

Agent With Style

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Name of Zine: Real Good Life, A

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Printer
Notes:

2-up digest. All interior pages printed in b&w.

A REAL GOOD life



by **Melody Clark**

A
BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN
SLASH NOVEL

A REAL GOOD life



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BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN
SLASH NOVEL

Real Good Life, A



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Real Good Life, A



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A Real Good Life

a Brokeback Mountain slash novel

Story and cover
by Melody Clark

(c) May, 2006 by Melody Clark, 44729 Fern Ave, Lancaster, CA 93534, melodyclark.fanfictiononthenet.com or just melodyclark.net (the person at melodyclark.com is *not* me, by the way)

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Please respect the non-profit spirit of fandom.

Please send all bitch fests, fan rants and threats of violence to melody@melarry.com. My other stuff is available from www.agentwithstyle.com.

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This novel is based on my short fan story, "The Marrying Kind". It's an extrapolation beyond that narrative. Like most other people, I absolutely love this beautiful film and, being the eternal Candide, I refuse to believe that Jack is dead. I was rewriting the ending before the credits ever finished. Yes, in fact, I *am* incorrigible. Je dis toujours que *tout est bien!*

Notes on bits and pieces:

I've played fast and loose with distances between things. I hope you Wyomingoes look the other way.

I was raised by Texans and Arkansans and thus have been around cowboy culture, though I'm sure I've messed up some stuff. Ennis was the hardest part to write, since so many of his utterances are things half-spoken. I just loved writing him, though. There's a great, quiet poetry to the language of the people that goes beyond the base mechanics of syntax and grammar. I never completely grasped how deeply Irish-haunted that cowboy English is until writing in it. Not too surprisingly, there are a great number of cowboy poets. I hope this does right by them.

Thanks, as always, for reading this and giving me a reason to write it.

Love,
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SO ORDERED BY THE AUTHOR,
THIS 20TH DAY OF MAY, 2006

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A Real Good Life

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Chapter One Possum Play

Felt like he was bleeding to death, one long day at a time.

All his days and nights of late had been one somber walk to the grave. He heard this infernal sad hymn in his head sun up to sundown. Least ways till he boozed himself into the drunken stupor that felt enough like sleep. Life, as before, was gettin' by. Life, like before, was makin' do, survivin'. Before...there was Jack to escape to. Afterwards, there was the promise of the next one. Now, there was nothing but the long, slow walk and it was getting slower and longer as his goddamned life wore on.

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Ennis sat there, filling off the edge on a rain gutter he was repairing, when he saw some piece

of shit Ford sputter slowly along the roadside up ahead of him. The Ford stopped. Some man got out. Some short fellow in glasses. Before Ennis knew it, the man was headed up the path toward him.

Ennis' place was too far out for salesmen, too close for surveyors, and none of his piss-poor handful of friends looked anything like *him*.

"Ennis del Mar?" the stranger said.

Ennis stared up from under the brim of his hat for a minute, sizing up the newcomer. "Depends. Who're you?"

"Name's Frankie Lee Minor. I'm from the *Rattler Tattler* newspaper outta the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex." Frankie Lee handed him a copy of something folded up. "This is in way of introduction."

Ennis took the copy from him, barely glancing at the front. "Okay," he said, tossing it down to the next chair.

"You've read us, then?" he said jauntily.

Ennis reacted not at all. "Saw it before. At the hair cutter. What's it got to do with me?"

"I'm following up a story. About the reported death of one Mr. Jack Twist, husband of Lureen Newsome Twist of—"

"I know who they are," Ennis snapped, biting his words off at the nub. "What about 'em?"

"Sorry," the fellow said. "I just was wonderin' if we might have a word or two about Mr. Twist."

"What words?"

Minor shrugged, opening up his spiral notebook. "I dunno what, really. Just feelin' for the story. Seems there might be more than the one we see. Any chance a tired traveler could get a

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cold drink around here?"

Ennis thought a moment, his expression never changing a bit. "I guess. Stay put 'til I get it. Beer's all I got."

"Beer is fine—" the man started to say, but Ennis covered over the other man's words by clattering into the trailer. Ennis leaned in far enough to bag two beers from his little ice box. Walking out, he handed the other beer to the stranger.

"Right that apple crate and sit. Or not. Your choice."

Minor reached for the old crate and did as suggested, lowering himself carefully to a seat. He caught the bottle opener Ennis tossed him.

Ennis pitched his own beer bottle cap toward the burn barrel, where the litter of previous attempts lay glinting halfway over the dirt. He picked up an empty bottle from the chair beside him, threw it as hard as he could till it clicked dully against the distant barrel and thudded to the earth.

Ennis leaned his head back against the screen-out door to his trailer. Tasted his beer. "I'm here. Talk."

Minor nodded, glancing around again. "Well, to start with, I hear you and Mr. Twist were friendly?"

Ennis kept his own face frozen. "We was friends," he allowed. "You're here. Means you know that already. A body asks questions about what they don't know."

"Well, why don't I tell you what I heard and you can inform my misapprehension? That means—"

"Know what it means," Ennis snapped back again, quickly losing his patience. "'Cause I talk

cold drink around here?"

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simple don't mean I am."

"Of course. No offense," Minor said quickly, tossing over a smile. He looked quickly back at his little spiral notebook. "So, I *hear* there was some big old story breakin' about your friend, Mr. Twist. I heard it come up under Old Man Newsome. He is some old sidewinder, I'll tell you. I hear he never cared much for your friend."

Ennis' considering thumb slid around the bottle lip. "May be," he said.

"Well, I'm hearin' somethin' pretty sordid happened, at least for that ol' bramble sprig of Texas. I'm a city man myself. I don't pay it no never mind. But it went with a lotta old rumors about Mr. Twist, well, having an appreciation for other men, you might say. I mean, Lureen Newsome Twist's husband, right? Guess it takes all kinds."

Ennis looked at him stonily. He didn't say a word in reply.

"Anyway," Minor went on, less forcefully, "the story went old Man Newsome had a fit. I mean, there he is, top of the family farm equipment business. How was that gonna look? Now right before there was to run a gossip piece about Mr. Twist's hidden life, Twist come up conveniently dead. Perfect timing, huh? Now up in those parts, a newspaper can't very well run such an article about a dead man, with a grieving widow and child left alive. It wouldn't look right. So, I'm thinkin' there's something more to this death than a roadside accident."

Ennis' hands folded around the long-neck bottle to intertwine at its throat. The fingers gripped together for a hard, white-knuckle moment until finally one hand was freed so he could

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bottom the beer and drink it all in a shot.

He came up out of his chair. He slung his empty at the distant barrel. The bottle shattered when it struck.

"You tellin' me," Ennis snarled, "you know Jack Twist was murdered? You sayin' *you* know who killt him?"

The other man was clearly taken aback by Ennis' reaction. Minor stood up himself, glancing backward like he was checking for his car and its relative location.

"That's just how I hear it, yeah. If everything is as it seems. Nobody knows for sure, but—"

"Who killed him?" Ennis snarled, past any hope of patience.

"Hey," Frankie Lee said, taking a full step back. "Listen, Mr. del Mar, this is all just vain conjecture—"

"That's bullshit," Ennis said. "You come up here to my place. Askin' what's no business of yours. You best tell me what news you have that's mine. You best tell me right now. *Who killed him?*"

Frankie Lee Minor was clearly chastened by what he saw before him: a hailstorm of grief and rage. Entirely unexpected.

"My guess would be Newsome," Minor said. "Just speaking purely hypothetically. I mean, I have no proof. I have no *evidence*. He's just the one with the most to gain with Jack Twist dead."

Ennis turned away from the other man. He turned toward his trailer. He picked up a pile of drying kindling off a bounty stacker. He slung them away.

"I expect," Ennis said, soft as a distant hur-

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ricane, "I need to be alone now. Think of what I got to do. I thank you for tellin' me of it."

"Of course. I'm sorry to be a bad-news bearer. But, Mr. del Mar," Minor said quickly, with just a hint of placation, "keep in mind, these are all just rumors. Idle speculation."

"If that's all I got, I take it with me."

"That's to say, I mean, you not gonna take off with it and do somethin' crazy, are ya?"

Ennis looked off into the inner shadows of his trailer. "Can't say right off. Don't know just yet."

"If I could offer some friendly advice, Mr. del Mar... That old bugger, he's too rich to kill. Even if I am right. You do something to him, at very least, you'd be looking at some mean-ass jail time."

"Can't be no worse prison than the one I'm in." Ennis turned back to peel open his trailer's screen door. "I'll thank ya to be leavin'. I got of it an early mornin' now."

* * *

Everything. Everything. Everything—was moving so slowly. The whole damned world rolling right past his eyes like white clouds flowing over some warm and drowsy summer afternoon. If only. *If only.*

The tabloid clipping pulled from that short fellow's newspaper was folded up in a clump. He felt it ride up in his pocket every time he'd sit too long or stand. He had read it over enough times, he might've recited it from memory. It was a small thing, but it was the heaviest load he carried. The heaviest one he'd ever carried.

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The images burned into his head, the ones he'd made himself inside his head. Jack dying a hundred horrible ways, when any way woulda been horrible enough.

Bits of the pocket headline threw fuel on the fire.

NEWSOME IMPLICATED

He had to swallow it all back a good while. At least somethin' had come up he could do. Somewhere he could take the pain. Some place he could settle something. Something. Jesus, something.

The sick stomach gripped him as the sweats came up. He wondered if he looked as bad as he felt. He reached into a pocket for a kerchief and found instead the piece of paper with the New Mexico hotel address on it. Better there, anyway. Better there than back on his Texas turf.

What the hell you gonna do when you get there, Ennis? Jack's phantom voice asked from within.

I'll figure that out when I get there, he said back silently.

To calm his belly, he started lookin' around the room for something to fix on. Something that wasn't kicking him in the gut every time he thought about it.

* * *

There was a warp in the window sill where the rain had got in, Ennis could see from where he sat. They sat at some old Wind River bronc rider bar where they had all gone out for a stag

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party wedding day toot or something. He'd only done it because his baby girl had asked him. Even at that, he was sitting there, reaching for a tall, cool one, wishing he had made up some reason to balk.

Especially now.

Kurt, his baby girl's soon-to-be husband, was talking the most. There was Kurt and his brother Cale for a while there, talking while Ennis listened, until some other man walked up to the join the table. The new one plunked down beside Cale and stuck out his hand toward the silent man still looking down the business end of a beer.

"I'm Michael Thornton," the new man said briskly. "Call me Mike."

The hand right beneath his nose caused Ennis to look up. It took him another full second to slip out of the dark place and into his threadbare social self. He gripped the other man's hand a second, then returned to the busywork of emptying his bottle of beer and numbing what ailed him.

"This is Alma's daddy," Kurt spoke up to explain. "Ennis isn't much a one to talk. Are you, Ennis?"

"Like as not," he said, putting the beer down, with a feeling this talking stuff was going to run on some.

"Mike here is my good friend," Kurt's brother Cale said, shining his smiling eyes over at the new arrival. "We're together. If you know what I'm saying."

Ennis tightened up a little, wondering for the hundredth time if what he was, was obvious. Or if somebody had told somebody something or something 'cause that kinda thing didn't happen a

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lot in Riverton and Signal and the like and here he was meeting up with two men like them. Like him. Like...*them*.

Ennis nodded, trying to glance away a lot. "Good to meet ya."

"Likewise," said Call Me Mike. "I'm originally from Tulsa, but Cale is here, so I am, too."

"Roughneck?" Ennis said, because he reckoned it was his turn to say something and that was the only danged thing he could think of to say.

"Ranch foreman," Michael said back.

"Good work, if you can get it," Ennis said.

"I expect."

"Ennis," Kurt said loud and all of a sudden. "Alma was telling us you had a good story about when you were a kid. Somethin' about a double murder around your homeplace."

That might have truly shook him up, except Ennis del Mar only knew one good story he could tell in public and that was it. His baby girl had heard it, but he'd just as soon she hadn't told Kurt and really wisht Kurt had kept it to himself.

"Coupla old boys got banged up real bad with a tire iron," Ennis said, slugging back beer again. "Nothing much but that."

"They were together, though, I mean..." Kurt said, making a hand motion like there was a whole bunch more to the story that was silently understood.

"Yeah, I guess," Ennis said, shrugging. "Weren't my business."

"Kurt was telling us," Cale hopped in quickly, "because we had a friend get killed up that way. Not a good friend, just a friend friend. Some old sodbusters beat his face so bloody his

lot in Riverton and Signal and the like and here he was meeting up with two men like them. Like him. Like...*them*.

Ennis nodded, trying to glance away a lot. "Good to meet ya."

"Likewise," said Call Me Mike. "I'm originally from Tulsa, but Cale is here, so I am, too."

"Roughneck?" Ennis said, because he reckoned it was his turn to say something and that was the only danged thing he could think of to say.

"Ranch foreman," Michael said back.

"Good work, if you can get it," Ennis said.

"I expect."

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own momma didn't know who he was. Nobody recognized him. Bashed in his whole bone structure, took out his teeth, just pulped him out but good."

Ennis was grateful his own face was just as unknowable. It never bore much witness to the working of his heart. The other man's words stabbed sharp and cold for a long, old time—almost like he'd swallowed a dagger rock that spent a winter frozen on Teton Bend. He was hoping to fuck his eyes hadn't wept out, either.

del Mar nodded roughly. He chased it down hard with the rest of his beer, but it didn't hardly help. "That so?"

"Yeah," the Mike one said, brightening up a lot. "But Cale was thinking he might not'a died at all. He mighta just run off, he says. On taxes or debts or an unhappy home situation."

"It happens!" Cale said.

Mike slapped some laughed-up beer from his chin. "When in the hell's that ever happened?"

"Happens all the time," Kurt said. "Like my old bossman Koop. Run up a huge debt. His old man hated his guts, anyway. Koop faked like he got blowed up in a dynamite shack. Seemed like a right slick way of makin' a fresh start."

Mike shrugged a little. "Hell, yeah, a dynamite shack. They be pickin' his parts with a broom and a dust pan. Ronnie Earl got took out different. With the beat up thing, they'd ID him by his dental record."

"Not up here," Cale said. "Roughnecks, cowpunchers, hands, rodeo bucks—men like us don't see no dentists except our own doctor to have a sore tooth tugged. You don't grow up with

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it, it don't seem natural, even when you got good gold in your pocket. We do it ourselves or do without. Or let the bronc bustin' take care of it for us."

"They still got fingerprints," Mike said.

"Yeah, well," Cale said. "Those Mafia boys can hack your danged hands off so they can't find out. Or burn off your finger ends. Or pay off somebody down at the lab."

"Mafia boys?" Mike said, slinging a hand at him. "Listen to you. You been watchin' too much TV."

"It happens."

"Not in Wyoming."

"I heard it does in Texas. All the time."

"Yeah," Mike said. "And I heard the wind blow before. What don't happen in Texas?"

"Ennis," Kurt said, clearly seeing what was happening to the silent member of the table.

"You all right?"

"No," Ennis said, like in a gasp. He pushed away his empty beer. "I'd just as soon not hear all this."

"We can talk about something else, then," Kurt said.

"No, you talk. I'll take a slow walk. Back to the church."

"I could drive you—"

"No, I'd sooner walk. I got a bug or something," Ennis said, getting up fast and walking away hard.

He wasn't beyond the door so he could breathe again, when he let himself grab something strong to hold onto. It was the door to the little bar's men's room, which he tore aside to enter, then sailed the door closed behind him. Now

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he knew for sure the only person he could ever give his life to was nothing but bone-bits and ashes half back in Texas and part up in Chambliss, being held hostage by that bitter old root, John Twist Senior.

Jack's ghost sprung up on him this way, same as always. There Ennis would be, living as best he could, then all of a sudden, there Jack Twist would appear, touching a phantom hand to his shuttered, ramshackle heart.

Damn stupid time to finally understand himself, full forty years old.

He washed his face in ice cold rust-colored water from the old faucet, then dabbed it dry with a pull down towel. He poked his black comb at his hair, but the unruly mop liked to never stand still. He thought he might have straightened his Sunday jacket a little, but he didn't know which way or why.

Ennis walked his way back to the Methodist Church at the end of the street where it bagged a mite around a drifting corner. The doors were opened up the way they did to take in or let out for weddings and funerals. He was real glad there wasn't a dead person where he was going. He carried around one of his own.

He managed to avoid Alma Senior and her husband at the far end of the church as the two stood up there talking to the rector. Ennis found the door marked *Bride's Room* and thought he probably should stop and say something. He tried to remember the way to knock and did so.

The door opened a peep. Jenny's eye, peering out. "Hey," she said smiling.

"Hey," he said back, smiling, too. "The bride decent so I could talk to her?"

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"I expect. You alone? Kurt not with ya?"

"Naw, I took ill and left. They're still at the bar drinkin', I guess."

"Come in, then," Jenny said, grabbing his best jacket's arm and towing him in. "Bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding, but I guess just fathers are fine."

Ennis fast pecked Jenny on the forehead before he reached a hand toward Junior, standing there in a long bleached calico wedding gown.

"Look at you. All done up like a lady."

She grabbed for his hand, squeezing it for assurances. "Am I all right?"

"More than all right, darlin'," he said, smiling. "You look more than a lot like your mamma."

That caused Junior to smile some more.

"Thank you, Daddy. Now you know you're to give me away, right?"

"That's what they been sayin'."

Junior's bright eyes grew large. Then she looked across to Jenny who smiled all the more. It looked like they shared a big secret between them, as they had when they were just kittens.

"Can me and Daddy have a talk, just us?"

"Sure," the other young woman said quickly, opening the door as if on cue. "I got to help tie the bouquets, anyway. See you later, both of you."

She was gone before Ennis could say another word.

Alma Junior reached for his spare hand. She squeezed them both together. She stared at him deeply until he looked up to fully engage her eyes. He gazed into them as directly as he had ever looked into any pair of eyes, beyond just one other.

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"Did Kurt's brother and his friend talk to you?" she said.

More things in Ennis' life had not been said so much as unsaid. He and his baby girl had always walked in step—right beside him or somewhere else. Somehow they sensed each other better than he and Jenny did. Ennis likened as how that counted for most things to be known by people in life.

He shrugged. "They talked some."

"Good. I hope you listened. More than usual. I hope you listened with your heart, not just your ears. They meant to tell you that life isn't so all go to hades hopeless. They meant to say that life has its big surprises that are sometimes real good ones. Life isn't just about surviving as if that was all there is. There might be something fine around the corner."

He let a smile come up a little. "Where d'you get so wise?"

She laughed at herself a little and nodded. "It came natural. But, Daddy, when Kurt and I marry, we gonna have our life together. And I don't want you to be alone."

"Sweetheart, I expect alone is like I am."

"It doesn't have to be that way," she said, with light and fire in her eyes.

It made him think so much of the last person that had said something like that to him. "Was once, maybe not," he said. "But that's all there is for me. It's just what life give me. That's all I got."

She reached forward at first in frustration to rake back his ungainly hair, then she took the moment to fix the awkward knot in his tie. She reached to the bridal desk for a pinned carnation.

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She tucked it under his jacket pocket, then slipped the pearl pin inside and out. She straightened out the effect.

"I got lots to do so I gotta tell you all this now. There won't be time for it later. It's important, so I want you to listen to me, too. You know already we're not havin' a reception on account of Kurt having to get back to Riverton for the weekly pull. The ladies all had white cookies and red punch together. You boys had your beers."

"Yeah, I recollect."

"After we say our vows, we're climbin' straight into the truck and driving off to Kettle Canyon River, where Cale and Mike have a cabin they're letting us use for the weekend." She squeezed his hands hard again, her voice riding up a little. Her eyes were all shiny. "You got a special package waiting for you back to your place. It's a great, big ol' surprise. It's real important that you pay attention to what it says. Okay?"

He grinned a bit sheepishly. "Sure, okay. But...sweetheart, this isn't some ol' girl you want me to get with—"

"Daddy, trust me?"

He sighed his confession and nodded a lot. "You know I trust you."

"Then please just do as I ask. Just this once?"

"I'll try, baby girl," he said. "But I'm obliged somewhere. A real important thing."

"Nothin'," Junior said, "is more important than this."

I don't want you to be alone, she'd said. *You got a package*. Ennis del Mar had never had

She tucked it under his jacket pocket, then slipped the pearl pin inside and out. She straightened out the effect.

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I don't want you to be alone, she'd said. *You got a package*. Ennis del Mar had never had

much arithmetic, but even he could put one and one together, no matter what she'd said. She was sending him some danged newfound marriage prospect. But she had just said it wasn't and it had been many times that Alma Junior had observed that her father wasn't the marrying kind.

It just wasn't in him to say no to her, with her eyes lit up like that and smiling.

"I'll try," he lied softly.

* * *

As quickly as her childhood had passed, the ceremony went on and ended. Flowers and such were tossed, rice was thrown, and he watched from the back of the pack as his little girl and her new-made husband walked smilingly through a moonlit night to their truck. Driving away, they dragged behind them a tail of tin cans and streamers and well-wishers running with them halfway up the street.

The night was long at hand. The street, so full before, was empty.

He got in his own truck and sat there for what might have been an hour

He turned around, looking at the gun behind his head on the outside rack. His hunting rifle.

So whatcha gonna do now, Ennis, kill somebody?

The truth was he didn't know. Truth was, he probably *wouldn't* know 'till he got there, even. Truth was, he probably wouldn't know until he aimed his goddamned shotgun.

You ain't never killed anybody in your life,

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You ain't never killed anybody in your life,

Ennis. You ain't never even come close.

But there wasn't to be no justice for Jack, that was sure. Wasn't nobody gonna track down the ones who done him, because L.B. Newsome was wildcatter wealthy—too rich to kill. No justice for a man such as Jack in the world. Hell, no justice for a poor kid at all. So Ennis would get some prairie blood justice for Jack in his own way and time.

At least he could make the old bastard tell him the truth, maybe. If all else failed, Ennis would deal with that then.

Ennis reached toward the drop box and searched out the road map. He put that on the seat beside him and from the map's many folds, he took up something he'd put there before for safe-keeping.

The picture postcard of...their own place ...

That would give him the courage. That memory. He placed it over his heart and kept it there a full second.

He was gonna do this for Jack.

Do what?

"I'll figure that out when I get there," he said to the troubled silence.

Nearly eight hundred miles ahead. You best get a move on.

Ennis del Mar turned away from town, and headed toward the US Highway in the darkening direction of old Cheyenne.

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He was somewhere near the Colorado border before he stopped for the necessaries.

At last, he was just sitting at a rest stop,

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At last, he was just sitting at a rest stop,

fighting not to think, watching other deep night travelers wobbling past him on their way from their cars to the facilities.

Two men walking together, gave cautious glances around. He nodded at them. They smiled back.

He kept smoking. He licked at a thumb to clean off his rear-view mirror, which gave him a smeared but too clear view of his own reflection. He aimed the mirror back in the right direction, just for watching the road.

He walked out into the park clearing to where the installed grass gave way to the sandy dirt. For a moment, he purposefully put the random clump of weary night travelers behind him. He stood away to dreg off the cigarette amid his own swarm of angry, biting thoughts...biting hard as a mad cloud of summer flies on open flesh.

Here, the breezes blew through the night in one continuous unseen sheet, rippling through tree leaves, brushing past branches. In the sandy moonlight, there glowed a dust devil dancing in the distance. It pirouetted gracefully around like some ballet girl hoping for her toes.

How could there be all this peace right around and none of it inside him?

How could he remember Jack so clearly and not have him here?

Every goddamned night. Every. God-damned. Night. He dreamed of Jack. Remembered what he felt like in his arms—kinda like wrestling a skinny ol' pony—and tasted like (sort of sweet and salty 'til Jack's moist mouth opened to take over his kiss, and Ennis usually got dragged onto his back)—and smelled like—a hint of salt-soap over skin as soft as it was firm and

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fine. Every damn near happy moment he'd ever had in his life, he'd shared with Jack. That was just the goddamned truth of the matter. Whether it made Ennis queer or not, it was the truth.

And the final thing he had to remember of Jack was the awful pain in his blue eyes as Jack looked at him the last time. Pain caused all by Ennis. He knew that now. Through all the beautiful things Jack had give him, the last thing Ennis gave him back was pain. He was pretty sure that most of Jack's tears had belonged to Ennis del Mar.

And Jack had died all alone, horribly, at the side of the road. Probably doin' somethin' Jack wouldn'ta done if they just had been together.

Ennis wondered if Jack had thought of him as he'd died. If he'd realized, that second, they'd never be together again. If he'd known that he was dying. If he'd known that he was dying alone.

Sometimes I miss you so much, I can't hardly stand it.

So every night, Ennis would wake up from remembering the death of hope. And he'd think, for a sweet second, it might have been a horrible nightmare. And then the bitter truth would crush down on him again in the night.

Like the trembling, bone coldness that ate up his hands and arms when he saw the word DECEASED across the face of his returned post-card.

All the possibilities. All the memories, any one of which he'd give the little he had in life to step back in and make right. To bring Jack back.

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All the possibilities. All the memories, any one of which he'd give the little he had in life to step back in and make right. To bring Jack back.

Every one of those remembered moments, he could have made a choice to change the future he now was stranded in, forever. Every single opportunity Ennis had wasted.

And here he was wasting another, standing here alone in the night.

* * *

He flicked off the fire from his cigarette and pinched it cold. He stuck the cigarette away in his pocket again.

Tears had finally made their silent way down his face. He lifted his eyes to the night wind to dry them and to look upon his old friend, the moon. In big sky country, the moon was a range rider's lamp. Every cowboy felt a kinship with it. Ennis had always felt his own.

He got back in his truck and drove on in some useful direction.

He pulled in to a drive-through for strong, bad coffee and got more than he deserved.

Coffee gotten, he headed out to the road.

Sometimes I miss you so much, I can't hardly stand it.

Well, Ennis knew what that felt like now.

"I miss you so much, I *can't* stand it," Ennis said to his own Sunday jacket folded up in the empty seat beside him, the little flower still pinned to his collar. "Shit, I know what you meant now. You been *that* much avenged."

He'd thought more than a time or two of feedin' his pistol and eating some rounds. If it hadn't been for his girls, he would have. Now

Every one of those remembered moments, he could have made a choice to change the future he now was stranded in, forever. Every single opportunity Ennis had wasted.

And here he was wasting another, standing here alone in the night.

* * *

He flicked off the fire from his cigarette and pinched it cold. He stuck the cigarette away in his pocket again.

Tears had finally made their silent way down his face. He lifted his eyes to the night wind to dry them and to look upon his old friend, the moon. In big sky country, the moon was a range rider's lamp. Every cowboy felt a kinship with it. Ennis had always felt his own.

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that they were both grown? What was there for him but a whole big bunch of missin' Jack?

That's the direction he was most scared to look in. Because he knew what he'd do. As scared as it made him, he knew what the answer was.

* * *

He left the first dose of coffee behind him in Denver and then took up his second. It was morning by the time he reached New Mexico and its own unbending chain of red-hilled highways.

Ennis had only once been to Santa Fe and that had been when he was a pup. He remembered the adobe buildings looked to him like melted mud with its edges pulled over.

He remembered a berry snow cone that was real sweet and tart. So sharp-tasting it made him cough whenever he breathed. The dye had run through the paper cone, turning his fingers all purple and blue.

And he remembered his parents fighting so loud he thought the whole world would take notice. That was plum all he remembered of Santa Fe.

"Hotel Histórico del Santa Fe," Newsome's right happy secretary had said when she'd answered the phone that Ennis called to see where he might "catch Mr. Newsome shortly for a farm equipment deal."

It was a big, shiny hotel, this *Histórico*. The kind only 5% of the whole of New Mexico could barely afford, but that seemed to make it

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worthwhile to the owners.

He was grateful southwesterners didn't stand on ceremony. He could show up lookin' grubby from a day in the dust and still fit in quite well among the glass diamonds and fake gold.

And Newsome wanted to look like a good ol' boy, though he didn't seem to be one. That meant he could have no reserves placed on those who called upon him. The hotel had orders to ring 'em all through. That was prairie courtesy—the southwestern door was always open. Ennis had counted on it being that way.

So you gonna walk in the door and open fire?

No, he'd just walk. The gun would talk to Newsome for him. They'd talk until Ennis was satisfied, and then they'd go to the police. Or not.

Ennis had broken down his two-part hunting rifle at a gas station's bathroom, shoving one part each into the sides of his roomy leg jeans. With his shirt untucked, he didn't seem too unusual.

He found a back way in and looked for the elevators.

He'd come up to look for a utility room or somewhere for him to put the rifle back together, but then he noticed the housekeeping cart outside a bank of doors, two of which were given to Newsome. One of the doors was open. The housekeeper was inside, but she was yonder in the suite and Ennis could hide in hither.

He snuck past the maid's cart and into the suite's big bathroom—already cleaned and sealed for *their protection*. He hid in the shower stall 'til he heard the maid's footsteps to the front door.

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He snuck past the maid's cart and into the suite's big bathroom—already cleaned and sealed for *their protection*. He hid in the shower stall 'til he heard the maid's footsteps to the front door.

He head it slam, with the first squeak of the maid cart rolling away.

He put his gun together fast and loaded it.

One half of the suite was done up as an office, down to the big, fake wood brown desk. Before Ennis took cover in the chair beside the rolling file cabinet, he slid out what desk doors he could open. He checked under the desk edge for guns. It was clean.

Ennis shut off the overhead lamp that almost knocked him in the head as he sat down in the hidden chair. The rifle already loaded, he locked it. He balanced it across his lap and waited for the quickening end.

* * *

It was either an hour or a hundred of them before the door opened again.

There came the artful Clydesdale clomp of L.B. Newsome, who seemed to be talking into his hand.

"Mrs. Killarney," he said aloud into what looked like a tape recorder, "you may tell my attorney, Mr. Chip Whitecastle, that not only is the Right Reverend Hooper Dunham of Dunham Family Fuckin' Farm Equipment a goddamned asshole, he's also a world class hypocrite with backdoor whores from here to Guadalajara. Furthermore, Hooper is one-half owner of the *Rattler Tattler* enterprises. Have Chip intimate strongly to Mr. Dunham, in the best fine and dandy legal way he can, if Hoob don't back off my goddamned haunches, I'm gonna have my boy Alsbury and his friends wrap up his goddamned equipment in a shitload of flypaper and dropped it off the San

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Antonio dam."

"That what you done to Jack Twist?" Ennis said, lowly but firmly, swinging the rifle in to aim.

Newsome looked from Ennis' face to the rifle, back to his face again. "Great day in the mornin', who the hell are you?"

"Doesn't matter." Ennis nodded his head to the desk. "Put that tape thing down. Sit in that chair. Put your hands out flat on your knees where I could see 'em. Then answer my fuckin' question."

"Okay, okay," Newsome said, raising his hands, "you're the man in charge. I'm a-sittin' down." He lowered himself into the indicated chair. He put his hands on his knees. "Now I'm lookin' up close, you seem familiar to me. We met somewhere before?"

"We don't keep similar company," Ennis said.

"You a friend of Jack's, you say?"

"I was," he said.

"Danged if you don't look durn familiar, though. Though Jack had all manner of friends in places I do not go, if you know what I'm sayin'." His grin finally swaggered wide over his thin lips. He nodded, a cocky gleam in his eye—something both obsequious, yet strangely contemptuous at the same time. "Yeah, I recognize you now, boy. Pictures from flatshoe friends o' mine. You are..." He thought for a long moment. "Ennis. That's right, Ennis. A good, ol' boy name, if ever I heard one. I expect you wonder how I know."

"Don't much care is all."

"Here's how it is, all the same. You an investor, Ennis? Ever invest in horses?"

"You know damned well I'm a poor man."

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"You know damned well I'm a poor man."

Newsome nodded, a bit more cautiously. "Well, you see, when you invest in horses, you're buyin' a bloodline. Whenever I mate one of my fillies, I get the stud's whole fam damily checked out, ponies to plow horses. All his old and present beaus, too. *That's* where I know you from." Newsome smiled a little more. "You're one of my son-in-law's old...paramours, I guess you'd call it."

"Ain't none of your business," Ennis hissed, leaning far forward with his every word, staring at Newsome with everything Ennis felt burning in his eyes.

"My daughter's my business. Gotta protect the line. Look, I got no problem at all with men such as you. Live and let live, I always say."

"Ain't how I hear it," Ennis said.

Newsome backed off a little. "I don't know what you heard, but it just ain't so. I realize you and Mr. Twist meant—"

"Ain't words to say what Jack Twist meant to me," Ennis said, his voice lashing out like a midnight express train screaming down an unseen trestle. "If there was, you wouldn't know 'em."

"I expect I might know a few words more than you think I know."

"Not the ones that matter. You never loved nothin' in your life you couldn't put in a billfold."

"Now you don't even know me, boy. How could you say that?"

"Jack told me. About you. So worried about bein' a *real* man. Hell, hogtied, I'd up and still kick your ass."

"Is that all you're here for? Hell, beat me up and be done with it, then. What the hell is it you need from me?"

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"You can't never give me what I need," Ennis said, issuing the other man a dark, direct challenge with his eyes. "Only thing I need is beyond this world now. I only had one real good thing walk into my life. Most men get several, I got one. Fool that I am, I let him go back to Texas, where *you* killed him like a no-account foamin' ol' dog in the road. Naw, hell, you'd show more mercy to a dog."

"Looky here, son," Newsome said, with a whole new blast of alarm. "Is that what this is all about? You have been sorely misinformed. I didn't kill nobody. Did you read that silly story in the *Rattler*?"

"You might not'a had him killed, but you was next to it. Now your tape recorder is gonna be handy. You gonna hit record and you gonna tell that tape all you know. All you know about what happened to my Jack."

"Mr. ...del Mar, is it? I think you ain't got all your facts put together. Why don't you be patient a minute and I'll call somebody in to set you straight?"

"Why don't you pick up that tape and start talkin' before I got no patience left?"

Newsome shook his head, and reached cautiously toward the hand-held recorder. He hit the record button. "I can't tell the tape recorder about what happened to Jack because nothin' happened to Jack."

"He just happened to turn up dead?" Ennis snarled back.

The door to the suite's second room squeaked open. A tall, bearded man stepped through it, his cautious eyes directed at Ennis. His hands were raised in a gesture of submission.

"You can't never give me what I need," Ennis said, issuing the other man a dark, direct challenge with his eyes. "Only thing I need is beyond this world now. I only had one real good thing walk into my life. Most men get several, I got one. Fool that I am, I let him go back to Texas, where *you* killed him like a no-account foamin' ol' dog in the road. Naw, hell, you'd show more mercy to a dog."

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"Ennis," the stranger said, "y'all just put that down now and listen to me. My name is Randall Malone. I'm a friend of Jack's."

The name kicked a hole in Ennis' resolve. He waited a minute. Nodded. "Yeah, I know your name."

"Good. I'm here to tell you somethin' you *don't* know. Lay down your weapon and listen to me."

Ennis glowered from one man to the other. "You sidin' with him now?"

"I'm not siding, I'm just sayin' — he's telling the truth. I want you to remember now. Remember yesterday—yesterday night?" Malone walked a little forward. "Your daughter told you to go back to your house, right?"

"How the hell do you know that?"

"'Coz I know. You were asked to go back to your place coz a package was waiting for ya. I hate to have to tell you like this, but my hand to God, Ennis. The package was Jack. And he's alive."

Ennis felt like all the air had got sucked out of the room. He didn't say anything—he couldn't think of a word that was enough of a word to say.

Randall nodded. "Yeah, I said alive. He's alive. How else would I know what Little Alma said if what I was sayin' weren't true? This was all a big ol' dog and pony show. Somethin' Jack himself has gotta explain. He is gonna walk in this door any second." Randall stepped forward slowly again. "Ennis, I swear on my momma's grave. it's true. You clearly know who I am. Newsome ain't no friend of mine."

"That's for sure," Newsome said.

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"That's for sure," Newsome said.

Randall tossed him a glare. "In fact, he gonna shit where he is after you gimme the gun. He's gonna forget this happened. Coz sordid publicity is the last thing Newsome needs right now. Right, L.B.?"

"That's for *goddamn* sure."

"Say something, Ennis," Randall said.

Ennis looked a longer, sadder time at Randall. There wasn't anything he could say. Words all failed him. So did thinking.

"Ennis," an impossible voice said from behind him.

He'd once known a man who claimed he'd saw a Bigfoot, up near Patchen Crick in the Little Wyoming. The Bigfoot had set a spell with him and shared a Granny Smith apple, cut into halves. They talked them some about life, the man had said. At the time, Ennis thought for sure the old man was crazy or tooted or lyin', because there was just no way. Just no how. Ennis didn't believe in Bigfoots happening. Or miracles. Or magic. *Good* things happened sometimes, he'd allow that. But not *so* good.

And here stood Jack Fuckin' Twist, something far less possible than any silly ol' Bigfoot. Those deep river blue eyes couldn't belong to anyone else. Nor could the love he saw in them. It was his face. It was *his* face. "

They're tellin' the truth, Ennis."

He didn't realize the rifle was being pulled out of his hands until his fingers were free. That somebody handed the rifle off to Randall who hurried it into the other room and away somewhere. Ennis didn't care where. He felt someone's hands reach out to support him so as to keep him standing.

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Ennis was suddenly lookin' at the only thing he wanted to see for the rest of his life.

This time, he went all cold. So cold he got hot from the chill of it. Sweating and shivering at once, he could only feel Jack's hands as he grasped his shoulders. The hands were real. The eyes were his. There was no mistake.

"How the hell do I believe this?" Ennis begged whatever was listening.

Jack smiled, big as day. "I reckon you better try."

Before another word was exchanged, Newsome got up from his chair and made his way toward the door to the hall. "You boys do whatever you boys do. I don't hardly give a shit. I'm goin' down to the goddamned bar. I'm gonna get goddamned hammered on goddamned Irish whiskey if it's all the goddamned same to you." With that, he slammed the door behind him.

Jack came closer.

Ennis reached out to touch the tip of a finger to Jack's face. Was a face he knew better than his own. What it looked like in every situation. And here it was, beyond any doubt.

How many times did he dream it all had been just a nightmare only to awaken to the real cold light of day? He'd had to live that remembering too many damned times, every one like kicking a bruised side to his soul. This was way too good to be true. But here it was, and it was smilin' at him. No doubt about it. And he knew damned well he was wide-eyed, righteously awake as the day woke up to the morning.

"God damn, it *was* just a nightmare," Ennis said, as the room around him filled up with grey water he fought fast to blink away. But those

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tears were followed by others just as quick.

Jack smiled. The way only Jack could smile. "I drove a long way today just to see you, Cowboy. Twice. C'mon, lets get a room of our own so's we can talk. We'll tell you the whole damned story, from start to finish."

* * *

Ennis didn't really start to breathe again until they were checked into the "room for talking".

Even then, he found refuge in another chair, only flicking his attention a moment away from Jack when a cold bottle was placed beside him.

"You look like you need that. Actually, you look like you need six cases o' that, but one to start with," somebody said. Ennis guessed it was the Randall fella.

The Randall fella sat down at the chair on the other side of the dead man come alive again.

Ennis leaned forward toward Jack. There was one first question. "Why?"

"Newsome had some of his gnarly, ol' mean-ass chickens come home to roost, is why. Remember all the time he was diggin' around about me? He was offerin' money for me to leave? Well, some of that mud got tracked back into his lily white office. One of his competitors bugged my phone," Jack said. "They got a tape of me breakin' things off with Randall. And speakin' in no uncertain terms about my feelings, if you know what I mean."

Ennis shook his head hard. "You *faked* it? The whole thing?"

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"Yeah. The competitors were out to lynch me. They blackmailed Newsome. They told him they was goin' public with a story in the *Rattler Tattler*."

Ennis nodded. "Explains that ol' boy come to my place yesterday. He's why I was thinkin' Newsome killed you."

Jack kept their eyes staring straight at each other. "Knowing what they know, I ain't surprised they come sniffin' around you. That rag was gonna run one of those give-no-names-but-it's-only-too-blame-obvious stories about L.B. Newsome's *pansy* son-in-law. Between you and me, I think Newsome's own first born told it to 'em in the first place. Like I give a god damn. I couldn't *stand* that life anymore. My boy was mostly grown. I never loved Lureen the way she wanted me to and she didn't love me anymore at all. So I was gonna hightail it down to Whylivehere for one more try with you."

"What stopped ya?"

"Old Man Newsome was of the opinion that every one of his client's liked-to-Mother-Mary wives reads that tabloid while they was standin' in the grocery store checkout. Newsome tried to buy off the paper's owner, but they knew they'd make one helluva lot more money from the new business after draggin' the old man through the family farm equipment dirt. Even if he did sue, which he couldn't sue, because it was true. Got it so far?"

"Yeah," Ennis said, trying on a nod.

"L.B. likened as how the *Rattler* couldn't tell such a vile tale about a dead man. It would be considered disrespectful, especially with a wife and son still alive. Newsome told me the only

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"Yeah," Ennis said, trying on a nod.

"L.B. likened as how the *Rattler* couldn't tell such a vile tale about a dead man. It would be considered disrespectful, especially with a wife and son still alive. Newsome told me the only

way he could stop that story was if I died. Me dyin' would also give Lureen her freedom, like she wanted, without any taint of divorce fallin' on the holy Newsome name. If there's one thing worse in rural Texas than a homo husband, it's a divorce. So the old man give me two choices. I could fake my death or he could have his son's goon squad kill me. No need to say which I chose."

Ennis nodded, but then another thought arose. "But your ashes—"

"Weren't my ashes, obviously," Jack said gently. "They belonged to some dead donkey Old Man Newsome got off the glue factory. Newsome thought he was real clever, it bein' a jackass and all. Made the rat bastard happy as a pig in mud. Said I'd be the only certified jackass ever to have a funeral in the Lone Star Full Gospel Church of the Risen Lord."

"But your folks said—"

"I know. I somehow got my momma, Mrs. Foursquare on the Pentecost, to lie for me. She knew, but the old man didn't. Asked her to keep it from my daddy 'til you found out. Sure wasn't gonna tell that old tom turkey buzzard before you knew."

Ennis shook his head hard.

Ennis remembered that house, like it had been a bad dream. Remembered it with a grey and grisly light. "Shit, Jack, I stood there in your room. Knelt in that damned closet of yours, trying to feel for some piece of ya."

Jack nodded, smiled softly. "Momma told me you been there."

"I opened your window. Tryin' to see somethin'. Somethin' you'd saw. And the whole

way he could stop that story was if I died. Me dyin' would also give Lureen her freedom, like she wanted, without any taint of divorce fallin' on the holy Newsome name. If there's one thing worse in rural Texas than a homo husband, it's a divorce. So the old man give me two choices. I could fake my death or he could have his son's goon squad kill me. No need to say which I chose."

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time..."

Ennis sank back to close his eyes for the first full moment since he'd opened them to Jack alive. Now, he nodded with certainty, reality wending its way through his shock. "Your momma *did* look like she was tryin' to tell me somethin' the whole time I's there. She didn't look all that wiggly chinned about your dyin', neither."

Jack laughed. "Momma never weren't no actress."

"I thought she was just bein' brave. She let me have some stuff..."

"Yeah," Jack said. "I asked her to. I took 'em out of where I kept 'em. Thought you might see 'em. I knew, if you took 'em with you, it'd be a good sign of where your heart was at." Jack gave him a hard, if quiet smile. "I was one happy damned bastard the day I heard you took 'em with you."

"Of course I took 'em with me." Ennis' face crumpled up at the burden of remembering. "My God, Jack, I thought you was gone *forever*. I thought I was *never* gonna see you again... Never gonna be with you, never gonna talk with you, never gonna—" Something crawled its fool way up his gullet, fully blockin' the aisle.

Jack reached out to touch Ennis' shoulder. "I couldn't be sure you felt the same anymore. I had to know. I thought maybe this would be a way of wakin' you up, too."

Ennis was beginning to think again. "Wakin' me up? You got any idea what I *been* through? You got any idea what it is to get up *every* morning like you're going to a *funeral*?" Ennis said, wincing hard at a moment of inner in-

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ventory that didn't even sample a fraction of the grief he'd suffered.

Jack's fingers rubbed harder at his arm. "I told you the first chance I could. Honest, Ennis. I didn't have no other choice. There's only three people outside the Texas tribe knew about it before you."

"You and your momma and who else?" Ennis said, but then looked across at the stranger to him at the table. "Wait. When did you find out?"

"Randall knew from the start," Jack said, in a voice of conditional surrender. "He was the third."

Ennis' eyes grew dark like a real bad storm was gathering. Or like it was already damned there. "*Randall* knew?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "Randall knew."

Ennis eyebrows crouched together. He shook his head again, fighting through the heavier mists of the moment. "He knew. When *I* didn't? When my goddamned heart was hurtin' *powerfully* from your dyin', *he* knew. That what you're tellin' me?"

Jack's eyes glowed with sorrow. "I didn't have to call or write him to tell him, Ennis. Hell, far as I knew, the whole of Texas was part of the plot against me. Randall helped me pull it off."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Ennis' jaw hardened into a tight line. His newly wary gaze retreated to survey his hands, now crawled up into fists. "I feel foolish. I come here to get justice. I come here fixin' to almost kill another human being for you. To *avenge* you. I told that Newsome man things I never told no one in my life and here this all was. Here you two were."

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"The tape they made of Jack was of him callin' it quits with me," Randall said. "Seems I had somethin' mighty bad wrong with me."

"Such as what?"

"Such as not bein' you."

Ennis shut his eyes with a sharp and swift regret. "Shit. I'm sorry. This is all just—"

"It's all right," Randall said, laughing while he stood up. "I's actually surprised to see you're just a mortal man. From the way Jack talked about ya, I expected you to have wings and a halo or somethin'. I reckon I should gambol along now, anyhow. Come see us, both of ya."

Jack looked toward him a moment. "You drivin' all the way back again?"

"Naw. I got a *muy loco* Uncle Phil in Albuquerque. My momma always pesters me to visit him. So I'll go see Uncle Phil and hear all about the goddamned war. Again. I'll drive home tomorrow. Texan or not, I can't take no ten-hour drive twice in one day at my age. Especially when one of 'em was at eighty mile an hour."

Ennis nodded, as if to catch up with himself. He was understanding it all now, in deeper and wider circles. "Thank ya," he said, looking up hesitantly, but still lookin' up. "For savin' me from all this."

"Yeah, thanks, Randall," Jack said, letting the words wander off to their own direction.

"I know. You're both welcome. Nice meetin' ya, Ennis, even if you don't walk on water. Next time, let's make it under more pleasant circumstances, ya hear?"

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and Jack walking back to Ennis' side.

Ennis felt like he'd been caught in a memory that couldn't be real, while realizing it was as real as he was.

Jack's strong hands set tenderly over his shoulders again. "You gonna be okay?"

"I guess." He shook his head, covering his eyes as if trying to forget the last stretch of months. "Jack, I just hurt so bad. I hurt so bad for so long."

"I know."

"No. No, you don't."

Jack's fingers combed comfort through the other man's gold hair with its own new strains of silver. Then he walked right around to drag his chair so he might sit before Ennis. "I wish I could say your hurtin' made me nothin' but sad. Truth is, part of me is damn glad for it. I feel guilty as hell about it, but seein' you like this gives me some hope. I was beginnin' to be pretty damn sure you didn't care no more—"

"Didn't care no more?" Ennis' voice lashed out like a gale blast wind. "How can you even say that to me?"

"I can say it easy, Ennis," Jack said, locking his unflinching gaze on the other man's. "How many times did you duck and cover? How many times did I beg you to share my life and you always ran away?"

"What do you want from me?" Ennis yelled back, rising up out of his chair. "Like you always say, you ain't me. I'm like *this*. I don't know how to be no other way, except to try. Hell, I wisht to holy Hannah I'd tried harder when I thought... what I thought. I wisht every day I could go back and change things, but I couldn't. I still can't."

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"No, but you could try to work your durn, fool head around it now."

"What the hell am I doin' here? But you say *my* durn, fool head? Where the hell do you get off? I was standin' there one day, easy as you please, when *you* walked up and asked me *my* name. I didn't walk over to you. I didn't seek you out. At first, you come to me, all but one time, you may recall."

"Oh, we gonna start on *that* now?" Jack yelled out, standing up himself. "That I turned you queer?"

"I didn't say that!"

"Yeah, well, you said enough. And here I stand, back from the grave so far as you knew, and I still ain't heard the word I need to hear most. The word that shoulda been first on your lips."

"What word?"

"You know what word! You never once looked at me and told me that. Not once."

"Shit, Jack. I ain't never told no one that. Nobody. Where I'm from, men don't say them things."

"Well, they do right now," Jack snarled, his jaw tightening into anger again. "I ain't asking for miracles from you. But hear me now. You want me to stay?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Then you look at me and admit that you love me every bit as much as I know you do. You look at me and have the guts to finally say it. 'Cause if you don't, all the good intentions in the world won't be for shit. Me bein' alive don't make us automatic. There are a couple of conditions. I wouldn't be nowhere else but here, but let me be

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real clear. It is high time, *mi amante*."

"Time for what?"

"Time for you to own up to *all* this. I can't take no more lyin' and denyin' and sneakin' around. I cannot for one more day stand to be some dirty secret game you play. Not when it means this much. Right now, right here, it's all or its nothin' at all. Leavin' you will kill me worse than Newsome would've, by a long shot, but if it has to be, it has to be."

Ennis tried to look at him fully, but only got halfway. He kept his stare down for the moment. "I never did say nothin' that couldn't go unsaid. Hell, I realize. When I thought you'd died, I damned my self to hell for every thing I never said. You gotta know that."

"Yeah, I know it," Jack said, his eyes filling with anger and tears. "I also know I ain't hearin' what I need to hear. Why in the hell did I think anything would be different? Why did I think maybe you thinkin' I died made some tiny bit of difference in you? But here we are, the same ol' story. Fine, Ennis. You made the call. You ever change your mind, send a postcard to my folks. I reckon I'll still be pinin' for you somewhere." Jack turned away to walk on a mission to the door.

Ennis grabbed him from behind and slung him up to pin him against a wall, staring hard into his eyes.

"You listen to me," Ennis roared into Jack's face, trying to tie together again tear-torn words into even sentences. "Just 'cause I'm quiet, don't mean I'm still. This what you need? Well, all right, then. Don't make no difference to you I was ready to throw my life away. Guess the nights I cradled my pistol don't matter for shit.

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While you was down here playin' possum with Randall, the only reason, I swear to God, I didn't blow my head off was my girls. Only reason in the world. But, shit, yeah, I love you. If you need it, I love you. I love you so goddamned bad that if your daddy woulda let me, I'da gone up on the fuckin' mountain and shot myself next to your jackass ashes. Is that love enough for you or are you all fired set to leave me again?"

Jack reached out to grasp the other man's head between his hands, his fingers pleading with the edges of his hair. "Ennis—" he said, like he couldn't quite believe what he'd heard so much he didn't have the words to reply. "I'm really the first person you ever said that to?"

Ennis nodded as he moved away. "Hell, yeah. You was first with me for lotsa things, Jack, as you may recall. First person I ever trusted, too. And the first person to ever break my trust."

"When d'I do that?"

Ennis looked straight at him to make the point. "A few goddamned minutes ago."

Jack's eyes grew darker with anger, betraying his own share of pain. "But I told you why I had to—"

"I know what you told me, but I'm tellin' *you* ... I's wrong to not make a stand with you. I know it. I know you was right about lotsa things. Other things. More than that, maybe. But you say you love me like I love you? Then you think of me *dyin'*. Think of facin' that...forever..."

Ennis' face fell with the weight of memory, a hard fist of grief punching at him with a still doomed certainty that was only now trying to ease up. He rubbed away tears with the back of a hand. "So help me God, I *never* woulda done that

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to you. Ever. Never so much that it makes me wonder about a whole lotta things."

"What things?"

"Maybe I ain't so automatic. Maybe it ain't no done deal on my end, neither. Maybe that's *what things*."

Jack's eyes had burned back at him with just that tragic sadness, a thousand times through broken windows in old, bad dreams. It was a stare out of a memory. Out of a wistful longing. "You sayin' you don't wanna be...us anymore?"

Ennis laughed at the very idea. It was a laugh so dark and loud, it sounded like a cry of utter helplessness—as if his own certain entrapment was just funny as all get out. "Shit, I swear," he said. "I swear to God. I'd follow you to hell right now, Jack Twist. Hell, I'd even follow you to Texas. If I *had* to."

Jack's rascal smile curled up at its edges. "Shoot, ain't nobody askin' you to go *that* far."

"Still and all..." Ennis looked away. "We gotta take it slow."

"Cowboy, you take it any slower, time'd stand still."

"Even so." Ennis surrendered to a seat on the sofa across from the one king-sized bed. He reached down to peel off a boot, then another. "I'm so tired I'm too tired to tell how tired I am. I went sunup to sundown to sunup again without sleep. Drove fifteen goddamned hours, then got all keyed up—"

"I drove all that way, too, *twice*." Jack sat down on the bed across from him. He tossed him a knowing look. "You so sure we gonna take it slow, how come you're all the hell over there?"

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"Even so." Ennis surrendered to a seat on the sofa across from the one king-sized bed. He reached down to peel off a boot, then another. "I'm so tired I'm too tired to tell how tired I am. I went sunup to sundown to sunup again without sleep. Drove fifteen goddamned hours, then got all keyed up—"

"I drove all that way, too, *twice*." Jack sat down on the bed across from him. He tossed him a knowing look. "You so sure we gonna take it slow, how come you're all the hell over there?"

You think I can't kick in my spurs from here?"

"I expect the distance may slow you some."

"Maybe."

The telephone rang from the table beside the sofa.

"That'd be my daughter with her Irish up coz nobody called her," Ennis said, plucking up the handset off the little table phone between them.

"Uh-oh," Jack replied with a grin.

Ennis had to hold the phone away for a full ten seconds or so until the shrill sound at the other end quit barking. It died down a second, but then came back up. He covered over the ear-piece with his palm and yelled into the mouth end. "Junior, just calm down..."

"I...will...not calm down!" Junior's voice whip-cracked the room again from the other end of the phone.

Jack smiled in sympathy with the other man.

"Well, quit caterwaulin' so's I don't go deaf!" Ennis said back, allowing a moment for the pitch of the voice at the other end to fade. He carefully brought the receiver to his ear. After a moment, he said. "We're fine. Hell, no, last we heard, he's down gettin' pig-eyed. Jack is right here. Yes'm, that's why I didn't call. ... Yes, ma'am. ... Yes, ma'am. ... I surely will. No, ma'am. Tomorrow sometime, I expect. We will. Goodbye."

Ennis clomped down the handset, while he jabbed a finger at his ear. "She's a mite sore."

"Sounded like it."

Ennis nodded, with a sideways smile. "I guess the girls was worried."

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"I guess." Jack patted the place beside him on the bed. "You know, I ain't gonna jump ya'. You free to come over here where it's comfortable."

"Expect it's fine where I am."

A smile crept up on Jack's lips again. "You don't trust me?"

"About this I don't trust neither of us." Ennis looked across the short space he'd allowed—a careful glance from a silent distance. For a second, he watched Jack with a dark and growing fear. "All the same—don't go nowhere."

"I ain't, Cowboy. I'm here. Just here."

* * *

Ennis thought for a moment, *okay, he'd shut his eyes*, and that would be the night but several times he tried to close them and they always popped back open again. Just to make sure. Just to see Jack and *be sure*.

He fought against sleep for nearly an hour to keep his silent watch, but sometime between Santa Fe's mud chapel bell chiming ten in the evening and the rest of the night, Ennis tumbled into his own shadowy Okefenokee Swamp of dreams.

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**Chapter Two
Men Such as Us**

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**Chapter Two
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Had to be a hundred times, he'd had the fu-

neral dream. It seemed it always started out the same.

He was running away with the DECEASED postcard in his hand, jamming the pedal on some unknown truck, racing toward some nameless place. He drove up mountains that looked like the Riverton ranges until the land bottomed-out at that scrubby little bottle-brush Chambliss prairie place where Jack had grown up. That big, sad, grieving wash-gray house, battered by wind and sun and time. He'd left the truck running, and surged up the stairs.

His heart hammering, crying, terrified he'd miss Jack...never, not ever get to say goodbye... as he stumbled up to a prairie casket laid out there.

Some church singer warbling "One Light in a Dark Night"...

Some itinerant pastor speaking from the old book of prayers, Oure fadir that art in heaven, halewid be thi name...

Ennis could smell gardenias and balsam, clear as night smoke, all around him. Dead rites full of flowers and spice to hide the stench of decay. He felt the still, waxy tension of Jack's cold face. And before he could lean down to kiss Jack farewell, other hands seized Ennis and began to drag him away. Ennis could do nothing but watch Jack slowly disappearing—vanishing—fading away forever while a helpless Ennis was dragged away by other hands.

He awoke with a jolt, his face burrowed into

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He awoke with a jolt, his face burrowed into

wet pillow. He was shivering like he was stone cold, with the warm room around him. He swore to God he could still smell gardenias and balsam—still feel the cold of Dead Jack's face near his fingers.

He couldn't bring himself to open his eyes until he felt other hands grasp his fingers, then pull the pillow away.

"Ennis," Jack's voice said, just above him.

One light in a dark night ...

Ennis made himself look up. He reached up to dredge his fingers deep into Jack's thick hair, his other hand silently questioning the warm, living face above him, as if still making sure it was truly real and not about to melt into a dream. The eyes bluer than any mountain morning stared down at Ennis in sharp concern.

That's right...it was a bad dream...or might as well have been one.

"Jesus Christ, Jack," Ennis said, dragging him toward him as if he might not let him go.

"Bad dream?"

Ennis shook his head hard and then sort of nodded. "Another night in hell. Just like the last ...like all this..."

"It's okay," Jack said gently.

Ennis sat up, drawing back his hands to hide his face until he could drag away whatever tears had spilled down it. He grabbed Jack's arm again, feeling for realness, holding onto the solid proof of his warmth.

"What time is it?" he asked, blinking around at a room filling up fast with a Santa Fe sun.

"Right at nine," Jack said, pitching him a towel.

"Shoulda woke me when you got up," Ennis

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"Shoulda woke me when you got up," Ennis

said, catching the pitch and folding the towel up in his arms.

"No, and I don't wake up no bear on Christmas mornin', either. I left you hot water. We got stuff to do. I'm gonna sign over that piece of crap I was drivin' to the pink slip parlor. Then I say we vamoose in almighty via dios fashion. I wanna get the hell out of No Mexico with daylight before us."

Ennis squinted as he stood up. "Where we got to go?"

"We got plans."

"Plans for what?"

Jack smiled in a big way. "Just plans."

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They took the old roads up out of Espanola until they booked it over the Colorado line with plenty of morning before them. They stayed with the road for Alamosa, intending to swing wide toward Denver and what would then have become the midday crush of men in tiny cars.

Jack grinned as the *Leaving New Mexico* sign receded in the rear view mirror. "Boy howdy, I's never so happy to put them god-damned montañas feas behind me. Good-bye, No Mexico."

"I's always kinda partial to New Mexico myself."

"You kinda partial to cat dirt and rattlesnakes, too, ain'tcha?" Jack shot back, grinning. He saw his humor was having little effect. "It's just too damned close to Taxes."

"Them's fightin' words to most Texans."

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"I ain't most Texans. I am exiled from the

promised land. I can't never go back to ol' Freedomia again. Not that you see me cryin' over it." Jack shot him an inquiring look that lingered.

"You still sore at me?"

"I'm a whole lot more than sore atcha," Ennis said. He shook his head as he drove. "You done somethin' so bad to me, Jack, you got no idea what you done. The only thing worse you coulda done was really die. If I wasn't so god-damned thankful to God and whatever else that you're alive, I'd be whuppin' your ass from here to New York City."

Jack lost his smile. "Gonna get over it?"

Ennis was quiet a moment. "If I can."

"You better," Jack said with a jab of a grin, after which he checked to see if he'd made progress.

"Or what?"

"Or... else..."

"Or... else... *what?*"

Jack shrugged a little, stifling a laugh. "Or else *them* might be fightin' words."

"Shoot," Ennis said, shaking his head, his stoic stillness shoved aside by a burst of a smile he fought all the way to the top. "Good mornin' is fightin' words to you."

Jack smiled a little and grabbed up the road map, unopened on the seat between them. He flagged it out and with his finger drew a winding line up its paper paths. "Pull over in Littleton and I can take the wheel. You can get some shut-eye while I drive."

"Don't need shut-eye. Expect I won't sleep for a week after this mornin'."

"Still and all, you shouldn't have to drive the whole way. I can take the wheel from Little-

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ton."

"Suit yourself," Ennis said, keeping his stare at the other man another moment. He squinted a little. "When dja shave off your lip fuzz?"

"Same time I lost my beard. Lureen, I mean." Jack winked over to Ennis. "You know, there's that real nice rest stop there in Coopers Narrows, up past the Whylivehere border."

Ennis grinned before he knew it had even hit his lips. "We takin' things slow."

"*You* takin' things slow. All's fair in love and war, I say. Just 'cause you sayin' slow don't mean I gotta take it for your final answer."

Ennis shook his head again, laughing to the road. "Jack Twist, you just never stop....:

Jack laughed. "Not 'til we get to Coopers Narrows anyway."

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As Ennis drove on, Jack fell asleep, hunkered down in the seat, his smile toward the sun. As they went up Rocky, Jack dragged his hat down over his eyes to block away the glare. Ennis made good use of these unseen moments, when he could just look at Jack without giving ground. He looked just like a man delivered of a hundred burdens, each one too difficult to bear. He had the jauntier step of the younger man Ennis had loved just way too hard, back when they had so many seasons before them, all untried.

Even so, what they had was young despite its vintage. So much time they'd known one another and yet too much time kept apart by...well, Ennis, if he told the truth so to shame the Devil.

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As they looped their way around Denver toward Boulder, he headed back to the 25. He pulled off before the border at a rest stop, parking quietly so Jack wouldn't stir. Ennis got out to stretch his legs, find the facilities, smoke some off his pinched-cold halfie, and fight to piece his brain back together.

Your life's like some goddamned big movie, Ennis had told Jack once during one of their fights. *Gotta be bigger and better than anything else.* Ennis was now kinda surprised he hadn't guessed Jack had faked it all. It was a Jack kinda thing to do. But then Ennis had always been the first one to expect the least out of life, because that was what it mostly give him.

I ain't never needed anyone like this before, he'd mumbled once into Jack's chest, sometime between their motel stint and their first pseudo-fishing-trip.

The truth was what Ennis should have said—but what he wouldn't've said aloud, so long as he had breath in his body—*I ain't never needed anyone before.*

A day ago, for all Ennis knew in the world, Jack *was* dead. Ennis had been dead himself, from the pain of it, and only moving like a moon through life in the tidal pull of his rage.

And if somebody hadn't come through that door the second they had—

Sweet Jesus.

He needed Jack so much, he had been gonna kill a man.

Ennis turned up his collar against a howling cold wind that was coming from within more than

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Ennis turned up his collar against a howling cold wind that was coming from within more than

from the air around him. That kind of cold felt more like fire than a chill. It drove moisture and suppleness from skin, just like flame would. It felt just like a pre-blizzard dawn did, on some cold morning up the rise, only turned inside. A man couldn't change the wind. He only had to stand it. Even if it was making him shiver to the quick.

Ennis knew damn well he was ignoring somethin' that was gonna creep up on him, just like Jack was, as Ennis felt the other man's shadow cross his path.

"Wondered where you got to."

Ennis glanced casually around like a saddle horse checking the trail. He flicked off the cherry and pinched out the cigarette again. "Just out here. Smokin'."

Jack was looking at him hard now. He reached to touch his hand. "You gone *muy blanco*. You all right?"

Ennis blocked the hand by grabbing it. He gently pushed it away. "I expect."

"Ennis, your hand's ice cold, what's wrong?"

"Nothin'. Nothin'. Just tuckered to the grist is all." He started walking with a purpose back toward the truck. "Come on, let's move. Got daylight waitin' on us."

"Daylight, my ass."

Jack's hand came after his shoulder, but Ennis jerked away to himself again. When he reached the truck, he leaned against the bed wall like that saddle horse now with a sore haunch, too proud to admit the support was needed. He shook his head and poked his pinched-out cigarette in his pocket again. Finally, when it was clear Jack wasn't going anywhere, Ennis lifted up

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his eyes enough to stare into his face. Ennis wondered if he looked as frightened as he felt.

Ennis shook his head, refusing the vision and just yanked open the door to his truck. "Let's get on the road. Need some wind in my face."

"At least you can let me drive a while."

"*I can drive*—" Ennis barked back.

"Not without these, you can't." Jack brandished the keys in his face to stop more protest. "Don't gimme no lip, Ennis Aintgotnomiddlename del Mar. Get in and get sat. I'm drivin'. That's all there is. And buckle your goddamned seat-belt."

"I ain't your granny," Ennis barked back.

"I said buckle your goddamned seatbelt,"

Jack snapped in return. "And I mean it. Next mess of tree miles come dodgy, with wild life and all. Hell, you know that better'n I do."

Ennis waved his hands in surrender, scaling the steep truck step and got in. He slammed the door and pumped down the window. As an angry afterthought, he yanked out the shoulder harness and jabbed it in the right slot.

"Thanks, Granny," Jack said, and then grinned away the cranky look he got in return.

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As Jack took to the road, Ennis drank in the easy comfort of the rising afternoon breeze. It was its own soft solace, coming back from a hard place. It smelled of Boulder trees and the little inlet piney groves that spotted the roadways all the way up, interspersed with the road signs saying DEER CROSSING.

Sunlight flickered through trees in random

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patterns until it lulled Ennis into a warm, calm haze. The joggle of the road furthered the process and pretty soon he was dreaming of walking up a hill he'd known as a child, only Jack was with him. But Jack was always with him, even in his dreams.

Then he felt a quick pressure—a sudden yank backward—and the swerving of something to the side.

Blinking awake, Ennis felt Jack stomp on the brakes, then squeal to a hard, lashing stroke of a stop in the middle of the road.

Ennis shook his head to clear it— Jack's door was open. Jack was already out the door and running around to the front.

"Goddamn it," Jack's voice brought him back to the moment. He had yanked off his hat and waved it at the air, like he was pounding at something that simply wasn't there. "Some people got no damned respect for life."

Ennis scrambled around from the passenger side. "What the hell—" he began to say, but then he saw, too clearly, what had happened.

There was an eight-point yearling buck sprawled five feet before them, with a lot more done to him than even a pickup truck could do. The buck's big black eyes were still pulsing with life, confused and in pain. The poor thing fought to stand, unable to move.

"Son of a bitch!" Jack said, slapping again at the air.

"What happened?" Ennis said, just beginning to feel the cold rise in him again.

"That old boy in a big rig just come zoomin' around that grade and broadsided it. Animal never stood no chance. Then the old bastard just

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"That old boy in a big rig just come zoomin' around that grade and broadsided it. Animal never stood no chance. Then the old bastard just

drove on and left it here. Go on and grab your shotgun, Ennis. The poor thing's put down hurt. We gotta end its sufferin'."

Ennis didn't think a bit beyond that, just reaching to the rifle rack to bring down his shotgun as Jack had directed. He shook up the shell and aimed the shotgun near the buck's stunned head.

Then every nerve in Ennis' hands and wrists and arms and shoulders went numb. His fingers froze in place.

"Go ahead," Jack said, a little confused.

Ennis' fingers uncoiled, one by one, as if he couldn't feel the barrel or grip. "I can't," he said, numbly, using both hands to pass the shotgun off to Jack. Ennis stumbled back to the side of the truck. "You do it."

The crack of the shot in the cold mountain air made Ennis flinch like it hit his own flesh. The only after-sound of death out here was silence.

Ennis grabbed at the truck, feeling like he was reeling drunk or very sick or maybe both put together. He couldn't sense his legs anymore than he could feel his hands. He folded his arms across the pick-up hood, leaning his head down as if in some kind of unknown prayer.

"Ennis," Jack said, his voice sharp with concern. He grabbed at a shoulder.

Ennis shook the hand off. "Shit, Jack," Ennis said, the words coming up stunned and staggering with his revelation.

"What the hell is wrong? And don't tell me yer just *plumb tuckered*."

Ennis shook his head hard, giving Jack a stare of amazement fused with terror and a hundred other things he couldn't put a name to.

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"Jack," he said. "I was gonna kill a man—"

Jack stared at him a couple of minutes, then quickly looked like he thought Ennis had lost what damned few marbles he'd had, cat's eye quartz to steelies. Jack erupted in laughter at the very idea. "What're you talkin' about, mulehead? You couldn't kill nobody. Hell, you couldn't even put down that buck."

"You ain't hearin' me," he said, still unbelieving every word tumbling out of his mouth, as if someone else entirely was speaking. "That's why I choked. I remembered. I remembered staring down the barrel at... Shit, I ain't never killed nothin' except animals for food. Mad as I was, hurt as I was, I mighta shot that man. I mighta killed *that man*."

Jack rubbed at his arm. "Well, if you had, you'da done it for the right reasons. If I thought somebody killed you, I'd do the same for you. It might not be right, but it's the first thing you think. To strike back, for the one you love."

"So many damn things I never saw in myself." Ennis shook his head again, inhaling as if it hurt to do so. "I never thought... I never, ever did think no man felt somethin' like *this*."

Ennis had been told he always looked at the world as a fort for his enemies. The first thing he expected was a threat. Because of all that, he guessed, Ennis looked everywhere at once. Everywhere, but—Big Alma had said—never once at himself.

Ennis glanced up at Jack warily. He battled back tears with his long lashes and gave a two-handed gesture of surrender.

Jack shined a smile up into his eyes. "Ex-try, ex-try, read all about it—Ennis del Mar is only

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human. Now help me drag this poor thing to the side of the road, and let's get the hell on the highway. We were makin' good time 'til this. We got plenty of time to talk on the way."

"I expect you're right," Ennis said.

"You know I'm right. I'm always right."

"Yeah, whenever you ain't wrong," Ennis said, faking a grin.

When the buck was dragged off to the side, near a yard spot tree and they were headed back to the truck, Ennis leaned over to re-rack his shotgun.

"You okay?" Jack asked, sneaking a hand out to grab the other man's hand as Ennis climbed back into the truck.

"Yeah, I gotta be. But to set the record straight..." Ennis affixed the seatbelt without a directive, "you would never kill nobody, neither."

Jack almost looked hurt. "You don't think I love you enough to kill for you?"

"Naw, I ain't sayin' that. That ain't even it. It's just, even if you blasted at a hundred things, you couldn't hardly hit a one of 'em."

Jack's grin put the lie to his angry glare.

"Yeah, smart ass, and who shot the buck?"

"Blind man in a blizzard coulda shot that buck."

"The hell you say."

"The hell I say."

Jack's blue eyes were beaming at him, full of life in every possible way. He reached out and ruffled his hair. "You keep up that devilish smile, we'll get to Coopers Narrows before you know it."

Ennis looked away, so Jack wouldn't see the smile brighten. "Yeah, we'll just see about that when we see it."

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As they pulled out on the highway, Ennis glanced once more at the black, vacant eyes of the creature Jack had put down. It made him remember a lot of things. Think of a lot more things. About killing, but also about living and dying.

He squeezed at his eyes, settling back for the next length of highway.

"Next stop, old Cheyenne," Jack said, shifting hard into the broadening stretch of road. "If this bucket of bolts don't fall apart before we get there."

"You the one sold his own car."

Jack grinned widely. "Yeah, and got twice what I give for it in the first place."

* * *

***Ski Big Sky Summit!
Gateway to the
Wind River Range and
Gannett Peak,***

the sign said.

That sign always told Ennis he was on the last leg of his own journey home, whenever this place had been home to him and whenever he still liked to care. All of a sudden, he had new purpose to him. He woke up just enough to see the sign fly past, and then he remembered the rest stop of his deep night musings.

In the dull light of some old sodium parking lot lamps burning low in the windy, spreading evening, Ennis could see the little patch of land where he'd mourned alone with the moon. It had just been a day...or less than that...ago. It

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"We peggin' *E*. Time to tank up."

"They's a service station off that ramp there."

Jack drove off the highway like a jack rabbit after a hidey hole. While Ennis shut his eyes, still holdin' a wake for the staring buck in his mind's eye, he listened to the usual, prosaic spilling sound of gasoline into the tin-pickle tank.

Once filled up, Jack pulled up the truck to the little overpass that bridged twin highways and took the one toward the mountains.

"Hoag Road's up that way," Ennis said, looking in the direction he thought they should've turned.

"Who says we're goin' up Hoag?" Jack said with a grin, wheeling the truck over the dirt path to the overpass, then soaring up the entrance to the old mountain highway.

"We ain't?"

"Nope."

Ennis squinted harder. "Where we goin'?"

"My place."

"Since when do you got a place in River-ton?"

"I don't. It was gonna be part o' your surprise if you'd got your dumb ass up there. I got a place in Signal."

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Thirteen hours, forty-five minutes, on the money.

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The reachable herbage had been champed into stubs, then burned in a very convenient range fire a year ago the August past, when its use for viable feed land had largely come to an end.

Jack had kept his good faith money at the land office for years until the opportunity presented itself when the old son of a Scotsman went to his reward in a lake of fire.

Paso Verde river bordered Green Step lake, which was really more of a pond part of Wind River, much farther away. Jack had only to follow the river until it parted company with the clearing. Twist brought the truck to a stop where he needed it to be.

In the dark, a man couldn't see the beauty unless he knew it was there. In his knowing, the beauty glowed back at him like a spectral thing, easy to see once you gleaned its edges.

"Ennis," Jack said gently, saying something he'd dreamed of saying for a long, damned time. "We're home."

Ennis woke up enough to look around. He knew the beauty well enough to sense its edges, too.

"Oh, my God," he said, looking behind and aside and ahead. "We can't be...where I think we are."

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Ennis' big-eyed surprise. "It ain't the best view of Brokeback, we still gotta hike a bit to that, but by gum, it's a damned good one."

Ennis pushed open the truck door, then walked carefully out on stiff, unsteady legs, as if anxious to look at a long-lost friend. He inhaled as deeply as he could and shut his eyes at the understanding.

"Oh, my God, Jack. Oh, my God. I never, ever thought to see it again. If ever I had, I thought I'd be bringing your ashes to scatter."

Jack nodded. "I know, Cowboy. But now we can pick up where we left off and never should've stopped."

Ennis laughed sharply. "We got no gear."

"Don't need any." Jack smiled. "Look around them trees. I expect you'll see something beyond it."

The *something beyond it* glowed with a honey-warm light that spilled out of the shadow of a tree like a lingering promise. There was an awning tented over the doorway and an outside table with chairs. In between it, was a fifth-wheel camper trailer. It was clearly a place meant for easier living. There was another shapeless car lurking in the dark.

"That's your trailer?"

"Yup."

"How'd you get permission to park it here? Hell, how'd you drag it up here in the first place?"

"Get anything up anywhere, throw enough money at it. But mainly I dug me a drivin' trail up from Folsom Road. And as for permission, didn't need any."

"How come?"

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to speak such words in his life. "Coz I bought it."

Ennis looked more than a little surprised.

"What in the hell did you just say?"

Jack grinned like the new day was dawning on him. "I bought it. Lock, stock and cash on the barrel head, roots to river bends, paid in full. Aguirre deeded it, and when the Devil come to cash in Joe's soul, the land office did bid claim to clear his debts with his property. I bought us a piece of Brokeback."

Ennis could only shake his head again in amazement. He looked up into the trees and around until his eyes came back to Jack. "You done it, Jack. You got your own place."

Ennis thought he might melt from the love in the other man's eyes—eyes that even in this half-light glowed blue as a mountain morning. "Naw, Ennis. I got *our* own place. Your name's on the title, too."

Ennis took two steps toward Jack as if he might have misunderstood him and the closeness would somehow make it clearer. "Jack, I ain't never owned anything in my life, except my truck and my gun and the clothes on my back. That'd be way too much. I can't accept such a gift."

"It ain't no gift. It's just the way things is."

Jack leaned a little forward, reaching up for his fingers to climb knowingly through Ennis' hair. Ennis, all at once, bent forward to brush his lips over Jack's. It was just a fleeting memory of a kiss, and it was over before it truly started. It had been enough to make Jack's eyes shine more brightly.

The trailer door burst open fast to pepper the quiet with a trio of voices that all skittered to a stop once everyone saw the kiss. The three

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people—Ennis' daughters and his new son-in-law—conducted a thorough examination of the tops of their shoes until it was clear the kiss was over.

Alma Junior then wheeled around like an asteroid on an earth-bound trajectory. "Daddy!" she said, marching forward, her arms folded commandingly across her chest. "Just what in the infernal churnin' pits of Hades do you have you to say for yourself? You had us worried sick."

Ennis gestured for calm. "Now, y'already yelled at me for that, Junior. My ears is still ringin'. Just hold your ponies."

"I ain't holdin' no ponies, Daddy. This ain't no rodeo. Me and Jenny been scared to death for two days."

"Not for two days," Jenny said, coming up beside her. "Just yesterday you talked to him—"

Alma wheeled around to cast her sister the evil eye. "Little birds got big britches, don't they?" Then she turned back to their father. "Not only did you spoil my honeymoon, you ruined our big, ol' surprise on top of it."

"Oh, I's surprised," Ennis said. "I been any more surprised I might be restin' in a marble orchard. But I am sorry 'bout your honeymoon."

"That's okay, Daddy," Jenny chirped quickly, shooting a cautionary glare at her sister. "We understand. *We* agreed on that already, back to home, before *we* got all fired up to drive to hell and back and yell at you about it." Jenny motioned toward Jack. "Now we have taken care of that, Daddy, you aim to finally introduce us to this very important person in your life?"

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"But you should glad-to-know us proper," Jenny snapped back. "Introduce us. You say *this is Jack Twist*. Your Jack, not just *some old Jack*. Like that. You have never introduced us once."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Okay." Ennis pointed at Jack. "This is Jack. My Jack, not just some ol' Jack. Jack, this is my daughters, not just some old daughters. The one first chewed my face off is Alma Junior and the one fussin' at me now is Jenny."

Jenny stuck out a hand to Twist.

"Charmed," she said.

Junior shook her head to the stars. "She been watchin' them high tea movies on TV again."

"That's what our people used to say," Jenny shot back.

"Our people used to go outside to use the privy, too. You aim to start doin' that as well?"

"Don't gotta ask which one favors you," Jack said, with a private grin to Ennis.

Jenny smacked her sister's shoulder. "You snippy old coot."

"Both sorta do," added Ennis.

"Yeah, I just saw that."

Ennis stuck his arm between them. "Girls. Reckon it ain't good manners to kill your family, either. So why don't you both just pull back and tuck your tail-feathers 'til the next go-round?"

Alma grimaced at her sister. "Really, we gotta be gettin'. We both got work in the morning and it's a good drive back to where we got to go." Junior tossed a sneer at her sister, a testy look at her dad, but then nodded at Twist. "Jack, it was awful nice *finally* meetin' you for the hundredth time or so. Come see us."

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Jenny stuck out her tongue at her sister,

but smiled back to Jack. "I'm happy to have made your acquaintance, Mr. Twist. Be *sure* to come see us."

"Snoot," Junior said, walking away toward the shapeless "other car" now lit up from the light spilling through the door.

"Coot!" Jenny shot back, chasing after her.

Kurt sighed as if in a parting salute to the other two men. "We go down the way we come up, I expect."

Jack nodded. "Shine your high beams all the way down, you'll be fine."

"Thanks, we will. See you both later. I hope your evenin' is quieter than I'm afraid mine's gonna be."

The young man trudged off as if condemned to follow the still-quarreling young women in the direction of their nearby car.

They waited until they could wave at the departing Chevy, bouncing its own new way toward a road Ennis didn't even remember.

"Hey," Ennis said, his brow furrowing with worry. "How they gonna get back down?"

"There's a road straight up from the highway now. It's rugged, but it's sure and straight. I's tire-dancin' on it while you was countin' sheep. It's a lot more civilized out here than it was when we was short-horns."

"*Cityized*, maybe." He motioned toward the trailer. "Wanna gimme the cook's tour?"

"Guess it was too much to hope that we'd get back to serious kissin'," Jack said, peppering a little devil through his grin. Still and all, he looked like a kid eager to show off Christmas bounty. "Go on, go ahead in. I'm anxious for you to see it."

but smiled back to Jack. "I'm happy to have made your acquaintance, Mr. Twist. Be *sure* to come see us."

"Snoot," Junior said, walking away toward the shapeless "other car" now lit up from the light spilling through the door.

"Coot!" Jenny shot back, chasing after her.

Kurt sighed as if in a parting salute to the other two men. "We go down the way we come up, I expect."

Jack nodded. "Shine your high beams all the way down, you'll be fine."

"Thanks, we will. See you both later. I hope your evenin' is quieter than I'm afraid mine's gonna be."

The young man trudged off as if condemned to follow the still-quarreling young women in the direction of their nearby car.

They waited until they could wave at the departing Chevy, bouncing its own new way toward a road Ennis didn't even remember.

"Hey," Ennis said, his brow furrowing with worry. "How they gonna get back down?"

"There's a road straight up from the highway now. It's rugged, but it's sure and straight. I's tire-dancin' on it while you was countin' sheep. It's a lot more civilized out here than it was when we was short-horns."

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The fifth-wheel was easily five times bigger than Ennis' own little squatters shed of a trailer. This fifth-wheel inside actually looked like a right and regular little house. There was a nice, warm roomy little galley area aside a kitchen table and booth. There was a queen-sized bed in the cab-over in full view of the nice little seatin' area. Big, but cozy.

"Shoot," Ennis said. "This is some deal."

"It's a start. I'd like us to build our own place directly, of course."

Ennis shook his head in genuine wonder, sinking into a part of the two-legged kitchen seat. "We're at Brokeback. In a nice little trailer. On a place that's yours. And you're alive."

Jack grinned, putting himself down on the other half of the seat. "Everywhere except Texas."

Ennis leaned his head against the other man's shoulder, like it was his only possible sanctuary in the whole, wide world. "Jack, I missed you so damned bad."

Jack's nose pushed away a short crop of del Mar curls blocking his way, and pressed a kiss to Ennis' moist forehead. He reached down to take the other man's hand in his, squeezing their fingers together. "Wanna celebrate by gettin' drunk and foolish?"

Ennis snorted out a laugh. "You's already foolish enough."

Jack laughed again, a soft and throaty and satisfied sound. He nestled against him firmly. "And you're all out, I can tell by the way you're talkin'. C'mon, *vaquero*, let's get you up to bed."

They crawled together into the quiet little sleeping alcove. The queen bed space was all lit

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They crawled together into the quiet little sleeping alcove. The queen bed space was all lit

up by ambient light from a wayward sky, reflected across the tranquil Paso Verde.

Ennis yanked off his last boot and then stretched himself out beside Jack, who was turned on his belly, chin propped on his hands. A smile teased at the other man's mouth as he stared through the high, slim window at a barely-visible night-side Brokeback beneath its cloudy mantle. Jack's starry eyes had always been big and wonderin', like he could see so many things that no one else could see—could see the hope of things in hopeless places. Ennis had watched that bright hope fade to a stray glint over their march of years. Ennis had thought it had been Jack gettin' older. He knew now it had been Jack givin' up hope.

He reached for a hand and squeezed it, rolling over to lie beside Jack and share his perspective on what he was viewing.

"You know what happened out there—right there?" Jack said, lifting an eyebrow as if in search of reply.

Ennis grinned mischievously. "Really? I thought that was down to Entwistle Ridge."

"Naw, Entwistle Ridge is where that bear got atcha."

"That's right. I get them two times confused."

Jack poked his shoulder. "I don't recollect you hollerin' too loudly when I got at ya." He propped his chin atop his linked fingers. "You know, I had every intention of ridin' you sweaty by the time we crawled up here. But you look as dragged out as I feel."

"Well, we're in our 40s now, Jack."

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old."

"No, but we're older. Specially the way we fly at each other. When it gets hold of us, we need all the energy we can get."

Jack crooked him a grin. "Yeah, I remember. Still and all, my granddaddy would say *tell me in forty years what old is, Jackey, coz you won't know until then.*"

"Okay," Ennis said, dropping back against the pillows, closing his eyes as he smiled. "I'll tell ya in forty years, Jackey."

"See that you do."

* * *

He'd forgotten how hard morning fell in the mountains. Gentle but insistent, the sun casting its rays downward like the relentless sound of Jack's skinning some cowboy song with the dull blade of his voice. A bit later, a nasty ragtime sound of a gasoline engine doin' something short and sweet to a tree. All the racket filtered down, by gravity, into Ennis' half-awake mind.

There was a piece of paper stuck to a wooden hatch door over some kinda closet. The paper said **SHOWER (KINDA)**. Next to it hung an ugly t-shirt Ennis recognized as one of his own. His best pair of half-dead blue jeans were folded up beside it on the hatch's dropdown table.

In fact, the "shower" was a sucker pump built up to spill over into a culvert, then collected in somethin' beyond the drain. It was enough for Ennis to manage a shower.

He elected to wear the blue jeans, but he opted out of the t-shirt. He tossed his jacket on over his bare shoulders and took his yesterday

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shirt down to the river to wash. The wind traveling through was warmer than he remembered, though he'd been a younger man with a thinner skin in many ways.

Ennis sat down on the ledge rock some old through-stock mover had worn down from many days waiting for the graze. He leaned down to touch the water, as if reacquainting himself with an old friend. He flagged yesterday's shirt through the small tidemark pool now filled with the risen river, then picked up and tossed several river rocks until they buoyed down the floated shirt.

He slipped off his jacket to free his arms for work, as a little bottle was tossed over his shoulder. A little bottle that smelled like river wash.

"That there's one hundred percent biodegradable," Jack said, perching himself on the other river rock. "And you don't gotta burn your hands on lye. You got a t-shirt in there."

"Sooner be butt-ass naked than wear that. Where'd you get it?"

"Your girls brought some stuff down for ya. That's one of the reasons they was here last night."

Ennis grinned, opening the river wash and salting it over his shirt. He gathered up the sleeves and tails into a rucksack and twirled it in the usual circle, against the lay of the rocks inside.

"Ain't done this in a long time."

"You know, we got a laundrymat up in Gannett."

"Ain't drivin' forty mile to wash no shirt."

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Folsom in that direction. Real estate developers blew the side off a mountain to bring them tractors up here. Build them big damned bloated houses. Still, that's how we got up here, too."

Ennis nodded. "Who buys them houses?"

"Beats me. I think they import 'em from... Mars or somewhere. Just wish they weren't so welcomed."

"We livin' up here, why shouldn't they?"

"Coz regular high country people know how to live with the land. They don't leave no scars. That's all them other people do leave."

"*Them other people.* Listen to you, Tex. You thought your pet armadillo was a dog, prob'ly."

Jack grinned again. "Yeah, prob'ly."

"Brings in good air to purge the bad. Big city thinkin' into ignorant little backwater places. Makes it safer for men such as us."

"That's for sure."

"About liked to starve. We got anything to eat? Other'n beans, I mean."

"Hell, I can't even look at a bean. Inside, we got some biscuits and tack in the trailer bustle, I expect. And some of that *sano guavango.*"

His expression buckled in on itself. "Shoot, shoulda called that stuff sano bat guano."

"I know ya hate it, drink it, anyway, it's what we got."

"Hell, I'd sooner suck water off a frog's bottom."

"Be my guest, long as the frog don't mind," Jack said, pitching him an impish smile. Then something seemed to hit him like a memory—a little ripple of recall through his face. "Wait a minute, what'd you say back there a little? Before

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the frog bottom and the bat guano?"

"You mean about beans?" Ennis said, walking over to the trailer's bustle that was already opened. He plucked out a trek packet for each of them, and a couple of those loathsome little bottles labeled *jugo*. He tossed one of each to Jack.

Twist caught them in one quick reach. "No, before that, too. About air and ignorance. You said *makes it safer for men such as us*. Did you say *men such as us? As us?*"

Ennis tore open the trek packet and began to chew at a biscuit. "If you say I did, I musta done it. Why?"

"Why?" Jack said, looking at him hard for a minute.

Ennis squinted at the name on the packet. "*Almacén Mexicano en Pogo*. Answer my question first, when in hell did you go to Pogo?"

"Last week, before I come down to see Junior. Don't get all twisty on me about it bein' Pogo. Just went there to talk to a couple of builder tradesmen I was referred to. Talked to 'em about buildin' our house. I got supplies. I didn't even see a juan the whole time I's there."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

"I didn't. You can even ask Randall, he's the one who referred me down there. These old boys slap up a good house in twenty-fours now. They say we can put up digs in plenty of time for the blistering cold. I ain't lookin' forward to spendin' no bitter-root winter up on aluminum skids, are you?"

Ennis stopped for a moment, the anger barely perceptible to anyone but those who knew him well. It tugged at his mouth first, then traveled up until it fixed the set in his jaw. "Why you

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even in contact with Randall?"

"Because he's my friend. I don't *want* him to be nothin' but a friend. That's all he is, but that's *what* he is. He even offered to come down and lend a hand, but I said no coz I knowed you'd drop a goddamned two-headed calf over it, too."

"I'm mad coz I got reason. You got history."

"That history is over, Ennis!" Jack's anger rose up quickly, but then he smoothed it back down. He walked around the circle until the edge wore off. He drew a deep breath, then turned back around. "They ain't nothin' in Pogo I want. They ain't nothin' in Texas I want. Everything I want is right here, Ennis. All I have ever wanted is right here. That's all yesterday was about."

"So you say."

"So I *know*." Jack turned around to walk downriver, but after taking five steps, walking back up, as if he'd drawn a second wind. "Do I push you out of your girls' lives?"

"They're my daughters."

"I know that. Coz you love 'em, I do. You talk to the girls, talk to your old friends, hell, you prob'ly even talk to Big Alma sometimes, for all I know."

"I don't love Alma. I never loved Alma."

"I never loved Randall neither!" Jack barked back. "Or Lureen. Like you say—tell the truth and shame the Devil. Not that I didn't try to love Randall, I *tried*. I tried as hard as I could, but the goddamned truth is what you and me got is so damn big, it takes up all the space I got in me."

Ennis nodded, the set in his jaw easing a little. "We got you and me. We don't need no-

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body else. My brother'd come up from Kinnear. And my son-in-law'd come down. We can always hire on a couple of men. There always young hands for hire at the Turbo. We got time to put up shelter with a firebox in time for cold."

"Yeah, and we bring all these young hands down here to help two men build a home where they gonna live queer together? What they gonna think? What's your brother gonna think?"

"I don't care what they think, Jack," Ennis said, as sharply as he could, the anger now trembling in every muscle in his face just as set his teeth against it. " I *don't care*. Anymore. I'm the one worries about that. You don't."

"You don't trust me."

"Do I got cause?"

"Hell," Jack said, shaking his head hard. "You still jerking my short leash, tellin' me bad dog while you're tellin' me stay. I don't want *them—not Randall, not Pogo, not Mexico*. I *never wanted them*. Like I told you a hundred times. You the one forced me to do that—"

"It's my fault you can't keep it in harness?"

"Why the hell not? You tell me it's my fault you went queer."

Ennis' face grew silent, in the way it always did when he was hiding something deep. "Ain't said it once since I found out you're alive," Ennis said, turning to look away. "You're the one sayin' it."

The immediate moment was so quiet, the sound of a nuthatch springing on wide wings, from the edge of a tree-top nest, could be heard. The moment lasted long enough for its high, carrying cry to sing on until the end.

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a quick mind on fire—a flame fed by understanding's first stiff breeze. "You *did* say *men such as us!*"

Saying nothing at first, Ennis gnawed at the tack since the biscuit was gone. "Hell, you the smart one, Jack. I don't know what to think about any o' this anymore. I just know what I feel."

"You as smart in your way as I am in mine. Some waters is deep, others run shallow but wide."

"All I know is..." He looked over directly at Jack, not averting his gaze for a second. "Even if you did turn me, then I come to think...it was a better life you gimme, even so. I don't want no life without you. I know that down to the ground."

Jack's hand touched a moment at the limits of Ennis' face, finally drawing their eyes into alignment. Jack's probing stare advanced through the other man's always guarded gaze—a resistance built up by a lot of fear and pain and framed by the deep furrows which had worked their way over time into Ennis' brow. Ennis glanced away enough to break the stare-off, but Jack gazed on, with the fearful optimism of a man hopeful of a good end to a long bad night.

"Tell me you're sayin' what I think you are," Jack whispered. "Please tell me that's what you're sayin'."

"I'm sayin' I don't know what to say—"

Jack's hand on Ennis' face moved back around behind his neck. He ran his fingers up the hair along the back of the other man's head, using leverage to draw Ennis toward him. He clamped his mouth down hard on the other man's

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lips. The hungry contact almost hurt for a second before Ennis didn't give a damn how hard it hurt at all.

Jack tore the kiss apart, still clutching Ennis' jaw to claim his sole attention. He pulled the tack away from Ennis' fingers, pitching it to the bench. "I been savin' somethin' for you, Cowboy. Somethin' *just* for you. You ready for it now?"

Ennis shut his eye hard, swallowing harder. "Jack—"

"Shhh," Jack said. "All I gotta do is claim what's my own. Coz I know how to make you go up faster than dry corn in July heat. Wanna see?"

Ennis breathed deeply against a building fire. "I already know."

"No, not all of it, you don't. We ain't ever done it all. Mainly 'cause there's some things you said seemed too queer." Jack whispered to his ear. "Know what I'm talkin' about, Ennis?"

Ennis gave him a ragged nod. "I expect I do."

"Good." Jack reached over and yanked free the top button on his blue jeans, then whipped down his zipper fly. "Get in there. Now. We goin' inside. Since you gonna be on the bottom, I expect you'll want us near a bed. If you even got half a thought in mind like I think you do, I'm gonna persuade you of it as best I can."

Jack grabbed his shoulders, pulling him tight and close to his face. He smiled long and hard into Ennis' eyes. Ennis reacted with something of both fear and pleasure, before Jack's hands turned him around forcibly and pushed him toward the trailer.

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"Shhh," Jack said. "All I gotta do is claim what's my own. Coz I know how to make you go up faster than dry corn in July heat. Wanna see?"

Ennis breathed deeply against a building fire. "I already know."

"No, not all of it, you don't. We ain't ever done it all. Mainly 'cause there's some things you said seemed too queer." Jack whispered to his ear. "Know what I'm talkin' about, Ennis?"

Ennis gave him a ragged nod. "I expect I do."

"Good." Jack reached over and yanked free the top button on his blue jeans, then whipped down his zipper fly. "Get in there. Now. We goin' inside. Since you gonna be on the bottom, I expect you'll want us near a bed. If you even got half a thought in mind like I think you do, I'm gonna persuade you of it as best I can."

Jack grabbed his shoulders, pulling him tight and close to his face. He smiled long and hard into Ennis' eyes. Ennis reacted with something of both fear and pleasure, before Jack's hands turned him around forcibly and pushed him toward the trailer.

* * *

Ennis' short climb ended when he was yanked back around—close enough for Jack's fiery grin to fill his line of vision. Jack's hand pushed deeply into Ennis' makeshift curls, then pushed him down slowly until Ennis was sitting at the edge of the queen-sized bed. Jack's fingertips roamed for a moment aimlessly through the other man's curls, as if seeking the right thing to do or say. Suddenly they stopped as Jack's strong right hand looped under Ennis' arm.

In a second of surprise, Jack used his legs and leverage to boost Ennis up across the bed.

He was all over him, like a blanket, like the old days of their youth. He was everywhere... anywhere. As Jack's face neared his, Ennis shyly leaned up to follow the inarticulate hunger he only half-understood only to find his mouth captured under a demanding kiss that was asking for everything and all of it right now.

Jack's hand rubbed hard against his crotch, then down into the fly he'd opened. He nibbled at Ennis' earlobe and whispered, "I'm gonna turn you over on your belly. You're gonna take it like a man, you hear me?"

"You sayin' I got no choice?" Ennis snapped back, gulping up the air he breathed out to speak.

"I'm sayin' you don't want one." Jack trapped Ennis' mouth again under his own lips, then bore his tongue through teeth to drive home his urgency to the depths of the other man's mouth.

Jack raised up enough to strip off his jacket and shirt, both of which he cracked like a landing lasso to whip them into projectiles trained north.

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He grabbed Ennis' thighs, one under each hand, then stared straight into the other man's wide open eyes.

Jack turned him over easier than a bale of hay in a loft sort. Then he dragged off Ennis' boots as if the Devil himself had give him the order. Ennis tried to slow his galloping heart, but it only sped up as Jack ripped the rest of Ennis' clothes down his body.

"Not saying," Jack said softly, "you're gonna like this. Only men such as me like it this way. And I loved it our first time, even though it hurt like hell, bein' bareback and all. I'm gonna make this a lot easier on you than it was the first time you put it to me."

Ennis heard a cap pop on something before a cool and slick flood pumped generously up his ass. Jack's fingers shoved it up there better and Ennis thought he was about to turn to cinder right there.

Ennis groaned a whole bunch of hot, formless things into a pillow.

Jack's hard, thick cock writhed with its own need at the cleft of Ennis' ass.

"If you were queer, well, then it would feel even better than it hurt. But if you were queer, it might mean we was meant to be together after all. Like our love was something God made and not some weird accident of fate—"

"Goddamn it, Jack, shut up and do it," he gasped out again, this time beyond the pillow. He added quickly, "Get it over with, I mean."

"Just relax. It eases the pain."

In his own private heart, Ennis felt like nothing so much as a bareback bronco, sweating out the seconds in a bucking chute, and really,

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really wanting the ride.

It hurt hard, but in some weird way, it felt even better the harder it hurt until finally, the pain passed and all there was, was this warming, golden joy—an overpowering pleasuring ache that went straight through him. It was filling up Ennis until he was sure he was full, but then it kept on coming even stronger.

Ennis bit hard into the pillow he clutched. He shut his eyes against tears quickly drenching the linen.

Ennis felt himself pulled up a little, then pushed down, slammed against pillows to open him up more. Ennis didn't know if he had risen up or if Jack had dragged him up to grasp with white fingers at the piece of wall above their bed.

Whether by design or luck, Ennis was opened more to what Jack thrust into him, harder and faster this time, and somehow it only got sweeter. The bigness of the sweetness Jack was giving him burst through the edges of Ennis' silence. He could feel the seams giving through his fight to control it. It was beyond him to staunch the smaller sounds struggling through his manic breath.

Ennis only realized how loud he was groaning when Jack's voice had to hike higher just to be heard.

"*Tell me!*" Jack pleaded.

Ennis only knew partly what Jack was saying. Ennis had been too tied up fighting every sound screaming against the wall inside him. That Jack and he were together. Really, really, *really* together. And as much as he'd have been doomed by nature to struggle against it, Ennis was melting with joy that he was losing the fight.

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"*Tell me!*" Jack moaned in a shaking voice that split the difference between a prayer and a command. "Tell me how good this feels, god-damn it. You tell me *now*."

Ennis managed a tormented twist of wordless words that rattled out of him like a blue norther through bad storm shutters.

"You want me to stop?"

"No!" Ennis roared back.

Jack lurched forward harder, to reach under Ennis to grab for his cock and jerk him along with him. Jack rammed even harder as he buried a sob into Ennis' shoulder. "Then tell me," he wept harder.

"Fuck me, Jack," the words finally shook free. "Just fuck me. Please. I want it... I just want it... Don't you goddamn stop!"

Jack's laugh was high and hard and almost crazy with joy, as Ennis' cock gushed utterly into Jack's demanding hand. Jack followed after, pumping everything he had into Ennis. It lasted forever. It was over in a matter of seconds.

Jack tenderly pulled away, then dropped down to reach out for Ennis. Ennis grabbed out for him with a deep and reflexive need. He settled into Jack, his one place of comfort.

"Oh, Ennis," Jack whispered, letting the words stand on their own.

Their respiration gradually calmed until they breathed again together.

"You never made me nothin'," Ennis murmured, slowly but firmly, "that I wasn't already."

That would've brought Jack to tears if he wasn't crying already. "You know that now?"

"I always did know it." Ennis shut his eyes to speak his truth. "Fought against it at first, with

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Jack leaned his face against Ennis' head. He left a kiss among his curls. "That musta been horrible."

"It was. But then them years later, there you was. Sweet Jesus, wherever I shoved them unclean thoughts, they sure as hell all come roarin' outta me. You was so fine. And when I fell so hard, I ran just as fast. Four years, it took me to realize. And then I still near messed it up. But I knew, Jack. I always knew."

"That don't matter now. What matters is this. What matters is we're us again, you and me, and that's the way it's gonna be."

Ennis whispered against his skin, "Just please don't go away ever again."

* * *

Chapter Three Living and Dying

The gravelly sound of traffic coming up their mile of plowed road was easily heard, even by two sleeping men. Ennis heard the sound and, by instinct, hurled himself to his feet. He put on his jeans, but opted out of the boot-pulling in favor of stocking feet for the moment.

He found Jack's own abandoned clothing and pitched them his way. "Company comin'," Ennis said shortly, peering into his eyes.

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"Figures," Jack said, with a grin as groggy as his voice. "Best sleep I had in ages and we get visitors. Your girls come early."

Ennis shot a look of surprise his way. "Why didn't ya tell me the girls was comin' up?"

"'Cause it's a surprise—yeah, another one—but that don't sound like Junior's car."

"It ain't," Ennis said, listening to the distant metal clamor going on. "Eight-banger with tires to it. Some off-road deal."

Jack zipped his fly, then listened to the engine sound sliding over the local quiet—with the racing ping of a carburetor now struggling with the high altitude as it circled the last length of their catdirt road. "Likely."

Ennis looked to his gun. Some time other, he might have reached for it without thinking. Now he left it as a thought, keeping it in sight.

Jack stepped first out of the fifth wheel, as the newcomer's off-road vehicle ramped up into view. It was a big, ol' thing with more tire flesh to it than windows and doors.

Jack recognized its passenger before the young man ever left the cab. He stepped to the running board; jumped to the ground. He was a tall, young man now, with a long black overcoat. The only bit of little boy still left of him was his baseball cap—now bearing a Texas A&M caduceus logo.

"Daddy," he said coolly, like a greeting to a virtual stranger.

"Bobby..." Jack answered his own shaky reply, waiting and watching.

Ennis turned to go back in, but a voice from behind him said, "You must be Ennis. I'm Bobby Twist."

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Ennis turned around toward the young man offering his hand to shake. A young man who couldn't be anyone but Jack Twist's son. "Glad to meetcha," Ennis said, because it was all he could think of to say.

A big smile like lightning opened up the younger man's face. It flashed its light across a dark trove of memory in Ennis' head. "Guess you know the world about me, I don't hardly know nothin' about you."

"I guess," Ennis said.

Bobby stalked around with a nervous step, turning around to survey the view—up to the mountains and down to the water and across to the fifth-wheel trailer.

"This camper rig where you live?" Bobby asked of the man who had given him his dark hair and blue eyes.

Jack nodded. "'Til we get a house built."

"Pretty place," Bobby said, looking around again, this time as if seeking the beginning of his next sentence. "Not a bad place for an afterlife. Least I don't gotta walk around thinkin' you're dead like about half your friends in Texas. Guess only the friends down here merit knowin' your alive."

Jack's face showed his anger at the words, but he shut his eyes as if keeping the ire out of sight. "Oughta ask your granddad about that."

Bobby waved away the suggestion. "Already asked Poppy. Heard his words. Hell, everybody kept everything from me for twenty damn years. Took that letter you left me to tell me what's what. And here I stand seein' my own father in his real self for the first damn time. So I hope you won't mind if I got things to ask you."

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Jack nodded, smiling sad regrets. "I'll try to find you some answers."

Bobby looked back at the camp chair behind him, thought about it, but then just circled it instead. "I won't pretend I'm not angry. I am as angry as I can be while I don't know exactly what I'm angry about. It's all bunched up inside me so much I can't mete it out to spare my soul."

Bobby stopped where he stepped, staring down at his black and white sneakers. "Daddy, I'm in college. I know...gay...people. I ain't as retarded as my Poppy, but...this whole thing. I just feel like, I don't know... Like I got no reason for bein'." He shook his head as hard as he could manage it. "Didn't you love my momma at all?"

Jack steeled himself outwardly. Inwardly. "No," he said. "Not like you mean. Thought I did at the time. But I didn't."

Bobby flinched a little at hearing it, but appeared to compose himself and nod again. "Much as it hurt, I thank you for the honesty. But if that's the case, why'd you even make me in the first place, then? Was it just some experiment, trying to put yourself back together? Didn't you think about what it would be to me?"

"I can't say we was thinkin' about you at the time, no."

"No, you sure weren't. Seems like a damn selfish thing to do. Didja ever once think about me?"

Jack looked up at the sky, the clouds overhead reflected in his eyes against a brighter blue. "Bobby, when all that happened, I's no less a youngster than you are now, but one whole lot less educated. I didn't know what was right or wrong or up or down or whatever. Now I know

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you had your share of trouble at school from the rumors. The same shit you get now, we got then. Only it was one helluva lot worse then. A *lot* worse. You can't blame somebody in that situation for trying not to be different. To be what everybody thinks is normal."

"I guess I can't blame you for makin' a mistake that gave me life anyway, but—"

"You weren't never no mistake," Jack spoke clearly. "You're still my boy. Nothin' that happened with me and your mother changes a thing about that. I was happy as hell the day you was born. I raised ya and I tried to do right by you. I can't hardly blame you for hating me for keeping this from you, but I wisht you'd try to understand."

Bobby let go a breath slow as he could. "Hell, I don't hate you, Daddy. I just don't know what to think." He started walking in circles again, like he was following some new line of thought, but then he stopped at that circle's center. "Damn it to hell, you shoulda said...some-*thin'*. They say it may be hereditary. Hell, you mighta passed it on to me. On to my children."

"It ain't no disease, Bobby."

"I know that. But they say you can inherit it. That's one damn hard thing to be, even nowadays. Did you ever think about me?"

"Yeah. Every damned day of my miserable marriage. Why do you think I stayed with Lureen all those years? Why'd I lock horns with ol' L.B. when he was sure and certain set on you studyin' animal husbandry at his hallowed alma mater when you wanted to be a doctor? All I thought of down in Texas was you."

"Well, by that time you'd already taken a

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"Well, by that time you'd already taken a

lot o' choices away from me. I already was here."

"What I am ain't like flippin' some switch. It's more complicated than that. Half my life I was runnin' from who my old man wanted me to be. I just want *you* to be Bobby, whatever that is. Nothing more. Nothin' less. Nothin' else. Now if we can go inside and sit and talk, maybe we can understand each other."

Bobby made a trudging circle, as if wanting to be headed back to his car, but kept by a higher gravity in one place. "No, I got to get goin'. I go back in the mornin'. I just needed to come out and get this off my chest. Speak my mind. I just had to come out and see all...this for myself. I couldn't hardly believe it otherwise."

"You're welcome to stay the night," Ennis said, from the edges of where they stood. "I'd be happy to head down to my daughter's—"

"No," Bobby said quickly, as if letting go of something quick before it scorched him. "I got lodgings overnight at the Wind River Rez student hostel. They got it for college students when they travel to the area."

There was an empty sound around the three of them—not so much quiet or silence, but just a reluctance to speak another word, for fear of what might be said and of all that might be said coming to an end.

"Bobby," Jack said, his voice fraying at the edges in such a way that only Ennis knew the sound, "when am I gonna see you again?"

"I don't rightly know, Daddy," Bobby said, yanking loose his ball cap to wave it at the wind and set his hair free, then pulled the cap back on. "To be all honest, I don't know where I can fit you in my life. Maybe some o' this is anger talkin',

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but I don't rightly know if I'll be seein' you again at all."

In the wake of the words, Jack didn't move a step. He just stood there, staring down at the dust rising around him as the younger man walked away toward his ride.

"Bobby..." was all Jack said, too soft a word to be heard.

"Daddy?" Bobby said, looking back.

Finally, Jack just shook his head. Looked away. "Nothin'."

Bobby nodded sadly, as if something grim had been confirmed. "That's what I thought."

"Bobby," Ennis barked after him, walking up past Jack for the moment. Ennis took a moment to temper himself. "You not the only one with a hot head. Your engine's burnin' with the altitude. Need to have a mechanic advance the distributor. Lean the mixture a little for ya. If you don't, you won't make it much anywhere. My brother Ked's got a garage called the Grease Monkey up the road in Kinnear. You go up there and pay him a visit, he'll treat you good. Tell him who told ya."

"Thanks... If I need to, maybe I will. Thank you for—"

"Wanna thank me?" Ennis said, cutting him off. "Cool down your own self. Come see your daddy again tomorrow. Things will seem better."

Bobby only nodded the same time as he shrugged, then shook his head. "See ya," was all he answered as he quickly climbed up into the big truck thing. Right off, it peeled away to crescent the trail and head back for the dirt plowed path on its way to Folsom Road.

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took the tires to drone down the road. He was far out of sight before Jack even turned around.

Jack hadn't for a moment been expecting the arms that swallowed him up and held them together like a solemn promise. They were everywhere around him, solid and firm and in their own way making promises in a way they never had before.

"Doesn't know what he's sayin'," Ennis whispered tightly against his ear.

Jack breathed in Ennis' presence, to clear away the clouds within. "Yeah, he does. Knows it all, just like we did at his age." Jack plucked away tears off his face. "I drove off my own son—"

"Bobby'll come around," Ennis said, offering up his tucked-under, slow-growing smile. "Got a good pigheaded Twist *cabasa* on them skinny shoulders. Ain't about to take no for no answer."

Jack laughed, making like he was ducking the kiss to his face, but making sure he wouldn't do so. "Who you callin' pigheaded, mulehead?"

"You. Texas-bred Arkansas razorback, down to the ground."

"You're a big ol' muleheaded buck, then, straight outta Whylivehere by way of Macon, Georgia."

"Maybe we both jackasses, then."

"Naw, you're a mule. You're only half jack-ass. Me, I'm the whole done deal."

"Now that's true."

Jack shook his head, looking in the distance where Bobby's footprints still lingered in the quickly scattering dirt. Jack's voice had a whole lot of quiet in it. "Why can't he be like your girls?"

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"Because. Alma's fed 'em on my evil doin's since they was old enough to swallow. They grew up knowin' their daddy was bent. Give Bobby time."

Jack shook his head, staring around them to check for the time in the shadows on the trees, the old cowboy way. "Maybe."

"Will be. One thing, though. I's wonderin'. He said bein' queer might be *hereditary*. Meanin' you get it from your folks, right?"

"Yeah, that's one idea about it."

"So maybe my folks give it to me somehow. In their blood and such. Sets me to wonderin'."

"What about?"

Ennis shrugged. "Just wonderin'."

Jack's sadness abated with a smile.

"Shoot, I can't believe my own ears with you, these days."

Ennis grunted a laugh. "Just these days?"

"These days especially."

Another blast of motor grinding and tire-slapping-road grumbled up the distant access road. Ennis recognized the sound of what passed for his first-born's car.

"We got all kinds of visitors today. That'd be Junior. Here with my surprise. You two's just bound to knock me on my ass somehow or 'nother, ain'tcha?"

"How do you know it won't be a pleasant surprise?" Jack said.

"It'll start out that way. 'Til you two get hold of it."

The old sedan scuttled to a stop just beyond them, moving half a foot and still sputtering when Alma Junior had already left it to walk to-

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ward the men. Jenny managed the emergency brake, scowling in Junior's wake. Jenny finally climbed out and slammed the door to make her point.

"Your daughter is crazy," Jenny said to her dad.

"There's somethin' new," Ennis said.

"No, Daddy," Jenny said, following her smiling sister with heavy steps, "this time she fell out of the loco tree and hit every branch on the way down."

Alma Junior was having nothing of her sister's attitude. She was beaming with barely-contained glee. She took a folded envelope from her pocket and handed it to her father.

Ennis opened it up, squinting at the words. "You are invited to a party," he said. He bent a sad smile at Junior. "Darlin', you know I don't cotton to parties."

"Daddy, you don't cotton to anything that's fun."

"Thanks for invitin' me, but with everything goin' on—"

"The party is for you, Daddy. And Jack. You can't send regrets."

"For us? Why?"

"Call it a house-warming."

"We ain't even built the house yet, sweetheart."

"Okay, a party to mark when you two break the dirt to build your house. It'll just be us and good friends. People who know you. But they don't know Jack yet. We can introduce 'em to Jack."

"Introduce 'em to Jack how?"

"How ya think? This isn't the dark ages,

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"Introduce 'em to Jack how?"

"How ya think? This isn't the dark ages,

Daddy."

Jenny shook her head with a pointy-eyed look at her sister. "I tried to tell her, Daddy."

"Baby girl," Ennis said, trying to slow down his temper before he spoke. "It can't be that way. That's awful...public."

Jack walked up to join the circle, while tussling with his hair to give it some kinda order. "I toldja, Junior. He ain't never gonna stand up nowhere with me at his side. He's ashamed of me."

Ennis swung him a sharp glare. "I ain't ashamed o' shit."

Jack looked back, looked deeply into Ennis' face, saying once again, "You are ashamed of me. I don't care what no people think, but it's all you can think of."

Ennis turned only in his direction. "You're upset over that with Bobby, I know, but you ain't got cause to speak to me like this."

Jack kept his face close, snarling, "Like hell I don't."

Ennis seized Jack's shoulder and hauled him toward their trailer where they could have some privacy. "I'm not ashamed, I'm just bein' careful."

Jack folded his arms as if to close himself off. He leaned against the stump that was nailed into a stanchion to their laundry line. "Here they are, right on time. The ghosts of them two damned ol' queers flyin' high over my life yet again. That was thirty-five years ago, Ennis. You were a puppy. When are you gonna let it go?"

"Every day, I try, Jack. It's scares me bad takin' up livin' here with you, but I'm here," Ennis snapped back, raring up above his whisper, then pulling his voice back down.

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"It scares you so bad, well, don't mind me. Leave. Hell, be my guest," Jack said until his voice broke down and he turned around to storm the stairs to the trailer.

Ennis glanced back at the girls. "Give us a minute," he said.

When they were both inside again, Ennis closed the door to guard their confidence.

"I toldja in that motel after we come back together, those years after our first season, I didn't realize what I felt for ya until you was gone from my life. Well, I didn't realize I didn't have a life without you until I thought you'd lost yours. Every night I see those dead men in the ditch in my dreams. I used to see you lyin' with 'em. And I realized there's much worse things than dyin'. Much worse. So, I'm here. I know I gotta get past this. But it's hard."

"I know that, Ennis," Jack said. "Sometimes I ask a lot—"

"Sometimes? Hell, most times. But I tell ya what, I been thinking. Ever since...what happened last night. I'm thinkin' of a way to put this behind me if I can. So, you three plan whatever dang party you want to. I gotta prove somethin' more, I'll prove it. I gotta walk over burnin' coals, I gotta pierce myself on some bed o' nails, I'll do it. Right now, I'm gonna drive up and set a spell with my brother. Talk about some things."

The sound of the girls' car firing up and turning around to drive away was loud enough to interrupt whatever words might have come after.

"I think we scared 'em off," Jack said, grinning.

"I don't doubt." Ennis reached for his hat off the sink. "Why don't you come with me, then?"

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You could meet my brother."

"Naw. You go. I trust ya. If you need to talk about things, it ought be done between ya. And I ought to hang out here a while and get my head around this thing with Bobby. Just... Ennis... "

He opened the trailer door, then looked back around. "What?"

"Be sure you come back."

Ennis laughed with a little, sad sound. He shook his head. "I always and forever gotta prove somethin' to you. I tell you what, in my worst hours, I used to wonder if I held back coz I felt so much. And if maybe you hold on so tightly coz you don't. Not too long ago, you yelled at me for not sayin' I loved you. Well, you mighta noticed that, throughout all these years, you ain't never once said it to me."

With that, the quiet man pushed into his pocket the crumpled invitation he still held in his fist. He reached down for his boots to bring them with him. He walked out the door, down the stairs and around the bend of their lives.

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The Grease Monkey had once been a gaso-line station that K.E. del Mar had bought for him-self and turned into his own auto garage long about the time the ranch-hand life got to him.

As he walked in, Ennis felt the cool, moist breath of an overhead swamp cooler blasting through a building where the engines always made it hot. The light-up face of the Orange Crush clock glowed despite both its arms being broken. K.E. kept it up there for some brightness

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in that dark little corner.

K.E. kept his initials because they'd been their daddy's, but his brother couldn't never take to his own the name. K.E. became all kinds of things before everybody bundled his three initials together to come up with a nickname.

"Ked!" Ennis called out into the low burble of muffled cowboy music.

"Yeah!" something called back, during a shuffle to quiet the flat voice of Chris Ladew as it punched back at that world from a radio. Chris Ladew, cowboy of cowboys. Voice as thin as water, not a whiff of bother about it, but he came from low folk and rode the ponies for pay so he was the good ol' boy of good ol' boys, before he'd died at some bad age, which only perfected the legend. Ennis' brother had always and forever liked his music.

Ked came out ragging off his hands on an oily cloth. He grinned in a big way when he saw him. "Tadpole! Ain't seen you in a mule's age."

"Been busy."

"So I hear. How's the blushin' bride?"

"Junior's fine. She's always fine. Got time to jaw a mite?"

"For my brother, always." From its lodging in an old crankshaft, Ked pulled free an aged grape Nee-Hi bottle. He upended it to bang a big leggy spider from its belly. The spider fell free to the floor, the key at the bottle's bottom falling into Ked's hand.

He turned the key in the lock to a little side door. "My little shit office is the best place.

Wanna Coke?"

"Thank you."

Once inside, Ennis took himself a seat at a

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Once inside, Ennis took himself a seat at a

little soda parlor table and chair, once white chrome and vinyl, now worn away to speckles of beige and gray. The big, old Coca-Cola machine, that looked more like the hood and grill off a '56 Studebaker with DRINK COKE spelled over its hood, set by itself in the corner. Ked slammed open the glass slider and plucked out two little glass bottles. He yanked off both caps across the bottle opener welded to the machine. He handed a bottle to Ennis.

"I didn't get Big Alma's invite 'til yesterday, the day after the big day. That's how come I wasn't there."

Ennis nodded. "Figured it was somethin' that way." Ennis stumbled on inside his head, as if kicking around for the next best thing to say along with a back-up reserve of nerve. "How's business?"

"Too much of it. Makes me nervous as a long-tailed cat in a roomful o' rockin' chairs, but the money is good. I work for myself, so my boss is a right son of a bitch, you know what they say."

Ennis nodded. "I know. And, well, if you got a bit o' time for me, I need to talk. About somethin'. I don't rightly know how."

"You can tell me 'bout anything, I expect. Wait, you ain't dyin'—"

"Naw, hell, no." Ennis took off his hat, reveling in the cool, dim place. "I wanna talk about somethin' that happened when we was kids. Its been comin' up on me in days of late."

"Shoot, don't gotta tell me what."

"I don't?"

"Hell, no. I been waitin' for this talk for years. Been thinkin' about it a lot lately. Go ahead. Let's talk it."

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Ennis nodded, staring into the white clouds of fizz circling the inside of the bottle. "Who you think done that? I mean, it didn't just happen."

"Maybe it was a accident after all."

Ennis looked a little as if he couldn't have heard him right. "Naw, that weren't no accident."

Ked shrugged a little, drinking at his Coke. "Maybe a body oughta just let things be. Maybe the past is past and that's a good thing."

"Two people died, Ked. Ought not just let that be."

"Well, it's hard to say what forces boil up in a man. We don't know what they are. We all just ignorant cusses in one way or 'nother."

Ennis felt the cold air sitting on him long and hard. "What about the law?"

"Some things is more important than the law. Things like livin' and lettin' it be. If you get what I'm sayin' to ya. If people would accept things as they is, well, things would be better. We ought try to understand."

"So we s'posed to live with it?"

"Ain't much else we can do. What's done is done. Hell, you know what's right? I sure as hell don't. Neither did Pop. He never even tried to know. We only know what we think is right and that ain't maybe it. Like I says, who knows what kinda pressures build up to drive a man?"

"So we just supposed to forgive murder?"

"To protect the innocent maybe. Don't get me wrong, it's still a bad thing, but if there ain't no second choice... Better the guilty be wronged than the innocent, right?"

"How were they gonna wrong any innocents?"

"Shoot, Pop was just rattlesnake nasty."

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"How were they gonna wrong any innocents?"

"Shoot, Pop was just rattlesnake nasty."

Who wouldn't he hurt?"

"Wait," said Ennis, utterly lost at that point, shaking his head with a vengeance. "What the hell we talkin' about?"

Ked stiffened a little in his chair, looking back with a hound dog's first alarm. "What were *you* talkin' about?"

Ennis was a mighty confused man. "When the old man took us up to Stopple Ditch, over near Powder Crick..."

"Oh!" Ked said, with a papery laugh. He gripped a little harder around the Coca-Cola's thick little throat. "That. Shoot. What about it?"

Ennis waited a second, as if wanting to re-visit what they'd said before. But then he opted to move on. He saw back a-ways. "Ya wonder how Pop knew those old boys was queer?"

"Earl and Rich? Hell, everybody knew they was queer. Not like they tried to hide it, huddled up the way they was."

"No, but the old man was pretty much the one who told me. And you. Maybe that's how everybody else heard it, too."

"Could be. He's always talkin' nineteen to the dozen about somethin' goin' on. What of it?"

Ennis swallowed hard before the rest of it, and chased the dryness down with Coke. "I wonder...if he mighta just...did the killin' himself."

"Well, sure. Hell, I always just assumed he did."

Ennis almost took a full step back without even standing up. He just sat there, in lockjaw surprise for a while. "Yeah. Me, too. At least I...wondered some about it."

"Pop always was a violent old bastard. Whup me with a leather strop and call me a pansy

Who wouldn't he hurt?"

"Wait," said Ennis, utterly lost at that point, shaking his head with a vengeance. "What the hell we talkin' about?"

Ked stiffened a little in his chair, looking back with a hound dog's first alarm. "What were *you* talkin' about?"

Ennis was a mighty confused man. "When the old man took us up to Stopple Ditch, over near Powder Crick..."

"Oh!" Ked said, with a papery laugh. He gripped a little harder around the Coca-Cola's thick little throat. "That. Shoot. What about it?"

Ennis waited a second, as if wanting to re-visit what they'd said before. But then he opted to move on. He saw back a-ways. "Ya wonder how Pop knew those old boys was queer?"

"Earl and Rich? Hell, everybody knew they was queer. Not like they tried to hide it, huddled up the way they was."

"No, but the old man was pretty much the one who told me. And you. Maybe that's how everybody else heard it, too."

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"Pop always was a violent old bastard. Whup me with a leather strop and call me a pansy

when I cried. Saw his own demons in me. He'd see 'em in you, too. You was so little, I'd take what he was bound to give you, then I'd turn around and whup you for it myself. Momma, she just sat there, starin' and drinkin'."

Ennis nodded. "I remember. Well, a lot of it I do. What's that mean with those ol' boys, though?"

Ked drank at his Coke and shrugged.

"Maybe he saw somethin' in him he didn't like 'coz it reminded him of himself, so he done 'em. The queer thing was probably part of all that. He saw his own self in a lot of different shadows. He woulda started in on you, too, only maybe worse. I's big and loud and burly enough to fend him off. You was another matter entirely. Big as you was, you was gentle as a kitten, even then."

"Wasn't so gentle later on. Tryin' to get the jump on you was 'bout the only thing Pop ever taught me. Back when you used to beat me up. I beat you up back one time pretty damn good."

"One time for all the times I beat you up? I hit you, you hit me. We did it coz that's what we was taught. That's all we knew to know. They broke the mold when ol' Pop went out, thank God. What was it ol' Dr. King used to say? We ain't what we could be, we ain't what we gonna be, but thank God Almighty, we ain't what we was."

Ennis almost laughed at the weird sound of church words comin' out of his brother's mouth.

"Amen," he said, far too serious to smile.

"Think what it comes down to is the why. You kill some couple o' old birds coz they ain't what you'd have 'em be. That just ain't right. Kill some old bastard out to hurt or kill somebody, just coz they's different. Well, that's not all okay,

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neither, but maybe it's understandable. To protect the ones you care for...the ones most likely to be hurt. So long as you're willing to live with the consequences of your actions. Speakin' of which, how's Jack doing now that he's alive?"

Ennis' look of dead shock brought a big damned laugh out of his brother.

Ennis stuttered out, "How in the hell—"

"Little brother, this is one damn little town. Alma talks to Monroe, Monroe talks to his kid sister, his kid sister talks to the whole damn beauty shop brigade. Don't pay it no never mind, I don't care. Anyway, I always sorta knowed you was different."

Now, that made Ennis sit way back in his chair. "How—"

Ked shrugged. "I just did. Just a feelin'. Kinda like I knowed how Pop killt them old men." Ked put his drink down on the table. "Listen, I heard about what happened with ol' Jack's ex-in-law."

Ennis nodded. "Yeah..." he said, the regret resonance in his long pause.

"And I knew you'd be beatin' yourself up over it. You was always way worse on yourself than you ever was on anyone else. You know the sayin' it takes a thief to catch a thief? Well, I just don't see no kinda meanness in your eyes. I never have."

Ennis was just about to ask his brother what the hell he'd meant by that, too, when the scream of a pinging engine loud enough to breach the walls of the garage office, pulled up outside. Ennis recognized the off-roader from before.

"That's Jack's boy," Ennis said, standing up with a start since the truck was clearly going

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much too fast to just be after a coolant fix.

As Ennis reached the outside, Bobby Twist came flying from the truck cab. "Ennis!" he called out, sucking up air to cough out words. "Something's goin' on with my daddy."

Ennis' heart flash froze within him.

"What—"

"My Uncle Alsbury!" Bobby said. "Momma's brother. He hates Daddy. All this time, he thought he was dead, but he kept askin' around. He musta tailed me down here or somethin'. The truck ran hot on me out on the highway, so I was sitting, waiting for it to cool down when I saw you drive past. And about ten minutes after you did, I saw my Uncle Als come racing down toward Folsom in his truck."

"Shit," Ennis said, fighting to think and not to panic while his blood ran cold. "Bobby, stay here and call the Riverton sheriff, tell 'em what's happenin'. Tell 'em where we gonna be."

"I ain't stayin' here!" Bobby said sharply. "I'm comin', too. I'll send my buddy in his truck to call the sheriff."

"Go do that, then," Ennis said, as the boy jogged off to do so. "Ked, you got a gun?"

"I got a pellet gun, for killin' snakes and scarin' coyotes."

"You know anybody's got a regular gun?"

"Just you!"

Ennis kicked at the dirt. "Hell, I god-damned left mine behind. Grab your scarin' gun. It'll have to do."

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Grease Monkey and Folsom Road. It was only about ten to the road itself. The sheltering tree that marked the large horse trail which had become Folsom Road, stuck out into the path a little. It was beyond there, in that clearing between the stand and copse, that the fifth wheel was sheltered. It also was where a big ugly black panel van had been left, with doors open, at the side of the road.

"Shit," Ennis said at the sight, lodging his truck beside it just as Bobby was jumping feet-first over the truck bed.

As he was about to run ahead, Ennis grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back. "Calm down. We gotta think clear."

"They could kill him!"

"Matters to you now?" Ennis barked back into his face. "*Stay here*, stay low. Wait for the sheriff, then tell 'em where I am."

"What do you want me to do?" Ked asked, coming up from behind.

"Hell, just follow me I guess," Ennis barked again, before he walked slowly and carefully beyond the big sheltering tree.

It didn't take long to spot them—Jack cold-cocked or something, bleeding from the brow, sprawled across the ground. He was conscious and crawling up like a cornered rabbit in a way that alone made Ennis want to kick the shit out of the man standing before Jack, aiming a heavy shotgun at the crawling man.

The standing man was a big sturdy son of a buck with his father's swagger. He couldn't have been much taller than Jack was, but his bigness made him seem fierce.

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"—my sister. You *toyed* with her, you made a *fool* out of her—"

Jack was saying back, "That ain't the way it was!"

"Shut the fuck up!" the standing man howled at him, aiming a handgun squarely and surely at Jack's head. This man had aimed a gun before. He'd aimed a gun a lot before. There was no anger in his hands. His hands were cool as glass. And that's what scared Ennis the most.

Ennis trenched his feet into the dirt, so the sod would muffle his advance. He stepped wide so that Jack would take notice. Jack looked quickly, but not for long, yet long enough to distract the standing man enough for Ennis walk between Jack and him.

"You ain't got cause for this," Ennis said, clearly and loudly.

The standing man was Alsbury Newsome, big as life and twice as ugly. He looked more than surprised to see Ennis walk in front of his gun.

"I got no beef with you!" Alsbury snapped. "Don't you get in with this or I'll just have to kill you, too."

Ennis nodded. "Maybe. But you ain't killin' Jack."

"Who are you to say?"

"The one standin' in the way. I almost killt yer daddy over somethin I didn't understand. I don't know what's in your head, and I don't wanna know, but it ain't the truth."

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my own sister's good name."

"Jack Twist never hurt nobody on purpose in his life. He spent most of his life stayin' away from old boys like you."

"Like me how?"

"Like you standing there, aimin' to open queer season. Then high-tail it down to Texas to hide behind your daddy's skirt. Well, that ain't happenin'."

Alsbury spit out a laugh like a gritty chaw off some plug of Copenhagen and aimed the gun between Ennis' eyes. "So you wanna die with him, that it?"

"Hell, no. But Jack ain't gonna die. I got a choice and my choice is, Jack lives. You kill anybody, it's just gonna be me. I'm willin', to spare Jack. Standing yonder is my brother, though, crack shot o' this neck of Wyoming. Kill me, my brother'll kill you. You'll be dead. I'll be dead. Jack'll be alive. No one'll die for any reason, even yer dumb ones. Don't be any bigger idiot than you are. Put your gun down."

"And if you don't listen to him," said Sheriff Avery, walking up behind Alsbury to aim a service gun at his head. "Maybe you'll listen to me." He reached over to snub the other man's handgun to the sky, then pealed it slickly from Alsbury's instantly loose fingers. "Afternoon, Ennis. How you boys doin' today? Got company, I see."

Ennis breathed for the first time in a minute or two. "Sure good to see *you*, Charlie."

"That young man called and I pretty much sized up the situation. I'd thought there was somethin' up when I saw all them cars headed up your way."

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hands and bent it back and low. He pulled the other one back around and bound them with rope prairie bracelets. "Our one pair o' handcuffs are with the other sheriff in Windtickle, darn the luck, so these'll have to do. Where you from, stranger?"

"Texas," Alsbury spat back.

"No kiddin', I got kin up near in San Saba. Ranchin' folks. You smell like a city Texan, though. New leather cowboy boots and Oh-Doe cologne. We a bunch o' violent ruffians out *chere*. Seein' he's a local boy, I'll give Ennis a choice. Ennis, should we feed him to the cob hogs, burn him at the stake or stick him in a jail cell 'til the county claims him?"

"Jail cell, I reckon," Ennis said.

"Shoot, and I thought I had me some plans for the weekend." The sheriff grinned, grabbing Alsbury by the prairie cuffs to swing him around to the road. He hauled him close for a second.

"Listen to me, Young Mister Newsome. I know your name, I know your face, so does my deputy. We pulled your lovely list of priors. You come near here again, or if anything happens to *either* of these boys, we gonna know who done it. I especially don't take kindly to people who try to kill local folk. You *don't* want to be on my bad side, most especially 'cause I don't have a good one."

"Everything okay?" Ked said, from the edges of it all.

"Is now," said the sheriff as he dragged Alsbury with him up the trail toward the patrol car, not far away. "C'mon, Mr. Newsome, I best safeguard you from danger. Here comes Ked del Mar, crack shot o' this neck of Wyoming."

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"Since the hell when?" Ked said, looking at his pellet gun, then up at the sheriff like he'd gone nuts.

"Since I lied," Ennis said, laughing and turning around to reach a hand down to Jack. Once he'd pulled him to his feet, he reached out to check at the gash in his forehead. "That hurt?"

Jack was looking up at him with a wild kind of wonder that just couldn't take him all in. "Nothin' hurts," he said, shaking his trickle-bleeding head. "Not no more. Not never again, either."

Ennis smiled. "Somethin' finally sink in?"

"Finally." Jack nodded, lowering his voice to whisper, in one word representing a thousand more, "Ennis... "

"On that note, little brother, can I borrow your truck?" Ked called down. "I need to get back to the shop. I can haul Bobby down to fix his 4x4 and tomorrow I'll have somebody follow me up to drop off your jalopy."

"I could do that—follow you up here," Bobby said, walking out from the trees to stand in the clearing. He was plucking high leaf feathers out of his Jack black hair. He glanced for a moment at his father. "I'd like to come back. Tomorrow. So we could talk."

Jack smiled like he could never smile enough. "You know I'd like that, too."

Bobby nodded to both of them. "See you then."

"You both come back, why don'tcha," Ennis said, looking from Jack's son to Ennis' brother.

"Gonna have a party or somethin', I hear."

"A party?" Ked said, his eyes looking at him hard. "Ennis, you *sure* you ain't dyin'?"

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"Hell, yes, I'm sure. Why's everybody ask me that? In fact—" With a mischievous grin, Ennis' hand dipped into his jeans pocket to pluck out the crumpled-up invitation of early in the day. He handed it across to Ked. "I even got your invitation."

It was the depths of Jack's silences that distinguished them, one from another. He wasn't quiet all too often, but when he was, the moments stuck out. And that one, as Jack moved up beside Ennis to watch Ked and Bobby trek up to Ennis' truck, was the loudest silence of them all.

Ennis noticed Jack mainly for what he wasn't saying. Ennis saw, from the edge of his eyes, Jack turn away from watching Bobby leave and then toward Ennis.

Only when they were alone did Jack start to speak. "You stood in front of that gun for me. You was ready to die. For me."

"'Course I was. Now you the one should be called mulehead, you jackass."

"I never thought— I mean, I hoped—"

"That I felt for you like you felt for me? Toldja I know now. Toldja I'm stayin'. Can't change the past, but we can what's comin'. What's it gonna take, Jack?"

Jack shook his head, smiling in wonder. "Nothin' else."

"You say that now. You'll be jawin' on about it shortly. Oughta get that bump looked at."

"This?" Jack said, yanking loose a hanky from his pocket to press against the forehead cut. "Hell, I won rodeos with a lot worse'n this. Got trampled and gored one time and got right back on the mount. No. I don't wanna think about

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"Me?" Ennis looked at him closer. "Sure you didn't get bumped harder than you think?"

Jack laughed, his blue eyes growing bigger as he was talking. "You was so beautiful, standing there."

Ennis gave him a joking glare. "Just now?"

"Just now, yesterday, all those days before. And the first time, standing there all gold-like in the shadows. Like you was hidin' from the sun."

"When?" Ennis asked, his eyebrows crouching together.

Jack laughed loud and hard. "When the hell you think, moosehead? The day we met each other." He had lots of sparkles in his big, blue stare and they were all shining at Ennis. "I wanted you so damn bad. It was all I could do to keep my hands to myself."

Ennis grinned shyly. "Right from the first?"

"Right from the first. You were so fine.

Then all those days we was together, I loved you a little more each day. I didn't think there was any way I could have loved you more than I did then. But here I stand, lookin' at you, not so young and golden no more, but still my Ennis, and I know now I was so wrong."

Ennis tucked under his smile. "Is that so?"

"That's so."

"Well, maybe the not so gold and young part."

"But you are still *so fine*," Jack said, his eyes loco hungry again, as his hands reached out to grab Ennis and pull him in hard for the kiss. He mashed their mouths together, until Ennis was leaning back just enough for Jack to wing roll him

nothin' but you. 'Cause you're my hero. You always have been."

"Me?" Ennis looked at him closer. "Sure you didn't get bumped harder than you think?"

Jack laughed, his blue eyes growing bigger as he was talking. "You was so beautiful, standing there."

Ennis gave him a joking glare. "Just now?"

"Just now, yesterday, all those days before. And the first time, standing there all gold-like in the shadows. Like you was hidin' from the sun."

"When?" Ennis asked, his eyebrows crouching together.

Jack laughed loud and hard. "When the hell you think, moosehead? The day we met each other." He had lots of sparkles in his big, blue stare and they were all shining at Ennis. "I wanted you so damn bad. It was all I could do to keep my hands to myself."

Ennis grinned shyly. "Right from the first?"

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to the ground.

Ennis' playful giggle got muffled by Jack's mouth when Jack rolled over on top of him. He cupped Ennis' face like something precious in his hands, then tongued his teeth apart, frenching the depths of the other man's mouth as though he couldn't reach far enough. His hand jumped down to clutch at what was coming to rigid life between Ennis' thighs. Jack kneaded it brazenly with the heel of his hand, encouraging it on.

"Jack!" Ennis cried out as he forced their mouth apart. "Jack, we can't do this here!"

"The hell we can't," Jack snarled back, his voice all smoky. "We're twenty miles from anyone. It's just you and me and the trees, same as always. Now hesh up so I can kiss you hard before I kiss somethin' else even harder. I'm gonna blow up if I don't put my spurs to you."

"But the sheriff just—"

"Left," Jack gasped out, desperately. "We heard 'em leave. We'd hear 'em a full five minutes before they turned the grade to come back, too."

"With all I got ringing in my ears, I ain't about to hear a thing."

"I'll hear it for you—"

"Jack!" Ennis begged, bucking up hard to pull free, struggling to his feet. "You know we can't hardly be decent together. Come on, when we collide... Shit, I don't even wanna risk somebody seein' that."

"I like the sound o' that," Jack said with a grin. He stood up slowly. "You best move, *vagüero*. I get you again, you ain't gettin' up 'til you get what you gettin'."

"What in hell's that mean?"

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"What in hell's that mean?"

"Move, 'less you wanna find out in front o' God and everybody."

Both men bolted for the trailer, but then Ennis broke off to the left. Jack grasped him again by the shoulders and towed him up the steps behind him.

Ennis wasn't sure if his clothes burned away, were torn away or if he'd just ripped them off like Superman or something. They went anywhere Jack wasn't throwing his own clothes. The two men converged, dragging each other against their big springy bed—the eye of their shared tornado.

Jack let out a wild little whoop of victory as he topped Ennis again. "Every rodeo I ride, I win," he groaned.

"Ain't the way I—" Ennis managed to gasp out before his mouth was throttled again by a tender assault of tongue.

Jack grasped hold of Ennis' painfully stiff cock again, jacking it with a rhythm that lured Ennis to the brink. His lips unlocked from Ennis' mouth, purring hotly into his ear. He pulled off the headboard shelf a small tube. "You with me, darlin'?"

"Fuck yes," Ennis groaned from the center of his own private inferno.

Jack released Ennis' cock to grasp out for his chest, to steady him motionless below him so he could target one of Ennis' taut nipples, pleading to be sucked. Jack's tongue swabbed up and down with tough and tender precision, then tenderly pursed it inside his lips. His fingers sweetly pestered Ennis' other nipple. Then he switched sides. One side pulsed moistly, cold with air now and taut with Jack's attention, while the other

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nipple, worked into aching and needing hardness was suddenly rewarded by Jack's eager mouth.

Ennis howled like something caught up in the jaws of something so fine, it was beyond him to feel it all. As Jack rubbed against Ennis in the process of his nipple sucking, Ennis' cock was twitching fiercely at Jack's belly. He was hard now. Hard until it hurt.

"Jack...please..." he groaned.

Jack swooped down on his cock—throating it so fast and hard Ennis felt it through his whole body. Sucking at him like something pulling oil out of the earth—pounding, demanding, compelling.

Ennis was almost scared with what was coming out of him—every sensation building and then cresting and growing even more.

Ennis rammed his cock forward, fucking Jack's mouth as it took it all in with a wild and greedy abandon. It felt like the most fuckin' normal thing in the whole fuckin' world. He pounded his cock into Jack's lips and Jack sucked every inch of it down, as if he couldn't get enough.

Jack pushed his hand, already lathered over with the jell from the tube, under Ennis, then maneuvered two fingers up the other man's ass. He slowly, firmly began thrusting those fingers up Ennis' ass.

"Jack!" Ennis screamed out, unable to say or think a thing more, because there was no holding back. He was spewing deep into Jack's mouth while the other man greedily took it all in.

Ennis pushed Jack to the bed to climb down his body. It was a raw, anxious, eager need that drove him down until he reached Jack's cock, rigid and riding up to bead thick moisture near Ennis'

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lips for the first time.

"Ennis," Jack gasped out, reaching for a handful of hair to lift Ennis' head up so their eyes might meet. "Much as I want it...much as I love you that you want it...I want something more. I know what you want. I want to *hear* what you want. I wanna hear it out of your mouth. I wanna watch you say it."

Ennis cleared the sweat from his eyes, wrenched air back into his aching lungs, then set his teeth at the waves still coursing through him. "You know what I want. I want what you want."

Jack's eyes blazed back at him like hot blue glass. "*Say it, Ennis.*"

"I want what we did yesterday—"

"What *was* it?"

Ennis winced at the impact of it all. "Fuck my ass, Jack. Same as yesterday. Please just—"

Ennis was pulled up as if he weighed half of what Jack did instead of twenty pounds more. He was suddenly chest down again, being straddled again in a way that made him quiver all the way inside.

"Tell me again," Jack coughed out, thrusting his cock with slickened ease into Ennis' ass. "Whaddya want?"

"Want your cock up my ass!" Ennis snarled back at the man covering him.

Jack's arms enclosed him as the last thrust hit, he clutched at the man beneath him, with a sweet, aching victory. He melted against him, around him, as if sealing their souls together.

"Ennis," Jack whispered, letting tears go into his shoulder. He cried like a man relieved of a long burden. He cried like a man who had come the long way home only to find it waiting for him

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with open arms. "My Ennis."

Ennis turned around to take Jack against him, brushing the tears off, fighting the hair back, staring down at him as if Jack was speaking a language Ennis didn't understand, which pretty much described Ennis' usual state of being.

"Whatta you cryin' for?" Ennis whispered, kissing his forehead gently.

"Because I love you. And you love me. Just like I always wanted. And we're here together, you and me."

"You just figurin' that out?" Ennis said, with a gentle, teasing grin.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

Ennis grin spread wide. "You know, yer quick on the uptake, but you ain't too good at puttin' stuff together fast, are ya?"

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Chapter Four A Real Good Life

"How'd you do it?" Junior asked Jack, staring at Ennis like he was some big mystery, then back again at Jack.

"I didn't, he did. It was his idea."

"Tell the truth and shame the Devil?"

Jack raised a hand. "Tell the truth and shame the Devil," he said. "You know that invitation you give your daddy? He give it to Ked and Bobby. Didn't he, Ked?"

Ennis' brother nodded, making short work of a wine cooler. "Tis that he did, yup."

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"That's amazing!" Junior said, her eye-lashes way up.

Jenny was batting away flies. "But if I'd had a say in it, we'd have brought some citronella candles and a canopy. These darn horseflies bite."

"Well, if you weren't talkin', they wouldn't be swarmin', would they?" Junior said.

Ennis seized Jenny's hand in mid-slap at Junior, then plunked the girl's hand back down on the table before her.

He'd just walked away from the big metal barrel turned barbecue grill, the hood now pulled down. The nice smell had faded, but so did the heavy smoke.

"What're you hens squawkin' about now?" Ennis said to his daughters.

Jenny pouted. "Nothin', Daddy."

"I ain't no hen, Foghorn," Jack said, "but I was tellin' the girls how you come to your senses about this party."

"Barbecue more than a party. Don't mind barbecues," Ennis said. "Where's your boy?"

"Over with the contractor. The one gonna build our house. Bobby worked with a builder three straight summers, so he knows some stuff."

"We got the shade tree over there for plantin' when you're ready, Daddy," Junior said. "The one to mark the day you broke ground."

"Where?" Ennis said, looking around.

"Right there," she said, pointing to a nearby little shrub of a thing with its root system bagged in breathing plastic.

"That little ol' thing? That's a shade tree? What for, elves?"

"Well, for a while, the sheltering tree will

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shade us enough from the other way," Jack said. "Before too long, that little bitty ol' tree will be a big one, though."

"In forty years, they say it'll cover the whole side of the house," Jenny said. "The hot side, anyway. But even then you'll still have a beautiful view of the mountain."

Ennis nodded, looking up. "We always have that. Shoulda said, I got the burgers about done. Y'all can go help yourselves. I ain't your damned servant."

"Daddy!" Jenny said, rolling her gaze around the picnic table.

"What?"

Jenny shook her head as she got to her feet. "Jack, will you *try* to teach him manners? Just try?"

"I got manners!" Ennis said. "Some of 'em."

"Don't listen to her, Daddy," Junior said, standing up to follow after her sister.

Jack got up to walk in that direction and Ennis grabbed his arm for a second. "Jack, see to it they don't kill each other on the way over there, okay?"

Jack laughed loud, like it mattered. "Yeah, I'll just try."

Ennis himself rose up, but Ked was suddenly next to him. "Can I talk with you a second? Just us?"

Ennis stopped short and sat back down. He nodded him toward the chair where Junior had been sitting. "What is it?"

"Just somethin' I wanted to say. Just you and me. You and I talk a lot, but we don't never say much. Neither one of us."

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"Just somethin' I wanted to say. Just you and me. You and I talk a lot, but we don't never say much. Neither one of us."

Ennis allowed a little smile. "Yeah, I know. What's there to say?"

Ked looked down into his left hand, calloused by gripping one wrench or another for years, then calloused before that by working as a ranch hand. He finally nodded to himself, as if giving his own permission.

"I just wanna say you got fine girls," he said, looking up. "It's a good thing you and Alma got together, I guess, but a better thing you broke up. And that you're happy with yourself. You helped raise some fine young ladies. And you did that, I reckon, 'cause of who you are."

"Did that, I reckon, by dumb luck, like everybody else."

Ked grinned. "Could be. But I think your becomin' okay with who you are helped a lot. And it'll help in the future, with them, and your grandkids, and in your life. And with Jack. If you know what I'm saying."

Well, if that hadn't been plain as day before, it was now. Ennis pulled back a little. Smiled a little more. "Yeah. I think I know. I wondered if you...knew."

"Always did know, Ennis. From before you did, I think. And I think when a man rastles with his conscience, when he tries to live his life by somebody else's rules, that's when he starts strikin' out at others, wantin' to hurt 'em, from all the anger inside him. I think that may be what happened to Pop. Like we was talkin' about the other day. There was a couple more murders such as...well, such as dead men we saw...down our way. I think he had a hand in them dyin', too."

Ennis looked at him hard, following him

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slowly to be sure he was keeping up with his words. "Don't mind my askin', what was all that about the other day? All that about forces boiling in a man? You was talkin' about Pop then?"

"Not really, but it's the same with him, too. And if he'da lived much longer, soon as you got of an age, he'da knocked all humanity outta you. Who knows, he mighta even killed you. He'da seen some familiar shadows in your eyes like he didn't see in mine. So I'd say we should be thankful for the sacrifice and be happy things are as they are, which is what I said yesterday."

Ennis was following the conversation, bit by bit. "Okay—"

"Just don't take no guilt to your own, 'cause you got no cause to be guilty. But honor the deed as a gift and accept your good life now, okay? You got no cause nor reason to suffer, no matter what you believe."

Ennis squinted, now thoroughly confused. "I guess." Anxious to extract himself from this tangle of discussion he didn't nearly comprehend, he pointed over at the grill, where Jack was in charge of hamburger building. "Best get over there and get some grub before them buildin' boys eat it all."

"Not hardly." Ked checked his watch, standing. "I got a customer's brakes to reline and that's mighty important. He's haulin' his brood down to Six Flags Over Bumfuck or somewhere."

Ennis laughed. "How's that so mighty important?"

"Bad things happen to a car when the brakes ain't right. You can floor the brake down to the ground, trying to turn on the one bend in a long, old road. You could drive right off the

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shoulder into a ditch. People been known to get killed that way. Mechanics gotta be careful."

The clouds burned away by understanding, Ennis looked up at him without blinking. He remembered two days before and what they had thought they had and hadn't spoken of.

He shook his head hard, feeling tears rise up. "Ked, are you sayin' what I think you're sayin'?"

Ked laughed sadly, tossing his finished wine cooler into the empties container. "You know the best thing about bein' the older brother? You can duck out of answerin' questions. Enjoy your day. I'll see you later, Tadpole."

"Ked," Ennis said, as his brother walked toward the road.

He turned back around. "Yeah?"

Ennis shrugged, after searching for something...anything... "There ain't nothin' I can say."

"Then don't say nothin'." Ked laughed, looking over at Jack, then back at Ennis. "See ya later, married man."

Jack sat some big unwieldy hamburger contraption down in front of him. "There, that's yours. How come you look like you seen a spook?"

Ennis shook his head to push the thoughts away. He plucked up the bun on the hamburger instead. "You make this?"

"Yeah, I made it for you. I ate mine standin' up."

"Becomin' a horse now or somethin'?"

"No, mulehead, I thought you and Ked looked like you was talkin' serious stuff. I didn't wanna butt in. And right now you look as washed-out as an old bleached cod. What'd he

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"Becomin' a horse now or somethin'?"

"No, mulehead, I thought you and Ked looked like you was talkin' serious stuff. I didn't wanna butt in. And right now you look as washed-out as an old bleached cod. What'd he

say?"

"Somethin' I'll tell you later. Somethin' we gotta keep between us."

"Okay. Ennis?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"I know. You told me. And I love you back, like I already said. You want another hamburger? I can't say I'm in much a mood for this one."

"Naw. The girls want us to come over there and plant a shelter tree, anyway."

Ennis groaned, shook his head. "Junior's big on ceremonies."

"We best get over there, then," Jack said, laughing. "I already learned my lesson about makin' her angry. She's just that much like her daddy."

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Their own little sacred valley was fairly sparse when it came to houses, but they had their scattered neighbors and a nearby grocery store. Close enough to walk it, even, if they had to. Not that they'd be walkin' anywhere much anymore. Which was okay. The calm in it, the knowing it, almost made him smile.

The afternoon sun was now hidden by the tall shelter tree engulfing the sunny side of the home they had shared for many, many years. Forty-three years? How the hell could it have been so many... and so few...

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"Thank God for modern pain medication," Dr. Bobby Twist said, as he navigated the injection system he had set-up to deliver Ennis' hourly dose of palliative. "Cancer is still cancer, but at least it don't grind down a man with pain before it kills him like it once did. Not for a while, anyway."

Jack lifted his weary chin enough from Ennis' forehead, and smiled gently across to his son. "How long will it last?"

"Long enough. He won't feel nothin' but a twinge every once in a while, 'til the— Well, 'til what comes, comes." Bobby plugged in the final pump unit and powered it up. He turned a bit toward his father, checking the integrity of the needle feeding into his father's arm, just as he had double-checked Ennis'. "Daddy—"

"Son," Jack said quickly to hush him. "You been with Abigail nearly twenty years. Could you live without her?"

Bobby thought enough, blinking his misty eyes. He offered softly, sadly, "No, I couldn't. I know."

Old Jack Twist offered up a dry little laugh. "Me and Ennis got 64 years together. There ain't no livin' for me without him. We old married folk. I'd be dying soon, anyway. You're a doctor. You know that."

Bobby nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I just hate it...bein' both of you at once."

"I know it ain't easy."

Bobby nodded, thumbing away something trickling through his face. "'Bout the hardest thing I've ever done. But your road ahead is

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harder, I reckon. I wish I had some... way... to take it from you, Daddy."

"Funny," Jack said, fighting for a smile. "I don't hardly think of it as hard. We was goin' somewhere when we came here and it turned out right. I expect we've got some pretty miles ahead."

"I think so, too. Got all kinds of patients who come back from me bringin' 'em back. They see beautiful things on the other side. Give my best to my Poppy, just so's you stay out of his way."

Jack coughed up what would pass for a chuckle. "I expect I won't 'coz he'll see me comin'. One thing, Bobby. We don't want no bringin' us back. You know that. No matter."

"I know. That's how come I'm here. To make sure your wishes are followed."

"You gonna get in any trouble for this?"

"Not anymore. Was a time, yes. Nowadays, people look the other way. I think everybody knows its best."

"What's gonna happen, just so I'll know?"

Bobby looked at the contraption. "As soon as you press the button, a dual lethal dose will be released. First a relaxant and then the substance to...end things for you. There won't be any pain. It'll be like you just went to sleep."

"Sounds like we can do that."

Bobby shut his bag. "I'm going to stop by Junior and Kurt's and let them know. I expect Junior will tell Jenny and her family. I'll stop by tomorrow and finish up what needs to be done here. Take care of the final matters. Junior and I will bring both of your ashes up here and follow your wishes."

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Jack smiled a lot, sighing as if into the most comfortable of thoughts. "Thank you, son. Thank you for everything."

"Thank you, Daddy." He stood up quickly. He leaned across Ennis to kiss his father gently on the forehead. Bobby reached down and gently touched Ennis' hand. "Anything more I can do to make you comfortable?"

Jack settled back in their bed, pulling Ennis still closer. "Not a thing in the world."

"You know I love you. Both of ya."

"The same back to you."

When the waning silence hit, Bobby spoke up quickly, as if with an edge of desperation. "Hey, didya hear they swore in the new Commander-in-Chief? First daughter of a former President ever to serve."

"So we did," Jack said, nodding with a smile. "I hope Amy's a mite better than her old man was."

"Weren't nothin' wrong with Jimmy Carter," Ennis growled from under an edge of sleep. "Compared to some of the others."

"That ain't sayin' much, darlin'. Anyway, I just wanted to see if you was awake."

"Hard to sleep listenin' to you talk politics."

Bobby seemed to make a firm decision, then made his way to their bedroom door. He jerked the door open as if by internal command.

"Bye, Daddy... Ennis..." Bobby said quickly, making himself leave just as fast as he shut the bedroom door.

Jack smiled. "This is so hard for the young. They don't know what it is to be old. They don't know what a deliverance this is."

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"Jackey, you ready to tell me what old is?"

Jack came as close as his old flesh could to bursting out in laughter. "Yeah, 'cause I finally know the answer."

"Well, if you know it, tell it."

Jack looked as far as he could into those wide-open eyes. "All those years ago, before we built the house, after we come back together, when we was young, thinkin' we was old, I didn't think I could have loved you more than I did right then. But here I am, lookin' at you, not so young and golden no more, and I know now how wrong I was. Again. To answer your question, I think when you have what we have, there ain't no such thing as old. You gave me a real good life, Ennis. I couldn't ask for anything more."

Ennis smiled, as much as he could smile, as fragile as he was. His voice was soft and brittle, like the dying call of some distant bird. "There ain't no words, Jack. No words at all."

Jack nodded. "With you, there never is when you mean it most. I know that now." He reached for the little pump that worked the apparatus Bobby had set up for them. "Wanna trigger our adventure?"

"You know better than that. You always led the trail when we rode." Ennis settled into Jack's still strong and constant shoulder. He shut his eyes. "This is everything, Jack. I swear. I swear to God."

Jack smiled in wonder as his thumb tripped the trigger, the apparatus at their bedside humming up with a bright array of lights and a warm pulsation. The world slipped gently into a soft fog, and Jack and Ennis just went to sleep in each other's arms.

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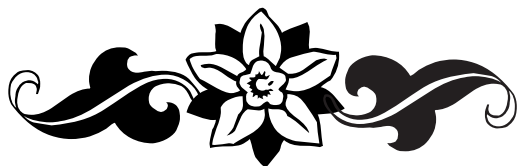
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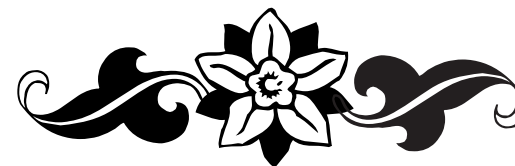
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