doesn't listen to his blacksmith master when he's warned about metal that's just come out of the forge. Got it?"

Got it.

Then he heard giggling and turned his head to look.

Down the road from the parking lot came a flock of little girls, bright as sunflowers, sunbonnets of flowered calico or pink checked gingham all bobbing in the breeze. They wore short-sleeved cotton dresses of lilac print or rosebud, with white, lace-edged bib aprons.

Jasper had said the little girls, under the direction of their Frontier Ma, had made the dresses themselves. Except for their modern day sneakers, worn for comfort's sake, it seemed, they would have fit right into the olden days.

Twittering as they came up, the girls curtsied and said hello before taking their seats on the bleachers. Frontier Ma introduced herself as Sue, and didn't seem to mind that when Ellis shook her hand in greeting he didn't actually say anything.

One little girl stood out, the youngest in the group. Instead of being dressed like a little girl on the high prairie, she was decked out as a cowgirl in a battered, shade-too-big denim cowboy hat that looked like a hand-me-down. She also had a striped button-down shirt, and cotton chaps that looked as though the edges had been cut by hand, and that she made them herself. She also had hair that was coming undone from her braid and looked half a mess.

In her hands, she carried two dolls. One was obviously a well-loved Cowgirl Jessie from the *Toy Story* movies. The other was a Ken doll. He was wearing beach shorts and a tank top and was obviously badly dressed for roping and riding. Still, he was smiling like he wanted to be all in, but maybe like he also wanted just to go home.

“Ruth Anne,” said Sue. “Why don’t you sit over here, next to Lisa?”

Lisa, on the other hand, looked like she was the oldest, tall and willowy for twelve, with her hair done in blonde ringlets beneath her crisp-edged and rather fetching pink sunbonnet. Her skill with the needle was far more advanced than the others, or maybe her mom had helped her, for her lilac-printed dress fell in graceful pleats below her knee.

Lisa paused as she was sitting on one of the benches, and Ellis feared, with a deep turn of his heart, that Lisa was going to turn up her nose at Ruth Anne. That she was going to be one of those mean girls, the playground equivalent of a bully in a prison exercise yard. And that the other little girls would pile on, so they could all be mean together.

Only that’s not what happened at all.

Lisa got up and patted the seat just one over from where she’d been sitting.

“Oh, yes,” said Lisa, her voice bright. “Sit next to me. Right here. Can I hold Ken?”

It might have been a trick, as sometimes such kind-seeming gestures were. But rather than Lisa just putting on a show because Frontier Ma and the Blacksmith and his Foolish

Apprentice were watching, Lisa seemed to mean it. She waited while Ruth Anne clambered up to the second bleacher and scooted over so Lisa could climb up and sit next to the edge. Then Lisa and Ruth Anne bent their heads together to make Ken and Jessie have a serious-seeming conversation, perhaps about where their relationship might be headed.

Ellis looked at Jasper, who shrugged as if to say: *Told you. Read the room. This is a nice place with nice people.*

Ellis didn't say anything, but what he wanted to say was: *Sometimes things just stay with you.*

Jasper started his demonstration, and while he was talking easily as he pointed out the tools in his workshop, the forge, the hammer, and the anvil, he was transforming himself. His voice became low and whiskey-laced, making Ellis' spine tingle all up and down.

When Jasper lifted his arm to point, he held the hammer in his hand. He held it straight out, like it weighed nothing, though the muscles along his arm corded tight.

Jasper explained what he was going to make that day, a simple dinner triangle, and then maybe something special, after which he was going to put the first pair of horseshoes on a pony. If they all behaved, Jasper promised that one little girl would get to ride the pony as Clay led her back to the barn.

“Her name is Starlight,” said Jasper, and all the girls cooed at this. “And this is my apprentice. His name is Ellis, and he's brand new, so he doesn't know where all the tools are, doesn't know where the water spigot is either. He knows how to pump the bellows, at least most of the time. The other half of the time, he doesn't listen when I tell him not to do something, so I'm hoping all you girls will help me out. If you see Ellis about to do something foolish, you just holler and point—help me out, you hear? Or he might hurt himself. A forge is not a place to play around. Now, let's get on with things.”

Pointing with his hammer, the muscles in his forearms standing out, Jasper described the parts of the forge, the low coals in the fire pit, the tools hanging off the edge of the brick, ready for use. He placed a long narrow iron pole in the fire pit,

turning it round and round before bringing it out to pound it on the anvil with his hammer. As Ellis knew, Jasper was making an iron dinner triangle to present to Frontier Ma.

After pounding and turning and reheating and pounding some more, talking low all the while, Jasper called on Ellis to get a bucket of water ready. Ellis picked up the bucket and whirled around, looking and looking, though he knew full and well where the sink and the hose were. The little girls laughed and pointed, and finally he was able to fill the bucket with water and bring it to the forge.

There was a lot of pounding and sparks, between which Jasper talked about what he was doing. After which he would send Ellis to do a very simple task, like bring more coal for the fire, or pump on the bellows. Ellis did as he was asked, each time badly, which made the girls giggle, though some kindly pointed and called instructions to Ellis to help him out.

At the end of this, Jasper stuck the newly forged dinner triangle in the bucket to cool it. When Jasper brought it out, Ellis pretended to touch it, then drew his hand back, as if shocked at the heat.

“What did I tell you about that?” asked Jasper, pretending to holler, drawing his dark eyebrows down in a scowl. He turned to the little girls. “Did I not tell Ellis not to touch things that are hot from the forge?”

“Yes,” said all the little girls in unison. “Yes, you did.”

After Jasper presented the fully cooled dinner triangle to Frontier Ma, Ellis brought over the box of new horseshoe nails. They all watched while Jasper took a very small hammer and made a horseshoe nail heart then and there, and handed it, when cooled, to Frontier Ma. All the little girls cooed and oohed and ahhhed.

“Y’all want one, too?” asked Jasper.

The shout was unanimous, so Ellis, with the box of premade horseshoe-nail hearts in his hands, slipped under the strong rope separating the bleachers from the forge, and began handing out hearts.

“You can make a necklace out of that,” said Jasper. “Frontier Ma says you’re to braid it out of leather or ribbon or whatever.”

Each little girl paid Ellis no mind whatsoever as they reached into the box and took their horseshoe nail hearts. In the second row, Lisa and Ruth Anne compared hearts and decided to trade. Everybody seemed well satisfied.

Down the road from the parking lot came Clay, leading a pretty grey speckled pony. The pony had a fancy green leather halter, and silvery-white hair that blew in the wind so artfully it looked like it had been styled at a beauty shop.

All the little girls looked where Ellis was looking, and the oooh sound went low, almost worshipful. The pony was nothing like the chubby fellow Ellis had owned when he was a boy, but instead was beautiful and graceful.

Jasper had Ellis take the lead from Clay, who tipped his hat and walked back up the road, so quickly Ellis didn’t have a chance to say anything to make amends.

Ellis watched as Clay went, thinking how that encounter, so simple and quick, was different from the one the night before. And how Clay hadn’t seemed to hold a grudge, but rather had given Ellis a quick smile before going on his way.

They all watched with rapt fascination as Jasper shod the pony’s hooves, and pointed out when he was done that she was now a quarter of an inch taller.

“Now,” he said, standing up, giving Starlight a pat. “Who is the lucky girl who’s going to get to ride this pony back to the barn? Shall we let Ellis pick? He’s foolish, but he’ll be fair.”

Jasper leaned close and whispered into Ellis’ ear, sending more shivers down his back. “Cover your eyes with one hand, point with the other and whirl around like a madman. Then pick the cowboy girl. Got it?”

Ellis nodded, did as he was told, and whirled and whirled around, stumbling as the little girls laughed. He was peeking through his fingers, of course, and when he stopped whirling,

he was pointing right at Ruth Anne. Who squealed with delight and, much to Ellis' pleasure, all the other little girls clapped with enthusiasm. They all got up to pet the pony, admiring her sweet mane and tail, wishing they had sugar to give her, but it was Ruth Anne who Jasper lifted onto the pony's back.

"Hold my dolls?"

Ellis looked up. Ruth Anne was holding out both Cowgirl Jessie and Ken.

"They've never ridden before and I don't want to scare them," she said, explaining it to him as seriously as she might instruct a child who was not used to horses.

"You take those dolls, Ellis," said Jasper, laughter in his eyes. "I'll put the fire out, then I'll lead the pony and we can all walk to the barn together."

The walk up the road and beneath the trees to the barn was pleasant and slow. The little girls swirled around the pony, twirling in their skirts. The girls petted the pony and walked alongside her, and they danced in and out of reach of each other, sunbonnet brims fluttering in the wind.

Ellis, who was holding the dolls carefully against his chest, lifted them so Ruth Anne could see they were well cared for. By the time they reached the barn, where Clay was patiently waiting to load Starlight into a horse trailer to be taken to her new owner, it was a very merry party indeed.

Merriest of all was the twinkle in Clay's eyes as he saw what he wasn't supposed to see, which was Ellis not only holding the dolls, but pretending to make them dance in the air as they waited for Jasper to help Ruth Anne down from the pony, much to the delighted amusement of the little girls.

"New hobby, eh?" asked Clay, but the teasing was playful and did not seem to be accompanied by a threat.

Ellis and Jasper escorted the little girls and Frontier Ma back to the parking lot where an assembly of cars was waiting, patient parents swinging their keys or jingling them in pockets. Ruth Anne raced up to an older couple, perhaps her

grandparents, and gestured with her dolls as she excitedly shared her day.

“That is a well-loved child,” said Jasper, tipping his head to speak only to Ellis. “She’s going to be a powerhouse some day.”

“Powerhouse now,” said Ellis.

What he’d not been expecting was the older couple to come up to him to express their gratitude for showing their granddaughter such a fine afternoon. They had no idea he was out on parole, which begged the question: should they have been informed?

“She’s been talking about today since she joined Frontier Girls six months ago,” said the grandmother.

“Nonstop,” said the grandfather, though he didn’t seem the least bit displeased at this.

“We’re happy to host these gals,” said Jasper as he shook the grandfather’s hand. “They were very well mannered.”

As the parents and their happy girls drove off, Ellis was glad to be left alone in the parking lot with just Jasper. He felt as if he’d partied hard for forty straight hours.

Not to mention the fact that if anyone at Wyoming Correctional had told him six months ago he’d be playing the fool to little girls and making dolls dance just to make them laugh, he would have unearthed a gun and shot himself in the head with it.

But this wasn’t the place for violent thoughts. This was his time to be with Jasper as the afternoon shadows went long and the evening they could share together stretched out before them.

“Shall we clean up and eat at the dining hall?”

Ellis hung his head and bumped it against Jasper’s shoulder. He just wanted to be alone with Jasper. Wanted to take a nice hot bath, to which he was becoming quite addicted, and spend the evening on the deck, eating ice cream while the sun went down.

Then, when the sun went down and it was time for bed, he wanted to fall asleep in Jasper's arms. He had the night before, but didn't know if he dared ask again.

ELLIS

Ellis lay in the tub, almost fully submerged beneath the silky slow surface of the water, watching the steam rise as he listened to Jasper making his way up the stairs to bed.

It had been a long day and while the Frontier Girls had been a blast, surely more fun than he'd been expecting, he was worn out. *Wore clean out*, as Jasper had put it as they sat at the table and finished the rest of the chocolate ice cream. They sat at the table rather than on the deck because, as became more evident with each passing moment, another storm was coming in. And now the storm was here.

Ellis had not seen sight of it all day, and Jasper had not mentioned it, but now it was here. A wind had kicked up while Jasper had been taking his bath, and Ellis had done the dishes and looked out the window over the sink, watching the shadowy outline of pine trees dancing in the wind.

Unease had started filling him then, and though he was now in the bath, and baths were supposed to be soothing, when the lightning flickered like a warning through the bathroom window, his heart jumped.

He wanted what he'd had the night before.

He'd woken up that morning without a thought of it in his mind, as encounters like that had been more common than not at Wyoming Correctional. But as the day had gone on, flickers of it kept coming back to him. Jasper holding him as Ellis tried to bite him, seeming taken aback when Ellis had latched onto

his nipple but *letting* him—letting him try to eat Jasper’s body, to take part of him inside of himself, so he’d always have Jasper with him. That’s the way it had felt in prison, sometimes, that he would come away from a mutual encounter with an inmate, wanting to take part in the sensation of touch, of gratification, with him, as a kind of talisman.

He never could, had never been able to. Prison was no place for any kind of fanciful thinking, no place to want what couldn’t be had, not for all the money, not for all the hope, in the world.

Yet now those thoughts, long since banished, or so he’d thought, had come up again, rolling to the surface in hard-boiled explosions, as if they meant to force their way to the surface of his skin and make him—make him what? Ask Jasper if he could suck on Jasper’s dick for a long, long time, soothing himself with that patient, over and over, tongue rolling feeling?

Ellis recollected bits from the night before, the warmth of Jasper’s dick in his mouth, the feel of Jasper’s belly trembling beneath his hand. The hard muscle of Jasper’s thigh. Jasper’s warm breath on his shoulder.

Those jagged memories, now, in the bath, were putting themselves together and presenting Ellis with what he knew he wanted. More of what he had the night before. More of Jasper’s muscled body curled around his, protecting him from the dark.

In prison there was no actual dark to be protected from, as the prison was always well-lit, leaving the odd, shadowed corner in an L-junction of a hallway, perhaps, or a part of the exercise yard beyond the baleful scope of the watchful guards or the security cameras. The true darkness, as Ellis well knew, came from within. No hand job, blow job, or quick fuck in the laundry room, had come close to blotting that darkness out with a sensation of being safe, of being in the warm light of the sun. Nothing had made a difference in prison.

But here? In Jasper’s cabin? Every minute of every day since he’d arrived, it had been different. Every ritual, be it the

simple act of sweeping up after meals, or oiling down tools in the workshop—all of Jasper’s motions, be they quick and sure or slow and thoughtful, brought a sense of peace that sifted down over Ellis’ shoulders like a soft blanket as blue as Jasper’s eyes.

Rain pounded on the tin roof, and Ellis heard Jasper roll over in bed, the floor creaking. It was odd how sounds in the small cabin travelled, signaling to Ellis where Jasper was at any moment, what he was up to. Probably Jasper was aware of this and the cabin sent him signals too, and that Jasper knew Ellis finally dragged himself out of the bath, pulled the plug to let the water drain, and dried himself off on the softest towels known to man.

For all Jasper seemed so gruff, worked in a greasy, fire-flinted workshop, he liked things like soft towels, and home-cooked meals, and the calm of an evening sharing a pint of ice cream. Not something Ellis thought he’d have, let alone ever want, not after two years in prison. But he had it now, and he wanted it now.

To ask Jasper for what Ellis’ body wanted now, well. That might risk everything else, so what should he do?

While the t-shirt he put on fit pretty well, the white briefs were too large, as they had been from the day he’d started wearing them. Jasper knew about that now, obviously, and had mentioned getting Ellis new ones that fit, but for now, Ellis would make do.

During the day he bunched the underwear so the waist of his blue jeans held them in place, at least for the most part. Now, as he put his dirty clothes in the hamper, he had to hold on to the waist of his briefs as he made his way through the darkened cabin and up the stairs.

Lightning came in through the window with silver-yellow fingers and a moment later, thunder made the glass shake in the window frames. Heart racing, Ellis scurried up the stairs and stood on the landing, looking at the shadowy outline of the calico curtain separating the landing from Jasper’s room.

“Well,” said Jasper from the other side of that curtain. “Get on in here.”

The softness in that voice, the calm surety of it, was something Ellis never thought he’d hear. He pushed aside the curtain and stumbled in the darkness to Jasper’s bed, throwing himself in before Jasper could change his mind. But he knew Jasper’s mind had already been made up, for he pulled Ellis to him, holding him close, their bodies growing warm together, the night air outside of the bedclothes a cold shock along the back of Ellis’ neck.

Lucky, lucky him, his head tucked against Jasper’s shoulder, inhaling the warm scent of Jasper’s skin, fresh from his bath. Feeling the furls of chest hair across his chin, Jasper’s breath stirring his still-damp hair.

“All right?” asked Jasper, his voice night-time low, burry.

Yes, yes, yes. It came out as a soft hiss.

He was as safe as he’d ever been, but still his heart continued to race. He was in Jasper’s arms, and surely that should be enough.

He was safe from the storm, and Jasper didn’t seem to mind that Ellis needed to be protected from the elements as though he was a small child, never seemed inclined to point out that Ellis was a grown man who surely knew a thunderstorm was nothing to be afraid of. Rather, he held Ellis and petted him, and sighed, his chest rising and falling slowly as Ellis’ fingers entwined themselves in Jasper’s chest hair.

Ellis lifted his chin, bumping his nose along Jasper’s jaw.

“What—?” began Jasper, but then he stopped, and seemed to blow out a long slow breath, as if he’d been thinking the same things Ellis had been thinking, only now that they’d arrived to this point, he didn’t seem so sure anymore.

Not that Ellis could read Jasper’s mind, of course not. But the fact that Jasper was asking him as if he wanted to know what Ellis wanted, meant that maybe, just maybe, Ellis could ask for what he wanted.

Maybe Jasper would say yes. Then it wouldn't be Ellis pleasuring himself with his own hand, but, instead, it would be Ellis suckling Jasper's cock, light and soft so Jasper would be hard in Ellis' mouth so Jasper would last and last. And when he came, it would be after pleasure rippled and waned in Jasper's body, rippled and waned like a sea tide coming and going, and his final pleasure would swamp over him, waves of pleasure almost drowning him.

Someone in prison, a nameless inmate, had confessed in a quick breath that this was what had happened to him when Ellis sucked him for a long time. Ellis had tucked that knowledge away and used it to his advantage. Found that doing it that way calmed him.

He didn't want to make Jasper come hard and fast, like an explosion, he wanted Jasper's release to overwhelm him to the point that maybe he'd reach out for Ellis and hold on to him forever and forever. You couldn't make someone want you to stick around, you couldn't force them. But Ellis found he wanted to try.

Jasper's chest was naked beneath Ellis' hand. This was the way Jasper slept, in boxers and nothing else. Ellis' toes connected with Jasper's toes, the bottoms of his feet were tickled by the hair on the tops of Jasper's feet, and he curled and uncurled his toes to repeat the teasing sensation.

Softly, as though he meant to impart a dear-held secret, Ellis whispered his mouth across Jasper's chest, licked soft skin over the hard curved muscle of Jasper's breast. Waited. Listened while Jasper inhaled. Ran his tongue over the hard nub of Jasper's nipple. Listened to Jasper inhale again, more sharply this time. Then kissed, kissed, kissed his way down Jasper's body.

Jasper's hands trailed across Ellis' skin as he went down into the darkness of the bedclothes, almost like seaweed might stroke him as he sank into deep water, drowning. But Jasper didn't stop him, not even when he pushed aside the elastic waist of Jasper's cotton briefs, and laid his cheek on Jasper's belly, feeling the scratch of hair against his lips as he turned to

kiss his way down alongside Jasper's cock, hard against that belly, pulsing with warmth and silky soft.

This was where he'd wanted to be all along.

Jasper's hand cupped the back of Ellis' head, fingers twisting in his hair, almost tugging to get Ellis to stop.

"Uh."

Ellis took that hand and placed it against his cheek, feeling the warmth of it, the hard calluses along the edge of Jasper's fingers, the skin of his palm rough from hard work. Then he used Jasper's hand to push his head down, as if Jasper was making Ellis take his cock in his mouth. As if Jasper was making Ellis do something he didn't want to do, which made his belly tumble and his mouth water, and he almost came in his overly large briefs then and there.

But he had Jasper to tend to, so he concentrated on that. On sucking and licking, on rolling Jasper's silky-damp cock in his mouth, rolling it on his tongue, over and over, till there was nothing but wet and the sweet-salt taste that leaked from the slit, and the tender trembling of Jasper's belly.

The storm went away. The thunder and the lightning were not even flickers on the horizon as Ellis closed his eyes and suckled and licked while his breath slowed and his heartbeat slowed.

Beneath his hands, beneath the motion of his tongue, the suction of his cheek, blood thumped along Jasper's cock, thin threads of pulse and power.

Jasper's release rose, his balls collecting between his strong thighs. Jasper's breath pitched high, like he was about to come, but then Ellis slowed his licks and touches and sucks, and Jasper's belly settled, his whole body relaxing. Then Jasper exhaled a long, slow breath in preparation for the next wave, and the next, and the next after that.

Long after the storm had thundered and gone, Ellis gave a hard suck, his fingers curled in a tender grip, and Jasper came in his mouth, wonderful ribbons of hot salt. Wonderful sounds Jasper made, a low cry of wonder, a shuddery breath, and

close behind that, *uh-uh-uh* sounds as he came up to the surface as though from beneath a giant wave of water.

Jasper pulled on Ellis then, to get Ellis to release his mouth from Jasper's now-spent cock, to get Ellis to climb back up Jasper's body so Jasper could hold him while his breath slowed. So Jasper could stroke Ellis' back while Ellis licked the sweat from Jasper's strong neck. So their breaths could slow together in the darkness, the quiet darkness, the storm's energy spent and vanishing as if it had never been.

JASPER

In the morning after a quick breakfast, Jasper drove to Chugwater, Ellis in the seat beside him, leaning half out of the window the whole while, breathing in the cool damp air the storm from the night before had left behind.

The storm had left more than water-sheened grasses and a pale blue sky full of puffy horsetails of clouds. It had left Jasper with an armful of sleepy Ellis, a well-sucked cock, and more feelings than his heart knew what to do with.

He was the man in the field; he was Ellis' CO, and however self-appointed he might be, he owed it to Ellis to do right by him. Jasper did not want to play a game of kiss-kick with Ellis the way Milt had done in the last days before his promotion, promising that he and Jasper would still be together after he got more bars on his collar. Promising that he and Jasper were still a team, and that they could make things work.

Kisses had followed, and hard fucks, and Jasper had believed with all his heart that Milt cared for him. Or maybe Jasper's heart had been lying to him. Either way, he knew what it felt like to be promised something, only to have that snatched away.

He couldn't imagine bringing any of this to Leland for a quick consultation, the way he'd often done in the past. Leland was a good sounding board, though he often remained silent, arms across his chest, leaning against the door while Jasper sat

in Leland's office chair and talked his problem through, coming to a solution all on his own.

One thing was clear to Jasper: he did not want to take advantage of Ellis, who, given their current situation, might feel he had to say yes to what was happening between the two of them.

What Jasper should do was explain to Ellis that their nighttime interludes could not continue, but that he'd support Ellis in every way that he could.

On the other hand, he didn't want to give up the way Ellis made him feel. He was falling for Ellis' mouth, his talented tongue, and those silver-grey eyes that watched Jasper all the time and seemed to know secrets about him that even Jasper wasn't aware of.

It wasn't even Ellis' mouth, really, but the way their bodies curved together in the dark. The way Ellis trusted him. The way Ellis had murmured words into Jasper's skin, too tender to be comprehensible, that echoed in Jasper's heart as he held Ellis while Ellis fell asleep, gently snoring against Jasper's neck.

It had been a long, long while since anyone had depended on him, had trusted him like Ellis did. And Ellis *did* trust him, trusted Jasper to understand him even if he never said a word. Trusted Jasper to be patient with him and did things with his mouth for a good long while, did them as though his life depended on Jasper letting Ellis suck his dick for an hour.

Yes, it had been at least an *hour*, until finally Jasper's release had sent ripples through his body that seemed to last as long as the blow job had. And then Ellis had been in Jasper's arms, still and content, for the rest of the night, as if that was where he'd always wanted to be, and everything else was just a lead-up to that.

Nobody had ever needed Jasper like that, not even Milt. Not boyfriends or casual flings, or anyone he'd ever known.

Being Ellis' bulwark against an unseen storm, or even an actual one, made Jasper feel like he was ten feet tall and

covered with hair. Like he was that giant in the Jack and the Beanstalk story, only instead of attacking Jack, trying to kill him, he was protecting Jack, and in this case, Jack was Ellis. Whose touch made Jasper melt, whose sucking mouth made Jasper come. Whose very existence brought forth feelings inside of Jasper, tender, silk-ribboned feelings that seemed to be weaving their way into his heart, like a soft bandage, healing him from the inside.

If he told Ellis there was to be no more, then maybe his heart would stop the healing that Ellis had begun there. But if he said yes to what was growing between them, then he needed to make damn sure it would be good for Ellis, and not just a selfish wanting on Jasper's part.

"Dairy Queen?" asked Ellis, sliding back into the cab of the truck as Jasper slowed down as they passed the town's limits.

"We just had breakfast," said Jasper, making like he was more horrified than he actually was.

Ellis shrugged, eloquent and silent, as if he knew full and well that Jasper could be tempted even though it was still morning.

"We'll see," said Jasper, pretending as best he could that the answer was still undecided.

Of course they would go to Dairy Queen, and maybe the sweetness of the ice cream would help settle the rattle in his head about what to do. He needed to decide before nightfall as well, for storm or no storm, without a hard line drawn, Ellis would be in his bed, in his arms, before the moon rose over the trees and the night became full and filled with the scent of pine trees cooling as they sent out their perfume.

At the ranch-wear and farming supply store, they stopped to get Ellis some better-fitting underwear, thicker socks to wear beneath his steel-toed workboots, thinner socks to wear to the dance beneath his cowboy boots, and a red bandanna handkerchief to tie around his neck to help soak up the day's sweat.

“Anything else you need?” asked Jasper as they both watched the clerk ring the items up.

Ellis shrugged, as if the question was inconsequential to him.

“C’mon, kiddo, we’re in town. Everything’s here. Something you need? Something you want?”

Ellis looked Jasper right in the eyes and Jasper could hear everything Ellis was not saying, all the innuendo, along with a great deal of forthrightness, rocking Jasper on his heels.

“I mean from the store,” said Jasper, laying all the gruffness into the words to warn Ellis from flirting too hard in front of the clerk, who was right there.

“Belt,” said Ellis pointing at Jasper’s belt buckle. Which meant he was also, pretty much, pointing at Jasper’s crotch. Whichever way this thing between them was going to go, Jasper was going to have to have a small talk about how free Ellis was with his gestures.

“Sure,” said Jasper. “They have ‘em here. Should have thought of that. Go pick one out. Get a nice one. I’ll wait.”

They finished their purchases, stopped at the Dairy Queen for ice cream cones for the drive, and Jasper took them back to the ranch.

Every now and then, he’d look over at how the wind through the open window on the passenger side stirred Ellis’ hair around his grey eyes. Eyes that looked at Jasper full of memories of what had happened between them the night before, only it was an everyday thing to him. As if Ellis had not set off a whole ricochet of emotions inside of Jasper, ideas swirling around, memories of bumping Jasper’s chest with his chin layering on top of the feel of the inside of Ellis’ mouth as he’d sucked him.

What did Ellis think? And how could they have a conversation about it, come to a mutual place between them, if the most Ellis could manage was a sentence consisting of only a word or two? Of course, Ellis could write out his answers

and they could discuss it that way, but it seemed too cumbersome a method for so tender a subject.

They arrived at the parking lot of the ranch to find a white van with the Wyoming Correctional emblem on the side. Standing beside it was Phil and his oversized aviator sunglasses, looking like he wanted a good smoke.

Phil didn't look up as the truck trundled past, but when Maddy came out of the office and waved at them, Jasper knew he was going to have to stop. And maybe, while Phil and Ellis had their prescribed meeting, Jasper might break down and go through Ellis' file so he would better know how to help Ellis.

A bit of sunlight lit up Ellis' eyes as he got out of the truck, silent and still, looking at Phil, at the driver of the van. At Jasper.

"I'll just be inside," said Jasper to Ellis. "What do you reckon you'll need?" he asked Phil. "Ten minutes?"

"Yes," said Phil, without much expression.

Not happy, but knowing the checkup meeting from the PO was a part of Ellis' parole agreement, Jasper thumped up the stairs and went inside Maddy's cool, dim office. When she joined him, looking ready for anything, as she always did, he tugged on his forelock and shrugged, feeling abashed that he was giving in at last.

"I might look at Ellis' folder, now that I have a minute."

"Sure," she said, not saying anything about how stubborn Jasper had been about *not* reading it. "I've got it right here." She reached into her filing cabinet and pulled out a manilla folder. "It's not an easy read. I got about halfway through and then had to stop."

Standing there, bright sunshine streaming in through the rectangle of open door, Jasper flipped through the file.

Phil and Ellis had gone behind the white van, and though he could see their shapes through the dusty windows, he was distracted from the contents of the folder and had to make himself concentrate.

What shocked him first off was the picture of Ellis, a black-and-white photo that, as the notes indicated, was from the flyer of the high school Ellis had taught at: Sand Creek High School in Cheyenne.

The Ellis that looked back at Jasper was almost a stranger. For one, he was smiling, eyes bright. His hair was cut in a close, sweet way. He was wearing a button-down shirt and a dark tie, looking for all the world like a first-year high school English teacher about to embark on a satisfying career exposing his students to the wonders of literature.

Another photo, a grainy one stapled to the page, showed Ellis under surveillance as he delivered drugs to a dark car with tinted windows. He looked pretty rough, leather jacket and all, and was that a gun in his pocket?

The date written on the photo indicated the cops had been on to him from the first, but let him run so they could snag a couple of other dealers along the way. If they'd grabbed him earlier, maybe his sentence would have been lighter and, worst of all, he would not have been in prison when his mother died.

The paragraph that described the riot in the dining hall at Wyoming Correctional was terse, a typical bureaucratic don't-give-a-shit recounting of the incident that had sent Ellis into solitary, just when he should have been allowed on furlough to attend his mother's funeral. The idea of it made Jasper want to weep, and the photo of Ellis for his release papers showed him with a face of stone, eyes of flint, his hair slick against his head, and greasy past his chin.

The cops and the prison system obviously hadn't cared why Ellis had started dealing drugs, had never looked past the surface of it, but even if Jasper hadn't met Ellis, he could read between the lines just as well as anyone else. Ellis had started dealing drugs, delivering, taking money, making the rounds, because he needed to pay for his mother's cancer treatment, something he could not afford on his teacher's salary. Everything had run out all at the same time, the money, Ellis' luck, Emma Bowman's time on this planet.

No wonder Ellis had lost his shit that day in the dining hall. Jasper would have done the same.

He looked up from the folder, fingers leaving sweat marks on the edges, to see the van shift on its wheels, as though it had been rocked on purpose. He could see Phil's hat and maybe the curve of a white beard, but he couldn't see Ellis at all.

Phil bent down, out of sight.

Jasper threw down the folder and sprinted out of the office and down the stairs, flying across the parking lot to round the van.

Phil had Ellis pinned on his knees against the van, both of Ellis' wrists in a tight grip. Ellis' hair was in his eyes, and he was all curled in on himself. His nose was bleeding and there was a smear of blood on his chin, speckles of blood on the side of the white van.

When Ellis saw Jasper, he shook his head as though he meant to warn Jasper away. As if Jasper wasn't fully capable of protecting himself and it was Ellis' duty to save him.

With a roar, Jasper pulled Phil off of Ellis and tossed him to the ground, then fisted his shirt collar and gave him a hard shake.

He wanted to punch Phil, so very badly, oh yes, he did. But Jasper felt Ellis tugging on the cuff of his jeans, felt Ellis curling around his leg, holding on as though deep, angry water was pulling him under and he needed Jasper as his anchor. As if Jasper was his bulwark against the storm.

With one tender touch to the top of Ellis' head, Jasper focused all of his attention full on Phil. Put his face close to Phil's and took one long, slow indrawn breath, blood thudding behind his eyes. Chest full of fury. Muscles at the ready, should Phil say one wrong thing. Do one wrong thing. Blink in the wrong way. Jasper wished he would, wished Phil would give him one good reason.

"You're out of here," said Jasper, voice deep and low and serious. "Step one foot on this ranch, and I will have you

arrested—it don't matter for what. I see you around here and I will *end* you. What's more—" Jasper ground his teeth. "You're going to recuse yourself from Ellis' case, or—"

Jasper heard a gasp and looked up. Maddy was standing there, having come around the van to see what was going on. Her hands were clasped to her mouth, and her eyes were wide. He didn't want to imagine the image the three of them created, or what she would think of it.

"Did he hit him?" she asked, hands trembling. "Did he?"

"It's abuse, plain and simple." Jasper didn't let Phil go, but he did draw back. Maddy's presence wasn't the only thing keeping Jasper from pounding Phil into the gravel of the parking lot. At the same time, he needed her on his side, in case there needed to be statements made.

"You're a *horrible* man," Maddy said, almost spitting this as she dropped her hands to her sides. "No, not Ellis," she said to Jasper's shocked expression. "Him." She pointed at Phil. "You've got the eyes of a snake; thought it from the first moment I met you. Get him out of here, Jasper, before I call the cops. And I will be calling the parole board to report this."

Jasper let go of Phil and took a step back, keeping his eye on Phil as he stood up and shook the dust off him.

"You won't call anyone," said Phil with a scoff. He settled his hat squarely on his head and looked at Ellis, his eyes orange colored through the lenses of his aviator sunglasses.

"Think they won't listen to me?" Maddy scoffed right back. "I have a cousin who works for the city. She goes out to lunch with all kinds of people. Lawyers, judges. Parole board members. They *will* listen to me."

"Oh, you're on Maddy's bad side now, Phil," said Jasper with a hard bark of a laugh, though it wasn't at all funny, none of it was. No wonder Ellis had looked like he had when he'd arrived, like he'd been drug through the dirt and smacked around because that's probably exactly what had happened. The ride in the van to the ranch, with Phil at his side, must

have been a nightmare for Ellis. “I wouldn’t want to be you right now.”

As Ellis clung to Jasper’s leg, they watched Phil get into the passenger seat of the van, watched the driver with his expressionless face wheel the van around in the parking lot and finally, finally, watched the van drive down the road in a cloud of churned dust until it went beneath the trees and out of sight.

Maddy would tell Leland. She’d tell Bill. There’d be serious conversations about whether Ellis and the violence that seemed to surround him was worth the tax dollars the ex-con program would bring.

Those conversations would likely require Jasper’s being involved, and they’d want answers from him. *Is Ellis dangerous?* they’d ask. *Can we trust him around guests?* And all the while Jasper would want to shout at them that Ellis had a kind soul and a sweet nature, that he loved ice cream, and he had feelings for Jasper, and he made Jasper *feel*—made Jasper feel all kinds of things he’d not felt in a good long while.

“Take him back to the cabin and take care of him.”

With his hand on the top of Ellis’ head, Jasper looked up. The expression on Maddy’s face was not what he’d been expecting at all. She was mad enough to spit, mouth curved down, eyes flashing sparks.

“I’m making those phone calls and believe me, heads will roll. They will *roll*.”

With that she marched back into the darkness of her office, cowboy boots stomping the floorboards, screen door slamming.

“C’mon, kiddo, get up. Get in the truck.”

Ellis slithered up Jasper’s body and curled himself against Jasper, and Jasper’s arms went around him, in that instant, forgetting that anyone might be watching. That Maddy, having furiously dialed the first number she could think of, could see them both through the open door of her office. Fuck that. Fuck all of that.

“You’re not to be alone in that man’s presence, not ever. D’you hear?” He meant to inject some levity, meant to assure Ellis about this, but his voice was jerky and it almost sounded like he blamed Ellis for what had happened. Like he was scolding Ellis for wanting to have a private conversation with Phil. But none of this was Ellis’ fault. “C’mon,” he said again. “Let me take you home.”

ELLIS

Ellis was still shaking by the time Jasper guided him to the couch, made him sit down, touched his hair. When Jasper left to get the first aid kit from the bathroom, Ellis gasped out loud, tried to hold the sound, almost choked on it.

He couldn't bear to be left alone, couldn't imagine how he could impart this to Jasper, even though Jasper always seemed to know what Ellis needed, what he wanted, what he was trying to say, all without him having to say anything at all.

First aid kit in hand, Jasper knelt at Ellis' feet, one hand on Ellis' knee.

"How many times did he hit you?" asked Jasper. "I mean this time, today. Not *all* the times. If you tell me all the times he hit you, I'm going to lose my mind."

Not quite able to put two fingers up without giving away how hard he was shaking, Ellis mouthed the word *two*. From there, he couldn't explain that Jasper had saved him from a third blow, during which his head would have hit the side of the van quite hard, leaving his ears ringing, his head aching. As it was, his jaw felt numb, and the blood drying on his upper lip was starting to itch.

"Should've bought an ice pack at the store."

Jasper stood up and brought back the bag of frozen peas, now badly misshapen from having been frozen, thawed, and then frozen again. He gently placed it against Ellis' jaw and lifted Ellis' hand to hold it there.

Then, his hard-edged fingers gentle, he wiped the blood from Ellis' upper lip, put a butterfly bandage on Ellis' forehead, replaced the bandage on his elbow, and tended to him like he would, as if he loved Ellis. Cared about him. That what happened to Ellis truly mattered to Jasper.

Ellis wasn't going to cry. He'd quite forgotten how. But his vision grew blurred, and he had to scrub at his eyes with his fingers to be able to see Jasper looking down at him with sea-blue eyes, deep as the ocean, his brow furrowed, dark hair messy over his forehead.

"I shouldn't have left you alone with him, not for a second," said Jasper as he dabbed antibacterial cream along Ellis' cheek. "I'm sorry."

Shaking his head, Ellis dipped his chin, let the dripping bag of peas fall to the floor. He took Jasper's hand and uncurled his fingers, clasped Jasper's palm to his face. Let the warmth of that hand soak into him. Closed his eyes for a minute.

He'd be able to go on if he had this moment between them. There was no telling how Maddy's phone calls would go, no telling what Phil would do once the director of the parole program got that phone call.

Phil would only be worried about how things would look on his record. Whether he'd be up for promotion any time soon. If he ever got hold of Ellis again, his revenge would be swift and final. All Ellis could count on was the now, this moment between him and Jasper.

He opened his eyes. Jasper was right there, still close, still looking at Ellis with worried eyes. Ellis wanted to kiss Jasper's mouth, and fall into his arms, and never leave his side. But that was not how life worked. Surely Jasper, in spite of the blow job, would not want to deal with Ellis' rocky relationship with his PO. Would want Ellis gone from his sight.

"You will never meet with him again, not if I have anything to do with it."

Ellis knew Jasper believed what he was saying. Maddy's righteous indignation on his behalf was an indication that maybe she wasn't as afraid of Ellis as she'd been when he'd arrived. But all that would go to hell right quick when Phil got his feet back under him and thought of a way to get back at Ellis.

"What's going through that head of yours, eh?" With his thumb, Jasper traced above Ellis' eyebrows, moving his hair out of his eyes, sending Ellis to shivering again. "Here now."

Jasper put the box of bandages down, moved between Ellis' thighs. Pulled Ellis to him, guided Ellis' head to rest against his belly. His arms were warm around Ellis' shoulders, the sound of his his heartbeat steady. The warmth of Jasper swirled all around Ellis, moving through him like a slow tide.

That tide would start pulling out, Ellis knew it would. But it never did. Even when Jasper pulled back to look at Ellis, as though making sure of him, the tide felt like it was still there and Jasper was still holding on to him.

"You need some ibuprofen?" asked Jasper. "Or if you'd prefer something else, I could run to the store and fetch it."

Trust Jasper to make an offer like that. Jasper did not know that were he to leave, Ellis would insist on going with him, for he could not be alone right now.

In prison, even if he was alone in his cell and his cellmate was off somewhere else, he was never alone. The sounds, catcalls and hoots, the banging of the pipes, guard whistles, doors slamming—all of this indicated activity that even if it was out of eyesight, was all around him. Sometimes that awareness, of never being alone, made prison more bearable.

If Jasper went out, Ellis would be alone in the cabin, and that he could not bear.

But as Jasper took Ellis' silence for yes and went off to fetch the bottle of ibuprofen from the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, the cabin seemed to sigh around him, affected by the motion, by the speed at which Jasper was back at his side, handing over the bottle before getting a glass of water from the

kitchen and bringing it back. The cabin whispered, announced Jasper's movements. Told Ellis the wind was rising; even without looking, he knew there were cat paws on the surface of the water.

When Jasper gestured to him, Ellis obediently took two pain pills and swallowed them down with a large gulp of water. In Wyoming Correctional, if you asked for pain pills, you might get them and, if you did, you would certainly be expected to swallow them dry or do without altogether.

When the cell phone in Jasper's back pocket rang, both of them jumped, but to Ellis' eternal gratitude, Jasper's arm stayed around him while he reached for the phone, thumbed it, and put it to his ear.

For a long, hard heartbeat moment, Jasper listened. His jaw grew hard, his skin a little pale.

"Now?" he asked.

Ellis could almost hear the voice at the other end say, *Yes, now.*

"Okay. Be there in five." Jasper thumbed the phone again and stuck it in his back pocket. "We have to go. Right now. Evidently Maddy is already on her way to Cheyenne, and she's just called Leland."

We?

"Yes, both of us. Maddy was pretty upset about what she saw—"

Ellis tried to stand up, to push away. The last thing he wanted was to upset Maddy. Even if she'd acted scared of him, she didn't deserve to be dragged into any of this. Phil was his problem, not anybody else's.

"Change your shirt. We're going." Jasper stood up, helped Ellis up, hugged him, and then let him go.

There wasn't much time. As Ellis raced up to get a clean, blood free t-shirt, and raced down again, he knew that his time with Jasper was at an end. After this meeting, they'd decide to send him back to prison or, at the very least, that his parole

shouldn't be served at the ranch, but somewhere else. Somewhere more suited to his rough past, his troublesome nature.

Jasper met him at the back door. He'd washed his face, and his jaw was dripping. Ellis reached up, and with his fingers wiped the moisture away.

Jasper took his hand and bent his cheek inside the curve of Ellis' palm, much as Ellis had done to him only moments before. He knew this would be the last bit of kindness he'd get for a good long while, and he brushed past Jasper to go out to the truck, in a hurry to get it over with.

The drive to the barn was short. Ellis tried to take everything in, the parts of the ranch he'd never seen before, the lush trees, the valley below, the large red-painted barn. Horses beyond in a corral. The scent of pine, warm in the sun, washing over everything, though all he could feel was cold.

Jasper parked his truck next to an old battered Chevy truck, and led him into the barn, which at first Ellis couldn't fathom the purpose of, except Jasper took him to an office just inside the main doors.

There were two men in the office. One, Leland, sat at the desk, phone in hand.

"Yes, Maddy, yes," he was saying, nodding slowly as if he meant to keep Maddy calm, to get her to slow down so he could understand her. When he put the phone down, he looked at the other man in the office.

If Leland was the professional manager of the ranch, pearl-snap buttons done up, nary a hair out of place, the other man was older, more rumped, seemingly casual beneath his ragged-edged straw hat. But in spite of how he looked, his steel-grey eyes focused on Ellis the second he entered the office, close on Jasper's heels.

Those eyes didn't miss a thing as they looked Ellis up and down.

"Boy," said the man to Ellis, his voice a lazy drawl. "You look like you been rode hard and put away wet."

“That’s a fact,” said Leland. “Bill, this is Ellis Bowman. Ellis, this is Bill Wainwright. He owns the ranch.”

The owner? Ellis felt himself go pale all over. He could barely feel Bill’s callous-roughened grip as they shook hands. He wanted to turn into Jasper’s arms to warm himself. Wanted everything to go away. How had it gotten so bad, so fast?

“You boys want a root beer?” asked Leland. He leaned to the side and grabbed some brown bottles out of a small red mini-fridge that gleamed in the corner.

“No,” said Jasper. “Look. All due respect, but can we get this over with? Can you just fire me and be done with it?”

“*Fire* you?” asked Bill with a harsh sound beneath the words. “Give that boy a dang root beer and give me one, too. Jasper can just watch, since he’s got no taste a’tall.”

Ellis clasped the newly opened bottle of root beer in his fingers and watched as Bill took a long swallow from his bottle. Then copied him, though he could barely taste the tang and the spice, could barely breathe or focus beyond the rushing sound in his ears.

“Here’s the thing,” said Leland. “Maddy is *very* upset. She’s going to see a friend of hers who works on the staff of the Chief of Police in Cheyenne, who I had no idea she knew ___”

“I told you not to mess with that woman,” said Bill, shaking his head, tipping his hat off his forehead with a finger to the brim. “She might look like butter don’t melt in her mouth, but dang, she does not play around.”

“That is why you hired her,” said Leland. “And this is why you hired me, Bill. To lay down rules. Rules help things run smoothly. And this ex-con program—”

“Is *not* out of hand,” said Bill, as if he’d said it ten times already that morning. “I don’t care what you say—”

“But I’m saying it,” said Leland. He put down his root beer and stood up so he could look Bill in the eyes. “It needs more guidelines. I’m not about to have a guy who thinks being a PO gives him the right to hustle in here whenever he damn well

chooses. Like he's got a gun on his hip and a license to use it. Which he most certainly does not."

"I'm not arguin' with you," said Bill, holding up his free hand as if he was terrified that Leland might lash out at him. But in his eyes, steel blue, observant, steady, there was a different expression altogether. Ellis couldn't figure out what the expression meant, that is, until he saw Bill's satisfied nod, a slight motion, really, but Leland stepped back and sighed, and ran his hand through his hair.

"And I'm not arguing with *you*. I'm just pissed that he scared Maddy. I'm just angry that a guest might have had their vacation ruined by watching that guy get so violent—"

Leland paused and looked at Ellis.

They were only feet apart, but it felt like they were much closer, that Leland knew everything about him. Then he realized, in the next second, that what Bill and Leland were arguing about was not what Ellis had done or not done, but what *Phil Singleton* had done. Bringing violence amidst all the peace and beauty of the ranch and upsetting a kindly woman in the process.

"You're always doing the right thing for this ranch," said Bill. "I know it. Maddy knows it." Bill waved his hand expansively to include everyone in Leland's office. "Everyone knows it. The ex-con program is doing just fine. You just—" Bill waved his hand at Leland's desk, tidy, piles of paper neatly arranged, a slender computer waiting for Leland's fingers to tell it what to do. "You just lay down some rules about the PO not coming without an appointment, not meeting with Ellis unless there's someone else present. Not that we'll need that last part, once Maddy gets Phil's ass fired." Bill laughed as he took another swallow of root beer. "You goin' to show them that letter that Sue whatsername sent?"

"It's right here." Leland turned to his desk, grabbed an envelope, and handed it to Jasper. "She's like you," said Leland. "Apparently Frontier Ma does not like email."

"So—" Jasper paused as he took the envelope and looked at the return address. Out of the corner of his eyes, Ellis tried

to read the address too, but Jasper pressed the envelope to his chest. “Is she complaining about the demo?”

“Hell no,” said Bill. He finished his root beer, then casually, almost without looking, held it out for Leland to take. Which Leland did, putting the bottle in a blue recycle bin. “She loved it. And I don’t mean a little, I mean a whole *lot*.”

“A whole lot,” said Leland in echo. His eyes were serious as he sat on the desk, propping himself up with his hands. “She raved. Makes me wonder why we didn’t have a foolish apprentice before now.”

“Raved?” Ellis could hear the surprise in Jasper’s voice, and behind that, the hesitant delight.

“Ellis was the Frontier Girls’ favorite. Kids like it when they can tell adults what to do. You, Ellis,” said Leland, turning his focus to Ellis. “You were a *hit*. The only thing—” Leland paused to smile, wiping his mouth with his hand. “Sue would like to arrange it, if possible, if we could do a lunchtime picnic ride with ponies. A pony for every girl.”

“Ponies?” asked Jasper, his eyebrows going up. “We can’t get that many ponies.”

“Actually, we could rent them,” said Leland. “But I’d rather we use our most gentle mares for this, the smaller ones. Take ‘em out to John Henton’s cabin and spread out quilts, handmade by local artisans, on the grass. It could become a thing. This picnic ride’ll be free, but then we charge.”

“A reasonable rate,” said Bill. “Nothing too expensive.”

“Agreed,” said Leland, nodding as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“So you’re not going to fire me?” Jasper’s voice rose, as if he simply could not believe it.

“No,” said Leland.

“Hell no,” said Bill. “You’re a good farrier and a great blacksmith. Ranch couldn’t stand to lose you.”

“I don’t think I would have fired you even if you had slugged that jerk in the mouth.” Leland nodded, as if to

emphasize his words. “He had it coming. And if I’d been there, I probably would have held him still for you.” Leland frowned, as if hating the idea of anyone on his ranch needing to come to blows. “There’s no place at Farthingdale for that kind of man. That kind of behavior.” He looked straight at Ellis, eyes serious. “I’ve read your file, Ellis. So has Jasper, here.” Leland gestured in Jasper’s direction. “We all think you deserve a break and we mean to give it to you. By all accounts, except for a little do-si-do with Clay, you’re doing fine. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

Ellis’ mouth fell open. He wanted to say thank you, but his throat had closed up hard. Not just because he wasn’t going to have to leave, but because now Jasper knew everything about him. Knew every time he’d gone to the infirmary from getting roughed up, or how many times he’d been caught in Laundry fucking another inmate or letting another inmate fuck him.

Even if he could stay at the ranch, there was no way Jasper would want Ellis in his bed. Which meant no more warm body next to his in the night. No more strong arms to protect him from wild, unpredictable storms. No more sweet smiles from Jasper’s deep blue eyes.

“So I’m not fired,” said Jasper, shaking his head, the letter still clasped to his chest.

“No, you’re not,” said Leland.

“No, you’re not,” said Bill, in echo. “Now get your lazy asses back to work, both of you. Daylight’s burnin’.”

As he and Jasper stepped out of the barn and into the sunlight, Ellis’ eyes burned and he had to blink. He might not get to be with Jasper anymore, but at least he got to stay at the ranch. At least he had that.

JASPER

Jasper drove the truck slowly, trundling along the dirt road, sticking to the edge as they passed a few guests walking beneath the trees. He was pleased as punch about the letter from Sue, even before he'd read it.

The demo for the Frontier Girls had had an energy to it, a sweetness layered beneath each blow of his hammer on the anvil. Ellis had been a perfect foolish assistant, and to see the idea that Leland and Jasper had talked about since last season come to fruition? Perfection. Chef's kiss.

The only trouble now was that Ellis, sitting beside him in the truck, was as silent as the first day he'd arrived at the ranch. He wasn't gesturing to Jasper or even looking at him, but instead stared with stony eyes through the windshield as if he didn't much care where they were going. His body seemed poised, as if he was only looking for a spot where he might jump out, truck still in motion, and roll into the nearest ditch and lay there till he died.

At least that's what Ellis' body was telling Jasper at that moment. There was a dull, aching cloud over Ellis' head, in addition to everything else, as if this was the last ride to the end of the world.

"Hey, kiddo," said Jasper. "You all right? It's past lunchtime. You must be starving."

Ellis was looking out the window as Jasper pulled up in front of the cabin. His expression was hidden, though those

shoulders of his gave him away. He was hunched and tight through his whole body.

“We still have our jobs, I reckon,” said Jasper. When Ellis didn’t get out of the truck, he didn’t either. He reached to tug on Ellis’ shirt sleeve. “Hey, can you look at me a minute?”

Ellis didn’t want to do anything but sit there, that much was plain.

They were both off the hook, and the meeting had ended on a good note, so what could be wrong? Jasper needed Ellis to look at him, needed to connect with Ellis to find out what was going on with him.

“Ellis,” he said, low. “Please look at me. Please tell me what’s wrong. Everything’s going to be all right, you’ll see. Leland’s a good guy, you know that. And I know Bill can seem a bit gruff, but he’s got a heart the size of Iron Mountain. Only don’t tell him I told you, ‘cause you’ll piss him off. He doesn’t like anybody to know.”

Sometimes, if you were shoeing a horse that was a bit fractious on account of it didn’t get enough molasses in its grain that morning, or if it’d been a while since they’d been shod and they were feeling a mite shy, you had to go slow, give the horse its time. Ellis was like that now, scatter-shy and withdrawn like a horse who didn’t know what was going to happen to it. Couldn’t trust the blacksmith on account of it had been betrayed by everyone else in the whole damn world.

To get this far must have taken Ellis everything he had to give. His stay in prison, from the little Jasper had read, had been no picnic.

To be out in the world unable to trust that what would happen next was good was its own kind of hell. To have thought and felt that Phil’s brutality was something he had to deal with on his own, a deeper hell. Nobody should have to go through that, not even an ex-con who had engaged in dodgy behavior to take care of his mom.

Jasper was the blacksmith, and Ellis was the horse. Jasper was the free man, and Ellis was the ex-con. There were things

between the two of them—wordless encounters, unshy advances from Ellis, and Jasper’s own body’s responses.

Flickers of feeling and warmth danced inside of Jasper’s heart that he did not want to let go of. But how to hold on to what he could not even name?

“Ellis,” said Jasper. “C’mere. Here.”

With one last tug on Ellis’ sleeve, he made Ellis look at him as he held his arms open. And like a mountain pony, too long from its stable and grateful for any shelter, Ellis scrambled on his knees across the bench seat and into Jasper’s embrace.

Jasper held him close, kissed his hair, wondering at his own reaction now when he’d resented Ellis’ arrival less than a week ago. Maybe he’d been so empty that anyone could have filled him up. Or maybe, just maybe, Ellis was who he had been waiting for all this long while.

Ellis’ body was bony in Jasper’s lap, hip bones angular and digging into his thigh, shoulders hard against Jasper’s chest. But that was all right, he could bide his time, now that he had Ellis where he knew Ellis needed to be. Close to him. Safe.

He petted Ellis along his back, slow pets to ease the shivers. Eased whispers in Ellis’ ear to calm him, as he would do with a horse uncertain of what was going to happen to it.

“We’ll sit here for a while,” said Jasper, his fingers curling in strands of Ellis’ hair, eyes catching the mangled tattoo on Ellis’ neck. “Then I’ll make you something to eat. You must be starving. Reckon tuna fish casserole do you? Or tuna fish sandwiches on toast? I’ve got a boatload of tuna fish in the cupboard.”

The words didn’t matter, only the tone, quiet and low and soothing. Ellis settled in his arms, his arms twined around Jasper’s waist as if he meant to hold on and never let go.

All Jasper wanted in that moment was to bring Ellis back to the young man in the photograph in the folder. Bright eyed, smiling, tie businesslike, hair tidy. Not that Jasper would ever make Ellis cut his hair, no. But if a cropped close head of hair

made Ellis feel more like his own self, then so be it. Jasper would wield the scissors himself.

In the stillness, it wasn't long before Ellis' hand reached out to undo the latch on the door on the driver's side to open it. Fresh air rushed in, the sound of the river, the swish of the early afternoon wind through the tops of the pine trees, the sparkle of aspen leaves fluttering.

“Okay?” asked Jasper. “Or at least better?”

The response Jasper got was a low *mmmmm* sound as Ellis bumped his head beneath Jasper's jaw the way a cat would. Which told Jasper that, at least for the moment, Ellis had what he needed.

Ellis slithered over Jasper's lap and out of the truck and, with a tug, encouraged Jasper to follow him.

“Food now?”

Mmmmm.

“Tuna it is,” said Jasper, pleased that he was getting a response, even if it was one without words.

Once inside the cabin, Jasper assembled tuna and cheese on toast, which was the quickest. As they ate, sitting together at the little square table in front of the window, he read the letter from Sue, Frontier Ma, out loud:

Dear Mr. Jasper and Ellis, Foolish Apprentice,

From all of us at Frontier Girls, we would like to thank you for the wonderful afternoon as you displayed your blacksmithing and farrier skills to us.

“Sounds a bit stiff, don't it?” asked Jasper, breaking off from his reading.

Ellis looked at him, sandwich halfway to his mouth, elbows out, eyebrows lifting.

“Well, I reckon it's kind of like a form letter, and they use a template of some sort.” Jasper shook his head. “But I'll continue.”

We enjoyed your explanation of the tools, and your explanation of the difference between a blacksmith and a farrier, as we had not known there was a difference before now.

“Same stuff as I usually get,” said Jasper as he paused.

But more than this, you made our afternoon very special, for in addition to the perfect weather and the fact that all the girls were able to come in costume, you showed us your true nature: your joy in your work, and the pleasure that simple industry can bring. I have several girls who are now interested in becoming blacksmiths, others who want to be farriers. That’s the kind of inspiration I’m talking about, above and beyond a simple demo.

All of us loved the Foolish Apprentice, who made us laugh, who entertained us with his antics. And though I personally know the whole thing was for show, the joy and camaraderie between the two of you made the whole thing feel real.

The girls have told their parents, and now the parents want to come see the demo, which I hope can be arranged. In addition, Ruth Anne suggested to me that perhaps there was a way all the girls might get a pony ride? Maybe we could arrange a picnic, and all the girls could ride a pony to the picnic spot, and we could eat the kinds of things little girls ate in the 1880s, like lemonade made with real lemons, bread-and-butter sandwiches, and fried chicken.

Best Regards,

Sue Mitchell

P.S. Thank you especially for your kind attention to Ruth Anne who lost her parents six months ago and is now living with her grandparents. Ellis was particularly nice to her, and Ruth Anne is thinking maybe Ellis would like one of her dolls? Such a generous heart she has. I told her no, but I thought I’d check.

Jasper looked up with a laugh. “You’re the best foolish apprentice!”

“No dolls,” said Ellis, licking his lower lip free of toast crumbs. “But you.”

“But me, what?”

Jasper folded the letter carefully, his heart aching for the little girl who’d seemed so secure in herself that she would wear a cowboy outfit when the rest of the little girls had been dressed as Laura Ingalls and Nellie Olsen.

“You.” Ellis waved his hand at the letter as Jasper leaned back to place it on the kitchen counter. “Beyond. Above and beyond.”

“The me being an inspiration part, you mean?”

Ellis nodded, and Jasper looked out the window at the river as he pushed his now empty plate away.

“I sometimes get letters,” he said, the memories of the few times rising slowly in his mind. “But none like this. Sure it’s fun and all, doing the demos, but seldom am I an inspiration to a bunch of young ladies who suddenly want to work in grimy trades.”

If there was one thing Jasper loved, it was being a blacksmith, being a farrier. After leaving the army and floating around the country driving delivery trucks, coming to the ranch had been like coming home.

That morning, he’d almost lost everything by being on the verge of slugging a guy who was abusing one of his parolees. Who, in the short time he’d been assigned to Jasper, had integrated himself, wound himself like a river inside all of Jasper’s broken places.

Had Jasper actually punched Phil, both of them would have been out on their asses, for there was no way Leland would have tolerated such aggression. The ranch was a peaceful place. And no matter that it had been Phil who had disturbed that peace, it was Ellis who would have had his parole revoked. And Jasper would have lost his sanctum sanctorum—

“What?” Jasper asked, lifting his head, which he unknowingly had buried in his hands, fingers carding his own hair as if he meant to tear it out. There Ellis was, crouched at Jasper’s knee, one hand on Jasper’s thigh, eyebrows raised in a question. “Never mind me. That meeting got to me, is all.”

Ellis made a gesture that was easy to interpret as *No, stop. That is foolish.* And, in the next moment, Ellis’ hand swept up Jasper’s bejeaned thigh to clutch at his shirt and to tug on it, the way Jasper had tugged on Ellis’ shirt earlier.

“Tell me,” said Ellis, quite clearly, and it was as if Jasper’s troubles, which had bubbled up in spite of himself, had refocused Ellis upon Jasper rather than on his own troubles. “Tell.”

“I’ve rattled around this world, you know?” Jasper’s voice felt thick in his own throat. He swallowed and petted Ellis’ dark, messy hair. “But this place. This is the only place that feels like home. And though I would not have believed it, sharing my sanctum sanctorum with you? Makes it feel even more like I would protect it from all comers or die trying.”

Ellis stood up and eased into Jasper’s lap, pushing the table away, insisting on being there, despite Jasper’s sputters and upraised hands at the sudden movement. But the more Ellis’ warmth soaked into him, the more the bony bulk of his body held Jasper in his chair, Ellis’ face buried in his neck, the more Jasper felt his troubles might be eased, all of them, whatever might happen in the future, because of an ex-con who dragged his own troubles with him wherever he went, like a chain he’d forged, link by link and yard by yard.

Maybe as Jasper was helping Ellis unencumber himself from that chain, Ellis was helping Jasper simply by needing him. Simply by shoving past Jasper’s own, self-erected defenses. Simply by winding himself around Jasper as he was doing now, like a vine twines around a strong oak tree. Which was how Ellis made him feel with every gesture, every whisper of a word. Like Jasper was his world, and his world was better because Jasper was in it.

“Sanctum sanctorum,” said Ellis whisper-low as he clasped both of his hands to Jasper’s cheeks and kissed him softly on the mouth.

“You know what that means?” asked Jasper, equally low, shivering at the soft feel of Ellis’ lips.

“English teacher,” said Ellis, a small smile curving his mouth. “Back.” He made a gesture over his shoulder as if to show how far back he meant.

Which was two years, near as Jasper could figure. Two years that were enough to turn him from an average, hopeful young man to someone with a badly done tattoo and a habit of scanning every room he entered, looking for exits, expecting that danger was near.

Jasper sighed, enjoying the feel of Ellis’ ribs beneath his t-shirt, the way his fingers fit into the grooves between those ribs. How easily he bore Ellis’ weight on his thighs. How marvelous it might be to tug Ellis to follow him upstairs, where they could fall on his bed and wind themselves around each other’s bodies. And spend the afternoon without words, because there wouldn’t be any need for any.

That would be good, very good. But he knew in himself that he needed activity. Needed to move. Breathe fresh air. Soak in the sunlight. All the things that would soothe him from his rattled state of thinking when he’d been on his way to Leland’s office to get fired, wondering all the while how soon they would expect him to move out of the cabin.

“Yes,” he said, to Ellis’ unasked question. “But later. I need to work now.”

Ellis nodded with solemn eyes, as if he understood everything Jasper meant.

With a soft kiss to Ellis’ curved mouth, Jasper stood up, bringing Ellis with him, putting Ellis on his own feet.

“We’ll trim the riverbanks, that’s what we’ll do.”

Ellis’ eyebrows went up in question.

“You think it looks the way it does because little elves trim it in the night? Ha.” Jasper smiled as he teased, already feeling the energy flow through him at the idea of it. He and Ellis, dressed in waders, moving thigh-deep along the banks of Horse Creek as they trimmed and tidied so it’d look to guests like the perfect setting for their expensive vacation. Like Disney himself had designed it.

Maybe the two of them would look for milfoil, though that wasn’t common in Wyoming, at least not so early in the season. Then, later, when it got dark, his body tired, his mind rested, he would find a way to treat Ellis to the same sensations as he’d gifted Jasper with. An hour-long blow job that had left him floating on a sea free of cares. A fine gift indeed that still resonated with him. Ellis should feel that free of care, of woe, of worry. It’d be a gift to them both.

“Bet you look cute in waders,” said Jasper. He circled Ellis’ waist and kissed him once more, holding Ellis’ body close to his, letting that brief moment remind him of everything good between them. At Ellis’ eyebrows raised in question he nodded, laughed under his breath. “Yes, waders. I’ve got an extra pair. It’ll be fun. You’ll see.”

Ellis kissed Jasper on the nose and smiled at him, and his silver-grey eyes smiled too.

ELLIS

The waders, a pair of rubber overalls that came up to his chest with large straps that went over his shoulders, fit Ellis better than he'd expected them to.

As Jasper adjusted the straps for Ellis, Ellis could look down at what Jasper was wearing. Which was a pair of waterproof canvas hip waders, held up by canvas straps from his belt and snug against Jasper's strong thighs.

The straps cinched the waders tight enough so that the waders cupped below Jasper's bottom, tucked up to his crotch. Giving Ellis an eyeful he'd not been expecting. Making his mouth water, just a little bit, for if working the river put Jasper in a good mood, then maybe Ellis could suggest he share Jasper's bed again and, after that, who knew what might happen.

Together, each carrying a bucket of clippers, trowels, black plastic garbage bags, and a couple bottles of water, they strode out into the sunshine from the workshop. From there Jasper took them along the north bank of the river to just below where the pond was, pointing out the different sections of growth along the river. Explained which part was the upland, which was the riparian.

"We don't want to cull everything along the bank, right?" asked Jasper as he picked a spot at the bottom of a slope and put his bucket down, gesturing that Ellis should put his bucket down as well. "But up there are guest cabins, log cabins that rich folks like to stay in because it makes them feel all rustic

and cozy. This area here is their view. We want to collect trash, if there is any, and while we might leave some dead branches, because that's the normal order of things and how a river functions, we'll crop down any that stick out in a way guests might think is ugly. We trim the grass to make it level all the way up to where the trees are. If you see any clumps in the river, that'll be river moss. We'll leave it unless it looks like it's choking the river or collecting trash. I don't think we'll find much, but keep a lookout, if you would."

Jasper wasn't wearing a hat, though he made Ellis put one on because it was going to be hot and sunny along the river. Because of this, Ellis could look at Jasper from the shade of his straw cowboy hat, and could see where sunlight gleamed on the sweat along Jasper's temples. See where his hair stuck to his skin. Where bits of dust clung to the sweat on his forehead.

Ellis' eyes traced Jasper's every motion as he unbuttoned the top three buttons of his cotton shirt and tugged at the straps on his belt, as though to make sure they were secure.

They were going to wade in the river and tend to the river banks and get as much done as they could before the evening winds picked up. If any guests looked down and happened to see them at their industry, which they might, Jasper had instructed Ellis to take off his hat and wave it like a madman, as if trimming the river were the most fun in the world.

"Which it kind of is, in a way," Jasper said as they stepped into the water. "Different from the forge," he said, looking at Ellis in an earnest way as if he was worried Ellis might disagree. That Ellis would be put off by hard, wet, mucky labor.

Nodding his willingness to do as Jasper asked of him, Ellis felt the pull of the river around his thighs like an embrace, as though some water goddess below the surface, sighing at his arrival, was twining her green and blue arms around his legs, as though she meant to pull him down and get him to stay forever.

Shaking his head at this foolish notion, Ellis focused on echoing Jasper's motions as he bent to the bank where he used his bare fingers to pick up bits of paper wound among the reeds or tugged at a dead branch to get it to come loose to float down the river where he tossed it. He paid close attention to what Jasper deemed worthy of removing and worthy of leaving.

Any patch that Jasper touched became more beautiful than it had been, still rugged and natural, but groomed in a way that it became more of itself. Something guests would appreciate without noticing all the effort that had gone into making it that way.

While paper and any styrofoam went into the trash bags, grass was allowed to float down the river along with dead reeds and dry sticks, which tumbled away in the slight white foam made by a small group of boulders in the middle of the river.

Up ahead was the almost circular pond created by a bank of round river-rock set all the way across the river. Water poured through a slight gap in the stones to tumble down in the pond, which remained a solid blue. Which made Ellis wonder how deep the pond was to be so unaffected by the churn of water into it.

The sun grew hot overhead as they worked. Jasper stopped them often to take breaks and drink water from the plastic bottles. Sweat stuck almost all of Jasper's hair to his head as he stood there, thigh deep in water, smiling as the breeze stirred the hairs on his chest. The water was high enough and Jasper dipped low often enough that his jeans, all the way up to his hips, were black-blue, soaked through.

As Jasper was busy with work, Ellis had many moments to look, to admire. Jasper had a lovely shape, carved by muscle and bone and denseness. The curve of his water-darkened backside was all muscle, his hips a dense bunching as he bent and turned, thighs broadening when he crouched low, spanning into length as he straightened up.

In Wyoming Correctional, inmates like that threw their weight around, pressing Ellis against a wall or a bench much harder than he could ever be prepared for, thrusting into him for their own pleasure, pounding away as they watched for guards. Sometimes Ellis got to be the one doing the pounding, as he let it be known to most inmates that it was not to be a one-way street with him. Some inmates, well, that was a different story. They took what they wanted and to hell with what the other fellow wanted.

Ellis knew it would not be that way with Jasper. When Ellis had been suckling him, devouring him, Jasper's hands on Ellis' head had been tender, no matter how hard Ellis had tried to show that he wanted Jasper to push and push harder. That he wanted Jasper to make Ellis' head go down. Force it. Keep it there, like what he'd grown used to over the past two years.

He knew, deep in his heart, Jasper would be gentle, and he would probably resist all of Ellis' efforts to the contrary.

"You stuck?" asked Jasper as he turned to look at Ellis.

Jasper's jaw glinted with sweat in the sunlight. Lines of sweat trailed down his temples and onto his cheek, his throat. He had circles of sweat under his armpits, and he was soaked, now, up to his waist.

It was as if the waders and any protection they might offer had melted away, leaving Jasper to bathe in the river water. In the forge, Jasper was all fire and stone and iron, In the river, he was a live thing now, standing strong against the push of the river, the force of years and years of the river carving a place for itself in the tall green grasses of the high prairie.

Jasper could never be water, no matter how soaked he was.

But Ellis was water, and he allowed the water to push him toward Jasper now. Allowed the water to tug at his thighs as he snuggled up to Jasper and clasped Jasper's damp neck with equally damp fingers. Allowed the course and push and pull of the water around both of them to tug as though the river wanted them both to move along. To keep working.

Jasper was stone and shore and Ellis had washed up against him, on purpose of course, but it also felt as though when the sun had come up this morning, this was how it was going to turn out. It was as though the river had known all along.

“Hey now,” said Jasper.

He clasped Ellis’ upper arms that Ellis had flung around Jasper’s neck. And, not quite removing them, not just yet, Jasper let their mouths meet for a slow, quiet moment. Let their breaths mingle, warm against the cooler air rising from the river, the scent of weed and grass and mud and damp swirling around them.

“Later,” Jasper said. “There might be guests.”

Knowing now that the ranch meant a great deal more to Jasper than Ellis could have imagined upon first meeting him, he obligingly stepped back, trailing his fingers along Jasper’s arms as though he were waterweed detaching from river stone. Then he nodded, picked up his bucket, and gestured to Jasper with a question as to where they might work next.

“Over here,” said Jasper, his voice shaky in its attempt to be firm. “Under these clumps of willow. There are some dead branches, but not many. We’ll have it fixed up in no time.”

In no time in blacksmith-speak was actually the rest of the afternoon, and it wasn’t until the sun was dipping low behind the trees, creating lacy shadows across the river, that Jasper called a halt.

“Reckon that’ll do for now,” Jasper said. “How about some dinner?”

“Good,” said Ellis, smiling at the way his voice sounded strong to his ears, and the way Jasper looked at him, a pleased light in his eyes.

They carried the buckets and trash bags back to the workshop, emptied them, rinsed them out. Recycled the plastic water bottles. After they’d disrobed from their waders and hung them up, Ellis didn’t even try not to stare.

Jasper's jeans were wet through, all the way down to his knees. It occurred to Ellis that Jasper had given him the waders meant for deep river and had worn the hip waders, which were meant for shallow water. That was like him. As was the curve of his blush as he caught Ellis looking hard at his backside, at the way Jasper's jeans clung to his thighs, his hips.

"Maybe we'll take baths before dinner," said Jasper. "I know I smell like river water."

Ellis inhaled deep, eyes closing as he thought how Jasper would smell, close up, skin cool from the river, how his cock would be cold in Ellis' mouth, warming up, slowly, then quickly. How Ellis could warm the rest of Jasper with his hands—

"Hey."

Ellis opened his eyes.

"What were you thinking about?"

With careful eyes, Ellis looked at Jasper. Jasper, somehow, always seemed to know what Ellis was thinking, could interpret gestures and the soft sounds out of his mouth, the half words. The words that were only consonants or vowels.

Jasper had acquired Ellis-speak almost by osmosis and didn't seem to think it was a big deal, never made much of it. Only now, he was asking as if he didn't know. As if he'd not caught Ellis looking where he'd been looking, at the weight of damp jeans pressing on the hump of Jasper's cock as if it meant to push it down, back into place, only it couldn't.

"You." Ellis moved forward and placed his hand to cup the curve of Jasper's cock. He didn't squeeze or press the issue. Just laid his hand there to leave a message. To see what message might come back.

In Wyoming Correctional, done right, the gesture was an invitation. Nothing forced. Something mutual. Here, though, Jasper might take it as too forward, despite what had already passed between them.

"Me?" asked Jasper, pointing to himself.

In Jasper's eyes, Ellis could see Jasper already knew the answer to his own question. He wasn't new. Wasn't a virgin. Wasn't timid. It might be he wanted to be sure of Ellis before taking him to bed, so Ellis needed to make sure Jasper knew the answer, to everything, was yes.

Moving even closer, Ellis laid his palm on Jasper's chest. Beneath the button-down shirt, the cotton thin, the pattern pale from years of wear, beat Jasper's steady heart.

Around them, the flinty-fire smell of the forge lifted in the faint breeze coming through the open double doors. Ghosts of coals and flakes of ash. The grease of the bending vice, the oil on the tools hanging along the walls. If nothing would ever happen between them, now or ever, Ellis knew he would remember this scent, the thick feel of industry all round them.

He rose on his toes and kissed Jasper, whose mouth opened, a curve of plush lower lip. Heard the sigh that passed between them. Tasted the sweet taste of river water. Felt the warmth of energy the connection of their bodies created.

"C'mon now, not here."

Jasper clasped both of Ellis' hands between his, gentle and firm, tucked them beneath his chin. Looked at Ellis with those deep blue eyes, so full of everything Jasper was feeling.

"Hard," said Ellis.

"Yes, that's true," said Jasper, a small curve to his mouth.

Ellis shook his head.

"What?"

Drawing back, Ellis pulled one of Jasper's hands to his crotch, pressed Jasper's palm against his hardness.

"Rough. Now."

"Oh," said Jasper, his face relaxing as understanding seemed to sweep over him. "I get it. But I could never be rough with you. Not you."

In tandem with these words, Jasper took his hand from Ellis' crotch and slipped it up to Ellis' belly. From there, his

fingers tucked below the waistband of Ellis' jeans. Slipped lower to the hard jut of Ellis' hipbone. Traced a low line, following a curve, barely touching the tip of Ellis' erection.

Not shy. Definitely not shy. More, careful. Making Ellis feel something flow through him, the same as had happened when Jasper had patched Ellis up after Phil's visit. Like Ellis was somebody Jasper cared about. Liked a lot, maybe.

Whatever other feelings were behind the gesture fluttered away like dragonflies over calm water. Ellis couldn't grab them. He could only wait to see if they would come back.

"Couch?" asked Ellis, going for broke. If he didn't have Jasper's hands on him inside of five minutes, he was going to have to take himself out and pleasure himself, then and there, right in front of Jasper, and hang whoever else happened to be watching.

Jasper nodded, and his mouth moved to form the word *Okay*, only no sound came out.

Without waiting for Jasper to change his mind, Ellis led them both to the back door of the cabin and inside to the couch, holding onto Jasper's hand the whole while.

Ellis sprawled on the couch and pulled Jasper to him, not bothering to close the curtains, letting the slanting sun spread over them like a warm, gold blanket.

And though Jasper's hands fumbled with the button and zipper on Ellis' jeans, he soon had Ellis' cock in his hand. He had his mouth on Ellis' neck, pressing gentle kisses that made Ellis shiver as though it were night, as though it was cold.

Jasper's knee on the couch splayed Ellis' thighs apart as Jasper stroked him, strong, calloused hand gentle and warm. Jasper's other hand was curved around Ellis' shoulder, and Ellis realized Jasper was holding him, cradling him as he kissed the slope of muscle beneath Ellis' ear, leaving tender murmurings behind, a lace of damp traces of his tongue. And that Jasper was shaking the whole while, as if he were the one about to come, though Ellis was the one stroking himself.

It did not take long, no, not long. He'd been hard, aching for Jasper all afternoon, and when Jasper's thumb slipped up in a rough way, the edge of a callous just catching the lip of the head of Ellis' cock, he came, spilling over Jasper's knuckles, breathing into Jasper's shirt, the neck of which had fallen open before him.

With a sigh, Ellis tipped his head back and soaked it all in. Jasper's warmth, his weight, steady above Ellis.

Jasper had been gentle, and the ravaging Ellis had wanted had not come. Instead, he was ravaged on the inside, mind whirling as it tried to store every touch of Jasper's tongue. Every sweep of Jasper's hand on his cock. The gentle way Jasper sank to the couch and gathered Ellis to him as though Ellis had been lost and Jasper had just found him. That was the way it felt. That was the way it was, at least to Ellis.

"Okay?" asked Jasper with a low, warm whisper in Ellis' ear.

Ellis nodded. The words were gone again, but they'd be back just as soon as he could catch his breath.

JASPER

*A*s Ellis did the dinner dishes, swept the kitchen floor, the sounds wafted over Jasper as he sat at the kitchen table. Generally those kinds of sounds, rhythmic, simple, tended to soothe him. But with Sue Mitchell's letter in his hands and a pad of paper and a pencil with a well-chewed end in front of him, he couldn't think of a single word to write that would convey how her letter had made him feel.

Words and he were not the best of friends at the best of times, though he'd been able to answer the handful of other letters of thanks he'd received in the past. This time, though, Sue had reflected back to him what he put into every demo he did. The pleasure of industry. The panacea work could bring. How the old skills should be valued right along with all the new skills.

Jasper could sign into Netflix easy as you please. He could also make a handful of square-topped nails from a single pole of iron. He could fix a wagon wheel with his hands and his hammer. He also knew how to install security software on his laptop to keep it from getting buggy. But he could not figure the words to answer this letter.

Ellis slipped into the chair opposite him, dusting off his hands to show he was done with chores for the evening.

Jasper lifted his head from his hands. He knew his dark hair was standing straight up, and maybe this might have been an opportunity for Ellis to laugh at him, for he surely looked comical. But all he saw in Ellis' eyes was the question: *What?*

“I’m trying to write this letter to Sue,” said Jasper. He toyed with the pencil, tried to spin the pad of paper around, only it knocked into the salt and pepper and came to a halt. “She was so nice. Got everything I always do with those demos. I can write letters, normally. But not this one.”

Here.

Ellis gestured Jasper should hand everything over, and Jasper did with a hard sigh because he had to admit defeat.

As Ellis took the letter, the pad of paper, and the pencil, he shrugged and shook his head at Jasper. *It doesn’t matter. I can take care of this.*

“Oh, right.” Jasper smiled and sat back. “English teacher.”

He watched as Ellis wrote, the cursive long and sloped, letters and words and sentences coming from the short stub of a pencil as smoothly and easily as though they’d been preordained since the beginning of time. Some folks knew how to write and that was all there was to it.

When Ellis was done, he handed the tablet back to Jasper.

The letter began:

Dear Frontier Ma, Frontier Girls, Cowgirl Jessie, and Ken,

The end of the letter said:

Warmest Regards,

The Blacksmith and his Foolish Apprentice

In between the greeting and the closing salutation were two neat paragraphs.

The first paragraph exactly expressed what Jasper had been feeling. How much he’d enjoyed this particular demo. How he appreciated that Sue understood what he was trying to show them. Not just how to make an iron heart out of a horseshoe nail, but how even small works, ordinary tasks, could have meaning and purpose.

The second paragraph indicated he would see to it that the pony ride-slash-picnic would be arranged as soon as he could

manage it, and that the ranch would provide everything, and that Sue was not to think of the cost.

All the prose was fluid but to the point. Jasper's heart was on that page, all done through the power of Ellis' fingers.

"Sweet river of Eden." Jasper shook his head at the pad of paper, then looked at Ellis. "You, kiddo, have missed your calling."

It was a compliment, to be sure, but it was the wrong thing to say, only he didn't realize this till the words left his mouth. Till the reflection of those words cast Ellis' grey eyes into shadow, and all the regret, the two years in prison, his mother's illness, the ravage that was currently his life, all of this was reflected in the down-tilt of those eyes, the unhappy turn of his mouth.

Jasper's heart fell into his gut.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean it like that. Maybe you made a wrong turn, sure. But that doesn't mean you can't make a different turn now. A better turn."

Ellis looked out the window where there was only darkness and nodded. *Sure*, his nod said, but there was doubt in the nod and the gesture, as if Ellis had no doubt the fates were against him.

Wanting to comfort, only not knowing how, Jasper stood up and focused his mind on practical matters.

"I'll type this up and print it out. We can take it to the post office tomorrow and maybe hit the laundromat? I'm just about out of clean socks. Maybe you are too. Then we can take in a burger at the Rail Car, too, if you'd like."

Maybe Ellis knew Jasper was trying to change the direction of Ellis' emotions, but though he looked at Jasper, it was with some effort.

Rail Car?

"It's the little touristy restaurant made of two abandoned boxcars. Right along the tracks in Farthing. They have a coffee

shop that's open in the mornings. They have good burgers. Not as good as mine, of course, but decent.”

Ellis nodded.

“I'll just type this up, and then maybe we can watch something on my laptop.”

Ellis raised his eyebrows, and Jasper felt desperate to get them beyond this point where he'd reminded Ellis of his past so hard that Ellis had retreated into non-vocalization again.

“I have Netflix. My laptop screen isn't as huge as a smart TV, but we can watch it together if we both sit on the couch.”

Ellis nodded again, and maybe he was more relaxed this time, which was encouraging.

Jasper set everything up, taking one of the kitchen chairs, putting a pillow on it so he could put his feet up and prop the laptop on his lap and type. It didn't take long to finish, though it was distracting to feel Ellis on the couch at his side silently watching.

When he was done, Jasper sent the letter to his small but trusty printer on the edge of the kitchen counter. Then he opened Netflix and scrolled through till Ellis saw something he wanted.

“Are you pointing at *Schitt's Creek* or *Ancient Aliens*?” he asked.

Without actually touching the laptop's screen, Ellis wagged his finger over the picture of *Schitt's Creek*.

With a grunt of pleasure, Jasper started it up at Episode One, figuring Ellis had missed out on the whole thing. Only Ellis actually tapped the screen this time and held up three fingers.

“Oh, you're on Season Three?” Jasper's eyebrows flew up. “Saw some of it before?”

“Prison favorite,” said Ellis. His tone was clipped, but he enunciated as clearly as anything.

“Ah, I see.” Smiling, Jasper scrolled to Season Three, started it on Episode One, and leaned back against the couch, preparing himself for sophisticated hilarity.

What he'd not been prepared for was the slow slither-slide of Ellis' body coming closer and closer to him on the couch. Jasper never had anybody over to watch TV or movies with, but he was pretty sure that if he had, they'd each have their spot on the couch and a good two feet between them.

Ellis operated by his own rules, obviously, and scooted close and closer still, till he was hip to hip with Jasper. Then he scooted down until his head was resting on Jasper's chest, his hand on the line of Jasper's leather belt.

“Can you see?” asked Jasper, ignoring the thumping of his heart. He checked Ellis' line of sight, then adjusted the angle of his laptop. “There. Better?”

Ellis nodded. Jasper could feel that nod across his belly and all the way down his spine. Imagined he could feel Ellis' breath across the zipper of his jeans. And could definitely feel the pulse of blood just below his skin.

On the screen, Johnny was getting agitated over territorial rights of the desk in Bob's Garage. Off screen, Ellis' hand, casually, as if by accident, curved around Jasper's belt buckle. One finger traced the outline of the belt, then the prong that went through the hole. Then the belt loop. Then back to the buckle again.

As if Jasper's lack of response was taken for consent, Ellis began undoing Jasper's belt buckle, the prong, the flap, all of it. Drawing it open before those skilled fingers undid the button of Jasper's blue jeans. The belt was a heavy weight as it landed against his hip when Ellis pushed it aside.

Jasper's stomach dipped low, concave, almost, as Ellis slid down Jasper's zipper, slowly and in perfect silence, as though he didn't want to disturb Jasper's enjoyment of the show.

Swallowing hard, Jasper gripped the edge of the laptop. If he lost that grip and the laptop crashed to the ground at any point in the evening, he was already backed up to the cloud, so

it wouldn't matter. Nothing to be upset about. Though he wasn't quite sure what was about to happen, preparing ahead of time was always the smart thing to do.

Ellis' cheek pressed against Jasper's belly. Ellis' hand pushed against and beneath the elastic of Jasper's boxer briefs. His hand was warm on Jasper's cock, the pressure faint, an almost lovely torture.

A little lightheaded, eyes unfocused, his mind certainly not thinking about what was currently playing on his laptop, Jasper looked down, the palm of his hand cupping around the back of Ellis' head.

Only what he'd presumed would be a quick blow job, which he would reciprocate, turned into something else. Ellis lowered his head, pushed up Jasper's shirt, and settled into the curve below Jasper's belly button.

The tip of Ellis' tongue touched Jasper's cock, a small warm shock, then Ellis began to suckle. Like he'd done before. Slowly sucking on Jasper's cock, licking the top, tonguing it against the inside of his own cheek. Watching *Schitt's Creek* while he lazily sucked, popping his mouth on Jasper's cock, sucking hard again. Suckling, as though Jasper's cock was a comfort to him, a kind of panacea to all the crap his life had thrown at him.

As before, the slight pressure, the tender suction inside Ellis' mouth, pulled Jasper's cock tight, but was never enough to send him over the edge. Instead, constant tremblings built up in Jasper's belly, tingles down his spine, the curling together of his balls between his thighs.

With one hand, the back of his palm against Jasper's belly, Ellis held onto Jasper's cock. The fingers of his other hand were inside of the open zipper of Jasper's jeans, twined in Jasper's dark pubic hair, clutching it.

Ellis never undid Jasper's clothing far enough for Jasper to feel Ellis' breath across his skin, but he felt the tug of Ellis' fingers in his pubic hair, the warm weight of Ellis' head, the softness of his cheek, the slow, slow, slow pull of Ellis' mouth, the gentle pad of his tongue along the underside. The moisture

that gathered at the tip. The ribbon of pleasure that kept advancing toward him but was so far off that he would never come.

When Ellis looked up at him, as if he meant to check on Jasper's state, those silver-grey eyes were half-closed, as if sucking on Jasper's cock this way was so soothing that Ellis was rocking himself to sleep with it.

Ellis might actually fall asleep with Jasper's cock in his mouth, and the thought of it, that even in sleep Ellis' mouth would still be on him, brought the pleasure closer. It was far away, like a slow-moving tide on a distant seashore. But as Ellis returned to suckling, slowly wrapping his tongue around the head, or licking the shaft, sleepy and content, the pleasure came closer like a wave coming in as the moon rose.

When Jasper did come in hard, spine-rocking pulses, the suction of Ellis' mouth never got any harder. He swallowed Jasper's seed as casually as he might swallow a drink of warm milk at bedtime, and this thought, this idea, this image, Ellis' mouth taking him down, rocked his hips and made him grunt as he pulsed into the warm cave, Ellis' tongue a gentle pad beneath his cock.

When Jasper was spent, his once-taut cock remained in Ellis' mouth as Ellis favored it with gentle attention, the gentlest, as if he knew Jasper was tender and couldn't take much more.

There was a tumble in Jasper's belly telling him that yes, maybe he could go again, given enough time. He was way past the days when ten minutes was a respectable measurement between one orgasm and the next. But Ellis did not seem to care about this, wasn't counting out the seconds till Jasper might come again. But rather seemed content to have Jasper pull Ellis' hair out of his eyes so he could continue to watch *Schitt's Creek* and move his tongue against the head of Jasper's cock.

Jasper might have fallen asleep and missed an entire chunk of episodes, but that was okay, he'd seen them all already. This was his second time through, so when he opened his eyes, he

knew exactly what was happening on-screen. Except for the fact that Ellis was gone, he might have lazed there and forgone his nightly bath, and determined the couch was an appropriate place to sleep.

His belly missed the weight of Ellis' head. His zipper was done up, his cock tucked neatly away, his belt tidy in the loops of his jeans. Looking around, he thought he could see the gleam of his keys in the bowl beside the easy chair. The kitchen light was off. Where was Ellis?

Getting up, Jasper shut the laptop on a funny scene where Alexis and David were driving and arguing and, really, underneath it all, bonding as siblings. He strode across to the back door. Ellis' work boots were gone, and the back door was ajar.

Jasper slipped on his boots and went outside. The auto-lights came on, flooding the darkness between the buildings with brightness. The light circled out to the place on the gravel driveway where he parked the truck. Which was still there.

The auto-light above the flagstone steps to the front door was out, so there wasn't much light in the front of the cabin. But there was enough to see tracks in the short grass where the dew had been kicked up by boot heels. Then the tracks disappeared into the small dirt path that led to the river.

Maybe the tracks were from earlier, when he and Ellis had come back to put their tools away, but he didn't think so. The flakes of moisture that glinted in the porch light were too newly made.

It was then he heard a splash from not too far away and, wondering if Ellis had decided to keep working, Jasper followed that sound. Followed the path to the river, and then heard the sound again, lower this time, more relaxed. It was coming from the pond.

Either Ellis was at the pond fooling around, or a mountain lion had come down from the range to take a drink. It wasn't that unusual, though at this time of year there was plenty of water for wild animals in the mountains, so they didn't usually come down this far.

His measured tread along the path echoed in his ears till he got to the pond. The light from the back door could barely reach this far, but it was enough to show Jasper what was going on. There was a pair of work boots next to the pond, on top of which was a neatly folded pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and white boxer briefs. In the pond, breaking the inky dark surface of the water, was a streak of white skin, curving like a white seal on the ocean waves.

It was Ellis. He was skinny dipping. He didn't know about wild animals or mountain lions, obviously, or even about the moose who liked to find their own private territory and who might consider the pond in Horse Creek a pleasant place to dally. Moose could be dangerous, as could mountain lions or bobcats. Or other animals who would consider Ellis a tasty snack.

He opened his mouth to bellow for Ellis to get the hell out of the water. But then the curve of Ellis' body shimmered beneath the surface of the water, white against ribbons of black water. Up Ellis came, swimming to the bank, his skin pale in the faint light, almost glowing. His wet hair trailing across his face. Eyes reflecting the stars.

“Swim.”

Jasper blinked. He didn't rightly know what time it was, but it wasn't that late, as the moon was just resting, a curved lemon-traced sickle, over the ragged shoulders of Iron Mountain.

There was nobody around. Nobody would see. With the two of them making enough noise to keep wild animals startled and away, they'd probably be pretty safe. Besides, he would wrestle a mountain lion if it dared attack Ellis.

He'd not been swimming in ages, didn't even own a bathing suit, but what did that matter, when Ellis made a bright shape in the night that drew Jasper to him.

Tracing his lower lip with his tongue, already imagining the taste of Ellis' skin flavored with fresh, bright river water, Jasper unlaced his loosely tied work boots, shucked his clothes, and sat on the bank.

The grass, so newly tidied by him and Ellis together, was cool and damp on his backside, tickling the undersides of his bare thighs. Coyly twisting its way into places it ought not to go.

Ellis swam over to Jasper and tugged on his knees till Jasper's feet were in the water. The pond was on the deep side, at least on this side of the bank. On the other side, it was only four feet, not appropriate for diving.

To keep Ellis from hurting himself, Jasper would take the time to explain this, and all the other areas of the ranch where safety was a factor. But for now, he tipped his chin down and smiled and let himself be tugged until Ellis was between his thighs, elbows resting on Jasper's knees. Felt the swipe of Ellis' tongue along the inside of his thigh, not far enough to reach his cock, but close enough to make him shiver.

“In.”

“Yes,” said Jasper.

He slithered into the water, gasping as it came up to his chin. Smiling as Ellis pressed himself close, their bodies were damp against each other, mostly submerged. Ellis' arms came up around Jasper's neck, and Jasper, paddling to keep them both afloat, kissed Ellis' damp mouth and smiled.

Water dripped into Jasper's eyes. This, this moment with Ellis, the round curve of the pond embracing them with watery arms, was his bath. Ellis' bath. Them together.

Why had he not thought to do this before? The bathtub in the cabin was just about big enough for two men, provided one of those men was snuggled between the other one's thighs. The idea of this delighted him into laughing out loud, as if he couldn't care less that they might disturb the sleep of the guests in the cabins above the river. Or that Leland might get word of what they were doing and come out and scold them.

Nobody was coming. They had the night, the water, and the black velvet sky, poked through with stars, all to themselves.

“Suck your cock?” offered Ellis, kissing Jasper with a river-water wet mouth. “Lick you?”

Beneath the water, Jasper’s cock twitched against Ellis’ thigh.

“In a minute I’ll suck yours,” said Jasper, kissing Ellis back. “But on the bank, not underwater. I’m not Aquaman.”

“Aquaman,” said Ellis, smiling, his teeth white above the surface of the dark water. His grey eyes, laced with silver from the stars, were happy, and his body, buoyed up by the water, was relaxed and supple.

“Race you.”

Jasper let go and dove into the water, spiraling through Ellis’ thighs, coming up for air on the other side of him. Ellis’ laugh was bright in the stillness, and a moment later, Ellis dove too, and came up at Jasper’s side.

Ellis’ hair dripped in his eyes. His smile was wide. He was beautiful in the slender moonlight, and had he been a fey and dangerous selkie intent on drowning Jasper in his arms, Jasper would have willingly gone with him.

They swam together in the quiet, cool air, their arms, their bodies, barely making any waves. When they turned around and returned to the bank, Jasper drew Ellis up onto the grass, kissed him once, dripping onto his shoulders, his skin. Then he snuggled down, spread Ellis’ cool-skinned thighs apart with his fingers, and took him into his mouth.

ELLIS

Emboldened to waken in Jasper's bed, curled up against Jasper's belly like a small, furry, burrowing animal, Ellis slithered down and was about to take Jasper's cock in his mouth. It occurred to him then that Jasper might not like this to happen without some warning. He might take it as too aggressive, almost like a rape.

In Wyoming Correctional, this had happened to Ellis a time or two from one of his cellmates, all of them coming and going through an imaginary revolving door, it seemed. He would wake up with his cock in someone's mouth. A pleasure, which might have been nice, was ruined by the abruptness of it, the lack of barriers startling Ellis' cock into going soft. Then the cell mate would be pissed and rough Ellis up, and stomp around till his dignity, broken at having another man's soft cock in his mouth, was appeased.

"Jasper."

Jasper blinked, adorably sleepy, his dark hair sticking up at odd angles from being barely dried off before they went up the stairs to bed together. As Jasper rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with a knuckle, he looked down at Ellis, who'd dragged some of the bedclothes with him. Ellis felt like he was at the end of a short, fluffy tunnel, down which Jasper was looking, as if Ellis might be stuck and need rescuing.

"Hmrrrrrr?" asked Jasper.

"Suck your cock," said Ellis. He traced the front of Jasper's boxer briefs with his fingers, giving Jasper a chance

to say no.

“Mmmmm.” Jasper nodded and then swallowed and took hold of Ellis’ fingers to drag them to the waist of his boxer briefs, indicating with the small gesture that Jasper was fully on board with having his cock sucked in lieu of a wake-up call.

Ellis took his time, lavishing Jasper’s body with sweet kisses and sucks, long licks up and down his shaft. Whispered words against the silky skin, unfiltered, direct from his heart. Jasper’s thighs trembled as he came, his head tossed back, throat working as Ellis soothed him with his mouth. Then Jasper pulled Ellis up into his arms and kissed him, tasting of salt, of warmth.

“Late start?” suggested Ellis.

“Mmmmm,” said Jasper, kissing Ellis’ forehead, cupping the back of Ellis’ head with gentle fingers. Then Jasper slunk down in the bed, his dark hair scratchy against Ellis’ belly, and tendered Ellis’ cock into tumescence, and then into softness, swallowing with a kiss and a sigh.

Their late start finally broke when Jasper rose from the rumpled bed, tousled Ellis’ hair, and coughed into his hand, looking about the room, the clothes a pile on the floor.

“Laundry today, I think,” he said.

Ellis smiled at Jasper’s constant focus on the practical. Which might, if he considered the matter, be Jasper’s way of creating space around him when he was overwhelmed with feeling. That was fine. Ellis could give him some space.

Ellis got up and put on his river-scented clothes, and pattered barefooted down to the kitchen where he assembled a pot of coffee in the metal percolator, and waited for it to brew while he considered their options.

It was already 9:30, way past Jasper’s usual time to get going on his day. He was a task-oriented man, which was fine by Ellis. As long as Ellis got to be one of those tasks, he was well contented.

Their late breakfast meant that it was going on eleven o'clock by the time they got the laundry out to the truck, and Jasper had found his list of things that needed repairing. Checked money in his wallet. Called Leland to let him know they were on errands, and did Leland need anything?

Ellis waited in the passenger seat, the window already rolled down, his elbow propped. He couldn't hear what Leland said in response, but Jasper nodded, started the truck's engine, and wheeled the truck along the road, out of the ranch's gate, and into town.

Their first stop was Latham Laundromat, on the corner of Latham and Second Street. Jasper left, telling Ellis to stay put. Ellis obligingly sat and watched their three loads go round and round in the sudsy water as it banged against the glass fronts of each machine.

Jasper came back within ten minutes with two coffees from the Rail Car, which had a little coffee bar that was available in the mornings before the restaurant fully opened up for lunch.

"Thought you might like something caramel flavored," said Jasper as he handed the paper cup in its cardboard sleeve to Ellis. "If not, I can fetch you something else?"

The last thing Ellis wanted was for Jasper to wait on him hand and foot. He accepted the cup gratefully and patted the hard plastic seat beside him. And sighed with pleasure as Jasper sat next to him, their shoulders brushing as they drank their coffees.

When the wash was done, they switched the piles to dryers, and finished their coffees in the low soap-smelling din all around them. When the dry cycle was fully finished, Jasper piled it into bags and had Ellis help him secure everything in the back of the truck.

Ellis had a feeling that rather than fold the clothes at the laundromat, Jasper wanted to be done with town. Wanted to be back at the ranch. At the cabin. With Ellis.

That could have been his imagination, or maybe it wasn't, as when they walked down the street to the hardware store, Jasper's hand was at the small of Ellis' back, a small, sweet warm pressure, as if he wanted to make sure of Ellis. To measure the distance between them, and to close the gap if the distance was too far.

Jasper pulled open the door to the hardware store, the bell above the door tinkling.

"Hardware?" asked Ellis as he went in, feeling Jasper close behind.

The smell of the hardware store swamped up at him. It was a mix of oils and glue residue, and the special, slightly exciting smell of new paint being mixed. Long rows of bins of screws, and nails, and plastic boxes of sharp-edged blades twinkled like low, dim stars.

The old wooden floor beneath Ellis' work boots creaked, and the fan above twirled the air in a lazy way. It was a Jasper kind of place, for sure, and Ellis hid his smile as Jasper sighed, his shoulders relaxing.

"I need to fix the auto-light on the front porch," said Jasper as he led Ellis into the rabbit warren of shelves, scanning.

Electronics were in the back, even Ellis could see that. Also, the signs indicated that the aisle they were on clearly held rope and tar and buckets. Not anything to do with auto-lights. But maybe, just maybe, Jasper enjoyed the stroll amongst the cloisters of items he owned, or wanted, or had bought and certainly knew how to use. His blunt-edged fingers traced the box that held a knife blade sharpener, and as an extra bonus, a scissors sharpener.

Perhaps feeling Ellis' eyes upon him, Jasper turned to look at Ellis, mouth trying not to smile, a little chagrined.

"I already have both of these," he said. "But this is new."

"You want it?" asked Ellis. "Get it."

"Don't mind if I do," said Jasper and, with a great deal of pleasure, he plucked the box from the shelf and tucked it under his arm.

They made their way to the back of the store where electronics and lighting had been located all along.

At the counter, waiting with impatient taps of his fingers on the glass, was a man who seemed to know Jasper, for his narrow blue eyes focused on them as they came close and his chin went up.

“Nash,” said the man. He didn’t tip his baseball cap at Jasper as much as he adjusted it with an aggressive tug.

“Piggot,” said Jasper. Not tugging anything at Piggot, aggressively or otherwise, Jasper went to the other end of the counter to wait his turn.

Ellis stayed close to Jasper, not understanding the sudden tense line of Jasper’s shoulders or the way he squared his feet, turned directly at Piggot as though he meant to mark where the other man was at all times.

“Jasper,” said the clerk as he came out of the back. He was smiling with pleasure, and though Piggot had been there first, and was, perhaps, waiting on something already promised to him, the clerk came over to Jasper and Ellis. “How you been? And who’s this with you?”

“Doin’ fine, Vernon,” said Jasper. He pointed a thumb at Ellis. “This here’s Ellis Bowman. He’s my new apprentice and all-round helper up at the ranch. Ellis, this is Vernon Wainwright.” At Ellis’ raised eyebrows at the name, Jasper nodded. “He’s a cousin of Bill’s. Owns this store.”

“Sure do,” said Vernon, brightly. “There’s been a store on this spot owned by a Wainwright since I can remember. Think it started as a general store, back in the day. Back when general stores sold a bit of everything from groceries to plowshares.”

The smile Vernon gave Ellis through his bifocals was friendly, as if he truly enjoyed meeting one of Jasper’s friends. Vernon wore a sharp-collared button-down shirt beneath his red and white striped apron, and it wasn’t hard to imagine him putting it on in the morning, checking the line of his shirt placket in a precise manner. The guy might work in a

hardware store, but he was as snappily dressed as any office worker.

Ellis held out his hand and swallowed, hoping he could find words of greeting.

“Lo,” he said, just managing that.

“Hello,” said Vernon, shaking Ellis’ hand. “What can I do you boys today?”

“I was here first,” said Piggot, moving closer. “You went into the back to get my flood lights I ordered.”

“So I did, Eddie,” said Vernon, raising his hands as though admitting defeat. “They’ve not arrived yet. I told you I would call you when they came in. Special orders don’t happen in a day.”

“Was picking up rubber sink liners for the bar, anyhow, so I thought I’d check,” said Eddie in a tone that suggested the delay was entirely Vernon’s fault and nothing to do with delivery systems. His side eye at Jasper and Ellis seemed to indicate he’d be willing to blame Jasper, if he could only figure out how.

“I need some parts to fix my auto-light,” said Jasper, as calmly as if Eddie wasn’t even there. “I think the connector’s gone bad rather than the bulb because I changed the bulb at the beginning of the season as usual.”

“You got the WestTek, right?” asked Vernon. “Good brand.” He shook his head. “They updated their models, and we don’t have spare parts for the kind you got. Better buy all new, take advantage of the new technology.”

“New lights ain’t going to amount to a squirt of piss on that sissy ranch of Bill’s.”

Jasper turned his head to look at Eddie, and so did Vernon. Jasper took a hard step forward, the hand that rested on the box of sharpeners curling into a fist.

Ellis’ eyes grew wide at the thought of Jasper getting into a fight. But what man wouldn’t want to take Eddie down a peg after a comment like that?

Eddie Piggot had a look about him that told Ellis what he needed to know. It was the kind of read he'd learned to do in prison. Jasper had asked him to re-learn this particular skill, and Ellis planned on doing just that. But right now, the read told him Eddie was pissed and in a flash-paper state that might go off at any moment.

“You ought not say that about the ranch,” said Jasper. “It’s a good place. Employs good people. Gives guests a nice vacation.”

“It’s nothing but a fake cow farm with fat, spoiled horses,” said Eddie, almost spitting. He was already red in the face and had shoved his baseball cap back from his forehead in preparation for whatever trouble might come his way or that he could cause. “Fake! And it’s a disgrace to all the real ranches around here, real ranches who don’t get fancy treatment from the BLM. Real ranches need that land you’re sitting on for grazing.”

“Hey now,” said Vernon. “Wainwrights have owned that land since before I was born. Since forever. They’ve a right to do as they please. And what’s between them and the BLM is just that. Between them.”

“If cattle grazed freely there,” said Jasper with a low growl, his words measured as if he was doing his best to keep his patience. “They would scalp the land dry. Sure there’s a river, but not enough to support herds of cattle. We have less than 100 head and we feed and water them. Don’t expect them to survive on land which is no good for free grazing.”

A lot of this went over Ellis’ head, and besides, he was focusing on the distance currently closing between Jasper and Eddie. Neither man seemed to realize they were taking steps toward each other for a rough standoff that would send the lights and electronic department into a disarray. Not to mention Jasper might get hurt.

Ellis moved his whole body between Jasper and Eddie, and felt Jasper thump behind him like an animal trying to break through a hastily erected gate.

“Hey,” said Jasper, bellowing.

“Get out of the way, kid,” said Eddie, giving Ellis’ chest a hard shove with the palm of his hand. As if Ellis wasn’t a threat to him, could never be a threat because he was, in Eddie’s eyes, just a kid.

Eddie didn’t know, of course, that Ellis could make a shiv out of a toothbrush. Knew how to break a man’s fingers with just a twist of his wrist. Knew how a pillowcase full of soap ends made a good blunt instrument. Knew how to trip a man to make him fall on his face and break teeth.

Ellis’ mind was just in the middle of how to set up a good trip to the floor for Eddie when Jasper pulled Ellis back and shoved him down one of the aisles.

“That’s enough of that bullshit,” said Jasper. “Vernon, I’ll come back for that new light for the porch when your place doesn’t have so much vermin.”

“Fuck you,” said Eddie, shrill, pointing. “Fuck you and your stupid ranch.”

“That’s enough Eddie,” Ellis could hear Vernon’s calm voice saying. “Get out now. I’ll call you when your flood lights come in.”

By the time Ellis might have been able to hear Eddie’s reply, Jasper had slammed the box of sharpeners back on the shelf where it had come from, and escorted Ellis out of the store.

His hand was pretty tight on Ellis’ upper arm, but was firm rather than painful. With a small jerk of his wrist Jasper opened the front door, almost breaking the bell off its perch as he put his hand in the small of Ellis’ back and pushed him out to the sidewalk.

Ellis whirled to look at Jasper, whose eyes were sparking, mouth drawn in a firm line. Was he in trouble? Or was Jasper so furious with him for interfering in a stupid fight that he was going to want to be rid of him?

“Mad?”

“No, I’m mad at Eddie Piggot.” Jasper balled his fists and then let them go. “And hell yes, I’m mad at you. What on

earth were you thinking getting between me and Eddie like that? He could have hurt you.”

“Hurt *him*,” said Ellis rather forcefully, looking Jasper up and down.

Jasper might prefer to forget where Ellis had come from, but perhaps he didn’t know everything Ellis had learned there. While Ellis didn’t want to give Jasper a complete list of those skills, perhaps a reminder was in order.

He placed his palm gently in the center of Jasper’s chest, though not for a minute did he want to push Jasper away. He took a deep, slow breath to relax his throat. Took another, and said, “I won’t let him hurt you.”

Jasper’s eyebrows flew up in his forehead, mouth dropping open. Then his shoulders relaxed into their normal position, and as he looked at Ellis, he shook his head. “You were worried about me and I was worried about you.”

Ellis nodded.

“I’m not used to that, I guess,” said Jasper. “Being the damsel in distress.”

He was trying to make a joke out of it when Ellis did not feel like laughing, not at all. He pointed his finger at Jasper and tapped him on the breastbone.

“Not. A. Damsel.”

“No, and neither are you,” said Jasper. “But just stay away from Eddie Piggot. He’s an asshat who runs a skank bar.”

Now it was Ellis’ turn to feel his eyebrows go up in his forehead. He’d never heard Jasper use so many curse words in a single day, which meant he was worked up about the whole thing. Which meant it was Ellis’ duty, and his pleasure, to distract Jasper from his woes.

Eddie Piggot came out of the hardware store, banging the door open to storm past them as he marched down the street. Ellis could see the battered vertical neon sign that read *The Rusty Nail*. It was a bar he never intended to visit, and he could imagine Jasper felt the same.

Ellis patted his belly.

“Hungry now.”

“Yeah, I could do with something to eat.” Jasper’s eyes followed Eddie’s retreating form almost unwillingly. Like he didn’t want to admit how much the encounter bothered him. “Burgers at the Rail Car suit you?”

Yes.

Eating out would distract Jasper and allow him time to settle. As for Ellis, it would be the first time he’d eaten at a real restaurant in two years.

JASPER

Jasper's cell phone rang just as they arrived back in front of the cabin, but by the time he pulled out his phone, the call was over. With his hand on the wheel, Ellis close at his side, Jasper looked at the text message from Leland. The message, translated badly by the voice messaging system, said:

Shoe tree hors. Art doon. Clay to delve. Tear's hay coming the morrow, so come by, bring Trellis. Okay? Bye.

Leland knew technology plenty well, and could have simply sent a text that would have been less garbled. But Jasper understood the message well enough.

Three horses needed shoeing that afternoon, and Clay was going to bring them by. Then on Saturday, there was a hay delivery that Leland needed Jasper's muscle for. He was to bring Ellis with him, as well, as Leland's motto was always: *Many hands make light work.*

"You up for watching me shoe some horses, kiddo?" asked Jasper.

Ellis' nod was a happy yes, as if there was nothing Ellis would like better than to stand around watching Jasper get into the task, sweat growing all up and down his back, horses nibbling his hair, leaving streaks of slobber behind. Ellis could make himself useful grooming the horses who weren't being shod, which would be a help.

But then there was Clay, who would be charged with leading the horses down to the forge and then back to the barn. Saturday afternoons, as guests started leaving, jobs like this, on the gritty side, the sweaty side, got done as fast as was humanly possible.

Jasper was surprised that there weren't more horses to shoe, but then Brody, the horse wrangler, kept a good eye on all the horses and tended to slip them to Jasper the moment their hooves needed any attention at all.

Jasper suspected Brody got some flak with Leland over this. Not the doing of it, but the part where Brody made the decision all on his own and didn't consult with Leland.

Leland liked to keep his eye on things, be abreast of all that was going on with the ranch. As well, Jasper knew it was no accident that Clay was the one bringing the horses down, rather than Brody. The encounter would be the first between Clay and Ellis after the fracas at the dance, which told Jasper that Leland meant for everyone to get along. Period.

They went inside the cabin and changed into grubby clothes. Then, out in the workshop, Jasper showed Ellis how to light the forge with a small flame, and to fan it slowly so it was just enough for three sets of hooves. How to lay out the tools. How to set up the cross-ties so the horse would remain in place without too much tension on the rope. How to tie on Jasper's leather apron, which of course Jasper could tie on by himself, but he enjoyed Ellis' arms around him and, by Ellis' low snickers, Ellis enjoyed the ritual as well.

They were both ready when the clops of horse hooves echoed on the stone flints on the dirt road. Clay came into view from beneath the shade of the trees, leading a string of three horses behind him.

Any of the horses could have trampled Clay in a heartbeat, but the ranch didn't keep horses so inclined. So instead of any trampling, Big Red, Travelle, and Dusty all nosed Clay's pockets, ears pricked in his direction as they walked like a group of three-year-olds tumbling behind their favorite kindergarten teacher.

While Clay wasn't the horse whisperer that Brody was, he had his own way with the horses. A sweetness that shone from his freshly scrubbed and shaved face, his smile. His pair of dimples only added to his appeal, especially among female guests, and some male ones, as well.

Secretly, Jasper had dubbed him the Beautiful One, and tried his best to disapprove of Clay. But it was hard, so hard, especially when Clay came up to the forge leading horses as happy as puppies and waved a genial hello.

"Hey there," said Clay. "Brought you some work to do."

"Thank you, Clay," said Jasper. He took Travelle's lead, as waiting made the sweet mare a little anxious, and passed the horse to Ellis. He kept an eye on Ellis while he crossed-tied the mare, then nodded his approval. "Will you stay and help groom?" he asked Clay.

"I would, but Maddy asked me to help Stella." Clay shrugged, then jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "One of the cabins had quite the party last night, and there's only so many condoms Stella is willing to pick up off the floor."

Ellis barked a laugh, then tried to look appropriately sorry that Clay had such chores ahead of him. But instead of being mad, Clay laughed too, as if Ellis had been a part of the ranch for a good long while, and they were pals.

"Brody will be by to pick this group up," said Clay. "Couple of hours, maybe? Then I'll see you two early tomorrow? There's going to be a lot of hay."

"Hopefully it won't spill like that one time," said Jasper.

"Yeah." Clay shook his head. "Eight at the latest, okay?"

"You got it."

Jasper waited until Clay was out of sight, and even his shadow had been swallowed up by the shade of the grove of trees along the road. Then he turned his full attention to Ellis.

"This here's Travelle," said Jasper, gently patting the bay mare's shoulder. "She's a good horse, but she doesn't like to wait, so we do her first. You can tie Big Red and Dusty to

those posts and give them each a good brushing. Comb out their mane and tails. Give them each a little grain to munch on. It's in that metal bin, alongside the tool table. Rubber buckets are on the wall."

Jasper propped Travelle's right front hoof and got to work with the pincers, taking the nails out of her hoof. He went around to each hoof like that, and gave the mare a moment to enjoy being barefoot.

Of course, he didn't know if horses actually liked this little moment, but he always gave it to each of them, letting them experience being naked and natural.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he liked to imagine the horses on the ranch talking amongst themselves about how good Jasper's manicures were, and how marvelous that moment was. Then he liked to imagine them all running free and wild, wind pulling their manes back, the breeze of freedom lifting their tails.

"What?" asked Ellis, suddenly appearing at Jasper's side.

"Oh," said Jasper, scrambling to collect his thoughts into something more workaday. "Just giving her a minute to be without shoes on. You know. The way you do with a dog or a cat when you take its collar off and make astonished remarks at how naked it is?"

"No," said Ellis, but he was laughing, seeming pleased with Jasper's little fantasy. He kissed Jasper, then went to get the rubber buckets with a bit of molasses-laced grain, the brush and comb for the horses, and got to work.

The grubby work calmed Jasper, as most work seemed to do. He enjoyed the warm weight as a horse snuffled his back while he pulled shoes off, enjoyed making a great deal of noise on the anvil as he pounded a horseshoe to the exact right shape. Enjoyed the flutter of white debris as he filed the nails down once he'd nailed them onto a hoof, making sure everything was ship-shape by the time he patted a horse's leg and settled it back to the ground when he was done.

As he grew sweaty and hot and started to think about taking a break for water, Ellis, somehow knowing this, brought him a plastic bottle from the house, and the two of them paused and drank the cool water as the shadows grew long, and the wind began to ruffle the tree tops.

“You did a good job there,” said Jasper. “Big Red looks as bright as a penny.”

“Tried to bite me,” said Ellis.

“No, no,” said Jasper. “We’ve no biters here. Big Red was just looking for carrots. Run into the cabin and see what we have. Cut the bigger pieces into slices, which are easier for the horses to manage.”

By the time they were done giving each horse a treat of carrots, the two of them were covered with orange-flecked slobber. And, just as Jasper finished the last draw of a rasp along a hoof, Brody came strolling down the dirt road, a bit grubby, t-shirt stained, straw hat battered and a little crushed on one side.

“Lo, Big Red,” said Brody, going up to the tall red horse as though Jasper and Ellis weren’t standing right there. “Good girl, Travelle.” He swept a hand along the mare’s newly brushed coat. “Dusty, how you been, boy?”

After a minute of kissing the horses’ noses, Brody finally straightened up and tipped his hat at them.

“You did a fine job, far as I can see,” said Brody in his usual low way, the words taking up almost no space. He was friendly in spite of his reserve, but then, while he knew Jasper, he did not know Ellis.

“Ellis, this is Brody, our horse wrangler.” Jasper gestured to Ellis. “Ellis is my new apprentice.”

The two young men shook hands without too much fanfare, but Jasper knew full well that Brody had good instincts. He’d obviously seen, as well, the fact that Travelle was nosing Ellis for more carrot, and Brody would have known in an instant had the mare been hand-shy of Ellis.

Brody knew horses better than he knew people, and he trusted horses to give him a read on those around him.

“Will you be okay leading all three back?” offered Jasper, knowing full and well that Brody could handle a whole string of horses, most of whom would follow Brody around like faithful hounds even without being on a lead.

“Yeah,” said Brody. He gathered the leads to the three horses, holding them loosely behind him. “Got roped into the hay delivery tomorrow, so I’ll see you there?”

“Sure thing,” said Jasper, lifting his hand in a goodbye wave. A hand that was, at present, sheened with grease and dirt, grease that streaked up his forearm. He’d need a bath before he proceeded to make their dinner, otherwise, he’d be frying up metal horseshoe flakes along with their onions and potatoes.

The clearing was quiet as the clop of newly shod hooves faded into the shadows. They were alone again and the difference between that and even the slight, momentary presence of Brody or Clay, was staggering. This was how he liked it, just him and Ellis, alone.

Ellis came up and tugged on the strings of Jasper’s leather apron, as though he was pulling Jasper into the now, into the space shared by just the two of them.

“You hungry?” asked Jasper.

Nod.

“I need a bath first,” said Jasper. “I hate to make you wait, but I’m all covered with grease.”

In response to this, Ellis moved closer, and with the tips of his fingers, he stroked Jasper’s arm all the way up to where he’d rolled up his sleeve to his bicep. Those fingers left trail marks behind, four white lines in the grime on Jasper’s skin, as though Ellis was leaving his mark, claiming Jasper.

“Help.” Ellis looked at Jasper, his silver-grey eyes steady.

“Help me in the bath?”

Jasper wasn't surprised by the offer, as he'd been thinking himself that it might be nice to take a bath together. The tub was big enough and there was enough hot water to fill the tub three times over, if they determined between them to take that long. When he realized Ellis was waiting for an answer, Jasper leaned close to kiss Ellis' mouth gently.

"Yeah. I'd like that."

With Ellis' help, Jasper wiped and put away his tools, spread the coals in the forge, swept up horse-hoof leavings, and collected bits of clipped nails. As he hung up his apron and the two of them went into the house, he wasn't quite prepared, for he'd imagined that Ellis might draw the bath and lay out towels, and then leave Jasper to it.

Except while Ellis did all those things, he remained close. Knelt to unlace Jasper's workboots. Stripped him of his dirty clothes. Ran the bath. Soothed Jasper's skin with the warmth of his hands while they waited for the tub to fill, which was good in many kinds of ways.

Jasper had been in the army, so being in the altogether with other men around wasn't an issue. It became more intimate with just one other man who eyed Jasper up and down and didn't seem to mind the grime or take any special notice of the wear and tear the years had left on Jasper's body.

Ellis touched the old scar Jasper had earned while learning to become a blacksmith, and the sword he'd just pulled out of the forge had slipped in his hand and burned through his jeans, leaving a blade-shaped mark on his thigh.

Ellis used an old towel to wipe some of the grease from Jasper's body, then, when the tub was full, he urged Jasper into it with motions of his hands. Then, as Jasper sighed from the warmth, Ellis took a washcloth and, sitting on the edge of the tub, put his arm, all the way up to his elbow, into the water to soak the cloth.

With moisture already dripping from Jasper's nose, he looked up at Ellis and knew that never in forever could he have imagined this moment. Him naked in the tub, his cock

floating upward like flesh-colored kelp, and Ellis looking at him, chin tucked low, a smile curving his mouth.

Ellis probably didn't even realize he was smiling or that in his eyes was a warm fondness that wrapped itself all around Jasper's whole body. He wouldn't trade this moment, not for all the forges in the world.

Ellis soaped up a washcloth and gently, quite gently, began to bathe Jasper from head to toe. Soft water sounds echoed to the ceiling, the scent of lavender from the soap filling Jasper's lungs. As Ellis scrubbed his body, oh, so gently, Jasper's head went back till it rested on the curve of the side of the tub.

When Ellis trailed the soapy cloth along the inside of Jasper's thigh, Jasper closed his eyes and let the feelings wash over him. Of the rough cloth on his cock, Ellis' firm grip. He was going to come in his bathwater quite soon and whatever happened after that would happen, all in its own time.

ELLIS

Ellis told himself he wasn't nervous as he piled into the truck with Jasper, who drove them to the barn. There, a large flatbed truck loaded with hay, plus a long flatbed trailer, also loaded with hay, waited for them. Flexing his fingers inside the worn leather gloves Jasper had loaned him, Ellis checked to make sure his straw hat was sturdily on, and slid out of the passenger seat.

He was so distracted, his throat closing up, his breath coming short, that he barely felt Jasper's warm fingers in the small of his back, easing him forward.

"It'll be all right," said Jasper low, so only Ellis could hear him. "Nothing bad's going to happen."

Nothing bad could happen to him, he knew that. As long as Jasper was around, he was safe, though he imagined that if anyone else knew how terrified he was of making another mistake, they'd laugh at him, the big, bad ex-con, and mock him endlessly.

The mocking he could ignore, as the words would mean nothing but sounds banging against brick walls. It was a potential enemy's awareness that he was vulnerable in this way that would be the risk. If they knew he was down, they would attack.

"Nobody's going to attack you," said Jasper. His mouth was quite close to Ellis' ear. "Cause you're not going to attack nobody. Right?"

Ellis turned his head. Their lips almost met, but Jasper drew back, a little shy, his deep blue eyes bright with affection.

“You’re being brave, being here.” Jasper nodded, then waved at Clay and Leland and Jamie who were already hard at work unloading the flatbed trailer, hauling each bale up by its bale wires to carry it around the back of the barn to the lean-to, where, as Jasper had explained on the way over, the majority of the ranch’s hay was stored beneath a tin roof and canvas. “Just keep on being brave, just like you are.”

Blinking in the bright sunlight that broke through the trees, Ellis watched as Clay came up, dusting his hands free of hay. His leather gloves made thump sounds as he did this, echoing the beat of Ellis’ heart.

This wasn’t a brief moment in front of Jasper’s cabin, where Clay and he had exchanged their virtual hellos and that was it. He’d be working with Clay all morning. Of course Clay was chatting with Jasper now, acting like Ellis being there was no big deal.

Everyone else was working. Jamie was on top of the hay bales, pushing them to the edge so others could grab them. Leland, his long legs striding, was carrying a hay bale on his shoulder as easily as if it weighed nothing.

“C’mon,” said Clay to Ellis now, making Ellis focus on him.

Clay reached out but, at the very last minute, he didn’t clap Ellis heartily on the arm the way he’d done with Jasper. There was a barrier there, invisible, and Clay was abiding by it.

Maybe he’d gotten a talking-to by Leland about not upsetting the ex-con, putting all the responsibility for Ellis’ behavior on Clay’s sturdy shoulders. Which wasn’t right. Clay deserved none of the blame for the almost-fight, and he certainly didn’t have to be on guard around Ellis, not now, not ever.

Clay was giving him a chance. He needed to give Clay a chance. So, swallowing hard, Ellis tugged on the cuffs of his

floppy leather gloves, showing that he was ready to go to work.

“Wh—” he began after a hard breath. Which shook him. It was just a simple word: *Which*. Meaning, which should he start unloading, the flatbed trailer or the flatbed truck? He tried again. “Wh—” The air left his lungs, the trembling gasp echoing in his ears. Sweat briskly popped out along his forehead, beneath his arms.

“He means which one,” said Jasper, quickly into the silence that hung in the air. “Which one do you want him to start unloading first?”

Clay blinked. Seemed to consider the situation, then smiled easily at Ellis, as if Jasper hadn’t spoken at all. Not in a rude way, it seemed, but in a patient way, as though he and Ellis had worked together for years and this was how it was between them.

“Sure,” he said. “Trailer, I think. I’ll show you where and how we’re piling the bales. Sound good?”

Ellis nodded, swallowing over the dryness in his throat. Clay seemed willing to have Ellis’ non-speak translated to him. Seemed willing to pretend Ellis spoke in full sentences. Seemed willing to overlook the fact that upon first meeting Clay, Ellis had punched him.

Following Jasper’s lead, Ellis grabbed the first hay bale he came to, glad of the leather gloves protecting his fingers. Glad of the long-sleeved shirt Jasper made him wear, otherwise his forearms would be marked red with jabs from hay as he lifted and carried the bales behind the barn to the pallets someone had arranged on the ground to keep the hay from getting moldy in the dirt.

Inside of ten minutes, two more men, dressed in a similar way, joined them, pitching in to move the hay. He did his best to catch their names, Quint and Levi. Both of whom looked at him and gave him a jerk of their chins, the universal male-to-male greeting, and went about their work. When Brody showed up, he poked Ellis with a friendly elbow, as if he and

Ellis were old pals, and slowly, bale by bale, they moved the hay.

Around mid-morning, Maddy drove up with a round green-and-white Coleman drinks cooler, which she set out on the tailgate of her truck. The cooler was like the one his parents used to have when they were alive.

Blinking back memories, Ellis grabbed a red party cup, stuffed his gloves in his back pocket, and stood in line with the others, waiting for his turn for Maddy to fill his cup. He was like everyone else in that minute, just another ranch hand. Not an ex-con, but just Ellis, taking a break.

“Hey Ellis,” said Maddy in a friendly way as she took his cup and filled it for him. “How’s it going? They working you too hard?”

Their hands brushed as she handed him his cup back. He took a breath. She deserved an answer. She’d been afraid of him at first, but now she was treating him like just another ranch hand. She *deserved* an answer. He meant to give it to her.

Jasper was standing in line behind Ellis, patiently waiting his turn. The other ranch hands, standing in the shade of the overhang of the barn, sipped their drinks. He knew they were looking at him, but trying not to look like they were looking.

“Hey,” he said, but it came out as a huff sound rather than a word. Licking his lower lip, he tried again. “Good,” he said to Maddy, over enunciating the *d*, just to make sure the whole word came out and not just a part of it. “You?” The end of the word stretched out a little too long, but again, he wanted to make sure he got all of it.

“Oh,” she said, tossing her long grey and white braid. “It’s going to be a scorcher, I think. I’d rather be in my cool office even if it does mean I have to start working on developing the website, like Leland asked. Can you imagine? Me? Messing with html code? I’m a gal who keeps paper files, you know? Well, anyway. You boys be sure to come up to the dining hall for lunch today. No need to keep eating bachelor meals all the time.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ellis. But though it came out *ye-am*, Maddy smiled at Ellis like she understood him perfectly, and reached past him to grab Jasper’s empty cup.

Ellis went over to the shade. The other ranch hands shuffled to make room for him. Not as if they were trying to get away from him, but lazily, as if he was anybody else trying for a bit of shade.

There was the type of kindness that had been offered to him by the counselors in the prison with their over-bright smiles and digging questions that wanted to know all of his hurts and woes. What trauma had caused him to stray from the path of goodness and light. How he *really* felt about missing his mother’s funeral.

That was nothing like the type of kindness he was receiving now, a calm acceptance, an everyday warm welcome. As Ellis took a sip from his red plastic cup, he had to blink and blink hard.

When Jasper joined Ellis in the shade, Ellis took a step to the left and bumped into someone. He turned his head.

It was Jamie, who tipped his straw hat in greeting and went on drinking his drink as if nothing had happened. Because nothing had. And nothing was going to, because he couldn’t even imagine lashing out at Jamie, so sweet and bright eyed. The Pert One, Jasper had once called Jamie in a derisive tone, perhaps too derisive, as if Jasper was desperately searching for a way to keep his distance.

Over the rim of his cup, Ellis saw Leland was keeping an eye on him, and of course he would. Ellis was standing next to Leland’s sweetheart. Moreover, Ellis was dangerous. He was an ex-con and had a tendency to go off at a snap.

Had Ellis laid even a single finger on Jamie, he had a feeling his head would have been rolling in the hay-flecked dirt in under a heartbeat. But there was no way, simply no way, that was going to happen. Ellis wanted to be at the ranch forever, surrounded by people who were more real, more themselves, than anybody he’d ever met. He was going to keep from lashing out if it was the last thing he did.

“Sorry,” he said. When it came out ‘orry, Ellis licked his lips.

“Not a problem,” said Jamie, bright eyed, his curls twitching around his face, sweat gleaming on his sweetly freckled cheeks. “If Brody here didn’t hog all the shade, there’d be plenty for everyone.”

“Am not,” said Brody. As if to prove a point, he moved closer to Jamie and gave him a hip bump, which sent liquid all over the front of Jamie’s button-down shirt. “Aw, crap. Sorry. Wasn’t meant to be that hard.”

The moment wasn’t even close to devolving into a scuffle, but Ellis wanted to make sure to keep it that way so Leland wouldn’t come marching over to see what the problem was. To distract the two of them, Ellis raised his plastic cup to Brody.

“What?” he asked, grateful that the word came out fairly clearly.

“It’s ginger water,” said Brody, swallowing a large mouthful. “We get tired of lemonade, you know? So Maddy has the kitchen mix ginger and honey into ice cold water. It’s good, right?”

Ellis nodded, even though the ginger water could have been grey sludge for all it mattered. Still, it was a pretty good drink for a hot day. And to think, if he’d not agreed to do parole at the ranch, he’d not be where he was, right that minute, drinking ice cold ginger water while listening to Brody and Jamie grouse between them. Would not be standing in the shade on a beautiful blue sky day, covered with hay, just like all the other ranch hands who’d turned out to work that morning.

And, most special of all, he would not have Jasper hovering at his side. Would not be able to tap cups with Jasper and then stride together to where Maddy was fiddling with the green-and-white Coleman cooler.

“More?” asked Ellis. He held out his cup at the same time Jasper did.

“Certainly,” said Maddy. “You first, Ellis, since you asked so nice.” Maddy arched her brow at Jasper, who laughed under his breath and waited his turn.

It took them another hour to finish piling the hay bales onto the pallets, to cover the hay, and to clean up the area in front of the barn.

“Thank you, everyone,” Leland said, walking to the front of the group. He had his straw cowboy hat in his hand and was twirling it around and around. “I’d like it if you could all get cleaned up and join me in the dining hall for lunch today. Nothing special. Just that most of the guests have already checked out and I don’t want the ones remaining to feel like they’ve been abandoned.”

The response to this was a general nodding of heads, the brims of straw hats going up and down not quite in unison, but almost.

“Ellis,” said Leland, calling out, catching Ellis’ eye at the very last second. “Can I count on you to attend and bring the blacksmith with you?”

There were a few chuckles from the hands, as evidently Jasper was notorious for not eating in the dining hall, preferring his own company.

With his mouth dropping in shock, Ellis took a slow breath. Leland was treating Ellis like a ranch hand, and ranch hands responded when their bosses asked them a question.

“Yes,” said Ellis as clearly as he could, though his heart was thumping against his breastbone. But why? There was nothing to fear, especially not if Jasper was with him. Which he was. “Yes,” he said again, and felt the curl of Jasper’s warm fingers along the back of his neck, the small squeeze of pleasure.

“All right, get to it,” said Leland, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Just Ellis answering his boss. Just the most ordinary of events, yet Ellis felt a bubble of elation rise inside of him.

He gestured to Jasper to get to the truck, hurry, hurry. He needed to clean up and find a clean shirt. His cowboy boots. If he was going to sit amongst the guests, however few there were, he was damn good and well going to look the part, look like the ranch hand they expected to see.

Jasper raced them back to the cabin, truck tires spinning bits of gravel. There, they shared the bathroom mirror to wash up and shave. They put on almost-matching snap-button shirts and thin socks and their cowboy boots. Then they raced back up to the main lodge in Jasper's truck, parking near the back.

As they climbed the front steps of the lodge, Ellis' cowboy boots clonked and his heart was racing so fast he couldn't hear what Jasper was saying to him. The doorways into the dining hall yawned open, and from inside came the bright light of the sun streaming through all the wide windows along the walls. A handful of guests were in line, and not many were seated.

With his hand once again touching the small of Ellis' back, Jasper led them through the buffet line. Half the buffet pans were empty, but the choices and the sight and smell almost overwhelmed him.

In prison, the food had been basic at best, and the odors rising from each warming pan, the sight of floppy cheese damp with melted ice water, had been enough to make his stomach revolt. Here, though, everything smelled wonderful, and the cheese was hot and bubbly with crisp edges.

Behind Ellis, carrying a tray, came Jamie. Behind him was Leland, ever watchful. The day Leland stopped watching him was the day Ellis knew he'd really be free. Until then, it was right for Leland to do what he was doing. Ellis nodded at Leland, and then turned his attention to Jamie.

"Everything is so good," said Jamie, bright as a new penny. "But I tell you what. The chicken and dumpling casserole is to die for."

Ellis lifted his head, scanned the warming pans, then pointed, raising his eyebrows.

“Yes.” Jamie nodded. “Try it, just be sure to save enough for me.”

The quandary then became something Ellis was not used to dealing with. Either take some of the casserole to validate Jamie’s suggestion, or leave it so Jamie would have enough of what he wanted.

Navigating waters such as that had been a part of the prison system. Guess wrong, and you might end up on your ass in the exercise yard when the guards weren’t looking. Here though, at the ranch, it might be possible that there wasn’t any navigating to do and Jamie was merely making a suggestion to be nice.

Read the room, Jasper had said.

With a nod, Ellis helped himself to the chicken and dumpling casserole, a slice of pizza, some pineapple upside-down cake, or at least that’s what it looked like, and two rolls—with butter. In Wyoming Correctional, they only had margarine, and that always ran out fast. Ellis felt like a happy pig as he walked behind Jasper, carrying his tray proudly in front of him.

He sat down next to Jasper at one of the long tables. Nobody tripped him. Nobody tried to give him a bit of coke, rolled in plastic. Nobody tried to grab either of his rolls.

Someone came around and poured him some iced tea in a glass and even offered him lemon slices. Ellis shook his head. In prison, you never knew where those lemons had been, and saying no to them was a hard habit to break.

Looking at the food, Ellis sighed, unrolled his napkin, and took a bite of the chicken and dumplings. A big bite. Bumped shoulders with Jasper and smiled as he ate. Gave Jamie a thumbs up when he saw Jamie stand up with a questioning look in his eyes. And felt more like he belonged than he had since forever.

JASPER

Later Saturday afternoon, after all the guests had gone, Jasper and Ellis pitched in to get everything ready for the next week's guests. They finished trimming the river, wading in their waders looking for milfoil and other plants that might clog the river and make it look less than picturesque. On Sunday, Ellis was on hand to groom the nine horses that suddenly needed shoeing, and while Jasper felt glad they were doing their bit to make the ranch run smoothly, he longed for it to be him and Ellis alone in the cabin during the long, warm days.

They were alone together at night, each night, of course, side by side watching Netflix, with Ellis soothing himself into restfulness by slowly, ever so slowly, sucking Jasper's cock.

Sometimes, Jasper showed Ellis his drawings for long-handled iron utensils, a big two-pronged fork and a big-bowled spoon, such as might be used on a cookout or overnight trail ride when the chuck wagon was put into use. Other times, Jasper grouched that they ran out of ice cream because Ellis ate it all.

Ellis learned to grouse that there wasn't enough cream for his coffee. Ellis would get up early to make coffee and drink a cup in his new boxer briefs while standing in his bare feet on the back deck, watching the sun come up. There Jasper would find him, and twine his arms around Ellis' naked waist, warming Ellis with his body, kissing his neck.

When it got dark, they slept in Jasper's bed, skin to skin, dispensing with undergarments and even blankets, merely

drawing the light cotton sheet over themselves as they spooned and wove their bodies like ribbons. And while full on fucking had not yet happened, they had started, in the most unlikely of ways, to hammer out how their relationship might go. But it began by Ellis asking for what Jasper was not yet ready to give.

“I can’t quite—” Jasper stopped, and ran his thumb along his eyebrow, getting soap in his eye, as he was in the middle of doing dishes. Ellis handed him a towel, and Jasper wiped his eye with it. “I’m not going to hold your head down and *make* you, you know, suck me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not going to, that’s why.”

“Rough,” said Ellis, his jaw firm and stubborn. “I like it.”

“I could be rough-ish,” said Jasper, willing to give in that much. He was pleased Ellis was making his wants known, pleased Ellis was sticking to his guns. But he was up to his elbows in soapsuds, and he just couldn’t picture himself being the mean guy, even if, as Ellis had carefully and, in his own way, explained how he liked it. That he wanted it. “But hold you down?” he asked.

“A little?” Ellis made a gap with his fingers and put his hand in front of Jasper’s face, where he couldn’t possibly miss it.

“I’ll think about it,” Jasper said, though by the expression in Ellis’ eyes and the quickening of his heartbeat, he knew, as he supposed Ellis knew, that he was going to give in, at least at some point.

Tuesday afternoon, Jasper got the phone call from Leland asking specifically if both he and Ellis would polish off their dancing boots and attend the dance that night. Things were on a turn for the better because Leland was giving Ellis a chance to attend the dance again.

“Wouldn’t normally ask,” said Leland, his voice serious and low, as it usually was. “But the guest numbers are particularly low this week, and I’d hate for those guests who

are here to feel like the crowd is too sparse for them to have any fun. You know?”

“Why so low?” asked Jasper as he looked across the shop to where Ellis was busy stacking pointed tines of iron in a bin for safe keeping. Ellis was bending over, his bottom curved in the blue jeans he was wearing, his t-shirt riding up along his slender back, and all together, he was adorable and distracting enough that Jasper missed what Leland had been saying.

“—okay with Ellis?”

It was like Leland to make it sound as if the request was just that, a request. But it was far more serious than that. If the numbers were down, everybody on the ranch would be asked to show up to various events and outings, putting aside their regular work to make sure guests had a good time.

Going to the dance would be no hardship. Dancing with Ellis would be no hardship, even if Jasper did have to dance with a few other folks in between times.

“I’m sure it will be,” said Jasper.

“Ask him.”

Jasper pulled the phone away from his face, shaking his head a little. Seriously. Leland could just say *come to the dance* and that would be that. Sometimes all of his *everybody’s on the team, everybody gets a say* obsession could get cumbersome.

“Ellis.”

Ellis straightened up and turned. He was sweaty from the work, grubby up and down his front, but as he came over to Jasper, wiping his hands on a cloth, his smile was sweet. And in his eyes was an openness Jasper was glad to see.

Each day, each hour they were together, he saw that openness stay for longer periods of time. Other times, those eyes were sly and watchful, which told Jasper that Ellis was on alert about something, was uneasy, or felt cornered. There were so many people in the world who talked all day and never said a thing. Ellis could speak volumes without even opening his mouth.

“Dance tonight?” asked Jasper. “Good with you?”

Leland? Ellis pointed at the phone.

Yes. Jasper nodded.

Ellis’ eyes looked around the shop as though there was something that might need doing to delay his response. But he nodded, as Jasper knew he would. You just didn’t say no to Leland, boss man, unless you had a damn good reason.

In the end, of course, they didn’t say no, but took early baths, each one walking in on the other, as if that was the way it’d always been. They shaved together, and Jasper lent Ellis his cologne, and when they got dressed, Jasper helped Ellis with the pearl-snap buttons on his pink cowboy shirt.

Surely, *surely*, Ellis could have managed on his own. But instead of Ellis pushing Jasper’s hands away, he stood there, patient as stone, and smiled when Jasper kissed him and pretended to swoon over the amount of cologne he was wearing.

Instead of driving the truck, they strolled along the dirt road as the sky grew dark above them. The night air felt blue and sweet as it swept across Jasper’s neck, making him feel very much that he’d prefer dragging Ellis back to the pond, stripping off both their clothes, and making love in the water. But needs must and Leland had asked specifically, and so, not quite hand-in-hand, they arrived at the main lodge.

Around the dirt dance floor, fairy lights twinkled like tiny, stationary fireflies, golden and silver, shimmering in the night air as it grew cooler.

As Jasper counted the number of guests, it became apparent that they were less than half of what the ranch could manage in a good season. Both staff and ranch hands had been called in to dance.

Jasper could spot the guests in their overly bright clothes and happy faces. The ranch’s employees were easy to spot, as well, at least to Jasper, for their clothes were less bright, more broken in.

All the employees, from the trail boss to the newest kitchen assistant, pretty much knew all the dance steps. But as the lady caller stood on the porch of the main lodge, calling out the moves, some employees pretended not to know so guests could laugh with them. Then everybody helped everybody along, making the dance a whirl of friendship and community. Eventually the ranch would get back on its feet, but until then they all would fake it till they made it.

“Line dance first?” asked Jasper with a tug on Ellis’ fingers.

Beneath the starlight of the fairy lights, Ellis’ eyes were silver and wide as he took in the scene. When Ellis looked at Jasper, a little bit of shadow from the brim of his straw cowboy hat fell across his face, but Jasper could see Ellis’ expression quite clearly.

In that heartbeat, he knew Ellis, in that moment, would have walked across fire for him. Which meant that maybe, just maybe, Jasper was going to have to pony up and get a bit rough in bed that night. He’d be tender most of all, and then he’d muddle his way through holding Ellis down to suck him —

“Fellows.”

Leland strolled up, Jamie at his side, pert as he always was, curls flying.

“We’re waiting for the next line dance,” said Jasper, pointing vaguely, wondering if how close he and Ellis were standing and the fact that they looked like they were about to hold hands was as obvious to Leland as it was to himself.

“Sounds good,” said Leland. “Don’t forget to mingle.” Then, with a tap of his finger to his straw cowboy hat, echoed by Jamie, they walked into the small crowd.

Jasper knew they were headed to the cooler up front that held locally made root beer, and thought about making sure Ellis got some, as he seemed to like it.

There was a short break, then the caller announced a line dance, so, whooshing out a breath, Jasper led the way to the

middle of the floor, mingling with guests, smiling until the smile felt real, and nudged Ellis to do the same as the dance began.

Jasper watched Ellis dance the simple step-touch-step-touch moves. Though Jasper doubted that the prison system officially taught the two-step to the rousing sounds of *Cotton Eyed Joe*, maybe somewhere, somebody had used lunchtime to brighten the halls with dance and song.

Ellis' body was supple, his hips moving into the sideways steps, his bottom shimmying to the backward steps. Jasper wanted to cup that bottom and splay his fingers across Ellis' bejeaned hips. To spoon behind Ellis so they could dance together that way, two step, two step, slow, slow.

But then the music ended. The caller announced the next dance was a couples dance, so Jasper touched Ellis' shoulder to indicate he was moving to select a partner. Or, as it ended up, allow himself to be selected by a guest, a middle-aged woman with a lovely smile and a sparkle in her eyes, who wanted Jasper to be her partner for the cowboy cha cha, done to a slow rendition of *Country Roads*.

She was a good dancer, and as he held her hands and smiled down at her, he could feel her joy, see the warmth in her soul. Sometimes dancing did that to him, which was why he avoided it, because after the dance was done, and he bowed a courtly goodbye to her, all he wanted to do was crawl off into the dark. Beneath the pleasure of the dance, as if released once the good feelings had passed, were the darker memories of Milt and his betrayal, and he just couldn't face those right now—

“Jasper.”

Jasper looked up. Ellis had said his name, clear as a bell, and was standing close, eyes curious, his hand on Jasper's shoulder.

“Yeah, okay,” said Jasper. He wiped his mouth with his hand, fully prepared to tuck all those feelings away again. “What's the next dance?”

“Mine.”

For a moment, Jasper didn't understand, but when the music started up, a western version of *Stand By Me*, and the caller announced a cowboy waltz, that was when he knew. There were several guests standing at the edge of the dance floor, but Jasper was going to disobey orders and dance, instead, with Ellis.

Standing tall, he took Ellis in his arms, Ellis' hand in his, his arm around Ellis' waist, fingers a tender press in the small of Ellis' back. Ellis' body was close to his, their hips touching, thighs weaving between each other's thighs. Jasper knew the steps, and he led Ellis around that dance floor in small, gentle circles, as though this dance, this place, this night, had been waiting for him all of his life.

As they swirled, the fairy lights twinkled, and the air smelled sweet, joyous laughter bubbling up inside of him, Ellis' sweet, low laugh following right behind. If this was love, then let it be like this always, the taste of dust on his tongue, the perfume of Ellis' sweat beneath the cologne in his lungs. The warmth of Ellis, connecting with him, tying him to that moment as they danced together in front of everybody.

When the music ended, his heart was pounding, and it took everything he had not to kiss Ellis then and there.

“Jasper.”

Jasper turned, not quite letting go of Ellis, but stepped back, still holding Ellis' hand, the way you did at a dance before you'd properly bid your dance partner farewell and thanked them.

“Hey, boss,” said Jasper, making his response as casual as he could, though sweat broke out along the back of his neck. “Any of that root beer left?” His voice almost broke on the question because Leland wasn't, and had never been, blind to anything that happened on ranch property.

“There is,” said Leland. “Why don't you two fellows come and have a bottle with me.”

Leland knew full and well Jasper didn't care for root beer, unless it was in a root beer float.

He felt Ellis' fingers trail along his upper arm, asking the question without asking it: *Everything okay?*

"Sure," said Jasper. "C'mon, Ellis, you like this root beer, don't you? Maybe not quite as much as the boss, but then, who does?" He was running off at the mouth, trying to collect his thoughts before the interrogation began. Leland didn't simply pull you off the dance floor to share in his favorite beverage. Leland pulled you out of the action because he wanted to have a *talk* with you.

Another line dance started up, leaving the area at the edge of the porch, where the cooler was, clear of people. Leland reached into the cooler, took out three sturdy brown bottles, used the bottle cap remover set into a post holding up the porch to open them, and handed a bottle each to Jasper and Ellis.

Leland bided his time, taking a drink of his root beer as he watched Jasper take a small drink of his. Ellis, knowing something was up, and how could he not, simply held the root beer in both hands, as if desperate to focus on the coolness of the bottle against his skin.

By the time Leland took a breath to speak, Jasper wanted to run for the hills.

"Something you need to tell me?" asked Leland. "Either of you?"

The music sounded discordant in Jasper's ears as his mind raced. What would Ellis say, should he be the one to answer this question? Would he say yes, all stout and courageous, or would he look off into the distance and pretend he'd not heard?

Instead of either of these, Ellis was looking straight at Jasper, as if Leland wasn't there and the question had somehow arrived on invisible ether. Ellis was trusting Jasper to say the words, whatever they needed to be, so Leland would

get off their backs, and they could go back to the cabin and make love in the dark.

Jasper just about heard what Ellis was thinking, like a bell going off in his head, the image quite clear. Ellis might have a sense that Leland was in charge, but in the back of Ellis' mind, somehow, it seemed as if he felt that mattered little to him as long as Jasper was with him.

How Ellis conveyed all of this with a look was astounding. Or maybe it was Jasper's mind r兔biting on, making up what he wanted to believe as he girded his loins to respond to Leland. One never left Leland hanging, after all.

"Well, boss," said Jasper, scratching the back of his head to give himself a minute. "It's like this, you see—"

"Oh, c'mon, Leland," said Jamie, appearing at Leland's side, giving Leland's arm, luckily the one not holding the root beer, a hard tug. "Just look at their faces. Can't you see they're in love? I can."

Jamie's smile was sweet, and it was obvious, at least to Jasper, that he felt he'd done them a favor, bringing it all out into the open. Problem was, it was all out in the open, like a bald, naked egg, vulnerable to anything Leland might care to throw at it. Anything from *cease and desist* to *you're fired*.

Frowning, Leland looked down at Jamie in the way a tall giant might look at his small companion. Jamie looked up at him, eyes dancing, as though he'd not a care in his sassy head. But behind that look was, perhaps, something more serious, more determined.

"And don't bring out the non-fraternization rule, either," said Jamie. "It's not fair if you do. You know it isn't."

Was Jamie saving them from themselves? Saving them from Leland's wrath?

Jasper was prone to think Jamie was a pert young thing without a mind of his own, free of care now that he had a place at Leland's side. Except that wasn't fair. Jamie worked hard at the ranch, and maintained his groundskeeping duties in spite of the fact that he was Leland's sweetheart and could have

called off and asked for an easier, more glamorous position. Could have. But never did.

And here he was, tugging on Leland's arm, looking up at Leland as though Leland was his heart, his midnight moon, and summer sunset breeze all rolled into one. Jasper knew that were Jamie his, he'd be hard pressed to resist a look like that. And, by the slow shake of Leland's head, Jasper also knew that while Leland wasn't normally a pushover, in this case, in *any* case to do with Jamie, he was.

"It's only problematic if it becomes—problematic." With his fingers holding the bottle of root beer, Leland ran his thumb over his lower lip. "The extra layer of complexity comes with the fact that Ellis is on parole, and is going to be on parole for the next six months."

"Or until the judge deems the parole has ended," said Jamie. "No, I didn't read the file, but I looked up stuff about parole on Maddy's computer."

As Leland looked down at Jamie again, as though surprised to be interrupted, and why wouldn't he be because nobody interrupted Leland, Jasper could almost hear Leland thinking: *Stand down, young one*. Only he'd never say that to Jamie, for Jamie was his heart on fire.

Such was the balance Leland must go through every day, his love for the ranch offset by his love for Jamie, neither of which was incompatible, both of which required special handling.

Jasper was surprised he'd not realized that until now.

"I don't mean to make trouble, boss," said Jasper with entirely more sympathy for the position he'd put Leland in. "It just kind of happened. I think I'm good for Ellis, and I *know* he's good for me."

Ellis moved close to stand at Jasper's side, stalwart in his silence, sturdy in his affection for Jasper, determined in his love—they'd not said the words to each other, but Jasper felt it, felt Ellis' energy working its way inside of him. Giving him courage.

“We’ll be discrete—” began Jasper, but then he stopped.

In Leland’s eyes was a question as he looked at Ellis, and then back at Jasper.

Before Ellis, B.E., as Jasper imagined in a wild, silent cackle of nervous laughter in his head, he never would have been able to read what someone was not saying, but wanted to say. Now he could. Leland was worried about the power Jasper might wield over Ellis. *Do this or I’ll tell your PO.*

Nothing could be further from the truth, but while Jasper didn’t imagine Leland actually thought it could be possible, he needed to reassure Leland and Jamie and Ellis—all of them needed to know Jasper’s intentions. And he was going to tell them, just as earnestly as a potential bridegroom might.

“I’m going to do right by Ellis,” said Jasper. “He’s made such a difference in my life, I can’t even begin to tell you. But here I am at the dance. I even ate at the dining hall—all because of Ellis, and you can’t make me give him up—”

To his depthless horror, Jasper’s voice broke and his eyes grew so hot he had to scrub at them with the heel of his hand.

Leland, eyebrows raised, gave him a minute, as did Jamie at his side.

But Ellis. He moved in like a mama bear whose cub has been messed with. In another minute, Ellis would put his body between Jasper and whatever threatened him. He’d shove, fists out, and it could all go so wrong in that heartbeat there’d be no coming back from it.

“It’s okay,” said Jasper, swallowing as he reached out to touch Ellis’ cheek, and Ellis stopped, mid-step.

Everything froze as though in a tableau. Jasper’s gesture and Ellis’ response said it all, and however Leland cared to interpret it, the truth was laid bare.

Perhaps Leland thought that if Jasper so chose, he could unleash Ellis and let him have at it like a dog of war. But what Leland didn’t know, couldn’t know unless Jasper told him, was that the leash was quite invisible, and it was Ellis who actually controlled it.

Though Ellis' prison past cast a shadow across everything he did, his soul was a spark. The trick was to explain this as quickly as possible so Leland knew Ellis was a safe risk. That the growing love between the two of them would be enough and that everyone at the ranch was safe.

"Love," said Ellis, the single word ringing in the air like a clear bell.

Ellis did move between Leland and Jasper, but, more, he shifted his body so their shoulders touched. He was only the slightest bit in front of Jasper, as though the two of them had been interrupted during a complex part of the dance.

Ellis now turned to Jasper and laid his hand upon Jasper's chest, right over his heart. Then Ellis, looking quite stern as he turned his head in Leland's direction, said, "Love him. End of story."

"I see," said Leland, and it was obvious that he did see. As did Jamie. As did the few people standing nearby who cooed beneath their breaths and turned away to give them their privacy. "I just need to be sure you'll be careful."

As to what that meant, it could be anything, from the balance of power between them to the fact that Ellis, for all he seemed so tame most of the time, had teeth. Teeth that Jasper knew would never be meant for him.

"We will be," said Jasper. Gathering a ragged breath, he let it out and tugged on Ellis' sleeve. "Maybe we'll go now."

Maybe, because boss man was in charge of everything, as he always was. While Jasper was willing to break rules when needed, mostly he liked to toe the line so he'd be left in peace. In this case, however, he wanted to take Ellis back to the cabin where they could be alone.

"Yes," said Leland. "Let's follow up later."

"Sure." Jasper nodded and Ellis nodded, and while the moment was good, Jasper took Ellis' hand and pulled him away from the dance floor and into the starlit darkness of the dirt road leading through the trees.

ELLIS

The winds of winter could not have reached him, not with Jasper at his side as they walked along the dirt road back to the cabin.

Jasper reached out to hold Ellis' hand, and Ellis felt the quick pulse of blood beneath Jasper's skin. Heard his heartbeat. Scented him, salt and sweat and anxiety, close at hand.

All of this swirled in the air, settling on Ellis' skin, mixing with the knowledge, clear and true, that he'd just told Jasper he loved him. And that Jasper, upon attempting to tell how he felt about Ellis, had almost broken down and cried.

Ellis had only cried once in prison, large, fat, mercury-colored tears of self-pity his first night in solitary. When he'd come out of solitary, into the relatively more open but still tainted air of the prison, his eyes were dry and his heart was encased in a hard layer of some material he could have sworn was impenetrable.

Only it wasn't. One man in a thousand could have gotten through to him and Jasper had. With his gruff exterior and tactics of distancing himself from others, sequestering himself in his workshop, Jasper had been the one. He was not what Ellis had expected at all, but more, he was exactly what Ellis needed.

"You okay?" asked Jasper in a whisper as he brought Ellis' hand up to his mouth to kiss it. "It's all out in the open now."

Beneath the dark, liquid sky, the shimmer of stars that came through the darker silhouette of leaves and tree boughs, Jasper's heart was in his voice. But then, Jasper's heart was in everything he did, from patiently shoeing a horse who did not like to wait, to acting the gruff bear of a blacksmith for some little girls, just to make them laugh. Who made sure of Ellis' comfort even before his own.

Maybe Ellis didn't deserve him. But then again, maybe he did. Maybe.

"Mmmmm," said Ellis, nodding, bending his head to the kiss so he could feel Jasper's hair against his cheek.

"Yeah?" asked Jasper.

"Yeah."

The word he'd just spoken was true though his heart could not contain everything he felt, just then, as they reached the back door of the cabin and Jasper paused to open it for him. The world seemed full of what might be, rather than, as it had been, what he could never have. And now he had it, the love of a gentle-hearted man, strong and true as a sword forged in love.

"Now," said Ellis. Jasper flicked on the light in the small hallway next to the bathroom. Ellis flicked it off. "Now."

"Now what?" asked Jasper, adorably confused.

"Me. You. Bed."

It was the only way to mark the moment, to brand it into his memory forever. Him and Jasper, standing in front of Leland and everyone at the dance, really, like young lovers sweetly announcing their troth.

"Now?" Jasper seemed shocked, or maybe he merely pretended to be to lengthen the moment, or maybe just to distract himself from the intensity of his own feelings.

Ellis had seen Jasper's face when he'd bowed to the woman he'd been dancing with. The dance, the merriment that went along with it, seemed to have shifted something for him,

and what was one moment a pleasure became, in a heartbeat, something sad.

Ellis would push to find out more, but in that moment, he wanted to be skin-to-skin with Jasper, their heads on the pillow together. And maybe, just maybe, he would be able to get Jasper to hold him down.

With one finger, Ellis unbuttoned the top pearl-snap button on Jasper's shirt. Then he unbuttoned the top button on his own shirt. The crack-pop sound was loud in the quiet cabin.

"Oh."

"Rough," said Ellis, reminding him.

"Um."

For a moment, Jasper seemed to be thinking. Then he let out a breath and in the next moment, Ellis found himself slung over Jasper's shoulder, headed to the couch. There, Jasper flung him down, ripped off his boots, and started in on the button and zipper of Ellis' blue jeans.

Ellis reached to help, but Jasper's hand clamped on his so fast it took Ellis' breath away in shock.

"No," said Jasper, perfectly bossy.

Moonlight coming through the uncurtained windows traced a moment so still, Ellis imagined he could sense the push of the river beneath the deck. Sense the night pushing toward midnight. Hear the crackle of faraway lightning.

Jasper eased Ellis' hand to the side, and disrobed Ellis from his boots, his shirt, his jeans, his briefs. Now Ellis lay naked on the couch, his cock pressed against his belly, and Jasper was fully dressed. When Jasper put his hand between Ellis' thighs and made a fist, Ellis sighed.

"Spread 'em," said Jasper. His voice was low, almost angry, as if Ellis had been disobeying him for hours and now Jasper had had it. "I said *spread* 'em."

When Ellis didn't move fast enough, Jasper's hand was rough, fingers digging into the muscle, and the movement of the cloth of the couch against bare skin came as heat that

shivered Ellis all the way to the bone. Best of all, Jasper sprawled between Ellis' thighs, the denim scratchy against tender skin, the hardness of hip and muscled thigh a welcome weight, a heady pressure.

Ellis tipped his head back on the arm of the couch and sighed as Jasper pressed him down and grabbed Ellis' hair with his calloused fingers. Ellis held his breath. Waited.

Jasper tugged, only it wasn't hard enough.

"Rough," said Ellis between gritted teeth. He wanted Jasper to be rough with him. Force him. Fuck his mouth. *Something*. "Please?"

Maybe there was something in the way he said it, the tremor in his voice, the quick rise and fall of his chest as Jasper loomed over him, still holding onto Ellis' hair. Jasper's breath was hard in his throat, Ellis could hear it.

"A little?" he asked now. He needed, so badly, for this to mark the moment. To feel Jasper leave his mark on him.

With a surge of his body and a small growl, Jasper flipped Ellis over. His face was half smothered in the pillows on the couch and behind him, his hips were sprawled over Jasper's bejeaned thigh, the denim rough, abusing bare skin. He heard a small smacking sound as if something had been sucked on and popped out of a mouth.

When he felt the cool tips of Jasper's fingers on the curve of his bottom, Ellis held his breath. Without preamble, Jasper pushed a finger into Ellis' ass. From the feel of knuckles against the curve of his body, it was Jasper's middle finger.

It didn't hurt, but it was rough, aggressive. Jasper leaned into it, grabbed both of Ellis' hands and held them behind his back, pulled his finger out, added another finger, and pushed back in.

Ellis' body shivered, both with the sensation of it, being forced, and being without a single power in the world to get away. He could get away, of course, knew the tricks of how to roll and kick, but he didn't try. When he struggled against the

onslaught of Jasper's touch, Jasper held him down harder, sending shivers up Ellis' whole body.

Jasper was breathing hard. This was hard for him, but he was doing it, doing it because Ellis asked. And if that wasn't love, he didn't know what was.

After more hard jabs with his finger, Jasper pulled out and pushed Ellis down, moving between Ellis' legs, his thighs spreading Ellis' thighs wide apart.

Ellis held onto the couch. Heard the jingle of Jasper's belt, the purr of Jasper's zipper, and, with his belly concaving to his spine, came across the couch cushions in hard, pulsing jerks of his body.

"Did I say you could come?" Jasper leaned close and growled in Ellis' ear.

This being Jasper, the last word rose, almost on a question, as if Jasper wanted to make sure this was what Ellis meant when he'd asked for it rough. Rough wasn't in Jasper's nature, but he was, right now, exactly what Ellis wanted. Needed.

"N-no," said Ellis, the quake in his voice entirely unfaked.

"You need to be reminded who's in charge." Jasper's hands pressed on Ellis' back. "Reach around and spread yourself."

When Ellis hesitated, hardly believing what he was hearing, Jasper pressed harder. Ellis could barely breathe. His jaw worked so he could get some air, but he was smiling into the couch cushions as he reached behind him and grabbed his own ass to pull it wide so Jasper could get at him. Do what he wanted.

Air seemed to whisk past his buttocks as though a storm was coming, cold and dangerous. He felt the snub of Jasper's cock, heard Jasper spit, felt the moisture spin across his skin. Then, with one hand still holding Ellis down, Jasper guided his cock to Ellis' anus and pushed. Pushed again. Breached inside of Ellis, and sheathed himself, as neatly as a newly forged sword, in Ellis' ass.

Sighing, Ellis' whole body relaxed. A good hard fuck, yes. From Jasper? The best.

Jasper's thrusts into his body, the distracting, almost painful rub-rub-rub sensation of blue jeans crumpled and bunched around Jasper's hips, spread Ellis' thighs even wider until he was sprawled open. Jasper propped up on both hands now, rose and pushed, rose and pushed again, deeper and deeper still, marking Ellis from the inside, leaving traces of himself behind.

Ellis tried to raise himself up on his elbows, but Jasper pushed him down, hard, and Ellis smiled into the crook of his elbow. Jasper was taking what he wanted, marking him, leaving his scent, dripping sweat onto Ellis' back. With a final shove, Jasper's whole body tightened, and Ellis shuddered, imagining in that moment, that small death, the stiffness of Jasper's cock inside of him, the tight pulse of Jasper's balls as he came inside Ellis, leaving his seed behind.

Ellis was Jasper's now, and forever would be, and that was just fine with him.

"Uh." Jasper pulled out almost gingerly, it felt like. He slithered off Ellis' back, and tugged Ellis to him, and together they lay on the couch, a tumble of bare legs and blue jeans now pulled down to Jasper's knees.

Ellis opened his eyes in the near darkness, tracing Jasper's silhouette. Jasper was breathing hard, using the heel of his hand to scrub at his forehead.

Rolling right on top of Jasper's body, Ellis smothered Jasper with kisses on his mouth, sucked on his ear, waited for Jasper's body to calm, still shivering with reaction.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," said Ellis again, this time lower, slower, putting all of his heart into it. "Chef's kiss."

"Oh." Jasper let out a breath as if he'd been waiting for the signal that he'd done right.

There was no right or wrong in this. But there was the fact that Jasper had crawled out of his comfort zone and given Ellis exactly what he needed. Now Ellis could go to work figuring

out exactly what Jasper needed, only could never ask for. And then give it to him. Give it to him good.

They were able to get to bed by the sheer fact that Jasper knew the way by heart, and had peeled his jeans all the way off, shucking his cowboy boots, too. Then they flopped onto the bed, and with a hearty sigh, Jasper pulled the sheet over them both. Ellis sensed Jasper fell asleep almost right away, and followed him gratefully soon after.

In the morning, they were blearily awoken by Jasper's cell phone bleating at them from the back pocket of Jasper's jeans, still crumpled on the floor. It was beyond Jasper's reach, so he crawled out, plonked his naked ass on the floor, and answered it.

"Sure, boss," said Jasper after listening a minute, a croak in his voice. He scrubbed the sleep from his eyes as he looked up at Ellis. "Half an hour? Sure."

Jasper hung up.

"Talk?" asked Ellis.

"Yeah," said Jasper. He stood up, adorably still wearing his socks but nothing else, and scratched the dark line of hair on his belly. "Maybe I'll send you off to do laundry and handle this myself."

Ellis frowned, doing his best to gather the words to dissuade Jasper from this notion.

"Please?" asked Jasper. "Just to take the edge off him, you know? Then after, we can all talk, if we have to."

Having these kinds of conversations so early in the day, and even ever, was obviously not Jasper's favorite thing. He was trying to save Ellis the trouble, that's what it was. The least Ellis could do was to go along with it.

"Okay."

Their morning coffee was rushed as Ellis hurried to gather their dirty laundry and put it in the truck. He made sure he had his prison-issued driver's license, just in case, and kissed

Jasper's coffee-flavored mouth as he took the truck keys from Jasper's outstretched hand.

"Come right back," said Jasper. "I'll make us an early lunch."

"Yes," said Ellis.

It felt odd to be driving Jasper's truck, to be stopping at the green-painted metal gate to open and close it behind him. To be all alone under the blue morning's sky, windows open to swirl untamed air in the truck's cab, lifting the ends of Ellis' hair. Swirling Jasper's scent all around him.

He found the laundromat straight away, and it was early enough in the morning that Ellis could park out front and snag three washing machines fairly easily. Thinking that it would have been nicer to be waiting with Jasper, Ellis strolled along Latham Street and up Main Street to the Rail Car. There, Ellis went inside and stood in the short line in the coffee bar attached to the restaurant.

With his hands in his back pockets, making himself look as casual and relaxed as possible, Ellis imagined he might whistle to show nothing to see here, just an ex-con getting coffee all on his own without supervision.

At the head of the line, he was displeased to notice, was Eddie Piggot, greasy baseball cap firmly in place over his straw-like blond hair.

With his knuckles tight around two large whatevers, Eddie strode past everyone waiting in line like he was the king of the world. It was in the lift of his chin and the sneer on his whiskered mouth.

When he got to where Ellis waited, the sneer increased.

"How's that shitty ranch doin', huh?" Eddie even slowed down to be the asshat he was. "What're you doin' here without your stupid blacksmith anyhow? Bet he's looking for another job so he can get out before your fake ranch goes down the toilet."

This last statement drew the gaze of everyone in the little coffee shop, and Eddie accompanied it by a jab of his elbow in

Ellis' direction. The jab never made contact, but the words did: fake ranch.

The ranch was the realest place Ellis had ever been. Eddie needed to shut his mouth and Ellis needed to make him.

With a flip of his wrist, Ellis sent Eddie's hot coffees flying over his face, paper cups bouncing off his forehead as the brown liquid streamed off his chin and onto his less-than-clean t-shirt.

With a growl, Eddie reached for Ellis and Ellis let him come, stuck out his foot, and sent Eddie flying into the front window. Which cracked with a low kaboom, Eddie's head right in the center of a three-legged, spider-web shaped crack.

That's when the girl behind the counter must have dialed 911, or maybe it was even earlier than that, for in short order two county sheriff's cars, bubble lights swirling, shrieked to a stop in front of the restaurant.

As the officers came in, sunglasses firmly in place, brown felt sheriff hats solidly on, Eddie pointed at Ellis. Within a minute, Ellis was handcuffed and bent over the white hood of a patrol car, the engine ticking, the warm spot soaking into Ellis, telling him he'd just made the biggest mistake of his life.

JASPER

When Leland arrived, Jasper was in the workshop, tightening the floor bolts on his vice, wiping down his anvil, shoveling coal dust from the forge, anything to give his hands something to do. That worked only for a moment as he and Leland greeted each other. Then it got serious.

“Put that down and let’s have that talk,” said Leland.

It might have been nice to have Jamie at hand to run interference for him, but Jasper wasn’t a child. He’d made his choices, and he was going to stand before Leland and stand by what he’d said about him and Ellis.

It might have been nice, as well, to have Ellis beside him while he explained how much he cared about Ellis. With so many feelings crowding him all at once, it was hard to tie down the words to really make it clear that he was not giving Ellis up and Ellis wasn’t giving him up.

“Let me just be frank,” said Leland as he stood in the doorway of the workshop, half in sunlight, half in shadow as he took off his hat and turned it over and over in his hands.

As if you’re ever anything but. That’s what Jasper wanted to say, but he kept his mouth shut. Leland had been good to him since the day he arrived, and both because of that and because he was the ranch’s manager, he deserved to have his say without a side dish of Jasper’s sarcasm.

“Now, normally I’d say it’s worrisome that my non-fraternization rules have been flouted,” said Leland with a

small chuckle as Jasper's eyebrows rose in his forehead. "But as Jamie has made clear to me, I'm hardly one to throw stones. Except in this case, it's different because of the situation Ellis is in. He's on parole."

"I know that," said Jasper. He was standing as close to his anvil as he possibly could without putting it between him and Leland. Spreading his fingers over the cool metal center of it, he nodded. "I'm fully aware. Believe me, I'm aware."

"I know you are." Leland's gaze was steady, though his hands seemed so restless. "I'm concerned because of the way he and Clay almost got into it. I'm concerned because violence seems to accompany him wherever he goes."

"He's not—"

"I heard word—" Leland held up his hand for Jasper to hear him out. "Of an almost altercation in the hardware shop in Chugwater. Someone was there, saw what happened between Ellis and another customer. Mentioned it to my mom, who then called me concerned, asking, was that *our* ex-con?"

Jasper drew in a breath.

"Now, Jasper, what am I supposed to tell her? That he's harmless?"

"He's not violent. He's not going to hurt anyone."

"You sure about that? You know everything he's going to do with everyone he meets?"

"No," said Jasper, feeling a dull weight settle over him. That he knew Ellis better than anyone on the ranch was certainly the truth, but he didn't know everything about Ellis. He wanted to, though. Wanted to see if they had a chance together. "So, look," he said. "Say you have a rescue horse and you bring it to the farrier to be shod. That horse doesn't know it's safe, so it's fidgety—"

"You're the farrier, and Ellis is the horse in this scenario?"

"Exactly, but—"

"I think it's more complicated than that," said Leland.

“It’s not,” said Jasper, realizing this as solid truth. “You gave me this job. I’m the man in the field, and I’m going to do the best I can by Ellis. He’s better than he was even a week ago, and he’s going to keep getting better. He’s not going to hurt anyone.”

“You sure about that?” asked Leland again.

“Yes,” said Jasper, standing tall. “I bet my life. I—” He thought about it for a heartbeat, but only that. “I bet my forge.”

“What about his lack of speech?” asked Leland, and Jasper wanted to do a little jig if Leland had moved on from the various altercations Ellis had been involved in. “Do we need to get him ASL lessons or a speech therapist or both?”

“We don’t need to worry about that.” Jasper started putting away his tools, sensing that the hard part of the conversation was over. Wiping his hands on a cloth, he said, “He talks to me just fine.”

“Actually, he doesn’t,” said Leland. “I’ve seen the two of you together. He’s not saying a word and you’re going on as if it’s a full-blown conversation.” Putting his hat on, Leland nodded. “He needs speech therapy.”

“Surely the ranch can’t afford that,” said Jasper, his mind working as fast as it could to think of what he might sell to afford the fees.

“We’ll find a way,” said Leland.

That was Leland all over. He was as supportive of Ellis as he might be of anyone who worked for him, and Jasper knew they were lucky Ellis had been assigned to them and not somebody else.

Leland’s phone rang in his back pocket, and he pulled it out to answer it, giving Jasper a jerk of his chin as if asking him to wait a minute because they weren’t quite done.

“Hello?” asked Leland, turning slightly away. Then his eyes went, half-focused, toward Jasper. “What? When?” As Leland listened he came over and, by the expression on his face, white, mouth drawn thin, Jasper knew it was serious.

“And who’s this again?” Leland listened some more. “Let me give you to Jasper. Here.” Leland held out his phone for Jasper to take. “It’s Ellis. He’s been arrested.”

Jasper took the phone with numb fingers, cold all over in spite of the waft of warm, sun-drenched air coming in through the open doors of the shop.

“Yes? Ellis?”

“This here’s Walter. I’m a guard over here at the county lockup in Cheyenne.”

“Lockup?” Jasper’s mouth fell open and his heart raced. “Give me to Ellis. Is he there?”

“Just a minute, young fellow, while I explain. He can’t talk, see. I showed him the phone, and he just stared at it like it was gonna bite him.”

“He can’t—” Jasper gasped and swallowed, staring almost unseeing at Leland with wide eyes. “He can’t talk very well and not with strangers—”

“I realize that. My sisters got a kid who’s got the same kind of trouble. Autistic, you know.”

“Ellis isn’t autistic—”

“I realize that, son,” said the man, and Jasper did his best to let the words sink in. “Sheriff couldn’t interrogate him properly at the scene, but they had to bring him in on account of Eddie Piggot done cracked his skull on the very large window at the Rail Car’s coffee shop. At least that’s what it says in the report I finally got.”

“Is Eddie—” Jasper stopped, feeling like his words were full of stops and starts that reflected his thoughts, racing, turning this way and that. “Is he okay?”

“I reckon he is because as of the moment, your boy Ellis, here, is only up for a hearing about his parole, rather than being booked on manslaughter.”

“Hearing?”

“I gave Ellis a piece of paper to write y’all’s information on just about the time a search on his prison-issued ID card came back with Mr. Tate’s number. I see y’all work at a guest ranch. That right?”

“Yes, that’s true.” Jasper nodded at the phone, though he didn’t feel settled at all. “Mr. Tate is the ranch’s manager and I’m the blacksmith and farrier.”

“That’s fine,” said Walter. “What you ought to do is clean the grease and dirt off your hands and get down here. He’s slotted in to get a brief hearing in front of the judge about his parole. It’s the last hearing of the day. Six o’clock.”

“We’ll be there,” said Jasper. “Can you put him on?”

“He won’t talk to you none.”

“I know,” said Jasper. “Please put him on.”

There was a brief pause, and some ruffled noises as the phone exchanged hands. Jasper could almost feel it when Ellis hefted the phone and put it to his ear.

“Ellis, it’s Jasper.”

From far away, almost like a low, hesitant breeze coming closer over the hills, came a sound: *mmmmm*.

“Listen, we’re coming to be with you for that hearing, okay? You won’t spend the night—” Yet again Jasper had to stop to catch his breath and to be very, very sure of what he was about to say. “We’ll do everything we can. Sit tight. We’re on our way. Okay?”

Jasper listened, pushing his ear to the phone to collect every sound, every nuance of Ellis’ breathing. Every shred of who Ellis was, what Ellis meant to him, he wanted to suck it all through that phone. That’s when he heard it, a low whisper, faint, like faraway rain: *Jasper*.

“Yeah, kiddo,” said Jasper, his heart flooding, worry mixed with hope, all at once. “We’re on our way.”

Someone took the phone back from Ellis.

“Reckon when you get here, you check in at the desk and ask for your boy,” said Walter. “They’ll bring you to him in a visiting room.”

“Thank you,” said Jasper. He hung up Leland’s phone and handed it back to him.

“Go get cleaned up,” said Leland as he dialed the phone and held it to his ear. “I’ll take you in my truck. We’ll go straight there.”

Without stopping to thank Leland, Jasper left his workshop, its doors wide open, and raced into the cabin to the bathroom, where he washed and shaved and scraped his hair back from his face with a comb. In the mirror, his eyes were wide and flat and scared, and he looked away, not wanting to see any more how close his emotions were to the surface.

Upstairs, he put on clean blue jeans, his cowboy boots, a white button-down shirt and his old blue suit jacket, which he’d last worn to a wedding some years back, and before that, for his interview with Bill. It was stiff on his shoulders, an unyielding signal that he needed to be on his best behavior and not hurt anyone on his way to Ellis’ side.

He was grateful as he strode out, already sweating beneath his armpits, that Leland was in his shiny F150 truck with the engine already running. Inside the cab was cool, and Leland drove without much ceremony, going a little fast, even, up the road and out of the gate, which Jasper hopped out to open and shut.

When Jasper was safely buckled, Leland took off down the highway toward Cheyenne like a member of his own family was in trouble, and not just some ex-con who couldn’t stem his temper.

“Thank you, Leland,” said Jasper.

“You’re welcome,” said Leland, focused on the road, steering with both hands. “Now tell me this, Jasper. You’re the expert here. Why did Ellis get into it with Eddie Piggot, of all people?”

“I don’t know.” Jasper scanned the briskly passing green and brown hills that sloped up to the west. “We ran into him the other day at the hardware store, and he was his usual asshat self. Wanted to get into it with me, then, so maybe it was the same at the coffee shop?”

“I reckon you might be right.”

Unsaid between them for the entire drive to Cheyenne was the fact that Jasper had sworn on his forge Ellis wouldn’t hurt anyone. And now Eddie had a cracked skull and who knew what else.

On the outskirts of Cheyenne, Leland pulled into the parking lot of an industrial-looking building on the edge of town. It looked like it was made of cement blocks painted yellow and had long windows that couldn’t possibly provide any type of view, which would have been of the parking lot, anyway.

Jasper tumbled out and met Leland on the sidewalk, where Leland was already shaking the hand of a young lady with long, ink-dark hair and a sharp-edged black suit. She wore tiny chunks of turquoise in her ears, but no other jewelry.

“Jasper, this here’s Alice Marie Brenner, our lawyer. Alice Marie, Jasper Nash is our blacksmith and, as I’ve recently learned, Ellis’ partner.”

Jasper could only gawp as he shook her hand. She was so very young, but she certainly looked more pulled together than he felt.

“I see,” said Alice Marie. She looked at Jasper, almost studying him. “You seem quite worried. Don’t be. I’ve already collected a handful of statements, and while you take advantage of visiting hours, Leland and I are going to put our heads together and make some more phone calls.”

“Did Maddy and you discuss the payment plan for all this?” asked Leland.

“Payment plan?” Jasper’s head whirled. “What do we need a payment plan for? What’s Bill going to say?”

“Good lawyers aren’t free, that’s true,” said Alice Marie with a bright, fierce smile. “But my family and the Wainwrights go way back. My great-great-great—oh gosh, I don’t know how many greats, but Aunt Adeline and Bill’s Grandad Pete were good friends. I aim to honor that friendship today, so while I normally cost an arm and a leg, you get the friendship rate and a payment plan.”

Jasper could not speak. Simply could not find the words to thank her, so he took her hand and shook it, his grasp swallowing her hand.

“Let’s go in,” said Alice Marie. She led the way inside the building, got them checked in through the first layer of security, then directed Jasper to the second layer. “Tell them who you want to see. I’ll join you in a bit to get Ellis’ statement.”

“He doesn’t communicate well with strangers,” said Leland. “Did Maddy explain that?”

“She did,” said Alice Marie. “She also explained that Jasper and Ellis seem to communicate quite well. Which is why Jasper is going to help me get Ellis’ statement, and why I’m going to ask Jasper to help Ellis make his statement to the judge. Go on, now.”

She gave Jasper a little shove in the direction of the glass-windowed clerk station, and the dull-sheened steel door next to it.

With numb fingers, Jasper showed the clerk behind the glass his driver’s license, and signed the form, and when the buzzer went off and the steel door popped open, he went through. Waited while the door behind him closed and the one in front of him opened, and then walked onto the shiny linoleum floor. Two steps, that’s all it took.

Ellis was sitting at a circular table in a small sea of circular tables, each one bolted to the floor. Each table had four round metal seats painted a bright primary color, as if to distract from the official function of the room.

At the far end was a bank of windows with bars on the outside and plastic guards on the inside. The plastic was scratched, so the sunlight came in streaks and daubs. The air, whirring from some unseen fan, smelled like Pine Sol and old piss.

Jasper strode to Ellis and just as Ellis got up and Jasper was about to hug him, a guard appeared at their side.

“No touching. You have ten minutes.”

Jasper sat down, heart pounding, feeling a cold sweat all over. He couldn't imagine being in a place like this and, in fact, had never been to jail. He didn't know what it was like.

Ellis did. He was wearing a blue jumpsuit and thin-soled slip-on sneakers that wouldn't have lasted a minute on the ranch. He was wearing handcuffs as well, and while he wasn't shackled to the eye ring bolt in the table, it sat there between them, winking silver and menace.

Ellis' head was down, the line of his cheek pale. His hair, stringy and damp from what must have been a recent shower, dripped dark dots on the pale blue cotton of his jumpsuit. Jasper saw no bruises, but realized that for Ellis, the bruises were all on the inside, and being arrested was making him feel every single one.

“Ellis.” Jasper put his hands on the table and pushed them across to Ellis as far as he dared.

With a motion that just about broke Jasper's heart, Ellis did the same. His handcuffs rattled against the surface of the metal table.

“Can you look at me, kiddo? Can you?”

After a very small pause, Ellis flicked his eyes up. There were purple shadows beneath his eyes, which were a dull silver that seemed to reflect the color of the handcuffs on his wrists. There was no color to his mouth whatsoever.

“Ellis.”

Sorry.

“I know. I know. We’ve got a lawyer. We’re getting statements. We’re going to get you through this and out of here.”

Ellis made a movement with his mouth. Jasper leaned forward.

“What?”

Ellis tried again, but Jasper had to shake his head, wishing he had a piece of paper and something to write with. It was his own fault for being unprepared for any of this.

When Ellis tapped the table, Jasper focused on that. Then Ellis drew letters with his forefinger.

P. H. I. L.

“*What?*”

G. U. A. R. D.

“He’s a guard here? Fuck that.”

Jasper stood up and opened his mouth to holler, but Ellis reached across and tugged on his fingers then snatched his hand back. Jasper sat down, eyeing the guard at the door, who was looking the other way as if there’d been nothing to see.

I. N. T. A. K. E.

“He was the intake guard?” Jasper looked hard at Ellis. “Are you okay? Did he do anything? Did he get rough with you?”

No.

Which didn’t mean much because even if Phil hadn’t tried anything yet, it didn’t mean he wouldn’t. They needed to get Ellis out of there before Phil had a chance.

The door opened and in walked Alice Marie Brenner with her briefcase, her high heel shoes going click clack on the linoleum floor.

The guard at the door straightened his stance as Alice Marie put her briefcase on the round metal table, unlocked it, and flipped it open. From it, she handed Ellis a pad of yellow

legal paper and a pen, which she clicked open before she handed it to him.

“Write a statement, if you would, Mr. Bowman,” said Alice Marie. “We don’t have a lot of time, so keep it brief. Answer the questions I’ve written down that I think the judge will ask. Include the facts, one of which, as I have learned, is that Eddie Piggot is quite a violent individual and this isn’t the first time he’s been aggressive to folks who work at the guest ranch. By the statements I’ve gotten so far from witnesses at the coffee shop, you were minding your own business. That’s our primary defense, and we need to make our presentation get right to the point when we get that ten-minute slot at 6 o’clock.”

Ellis wrote as fast as he could, his hand moving over the page, leaving behind his neat handwriting as he answered the questions. Meanwhile, Alice Marie took Jasper’s statement, and by the time she packed up her briefcase, and by the time the guard came to take Ellis back to his cell, Jasper was in a sweat from head to toe.

“He can’t be alone with Phil Singleton,” Jasper told the guard.

“Who’s that?” asked Alice Marie, her eyes sharp.

“That was Ellis’ old PO. He got caught red-handed smacking Ellis around, so he got fired from that. Now he works here.”

“Were you aware, sir?” Alice Marie looked at the guard’s badge. “Were you aware, Mr. Tillman?”

“No, ma’am,” said Mr. Tillman. “But I am now. I’ll look into it. Meanwhile, Ellis is in a cell by himself and he will be until the hearing. I’ll keep my eye on him.”

“Thank you, Mr. Tillman. Now.” She turned to Jasper. “Leland is in the coffee shop across the way making phone calls. We’re going to join him. You got your cell phone with you?”

Jasper nodded.

“We’re taking statements from everyone from the cashier at the coffee shop to Vernon at the hardware store to everyone Ellis has worked with. Leland mentioned someone named Sue, Frontier Ma. Do you know her?”

“Yes,” said Jasper, and while the tightness in his chest made his heart sore, he thought he might be able to see some light. Maybe.

He watched Ellis disappear through another steel door at the far end of the room. The line of Ellis’ shoulder looked sharp enough to cut through that steel, but Ellis went as obedient as a lamb.

The only thing keeping Jasper from breaking down was Alice Marie at his side, looking up at him with understanding in her solemn brown eyes.

“We’ll get him out,” she said. “It’ll just take a little work.”

ELLIS

Ellis lay on his back on the single bunk in his solitary cell, staring at the ceiling while the sounds of the county lockup swirled around him.

County lockup was different from prison in that the doors were thinner and the narrow mattress a little thicker. The sounds were familiar though, the clang of a door being shut from not too far away, the whoosh-whoosh of the air conditioning that made the cell more like the inside of a fridge than anything else. The smell of industrial cleansers. The sound of footsteps in the short corridor outside.

His single-bunked cell was for one man only, for a short time only, so unlike Wyoming Correctional, he had no books in a nearby cubby, nothing to write on or with, no generic chocolate cupcakes from the commissary hidden away for later. Someone, he'd been told, would bring him lunch in a bit. Until then, he could lie down or sit up. Either way, his thoughts had liberty to consume him. And consume him, they did.

Regret was a part of living, of course it was, and his regret over letting Jasper down, hell, letting the whole ranch down, but especially Jasper, felt like hard stabs from an unseen blade.

As he'd waited in the visitor's room, handcuffs clinking, damp hair from his required inspection shower dripping onto the thin cotton of his prison-issued jumpsuit, he felt as though he'd stepped back in time to his meeting with the parole board. Then, he'd been sweaty and nervous about his mangled tattoo and whether he'd end up some place shitty or whether they'd

let him out at all. Still reeling from his days in solitary, he'd been focused on getting out, and that was it. After that, he hadn't cared.

Now, though. Solitary, while not punitive, gave him too much time to think. About Jasper and their first days together.

Jasper had not welcomed Ellis with open arms, but then, who could blame him? Had their places been switched, Ellis knew he wouldn't have wanted a shifty-eyed, drug-dealing ex-con placed in his care. Wouldn't have wanted the responsibility of trying to house and feed someone who only wanted to visit their mom's grave and then lay down in a ditch to die.

Ellis had visited his mom's grave. Had said his goodbyes as best he could, unheard words from a sick-sore heart spoken over a flat, granite marker that perhaps only the pastor who'd read the service and the maintenance man who mowed the grass in the small cemetery outside Cheyenne would ever see.

When he'd returned to the ranch to Jasper, Jasper's welcome, while gruff, had not been what Ellis had been expecting. Jasper had explained how he wanted things to go, that he wanted Ellis to let him know when he'd needed something.

He'd fed Ellis and put him to work. Made sure of Ellis' favorite flavor of ice cream. More than that, he'd made a place for Ellis at his side, welcoming him to the warmth of his forge, the simplicity of industry, the panacea of work.

And when he kissed Ellis and held him and danced with him? Over and over, like a balm to the ragged edges of his soul, the healing had begun. Slowly. Over ice cream and sunsets and the sad, thin wail of faraway coyotes. Over the clang of Jasper's hammer on his anvil. Over the excited chatter of little girls in calico sunbonnets, their flowered skirts swirling. Little by little, the bits of him had begun to patch themselves together.

But as he'd sat in the visitor's room waiting for Jasper, teeth on the verge of chattering, he'd been reeling from Phil's slanted grin as he'd instructed Ellis to strip. To bend over and

cough. Phil's latex-gloved fingers had then checked out all of Ellis' holes and crannies. His mouth. His armpits. His ass.

The fact that there'd been another guard monitoring the intake process had been the only thing saving Ellis from truly rough treatment. Just the same, his heart had sped up and not slowed down until the intake process was over, and he signed for the receipt of his wallet and the keys to Jasper's truck. The receipt from the laundromat when he'd gotten change for the washer. There'd been no receipt from the coffee shop because, of course, he'd not gotten that far.

Phil hadn't said anything in particular about it, but Ellis knew he'd be by later. When there was more privacy and less of an audience. Jasper had said they'd get him out of lockup, but would it happen in time?

Jasper. He'd looked Ellis up and down as he sat opposite from Ellis. In a dark blue suit jacket that looked a bit rusty at the edges, he seemed overly dressed, far from his normal and rumpled t-shirt and coal-dust stained blue jeans, adorably mussed, comfortably at home in his own skin.

Ellis had betrayed the trust Jasper had placed in him. And the ranch's trust, too, of course, but Jasper was what mattered. The look in his eyes made Ellis want to crumple under the crushing weight of everything he saw there. Affection mixed with worry. Fury mixed with pity. Love mixed with sadness.

If anyone had ever asked him how he could understand Jasper so well, he might have told them it was easy for him to see what was in those deep blue eyes. The simple sweetness of his curved mouth. The strength of his jaw, the cords of his forearms. The calluses from hard work on his hands.

That Jasper could understand Ellis so well had been a mystery from the start, though things had happened too fast for him to stop and examine all of this. Jasper had translated sounds, low hums, the flick of Ellis' fingers, as easily as if he'd been studying up. As easily as he turned forged iron into the shape of a heart, he could look at Ellis and just know.

Not that shaping iron was easy. It took fire and heat and energy. Understanding Ellis must have taken no less, yet

Jasper had done it, taking Ellis' silence and turning it into meaning. Being understood in that way made Ellis want to weep.

His weeping days were long behind him, and though the fraught goodbye between him and Jasper in the visitor's room had only just happened, his eyes were dry. His shivers were dying down. He just had to get through the afternoon.

When nighttime came, that would be a different hurdle bringing different fears. But for now, he listened to the hum of the air conditioner and imagined he could smell onions frying in old grease.

“Up.”

The door had opened without his realizing it, and Phil stepped into the cell. He carried a plastic cafeteria tray in his hands and walked over to place it on the metal table attached to the wall.

“Not surprised to see you in here.”

Ellis remained where he was, hands beneath his head on the thin pillow, elbows spread.

“Still not talking, eh?”

Phil might as well have been twirling a thin black moustache, Snidely Whiplash style, announcing to Ellis, with his usual lack of subtlety, that despite his demotion to county lockup guard, he was still intent on making Ellis' life hell.

Ellis wasn't scared, at least not at the moment. Guards had a predetermined period of time to do bed checks, deliver lunches, and fill out their reports. Everything was clocked. There was little Phil could do in two minutes and forty-five seconds besides deliver threats.

But later? Yeah. Phil could look at the monitors and write down in his log that he had a good reason to check out the solitary cells in the A wing of county lockup. Or maybe just one cell.

Phil was probably pissed about losing his job as PO, a job that paid well and had plenty of perks. Ellis was due for

payback, and that was a fact.

Looking up at Phil, dressed in dark blue pants that didn't quite fit and a lighter blue shirt that was too big in the shoulders, Ellis could, even without Phil saying a word, tell that Phil felt he'd come down in the world. He also probably resented that his uniform included a pretty unimpressive cloth badge sewn onto his shirt that said *Laramie County Detention Center* and a newly made, crisp-edged pin-on badge over his left breast pocket that said *Phil Singleton, Guard*. At that moment, he was nothing more than a rent-a-cop. Later that night he'd make Ellis pay for the insult. Later, when it got dark.

"Get your feet off the bed," said Phil as he went out the metal door and locked it behind him. To add insult to injury, he clicked the lock shut on the pass-through window, as if he expected having that much less light and sound in the cell would be additional punishment.

Ellis didn't move. Nor did he sit up and eat his lunch as, seeing that it was Phil who had brought it to him, there was no point in thinking that Phil hadn't spit in it or scraped grease from the floor to add flavor to the iceberg lettuce salad.

Behind this mild defiance, and in the silence that followed in Phil's wake, Ellis cowered beneath the roar of his own mistakes.

The afternoon was long, but eventually, someone, luckily not Phil, came to escort him to the hearing room. Ellis was familiar with such rooms, was familiar with being escorted in with handcuffs on his wrists. Being dressed in pale blue, he had nothing binding his ankles, which made it easier to sit on the knee-narrow bench.

To his right was the spot for the judge. To his left was another bench, which usually held the harder felons dressed in bright orange. There was no jury, and only two security guards, one at the back door, one at the far door, where regular people came in.

It was a small room, but before Ellis could look for Jasper, the judge came in, accompanied by her bailiff and the court

reporter.

Ellis stood up and sat down, trying to focus. There were only a few people sitting in the wooden rows. He was the only criminal present. Where was Jasper?

The door opened. In walked a young woman in a black suit, then Jasper, still in his blue suit jacket. Behind him, in a brown corduroy suit jacket and with his hat in his hands, was Leland. Behind him was Clay in a hay-speckled t-shirt as if he'd driven straight from the ranch. Leland was bending toward Clay, and he didn't look happy.

"I thought I told you not to come," said Leland in a voice he'd obviously meant only for Clay but, with the acoustics in the room, everyone heard him.

"I came anyway," said Clay with a defiant lift of his chin.

The whispers died a scratchy death as the young woman in a black suit came up to the table on the left in front of the judge, and an older man in a dark suit who was obviously there to represent the county, came up to the table on the right.

"You may be seated," said the bailiff.

Everyone sat while the bailiff made his announcements, and the judge flipped open a manilla folder and read off the purpose of the hearing.

If having to strip naked in front of Phil and remain perfectly still while Phil jabbed an un-lubed latex covered finger up his ass was a hardship, however brief, then listening to the judge read out the pertinent facts of the issue before them, while Jasper, and Leland, and Clay, and the woman listened with grave faces, was like getting fucked by the biggest cock in the cellblock.

Which had happened, back in the day, because Ellis had courted the biggest cock and literally invited him to an interlude in the library. Which meant that while he'd been well fucked, he'd not been fucked so hard he had to take himself bleeding to the infirmary and try to shrug it off and say he fell on a nasty pile of gravel in the exercise yard.

Still. He was naked now and all his faults, all of everything that had led up to the altercation in the coffee shop, were laid bare.

“I’ve read the facts,” began the judge, as she looked at all of them through her bifocals. “And I’m at a quandary as to what happened. By the contents of this file, Ellis Bowman is not a dangerous man, yet here I read of a fight in a coffee shop. There’s also a complaint by Mr. Eddie Piggot, who can’t be here on account of a headache. So I’m here to listen to why Mr. Bowman’s parole should not be revoked.”

The prosecutor for the county stood up and began to speak, and Ellis’ mind floated away.

He didn’t need to hear. He’d been there all the times he’d used his fists, even if it wasn’t in the record. He knew what happened between him and Clay, between him and some no-name guy at the hardware store in Chugwater. Between him and Eddie at the hardware store in Farthing. Between him and Eddie at the Rail Car’s coffee shop, the only incident actually being discussed.

When the prosecutor sat down, the young woman stood up. She had a back as straight as an arrow and long glossy dark hair, and she was so professionally dressed her edges almost seemed sharp.

“Your Honor,” said the woman. “I’m Alice Marie Brenner and I represent the defendant, and have been hired on his behalf by Farthingdale Ranch.”

“That’s the guest ranch, right?” asked the judge.

“Yes, Your Honor.” Alice Marie paused to look at the open folder on the table in front of her, which, from this short distance, Ellis could see contained a pile of yellow legal paper, neatly torn from the pad, and stacked. “I have here before me a statement from Ellis Bowman, written by his hand, when I visited him earlier today. I also have a number of statements from various people whom Ellis has worked with during his short time on the ranch. I have here with me in the courtroom Leland Tate, the ranch’s manager.” Alice Marie paused to gesture behind her. “Along with Jasper Nash, whom Ellis

worked for as assistant blacksmith and farrier. And Clay Pullman, who is a ranch hand who has worked with Ellis.”

“Thank you,” said the judge. “You may continue.”

“I have statements from a number of other people, Maddy Greenway, Vernon Wainwright, and so forth. There’s a long statement from a woman by the name of Sue Mitchell, who runs a program called Frontier Girls, who have visited the ranch a number of times. I have, in fact, more statements than can easily be read in the short time available to us, but which I would, if asked, hand over to the bailiff for your review.”

“Yes, please,” said the judge. There was a slight rustle of papers as the statements were handed over, and though it did seem to Ellis there was a lot of yellow paper placed on the judge’s large wooden desk, she only glanced at them.

“And then I have a favor, Your Honor,” said Alice Marie. “You could, of course, ask Mr. Bowman questions, as is the norm. But special circumstances have come to my attention. Due to trauma he suffered in prison, Ellis Bowman is unable to speak. I believe the trauma of not being able to attend his mother’s funeral one week before he was to be released on parole led to his mute state.”

“Are you a speech therapist?” asked the judge. “Or has a speech therapist evaluated his condition?”

“No, Your Honor,” said Alice Marie. “And that’s the problem. Nobody noticed. His condition slipped through the cracks and remained unevaluated, that is, until he was placed in the care of Jasper Nash. Who, in a very short period of time, was able to not only discover Mr. Bowman’s speech impediment and establish a line of communication, but has also discussed it with Leland Tate, the ranch’s manager, as to what might be done. Which is far more than the prison system ever did, and one reason why Ellis’ parole should not be revoked. Jail would be the worst place for him.”

“Might I ask what your favor is, Ms. Brenner?” asked the judge.

Ellis could hear the impatience in her voice, but then he could see the clock as well. It was three minutes after six. Hearings usually lasted ten minutes, and then the judge and everybody would get to go home.

“As you question Mr. Bowman,” said Alice Marie, “I would ask that you allow Mr. Nash to reply for him from Mr. Bowman’s statement. This will speed everything up and allow Your Honor to go home in time to enjoy dinner with your family.”

“I see.” The judge turned to Ellis with eyes that saw everything he was in that moment, from his stringy hair to the mangled tattoo to the handcuffs on his wrists, his hands in his lap. Waiting. Just waiting for the final verdict. “Mr. Bowman, do you consent to this?”

“Might I suggest, Your Honor,” said Alice Marie, somewhat hurriedly. “If Mr. Bowman objects to anything Mr. Nash says, he can raise his hand?”

“That would work for me,” said the judge. “Mr. Bowman, are you agreed?”

Jasper looked at Ellis, dark blue eyes focused on him and only him, as if waiting for the word. Of course the word had been given, perhaps so long ago it had been before Ellis had even been born.

Jasper had, almost from the very beginning, been able to understand Ellis even though he said practically nothing. And now, Jasper would say what Ellis could not. Of course Ellis agreed. But then he realized, as the silence grew, that they were waiting for a response from him.

Nod. Indrawn breath. *Yes*. Except the sound that came out was a huff of air.

That was enough for the judge, and for Jasper, who sent Ellis one of his sweetest smiles and then turned his attention to the judge.

“Any objections from the prosecution?” asked the judge.

“No, Your Honor.”

At the bailiff's direction, Jasper stood up, came through the little wooden gate, and stood at the side of Alice Marie's table. The back of his neck gleamed with sweat. He was nervous as hell, but he'd come all this way, far from his beloved forge, for Ellis' sake. It was more than Ellis deserved, but he'd do his best to earn it, come what may.

"Let's begin," said the judge. "Mr. Bowman, what can you tell me about your time at the ranch. Have you enjoyed it?"

Everyone turned to look at Jasper, who scanned Ellis' statement for a good long minute, then he began to speak.

"Yes, I do," said Jasper, after he looked at the yellow papers in his hand. "I enjoy the work and the food is good." Jasper smiled. "Except for stewed tomatoes, which I don't enjoy very much."

This made everyone laugh, a low polite laugh, which seemed to relax the air in the room.

"What do you do at the ranch, Mr. Bowman? Do you like your co-workers? Have you had any trouble with them?"

"I do a bit of everything at the ranch," said Jasper, his voice growing stronger. He took a breath as if to settle himself while he looked at Ellis' statement, and continued. "I do what Jasper tells me. Jasper is my boss. When we go to the workshop, we shoe horses, and I groom them, give them treats while they're waiting. I help Jasper scythe the grass around the fire pit. I help Clay and the others stack bales of hay for the horses' feed. When Leland asks, I go to the dances to make the crowd look less thin."

"So you basically do as you're told, is that right?"

"Yes, I'm very cooperative. Jasper gives clear instructions, so that helps. My only problem with him is that he gets up too damn early."

That made the small crowd laugh, and even the judge smiled.

"And who are—" The judge looked down at her papers, shuffling through them for a minute before looking up. "And who are the Frontier Girls that you worked with?"

“It’s a local version of the Girl Scouts,” said Jasper, after a glance at Ellis’ statement. “They’re all around ten years old or so, and they dress up in skirts and bonnets and earn badges. They came to a demo at the forge, and watched Jasper make things, and shoe a horse. Then one of them got to ride the pony that had just been shod. They want to go on a picnic—” Jasper stopped, and it seemed to Ellis that he was personally moved by the fact that the Frontier Girls had had such a good time that they wanted more of the same. “They liked the demo, and now they want to go on a pony ride and picnic with us. With me and Ellis.” Those last words were said in Jasper’s own voice, low and even-timbred.

“There are a lot of signatures here,” the judge observed, glancing briefly at her own notes.

“Well, there were a lot of little girls,” said Jasper, smiling. “I’m speaking for myself here. They’re well behaved each time they visit us. Very polite. I’d be glad to have them back to the ranch in a heartbeat.”

“Nice to have that kind of response,” said the judge. “Now, can you tell me what Ellis said happened at the coffee shop?”

It took Jasper a minute as he collected his thoughts and looked at Ellis’ statement, and Ellis knew why. Jasper had never ranted about Eddie Piggot, but his reaction in both hardware stores, the stiffness of his shoulders, the sharp way he looked at Eddie, was enough to tell Ellis there was bad blood between them and a whole lot of nasty water under the bridge.

“Mr. Piggot,” said Jasper, biting off the name. “He doesn’t like the guest ranch at all. He thinks it’s fake. He likes to talk smack about it every chance he gets. Both times I met him, he was going off at the mouth about it. I was alone in the coffee shop when Eddie went past me. He bumped into me and he was badmouthing the ranch, and I lost my temper with him because I wanted him to shut up.”

Ellis’ eyebrows went up because that had been exactly what had been going through his mind. He’d not written all of

that down in response to Alice Marie's questions, but trust Jasper to know what Ellis had been thinking.

"Do you lose your temper often?" asked the judge.

"Only with Eddie Piggot," said Jasper, which caused titters, though these were edged with nervousness.

"Seems to me it's not only with Mr. Piggot," said the judge. "According to my notes, you caused a riot in the prison cafeteria shortly before you were to be released on parole. Can you explain what happened there?"

"I'd started dealing drugs to pay for my mom's cancer treatment," said Jasper, with no hesitation at all, not looking at his notes. "I got in pretty deep pretty fast, and was in jail while she had to struggle on her own. The money ran out. She died. They wouldn't let me have furlough to attend her funeral. I lost it."

Jasper paused, licked his lips, then began again, not looking at the statement at all but speaking as though from Ellis' true heart.

"I loved my mom. After my dad died, she was my whole world. I wanted to say my last goodbyes to her, but they wouldn't let me out. I don't know why. They were going to release me in a week, anyway."

Ellis held so still he could feel the blood rushing beneath the surface of his skin. A lot of the information was in Ellis' file, now on the judge's desk. But a lot of it, Ellis' reasoning when he'd lashed out, how he felt about his mom, wasn't. And nothing, but nothing, felt as naked as having his own personal thoughts, locked away in his heart, laid bare for all to hear.

The only way Jasper could have known all of this was because he knew what was inside of Ellis. Whom he'd read as clearly as the words on a page in one of the books on the shelf in the living room of his very small cabin.

Jasper's life was contained in that cabin, in the workshop. He'd made Ellis a part of that life, made a space for Ellis' body in his bed. Understood Ellis, perhaps even better than he did himself.

“I see,” said the judge. “Mr. Nash, if I might speak directly to you now.”

“Yes, Your Honor,” said Jasper, swaying on his feet a little, reaching out to the table to steady himself with his fingertips.

“How do you feel about having Ellis Bowman in your care once more? Do you feel he’s a danger to you? That he might hurt you or steal from you?”

“He’s not a danger to me,” said Jasper, as easily as if he’d said the words a hundred times before. And, as Ellis noted, Jasper didn’t mention Ellis’ illicit borrowing of his truck. Which was where now? Ellis had left it parked by the laundromat. Had it gotten towed? Or was it still there, gathering debris around its wheel wells?

“Is he a danger to anyone?”

“I don’t believe so,” said Jasper. “And my boss doesn’t think so either. That’s why he hired us a lawyer so Ellis can come back to us.”

“Mr. Tate,” said the judge. “Do you agree with Mr. Nash’s statement?”

“I do, Your Honor,” said Leland, as solemnly as if he were reciting his wedding vows. He even stood up, his hat in his hands going round and round, quite slowly.

“And—” The judge paused to check her notes. “Mr. Pullman, you’re an employee of the ranch who has worked with Ellis Bowman. You’ve come, I assume, in support of Mr. Bowman being released into Mr. Nash’s custody?”

Ellis held his breath. He and Clay had clashed from their first meeting, but that had been Ellis’ fault. He’d read the room wrong and taken Clay’s miss-step on the edge of the dance floor as an overt show of aggression. So what might have been a mere shoving match between two young men had turned into Clay on the ground with a sore jaw and Ellis standing over him with a sore hand. Which had led to Leland having to intervene, which had led to Ellis shoving the boss man.

Why they’d let him continue on at the ranch, he didn’t know. Nor did he know, not really, whether or not Clay was

about to throw Ellis under the bus. He had every right to, every reason to.

“Yes, I did, Your Honor,” said Clay in a clear, steady voice.

There was no doubt in his eyes, no hesitation in his words. His square jaw was set and determined. He was so pretty standing there with the overhead lights gleaming on his corn-silk blond hair and his freshly shaved face, complete with dimples, that, at least the way Ellis saw it, anybody would be hard-pressed not to take him at his word and, besides, fall in love with him utterly and completely.

“He’s a hard worker and I’m proud to know him.”

“That’s quite a statement,” said the judge. “You may sit down. Counsel, will you approach the bench?”

Sometimes this happened. Ellis had seen it before. Sometimes the judge invited counsel into chambers, but most of the time, in little cases like these, the judge wanted both the prosecuting attorney and the defense attorney in front of her desk for a quick chat before making a decision. At this point it could go either way.

Ellis looked at the clock. It was nine minutes after six.

In less than a minute, he would know.

“Thank you, you may return to your places,” said the judge. She fiddled with her bifocals for a quick second, straightened the papers on her desk, then looked directly at Ellis.

“Mr. Bowman, your case is not unusual in that sometimes parolees backslide and need another stint behind bars. However.” The judge paused, and she seemed to relax her whole body as she sat there. “Your case is also unusual in that you weren’t treated fairly by the prison system. You were assigned a PO who abused you and who, as I have just learned, works at this very facility. I intend to follow up with that, but in the meantime, I believe you are better served outside of these walls rather than within them. I hereby release you into the custody of Farthingdale Ranch, and in particular

the custody of Jasper Nash. Your parole has been increased from six months to twelve months, including time served. I suggest you use the time wisely. Understood?”

Ellis stood up. He took a deep breath and tried to say *Thank you, Your Honor*, but nothing came out except a puff of air.

“He says, thank you, Your Honor,” offered Jasper.

“I gather that,” said the judge. “That is the end of this session. Bailiff, will you see everyone out?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” said the bailiff. “All rise.”

Everybody stood up. The judge stood up, furling her black robes around her, and walked down the short flight of steps to the back door, which the guard held open for her. The stenographer closed her machine and shut down. The other guard opened the back door and everyone filed out.

Everyone but Ellis, who was led out the door he had come through and was escorted, not to his solitary cell, but to the intake room, where he was given back his clothes, his work boots, his wallet. The keys to Jasper’s truck. He signed for everything, shuddering the whole while.

He was allowed to step behind a curtain to get dressed in private. In spite of his shower, the day’s funk pressed into his skin, and his stomach decided it was hungry. Jasper would feed him, that he knew. All he had to do was wait.

“This way, Mr. Bowman,” said the guard from the visitor’s room, *Ralph Tillman, Guard*, as he buzzed open the door to the lobby of the detention center. Then with a wink, he added, “I’ll be sure to give Phil Singleton your regards.”

Ellis could not help but grin at this. Phil would be mad that he’d not gotten a last shot at Ellis. As well, the judge, a stern woman for sure, had Phil on her radar, which would be the last of Phil on the state’s payroll.

If he and Ellis ever again met, they’d be on a level playing field. For now, he jingled the keys to Jasper’s truck in his pocket and strolled through the lobby like a free man. Which he was.

He'd be even more free the second Jasper's arms went around him, so the only thing he needed to do, had to do, was find Jasper. After that, he'd be with Jasper, and nothing else would matter.

He stepped out into the parking lot, warm in contrast to the interior of the detention center. Summer air wafted all around, and he took a deep breath.

It was only when he saw Jasper standing next to Leland and Leland's shiny silver truck that his emotions, buoyed up by his being granted a continuance of his parole, wavered. Not because he doubted Jasper would be there waiting for him, and he was, but because all the deep, tender feelings he couldn't explain to himself rose and rose and rose until he could barely breathe.

Jasper was there. Waiting for him. He was not alone.

JASPER

The wait felt like forever. Leland had sent Clay back to the ranch in his battered yellow truck, and now it was just the two of them, Leland and Jasper, waiting at the edge of the parking lot by the silver F150.

The rumple-surfaced asphalt parking lot was pretty much empty except for a row of cheap cars at the far end that no doubt belonged to folks who worked at the detention center.

One of those cars was Phil's, probably, but Jasper didn't want to waste his time on anything so foolish as keying Phil's car, which was illegal and, more importantly, would distract him from waiting for the door to the detention center to open. The front desk guard had indicated that was where Ellis would emerge from when they released him.

So Jasper waited. And waited some more while a warm breeze kicked up and the sun slid in and out of clouds overhead that looked as though they, with their puffy edges, were also anxiously awaiting Ellis' arrival. Which was only his mind being fanciful in an effort to distract him. He didn't want to be distracted. He wanted Ellis.

When the door opened, he was ready, breath held tight in his chest, and when he saw it was Ellis, he started walking, started walking fast.

Ellis saw him and froze, as if he couldn't believe his eyes, then wobbled on his knees as if he'd been just about knocked over by a hard breeze. Then Ellis ran at Jasper like he'd been

shot from a cannon, and when Jasper held his arms open, Ellis flung himself into them, wrapped his legs around Jasper's hips, and buried his face in Jasper's neck.

He was shaking. Jasper could feel tears on his skin.

"Easy, kiddo," said Jasper, low, not concerning himself with who might be watching as he curled an arm around Ellis' back, slinging the other beneath Ellis' bottom. "I've got you. You're safe now. You're safe. I'm going to take you home, okay?"

Nod.

A kiss.

Ellis' warm breath on his skin.

Jasper.

"Yeah, kiddo, it's me."

Ellis smelled like day-old sweat, and tear stains, and Pine Sol, and dust from an ancient air conditioner. And he felt so thin, like his ribs were just below his skin.

Jasper wished he could fly home with Ellis in his arms and run a hot bath so he could scrub away the memory of that day and whatever crap Phil had pulled while Ellis had been within his reach. Then he was going to feed Ellis whatever he wanted to eat, and then hold Ellis while he slept. Even that wouldn't take away Jasper's jittery feeling that it could still go terribly wrong and the judge would change her mind, but it was a start.

From behind him came a small, discreet cough.

Jasper turned, his fingers in Ellis' hair as he cradled Ellis' head.

"Give you boys a minute?" asked Leland.

Leland didn't ask questions like that, at least not normally. His job was to give orders and have those orders followed. Jasper knew he was being given a lot of leeway, but as to how long that might last, he had no idea.

"We just need to get home," said Jasper.

“Where’s your truck at?” asked Leland.

“I don’t rightly—” began Jasper, but he was stopped by a single whispered word in his ear. “The laundromat. That’s where Ellis parked it when I sent him there.”

“Well, let’s go then. I’ll drop you off so you can drive you two home.”

Though it pained him beyond belief, Jasper urged Ellis out of his arms to stand on his own feet so they could get in the truck and leave the detention center far behind them. He managed this, though Ellis stayed close while Jasper opened the passenger side door before crawling into the back behind the passenger seat.

When Jasper buckled himself in, he felt Ellis’ fingers stirring along the back of his neck as though Ellis could barely bear to let go of the contact between them.

As Leland drove them, businesslike, through town and up the back highway along the sloped green and brown foothills, he kept his silence for a good long while. Jasper clocked the distance with anxiety building in his gut the entire way to Farthing.

“This is how it’s going to be,” said Leland as he chugged slowly down Main Street and over to Second Street, where the laundromat was. He parked the truck across from Jasper’s truck, but kept the engine running. “Judge wants quarterly reports, if not monthly, but that depends on us and how well this goes.”

“Sure,” said Jasper, slowly, trying to keep his eyes on Leland’s expression at the same time he watched Ellis watching him with those grey eyes of his.

“You and I and Ellis are going to meet weekly, from now on,” said Leland in his careful way. “In my office, so it’s official like.”

“Boss—”

“This is not punitive,” said Leland. He shook his head. “It just isn’t. It’s to make sure that this works, you see?” His gaze at Jasper was steady, the way it always was. As if Leland

expected the best of Jasper and knew he would get it. “Those meetings, and the write-ups, which I’ll do, will ensure that by the time Maddy types up the monthly or quarterly report for the judge, we have all our ducks in a row. Right?”

“Yes,” said Jasper with a swallow. “Yes, sir.”

“You are not in trouble, so get that through your head.” Leland looked out through the windshield as he gathered his thoughts, gently tapping on the steering wheel with his thumb. “The mistake was, I think, sending Ellis on his own so soon. On the ranch, when you’re near, there’s no trouble, not as far as I can see. So let’s do it that way. And, as time goes on, we’ll all help Ellis do things more on his own. When he’s ready.” True to Leland’s nature, he turned to look at Ellis and addressed him directly. “Does that sound good to you, Ellis?”

Jasper heard Ellis swallow hard.

“Yes.”

“Good,” said Leland. He bent to put the car in drive, but then paused and looked at Jasper. “I just had no idea myself, you know? I read Ellis’ file, but with the tax benefit glittering in my eyes, I just didn’t realize it would be like this. Then again, I’d rather he were with us than somewhere else.”

“Somewhere less wholesome,” offered Jasper.

“Yes,” said Leland. “I admit that’s how I think about the ranch. Now, you two get on home. I’ll figure out a good meeting time next week and let you know.”

“Thank you,” said Jasper, then he got out of the truck before Leland could change his mind and determine he needed to distribute more lecture. But that wasn’t Leland’s way at all. When he said he was done talking, he was done talking.

Offering his hand, Jasper helped Ellis shimmy out from behind the passenger seat, and together the two of them waited on the sidewalk across from the laundromat while Leland drove off.

As the street grew silent, Jasper slid his arm around Ellis’ waist and kissed his temple.

“Food first? Or bath?” asked Jasper. “I recommend the latter because once again, you smell like a prison.”

“Bath,” said Ellis, and while he wasn’t smiling, not yet, there was a small light in those silver-grey eyes of his. “Grilled cheese?”

“Sure,” said Jasper as Ellis handed over the keys and they strode across the traffic-less street to his patiently waiting truck. “Grilled cheese is love.”

Jasper peeled off his old blue suit jacket while Ellis, oddly, kicked some leaves away from the tire wells. When Jasper got in the driver’s side, Ellis got in the passenger side.

Ellis was just about to buckle his seatbelt when Jasper stopped him with a raised hand. Pulled the lever beneath the bench seat to shift it back.

“C’mere,” he said, patting his thigh.

Ellis did not have to be asked twice. He slithered onto Jasper’s lap, his back against the steering wheel, his thighs over Jasper’s thighs. He snuggled himself close, and Jasper held him closer so they were hip to hip and belly to belly. He was warm where his body touched Ellis’ body, the hard bones of Ellis’ hips almost grinding into his.

Jasper checked the rear-view mirror and reached around Ellis to start the engine and shift the truck into gear. It was dangerous to drive like this, but he was going to do it, slowly, all the way to the ranch.

Leland would never find out, and who was going to tell him? Not him. Not Ellis, who pressed even closer as the truck trundled out of town and up the dirt road to the gate of the ranch.

“Can you get it?” asked Jasper, kissing Ellis’ neck, pushing away his hair.

Mmmmm.

Ellis slid off Jasper, got the gate, then shut it and slid back in, this time to sidle up to Jasper on the bench seat, pressing their sides together.

“Leland,” said Ellis. “Might see.”

“Yeah, probably smart.”

Going as fast as he could without raising a dust cloud, which might alert someone to how fast he actually was going, Jasper pulled up in front of the cabin, slammed on the brakes, turned off the engine and pulled Ellis to him. Smothered him with kisses and long pets to his back, whispers against his skin, feeling the ache all through him that he had almost lost this. Ellis had almost been sucked into the bowels of the prison system as though by an invisible giant who didn't care who it harmed but only wanted to fill its belly.

“Come inside,” said Jasper. “I'll run you a bath.”

“Hair,” said Ellis.

“Sure,” said Jasper, and he smiled, already envisioning it. “I can help you with that.”

Inside the shadowy, still coolness of the cabin, Jasper took off his cowboy boots, tossed the suit jacket on the couch, and sent Ellis up to get clean clothes. All the while, Jasper contemplated burning the clothes Ellis had worn, but that would be foolish, and besides, he had plenty of bleach.

In the bathroom, he ran hot water into the tub, mixed it with just enough cold, and peeled off his socks, as it was getting hot in the room.

Ellis appeared at the door, adorably naked with an armful of clean clothes. Which Jasper took from him and laid to the side, then pulled Ellis to him and traced the line of Ellis' body with his hands. Making his mark. Wiping away the air of the prison, the touch of the guards, the scent of cold air inside the room where Ellis had been held.

Ellis shivered and sighed, tilting his head back, exposing his throat, the badly done tattoo.

“Bath now?” asked Ellis as he dipped his chin and looked up at Jasper.

“Yes,” said Jasper.

He helped Ellis into the tub and sighed as Ellis sighed when he sank low until the water came up to his chin. A low lavender-scented mist hung in the air above the tub, which shifted with the movements of Ellis' body.

"Hair," said Ellis again.

"Sure," said Jasper.

Then he began. He washed Ellis' hair, rinsing it out with water from the spray hose, over and over. Then he scrubbed Ellis' back and his arms and his chest, between his legs, and everywhere.

With every motion slow and careful, he wiped away the stain the detention center had left behind and left his own mark, of love, of caring, in its place. He kissed Ellis' nose, dripping with water. He swiped the soap from Ellis' forehead lest it get into his silver-grey eyes. He bent low, propping himself on the other side of the tub with one hand, and kissed Ellis' damp mouth as solemnly as a vow.

When Jasper determined Ellis was clean enough, at least for now, and the rolling growl of Ellis' stomach could be heard underwater, he guided Ellis out of the tub and knelt at his feet to buff his legs, between his legs, his belly, everywhere, finally to stand to pat Ellis' hair dry.

"Hair," said Ellis.

"Yes, it's clean," said Jasper, scrunching the towel around the ends of Ellis' hair.

"Cut," said Ellis.

"But why?" asked Jasper. Of course he would do as Ellis asked. It was his hair, after all, and Jasper knew right where the scissors were that were sharp enough to cut hair.

"Phil," said Ellis, then he yanked on his hair, pulling his head to one side.

"Oh."

Sure, that made sense. Phil had pulled on Ellis' hair, so Ellis wanted what Phil had touched gone from him. Which made Jasper want to drive straight back to the detention center

with a sledgehammer and make short work of whatever piece of shit vehicle Phil drove. Maybe later. Maybe.

For now, Jasper wrapped a dry towel around Ellis' slender waist and guided him to sit on the edge of the newly drained tub with his feet inside the tub. Then, grabbing the sharp scissors and a comb, gently, and with a great deal of care, he began to cut Ellis' hair.

He wasn't a barber by any means, but had seen it done, had felt it being done. Ellis shivered as the locks of partially damp hair flitted onto his shoulders before rolling into the tub. He crinkled his eyes as Jasper cut the hair at his temples and looked up at Jasper with an almost wonder in his eyes as Jasper created bangs for him.

"Yours," said Ellis, and at first Jasper thought he was making a joke, that Jasper was in charge of his hair now, since he was the one who'd cut it. "No, yours."

Ellis stood up and took his hand and placed it on Jasper's heart. Jasper held the scissors and comb out of the way, somewhat startled, then he put them down on the bathroom counter with a clunk and echoed Ellis' gesture.

"Yours," he said.

Nod.

"Grilled cheese," said Ellis solemnly.

With Ellis dressed in boxer briefs and a clean white t-shirt, and Jasper in his boxer briefs, Jasper solemnly made two grilled cheese sandwiches with sharp cheddar and plenty of good mayonnaise on the outside and a swirl of golden mustard on the inside. Then, sitting at the table, they both crunched through their sandwiches. It was only when Ellis looked at him, partly damp bangs falling over his sleepy eyes, that Jasper decided they'd both waited long enough.

"Cmon," he said. "Upstairs."

With a sleepy nod, Ellis wiped the toast crumbs from his mouth with the back of his hand and followed Jasper to Jasper's room. There Jasper laid Ellis on the bed and knelt between Ellis' legs. When Ellis was settled, his head on the

pillow, Jasper hooked his fingers around the elastic waistband of Ellis' boxer briefs, Jasper looked up at Ellis.

“This is as rough as I'm going to get today,” he said. “Understood?”

With a swallow, the muscles of his neck moving, Ellis nodded.

Without putting Ellis' boxer briefs down, Jasper dipped his chin, pressing his cheek on the gentle dip between Ellis' hip and his cock curved against his belly. He felt the warmth of Ellis' skin through the cotton, smelled Ellis' scent, salty and clean from the bath. Felt the rise and fall of Ellis' belly, the tremor on the inside of Ellis's thighs. And sighed. Soaked up the moment. Wanted to thank the universe that he had Ellis back in his arms, under his roof, in his bed.

He sensed Ellis's fingers swirling in his hair and realized he'd not done anything remotely rough the way Ellis liked it.

He lifted his head.

Ellis pulled on the waistband of his boxer briefs to expose his now-hard cock with a small, flesh-echoed pop. Tugged on Jasper's hair as if he intended to force Jasper to take him in his mouth. But there was a smile curving Ellis' lips, and in his eyes was a gentle laughing tease.

“Yeah, okay,” said Jasper, smiling back.

Later, perhaps, they might have a serious talk about exactly what had gone on in that detention center that while it had left no mark on Ellis' body had certainly left its effect behind. As to how much of that involved Phil, Jasper would find that out later. As for now—

“Here,” said Jasper. He knelt up to grab both of Ellis' hands and held them in a single fist over Ellis' head. “You can't get away, right?”

It was all foolishness. With a single twitch Ellis could most certainly get away, and Jasper would let him. For now, they would pretend that Jasper was being rough and mean about it as he held Ellis' hands in his, and that with the other he

roughly pulled Ellis' boxer briefs down to his thighs with a hard tug.

In reality, he coaxed the elastic down with the utmost care. Then, with the sweetest gentleness, he took Ellis into his mouth and began to suck. Softly, oh, so softly, which perhaps, seeing as how hard Ellis began, weeping moisture from the slit of his cock, was its own kind of torture.

Jasper took his time. Used his tongue slowly, sucked quite lightly. Laved Ellis' shaft carefully.

And all the while Ellis squirmed, moans coming from his throat as it worked over the sounds, parts of words, some even close to true swear words, and all of this made Jasper smile, vibrating a low chuckle as he swirled his tongue around the head of Ellis' twitching cock.

"Don't come till I say so," said Jasper, lowering his voice to a growl for effect. "You hear me?"

It was worse than hopeless. With a bark of a laugh, Ellis came, pulsing into Jasper's welcoming mouth, and Jasper let Ellis' hands go and smiled as he swallowed.

It was too good. It was too good between them to pretend like it was anything else: a welcome home. And true love's kiss as Jasper rose between Ellis' thighs, planted his hands on either side of Ellis' head, and kissed him on the lips good and proper.

"Love," he said against Ellis' mouth, curved in a smile.

"Love," said Ellis, in echo, his eyes glinting silver and grey.

A soft wind stirred the thin cotton curtains and washed over their bodies as they nestled amidst the bedclothes, waiting till their breaths slowed, their skins cooled.

Jasper sensed the sky reaching to the dark purple and purple-blue hues that came just past sunset. There wouldn't be a storm that night, but that didn't matter, for Ellis would spend it in his arms. And every night till forever ended.

EPILOGUE

It was always busy at the ranch, and that was good because it kept Ellis from thinking too much. And it was nice, as well, to follow orders without imagining there was an ulterior motive behind it, that Jasper or Leland might be trying to grind him to a stump.

What they were actually doing was building him up, supporting him. He knew that like he knew the back of his own hand.

The only thing that kept their attentiveness from being bothersome, and it was hardly that, was because in response to the room and board and monitoring that kept him out of prison, they expected hard work. Every day. All day. Work that left Ellis a sweaty, hay-flecked, horse-slobber dappled mess, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

Most mornings he would work with Jasper in the workshop, helping to shoe a horse, or helping to repair a bit of wrought iron that once decorated the top of a split-rail fence but that had rusted apart after years of weather. Then would come a phone call from Leland, where Jasper and the boss man would discuss the types of weatherproof paint they might use and should it be black like the metal wagon wheels that made up the fence line along one side of the parking lot or should it be green like the front gate?

It was all so mundane and pedestrian and simply ordinary that all Ellis could do was smile. His life now was so different from what it had been only a short while ago that he was grateful for every blister on his heel, which of course then

caused Jasper to assess whether Ellis' work boots were too big or too small or whether it was the thickness of his socks that had caused the issue. Ellis got used to being fussed over like he was an overgrown child whose loving nanny was sure he might catch pneumonia if the slightest bit of damp reached him.

In the afternoon, someone would call Jasper on his cell phone, usually Clay or maybe Maddy, and the request would come: could Ellis help Jamie in the corral? Could Ellis help Brody with the post-trail ride grooming? Once a call had come from Levi, the ranch's cook: Could Ellis come and help peel carrots and potatoes for the dinner buffet?

Whatever it was, Ellis was happy to help. He was earning his keep. He was keeping to the conditions of his parole.

Best of all, at the end of each day, he got to go back to the cabin to have dinner with Jasper. To take a bath and fall into Jasper's arms. Or take a bath and push Jasper onto the couch so he could lazily unzip Jasper's crumpled, soot-stained blue jeans, pull out Jasper's still-soft cock. Take it into his mouth. Lick it into attention, and suckle it into hardness, swallowing Jasper down when he came a good long while later.

It was on a Friday afternoon when things changed a little bit, and the attention shifted from Ellis to Maddy. Ellis was glad to give up the spotlight, but he was almost frenzied by the reason for it.

At a trucker gas station just outside of Dwyer Junction, where Maddy had stopped to fill up her gas tank, a trio of ruffians, truckers who'd just gotten laid off from their routes, had determined Maddy was fodder for some fun. They'd not only hassled her while she went inside to pay, they'd gotten in their battered trucks and tried to run her off the county road that led to the highway.

Maddy had managed to lose them by knowing the back roads better than they did, and made her way to Mrs. Tate's 10-acre farm in Chugwater. There, shaking past the point of being able to drive another foot, she'd called Leland. Who came to pick her up, along with Clay, who drove her truck

back to the ranch. Leland had called the state troopers, who, armed with good descriptions of all three men, and partials of each license plate, promised to take care of it.

Which then led to a small argument in Maddy's office, Leland standing over her, as they discussed whether or not Maddy should be allowed to drive herself around anymore.

"I will drive, thank you very much," said Maddy with some force. "I'll be good God damned if you keep me from doing something I love, and something which benefits the ranch, need I remind you."

Ellis watched this with wide eyes, making himself a narrow shape against the frame of the open door. He'd come up to her office when he'd seen the state troopers leaving and, heart pounding a bit fast, wanted to make sure he wasn't in trouble, so he thought to ask first hand. Ask Maddy. That was the way to find out anything he needed to know, usually.

"I just want you to be safe, Maddy," said Leland. "I don't doubt your ability."

"Yes, you do." Maddy stood up, slamming a stack of manilla folders on the desk with some force. "You think I didn't handle those dumb jerks? Why, I sure did. I shook them off. I got the info. I drove to a safe place. I did everything right and you know it." She emphasized her words by poking Leland in the chest.

At that point, both Maddy and Leland turned to look at Ellis. He'd probably made a noise under his breath, and now he was the focus of their combined attention, not anything he would wish on anyone not prepared for it.

"Ah," said Maddy. She pointed at Ellis. "I have the perfect solution. I'll drive. Ellis will be my bodyguard."

Ellis felt his eyebrows go up in his forehead.

"You can't just pull Ellis off his work every time you want to run an errand," said Leland. "That's not fair."

"We'll make a schedule," said Maddy, undeterred. "I'll promise to stick to that schedule, and during that time Ellis works for me. He can help me in the office if I don't need to

pick up groceries or supplies. He's an English teacher, isn't he? He can file and do other stuff." Maddy looked at him with a smile. "Right, Ellis?"

Ellis nodded as hard as he could, unable and unwilling to refuse her. After all, she'd been brave enough to befriend him, and wasn't afraid of him now.

"Then he'll drive you—"

"No, no," said Maddy, wagging her finger at Leland. "I'll drive. I can drive perfectly well. Ellis can be my navigator, though I hardly need one. And between times, he can read to me."

"You've got podcasts, audio books—"

"This will be better. It'll give Ellis a chance to work on his communication skills."

The ranch had been able to get the county to pay for only four speech therapy sessions, and those were all over. The teacher, a young woman with bright eyes and a ready smile, had tested Ellis and determined that time and practice would help best, plus he should be encouraged to speak but in his own time, at his own speed. This didn't seem much more than Jasper had already figured out, but it was nice to know he wasn't going to be mute forever.

Which was how, two afternoons a week, he started working for Maddy. He filed folders and typed up letters on her ancient computer. He took a look at the ranch's website when she complained about it, and determined to teach himself html code, and a little bit of graphics, and started to work on it.

In the end, he'd come up with a design for the website that was beyond his skills, so they hired a young kid, still in high school, who made them a whiz bang website that was easy for Ellis to update as needed. Then when Maddy's computer gave up the ghost, Ellis researched a new computer for her, and set up a better backup system for her.

All in all, she was proud of his usefulness. Through the grapevine he found out she bragged about him to all her

farmer friends, and her co-op friends, and even to the man who sold her sweet honey and rhubarb compote. Clay, when he found out about all the praise, gave Ellis some good-natured hassle about it, along with a gentle jab to the ribs.

Then, one other afternoon each week, he accompanied Maddy on her rounds. She drove, of course, and he read out to her whatever she wanted, from romance novels with steamy covers to biographies about George Washington or Marilyn Monroe. Her reading tastes were so varied he never got bored, and bit by bit, his speech began to come easier, and he could say more than single words to just about anyone he interacted with. And when he was with her, nobody, but nobody, bothered Maddy at the gas station anymore, or anywhere along her route.

Still, all of his efforts on Maddy's behalf, the new computer, the website, cost the ranch money. The number of guests were still half what they usually were, according to Jasper, who then told him about the guy who went missing and made people scared to make reservations.

"It was a thousand and one chance that guy went missing," Jasper would say, irritated, but never to the point where he'd throw his tools around in the workshop. In the kitchen, though, he might slam a few pots on the stove. "There's no serial kidnapper hanging around or anything."

"Bill says—" said Ellis one evening when Jasper was whipping them up pancakes for dinner.

"I don't care what Bill says," said Jasper. "The heart scare he had over Christmas did something to his head, I'm telling you."

"—the mountain took him. Iron Mountain." When Jasper looked at Ellis mid-flip, Ellis nodded. "Brody told me all about it. The story of Old Joe and his little red fox."

"Told you all about it, huh?" Jasper waved his spatula in Ellis' direction. "If you want chocolate chips on these, they're in that cupboard. The bag is half empty and has a rubber band around it."

In no universe would Ellis ever say no to chocolate chips in his pancakes. He got out the bag and dumped every last chocolate chip into the batter. There were way too many chips now, but Jasper just stirred them in and cooked them up for Ellis.

They ate like bachelors, standing at the stove in their bare feet and blue jeans, shirtless, eating each pancake when it was ready, each bringing their respective plates to their chins and shoveling it in. They didn't bother with knives or napkins, just loads of butter cut from the stick with the edges of their forks, and as much real maple syrup as they each wanted. In the end, there were fewer things to wash, which meant they could go to bed earlier.

Not that they slept right away, oh no. Ellis stripped to the skin and wriggled on the bed so he was beneath Jasper's solid body, like he was hiding in a cave. Pulled Jasper to him and kissed him soundly, winding his legs around Jasper's legs, enjoying how Jasper's weight pushed him down. Enjoyed the rough scratch of the hair on Jasper's chest, the denser hair between his legs, the wiry hair on his thighs.

Then Ellis kicked like he was trying to get away. Like Jasper was the Big Bad on Cellblock C and he'd just cornered Ellis in the laundry. Or should it be the library? No, the library was too cozy, too homey. The laundry, which smelled like bleach and had hard edges and unseen corners where unspeakable things could happen, would be better for the story in his head.

Jasper was still kissing him, holding his head, stroking Ellis' bangs back from his forehead, and hadn't quite gotten into the spirit of things, so Ellis took it up a notch.

"No!" he said, pushing at Jasper's chest like he was defending himself.

Jasper drew back, blinking a little. Ellis could see his expression in the half light. He was totally confused.

"The guard will be along any minute. Besides, I told you no and I mean it."

Jasper's mouth made a little circle, and he shook his head with a low laugh. It might be mean of Ellis to expect Jasper to shift gears so suddenly, but Jasper had said, *Just give me a signal and I'll go with it. I'm adaptable.*

"I'll take what I want," growled Jasper. "And you can shut up about it."

Grabbing Ellis' hands, Jasper pulled them down till he tucked them beneath Ellis' back and held them there. It wasn't comfortable, but that was the point because it made an arc of Ellis' belly and widened the vulnerable space between his legs.

Holding Ellis tight against his chest, Jasper rolled to the side and reached between Ellis' thighs to stroke Ellis' cock, intent as if he meant to make Ellis come against his will.

"Don't like it?" asked Jasper, as mean as he could possibly be. "Too bad. You're going to come for me but not till I say so."

The strokes were lovely, the pressure of Jasper's fingers was lovely. When Jasper paused to lick his palm and add that to the moisture leaking from Ellis' cock, that was lovely, too.

It was all so lovely it was hard to get to that place in his head where the rough drive of desire took over the romance and snatched him into a darkness where he could grit his teeth and ride it through, coming out on the other side a little bit less dense with regret, a little bit lighter in his soul.

As well as he could, Ellis had explained this to Jasper. Jasper, the good man that he was, agreed to do his best. But he was as bad an actor as he was a good blacksmith. And he loved Ellis, loved him so much it was hard for him to hurt Ellis. Or even pretend to hurt him.

"Please," said Ellis, his voice small. He was asking for a lot, he knew he was. But Jasper had said to ask, and so he was. "*Please.*"

Ellis heard Jasper blow out a slow breath. He could almost hear Jasper thinking.

Then Jasper drew back and was up on his knees, towering over Ellis.

“Turn over.” When Ellis didn’t respond, Jasper grabbed his knees and flipped him over. Then he bent close, his fingers curling around the back of Ellis’ neck. “When I say turn over, you turn over. Got it?”

“G—” began Ellis but his single word was blocked off as Jasper shoved his face in the pillow.

“You say one word and so help me God I will throw you to the wolves in the exercise yard.”

Jasper gave Ellis a hard shake, then Ellis heard him spit. Two seconds later, Jasper was jabbing two fingers up Ellis’ ass. Not one finger, politely, and then two, when Jasper deemed Ellis to be good and prepped, but two at once. And not all that damp, either. The calloused edges of Jasper’s fingers were deliciously rough.

“Up on your knees so I can fuck you like this. *Up.*”

Unsteady, his heart racing, Ellis kept his head down and pushed his ass up in the air. That’s what Jasper wanted, though he probably didn’t know it.

He shoved his fingers in and out of Ellis’ ass with a marching cadence, and the feel of this and the sensation of looking through his legs at the outline of Jasper’s thighs made Ellis a little dizzy, delightfully unstable and when he half fell off the bed, Jasper was there to grab him. Threw him down on the bed, jabbed his fingers right back in Ellis’ ass, his weight spreading Ellis’ thighs wide apart.

The stretch was delicious, Jasper’s growling presence was perfect, and when Ellis came, spilling semen all over his belly, his release pulled him through a room of light, and he grabbed some of it to take with him as he left it. Fell into Jasper’s arms, where Jasper was pushing Ellis’ hair back from his face, kissing him, making low, comforting sounds, as though Ellis was a child who’d been frightened by a storm.

“Okay?” asked Jasper. “Okay?”

Ellis' head lolled on his neck and he smiled at Jasper and kissed his nose. Wrapped his arms around Jasper's neck and pulled him close.

"Wonderful," he said, whispering into Jasper's ear. "Thank you."

Doing this was never easy for Jasper, and Ellis was doing his best to ask for it less often.

"But you're not supposed to come until I tell you," said Jasper in the tone of one truly wounded. "That's how it's supposed to go, right?"

"Sorry," said Ellis. "But you do it so good."

They rested in the long shadows of evening with the sweet mountain air coming through the screen over the window in Jasper's room. The thin cotton curtains were pulled back, but the moon wasn't up yet and there were too many clouds to see stars. Still, it was pleasant to cool down and breathe while in each other's arms this way, and not have to rush or pretend they slept in separate beds.

"Jasper?"

"Mmmmm."

"Jasper, open your eyes."

Jasper opened his eyes, which in the half-dark Ellis could only see the outline of.

"Do you think maybe it's time to share your sketches with Leland? The idea about ranch-branded things to sell? Horseshoe nail hearts and dinner triangles and iron cooking gear?"

"Maybe."

Ellis sat up to settle himself against the pillows. Jasper moved till his head was in Ellis' lap and he could look up at Ellis while Ellis twined his fingers in Jasper's dark hair.

"I think it is." Ellis bent to kiss Jasper's forehead. "The ranch needs money. The designs are good, at least I think so. You owe it to Leland, to the ranch, to try."

“And if he says no, he says no, right?”

“Yes.”

They’d talked about this a few times. Each time Jasper had seemed uncertain both about his talent, and Leland’s reception.

Ellis had, for a brief second, considered just taking those designs, those sketches, to Leland in his office. But that would be a betrayal of Jasper’s trust, and Ellis could never do that.

“We could show him together,” suggested Ellis. “I’ll go with you and hold your hand.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake, I don’t need my hand held!”

With that, Jasper sat up with a growl, yanked Ellis beneath him, and smothered him with kisses, each one more gentle and loving than the last.

Want to read more about the sweet romance between Jasper and Ellis? [Click here.](https://claims.prolificworks.com/free/cv0ApnSX) (<https://claims.prolificworks.com/free/cv0ApnSX>)

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You can stay up to date on upcoming releases and sales by joining my newsletter or my reader’s group.

Newsletter: <https://readerlinks.com/l/1775220>

Reader Group: <https://readerlinks.com/l/1776076>

If you enjoyed *The Blacksmith and the Ex-Con*, I would love it if you could let your friends know so they can experience the romance between Jasper and Ellis. Currently

the book is available on [Amazon](#), and is also listed on [Goodreads](#).

ALSO BY JACKIE NORTH

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JACKIE'S NEWSLETTER

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AUTHOR'S NOTES ABOUT THE STORY

While plotting out the six books for the Farthingdale Ranch series, one of the first ideas that came to me was for *The Blacksmith and the Ex-Con*. I had a vision in my head of a cabin set off by itself, much like John Henton's cabin in *Honey From the Lion*. I liked the idea of writing about two men being alone together and falling in love.

Except in this instance, in present day, the cabin would have hot and cold running water, Netflix, ice cream in the freezer (at all times!), and it would only be a quick drive to Farthing to get anything that was needed. There would be no hardship, no want, no suffering in the cold.

In this cabin, which is for the use of the ranch's blacksmith, there is a river-rock fireplace (much like the one in John Henton's cabin, though perhaps a bit bigger), but since it is summer, the fire is never lit. There is also a lovely deck that overlooks the slow-moving Horse River and the sloping land beyond. In short, I built a cabin I would very much want to live in. Something simple and homey and cozy.

I was also inspired to write this story by the scene in *Honey From the Lion*, where Laurie grouses that the chuck wagon is drawn by cowboys and ranch hands, rather than actual horses. The explanation, at the time, was that the horses needed to be shod and so had been hauled off in horse trailers.

My question to myself was: if this is a ranch, why are horses being taken away to be shod? There are a lot of horses. Horses that are ridden a lot, every day, almost, would need to be shod

somewhat frequently? Shouldn't there be a blacksmith? And if so, why was he missing?

In answer, my mind came up with the idea that the blacksmith was laid low, perhaps by an accident or a bad cold, but that he was generally on hand to shoe horses and fix things. As you will have no doubt by now read, Jasper Nash, the blacksmith and farrier, tells us he got kicked in the leg by a horse and was down for a whole week, and was not there when Laurie Quinn went missing.

And then I began to wonder what this blacksmith thought about while he was resting up and healing? What did he watch on Netflix? Did anyone fuss over him? Was he lonely? Did he, perhaps, rather enjoy being alone? And what kind of character could I create to bring my sweet blacksmith out of his shell? And thus a story is born.

Also, since Bill always assures us there are no biters at Farthingdale Ranch, which horse would be so fractious that it would kick Jasper, the nicest man on the planet? Maybe I'll figure that out in a future story.

A LETTER FROM JACKIE

Hello, Reader!

Thank you for reading *The Blacksmith and the Ex-Con*, the second book in my Farthingdale Ranch series.

If you enjoyed the book, I would love it if you would let your friends know so they can experience the romance between Jasper and Ellis.

[Click here to leave a review](#), and if you do, I'd love to read it! You can send the URL to: Jackienorthauthor@gmail.com

Best Regards and Happy Reading!

Jackie



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie North has written since grade school and spent years absorbing mainstream romances. Her dream was to write full time and put her English degree to good use.

As fate would have it, she discovered m/m romance and decided that men falling in love with other men was exactly what she wanted to write about.

Her characters are a bit flawed and broken. Some find themselves on the edge of society, and others are lost. All of them deserve a happily ever after, and she makes sure they get it!

She likes long walks on the beach, the smell of lavender and rainstorms, and enjoys sleeping in on snowy mornings.

In her heart, there is peace to be found everywhere, but since in the real world this isn't always true, Jackie writes for love.

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The Blacksmith and the Ex-Con

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The Foreman and the Drifter/Jackie North

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