

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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RUNNING DEER
AND HIDDEN BADGER
K.D. Sarge

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

RUNNING DEER AND HIDDEN BADGER

By **K.D. Sarge**

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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RUNNING DEER AND HIDDEN BADGER

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Photo Description

Two young men in white T-shirts snuggle contentedly, asleep together in a narrow bed. Both are fit and tanned, as if they work outside a great deal.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I didn't want this at first. I don't want to be vulnerable. I don't want to be weak. I don't want to lose myself.

But I'm here with him now, and I just feel so... safe.

I know it's not on the picture (I couldn't find one that fit what's in my head) but if you give the boyfriend/love interest/whatever we call him long hair I'll be ever so happy. If you make him Native American I'll send millions of virtual kisses your way :)

Sincerely,

Astrid

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, sweet no sex, young adult characters, western, slow burn, hurt/comfort

Word count: 46,952

RUNNING DEER AND HIDDEN BADGER

By **K.D. Sarge**

CHAPTER ONE

The faded blue truck was older than Cal. He'd sat in the middle between his granddad and great granddad, ridden in the back with dogs and hay, ridden smushed between his brother and his granddad with Mom on the end every Sunday for years. He felt out of place sitting behind the wide wheel even if he had learned to drive in it. Worse still was his mom sitting at the far end of the bench seat leaning on the door, her body jolted by the ruts Cal couldn't avoid, looking weary and even fragile like Jessamyn MacGregor never should.

Any AC the truck might have known was long gone, and the rutted dirt road kept Cal from getting any speed to initiate wind-cooling. So he sat in the polo and slacks he'd worn onto the plane and felt the sweat bead on his forehead. Welcome back, Cal MacGregor. Texas goes on, with or without you. He jerked the wheel aside, dodging a pothole big enough to lose a heifer in.

"The weather channel said it was fifty degrees in Massachusetts this morning," Mom said. "You going to wilt if we hit ninety like we might could?"

"I'll try to withstand it, ma'am."

"If you feel the need for a wallow in the horse trough, just jump on in."

"Yes'm."

The conversation died again. So much for the weather. They'd already tried discussing how finals had gone, and the latest stupidity the state legislature meant to push through. Cal hoped the next topic wasn't going to be ranch-handy girls of marriageable age.

Mom shifted awkwardly, sighed. Cal was sure her hip pained her, and doubly sure he better not apologize for the long trip again. Nor say word one about how she should have sent someone to fetch him, not driven all the way to the airport herself. Especially he better not mention how Lyle was already in

Amarillo, and would have been glad to leave work early to pick his brother up and drive him home and argue with him the whole way.

Lyle said Mom was hiding things from Cal. That he'd better get home and get it sorted, because she wouldn't listen to reason from Lyle anymore. Cal didn't want to listen to Lyle neither, but Mom's needing a cane was proof he had some of it to rights. Mom had told Cal she was doing fine.

The truck jolted past the Dead Turkey cutoff and Cal was home, on *Y Otra Cosa* land for the first time in near on a year. The road stretched ahead, rutted and dusty yellow in the near-noon light, but Cal knew the ranch as well as he knew his mother's face, and they were on MacGregor land.

He'd expected to feel relieved.

Mom sighed again, shifted some more. Fencing appeared on either side of the road. Cal watched it for holes as he'd always done. Driving slow took little concentration, especially as he hadn't a June bug's chance in the chicken coop of finding a smooth route over the hard-packed earth. Up ahead he spotted a sagging section of fence, and someone fixing it. The saddled horse behind the ranch hand was Delilah, but Cal didn't know the hand himself. "Who's that?" he asked.

"Joseph." Mom smiled. "He's from California. Can't do a damn thing but mend fence and look pretty, but he does just fine at both." She gave Cal a sly smirk. "Nothing like the scenery in Texas, huh?"

"Mom..." Cal grumbled, but she had a point. Native American, guessing by the nose and cheekbones, the brown skin and the black hair under a fancy black hat with a feather band. Cut, judging by the thin T-shirt he wore, clinging to his sweaty torso and showing off arms with muscles that stood out as he wrestled with a posthole digger. Cut but still slender, tight jeans and leather gloves and just damned pretty if you were into dark lean sexy guys and Cal certainly was.

"I'm old," Mom grumbled back, "I'm not dead. And he's hot." She leaned across the cabin to poke Cal. "Huh?"

“Yes,” Cal agreed. “He’s hot.” Was she really encouraging Cal to lustfully admire a man? Maybe some things in Texas had changed.

The ranch hand looked at Mom as they rumbled near, and touched two fingers to his hat. Cal waved but Joseph didn’t look at him. Mom chuckled as the truck creaked on, leaving Joseph to put a hand over his face in the rearview, protecting himself from the dust Cal couldn’t help raising.

“Not the friendliest fellow,” Mom said, “but he gets on all right with the boys and he does what I ask as best he can.”

“What about the girls?”

Mom made a face. “I don’t pretend to know a gay on sight anymore, if that’s what you’re asking. He don’t bother the girls, and they don’t braid his hair that I’ve seen, and that’s all I know.”

Cal hadn’t meant that, but he let it go.

“With the new bunkhouse it’s easy for ’em to sneak,” Mom went on, “so if he’s slipping into someone’s bunk I haven’t heard.”

The “new” bunkhouse. It had been there fifteen years, since Mom won the battle over women hands being treated the same. The “new” bunkhouse was built like a motel with every small room opening onto the porch and shared, lockable bathrooms.

“Did someone leave?” Cal asked. “You didn’t mention anyone.” Every hand but Joseph had been on the ranch ten years or more, helping to raise Cal along with all the other livestock. He would expect to hear if someone moved on.

“You did,” Mom said. “And Lyle before you. Think we wouldn’t miss you ’round the ranch? Wobbie’s getting up there, and so are most of the rest. It’s not fair to work them short-handed. Joseph comes tenderfoot-cheap. I figured it was even odds whether he’d last long enough to earn his keep, but he’s pretty enough I took a chance. So far, so good—he’s a hard worker, and he learns fast.”

The truck creaked up a little hill and through a leaning gate. The *Y Otra Cosa* lay below, baking in the heat of a warm day in May. Cal’s eyes knew

every detail—the sprawling old adobe house where he was born in the same bed his mother had been, the barn where he learned to work, the bunkhouse, the shed where Cal got his hide tanned once and only once, the paddock where he learned to rope... Lupe, housekeeper and nanny, waited on the porch with sweet tea in a pitcher and a baby on her lap. A grandchild, maybe, or a neighbor kid. She worked best with a baby on her hip, she liked to say. Sekhmet, Athos and Porthos all sat around her, guarding the lady who fed them from the unknowns in the truck they'd probably heard a mile off.

“Welcome home, Cal,” Mom said.

Joseph's head hurt and his feet hurt and that bastard was wearing his hat. The rope sawed at his arms, and he thought he might explode, blow up in a million flaming shards from humiliation and anger and he'd have been fine with that as long as he took the others with him.

“MacGregor!” the leader of the bandits called again at the house. “Get out here, I want to talk to you!”

Jess MacGregor continued to not come out. Another MacGregor did, though. Over the saddle of the horse in front of him, Joseph could see the stranger from the truck that had driven by with Mrs. MacGregor. The younger son, home from college just today. Pasty and headed towards pudgy, Cal MacGregor didn't look a thing like his mother except for the straight nose and the intense eyes, and Joseph knew he was on his own.

“Howdy, Mr. Ferguson,” Cal said as he stepped to the edge of the porch but didn't come off it. He faced four armed men on horseback. Joseph couldn't blame him. “You wanted a MacGregor?”

“Well, if it isn't young Callan, finally home.” Ferguson tapped his hat. “Where's your ma, boy?”

“Resting.” Cal wore his own battered hat, and now a T-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. Joseph still would have rather had Jess MacGregor. By about a million miles. “And Lyle lives in Amarillo,” Cal MacGregor went on, “so unless you hold a seance, I'm all the MacGregor you get right now.”

Ferguson jerked his head at one of the horsemen and he backed his horse so Cal could see Joseph, hatless, scuffed, and tied up. The college boy's eyes went wide and he went still.

"I warned your ma about hiring illegals," Ferguson began, and Joseph saw the moment Cal MacGregor stopped listening. The man's jaw clenched and his head lowered. He shoved his hat down on his head and stalked off the porch, his eyes on Joseph while Ferguson went on about wetbacks and kindness. A step away from Joseph, Cal bent and pulled an actual knife from his boot, reached Joseph and pulled up a loop of the rope to cut. It was a stiff rope, but the knife was half through before anyone reacted.

"Bastard, that's my best rope!" yelled the cowboy who'd lassoed Joseph. Cal didn't even glance at him, and he leaned over and slugged Cal just as the rope parted. Cal staggered back.

"Johnny!" Ferguson barked. Then a series of clicks froze everyone in the yard.

Jess MacGregor stood on the porch, her cane leaned on a post and a rifle on her shoulder aimed at Ferguson. Joseph thought maybe he didn't want anything to do with Texas after all.

"Case Ferguson, explain yourself and make it good," Mrs. MacGregor said.

"Good afternoon, Jess," Ferguson said, sliding off his horse to take his hat in his hand. "Why don't you put that rifle down?"

"Armed men in my yard assaulting my son? I'll hold it a bit. Cal, bring Joseph over here."

Cal tried but Joseph shook him off as he tugged at the remains of the rope. Cal looked at the man who had held the rope.

"Give me his hat," he ordered, and the man took Joseph's hat off his head to hand it over. Joseph stalked to the porch and Cal followed. Once there he gave the hat to Joseph, then walked into the house without a word, leaving his disabled mother to face Ferguson. Joseph put his hat on his head and stood next to her.

“Be reasonable, Jess,” Ferguson said. “I’ve got a right to see his papers.”

“Not in America!” Mrs. MacGregor snapped. “He doesn’t have to prove his rights—you’ve got to prove reason to take ’em away. Innocent till proven guilty, Mr. Ferguson. You got anything beyond the color of his skin that ain’t reason at all? Let’s hear it.”

Cal MacGregor came back out of the house, a revolver in a holster on his hip and a rifle in his hands. Joseph kept up his glare but behind it he wondered why he’d left home if everywhere he went people pointed guns at each other.

“I think if anyone has a right to be peeved, it’s me,” Ferguson said. “I’m trying to help you, Jess. You want trouble with the feds? I’ve talked to you before about trusting folks.”

“Mr. Ferguson,” Mrs. MacGregor said, “you are not my daddy.”

“If he were alive today—”

“You’d already be dead in the dirt. You assault my hand and drag him from his work, you lay a hand to my son, and now you stand here and patronize me? Not a jury in Texas would convict him. Or me.”

“I’d worry more if you aimed that gun *at* me, Jess. Arms getting tired?”

“I’m aiming at the head you think with,” Mrs. MacGregor answered. “It’s pretty small, but I like a challenge.”

“Jessamyn Lynne MacGregor—”

“Touch my men again,” Mrs. MacGregor said, “and I’ll have the law on you. Rangers will act if the sheriff won’t move like we both know he won’t. Now git off my land.”

Mr. Ferguson shook his head sadly and put his hat back on, swung up on his horse and led his bandits off. Mrs. MacGregor lowered the gun and let the hammer up.

“Still say you should have shot him when he grabbed Lupe,” Cal MacGregor said.

“It’s a regret,” Mrs. MacGregor said. “Joseph, you all right? Did someone hit you?”

“I... fell off my horse,” Joseph admitted. “I’m sorry, ma’am—it threw me and ran off when they shot.”

“They shot at you?” The gun came back up and she looked around as if for a posse to lead after Ferguson.

Joseph shook his head. “No, ma’am, they shot into the air to scare the horse. I couldn’t stay on.”

“Haven’t taught you bronc riding yet,” Mrs. MacGregor muttered, jerking her head at Cal. He was already headed off the porch. “Chisholm’s waiting,” she called after Cal. “He’ll be ready—”

“Horses coming,” Joseph said because they didn’t hear the hoof beats. “A horse, I think.” The brown horse he’d been riding came trotting around the barn, headed for the water trough. Mrs. MacGregor relaxed.

“There she is!”

Cal MacGregor walked slowly towards the horse. Mrs. MacGregor took Joseph’s arm.

“Come in the house and let me look at you,” she said, but Joseph knew it was an order so he let her take him while the boss’ son took care of Joseph’s horse—just like he’d been told was rude to do. In Texas a man took care of his own horse.

Delilah was a good mare worth good money and seeing her all lathered up and mistreated didn’t help Cal’s fury at all. But only a fool showed his anger around horses, so he kept his voice quiet and his hands gentle as he cleaned her up and cared for her, and slowly the shade and peace of the barn seeped into him. As long as he didn’t think about Case Ferguson roping up a man like a calf because of the color of his skin, anyway.

It wasn’t like he didn’t have other things to think about. Lyle was right about the ranch too. Cal had been home three hours and he’d seen things needing fixing that he’d never noticed before, things that had been broken or damaged for years and just got overlooked in the everyday work of keeping the ranch solvent. The money wasn’t there to replace stuff, but oftentimes

what money couldn't solve hard work could, so Cal had started a list and worked out some priorities.

So yeah, Lyle was right. The ranch did need more looking after than it was getting. But Lyle was wrong too—it wouldn't be any hands but MacGregor taking care of those things.

Cal went over Delilah a second time with the curry comb because she loved it, leaning into the brush till his hand ached. Cal switched hands and went on, relaxing the mare. She'd had a rough day, what with gunshots and greenhorns falling off her.

The greenhorn in question was coming from the house. Cal watched him over the horse's neck as he brushed. Damn, but the man was pretty. He must have had his hair tucked in his hat when Cal saw him on the fence, because no other way had Cal missed seeing all that. Now Joseph had that fancy hat in his hand, and black shiny hair fell—well, probably all down his back, though all Cal saw now was a lock draped over a fine chest to the man's flat stomach. Joseph shoved that lock back with the others and Cal admired his chest and arms.

No lusting after the hands, Cal MacGregor. That was sure to end badly. Cal put his eyes on the horse.

Naturally, the pretty hand Cal wasn't supposed to lust after came right to him. "Thank you, sir," he said. "I can take over."

"I already brushed her once," Cal said as he handed the curry comb off. "Just working out my mad now, but I guess you've got some of your own."

"You could say that. Sir."

"Stick with 'Cal'. Mom's the boss. I'm Cal."

"But I still jump when you give me orders?"

"Yes." Cal grinned to show he didn't quite mean it. He walked down the center aisle to where Chisholm had stuck his head over the stall door. Cal grinned at the little buckskin, but mindful of the man behind him, he greeted the horse softly.

“Hey, fella. What are you doing, hanging out in the barn? Sitting around getting fat like me?” The stallion had put on some weight. Cal scratched behind his ears. “Well, I hope you enjoyed your break. I’m home now, and we’ve both got work to do.” Speaking of work, Cal’s nose was telling him barn care was one of the things that had slipped since a cow fell on Mom.

No time like the present. Cal went and got the wheelbarrow and a pitchfork and started on the first stall.

“You do what you want,” Cal said to the hand as he pitched. “But if you keep calling horses ‘it’ I imagine the boys—and that includes Billie and Gina—are going to laugh at you.”

“Why are you Texans so obsessed with looking at an animal’s junk?” Joseph demanded.

Cal chuckled. “It’s important information!” he said, wondering why the stall looked like it hadn’t been pitched in days. Who did Mom have on barn duty? “To a rancher with an eye to breeding, anyway,” he went on. “I can see where you wouldn’t care. For the record, that’s a mare you’ve got. Delilah’s a she. Are you what Mom would call an experienced rider?”

“The woman who rides like she was born up there? No. That I am not.”

“She was born up there, near enough.” And she shouldn’t be riding, Cal was sure. “But you’ll probably get mares to ride. Generally the girls are the gentlest.”

“I like my feet,” Joseph grumbled. “I know what they’re going to do.”

“Horses are pretty predictable too. You just have to learn their habits.”

“That’s what Wobbie keeps saying.”

“No surprise, I learned it from him.” Cal decided to fork out the whole stall and put down fresh straw. It looked overdue. “She’s just milking it now,” he said, grinning at the sight of Delilah leaning full into the brush. Joseph’s hand was probably killing him. “You want to maybe put her away? Then if you’ve a mind, help me get these stalls forked out.”

“Easier than holding this horse up.” Joseph put the mare away and got a pitchfork for himself. He twisted his hair up and stuck his hat on. Then he

started on the stall across the aisle, and the barn was silent but for the noises of the horses and the soft sucking sounds of shitty straw being forked.

Within three stalls, Cal thought his arms were going to fall off. He couldn't believe how out-of-shape he'd got in less than a year, but he kept going. If the boy from California who called horses "it" could keep going, then by God, so could Cal. Besides, he hated the weight he'd put on and he wanted it gone. Pitching shit was the best exercise in the world, not to mention useful and perpetual. Cal carried on, resolving to stop when Joseph looked tired. That was a good barometer, right?

Joseph didn't get to looking tired, but in Cal's frequent stolen glances he did look hot as hell, working up a fine and sexy sweat.

"Cal?" Mom called from outside. Where did she think he was?

"In Rincewind's stall," Cal yelled anyway, hoping she was about to give him an excuse to stop. In the meantime he kept on.

"Oh, fine," she said, coming through the door. "I'd meant to give you a day before I handed you a fork." Mom grabbed the bale hook from the wall and dragged a bale of straw to the first stall. "Lupe's fixin' to ring the dinner bell in a bit, but if we move right quick we can get done." She cut the string on the bale and started breaking it up, putting down a clean layer in the first stall Cal had cleaned. Cal held back a groan and moved faster. She probably shouldn't be doing even that much, so he ought to get done so he could take over.

At least Joseph was two stalls behind Cal now. The bad side of that was that Cal would probably end up doing at least one of Joseph's stalls, so they could get done before dinner. Cal left the door of Rincewind's stall open and moved into Chisholm's.

"I got nothing for you," he grumbled as the horse came looking for treats. "I wasn't fixin' to come down here yet!"

"He missed you!" Mom called from the other end of the barn. "Moped about for a solid month, till Petunia came into season."

"Who do you have on barn duty, Mom?" Cal asked. "They're not keeping on top of it."

“Billie helps me feed in the morning,” Mom said, dragging another bale to the next stall. “And Juan Carlos at night. But I haven’t kept on top of the pitching.”

Damn it. Of course she’d taken barn duty rather than hire someone. Someone else, as she’d put Joseph on the fences. Cal reckoned he ought to be glad she’d at least hired someone for the fences.

Across the aisle Joseph looked up, his eyes on the door, then started pitching faster. A minute later Cal heard hoofbeats too.

“About to get a mite crowded in here,” Mom said, dragging a bale to the third stall and pulling it in with her.

Cal braced himself for the welcome of the ranch hands though he wasn’t in a friendly mood. At least it meant he was almost done pitching.

Joseph’s arms hurt in the morning. He’d been a fool, trying to outwork Cal MacGregor. Pudgy or not, the man had probably been shoveling manure all his life. Joseph wasn’t going to win a contest like that.

Over breakfast Mrs. MacGregor informed Joseph that Cal would help him finish the rest of the Limp Creek fence, since “Ferguson’s stupidity” had lost him half a day and she needed it done three days gone. She didn’t mention the other reason, that the presence of the heir apparent of the ranch should keep Joseph from being tied up again.

Joseph could live with that. He did hope the man continued not talking too much. Then he went past Cal in the hall and the man was putting on yesterday’s gun belt, revolver and all. Joseph wondered again if he shouldn’t just go home.

Joseph was the last hand in the paddock but he was done saddling his assigned mare and was checking that the cinch-strap was tight enough by the time his new partner came from the house. Joseph had been dumped once because he was too worried about pulling the cinch-strap too tight and hurting the horse. Now he checked.

Despite Joseph's lead, Cal Macgregor was checking his own cinch by the time Joseph swung up on his horse. He glanced up at Joseph and made a face.

"Who taught you to ride?" Cal demanded.

"My grandmother." In about three lessons, on a very small and well-behaved pony, but Joseph hadn't said that in his interview and he didn't say it now. Except when firearms were involved, he hadn't fallen off since the cinch-strap incident, and that was good enough.

"I'm guessing it wasn't with a saddle," Cal said and walked over, holding a hand out to the mare. He seriously moved like the gun-belt belonged on him, like he was used to the weight at his hip. Like he'd just stepped out of a movie.

"Howdy, Athena," Cal said to the horse. "Been a while, but you remember me. Right, girl?" The mare sniffed him and looked away, disinterested. Cal slapped Joseph's leg lightly. "Let me at the stirrup," he ordered. Joseph took a deep breath and took his foot out of the stirrup, putting it back by the mare's leg. "You want these shorter," Cal said, flipping the leather flap up to tighten the strap underneath. "You don't want your weight on your crotch, you want it on your feet and the back of your rear." He dropped the stirrup back into place and stepped back. "Let me see."

This was what he wanted, Joseph told himself, to learn to ride so the other hands didn't laugh at him. So he did what he was told without comment. Cal jerked his chin to the right and stepped forward again. Joseph moved his leg so his boss' son could fix his stirrup.

"Now," Cal said.

Joseph put his foot in the stirrup, bending his knee to do so. It felt—better. Putting his weight on the stirrup changed where butt met saddle, and Joseph thought maybe he could ride without feeling split like a log. But Cal slapped his ankle through the jeans.

"Heel down," he snapped. "If you're not going to wear boots, you've got to do for yourself what the boots do. Learn to ride heel down."

Joseph put his heel down and didn't tell the rich ass who probably had never paid for anything himself that cowboy boots cost six times what a cheap

pair of sneakers did. The rich ass walked around to shorten Joseph's other stirrup. He had a tug at the cinch too, so Joseph figured at least the guy wasn't looking to embarrass him. Yet, anyway.

Then Cal MacGregor swung into his own saddle. His horse was a dark cream with black markings, and it skittered as he mounted but Cal landed in the saddle anyway. Of course he did. He even smiled at the horse. "Eager to be moving, boy?"

Boy. Cal MacGregor got to ride boy horses. And his saddle had a lasso tied to it.

Cal turned his horse, not hauling it around as Joseph tended to do. Joseph tried the same move, pulling the reins to lay on the mare's neck, and she turned almost as neatly as Cal's horse did. And Joseph didn't wobble in the saddle as she moved—his feet were firm in the stirrups where he could adjust his balance.

Okay, maybe this was going to work out all right.

As they rode out to the Limp Creek fence, Joseph kept watching Cal, and it was making Cal—not nervous, exactly. Aware. On alert, sort of. An extremely attractive man couldn't take his eyes off Cal. It was interesting. Even if he knew it was because Joseph had figured out that Cal could teach him the things he wanted to learn, like how to ride decently.

Mom said the man had been here a month. Why hadn't someone taught him already? In the maybe twenty minutes they'd been riding, Cal had already seen Joseph's seat improve.

It was probably because Mom had put him on the fences alone. Joseph hadn't had the chance to watch anyone else ride.

Cal wasn't sure, but he thought Joseph kept glancing at the gun on his hip too. If he didn't understand the reason for that, there was no helping the man.

Aside from Joseph winding him up, though, Cal was relaxing as he hadn't in—well, nearly a year. Massachusetts had been so *noisy*. Always someone

talking, someone driving by, something flying over... a confusion of noises that didn't mean much of anything, as far as Cal had been able to figure out.

And the sun! What they called a sunny day back east was... well, it wasn't much of one. Cal knew the day was a mite warm and would get more so, but he found he liked it. Maybe he'd known that and forgotten, but the heat and the wide-open space felt like home and eternity. Cal could feel his mind stretching out like his body, spreading in the sun and abandoning the little circles it had been running in for months.

A man could *think* in Texas. On the prairie, with no buildings or trees or much of anything around, he could see where he stood.

Joseph rode Athena a bit behind Chisholm, whether letting Cal enjoy his homecoming or hanging back respectfully or just not knowing he needed to prod his mare, Cal didn't know. It was all right. If Joseph wasn't the talkative sort, Cal would just be that much more pleased with Mom's idea. He had a lot of room to get more pleased by it—he'd meant to start on his list first thing, and it was only getting longer.

Maybe Joseph would give him a hand with that list. Once they'd finished Limp Creek and moved the herd up from Swamp Bottom, riding fence would go back to its usual not-immediate urgency. Mom said Joseph wanted to learn ranching, well Cal could teach him from the ground up if he was actually willing. Many a man thought he wanted to be a cowboy until he saw the work it took.

If he wanted to get on his list sooner, Cal knew, he should stop poking along on the fence repairs. "How far have you gotten, checking the fence?" he called over his shoulder.

"I don't know," Joseph called back. "I can't answer in miles or landmarks. But I started on this end, and I went thataway." Cal looked over his shoulder and Joseph was pointing the way the horses' heads were.

"If you've a mind, go ahead and show me where," Cal suggested. He nudged Chisholm into an easy lope. "Yell out if you see where you stopped," he told Joseph.

Riding Chisholm was just about the best thing in the world, Cal reckoned. He wanted to let the horse run, but that wouldn't be right when they had the whole day's work ahead. Instead he untied the lasso. "Stay back," he warned Joseph as he let the loop out. "I'm a mite out of practice."

He wasn't so much, though. He twirled and played with the rope as they rode and did fine, and when he spotted a fence post that had to go, he dropped the loop around it pretty as you please. Chisholm did his part, pulling the rope taut, and it was that much less work Cal and Joseph had to do.

"No one told me that was how to pull fence posts," Joseph said with a grin as he rode up. "Not that I could."

Cal grinned. "Wait'll you see me hog-tie it."

Joseph laughed and got down, dropping his reins to ground-tie the mare before pulling the tools from his bag. Cal got his rope out of the way.

"Mom says you want to ranch," Cal said as they worked.

Joseph's shoulders jumped as he reached for the hammer. "Maybe. Now my stirrups are fixed, I might decide I still want to."

Cal snorted.

"Maybe," Joseph said when they'd fixed the post and remounted, riding the fence looking for the next problem. "I don't know. It's kind of... quiet. I thought I'd like that. Now I'm not sure."

"It's not so quiet." The wind was rustling the grass, after all, the ever-present wind of the high plains. Cal had missed it. In Massachusetts the air just... stayed, a lot of the time. Heavy and wet and still, like drowning in a puddle. "Though I can see where the high plains alone would be a bit of a stretch for most."

"And there's... just nothing."

Cal looked around at the clouds ambling across the sky and the cloud-shadowed and wind-twisted prairie and the fence stretching on, at a hawk floating down towards the tops of cottonwoods sticking out of Limp Creek Canyon yonder, and shook his head. "There's everything."

“You’re Texan. Your judgment is suspect.”

Cal chuckled and looked around again, this time at the ground. “Here,” he said, pointing. “Badger burrow. If you want to meet a true Texan, stick a hand in there. Though I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“No, thanks. I’ve seen documentaries. Badgers are mean.” Joseph reined his horse away from the hole as they passed it.

“If you corner one, yes. He’s not going to climb your horse.”

“What does it eat? Grass?”

“Probably prairie dogs, what eat grass. It’s the circle of life.”

“If you start singing I’m heading back to the barn.”

Cal chuckled.

“Don’t horses die from stepping in prairie dog holes?”

“Most folks have the sense not to ride a horse through a town, so—”

A sound cut Cal off, the deep bark of a 30-30 rifle a ways off. Echoes and birds told him where.

Joseph realized the sound was a gunshot as Cal and his horse took off, running towards the line of shrubs ahead where birds had flown up.

Hell!

His horse wanted to follow. Joseph figured he better let it. Her. He should stay by the boss’ son. Joseph clamped his legs and bent low like Cal had, and hoped they weren’t going to run right through the prairie dog town. He also hoped whoever was shooting didn’t want to shoot him. Or Cal. That would be bad.

Running was amazing. Exhilarating. He almost lost his hat. Joseph clamped a hand on his head. Before him Cal disappeared, reappeared, running through a ripple in the land Joseph hadn’t seen.

Cal disappeared again, didn't reappear. Joseph let the mare go, figuring she knew where the hell they were going. Wobbie said horses didn't like to be away from other horses.

The line of shrubs was a line of trees, following a creek in a steep canyon. Joseph saw the edge before they reached it, and reined the horse to a walk even though below him he could see Cal and his horse trotting down the path they'd chosen. Farther down, by the stream, a brown man in a round hat stood waiting, his rifle butt grounded on the flat rock he stood on.

Joseph hoped the man's smile stayed put.

"Luis Agustin!" Cal called, waving his hat. "*Buenos días! Cómo estás, mi amigo?*"

Luis Agustin answered with a flood of Spanish too quick for Joseph to catch any words. Cal answered. Joseph let the mare pick her way slowly down the path as Cal dismounted near the man and they met with a big hug and back-slapping.

As Joseph came up he heard Cal say his name. Luis Augustin shook his head.

"*¿Entienda usted español, amigo de Cal?*"

"He's asking if you understand Spanish," Cal said after a second. "No, Luis."

"Then we will not be rude," Luis Augustin said. "It is good to meet you, Joseph." He offered his hand and Joseph shook it.

"Luis and his family have standing permission to help with the hog problem whenever they like," Cal said. When he waved, Joseph saw the large hairy form lying in the shade, blood oozing from a hole behind the beast's shoulder.

"That's a *pig?*"

"Well, it's not a cow."

"It's huge."

“Three hundred pounds at least.” Cal grinned. “One less hog digging up pasture, and just a few meals Luis doesn’t have to buy. ¿*Verdad*, Luis?”

“*Si*. Yes. Now I must care for the food.”

After an even friendlier goodbye, Cal swung back on his horse and led the way up out of the canyon. Joseph rode behind him.

“Does that Ferguson harass them?” Joseph asked.

Cal chuckled. “The Saldanas have been here longer than he has. And Señora Saldana sort of forcefully adopted him into the family. She sends cards and invitations and pictures. Ferguson’s very proper in some things. Grits his teeth, swallows his gall, and sends gifts for every baptism, quinceañera, and wedding.”

Joseph grinned at his horse’s neck.

“I didn’t even know this was here,” he told Cal as they neared the rim.

“The prairie looks flat,” Cal said, “but there’s secrets everywhere when you look closer.”

“Like badgers?” Joseph asked.

Cal snorted. “Here,” he said, and turned his horse to the right, heading along the edge of the canyon instead of back to the fence. His horse started trotting. Joseph sighed and prodded his horse with his heels. She moved willingly, and Joseph bounced. Her back went up, and so did he, but then her back dropped and while Joseph was still coming down she came back up and OW! But still it was a lot less jolting than before Cal fixed Joseph’s stirrups. Before when he trotted, Joseph had been sure he’d fall off any second. Now he just wished he would.

“Stand in the stirrups,” Cal said over his shoulder. “She’s got a dreadful bouncy trot.”

Joseph leaned forward and put his weight on the balls of his feet and the horse jolted along under him, but didn’t beat the hell out of delicate portions of his anatomy with her back.

Okay, he might kiss Cal MacGregor just for that. If it wouldn't get the crap beaten out of him and then get him shipped back to California in a cat carrier, anyway.

Cal wasn't standing in his stirrups. He moved with the horse, with a minimum of bouncing that Joseph could see. Well, of course he did. He'd been doing it all his life and had a hand-picked horse besides.

With everyone knowing how new Joseph was, why didn't *he* have a horse with a smoother trot?

Cal rode close to the canyon wall, not really watching where he was going the way Joseph would have if he were that close. He wasn't, of course. Joseph rode a bit behind and off to Cal's left as they rode—Joseph thought they were headed south. But he wasn't sure.

"There." Cal's horse stopped and without Joseph telling her to, so did his mare. He felt his balance go and grabbed the saddle horn to stay on as the dumb horse walked closer to Cal's buckskin. Cal himself was pointing down into the canyon. "See the ruins?" he asked.

"No—yes." If by ruins Cal meant the seemingly regular collection of rocks that might be the size of a small hunting lodge, down by the creek.

"You've heard of the Battle of Adobe Walls?"

"No...?"

Cal shook his head. "In 1864, Kit Carson held off thousands of Kiowa and Comanche with three hundred men at Adobe Walls. The part they often don't mention is that Carson had raided the Kiowa a couple days before in provocation, and he had howitzers. Still, it was a helluva battle, three hundred against thousands. He didn't win, but he didn't lose either. Whatever you think of the reasons for the battle, that's pretty impressive."

"History-wise, that's pretty awesome. But I thought adobe was mud?"

"That's not Adobe Walls down there, but it was one of the triggers. A man named Willard Grissom lived down there with a couple wives and a passel of kids, and he traded with the Comanche. After a while he got to thinking he should run the place, the story goes, and the Comanche disabused him of the

notion. It was pretty nasty—though history now says not nearly as nasty as the rhetoric went, kind of like Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction—and it’s part of why Kit Carson was sent after the tribes here.”

“Texas schools must beat California’s by a mile,” Joseph said, trying to remember anything he’d learned in school besides *nobody’s listening*. “When did you have time for rodeo class?”

“That was PE,” Cal said with a grin, turning his horse. The little horse almost swapped back for front, he turned so tightly. “I didn’t learn about Grissom in school, though,” Cal said. “My four-times-great-grandfather was at Adobe Walls. Twice. In the second battle he fought beside Bat Masterson, and twenty-eight men held off seven hundred attackers mad as hell about white men shooting their buffalo and doing a lot of other rotten things.”

“...damn,” Joseph said. “So the ranch has been here over a hundred years?”

Cal looked up at the sky, looked around, moved a bit as if settling deeper in his saddle. “The ranch has been here since God made it,” he said. “It’s been entrusted to MacGregor hands for more than a hundred years. And I mean to keep it that way, so we might ought to get back to the fence.” He shoved his beat-up hat down on his head. “How d’you feel about running?”

“That it’s easier than trotting?”

“Good.” Cal clucked at his horse and he bolted. Joseph braced himself and prodded and his horse went flying after.

Riding a running horse felt like flying. Or music. Joseph wanted to shout for joy as the horses thundered across the plain. He snatched his hat as it swooped off his head. His hair streamed behind him and Joseph laughed into the wind.

All too soon Cal was slowing his horse to trot alongside the fence. Joseph stood in the stirrups and followed. Soon they came to another drunk-looking fence post and Cal swung down to give the fence post a shove.

“Yep,” he said, and kicked the new fence post lying in the grass. He kicked it again, then pulled on his gloves and picked it up. He’d kicked the first one

too. “Scorpions,” he said, maybe seeing the mystified look Joseph knew he was wearing. “They don’t want to sting you any more than you want to be stung. Always give ’em the chance to get out of your way.”

Joseph thought of all the things he’d picked up off the ground without a thought and cringed. Then he got down and pulled the posthole digger from its sling behind Cal’s saddle.

They worked in silence, Joseph starting a new hole as Cal pulled the staples off the old post. Then Cal took a turn at the posthole digger. Soon they were on horseback again, sweat cooling in the breeze of a quick trot down the fence line.

He could get used to this, Joseph decided. Cal was far more interesting than Wobbie, more quiet than Billie, and unlike either Billie or Wobbie, he told Joseph things a non-Texan needed to know without acting like he was a fool for not already knowing.

Well, he probably shouldn’t get used to it, actually. Joseph had been put to riding fence because it was simple work. Cal was only on fences because Mrs. MacGregor needed this one done. Cal could probably do any job on the ranch; surely there were better uses of his time than riding herd on the tenderfoot.

Lunch was sandwiches under a bush while the horses dozed in the sun. Cal seemed preoccupied and Joseph had already had more conversation than he’d had in a week, so the quiet held. Cal did break it to point out vultures circling far off, and to explain the wing shape that let a man tell from just a silhouette if he was looking at a scavenger or a raptor.

“If it was MacGregor land,” he said, “I might would find out what they were after.”

“I thought the ranch went ‘as far as the eye can see’?” Joseph said. “That’s what Mrs. MacGregor said, anyway.”

“Does,” Cal said with a chuckle, “if you’re standin’ in the middle of it. Now we’re on the edge. That’s Ferguson’s Forked F over there.”

“Ah,” Joseph said. Duh. Idiot.

When Cal had first stretched out on the ground under the bush, he'd pushed his hat back. Now he shoved it down on his head. "Reckon we better make fence while the sun shines," he said.

For the first time in weeks, Joseph didn't think he'd rather die than get back on that horse.

The new hand, Cal decided, might just train up good enough to ride the river with. When Cal got the text that dinner was almost ready, he muttered about the fence being almost done, and Joseph suggested they just stay out and finish it.

"Lupe's a good cook," Cal said, not really arguing though he hadn't spent a day on a horse in ten months and his whole body ached.

"And her food never runs out," Joseph said, clearly not affected by the hours they'd already put in. "Also Mrs. MacGregor wanted to move those cows two days ago."

"Cattle," Cal corrected, keeping them riding along the fence instead of heading for the barn. "A cow is a specific age and sex. It's not wrong to call 'em all cows, but it's vague. Comes back to caring about their junk."

Joseph snorted.

In a little more than an hour the last bit of barbed wire was spliced and a fine strong fence stood to contain the four-footed wealth of the *Y Otra Cosa*. Cal turned Chisholm towards the barn, putting the sunset behind them. Long shadows stretched out before them.

"If you're really interested," Cal said, "I've got a book on the history of Texas that's not just about the Republic. Or about killin' Injuns."

"Yes," Joseph said, still riding behind him. "I'd like to read it." He chuckled. "Don't tell my sophomore English teacher, but I'm so bored nights I'd kill for a good book."

"I could loan you more than one if you promise not to kill anyone," Cal said. "We need all the hands right now."

“Can I get a possible exemption for Billie?” Joseph asked. “She keeps wanting to braid my hair.”

Cal jerked and Chisholm skittered under him, willing to move but not knowing what Cal wanted. He calmed the horse with his hands. “If you only kill her a little bit,” he told Joseph. “She’s a dab hand with a rough calving.” He took a deep breath. “Is the TV broken?”

“The other guys are always watching sports. I find baseball so dull I want to throw pointy things, and I don’t care to watch other guys play basketball. Billie taught me checkers but she creams me every game so we’re both bored of it. And all her books have bare-chested cowboys and fainting women on the covers.”

“Ha!” Cal snorted. “I’d have expected bare-chested ladies and fainting cowboys!”

“That’s probably the book she’s writing.”

After a long shower, supper, and some ibuprofen, Cal plopped on his bed with his laptop to see what the rest of the world had been doing while he was digging holes and stringing wire. He realized when Skype chimed that he should have set everything to “invisible.”

Preston. Oh... hell. Cal grabbed the headphones with the mic and answered.

“Hello.”

“Hello, sweet Callan!” Preston’s voice said, delighted like they hadn’t talked yesterday. “How are you?” he asked. “How goes life in the Wild West?”

Cal winced. Despite his best efforts, Preston insisted on seeing Texas as exactly what he’d seen in the spaghetti westerns late at night. “Awkward,” Cal answered anyway. “I hurt everywhere.”

“Ouch,” Preston said. “Please tell me you didn’t get assaulted.”

“It’s Texas,” Cal said, “not Uganda. We don’t kill gays here. We even stopped public floggings a whole five years ago.”

“Tell that to the police in Fort Worth that raided that gay bar,” Preston said. “I’m glad you’re all right, though. Are you sure you don’t want to reconsider your vacation plans? We could still take off to Europe for the summer.”

“I reckon not,” Cal said, thinking of far-off places and thinking he shouldn’t.

“No cowboy talk,” Preston reminded. “Have you started regressing already?”

“Fixin’ to,” Cal said, setting his jaw, “if y’all keep doggin’ me on it.”

“Now you sound like a pouting child,” Preston said. “You said you wanted to change. You didn’t want to sound like a savage. Remember?”

He didn’t want to sound like a hick, was what Cal had said once. But to Preston they were the same thing.

“Might could change my mind,” Cal said.

“Dear God, that place *is* affecting you,” Preston said. “Why don’t you get your mom to invite me for a visit? I’ll brave the wilds for you.” He chuckled. “Tell her I’ll share your room and I won’t eat much.”

“No,” Cal said.

“Still playing hard to get. Fine. I would like to come, though. Surely that ranch has a guest room. Will you ask? You’ve met my family; it’s time I met yours.”

“No,” Cal said again.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Preston said.

“No,” Cal said a third time. Hell. Just do it. Over Skype sucked, but what were his options?

“Now you’re being obstinate,” Preston chided. “That’s so unattractive. Fine. I won’t visit. You won’t come to me. We’ll both be miserable and lonely. Satisfied?”

“Preston...” Cal took a deep breath. “I’m not coming back.” There. He’d said it. It was better to do it now rather than—

“What are you talking about?” Preston demanded. “Not coming back to school? To me? You can’t do that! I’m madly in love with you!”

“And I’ve got a ranch that’s been in my family a hundred thirty-five years,” Cal said. “Mom needs me if we aim to make it a solid one-fifty. The savings on tuition alone—”

“You’ll earn more with a degree. I could help. I want to. Callan, I refuse to lose you over money!”

“I won’t take your money, Preston. And I told you—I won’t live anywhere but here. It—it’s been grand. But I’m home now, and I’m stayin’.”

“You wanted to see Europe! I could show you so many things, Callan. You could hire a ranch manager—”

“That’s done with,” Cal said. “I’m stayin’ here.”

“Then I could—I could come visit. Summers there, and when I graduate and come into the business—”

“You’d never fit in here, Preston. I’m so far out, pizza delivery is a pipe dream. There’s nothin’ but dust and horse shit and scorpions. You’d hate it. You’d be miserable and you’d come to hate me for putting you in it.”

“...scorpions?” Preston asked.

“Pesky critters,” Cal said. Preston hated bugs of all sorts. “I almost forgot to check my boots yesterday, and damned if there wasn’t one in there.” A fake one, a joke perpetrated by Lupe’s youngest probably, but Preston didn’t need to know that part. “And I spent all day today on a horse, from sunup to sundown just about, getting bit by horseflies and skeeters. You think you’ll ride with me? Or sit around the house till I come home too tired to do more’n eat and fall asleep?”

“Callan...” Preston said, soft and pain-filled. Cal closed his eyes and took another deep breath.

“It’s been grand,” he told Preston again. “Truly. I’ll never forget you, Preston.”

“God damn it,” Preston snarled, and ended the call. Cal closed the laptop and heaved an unsteady breath.

Done. He’d been dreading it since he saw Mom walk and knew he couldn’t leave again, not with her like that. But it was done. Cal pushed away thoughts of Preston’s tall, tennis-toned body, of his laugh, of being part of a couple just like everyone else. It didn’t matter. What mattered was MacGregor land.

That hollow feeling wasn’t his heart breaking. He hadn’t been in love with Preston. Probably would have got there eventually, but not anymore. The last thing he needed was a boyfriend messing things up and distracting him. Talking of far-off places and sights and—

For the first time in Cal’s life, Texas felt small, and closing in. Cal yanked off the headset, tossed the laptop on his pillow and headed for the door. Came back to shove his boots on and grab his hat, though it was dark out.

In the hall he passed the bookshelf and snatched the history book from it. He’d take that down to the bunkhouse, go check on that foaling mare though Billie was with her—hell. He did *not* want to talk to Billie tonight.

Well, he’d find something useful to do. But first he’d take the book to Joseph, since he didn’t even have Billie creaming him at checkers to occupy him.

CHAPTER TWO

Whatever the game was tonight, Joseph thought as the roar of excitement came through his wall from the common room, someone had just scored or spectacularly failed to do so. He couldn't wish the other hands a boring game, but he could wish they got a little less loud about it.

They'd been roaring off and on for an hour. It couldn't last much longer, then he'd sleep. Hopefully. Joseph pondered getting off his covers to strip and slide under them and decided it was too much effort. Even kicking off his shoes seemed unjustifiable work at the moment.

Damn, but he was tired. He needed to stop trying to out-work Cal MacGregor. Pudgy or not, the man was an energizer bunny. Even after a long and enervating shower, every part of Joseph hurt. He should go ask Gina for some Tylenol, but that too required an inordinate amount of effort incomprehensible to his tired brain.

It wasn't just the extra hour they'd stayed out. Joseph knew they'd got twice as much fence done as he'd done in three days alone because Cal knew what the hell he was doing. More work meant less rest time, and the only part of Joseph that didn't ache miserably was his backside, thanks to the stirrup trick. That no one else had shown him.

Well, the others might like laughing at the tenderfoot, but the boss' son probably recognized that he'd get more work out of a hand that wasn't too busy thinking about his ass to think about his job.

Joseph had known he'd get hazing. That was expected, and to be fair, aside from the bull joke no one had actually been mean. Joseph wasn't sure anyone else had looked at the way he rode—Mrs. MacGregor had sent him out with Wobbie in the pickup the first time he worked on the fence, so Wobbie could show him what to do and then drive on dropping fence posts where needed.

God, Wobbie and his pointless stories... Joseph hoped whoever he got teamed with to teach him whatever he'd be learning now had more interesting stories than Wobbie. Or was as quiet as Cal when he wasn't saying interesting

things. He could stand maybe one or two boring stories, if the hand shut up the rest of the time, or lots of interesting stories, or—

Someone knocked on the door. Joseph sat up in surprise, and groaned just a little at the sudden movement. He rolled out of the bed and opened the door.

Cal stood there, a book in his hands and a twisted smile on his face. Like he was being polite but something else was very much on his mind. Joseph told himself he'd known the man two days and he shouldn't be trying to read him like his best friend back home. Before he died.

"I brought the book," Cal said like it wasn't obvious. "Since I forgot to give it to you after dinner."

"Hey, thanks!" Joseph pushed a little enthusiasm into his voice to hide the tired. "*Tall Tales and Taller Truths: A History of the Texas Panhandle*. Sounds good." By Skyller MacGregor. Cal hadn't mentioned that part.

"It's not half bad." Cal started to turn away. Joseph almost invited him in, but the place was damned small. A roar through the wall gave him an idea. "Hey, I was gonna go for a walk till the game ended," he said. "Anything I should know about Texas at night? Killer armadillos? Alien abductions?"

Cal snorted. "The armadillos are harmless, but if the coyotes spot you for a tenderfoot you could have a problem." He pronounced it "ki-yotes" not "ki-yotees." As if to punctuate his warning, off in the darkness an animal yipped. Another answered with the bark that sounded like maniacal laughter. Howls answered the first two. "Stay close to the house, though," Cal said, "and you'll be all right."

"I could take a dog with me?" Joseph said. The dogs were ubiquitous during the day, following people around or dozing in the shade. He was surprised Cal didn't have the whole lot of them following him now.

Cal chuckled. "That's why I said stay close to the house. The dogs are working. Listen."

Joseph heard deep barks, snarls, and then the yip of a distressed coyote fading with distance. Cal grinned.

“If you ever think you’re worked too hard, try following them around for a day—and a night.”

“Should have known you didn’t keep them for the fluffy factor.”

“The *Y Otra Cosa* is a working ranch,” Cal said. “The only critter kept for cute is Lafe.”

Joseph laughed. Lafayette “Lafe” Cisneros was one of the hands. Cheerful and funny, he had the habit of stopping work to talk with his hands. Billie said that was why he was often paired with Wobbie—because he worked best when he couldn’t get a word in edgewise. “I heard it was his wife’s cooking,” Joseph said. Lafe’s wife was Lupe.

“She keeps him ’cause of cute. We keep him to keep her. Here.” Cal turned away. “I’ll walk you. Have you been down by the creek?”

Well okay then.

“Only today when we met Luis Augustin,” Joseph answered, following.

“Not that creek.” Cal took off, walking fast towards the far end of the house where Wobbie had told Joseph, “Hain’t a road fer a reason,” and Joseph had ridden his horse the other way and never found time to wonder why he shouldn’t go that way.

Cal’s legs were shorter, but he’d caught Joseph by surprise. Now he trotted to catch up. Since they weren’t working, he walked beside Cal and wondered what a near-stranger could say to help with whatever was bothering the man. “So the dogs are guard dogs?” he asked.

“Athos and Porthos—the big ones—are what’s called Livestock Guardian Dogs. Once they bond with anything, human or animal, they protect it. Sekhmet’s the border collie, she’s a cow dog—she can turn eighteen hundred pounds of aggravated Angus with a nip on the nose. She runs with the others ’cause she bosses them too.”

They walked past a low fence of close-woven wire. “Lupe’s garden,” Cal said. “Fence does a middlin’ job of keeping the foragers out. Goes down in the ground a couple feet to discourage ’dillos.”

Armadillos. Joseph had heard they were everywhere, but he hadn't seen one yet.

A few hundred feet on, the ground did that thing where it disappeared again. Joseph eyed the little canyon in the unbelievable light of a full moon like he'd never seen. There were stars, but they couldn't compete with that moon.

"Texas skeeters are the size of Cessnas," Cal warned, "but you'll probably survive."

Skeeters. Mosquitoes. Joseph shook his hair around his shoulders for what protection it could provide. "I'll brave them," he said.

"Here's the trail." Cal led to the edge and stopped, looked up, looked down, and looked at Joseph. "The moon's not high enough to hit the path," he said. "I could walk this in my sleep and likely have, but I'd hate to lead someone to a tumble. Take my hand?"

Joseph knew the smart move was to walk somewhere else, but he let that foolish pride take him again, and took Cal's hand rather than back down in front of him. Cal turned and led down a steep path Joseph couldn't see. He could almost see where Cal put his feet, so he tried to let that guide him.

Cal MacGregor's hand was warm and not as callused as Joseph had expected. Well, the man had spent the last year in school. And Cal had a blister on his hand. Joseph had been awed by his endurance, and he wasn't the iron man he seemed? Joseph's measure of Cal's strength came down to more human levels, while his estimation of Cal's determination went up.

The path led down in darkness, but beside them the moonlight streamed almost tangibly to the bottom of the canyon. Joseph stopped watching the path and stared at the landscape revealed.

A creek ran chattering down the canyon, but right below them it widened into a still pool. Along the canyon stood more of those trees that Joseph kept thinking were bushes because apparently they all stood in canyons next to creeks he didn't know existed. On the near side and right on the edge of the

pool leaning over it was the largest, a tree to dwarf anything called that back in Los Angeles, and from it hung a tire on a rope.

Ah. The swimmin' hole.

Cal led out of the shade of the cliff and the instant Joseph could see where to put his feet, let go like Joseph's hand burned. Maybe it was the blisters. Cal paced across the rocks and into the shadow of the tree. The moonlight was so bright Joseph could still see him, dappled as a breeze moved the branches.

"That same great-grandfather who served with Kit Carson planted this tree," Cal said from under it. "It's a Red River Gum—a kind of eucalyptus from Australia."

Joseph thought about his mom's "his name was Dan—I think" the one time he had asked about his father, and didn't comment on MacGregor history because he was too busy fighting down envy.

"The first ranch house was down here," Cal said. "Then Wilf reckoned he might ought to get married, only she didn't want to live with the skeeters and she did want indoor plumbing, so he built a house up on the prairie to bring her home to."

So history was Cal's way of freaking out, was that it? Joseph could see him, leaning on the tree like he needed it to stand. Like he thought Joseph couldn't see him. What the hell?

"Why aren't there a couple dozen more MacGregors?" Joseph said because sometimes he said stupid shit without thinking. He'd heard Jess MacGregor was "a shadow of herself" since the accident. Was she worse off than anyone knew? Was Cal looking at losing his mother? If she was about to become part of MacGregor history, that would explain Cal's fixation on it. "I mean, since you've been here that long," Joseph explained. "Staying in one place makes it easier to keep track of relatives."

"Good question." Cal straightened. "Bad luck, maybe an 'Injun' curse, Wilf's own misdeeds—I've heard them all. Wilf had five children, but only Kaden lived long enough to have kids of his own. A son, anyway, then Kaden got caught on the wrong side of a stampede. Down through the years—only

one or two each generation has made it to parenthood. Mom's brother Skyller caught that damn hantavirus before they knew what it was. My brother Lyle up and moved to Amarillo after. Said he was trying to avoid the family curse. He's got two kids, but he doesn't bring them here much."

Leaving his ranch work to the new hand. Joseph knew he was there to do what the boys weren't there to do. He'd worried briefly that Mrs. MacGregor would send him back to LA when Cal changed his mind about going to Europe and came home instead.

They stood silently. Joseph restrained the urge to hold out his hand and see if moonlight puddled in it.

"You ever just want to chuck it all," Cal asked, "and light out for parts unknown?"

"Yes," Joseph said. "Definitely. Oh yeah."

"What do you do about it?"

"Umm... here I am."

Cal chuckled. "Right. Whole other world here, isn't it?"

"Pretty amazing," Joseph agreed. "It's three states away from home, but there's so much I don't know." And a lot of that could kill him or at least hurt pretty bad, like the scorpion thing. He hadn't realized that before he left California.

Joseph wondered, not absently, if scorpions liked water. And moonlight.

"I was born on this ranch," Cal said. "Pretty near certain I'll die on it."

"There are worse fates," was the best Joseph could think of. Was it the moonlight? Was it sheer desperation? Why was Cal talking to the person he knew the least for probably twenty miles?

Maybe because Joseph was a stranger. Anyone else might lecture Cal on his duty, or his history or something. Joseph knew he had no right, and he wouldn't have anyway. He knew the walls-closing-in feeling too well, the overwhelming urge to just run before you couldn't, before you were trapped forever and maybe dead—Joseph had cut and run. How much worse was the

claustrophobia for Cal, sixth generation and the last of the MacGregors, with upright and honest duty in front of him?

“God’s country, they call Texas,” Cal said. “You oughtta see when it’s foggy—happens just this side of never—and the sun’s rising out of the fog and it hits just right, the air turns to gold all around and you can’t breathe it’s so magical.”

Joseph figured the subject change meant Cal wasn’t going to cut and run. He knew his duty, and he was damned well going to make the best of it. So talk about how beautiful his trap was. “Right here is pretty nice,” Joseph said. “Is that a firefly?” A spot of green light had lit over the creek. Either it was a firefly or his joke about alien abductions hadn’t been a joke.

“Yes.” A sound came out of the darkness, like the “twang” of a rubber band. “And that’s a tree frog,” Cal said quietly, walking slowly, lightly, from the tree to stand next to Joseph. “If we keep still,” he said softly, “they’ll all be back in full chorus soon.”

Joseph stood still and watched the firefly wander. His eyes picked out more, little flares of green light all around. He knew crickets, though he didn’t think he’d ever heard them so loud. The *twang* sound repeated, and more voices joined in. A deep *ba-RUP* was probably a bull-frog. He’d heard them in movies or documentaries or something. In the dark something peeped, and something answered, and then a whole chorus came in. The noise swelled to fill the night. A breeze brought Joseph cool air off the water, and he wrapped his arms around himself. “I can’t believe it’s so... much,” he said.

“They say all of nature is the sound of millions of creatures trying to get laid.”

Joseph snickered.

“You think this is loud, you should hear them when spring first gets started,” Cal murmured. “Every wild critter goes nuts when spring hits.”

“It’s... amazing.” Unlike in daytime, or maybe unlike on the high plains above, the air in the canyon was soft and just on the pleasant side of damp. The brightest moonlight Joseph had ever seen streamed down from above, and

all around him wildlife moved through their lives as if the humans didn't exist at all. "You could—it's easy to imagine one of those books where a man steps out of his time and into prehistory or something."

"Texas abides," Cal said. "She's not much impressed by us, on the whole."

"Isn't there some philosophy thing—or physics—that time doesn't actually exist, it's just an invention like... like making shapes out of the stars and telling stories about them?"

Cal shook his head. "Friend, I don't know. Too deep for me."

Joseph stood in the pale light and watched the fireflies flit, listened to the many-voiced chorus of life around him. From the plain above, the plaintive howls of coyotes floated down, and Joseph thought about the veil between the human world and the spirit and shivered. Then he shook himself. No one he'd ever known had come to Texas to die. Shawn wouldn't come all the way to Texas to haunt him. If anyone needed to worry about a visit from the restless dead, it would be Cal.

"Reckon the path's lit enough to go back up," Cal said, unaware of Joseph's thoughts. "And we'll be rousted out early to help with the gather."

"You mean I'll actually get to ride a horse near a cow?" Joseph asked. Oh. Hell. Now he had to walk back up. Just the thought made the wonder go away and the aches come back.

Cal hadn't been kidding about being rousted out early. Joseph wasn't even up when the knock came on his door, and after he threw clothes on and staggered out, went back for a jacket and wandered out again, he didn't make it as far as the house in the pale light. Wobbie hailed him from the paddock, where Cal was saddling a horse while his own mount Chisholm stuck his nose down Cal's neck as Cal worked. He was done saddling before Joseph could get there to take over, tossing Joseph a grin as he swung up on Chisholm. Once Cal was up, Lupe handed him a metal cup and something wrapped in a cloth napkin.

“Breakfast,” Cal said, as Lupe held out the same to Joseph. “When you’re done, tie the cup and napkin on your saddle.” He tugged a pair of leather laces hanging from the side of his saddle to show Joseph where.

“Tippy cup!” Joseph said. “Man, I used to love these.”

Cal grinned. He didn’t look like he felt like bolting today. He did have his gun on his hip, and his lasso tied on the side of his saddle.

“You’re on Delilah,” he told Joseph, “just so you know.”

“Hey, hey, good morning, littlest MacGregor!” Lafe’s horse bumped Cal’s and he grabbed Cal by the back of the neck and shook lightly. “Riding with the big boys today?”

“Somebody’s gotta show you how to work, Lafe.”

“Oh ho! Somebody’s hat’s gotten big!” Lafe tapped his own hat. “Morning, city boy. You young’uns just hang back and see how it’s done today, huh?”

“And while you’re showing,” Lupe said, holding out a sandwich, “don’t you show them how to fall off your horse midstream, Lafayette Cisneros.”

“Guadalupe my darling!” Lafe said, clutching his heart as the hands laughed. “How can you betray me so?”

“Take your breakfast or I’m giving it to Cal.”

Lafe snatched the sandwich a heartbeat before Cal’s hand got there.

“Lupe—”

“Hey, Running Deer!” Bart Collier, not the brightest of the ranch hands, slapped Joseph on the back. “Ready to get up close and personal with persons of the bovine persuasion?”

“Running Deer?” Cal demanded. “What’s this?”

Bart’s grin folded. Every one of the cowboys in hearing range found something to do with his hands. Cal’s solid stare wasn’t on Joseph, though, so he didn’t answer either.

Cal waited. His horse shifted under him and his saddle creaked. Bart jerked like he'd shouted.

"Just a joke, Cal!" he blurted. "Nobody meant nothing. He's fine—and he's fast! Boy can sure run!"

"The bull trick," Cal said. "Right? Tricked him into a field with a bull?" Cal snatched off his hat and smacked Bart with it. "Dammit, Bart! You could've got him killed then you give him a name mocking his history?"

"It wasn't me—" Bart began, implicating his friends.

"Wobbie!" Cal shouted.

"I'll take care of it, boss." Wobbie swung up on his horse. He was a big man, and his horse was the tallest of the animals so he looked down on everyone. Most of the hands looked away as he surveyed them. Joseph bet Wobbie—and Cal too—were taking note of who couldn't meet Wobbie's eyes.

"Let's move 'em out," Wobbie said after a long silence. Lupe opened the gate and Billie directed her horse through it.

"Sorry," Cal muttered as Chisholm paced through the gate, Delilah's nose by Cal's stirrup. "Sometimes they're idiots."

"I'm the idiot who fell for it."

"I hear tell," Cal said, exaggerating his drawl, "city-folk don't gen' rally put much stock on an animal's junk."

"I hear tell there's a big damn difference between a cow and a bull, and city-folk who like life better learn it."

Cal snickered. "Huge difference, about two foot long."

"Holy shit!"

"Pretty much. Except when a cow's got a calf. She can get meaner than any bull then. That's easier, though—any damn fool knows not to get between a mother and her baby."

Joseph bit into his breakfast and didn't mention that it hadn't occurred to him, since no one else seemed worried about working with cows instead of

bulls. He sipped his coffee, letting his horse follow Cal's as she seemed happy to do. Wobbie's horse loped by, taking him to the front of the little posse.

"Is he John Wayne's illegitimate son or something?" Joseph asked.

"Could be," Cal said, "for all I know. I've never asked. Don't know as I'd look if I could, but he doesn't have an employee file I could check either. Only contract he's ever had was Granddad's handshake."

The reciprocal of that factoid was that a handshake was all the contract Wobbie had ever needed to get fair treatment from the MacGregors. Nice thing to know about your boss.

Joseph had tried bringing his iPod for long rides, but it took him too far from what he was doing, and the dissonance between Texas and street music was too much. So he didn't know how long it was before Billie and a few other hands split off, or how long after that he finally saw cows. Most of them had calves sticking close. Well, that should make it easier not to get between.

"You ride with me," Cal announced, like Joseph hadn't been at his stirrup for the last however long. "The goal is to get them moving slowly. A stressed cow loses weight and also produces less milk, which stresses her calf."

"So try not to push them faster than a good mosey?" Joseph asked.

Cal grinned. "Yes. A smooth mosey is the perfect gait for a herd on the trail." He untied the straps holding the lasso on his saddle and put the loops of rope over his saddle horn. "If you need to come at a cow, do it from the side the calf's not on. If for some reason you can't, come at her slow. Make sure it sees you, and likely the calf'll scoot around to the other side. Then you can get his momma to mosey along to the group."

"Should I have a lasso?" Joseph asked.

Cal snorted. "No."

At Wobbie's direction, the riders spread out. "We'll ride the whole pasture first," Cal said, "and gather them up. Then we'll move them. Got your phone?"

"I do." Using a cell phone to ride herd seemed wrong to Joseph on a basic level, but he could see the value in instant communication when they would cover so much land they'd lose sight of each other.

Riding through a patch of tall grass he wondered how the horses knew where to put their feet, but his mare plodded on behind Chisholm and didn't seem to be tripping over anything.

"Next question?" Joseph called as they rode along a fence, getting to their assigned position. It was the first time Joseph had approached cows on horseback, and he was noticing a surprising discrepancy. Cal turned his head and tilted it, waiting. "Why is Wobbie's horse the only big one?" Joseph asked. "Why choose horses so much smaller than the cows they're supposed to herd?" Nearly all the grown cattle were black and huge, perhaps shorter but way more solid-bodied than the black-and-white cows Joseph remembered counting on long road trips. They also, thankfully, did not have horns. Joseph had seen pictures of Texas Longhorns and he wanted nothing to do with them.

"That," Cal answered, "is better seen than told. Likely you'll get a demonstration before too long."

It was the first time Cal had put him off. Joseph decided he could take it on faith that a smaller horse was better, and he was safer where he was than up behind Wobbie. If Cal's hat-beating of Bart was any sign, the MacGregors took the safety of their ranch hands seriously.

Cal reached some point in the sea of grass that meant something to him though not to Joseph, and turned in his saddle. "Stop here," he ordered. "When I turn in, you do too. Watch for Lafe—" Cal pointed to where the hand sat his horse on their back-trail, "and don't lose sight of me. Remember to mosey."

Joseph snickered as he reined in his horse.

Cal continued alone for a while, then turned his horse and started into the field. Joseph clucked to Delilah as he prodded with his heels and she pulled her head out of the grass and moved. In Joseph's pocket his phone vibrated.

Don't let a horse graze when she's supposed to be working, the text from Cal said. She'll get bad habits.

Yes, sir, Joseph texted back.

Delilah knows her way around cattle, Cal sent, but if you let her get lazy, she might endanger you both.

I'll be more careful, Joseph promised, sitting up in the saddle. He might have thought Cal was just being a nanny, but there were all the missing MacGregors. Clearly ranching was more dangerous than Joseph had yet seen.

Off to Joseph's left Lafe met cattle. He heard the man call out to the cows, and saw him ride close enough to whack a stubborn one across the backside with his lasso. The cow jolted into motion but only jumped a step or so before she slowed to the mosey the others had adopted. Lafe grinned at Joseph and tapped his hat.

On Joseph's right, Cal met cattle and did pretty much the same thing. He didn't look to see if Joseph was watching. He also didn't startle a single jump out of his cattle.

Joseph rode on, until he approached a clump of cattle clearly in his area. He nudged Delilah into a trot as Cal had done, and waved his hat in lieu of a rope.

"Hup, hup, hup!" he called, and the cattle started to move. Joseph looked to Cal and got a grin for reward.

Through the morning the cowhands worked, pulling the herd together and setting it in motion. When Cal and Joseph and Lafe neared each other again, Lafe rode over to Cal.

"There's a calf in trouble," he said, pointing. "The bald-face heifer with the limp. I think she's got some wire on her off hind leg, but momma won't let me near enough to see."

Cal pulled out his phone and punched a speed dial number. Lafe sat staring into the herd, keeping his eye on the calf in question.

"Wobbie," Cal said into the phone. "Send me someone you can spare that's good with a rope. We need a look at a calf."

In minutes Gina came riding around the edge of the milling herd, followed by Steve and Juan Carlos.

"Cut her out, Lafe, Gina," Cal said, and the two cowhands rode in among the cattle. Joseph couldn't see how they managed it exactly, but soon Steve and Juan Carlos were moving the rest of the herd on while one cow was held

back by a rope on her neck, Lafe's horse backing away to hold her as the cow struggled to follow the herd. She lowed as her calf pressed against her. Even Joseph could see the little one had something wrong with its leg.

"Gina, rope the calf," Cal ordered. "Lafe, take her down when she turns. Joseph, you're with me."

Gina's lasso spun above her head then flew, and Lafe did something with his horse, and suddenly the cow was on her side on the ground, Lafe wrestling her legs together and tying them. Gina's horse backed, dragging the calf away from the cow, then she flung herself out of her saddle to tackle the calf. It bellowed, its mom bellowed back, and Joseph jumped from his horse's back as Cal did, remembering to drop his reins so the mare would stay put.

"Joseph, on her neck," Cal ordered, so Joseph put his knee and his weight on the animal's neck like Gina had and she moved away. Cal grabbed the calf's hind leg and pulled it straight.

"Wire," Gina said like it wasn't obvious, barbed wire wrapped around and starting to cut into the calf's skin. She dipped a hand in a pocket and came out with a pair of pliers. "Two minutes, boys, give me two minutes..."

"No hurry," Cal muttered, fighting with the waving leg. The calf bleated, a desperate little sound, and its mom bellowed back, deep and angry.

Joseph was perfectly placed to watch her struggle, nearly a ton of pissed-off mom that would kill him in a heartbeat if she got the chance. Lafe had tied three of her feet together, but she still writhed, trying to get her legs under her.

Then she got a leg out.

"The cow—" Joseph gasped.

"She's working free!" Lafe shouted from the safety of his horse. Cal jumped.

"Get away from the calf!" he ordered, vaulting into Chisholm's saddle. Joseph didn't move because Gina didn't, she had her back to—

"Ten seconds," she muttered. "Hold, baby, hold ten seconds—"

“Not gonna get it!” Joseph gasped but he stayed because fighting her would take longer than ten seconds.

The cow roared to her feet, her front feet hobbled but murder in her eyes then the loosened rope fell off her—

“Hi hi hi!” Cal’s feet and Chisholm’s legs appeared, blocking Joseph’s view of the enraged mother. Chisholm’s head was down and his ears back, angry posture of his own but Cal sat loose on his back. “Gina, get off that calf!” he shouted.

“Five seconds!”

The cow lunged towards Chisholm’s back end but the little horse spun in place, glaring her down. She lunged again, he spun again. She lowered her head and pawed the ground and Chisholm’s ears went flatter, his head lower. Cal took the lasso off his saddle horn.

“Gina, I swear to God if this horse or Joseph gets hurt because you—”

“Done!” Gina bounded away. Joseph jumped up and Lafe was right there, his stirrup empty and his hand out.

“Clear!” Lafe shouted as the calf bolted and Joseph landed behind him. Cal and Chisholm dodged out of the way of the mother and child reunion.

Gina had Joseph’s reins and everyone had cleared out so the angry mother had no close target, and her baby stuck close to her side. She lifted her tail with a bellow and both ran off after the herd.

“Joseph,” Cal said, his voice tight, “get back on your horse. When you drop rein you drop *one* rein, so you can get back up in a hurry and ride.”

“Yes, sir,” Joseph said with not a hint in his voice or his mind of sarcasm. Lafe gave him a hand down and he walked to his horse while Cal rode over to Lafe and smacked him with his hat.

“What the hell kinda tie was that?” he demanded, smacking again as Lafe hunched his shoulders. “You could have killed us all!” *Smack!* “Keep your mind on your damn knots!” *Smack!* “You going to—” *Smack!* “—tell Lupe you let—”

“Cal,” Gina said, “gonna be a long day yet. You’ll regret doing that to your hat.”

“And you!” Cal stopped beating Lafe to point the hat at Gina. “I’ll have you—both of you!—in the kitchen with the babies till you die of shame or Lupe learns you some goddamn *sense*. We could have roped her again!”

“Figured it was easier to just get ’er done,” Gina said, hunching her shoulders like Cal had smacked her too.

“Ride herd,” Cal snapped, turning Chisholm after the cattle. The other horses followed, their riders silent. Delilah tried to take her favored place by Chisholm but Joseph held her on the far side of Gina instead.

When they came to the herd Cal pulled a bandana from his pocket and tied it on his face. Gina and Lafe did the same, then Cal held a bandana out to Joseph without a word. Joseph tied it on and took a deep grateful breath of less-dust-filled air.

After the adventure of the maddened cow, the day went more like Joseph thought a cowboy’s day should. The ranch hands rode along the edges of the herd, keeping it moving and collecting stragglers, but no one needed to rope anything and Joseph got to stay safely in his saddle. He kept Delilah clear of Chisholm on the pretext that they were supposed to spread out, but eventually he found Billie riding her red horse next to him.

“Tell me,” she said, smacking her horse’s nose with her lasso when it tried to nip Delilah, “what in tarnation has Cal tossing his horns?”

“...tossing his horns?”

“Mad. Pissed. Got his dander up.”

“How can you tell?” All Joseph could see of Cal was his eyes, and maybe the stiff way he—

“Looks like someone nailed him to the saddle,” Billie said. “And his hat’s more smushed than it was this morning.”

Joseph shook his head and told her the adventure of the maddened cow. Billie whistled when she heard what Gina had done.

“That little idiot,” she said. “She thinks she’s gotta be better and braver than any of the boys and she’s right. But when a MacGregor runs and tells you to do the same...” Then she took off her hat and smacked Joseph on the shoulder with it. “What would have happened if you got up when you were told?”

“Gina would have been alone—”

“BZZT!” Billie buzzed like a game show. “Gina couldn’t hold the calf and pry at the wire, so she’d have given it up for hopeless and moved her own ass.”

“...Oh.”

“Instead you both endangered Cal and Chisholm, because do you think for one second he’d have saved his own self with either one of you on the ground and a dead easy target, and I do mean *dead*?”

“No,” Joseph hunched his shoulders, mimicking the others without meaning to. He was sure of that, now the terror was gone. The only way that cow would have gotten to him and Gina was through Cal.

“You’ve got the excuse of being a tenderfoot greenhorn newbie what don’t know shit from shinola,” Billie said. “But I seem to recall you don’t want slack on that account. Or do I misremember?” She leaned to smack her rope on the rump of a cow that was moving at a too-slow mosey.

“No,” Joseph said. “I don’t want coddled.”

“Then you listen to Cal MacGregor. Wobbie and his mamma both won’t countermand him, so you might ought to follow their lead. Boy’s a born stockman. Not to mention he’s your boss as much as Jess. He can fire you just as quick and he’s twice as likely to do it.”

Every time it turned dangerous Joseph wasn’t sure he wanted the job, but he was absolutely sure he did not want to be sent off by Cal MacGregor.

“I’ll remember,” he promised. Listen to Cal. He’d known that, really, he’d just... forgotten, in the heat of the moment. “Chisholm,” he said, changing the subject a little, “glared that cow down, I swear, and kept her back.”

Billie chuckled. "Him and Cal are a match. Generations of careful breeding to get the finest cutting horse in Texas and a proper cowman to ride him. Chisholm knows his job and he loves to do it."

"Okay, I'll bite. What is a cutting horse's job?"

Billie rolled her eyes. "Cutting one certain animal out of the herd and keeping her out till we're done with her. You really want to see Cal and Chisholm dance, wait till the fall sorting. Watching those two work is like being in the front row at a ballet. Impressive as all hell."

"I don't know," Joseph said, his eyes finding Cal by his crumpled hat off to the side of the herd. "I'm already pretty impressed."

"Hmmpf," Billie grunted, taking her hat off again, but this time she swiped her sleeve across her face instead of hitting Joseph with it. She dropped the hat on her saddle horn and ran her fingers through her short grey hair, keeping one hand on the reins. Unlike Delilah and Chisholm, her horse had a habit of minor misbehavior. "Why'd you leave Californy again?" she asked.

"Just needed to get away," Joseph said, trying to remember what he'd told her last time and failing. Why did she keep asking? He did remember that last time she'd called it "cali-for-nigh-ae."

"Uh huh." Billie prodded her horse and it turned to head off a contrary cow trying to go the wrong way. She didn't come back, so Joseph focused on keeping the cows moseying in the right direction and forgot to keep clear of Cal until Delilah found her way back to Chisholm's side.

Cal glanced at him but didn't speak.

"Billie says when stuff goes down I need to listen to you," Joseph said in a sort of apology. "Not anybody else."

"It was mostly my own damn fault," Cal said without looking at him. "Don't know how I managed to forget Lafe's worthless as tits on a bull most of the time."

"Texas slang is so... evocative," Joseph said.

Cal snorted. Joseph let Delilah keep her nose by Cal's boot. After a while he started telling himself yes, he was an actual cowboy herding actual cows

but it was not nearly so glamorous as the movies made it out to be so he should just get over it and think about going back to Sefu's shop where he knew what he was doing. Before he got someone killed.

It was only natural that he kept glancing at Cal, the person he seemed most likely to get killed besides himself.

When the cattle were finally moved, it was midafternoon. Sandwiches had been passed and devoured despite the grit of the trail pervading them, and the last warm gulps of water had been taken from canteens and water bottles. Joseph felt like he had dirt in every fold and pore of his body and he'd never be clean again. Cal pushed his hat to the back of his head and Joseph could see the line across his forehead where his sweat had washed the yellow dust away.

"That's it," Wobbie said, as Billie got down to close the gate. The tail end of the herd had stopped not fifty feet off, nose down in fresh grass. It didn't look much different from the other pasture to Joseph, but then, he wasn't a cow. "Head back, boys and girls," Wobbie went on. "Gina, Lafe, Joseph—you're on barn duty. The rest of you take the afternoon."

On the far side of the group Lafe heaved a deep sigh. Next to Joseph, Gina swore under her breath. Joseph didn't make a sound. An extra hour of forking manure was light punishment for what could have happened.

Cal clapped Joseph's shoulder, sending up a cloud of dust then spun Chisholm to point his nose the other way. "Ready for a run?" Cal asked Joseph as Delilah performed a less impressive turn. Cal tugged his bandana down to grin at Joseph then shoved his hat down on his head. "Not the whole way, of course, but—"

"Last one in the jacuzzi is sweet on his horse!" Billie shouted, and her horse shot off. Chisholm bolted after, Cal leaning low over the little horse's neck. Joseph let Delilah chase him. His hat tried to fly as he thundered across the plain. Joseph snatched it off, letting the wind stream his hair out behind him, and despite the dust and the tired and the work he ran towards, Joseph laughed into the wind.

The "jacuzzi" was the swimming hole Cal had shown him, Joseph discovered when barn-duty was done. Lupe had sent snacks down to get them

by until dinner, and someone had put a case of beer in the stream to cool. The ranch hands played in the water and dozed in the shade and Joseph thought he could get used to ranch life after all, though he wondered why Cal didn't come down.

Cal went into the house through the laundry room door, and was stripped to his jeans before he came out of the laundry room. He padded barefoot down the hall, trusting Lupe and Mom would be busy elsewhere for the ten seconds it took to get to his room. Once there he hung his gun belt above his desk and tossed his boots then his hat on the floor. The poor thing lay there crumpled and Cal shook his head. Probably time for another one. Again.

Whatever. At the moment the important thing was that he get down to the "jacuzzi" before Lufe splashed all the water out.

That, of course, was when his phone rang. Cal picked it up because only a few people had his number, and all of them deserved instant access to him.

Lyle's home number, calling at a time he and Cal should both be working. Cal flipped the phone open.

"Howdy. Is everything all right?"

"I should be asking you!" Lyle's voice had laughter in it, so Cal relaxed and dropped his jeans. Swim trunks...

"Everything's fine here," Cal said. "It's just not often you call so early."

"I took the afternoon off to help Enola get the party set up. I'm guessing since we never heard from you that you're not coming? We at least got Mom's polite refusal."

"Sorry, Lyle. I've been busy."

"You're never going to have a minute to yourself as long as you're chasing extinction."

"I do not want to go over this again."

“Too bad. I had an offer today. It’s more than the last one. Enough to put you through school, buy Mom a house, and neither of you would have to work for at least ten years if you played it smart.”

“And the *Y Otra Cosa* would be drilled and fracked and blown up.” Cal turned a dresser drawer over on his bed. Where the hell were his swim trunks? “No.”

“You’ve seen the shape Mom’s in. The finances are similar. Hasn’t shown you that, has she?”

“No,” Cal said again.

“You’re not going to turn the tide by yourself, Cal. The ranch has been killing MacGregors and dwindling because of it for years. You and Mom are the only ones who won’t see it. We need to sell while people still want to buy.”

“No.”

“So you’ll work yourself to death, you’ll watch Mom do the same, and then what? There won’t be any more MacGregors to pick up the reins, will there?”

Cal winced. “You asshole,” he muttered.

“I’m your brother. It’s my job to make you see the truth so you take care of yourself. Come to Amarillo. Acceptance is growing, and no one here will ever care if you father babies. You can play with mine. Leandra has been flat-out pining for you.”

“Lyle—” Cal closed his eyes. “Give my love to Enola and the girls.” He closed the phone and drew back to throw it against the wall, but instead he tossed it on his bed. Cal jumped with both feet on the abused hat, then stalked into the shower.

In the morning Cal’s assignment was to take the truck and Lafe to the Nine Tails tank and get it pumping properly. Of course Wobbie didn’t put it that

way. There was “might” and “if you’ve a mind to” and “surely could use” until Cal said he’d take care of it.

The pairing was understandable. Only Cal, Wobbie, and Billie got much work out of Lafe, and Billie was on foal watch still. Didn’t mean Cal had to like it.

When Cal had Lafe and the supplies in the truck, though, the consarned thing wouldn’t start. ’Round and ’round the starter went, but the engine wouldn’t catch. From the paddock, Joseph came running.

“Pop the hood,” he told Cal.

Wasn’t like he could mess it up much. Cal popped the hood. Joseph leaned under. Cal kept his hands on the wheel and didn’t lean out the window to admire the portions of Joseph’s anatomy not under the hood.

“What’s pretty hair gonna do?” Lafe muttered. “So anyway, there I was—”

“Try it!” Joseph called. Cal turned the key and the starter cranked but nothing else happened.

“Cut it!” Joseph said. “Hold on—now try it!”

Cal turned the key and the engine roared like an engine built before “quiet” was a thing. Joseph dropped the hood and stepped back with a grin. Cal grinned back then leaned out the window.

“Wobbie!” he shouted. “I’m taking him!” He pointed at Joseph. “You take Lafe!”

“But I—” was as far as Lafe got. Cal helped him out of the truck. If he had to listen to Lafe rattle on all day, he’d probably beat the man with more than a hat. That couldn’t be a good thing.

Joseph was a far sight prettier than Lafe too. Cal reckoned he deserved that.

“Great!” Joseph said when they were rumbling out of the yard. “A day not on horseback! Where are we going?”

“Nine Tails tank needs some work.” Cal gave him a bit of a smile. Now things were level, he was feeling his grumpy again. “Mechanical work, most likely.”

“Excellent.”

“Mom didn’t say you were a mechanic. I reckon she didn’t know, or you wouldn’t have been on fences. So much, anyway.”

“I didn’t figure it was worth listing. High school classes, and hanging around Mom’s boyfriend’s shop.”

“We get this done fast,” Cal said, “I got a tractor for you to look at.”

“Uh oh, now you’re going to expect miracles... A tank. That’s a watering pool, right? Not a war machine? Because I’m not up on tread technology.”

“It’s a watering hole,” Cal said. “If I wanted talk instead of work, I’d have brought Lafa.”

“Got it,” Joseph said before Cal could apologize. He turned away, putting his arms on the bottom of the window frame and looking out.

“Cal,” he said after an hour of silently watching the grass go by, “why is there a house in the middle of your ranch? That’s not yours, I mean?”

“It’s a hard land, especially for starting out.” Cal slowed to creep through a wash. If he broke an axle, it was a long walk home. “Fellow ran llamas, but he lost half his herd to a hot spell some years back. Sold out and moved back east to his nine-to-five. Granddad bought the land.”

“And you just leave the house there?”

“It’s not hurting anything.” Cal pulled the truck up into the breezeway of the abandoned barn.

Joseph slid out and looked around then he froze. “Cal, what are those?” he asked quietly, nodding over Cal’s shoulder.

Under a herd shelter stood four or five antelope. Cal grinned.

“Pronghorn antelope. Teenage boys hanging out, most likely, since in spring the females drive the young bucks out of the herd. Here for the water, probably.”

“They’re beautiful,” Joseph said, still not moving.

“I should say they’re not actually antelope,” Cal said. “It’s convergent evolution—true antelope are the ones that live in Africa, but they occupy the same niche.” Yay for one-fourth of a college education.

“Let me know when we run across something you don’t know?” Joseph said.

“If I notice it,” Cal said with a chuckle. “Grab the toolbox from the back. We’re far enough off they probably won’t run from a water source midday unless we make a helluva lot of noise.”

“Got it.”

At the windmill Joseph stopped to stare again. It would have bothered the hell out of Cal if Lafe did it, but Joseph was a tenderfoot.

“The water’s there,” Cal said, pointing down. “This is how we bring it up.” He waved at the tank, less than half full and murky. “The windmill taps a near-constant power source we don’t have to pay for.”

“I take it the fact that the windmill is going but water isn’t happening is why we’re here?”

“Yep.” Cal pulled a breathing mask out of the toolbox and pulled it on. He saw Joseph’s eyebrows and smiled a little despite himself. “Hantavirus spreads through rodent feces,” he said. “We figure this is how Uncle Skyller caught it.” He held another out to Joseph.

“Thank you.”

So, looking like cowboys taking a hand at being surgeons, they stuck their heads and hands into the innards of the old pump. Cal pointed out the working parts and Joseph nodded like he got it, and Cal bet he did. Cal gave him gloves and let him deal with the rat nest. Sometimes it was good to be the boss.

Within two hours of tinkering—and without using any of the must-be-bought spare parts—the turns of the windmill were bringing water from the pipe. Cal grinned at Joseph. “That would have taken me most of the day alone. Two days, with Lafe.”

“So now what do we do?” Joseph asked.

“Now is the fun part,” Cal said, taking his boots off.

“What?”

“See the gunk?” Cal pointed at the algae growing in the tank. “Comes of it being stagnant—the water gets warmer and the algae gets out of hand. We have to clear it out.” Cal shrugged off his shirt. “The pump’s bringing up cold water,” he said as Joseph hadn’t moved. “It’s going to be a mite uncomfortable in there soon.”

“Right.” Joseph hung his hat on the cattle rail and braided his hair quickly. Cal stripped to his jeans and emptied his pockets, but left his hat on. He jumped into the murkiest part, wondering as he always did if the water had been stagnant long enough for leeches to find a way in.

It was a tank in the middle of the prairie, he told himself as he always did. There weren’t any leeches.

Joseph had stripped down to boxers and jumped in, unbothered because he probably didn’t know what leeches were. Cal showed him how to “herd” the algae together so they could grab larger armfuls of the stinking stuff and toss it out.

“I like the swimming hole better,” Joseph said, craning his face away from the smelly stuff in his arms.

“Me too,” Cal said.

A few minutes later Cal declared, “Doesn’t have to be perfect.” He stepped into the pump-stream and sputtered at the cold, but he rinsed off anyway and then stepped out. “It’s cold,” he warned Joseph, “but I particularly dislike the smell of algae.”

“Me too,” Joseph said, and took his own turn at sputtering.

If he’d been alone, or maybe even with Lafe, Cal would have stripped naked for the cleaning, and lounged about letting the wind dry him before he dressed. But Joseph was too pretty to risk it, especially as he’d probably stay half-naked as long as Cal did. So Cal threw his T-shirt on, but left off the outer shirt until he dried a bit. He carried his boots to the truck, stepping carefully

until he could step into the truck bed and get the lunch box Lupe had sent. Joseph jumped up to join him.

“Wonder if Lupe puts better food in the box when it’s meant for Lafe,” Joseph said, “or worse?”

Cal laughed as he led them back to the house’s porch, thumping it as he stepped up to drive off undesirables. “After yesterday? We’ll be lucky if she didn’t put rat poison in it.”

“In that case, I call the sandwich that has your name on it,” Joseph said, planting himself with his back to the house’s wood siding before starting to unbraid his hair.

“Did you get beat up for that in high school?” Cal asked, thinking how beautiful Joseph’s hair was and what jerks most teenagers tended to be. He put a vacuum bottle of sweet tea between his knee and Joseph’s, and set a cup on Joseph’s knee.

“The white kids tried,” Joseph said, as Cal poured himself some tea. “But the Latinos had them outnumbered, and while no Latino ever mistook me for Mexican, they weren’t going to allow any white kids beating up brown kids. Since they knew the white kids couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Sounds... fun.” Cal put a paper-wrapped burrito on Joseph’s leg beside the cup.

“Oh yeah.” Joseph’s eyes focused beyond Cal and he grinned. “Our work is appreciated,” he said softly. Cal turned to see the pronghorns picking a cautious path to the tank.

“Pretty things,” Cal said, turning back to his lunch. “You ought to see them run.”

“This is pretty awesome.” Joseph finished with his hair and tossed it over his shoulder. “I wish I had my camera.”

“Mmm,” Cal said. Lupe had made her black beans and rice burritos, known to every current and past *Y Otra Cosa* hand as “those blessed amazing things.”

Unlike Lafe in nearly every way, Joseph took the hint and bit into his own burrito, grunting approval around his first bite. After that the only sounds came

from the prairie—the eternal wind swishing through the grass, the rattling tin and creaks of the windmill working. The soft bass thud of the pump in the well, the chime of cold water trickling from the pipe into the tank. Cal ate his lunch and let the world go by, watching a thunderhead stack up on the horizon. Weather guy said rain wasn't likely, but the man had been known to be wrong.

Joseph could get used to this. He sat with his back to the house and his toes in the wind and relaxed in the middle of the day, a luxury unknown since Mrs. MacGregor picked him up at the bus station in that ghost town that everyone swore had people but he'd only seen two besides her.

The burrito had been delicious and large. The sweet tea was sweet and cold. The windmill creaked and rattled, the wind blew, and the sun shone but not on him. Joseph wriggled his toes and sighed.

“Yeah,” Cal said. His feet were pale except for a few freckles. His big toes had a tiny sprinkle of red-brown hair on them.

Beyond Cal's bare toes lay the abandoned ranch. Joseph pondered the windmill, the falling-down outbuildings, and the dead trees. He wondered if the little ranch welcomed some life, or if they were intruding.

If he'd had to fix the windmill alone, Cal had said. Joseph thought of being out there alone and he didn't like it. Working the fence alone had been weird enough, but at least then he'd had the solidity of a warm and breathing horse beside him, and aside from the fence, nothing to see but wild. Here where people had tried and failed... He wondered if anyone had ever checked that the former rancher had really moved back east, or if Texas had just swallowed him whole. Like in a horror movie when an unsuspecting family moved into that great house they can't believe they got for such a steal, and why was that old woman staring at them like that?

Yeah, stop that. Joseph glanced over at Cal.

His boss, the energizer bunny, the man no hand wanted to work with because he worked them hardest, had tilted his hat down over his face. His hands were folded on his stomach, that was not as pudgy as Joseph

remembered from just a few days ago. Get Cal back in his element, apparently, and he was as healthy as the horses he seemed such friends with.

It shouldn't be surprising, given how hard Cal worked. Give him another day or two and he'd be as lean as David Tennant. And a week after that, he'd look like Matt Smith.

Joseph snorted softly. No, Cal would never be lanky enough to pull off Matt Smith unless he stopped eating entirely. But David Tennant—yeah. Cal could play the Tenth Doctor. He was a bit short, but he had the expressive face, the intense eyes, hair almost the right color—give him a suit and a trench coat and a Jack Harkness to snog at conventions—whoa. Joseph dragged his brain back out of the danger zone.

Over at the water tank, an antelope stamped, and then they all took off, bounding across the prairie. Joseph grinned at the beautiful sight, but beside him Cal sat up to pull his socks on. Damn. “Back to the grind?” Joseph asked. “What's next?”

“Something spooked them,” Cal said. “Best to meet it with boots on.”

Oh. Double damn? Joseph reached for his own socks and shoes. If running was in order, he wanted his sneaks.

Cal stomped into his second boot, jammed his hat down on his head and stood, staring at the grass beyond the water tank. “Coyote,” he said.

Now Joseph saw it, a grey-brown dog shape running towards them in a jolting gait and—growling?

“Cripes, it's rabid!” Cal grabbed Joseph by the collar and dragged him off the porch. “Get to the truck!”

Joseph had read *Animorphs*. He knew about rabies. He clutched his hat and ran. Cal's boots thudded behind him. Behind that sound came the lurching growl of the rabid animal.

Joseph outpaced Cal in three strides, but he still ran his hardest. He nearly flew into the bed of the truck, snatched up a wood fence post and spun to fend the beast off attacking Cal as he jumped. Cal lunged for the front of the truck

and Joseph jabbed the post at the frothing, snapping mouth, and then Cal was beside him with a pistol in his hand and shot the thing.

“Holy shit,” Cal gasped while Joseph stood there, alert for more or just too freaked out to put down the post or whatever. “Running Deer! If you get hungry again, just go chase down an antelope!”

Joseph laughed and eased the fence post down to the truck bed. “In school the track coach was always after me to join the team. I’d quote *The Faculty* at him.” Cal didn’t look like he got it. Well, neither had the coach. “It’s a movie. One character always said he didn’t think that a person should run unless he’s being chased.”

“I’m sorry,” Cal said. “It was stupid to leave the gun in the truck.”

“I’m thinking it was stupid to leave LA,” Joseph said. “Nothing to worry about there but the smog and traffic...”

“That’s Texas.” Cal put the gun back in its holster and strapped the gun belt on, his gaze on the waves of green and brown grassland. “Always something going on.” He sighed. “Reckon we might ought to be getting back. Heaps of daylight left to get some work done.”

“Yessir.” Joseph took one last look around before he got down to climb into the cab of the truck. He picked up the papers that had fallen out of the glove box when Cal lunged through the back window to grab his gun. When he straightened, in the large towing mirror he saw Cal coming from the porch, the lunch box in one hand, the other hand on his gun as he scanned the area. Joseph watched him walk. He was so fucking *picturesque*. Igloo-brand lunchbox or not, Cal could have just walked out of any of the Western movies Joseph had watched at Babu’s feet. That early programming came through—Joseph’s mind practically painted a neon sign above Cal’s head that said “HERO.”

Didn’t help that he was so damn cute when he was flustered, that he’d all but thrown Joseph off the porch one-handed...

Goddamn, stop that.

Cal set the lunchbox in the truck then he pulled a tarp from the large set-in toolbox that rested across the bed. He vanished behind the truck, then Joseph saw him toss something into the truck wrapped in the tarp, and he dropped his gloves on top of it.

“If you don’t mind, grab me the sanitizer,” he said when he came to the driver’s side window. Joseph had seen that in the glove box; he got it and dumped some on Cal’s outstretched hands.

“We’re taking the coyote home?”

“Needs to be buried. Ground here’s worse’n cement, and all I’ve got is a blunt shovel anyway. I’ll cultivate it into a fallow field.”

Ew.

The drive home was long and slow and uneventful. Cal was quiet and Joseph leaned out the window humming and watching the clouds go by. Back at the ranch Cal apparently had a list of things he wanted done, starting with the coyote carcass and moving on to more pleasant things like fixing broken slats on the barn and cleaning gunk out of the buckets hanging in the horse stalls. When the light started to fade, they turned to gathering up chickens that had gotten out of the habit of nesting in the chicken coop. Up in the hay loft, Cal looked into a wooden box and called Joseph over.

“Sit,” he ordered with a grin over his shoulder. “I just found our next job.” He reached into the box. “Oh, yes, you’re a vicious beast, you are,” he said, and then he was depositing a tiny kitten in Joseph’s lap. “Pet it,” he ordered. An orange kitten joined the black one as Joseph petted the hissing little bundles.

“They don’t like me,” he said.

“They think we’re going to hurt them.” Cal plunked down across from Joseph with his hat in his hands and three kittens in his hat. “We don’t want them feral,” he said, stroking tiny kitten backs, “so they have to get used to us. As Mom puts it, we love on ’em until they like it.”

Joseph shrugged. “You’re the boss.” He petted kittens.

Apparently the game wasn't good tonight, Joseph thought when there hadn't been a roar through the wall in at least ten minutes. He didn't mind the quiet. Working in Photoshop with a touchpad wasn't the easiest thing ever; he could be glad he didn't have distractions to mess him up along with his own fingers. At least until—

On schedule, his phone rang. Joseph pushed the laptop back with its fine image of the *Y Otra Cosa* ranch house silhouetted against the sunset, and answered it.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Shouldn't that be ‘howdy’?” Mom's voice asked. “Hello, Ki. How's things?”

“Going great. Today I played in algae and then got chased by a coyote with rabies.”

“Don't I remember that disease absolutely terrifying you when you were little?”

“I was twelve, Mom, but yeah. It's okay, though. The thing didn't get near me, and Cal shot it.”

“Shot it,” she said flatly. Mom had a thing about guns now. “Tell me the whole story, young one, in proper order.”

“Should I start with this morning, or go back to yesterday and the cow that almost killed me?”

“Don't make me come over there, young man.”

Joseph laughed and started at—no, the day after Cal got home so he could skip the part where Cal cut him out of Ferguson's rope. The edited version still made for a better story than last week's events, which had been mostly *And then I rode more fence. And fixed a fence post. And rode more fence.*

“So we sat there petting tiny sleeping kittens until their mom came and woke them all up,” he finished.

“Wow!” Mom said. “Sounds awful! How much are they paying you again? Because it's not enough.”

Joseph snorted.

“So help me picture things,” Mom said. “Since you haven’t sent me any photos in at least a week. What does Cal the coyote-killer look like?”

“Mom...” Joseph grumbled. “I don’t have any pictures of him—I’m supposed to be working, remember? But he looks like a shorter David Tennant.” She wouldn’t know who that was. “Google the Tenth Doctor.” She was probably sitting at her desk. Heaven forbid she should neglect Farmville.

“The Tenth Doctor what?”

Joseph chuckled. “Just like that. Google images, type in *Tenth Doctor*.”

“Oh,” Mom said. “He’s just adorable.”

“Remember those Westerns that Babu was always watching when you came to pick me up after work?” Joseph asked. “Cal looks like he just walked out of one all the damn time. When he sees trouble coming he jams his hat down to make sure he doesn’t lose it.” Unlike Joseph, who was always wasting a hand holding onto his hat because Mom had bought it big to contain his hair. “He wears a leather gun belt with his four-times-great-grandfather’s revolver on his hip.” Joseph knew that because there was a picture of the gun in the book Cal had loaned him. “And he knows like, *everything*.”

“Mm hmm,” Mom said. “And how does he feel about you?”

“Mom! I’m just—”

“Sitting on a rock singing *Part of Your World*?”

“No! It’s Texas. He’s not—”

“Ten percent of the population,” Mom said. “Some of them have got to live in Texas.”

“There’s only about a hundred people in the whole state, from what I’ve seen,” Joseph argued.

“That still leaves ten gays, and at least four of them should be male.”

“You shouldn’t encourage me, Mom. He hasn’t done a single thing to make me think he’s interested, or even gay.”

“I’m your mother. It’s my job to encourage you.”

“Mom—”

“You don’t fall in love every day, Ki. Enjoy it a bit before you bludgeon it with reality.”

“I—all right.” Joseph slithered from chair to bed, wriggling to get comfy. “I don’t know how you do it, but you saw it before I did. I’ve got a crush on Cal. Happy?” Cal. Oh God, he was done for, he even liked saying Cal’s name. Cal. Cal MacGregor, hot cowboy.

“Very happy,” Mom said. “Now tell Momma all about your new man.”

Cal had observed a few things over the three days he’d worked with Joseph. The man didn’t groan when he was assigned to work with Cal, unlike pretty much everyone else. He didn’t talk too much, nor too little. Joseph worked hard, he did what Cal told him to, and he never acted like he resented having to earn his pay. He also didn’t spend dinner telling everyone every minute of what they’d done that day like Lafe, so if Cal felt like taking a few minutes to point his toes skyward, he could. Also, Joseph continued to be prettier than anyone else on the ranch. Any other human on the ranch. Chisholm was prettier than Joseph. Still, if Cal could have both kinds of scenery set against the backdrop of beautiful Texas, why wouldn’t he?

In the next week, though, every day or so Wobbie would try to cadge Joseph and dump one of the other hands on Cal, but Cal felt justified overriding him. The evening after the second time Cal overrode Wobbie at breakfast in front of everyone, Cal made time after dinner to walk out to Wobbie’s little house and greet Wobbie’s silent wife. He brought a six pack of good beer and had a talk with Wobbie about how things needed to be. That the men needed to know Wobbie was the one in charge, but Cal wasn’t going to be just one of the hands either, so he and Wobbie should be talking often. And also that if Wobbie thought he wanted Joseph on a particular job that he didn’t want to put Cal to, he should come to Cal before breakfast to debate the matter.

Things went a mite smoother after that. After checking on Nine Tails, Cal and Joseph worked on the Pigeon Walk tank. Another day they rode fence before helping move the small but vital herd of bulls. Most days they got done well before dinner, got some relaxing in someplace pretty, and got back to the ranch to work on Cal's list.

Joseph started bringing a digital camera along, but he only pulled it out when it wouldn't slow his work, so Cal didn't object. Cal had his picture snapped about a double dozen times the first day, but he reckoned that wasn't any sort of a big deal.

One night after dinner Lupe brought a cake out and everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to Cal. It was a surprise—he hadn't looked at a calendar or even his laptop in days. Mom gave him a fancy new cell phone. Wobbie gave him a leather hat, "the better to smack the men into line." The others had smaller gifts, and the cake was delicious like everything Lupe made.

After the third time Cal walked by Joseph mounted in the paddock, and smacked Joseph's leg with his gloves to remind him to keep his heels down, Cal figured out all on his own that the reason Joseph wore tennis shoes for work on a ranch was that he didn't own boots. Cripes, why had that taken so long to get through his head? Everything else, soon as Cal told him to do it differently, Joseph started doing it proper.

That was probably why he wore that fancy black hat every day too—because he only had the one. Cal consulted with his mother, and told Wobbie he'd be taking Joseph into town. It was time for a treats run anyway. Monday at supper Wobbie told everyone if they had outgoing mail or shopping requests, to get them to Cal by morning.

Tuesday morning found Cal and Joseph in the truck, jolting along the dirt road to the highway. Cal would as soon have taken the horses, but he needed to bring home more than two burdened horses could carry. It was also more than he could carry, so Joseph was completely justified.

"So I've been told there are actually people in Vega," Joseph said as Cal turned onto the highway. "Will we see them today?"

“Might could,” Cal said, “if you look fast. Most folks don’t have time for hanging around in town.”

“But we get to make a day of it? Lucky us!”

Cal chuckled. “I don’t reckon it’s much of an outing for you,” he said, pushing the old truck up to fifty. The wind rushed through the cab and he had to raise his voice. “Seeing where you’re from.”

“After a month on the ranch?” Joseph asked. “It’ll feel like New York City.”

“Well, try to keep your gawking under control,” Cal ordered. “You’ll make the ranch look bad.”

“I’ll be good, boss,” Joseph promised. He took his hat off to let his hair blow in the wind. Cal grinned and pushed the truck to sixty.

In Vega, the first stop was Mix’s Ranch Equipment. Cal led Joseph to the back.

“Mom says your birthday’s next month,” he told Joseph. “We’ll be busy then, so I’ll be facilitating Mom’s gift to you now. Get yourself a pair of boots.”

“But—”

“Don’t you know better than to argue with your boss?”

“No, sir. I mean yes, sir. I mean—” Joseph grinned. “Are there particular boots I should consider, sir?”

Cal pointed Joseph at the boots he preferred with a well-worn version of that same brand, and went to browse the hats. He came back as Joseph was trying on the cheapest pair he could find of the specified boots. Cal swapped a white straw hat for Joseph’s fancy black one. All that hair came tumbling down.

“This is my gift,” Cal said. “So you can save the pretty hat for impressing the ladies.”

Joseph grinned. “Are you going to stock up for your Lafe-smacking while we’re here?”

“Going forward, I’ll smack him with his own hat,” Cal said, but he picked out a replacement for the one he’d jumped on after talking to Lyle. He didn’t lose hats like he used to, but he still liked to keep a few on hand for unexpected circumstances.

Joseph caught himself staring at Cal’s ass when he bent to look at something on a low rack, and dropped his eyes to the boots he was standing in. He couldn’t stop grinning, though. It was the same as every other day—him and Cal doing something that needed doing—but it also really wasn’t. It was almost a date. Especially with the gifts thrown in.

Lose gracefully, Mom would say. He didn’t have a leg to stand on refusing the gifts, so he would be happy about them. Both that Cal and/or his mom cared that Joseph had proper boots, and that he got to spend a working day hanging out with Cal and not working.

“Try these,” Cal said, returning to drop a pair of dark brown boots with a wing pattern on the tops by Joseph’s feet. “Those you’ve got are work boots. These are riding boots.”

“What if I say I’m afraid of heights?” The pair Cal brought had a higher heel. And a narrower toe. Joseph had assumed they were more for dress up, but now he looked, Cal’s beat up boots looked much like the pair that he’d picked out for Joseph.

“I say get over it,” Cal said. “If you fall off—as you’ve been known to do—and your foot gets stuck in the stirrup, your dragging body isn’t going to slow your mare much at all. The more you thrash and yell, the more she’s gonna run, and eventually you’re not gonna be making any noise.”

“Ew,” Joseph said, and started to sit.

“Hold on.” Cal knelt to push at Joseph’s toes in the work boots. “How do these feel?”

“Good?” God, Cal at his feet... Joseph raised his eyes to the buffalo head hanging on the wall. “They’re stiffer than I’m used to, obviously,” he went on, “but they’re more comfortable than I expected.”

Holy shit, buffalo were big!

“Walk around a bit,” Cal ordered, standing.

Joseph walked. Was Cal watching his ass? Joseph couldn't tell. And for all he knew Cal needed to, in order to see if the boots made him walk funny or something. So he better not make any assumptions, even though he was pretty sure Cal was, in fact, watching his ass.

“Those'll do,” Cal said. “Now come try these.”

“But—”

“We'll take 'em out of Lafe's pay, for pretty near killing you the other day. You need work boots too.”

Joseph shook his head and brushed his hair back and sat to do what he was told. When he'd tugged off the work boots and jammed his feet into the riding boots, he stood up and Cal had to look up at him. Okay, definitely liked these boots.

Cal raised amused eyebrows. “How's the weather up there?” he asked.

“A bit unsteady,” Joseph said. Cal stepped back, waving an arm for Joseph to walk. He tried, and immediately wobbled. Cal grabbed his arm to steady him.

Really liked these boots.

“Practice,” Cal said, and led Joseph across the rug and back. It wasn't that hard, just had to keep his feet solidly under him. “Now let's see,” Cal said, and let go.

Joseph was too occupied with not falling over to see if Cal watched his ass, but after two times across the rug and a couple wobbly turns, Cal nodded.

“Do you like the color? There's light brown too.”

“No, these are great.” If they'd been white with sparkles, Joseph probably would have kept them since Cal picked them out.

Maybe not with sparkles, actually.

“Leave them on,” Cal ordered as he scooped up the rest of Joseph’s haul. “Sooner you learn to walk in ’em the better.”

Cal paid for the boots and hats and the other things he’d collected, and Joseph managed to help carry stuff to the truck. Then they walked down the sidewalk with cracks that sported the only green grass in sight. Joseph had a new hat and new boots and got to grab Cal’s arm at random moments, so all was right with the world.

“What’s next?” he asked as they crossed an empty street to step onto the sidewalk in front of First Lock and Storage. Next was Vega Flowers and Gifts, but Joseph doubted they were going there.

“Plannin’ to drop by the post office, save Del a trip,” Cal said. “Have a sit at the Dairy Queen for lunch then see if we can’t round up all the provender everyone—”

“Cal! Cal MacGregor!” A tall, hollow-cheeked man stepped out of Vega Flowers and Gifts, rubbing his hands together. He was smiling, and it just looked wrong on that face. Joseph thought he’d be a great undertaker in any of those movies Cal should probably be making. “Ah, you’re here! Well, this—this is a mite embarrassing. I’d have been out tomorrow, I mean my Jake would have been, honestly, but we still wouldn’t have been ready and I’m sorry. I am so sorry. And now here you are, and I haven’t even called—”

“Cyrus Whaley, what are you rattling on about?” Cal demanded.

“Why, your flowers!” He put a long, thick finger on his cheek. “Or—have I ruined the surprise? Blast it, the order said nothing—well.” He took Cal’s arm. “Come here.”

Cal let himself be dragged into the store, so Joseph followed.

“Howdy, Cal!” A tall young man with a softer version of his father’s features grinned at Cal from behind a tall vase in which he was arranging long stem red roses. “We’ll bundle everything up for you, but I figured you could see one arrangement the way it ought to be.” More vases surrounded him, and several flower boxes.

“Jake, hush a minute. Let him see. Cal, these are the cards.” Mr. Whaley handed Cal an envelope with that ghastly smile. “The first order was late for your birthday, so we thought there was no rush, thought you knew, wouldn’t mind if we just made one trip—”

Joseph totally wasn’t watching as Cal opened a card with a confused frown. But he did see a large scrawled “P” at the bottom before Cal closed it and stuffed it back in the envelope blushing.

“Ahh, I knew it!” Jake Whaley crowed. “Some pretty East Coast girl fell for our cowboy! What’s her name, Cal, and does her daddy know what she’s doing with his credit card?”

“Cy,” Cal said, “can you reverse the charges?”

“Why—yes, of course, Cal.”

“But then you pay for all these?”

“I had to make a special order,” Mr. Whaley admitted. “I’ll never sell all these before they die.”

“You—” Cal waved a hand as he ran out of words. “You bundle ’em all up. Make ’em pretty as you can, and then you take ’em to anybody you think should have ’em. Can you do that, Cy? Give Abuela Martinez a big bunch. Betsy Layton. And old Miss Rowena. Take some home if Ms. Laila isn’t sick of flowers. Anyone else you think would get a smile on ’em. Get rid of every last petal if you would, and then don’t accept anything else from this buyer.”

“Cal, if it actually is someone using her daddy’s card—”

“I’ll swear to you, Cy, that every single thing was bought fair and square. Will that satisfy you?”

“A MacGregor’s word? Of course!” Mr. Whaley clapped his hands together. “That’s an odd and expensive joke, but we’ll turn it to good. Want your name on the cards?”

“No. Please. Just get rid of them.”

“Will do,” Mr. Whaley said. “Awful sorry to throw a wrench in your day, Cal.”

“Not your fault, Cy.” Cal stalked out the door and Joseph hurried tiptoe after so he wouldn’t fall over when Cal was in no mood to be catching him.

“Post office,” Cal said when Joseph had mostly caught up. “This way.”

Walking fast in heeled boots was far harder than walking slow, but Joseph managed. At the post office Cal took custody of a canvas bag of mail and a large box. Joseph saw how Cal’s jaw tightened at the sight of it, so he wasn’t surprised when Cal stepped over to the customer’s prep counter and pulled his knife out of his boot.

Well, at least he didn’t have his gun on him for the town visit? Joseph bet it was in the truck, though.

Cal sliced the box open and peered inside. Joseph mastered his curiosity and stayed politely where he couldn’t see what made Cal’s lip curl.

“Bobbi Jo,” Cal called over his shoulder, “how old’s your girl now?”

“All of four years old, Cal, and smart as a whip.”

“If you’d kindly bring her out,” Cal said, “I’d like to pay my respects.”

The little girl was duly produced, and her shyness lasted only as long as it took Cal to pull a fuzzy blue bear as big as herself out of the box and hand it to her. Cal gave the empty box to Bobbi Joe to deal with, stuck the note in his pocket and put the mail bag over his shoulder like a cowboy Santa. He tipped his hat to the ladies, and stalked out.

Joseph didn’t try to catch up; he just walked behind Cal, torn between wariness and elation.

“P” had to be a man. Right? The credit card had a man’s name on it—father and son Whaley had both been certain of that. And Cal had said the flowers were bought “fair and aboveboard.” The owner of the card knew what was happening. So he was doing the ordering.

Cal was gay. And if he’d had a boyfriend back at school, Joseph bet that just as soon as Cal had five minutes alone with his phone, he’d be single. The man was furious. Joseph could see it in the set of his jaw when he wasn’t walking behind Cal, the way Cal held his shoulders, the way he stalked down the street...

Ahead he could see the Dairy Queen. Joseph debated if asking why they were having ice cream for lunch would annoy Cal more, and if he really cared why they were having ice cream. It was ice cream! He could eat a real meal later. Lupe was never stingy with the leftovers.

The DQ parking lot held one car as Cal stalked past the outside tables. It was a beat-up Chevy about the same age as Cal's truck, and three young men came out of the other door of the restaurant headed for it. One of them made a face at Joseph's glance.

"What are you looking at, Cochise?"

Cal spun on his heel. "Beg pardon?" he said.

"MacGregor!" The guy was brought up short, but then he looked at his friends and the sneer came back as they walked over. "Get tossed out of your fancy college?"

Cal set the mail bag down. "You're a jackass, Steele Kennedy," he said, shoving his hat down on his head. "A stone-cold fool. And if you ever go near Betsy Layton again you're going to be a toothless fool. Got it?"

Joseph stood behind Cal and wondered if what he thought was about to happen was really going to happen and what he should do about it if it was.

Betsy Layton? She was getting some of Cal's flowers.

Steele Kennedy laughed. "You're just jealous she never put out for—"

Cal's fist in Steele's face interrupted him. Cal punched him once, and stood there as the idiot staggered back. The other two boys laughed while Steele picked himself up.

"Your face was asking for it," Cal said as Steele stood. "Wearing that smirk? Just begging for it."

"Get him, Steele!" one of the others said, still laughing. "You can't let him knock you around!"

"Cool it!" the other snapped. "Deputy Haley!"

On the street a red car with “Oldham County Sheriff’s Dept” on the side rolled slowly by. It seemed to go slower and slower as the driver watched the Dairy Queen parking lot and not the road.

“Clear out,” Steele muttered, and they all piled into the car. As the car pulled out of the driveway, the deputy tapped two fingers to his hat. Cal returned the salute then picked up the bag as the deputy’s car accelerated.

“I’ve been hankerin’ to do that for six months,” he told Joseph, and yanked the door of the Dairy Queen open.

“Cal MacGregor!” called a girl’s voice, “Welcome home!”

“Thanks, Millie.” Cal walked to the counter and set the bag down, put his hat on top of it. “I’d take it kindly if you’d give me a cup of ice. I just split my knuckles on Steele Kennedy’s teeth.”

“Did you?” The girl grinned. “Lacy!” she called over her shoulder as she filled a cup with ice. “Cal MacGregor decked Steele Kennedy and I’m buying him lunch!”

“You have my blessing!” came a voice from the back, followed by a tall dark-haired girl. “Ooh, maybe I’ll buy you lunch,” she said, smiling at Joseph. “What’s your name, handsome?”

“Oh!” Cal looked stricken. “I haven’t introduced you—Joseph, I am sorry. I had my head so stuck in what I needed to get done, I just let you follow me all over—”

“So make it up to him now, and introduce him to two pretty girls!” Lacy ordered.

“Joseph,” Cal walked over and snatched Joseph’s hat off his head, “meet Millicent Grant and Lacy Jane Dalton. Ladies, Joseph whose last name I don’t even know. He’s a new hand on the *Y Otra Cosa* since last month.”

The Dairy Queen in Vega, Texas, served actual food alongside the ice cream. And the girls who worked there didn’t have a lot to do. They chattered with Cal as they fixed the food, flirted with Joseph, and took turns coming to the table to hang out until finally two frazzled road-tripping parents came in with their cranky brood of five, and Cal went and ordered ice cream cones to

go. He led the way out the door as the youngest vacationer started wailing about being told to eat his dinner before he got a sundae. Joseph followed Cal down the street, licking his cone and wondering anew. “P” had to be a man. But Cal had decked Steele Kennedy because of Betsy Layton, and both Lacy and Millie reminisced about going with him to the drive-in.

Vega, Texas, had a drive-in?

So maybe Cal was bi, Joseph thought. Maybe he’d gone away to college to explore his orientation. It wasn’t because he hated Texas, after all, or needed an education Texas couldn’t offer. It made sense. If everything in Cal’s life began and ended with the *Y Otra Cosa*, what other reason could he possibly have for going halfway across the country to go to school?

No wonder Cal felt trapped when he came home. Now if only Joseph could figure out a way to show him that he wasn’t as alone as he thought—

If Joseph’s entire chain of suppositions wasn’t completely off base, anyway. Did he have one shred of evidence? No. Did he tend to see things in the rosiest glow possible when he had a crush? Yes. Witness the horrible incident with Blake and the balloons that weren’t actually for balloon animals and if Shawn hadn’t been way smarter than Joseph...

Before they left the DQ, Cal had been pressed to call both girls but Joseph noted he hadn’t promised to call either. Joseph had been given both their phone numbers too, which he planned to lose ASAP. Within three steps of the door the smile slipped off Cal’s face and silence fell between them. Joseph turned that around in his mind and decided he liked it. Cal knew he didn’t have to fake cheerfulness with Joseph. That was a good thing.

If, you know, he wasn’t getting everything wrong. Cal might just be sorry to be back to being alone in Joseph’s company.

They walked back to the truck, put the mail in it, and got in to drive to the supermarket. Joseph thought it might be half the size of every supermarket he’d ever seen, but it was sufficient. Cal brought out the envelopes with lists on the outside and money on the inside, and they bought the special treats everyone had requested and a bag of ice to dump on the cold stuff in the cooler in the back of the truck.

When they passed the “Now Leaving Vega City Limits” sign, Cal let out an explosive breath. “Sorry,” he said without looking at Joseph. “Guess I’m just not ready to be around people again yet.”

“Well, if the people include that Steele Kennedy...”

Cal snorted and settled a bit in his seat and Joseph turned his grin out the window. He *was* more relaxed around Joseph than with girls he’d known all his life!

“Reckon we might get us some rain,” Cal said. “Don’t see clouds like that in Los Angeles, do you?”

Joseph hadn’t been looking at the scenery. Now he did, at the huge cloud that hung low and flat at the bottom, but towered higher and higher and looked slightly twisted, containing the cloud in a big circle. “Is that a tornado? I mean—”

“Naw. Supercell they call ’em. Some of ’em spawn tornadoes, but the weather guy says it’s not likely this one will.”

“Fine by me.” Joseph leaned out the window, his hair blowing in the wind as he watched the gorgeous cloud. For once he wasn’t wishing for his camera—he was remembering that in his interview Mrs. MacGregor had specifically asked if Joseph could work with gays. He’d decided she meant Billie, but given Billie’s reading tastes he wasn’t sure. Unless she read that stuff for the quivering females?

Whatever. It was unlikely, but it was statistically possible that the *Y Otra Cosa* contained two percent of Texas’ gays. Because he really didn’t think many straight guys would get as close to him and stay there as Cal kept doing. Taking his hand not his wrist to go down to the creek, holding him up in the store, sitting at a tiny table rather than a bigger one the girls could have sat at too in the Dairy Queen...

Of course, the question was, had been, and remained—what the hell was Joseph going to do about it?

CHAPTER THREE

When Cal drove into the yard, the hands were heading from washing up in the bunkhouse to dinner. He sent Joseph off with his arms full of his gifts, then drafted the other hands to get everything else in the house and sorted out. The mail Cal kept in his own custody until he could dump the bag out on his bed to sort. That was the safest plan after Preston's damned fool gifts. Looked like there was one more—a good-sized flat box with the image of a red ribbon printed on it, from FrameURFace.com. God only knew what was in there and Cal didn't feel fortified enough to find out. He left it on the bed, sorted out everything for his mother, and took the rest to dinner to pass out.

The box was, naturally, still there when Cal returned to his room after dinner. Might as well get it over with. He tugged on the tab embedded in the ribbon to open the box.

Out came a picture that Preston didn't take, had never seen. It was a canvas print of Cal's mother in a fine black frame. She stood leaning on the paddock fence, staring into the distance. Behind and above her floated sculpted clouds, before her the *Y Otra Cosa* stretched in spring-green waves. The picture was cropped just right so none of the buildings showed—it was just Mom with her back to the fence, and Texas. She wore her hat, but her face was barely shadowed. She looked—determined. Content. Her cane was not in the picture.

It was beautiful. Cal turned it over, turned the packaging over, but it offered no clues. The picture wasn't a present Mom would give, nor Lyle, and obviously not Preston... Cal went looking for his mother.

She was sitting at her desk. She put a file folder over what she was working on when Cal knocked.

"Mom?" He showed her the picture. "Who sent me this? There's a gift receipt, but it only says *happy birthday*."

She grinned. "Oh, that did come out nice!"

"It was you?"

“Joseph took the picture. He told me it would be amazing, but it didn’t look so great on his little camera. Reckon it was all he could think of to give you. Didn’t think to mention the hands always give you presents. Or when your birthday was, come to think on it.”

Joseph. He should have guessed, but Cal hadn’t imagined that dinky little camera the man played with could take such impressive pictures. Cal had seen shots no better hanging in the galleries Preston dragged him to.

Mom held out her hands and Cal handed her the picture. “Goodness, it did come out well,” she said. “He even made a crippled old lady look good, without making me look like someone else!” She handed it back with a smile. “Me and the *Y Otra Cosa*. That boy has good instincts—that’s a picture you’ll treasure all your life.” She sighed.

Something in the way she said it rattled Cal. Like she expected him to have nothing left but the picture one day. Maybe one day soon. Cal took a deep breath.

“I’m not going back to college,” he said.

“What?”

“I’m not going back to college.” Cal stopped himself from shoving down a hat he wasn’t wearing. Instead he set the picture down. “I’m not moving to Amarillo to take that job with Lyle either,” he went on. “I never meant to, I just never told him no so he wouldn’t step up the pressure. I’m staying right here and if I never get farther than the Vega Dairy Queen again, I’m fine with that.”

“You’re no quitter, Callan MacGregor,” Mom said.

“That’s why I’m not going back. The *Y Otra Cosa* has first claim. I won’t quit her.” One reason. There were so many more, but they were personal, petty. The *Y Otra Cosa* was the one that mattered.

“You could get your degree and come back after. You were so all-fired-up sure you could bring the ranch into the twenty-first century. Without losing our history, you said.”

“I can do that better here. I can read books myself, and no teacher in Massachusetts or anywhere else knows more about ranching than Wobbie. He’s not going to live forever—I need to be here, learning from him.”

“None of this is new since you left,” Mom said. “I remember sayin’ a lot of it beforehand. So I reckon there’s another reason.” She prodded her cane with her toe. “Isn’t there?”

“Maybe I just needed to see it for myself,” Cal said.

“And maybe you’re as rotten a liar now as when you were five,” Mom snapped. “You want to stay and take care of me, take care of all the things I can’t do quite right anymore. Follow me around and nursemaid me.”

“Have I been doing that?” Cal demanded.

“You treat me like fine china,” Mom growled. “Don’t get up, Mom, I’ll get it, Mom, why not let me handle the business stuff, Mom—do you think I broke my head too?”

“I just think I’m old enough to be involved,” Cal said. “That’s all stuff I have to learn too. I should learn it from you.”

“You think you’ll just take over,” she said. “Same as Lyle. Just bull in and tell me what to do with my land, my life, because you’re a man now you’re twenty and men know it all!”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t you argue with me again!” She pushed up out of the chair, grabbed her cane and threw it down. “I’m not so helpless! I ran this place from my hospital bed, and I ran it from the couch, and I’ll run it from this desk.” She pointed at him. “You took off then you come home and tell me you changed your mind, just step aside? I don’t think so!”

She took a step. Cal saw her waver and he stepped forward to catch her but she stopped him with a glare as she caught herself on the chair.

“See?” she demanded. “You think I can’t stand in my own office!”

Cal reached again to shove down his hat again, set his feet instead. He'd come too far to back down. She'd spend day and night bullying him to go back to school if he let off now.

"Don't you set your jaw at me, young man," Mom said. "You were a stubborn boy and now you're a stubborn man, but your mamma has your measure."

Cal didn't want to test that. He really didn't. But he didn't see that he had any other choice.

Joseph was reading a book of *True Texas Ghost Stories!* he'd just bought when his phone rang. He nearly jumped out of his skin. He reached from bed to desk to pick it up. Cal's number?

"Hello?"

"If I tell you to do one thing," Cal said, "and my mother tells you different, are you going to mind me?"

"Yes?"

"Then meet me at the truck."

Okay, then. Joseph sat up and pulled on his sneakers. His feet had endured more than enough of the boots for one day, and "the truck" meant no horses. He hoped.

He got there first. Then Cal came from the house, carrying a cursing Mrs. MacGregor.

"Get the door," Cal ordered. Joseph jumped to open the passenger door. "She fell," Cal said over Mrs. MacGregor ordering Joseph to get his skinny city butt back in the bunkhouse, didn't he know better than to get in the middle of family? Somehow Cal got in, still holding his mother. "She's going to the hospital."

"The hell I am!"

"Keys are in the visor," Cal said. "Move!"

Joseph ran around the truck to get into the driver's seat.

“Come on,” he told the truck as he pumped the gas. He didn’t want to be playing with the carburetor while—the engine roared and he patted the dash before throwing the truck in gear.

Los Angeles had some bad roads, but nothing to compare with the raw dirt of the ranch driveway. Joseph crept along at two or three miles an hour, and even then sometimes he hit a bump and Mrs. MacGregor let out a gasp or a swear. Actual swear words, not the “dadblast!” and such of days past.

“I’m sorry,” Cal would murmur with each thump. Eventually Mrs. MacGregor stopped cursing, only letting out a gasp on really bad bumps.

“She still had some narcotics left,” Cal said. “I made her take one.”

“I can’t imagine the pain she’d suffer if you hadn’t,” Joseph said. “I’m trying to be careful.”

“Ain’t no gentle on this road,” Cal said. “It’s one thing I’ve always meant to fix. We’d only be half an hour out of Vega if the road had some flat to it.”

“But then you’d get... salesmen.”

Cal snorted. The truck thumped. Mrs. MacGregor whimpered. Lit only by the dim green of the dash lights, the truck’s cab was pretty dark, but Joseph saw Cal’s hand stroke his mother’s hair.

“Would she be more comfortable on the seat?” Joseph asked softly.

“I think I’ve got more give than this old padding,” Cal said, and went on holding her.

The drive to the highway took forever. When finally the headlights flashed on road signs as they went over a small hill, Joseph flipped the turn signal on automatically.

“Turn right,” Cal said. “There’s no hospital in Vega—we have to go to Amarillo.”

“Got it,” Joseph said, and switched the turn signal.

The road was empty both ways. Cal had Joseph stop on the shoulder so he could buckle his mother into the middle seat, but he didn’t offer to take over driving. “Watch for deer,” he said as he buckled himself in. “And cows.”

“Got it,” Joseph said again, and put his foot steadily and slowly down. Cal pulled his phone from his pocket and called Wobbie. Mrs. MacGregor leaned on Cal and muttered something Joseph didn’t catch, but when Cal was done talking to Wobbie he placed another call.

“Lyle,” he said. “Cal. Mom fell. We’re bringing her to Physician’s Surgical. Be there in—” he peered into the dark until a milepost sign came into view. “Twenty minutes. Do you know... right... okay... see you then.”

“Whassurna?” Mrs. MacGregor asked.

“What, Mom?”

“What’s... your... name...?” she said again, slowly.

Oh, crap, had she hit her head?

“Callan Stonewall MacGregor,” Cal answered. “Because you knew I’d have to be a fighter.”

“Don’t... let Lyle...”

“I won’t, Momma. You know I won’t. If you can’t move me, damn sure he won’t.”

“Good boy,” she said, and her head fell to Cal’s shoulder. Joseph wanted to ask what that was about but he didn’t think he should. Instead he just drove the truck.

Traffic on a Tuesday night in Amarillo was no big deal, but Cal gave directions like it was impenetrable. Go this way rather than make a left, watch out for that car, better wait on the light—“Tell me where to go,” Joseph finally said. “Let me get you there.”

After that it took seven minutes before he was pulling up at the Emergency Room drop-off. A tall man in a suit came towards the truck the moment he saw it. He yanked the passenger door open as Cal unbuckled, dragged Cal out and hugged him quickly, set him down and reached for Mrs. MacGregor. Joseph unhooked her seat belt and the man pulled her carefully out. He shut the door with his hip and Joseph drove off to find a parking space.

On the ranch the keys stayed in the truck. Here Joseph locked up, and pocketed the keys, then hesitated. If there was one place in the world he didn't want to be, it was waiting for hours in another ER. And inside, he'd be right in the middle of all the family stuff Mrs. MacGregor was completely right to warn him away from. Why not stay with the truck? He could probably manage to sleep in the back. Cal could just call when he needed a ride home.

Because he was a damn fool in love, that's why he couldn't stay with the truck. Mrs. MacGregor knew Cal and Lyle were going to fight. As the fool in love with Cal, it was Joseph's duty to be there to back him up, whatever the hell they were fighting over. He sighed and walked, trying to comb the wind-snarls out of his hair with his fingers. Should have worn his hat, or put his hair back. Brought a hair-tie. Or a jacket. Or a book. Too bad Cal had been too busy wrestling his mother into the truck to tell Joseph what he might need.

Joseph hoped Cal and Lyle wouldn't actually get in a physical fight. Suit or not, Lyle MacGregor was a big man.

In the waiting area of the ER, it looked like Cal and his brother were already at it. They stood in an alcove by the unoccupied kids' corner, facing off. Lyle was explaining something important, and apparently frustrating, with his hands. Cal had his arms folded and his jaw set, and, if he'd been wearing a hat, it probably would have been shoved down to the bottom of his ears. Joseph took a deep breath and called himself a fool a few more times and moseyed on over.

"Howdy," he said, and hoped it didn't sound stupid from him. "Did they take Mrs. MacGregor back already?"

"Lyle, this is Joseph," Cal said. "He's the new hand—he drove while I kept Mom from walking home."

"Joseph!" Lyle offered his hand with a smile that showed a lot of teeth. "I've heard good things about you, young man!" He had a firm grip but if he wanted it to hurt, he should have met Joseph a month ago. "Thank you for your assistance tonight."

Joseph shrugged. "I just drove. Cal was the one who got cussed at."

“Mom’s doctor had her taken back to X-ray,” Cal said. “It will probably be a while before we know anything. I’m sorry—it’s not the way anyone wants to spend an evening.”

Joseph shrugged. Get rid of Lyle and he could still manage to have a great evening, but he didn’t say that.

Lyle clapped his hands together softly. “Gentlemen,” he said. “I know a self-serve cafe a few corridors away. Dr. Singh will know to find us there. Cal, Joseph, may I buy you a cup of coffee?”

Cal let himself and Joseph be guided down the hall by Lyle’s shooing motions. First he’d get them somewhere less public, then find a way to politely get rid of Joseph, then... well. It didn’t matter. His momma didn’t name him Stonewall for nothing.

In the little alcove that held a couple vending machines, three tiny tables, some magazines and a small couch, Lyle bought two cups of coffee and a soda. He handed the soda and a magazine to Joseph, who took the hint and planted himself on the couch while Cal and Lyle sat at the table farthest from him.

One day, Cal promised himself, MacGregor plus MacGregor wouldn’t always equal a fight.

That’s not where Lyle started, though. He turned his head to check that Joseph had obediently buried himself in the magazine, then he leaned forward, sliding his hands across the table.

“I know we’re going to crash horns in a bit, but let’s get this out of the way first. Cal, we’ve got to convince Mom to stay this time.”

“To stay?”

“Dr. Singh wanted her to stay in a rehabilitative facility last time, but as soon as she felt like she could walk well enough, she checked herself out and went home. I guarantee you, when Dr. Singh comes in here, he’s going to tell us that skipping all her physical therapy is why she’s hurt herself. She didn’t heal proper. And she’s not going to heal proper if she doesn’t allow that

maybe doctors know something. Especially Dr. Singh. I checked him out, Cal. He's the best in Texas, possibly in the country. The man is right smart."

"Why didn't she stay?" Cal had heard none of this, from either of them.

Lyle's hands balled into fists, still on the table. "That would have left the ranch without a MacGregor."

"Temporarily. Wobbie can run the ranch, though, and you and I could have helped with the financial—"

"Tell it to her," Lyle said, bouncing his fists lightly on the table. "Tell it to her this time, because it's going to take both of us. She didn't even want me to tell you she was in the hospital last time, Cal, and then she censored how much I could tell you. I listened because we both wanted you to stay in school, and also because I didn't want her kicking me out and then trying to handle everything on her own."

He didn't want to, but Cal had to ask. "Does our insurance cover the physical therapy?"

Lyle gave him a sour look. "Some of it. The year changed since last time, so we'll have to pay the twelve thousand dollar deductible before the insurance kicks in again, and I'll promise you the bills weren't paid off from last time. The minute we carried her in the door we started the bills mounting again. And that's not all the debt. You still don't know, do you? Why do you think I keep telling you we have to sell while we can? You two are going to hang on until they take the *Y Otra Cosa* out from under you, and then you'll be penniless and landless. I'll take you both in, of course, but—"

"Let's stick to Mom," Cal interrupted. "For now."

"For now." Lyle sat back and crossed his arms. Cal sipped his coffee and made a face. The stuff needed another brown crayon. From a speaker somewhere George Strait sang about not owning anything but what he wore. As a Texan, Cal knew he was contractually obligated to like George Strait. Most times Cal was tepid about it.

Sometimes, though, the man just hit it right. George sang that he wasn't rich, but he was free.

The *Y Otra Cosa* was worth a passel of money, Cal knew that, but it was all tied up in the ranch. A man couldn't spend an acre like he spent his paycheck on Saturday night, knowing he'd get another next week.

No way could Cal let go. The *Y Otra Cosa* was *his*, but it went deeper than that. He was the *Y Otra Cosa*'s. Cal was a child of her just as much as of his mother. More, because his mother came from the land too. It wasn't right that the land should be anything but the *Y Otra Cosa*, home of the MacGregors.

It wasn't right, but wrong things happened all the time. You only had to turn on the news to know that was true. Cal considered a mountain of debt ready to sweep over the *Y Otra Cosa* like a flood from a toad-strangler of a days-long-storm, and where everyone would wash up if it happened. Where would the hands be, after? What would happen to Lafe and Lupe and the kids, to Wobbie when he'd spent his whole life learning to run the *Y Otra Cosa* just the way the MacGregors wanted it done? To Billie and Gina, when in the 21st century many ranches still wouldn't hire a female hand?

If it was as bad as Lyle said, then the thing to do was to sell. If they sold, they had control of the situation. Everyone would have a chance to go job-hunting before they lost their home. Cal could make sure Mom was taken care of. He could find a way to—to do what? What would he *do* without the *Y Otra Cosa*? What was life, away from the ranch and never able to go home? Never daring to go home, not wanting to see what oil or gas interests would do to the land. Could he betray it like that, let someone drill holes and blast out blocks of the land that had nurtured his family for six generations?

Could he let his mother ruin her health, cripple herself, and probably die too soon, trying to save a way of life that had been gasping its last for years?

"I'll be right back," Lyle said, getting up. He hadn't touched his coffee. Probably he knew how bad it was. He walked away, following the "Restroom/Baños" sign. Cal considered if he cared enough to see if the vending machine held anything decent to drink, and decided he didn't. From the vending machines his eyes wandered to the couch, where Joseph had set aside *Sports Illustrated* to pick up a celebrity magazine. Cal wondered if Joseph knew any of those people personally. With so many celebrities in Los

Angeles, some had to live near normal folks, right? Maybe not, though, because Joseph switched the celebrity magazine for one about cars. He put his feet up, sliding his shoes under the cushion of the next spot instead of putting them on the couch, putting the magazine on his upraised knees. Cal wondered if Joseph was cold in his T-shirt, seeing how aggressive the hospital's AC was. Should have warned the man they'd be gone for hours, maybe the night.

"Somehow Mom never mentioned how handsome the new hand was," Lyle breathed, coming back to the table. "Are you sweet on him?"

"You got the wrong pig by the tail, Lyle." Cal sat up to glare at Lyle. "I didn't come home to go getting tangled up in *that* sort of mess."

"Sorry." Lyle sat and ran his hands through his hair, just a shade darker than Mom's. "Just thought I'd twigged to something."

"Tend to your own rat-killin'," Cal ordered. "If I decide to go courting, I'll ask for help then."

"No, you won't," Lyle countered. "Just like you won't ask for help with Mom, or the ranch. I don't want to see you go under, Cal, I swear I don't. Do you think I don't love the *Y Otra Cosa* too?"

"You left, didn't you?"

"So did you!"

"And now I'm back." Cal managed to keep his hand from shoving down the hat he wasn't wearing.

"And now you're set," Lyle said, sitting back, "you've got your dander up and a two-by-four upside the head won't move you." He folded his hands on his stomach. "Granddad left the ranch to us as much as Mom, so you've a right to look at the books. You might ought to do that when you get home."

"Is that what you did, last time?"

"If the *Y Otra Cosa* is taken, I lose out too. Yes, I looked. Mom kicked me out of her office the minute she got home, and I didn't fight her about it, but I do have a right to see how my inheritance is being managed, just like you do. So—Doctor!" His scowl turned to a smile and he stood to greet a dark man in a lab coat as he walked into the alcove. Cal stood too.

“Cal,” Lyle said, “let me introduce Dr. Singh. Doctor, my brother, Cal MacGregor.”

“Ah, the college son, yes?” Dr. Singh took Cal’s hand with a gentle squeeze. “I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Cal MacGregor. May we sit?”

Wasn’t like he could say no, like refusing to hear would change things. Cal sat and folded his arms on the table.

Lyle wasn’t always right. And *he* wasn’t named Callan Stonewall MacGregor.

Into the silence as they settled, old Waylon sang about how easy life was in Luckenbach, Texas.

Joseph was trying to be polite, trying to pretend he wasn’t there, but it was hard as hell. Cal looked—he looked stricken. He didn’t let it show in his face, but his eyes...

Lyle was, as Billie would say, big enough to hunt bear with a switch, but if Joseph leaned back just a little he could peer around Lyle to keep an eye on Cal. And he did feel like he had to. Whatever Lyle had said had put a worried look in Cal’s eyes that Joseph hadn’t seen when he faced down an angry cow or a rabid coyote, and now as Cal sat with the doctor he looked braced for more bad news.

Mrs. MacGregor had just fallen, hadn’t she? Joseph was sure she was in a lot of pain, falling on an already bad hip, but Cal’s face made Joseph wonder if the doctor was telling the MacGregor boys their mother was dying.

No, he wouldn’t do that here. Emergency departments had special rooms to give families privacy in such times.

As the doctor talked, Joseph kept a sneaking eye on Cal and saw the news was not good. He’d spent every day for nearly two weeks staring at that face, the last nine days like a man in love. He ought to be able to tell when only politeness was keeping Cal from slugging someone or shooting something.

Cal dredged up a smile, then Lyle stood up and so did the doctor. Joseph could no longer see Cal, until the doctor headed out and Lyle stepped around the table to bend down and talk to a standing Cal. Joseph stared at his magazine, totally not watching out of the corner of his eye. Nope.

“I’m going home,” Cal announced. “I’ll be back before she’s out of surgery tomorrow.” He said it louder than the rest of the conversation, but still not loud. Joseph debated if it was a test to see if he was trying to eavesdrop, and settled for looking up with a questioning face.

“Ready?” Cal asked Joseph, giving him a version of that ghastly polite smile. “Morning comes early on the *Y Otra Cosa*.”

“You’re telling me,” Joseph said, tossing down the magazine.

Cal asked for the keys before they were out of the building. Joseph shook his head.

“Let me get us out of Amarillo, then if you’re determined, we’ll switch.”

“I’ll be needing to learn to drive in Amarillo,” Cal said. “Late Tuesday night’s as good a time as any.”

Cal driving in a city was nerve-wracking. Joseph kept his mouth shut and held onto the door as Cal drove for the next half hour like they’d fallen into a reboot of *The Road Warrior*. Every car was out to get them, and every driver but Cal was an idiot, and it was a wonder that no one died before they were out on the freeway and humming along pretty much alone.

It was late. They moved behind a cone of light, pushing it forward but never reaching it. The night air flowed through the truck and Joseph was finally warm. So naturally he got sleepy. He tried not to, but he yawned.

“You could sleep,” Cal said. “I won’t mind. Thanks for giving up your evening to help me out.”

Joseph thought about and discarded *my pleasure*. Instead he answered, “*De nada*.” It was maybe one-sixth of the Spanish he knew, and it meant *it was nothing*. Which was just about the truth.

Cal snorted. “Better watch it,” he said. “Too much Spanish and you’ll get yourself deported.”

“If I could deport myself to a nice bed right now, I might consider it,” Joseph said. “But this seat—well, it probably would be softer sitting on you. And seeing how you’ve lost most of your padding since you got home, that’s pretty sad.” Though he’d do it in a heartbeat given an invitation, oh yes.

“I’m surprised Mom hasn’t mentioned to you,” Cal said, “but she doesn’t like ‘Mrs. MacGregor’. When she married she was the last MacGregor, so she didn’t change her name. Dad took hers. She feels like ‘Mrs. MacGregor’ is a hint she don’t belong running the *Y Otra Cosa*. She’s a mite touchy about it.”

“Ah. I, um, call her *ma’am* to her face,” Joseph said. “I’ll get it right. Thanks for telling me.” It was the first mention Joseph had heard of Cal’s father. “What happened to your dad?” he asked.

“Ale McMurphy’s longhorn steer,” Cal said. “Went through his fence and ours, come to service our cows. Mixing breeds devalues the beef. Dad decided to put himself and Chisholm’s grand-sire in the way. Lost them both.”

Kind of like Cal had put himself and Chisholm between Joseph and an angry mom-cow. In the green light from the dash, Joseph couldn’t see Cal’s face. He asked the next question anyway, softly. “How old were you?”

“Two months from being born.”

“That’s why the name?”

“That’s why the name.”

Joseph looked for something else to talk about, but the world beyond the green dash lights and the pale headlights was black. “I can’t see any stars tonight,” he said. “I’ve heard about the stars in Texas, but every time I think to look, I can’t see them.”

“In Massachusetts I’d wonder why anyone even believed in the stars,” Cal said, “since you never saw ’em.”

“Why in hell did you go all the way to Massachusetts to go to college?” Joseph asked. He could have gone to California to be gay, after all.

Cal chuckled. “About a half-dozen bullheaded reasons that don’t matter anymore. Seen it, didn’t like it, trotted myself right back home where I’m stayin’, thank you very much. I won’t be going back in the fall. And speaking

of home—thank you for the picture. I didn't spot it till after dinner or I'd have said sooner."

"Oh, good! I was starting to wonder if it was ever going to show up." So he really was home forever. That explained the panic that night by the creek, maybe.

"It's beautiful," Cal said, still talking about the picture.

Joseph shrugged. "I—well, it would be hard to go wrong with such subjects."

"How did you manage to get Mom's face under the hat?" Cal asked. "When I take pictures of folks in hats you can't never see faces proper."

"I forced the flash." Joseph grinned and turned sideways on the seat so he could more easily talk with his hands as he explained about lighting angles and went on to how he'd chosen the composition, and taken at least fifty shots because the clouds kept moving, and finally Ms. MacGregor had laughed at him and pointed out they both had work to do. Cal asked if he'd had anyone else "sit" to get their portrait taken, and Joseph told him about those sessions too. Before he ran down they were jolting their way back into the *Y Otra Cosa* yard.

"I'd sure like to see the others sometime," Cal said as he shut off the truck.

"You're welcome to come anytime. Right now if—" Joseph slid out of the truck but grabbed the door before he fell. "Ow!"

"What?" Cal ran around the truck, scanning the ground as he neared Joseph. "What's wrong?"

"My leg fell asleep." Way to be an idiot! Cal probably thought he got bit by a snake or something.

Cal snorted and took Joseph's arm. "If that's the worst you get from taking that driveway four times in one day, you're doing just fine." He helped Joseph limp towards the bunkhouse. Then Joseph realized it wasn't as dark as it probably should be, and he looked up. And stopped.

"Wow," he said softly. The clouds from earlier had moved off, and a hundred times the stars Joseph had ever seen lay spread above him. The sky

was lit nearly from horizon to horizon, and right above him was a great brilliant slash of stars and light like a river in the sky. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing.

“City boys,” Cal murmured with a chuckle. “That’s the Milky Way. Your home galaxy. You really never saw it before?”

“I—no. Not like that.” He’d seen an anemic blur, a fuzzy ribbon pointed out as the “amazing” Milky Way one late night when half the city was blacked out. Joseph had never seen this. The stars were so huge he swore they quivered just beyond arm’s reach, and the Milky Way... “Would you—is it all right if I just crawl up in the truck bed and stare for a bit?”

“Good a place as any for it.” Cal guided Joseph to the side of the truck and he grabbed onto it. “But if you fall asleep, you’ll likely wake to Sekhmet washing your face.”

“Reckon I’d survive that,” Joseph said and Cal grinned. “But I’ll try to avoid it.”

“G’night, Joseph. Thanks for your help.”

“Good night, Cal.”

Cal walked away. Joseph looked from him to the sky and he just couldn’t believe the difference. It was the same sky, only three states away, but...

Inside the house a light came on. Joseph happened to know that Cal’s bedroom was on the far side of the house. He looked and the light was on in Ms. MacGregor’s office. Maybe Cal was looking for a place to hang the picture?

Whatever. Joseph limped his way into his room for a blanket, grabbed his camera bag and tripod, and staggered back out to climb into the truck bed.

From the creek he could hear frogs and crickets. The air was finally cool, and the view... well, he didn’t even mind the mosquitoes as he played with settings and snapped away.

Some unknown time later Joseph thought he might have got some decent shots, and knew he’d stayed up way later than he should have because he was

yawning hard enough it hurt. He sighed and stretched, packed up his camera bag, then stood.

The light was still on in Ms. MacGregor's office. Through the window Joseph could see Cal sitting at her desk, his head on his hand as he leaned over something. Telling Cal to quit being stubborn and go to bed was not his job—not his *right*—so Joseph slung his camera bag over one shoulder and his blanket over the other, grabbed his tripod and went to his own bed.

Maybe Cal would sleep in tomorrow. No way Billie would be dragging Cal out of bed like she often did to Joseph, right?

Billie did drag Joseph out of bed in the morning—he didn't even set an alarm, intending to sleep through the last possible second—and prodded him towards the house for breakfast.

“Just what were you up to last night?” she asked the third time she prodded him to shamle faster. “If you don't move, all the sausages will be gone!”

“I finally saw the stars!” Joseph said. “Do you know in LA you can't see the Milky Way? I got some great shots I think. Couldn't look at them last night, of course. I can't wait to see what I got. I should read up on night photography too. I want to send my mom a good picture—she won't believe it!”

“That woke you up.” Billie laughed and poked him. “Better take your camera today, to wind you up when you're flagging.”

“I take the little one with me every day now.” Since Cal didn't mind it. Since that way Joseph got at least one new shot of Cal every day.

“Really?” Billie asked. “Boss lets you?”

“I don't take it out when I should be working, so he doesn't mind.”

“Uh huh.”

Ms. MacGregor's seat was empty, of course, but Cal was at breakfast. He told the hands about Ms. MacGregor's accident then handed the announcing over to Wobbie, who made a few comments about keeping the ranch going

and then handed out assignments. Cal looked tired, and he didn't eat much around the four cups of coffee he drank.

Once Joseph yawned and Cal caught his eye, shaking his head with a small smile.

They worked on another tank that day. The windmill was in good shape, but the tank itself needed repairing, so it took a while and involved more than a little wrestling with slime-covered bolts out of sight. Cal was quiet, and Joseph didn't try to draw him out.

It was past time to eat, according to Joseph's stomach, when Cal's phone rang. His hands were covered in green, but Cal managed to get his phone out and answered.

"Cal." He was silent a moment, then he smiled. "Good. That's good. I—no, I'm out at the Long Neck tank... Surely. I'll be there. Yep." He ended the call and grinned at Joseph. "Mom's out of surgery. Lyle says the doctor thinks everything went great."

"Excellent!"

"Yeah. Now—" Cal picked up the wrench, "let's get this contraption put together."

The thing didn't magically start cooperating, but eventually Joseph and Cal got it in working order. There was no convenient ghost-house with a porch to rest on after, so Cal drove home eating his lunch one-handed. Joseph had both hands to use on his sandwich, but it still wasn't easy eating while the truck bounced.

Back at the ranch Joseph was ready to work on Cal's list, but instead he was set free. Before he got out of the shower the truck was gone, with Cal running off to Amarillo. Should have expected that, but even hearing half the conversation, it hadn't occurred to Joseph that Cal would leave the ranch while there was still enough light to work.

Set unceremoniously adrift, Joseph took his camera to the barn. Billie was standing in the aisle, leaning over one of the stall doors. She looked up when she heard him.

“Come here,” she said softly, a brilliant smile on her face, “and see one of the best parts of this life.”

Joseph went. In the stall was one of the mares, standing over a little brown ball of damp fluff with a white blaze on its face. “She had her baby?” Joseph asked. Duh. But Billie didn’t laugh at him. The mare nuzzled the little one, licking its shoulder, and the little head bobbed, heavy on a long, hard-to-control neck.

“Called a foal. Mebbe twenty minutes ago,” Billie breathed. “He’s a mite tired, but any minute—” The foal lurched, sticking impossibly long legs out in front of him. “There he goes,” Billie said, as the foal lurched again, trying to get back legs under him but it didn’t quite work out. He rested a moment then lurched again, almost made it up, but didn’t. One more time and he was up, balanced on his wee stilt-legs, but none of his feet were under his body and he didn’t seem sure what to do about it.

“Almost there!” Joseph whispered. “Come on, little guy!”

“He’ll get there,” Billie promised. “Mom’s got the milk, and he’s a hungry boy.”

The little fuzzy tail was spinning furiously, trying to provide helicopter-like support, but the little feet slid and the baby horse fell back to the straw. Joseph gasped like the manly man he was.

“It’s good and deep,” Billie said, “so he can fall all he needs to.”

The little one, though, didn’t have any patience for this falling business. He lurched right back up and this time got his front feet under him, and a little buck of the back end brought his hind feet where they needed to be. The foal stood there a moment, tail spinning as he pondered the new situation.

“Mom,” Joseph muttered, “why are you all the way over there?”

Billie chuckled. The foal picked up a leg, wobbled on the three left, put it down in the same place.

“How do you humans balance on just two?” Billie breathed.

The foal put his head down and, in a wild flinging of legs, managed to propel himself to his mother’s side. Joseph laughed.

“Just like Cal! Puts his head down and charges on in.”

Billie snorted. “Even when he doesn’t have a clue what he’s doing, yep. That’s the wrong end of Momma, little man.”

The foal had fetched up against his mother’s front legs. He leaned on her and stretched his neck towards the milk, but her body was too long or his neck was too short or both. Mom stepped away and the foal staggered and fell, but he was back up in one lurch and this time he got his head in the right place. The little tail twirled twice as fast as before. Billie sighed.

“Seen it fifty times. Never gets old.”

“Awesome,” Joseph said, leaning on the stall door. His hip pressed against the camera in his pocket and he felt like an idiot. He could have got some great shots!

“You sweet on Cal?” Billie asked.

“I—”

“Just you, me, and the horses,” Billie said. “And none of us gonna say a word.”

“Yes!” Joseph said.

“There’s queers in Texas,” Billie said. “We mostly hide behind the steers.”

“Cal is—?”

“Didn’t say that,” Billie interrupted. “I dunno. Never saw it my place to ask. He used to drive into town on a Saturday night, takin’ girls to the drive-in or DQ. Town girls, what didn’t know beans about living on a full working ranch. Went round with Betsy Layton for a bit, folks was thinking he might marry her, but it never looked that way to me.” She shook her head. “Cal’s no fool. Betsy’s cute as a possum and sweet besides, but that girl is tendsome as they come. Sure as shootin’ she could never stand up to the *Y Otra Cosa*. Could never stand up to Cal neither—that boy needs reining in once in a while, and Betsy Layton hain’t got enough mean to knock him down when he needs it.”

“When we were in town,” Joseph said miserably, “Cal punched Steele Kennedy and told him to stay away from Betsy Layton.”

“Yet he ain’t gone to see her and he’s been home nigh on two weeks.” Billie tipped her hat back, wiped her arm across her forehead. “I’ll tell you what. Steele Kennedy most times needs a sock in the face. And Cal didn’t ’zactly date Betsy—he did his homework with her, danced with her at barn-raisings and what have you, but it was other girls he took to the drive-in. Not my place to say much of nothin’, but that’s all common knowledge. No blame to me if no one else sees what’s in front their face.”

“So... you’re saying you don’t know?”

“Didn’t I say that first?” Billie demanded. She took her hat off to fan herself. “Humid enough to drown a bullfrog today. Reckon we might could get rain by nightfall.” She smacked Joseph’s shoulder with the hat. “Don’t be lookin’ all down in the mouth. Want my advice? Wait on it. See what falls out. City-folk are always in such an all-fired hurry—you just met the man two weeks ago. You’re right here, Cal ain’t goin’ nowhere. Give it time.”

“Why do old people always say that?” Joseph asked, dodging away with a laugh as Billie swung at him harder. “You’d think you guys would know you’re running out of time!”

“Get over here, boy, I’ll learn you who’s out of time!”

Joseph laughed as he ran.

Outside, the heat and humidity, as well as the sunlight, hit like running into a sauna. Billie hadn’t chased him into the sun, so Joseph slowed to a walk and pondered options.

He could go play with the pictures he’d taken. Billie would loan him her Wi-Fi hotspot later so he could send a few to his mom. He could go nap, considering how tired he was, or would be once he settled somewhere for a bit. He could grab that history book Cal had loaned him and fall asleep over it, maybe on the porch swing? There someone would be sure to wake him up in time for supper.

Billie was right. It was a hot one, and the humidity didn't help. Especially as he couldn't go jump in the Pacific Ocean. Joseph thought of the little fan in his room, and of trying to sleep in stifling heat. He thought of all the things one of the hands might think it funny to do if they came on him sleeping on the porch when they'd been out working all afternoon. Maybe a nap wasn't such a great idea.

Well, there wasn't an ocean to jump in, but there was water. Joseph eyed the treetops sticking out of the canyon that held the creek. It would be cooler down there. And he could probably get some great shots, not to mention putting his feet in the water. Joseph popped into his room to change into shorts and the flip-flops he hadn't touched once since he took them out of his suitcase. He snatched up a towel and his camera, shoved his new hat on his head and headed out.

With every step down into the canyon, the air was a tiny bit cooler. Joseph took a few shots as he walked, but he was too eager to reach the water to linger.

When he reached the swimming hole, a soft *plop* told him he'd disturbed the denizens at least a little. The sun fell on half the pool so the tiny ripples on its surface cast dancing reflections on the canyon wall above it. Dragonflies flitted about, a cicada buzzed, and Joseph grinned and dropped his towel under the swing-tree.

He didn't mean to go swimming. He was tired and alone, and in the ocean if you were smart you didn't swim alone or tired, let alone both. So he was just going to stick his feet in the water and take some pictures. But eventually it dawned on Joseph that he was: one, completely alone and likely to stay that way since no one knew where he was and also everyone else was still working, and, two, next to a swimming hole that was deeper than his head for less than a third of its area and also contained no waves, sharks, or jellyfish to worry about.

Two minutes after those dual realizations, Joseph was skinny-dipping and it was glorious.

The hoped-for rain didn't come that night, but the clouds hung around so Joseph went to bed early instead of stargazing. He did notice as he was falling into bed that the light in Ms. MacGregor's study was on. Cal hadn't made it home for supper, so he must have come while Joseph was in the shower.

The day after Ms. MacGregor's surgery was hotter and more humid. Even over breakfast, tempers were short. Cal looked exhausted, and he snapped at Lafe when he hadn't even done anything but ask for more pancakes. Joseph was assigned to work with Cal again, and he resolved to keep his mouth shut as they rode out, no matter how Cal snapped at him.

Great dark clouds formed off in the distance as the day went on, mirroring the look on Cal's face at times. Joseph wanted to ask what the hell was wrong with him, but he didn't.

As soon as they got back to the ranch Cal ditched Joseph again. It was later in the afternoon, but still far earlier than Joseph was used to being done working, so he went looking, found Lupe busy in the kitchen, and asked her about something needing doing. Lupe sent him off with her youngest son to help clean "great-granddad's den" since her second-youngest was spending the summer in Mexico with his grandmother. Apparently a lot of the chores weren't getting done because of that.

Joseph followed the ten-year-old Emilio through the maze-like house. He had to love the layout, which must have grown organically as MacGregors found they needed more space. No one would actually design a house that sprawled like that, would they?

Joseph had seen the common dining room. He'd been in the hall between it and the side porch every day. He'd been in the kitchen once or twice. Those parts were, if not modern, at least updated a bit. The "family" portion of the house, though—Joseph couldn't believe all the stuff everywhere. It was like a museum, or a thrift store. In one corner stood a cigar-store wooden Indian, next to a knight's suit of armor. A case in a hall held a bunch of spooky looking dolls, and one entire wall in a room he passed was full of stained glass art.

Great-granddad's thing, Joseph found when Emilio at last led into the den, was saddles. Emilio told him all about Storm MacGregor and every single saddle as they cleaned and polished the collection.

When the work was done and Emilio dispatched back to his mother, Joseph went skinny-dipping again because he could.

On the third day after Ms. MacGregor's surgery, Joseph was assigned to work with Cal once more. The damn man had snapped at him twice before they even left the house, and Joseph's patience was already gone with everyone else's—up in the smoke that hung in the air from brush fires started by dry lightning from the damn clouds that kept forming all huge and photogenic, looming about threateningly, sounding off with occasional lightning and thunder, but *not raining*.

As they rode out of the paddock the heat was already oppressive, the air thick and hazy, and Cal snapped something about “seat like a sack of potatoes.” Joseph decided that if Cal MacGregor didn't straighten his ass up, he was going to learn that country boys weren't the only ones that knew how to sock a jerk in the face when he totally deserved it. Joseph was past caring that every line of Cal's face and body showed his exhaustion, that he knew damn well the man had barely slept in four days. Who was it making the damn stupid choice to work all day, visit his mom evenings, then spend all goddamn night in her office doing whatever the frick took so much time? Cal could leave one of those things out to sleep once in a while. He was the damn boss, wasn't like anyone was going to call him out for taking a fricking nap.

The job of the day apparently somehow involved a normal-looking truck tire, rim and all, tied on the back of a packhorse, on the end of a lead tied to Cal's saddle. Wobbie had said at breakfast that they needed to deal with a “pressure warning.” Joseph eyed the tire as he rode but he swallowed his questions. Cal was in a foul mood, and Joseph wasn't going to go asking for the waspish remarks.

New to Texas Joseph might be, but he knew the feeling of a storm coming as they rode into a gully and out of sight of human habitation. He hoped the

storm came soon, hoped it rained like no tomorrow, because both fires and tempers around the *Y Otra Cosa* needed a good dousing.

The ride was long, as usual. Joseph spent it riding behind his boss, where he could stare at Cal's butt. It improved his temper a bit.

The tire, it turned out, was for a "center-pivot irrigation system." As they came over a rise, Joseph saw big circles of green on a brown backdrop. Crop circles, for real. Each circle had a short tower in the middle, extending an arm to the edge of the field. Great metal arms, on wheels. Ah.

In the field Cal led the way into, one of the tires on the irrigator was nearly flat. The sensor gauge on the tire's valve, Cal explained in short, sharp sentences, had sent a warning to the system's hub, which had sent a warning to Wobbie's cell phone. If it went flat, it might damage the whole expensive system, so Cal was sent out right away to deal with it.

Middle of the plains, nothing but grass and sky to see, and Cal and Joseph were changing a tire.

Helping Sefu with cars, Joseph had changed many a tire over the years, but Cal didn't want to act like Joseph knew how to do anything, so Joseph let him change the damn tire and stood there watching as Cal fought with the lug nuts. Joseph knew the trick of standing on the lug wrench when the nuts wouldn't budge, but he didn't share it with Cal. He'd probably get snapped at for being right.

As the heat built, the clouds stacked up again. Joseph watched them grow in puffs and swirls as they advanced and Cal's temper deteriorated even further. *Come on, rain*, Joseph silently urged. Riding home in the rain would probably feel good, and if it rained hard enough it might keep Cal home until he accidentally took a damn nap.

When Cal got the tire off, he let Joseph help to set the new tire in place, but then he beat Joseph's grab for the lug wrench. Joseph stepped back with a shrug. Maybe enough work would tire Cal out so he'd sleep. And if he fell asleep on his horse, Cal the born cowboy certainly wouldn't fall off. Joseph grinned at the thought of leading Chisholm in circles while Cal napped, since the moment the horse stopped he'd probably wake up and...

And how the hell was he now grinning fondly at the back of Cal's head, when he'd wanted to slug the man ten minutes ago? When he'd be done with the damn tire already if he were allowed, but instead Cal kept dropping lug nuts and even managing to let the lug wrench slip off because he was tired and uncoordinated?

Whatever. A cool breeze blew out of the huge looming cloud, and Joseph lifted his face into it.

Cal dropped the lug wrench and stood so fast he almost fell over, whirling around to stare at the sky.

"What?" Joseph asked. "Rabid coyote? Invisible buffalo stampede? We're actually standing in a dry river bed and God just asked where's our ark?"

"Pick up the tools," Cal ordered, looking around. Joseph shrugged and bent to finish the job.

"Leave it!" Cal snapped as Joseph gave each nut a last turn. "Let's go!"

Joseph bundled the tools into the bag and clutched it to his chest as Cal grabbed him, twisting a hand in his shirt to haul him up. The old tire they left where Cal had dropped it, and that told Joseph this wasn't just about Cal's bad mood. He put some of his own power behind Cal dragging him out of the field. Cal took the tool bag and shoved it into the packhorse's saddlebag. Joseph looked around as he swung up on his mare, and he saw the funnel dropping from the giant cloud.

"Oh holy fuck."

"It's between us and the house," Cal said, turning Chisholm with a rein on his neck. "And it's coming right at us." He shoved his hat down on his head. "Don't fall off," he warned with a strained grin over his shoulder, then he prodded Chisholm and the horse took off. Joseph leaned low over Delilah's neck and urged her after.

It might be coming right at them, but that didn't mean it would stay on that course. Why were they running perpendicular to its path? Why not just run away as fast and far as they could go?

Because canyons maybe, blocking their escape route. Because wind patterns. Whatever. Cal knew Texas and Joseph didn't, so he raced after Cal and prayed that lack of sleep hadn't fatally screwed up Cal's judgment.

Trust Cal. Didn't he know yet to trust Cal?

Trust meant he didn't need to think. Freed from the need for rational thought, Joseph's mind turned to gibbering terror. He looked to his right and the funnel had almost dropped to the ground. He leaned lower and the saddle horn bit into his stomach but he thought Delilah went a little faster so he stayed there. He looked again and the funnel had receded a little, but Cal was looking too and not slowing, so Joseph and his horse thundered on.

Out of the blue he wished he could take pictures. God, the ride would be so amazing if there weren't a damn tornado coming! Delilah bunched and stretched under him, running like she was born to do. Ahead Cal moved with Chisholm like music, riding like *he* was born to do. It was beautiful, it was amazing—Joseph's hat lifted in the wind. He snatched it and his hair streamed behind him and suddenly it was cold. Why—

“Hail!” Cal yelled. “Put your hat on!”

Joseph put his hat on, shoved it down but it didn't—he took his hands off the reins and stuffed his hair under his hat then shoved the thing down, and it fit tighter and stayed on. He snatched up the reins.

Off to his right the white funnel touched down, and was dyed brown.

“That's MY goddamn dirt!” Cal yelled at it.

Delilah was wet with sweat. The packhorse ran in a jolting gait beside Joseph, the line between its halter and Cal's saddle taut. The wind roared and far off the sky was a stunning pale green, but under the cloud—

Oh God. Two funnels.

Ahead of him, Cal cut the packhorse loose. Chisholm leaped forward. Joseph put his arm on the saddle horn and leaned lower still and yelled to Delilah, and she ran harder. The packhorse fell farther behind with every step and Joseph spared a fleeting thought to hope she survived, but then he was back to hoping he and Cal survived.

Hail pelted Joseph with tiny sharp blows. The horses came thundering over a rise and Joseph saw the Nine Tails tank, and the ghost-house beyond it. Fucking Cal, genius!

“Go right, look for the cellar door!” Cal shouted over the screaming wind. The first funnel was nearly on them, wide and black with debris. Chisholm leaped the dead hedge and plunged to the left across the yard. Joseph yanked Delilah to the right, through a hole in the hedge. They hadn’t gone three running leaps before he spotted the slanted door opening down into the ground.

“Here!” he shouted, leaping off and dropping one rein. “Cal, it’s here!”

Locked! There was a fucking padlock on a chain! Son of a bitch, who abandoned his ranch forever but locked the goddamn cellar before he left?

Cal snatched Joseph behind him and shot at the chain. It wasn’t like the movies. It took three shots before the chain was in pieces. Three shots while the storm howled closer—Joseph leaped to pull the chain out, and Cal grabbed a door and dragged it upward.

“Hold this!” he ordered. Joseph held the door; Cal grabbed the horses’ reins. Chisholm snorted and tried to back away, but Cal talked to him too soft for Joseph to hear, and the little horse let himself be led down the steps. Delilah followed Chisholm. In half a moment Cal was back, helping Joseph fight the wind to pull the door down. Hail clattered on the wood, percussion under the wind section howling as they fought to bolt the doors in the dark. Finally the mechanism slid home.

“Here,” Cal said in the utter dark and roaring wind. His hand slid down Joseph’s arm to take his hand so Cal could lead him away from the doors, both of them bumping into things in blackness until Joseph ran into a horse’s rump. “Here,” Cal said again, leading Joseph between the heaving, sweat-slicked sides of the horses. “Farthest corner from the door, and pray however seems best to you.” He took his hand from Joseph’s. “Poor things,” he said. “The horses are too tuckered out to be scared.”

“Wish I was,” Joseph said. Cal’s hand came back to his arm and squeezed.

“Ain’t you glad I didn’t toss that dead coyote down here?” Cal asked.

Joseph laughed. Outside the wind shrieked over the rumbling sound of a freight train. Across the cellar the doors rattled, hammered by hail and under attack. Inches away, the man Joseph loved stood waiting to maybe die beside him, and Joseph still didn’t even know how Cal felt.

He took his hat off and, by feel, put it on the saddle horn of the horse next to him. Then he reached, guessing distances from the location and angle of Cal’s hand, and his fingers found hat. He plucked it off.

“Joseph, what—”

He followed the sound of Cal’s voice until his lips landed almost right on target, and Cal stopped talking. He just stood there while Joseph adjusted his aim, and then his arms went around Joseph and he became an active participant in the kiss.

Scratch that. He *took over* the kiss. Cal wrapped a fist in Joseph’s hair and kissed him hard, a desperate, needing, demanding kiss that set Joseph’s heart thundering in his ears, drowning out the storm above. Then he broke the kiss, caught Joseph’s head in his hands and his lips ghosted over Joseph’s cheek, across his forehead in tiny kisses so tender Joseph’s chest ached as well as places farther south. Cal kissed his eyelids and his mouth again and ran his hands over Joseph, molding Joseph’s body to his as he pressed their lips together. Joseph opened his mouth and Cal accepted the invitation, grabbing fistfuls of Joseph’s hair again as he deepened the kiss. All Cal’s focus, it felt like, everything that Cal was, was in that kiss, and Joseph was drowning. All he could do was cling to Cal’s strong, sexy body, holding them together with all his strength as Cal kissed his brains out.

Lightning lit the basement even through Joseph’s closed eyelids, but he was lost in Cal’s kiss.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cal was certain they—himself, Joseph, Chisholm and Delilah—were going to die. The twister looked strong as hell, and the house above them was not. So when Joseph kissed him, he went with it. Why not?

Went with it, hell. He went *for* it. He grabbed Joseph back and kissed him just how he'd been wanting to, driving back from Amarillo tired and feeling sorry for himself, his weary mind wandering to better ways a man might could spend a gorgeous Texas night. The wind roared and above them something thudded as the house started to come apart, and Cal kissed Joseph with all he had, instead of apologizing for being too damned focused on an effing tire to notice a twister coming up.

He couldn't stop the tornado tearing up the *Y Otra Cosa*. He couldn't get to the other hands, let alone protect them. So he put his all into kissing Joseph, distracting them both from the imminent death he also couldn't do a damn thing about.

Something slammed the house and everything shook. Joseph jumped. Cal held him tighter. The horses snorted and startled but they had nowhere to run. Dust rained down, but Cal just went on kissing Joseph. He hadn't had many kisses. By God, his last one would make up for that.

Cal knew he was in trouble when he heard the soft sounds of their kiss—when the wind had calmed enough he could hear it.

They were going to live. Now what?

He'd seen two funnels. Best to be sure it was safe before they tried the door. Cal let his hands frame Joseph's neck, fingers in that glorious hair and his thumbs on the pulse points in his throat, feeling Joseph's heart pound as Cal kissed him.

Then he felt guilty. He felt like a damned fool. Handy, seeing how he *was* a damned fool. He pulled out of the kiss and he had to push gently back to keep Joseph's mouth from following him.

“Cal...” Joseph said softly in the darkness. His fingers brushed Cal’s cheek.

“I’m sorry.” Cal would have stepped away but he didn’t have anywhere to go, pressed up between two terrified horses under a falling-down house. “That should never—”

“I started it,” Joseph said, laughter in his voice. “Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I shouldn’t have let it go on.” Cal managed to take his hands off Joseph, but he could still feel Joseph’s warmth so close to him. “I’m sorry. I can’t...”

“Can’t what? Kiss? You sure as hell can!”

“I can’t—the ranch needs me.”

“I didn’t ask you to run away with me, Cal. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m *on* the ranch, so that’s not much of an excuse for whatever you think you committed yourself to.”

Cal tried to gather up his thoughts, but they’d been all spun out everywhere by racing the tornado then kissing Joseph. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “We—better see if we can get out.”

“I guess we better,” Joseph said.

Cal stumbled his way back across the cellar, calling himself names in his head to avoid thinking what he’d see when he lifted the doors. When he found the doors with outstretched hands, he managed the bolt easily by himself, since the doors weren’t jumping around. He pushed one up, keeping his eyes on the task.

Sunlight smacked him in the face like there’d never been a storm. Cal slit his eyes against the brightness and went to bring the horses out. As he came up the stairs, his cell phone rang.

“Cal,” he answered. “Joseph’s with me and we’re safe. Has everyone checked in?”

“You’re the last,” Wobbie said. “Damn you, boy, don’t scare me like that! Why didn’t you answer?”

“We hid out in the cellar of the Nine Tails house,” Cal said. “Phone didn’t ring till we came out. How—” he still hadn’t looked around. “How bad is it, Wobbie?”

“Bad enough. Didn’t it go right over you? The house held?”

“The tornado dropped a tree on it,” Cal said. That must have been the crash. “Maybe that’s why the cellar wasn’t breached.”

“God’s got a use for you yet, son. Is the tank still there?”

Cal lifted his eyes, and shook his head. “No,” he told Wobbie. “Windmill, tank, pump—it’s all gone.”

“Meet me at the L-bend of Limp Creek,” Wobbie said. “We’ll ride the path and see where we stand. Right now I’ve got to call your mother.”

“Limp Creek,” Cal said. “I’ll be there.” He put the phone back in his pocket.

“How bad is it?” Joseph asked. Cal shook his head.

“No one’s dead,” he said. “Everything else we can rebuild.” Somehow. If the money could be found. If the herd wasn’t gone.

“Isn’t Limp Creek where the herd is?” Joseph asked, not knowing what he was saying so it wouldn’t be right for Cal to sock him one, even if he hadn’t been kissing the man senseless ten minutes ago.

God help him, he was such a damned fool.

“Can you find your way to the ranch?” Cal asked. “No reason for both of us to be out.” They were covered in dust, looked like a gentler version of a coal mining accident. The only part of Joseph that wasn’t dust-coated was his mouth.

Hell. Cal pulled out his bandana, wiped his own face. Offered it to Joseph.

“It’s... back where the tornado came from?” Joseph said, scrubbing at his own dust-coating. “Only farther on?”

“Better stick with me.” Cal took Chisholm’s reins and led the horse to the puddle that remained of the Nine Tails tank. “Don’t let her drink too much,” he told Joseph as he followed Cal’s lead. “We’ve still got a long ways to go.”

After a brief slurp for the horses, Cal mounted and so did Joseph. Cal put Chisholm at a trot, riding after the tornado. Joseph rode next to him, his eyes mostly on the tornado’s path. What was there to see? Dirt. Dirt, where there’d been grass an hour ago. Dirt and matchsticks, where there’d been an outlying stand of trees. Dirt and barbed wire slinky where there’d been a fence.

Cal couldn’t stop himself toting up the damage. He didn’t know the numbers—would they have to redrill the Nine Tails well? How much for a whole new windmill?—but his brain tried to add it up anyway. Too much, he knew that. It was all going to cost too much, and he’d waited too long to sell. The *Y Otra Cosa* in other hands, himself and Mom living on Lyle’s charity—

There was insurance. It’d never pay enough, but it might keep the ranch solvent if it paid fast enough. Needed to find the paperwork—he hadn’t thought to look for that yet, tied up in all the tangles of the ranch’s financial status. How much would it pay? What was the deductible? What was his best bet, where did he start to repair the damage?

The herd was most important. If the herd survived, the ranch might could. Start with the cattle, and work the priorities outwards. Water and grass and fencing. Shelter for the cattle. Then irrigation, so he’d have something to feed them come winter. Maybe sell off more than Mom had planned if beef prices stayed high, get more cash this year in return for having less to sell next year, and hope Providence didn’t throw anything else at the *Y Otra Cosa* for a few years.

Planning on luck was no plan at all.

“Are you sure we should be chasing the tornado?” Joseph asked. “I mean, that was a perfectly good cellar back there, and either the tornado will come back and we’ll want it, or it won’t and the ranch will still be here when the funnel’s completely gone. Right?”

“It’s not going to turn back,” Cal said. “Weather don’t work like that.”

“Really liked that cellar,” Joseph muttered soft enough maybe he thought Cal didn’t hear. Cal felt himself blush. Damned fool, letting himself take advantage of the situation. He didn’t want a boyfriend, had no time for a boyfriend, nor for the hassles of a *boyfriend* in Texas, and he should never have gambled on not surviving.

Cal MacGregor, sixth generation rancher, kissing a boy in rural Texas? Of *course* he was going to have to live with it.

“I went to a Pride parade once,” Joseph said. “Mostly because Sefu, my step-dad—well, mom’s boyfriend for the last fifteen years—told me I could be gay if I kept it quiet. Flamboyance isn’t my thing, but I bought a rainbow shirt just for the occasion.”

“I was out in Massachusetts,” Cal said. Emphasis on *was*. “Here only Mom and Lyle know. And it’s staying that way.”

Joseph chuckled. “I hate to tell you, but one more person figured it out a little while ago.”

Cal had a moment of panic, thinking he meant Billie or worse, Lafe, but then he realized Joseph meant himself, referring to the kiss.

“I don’t announce it,” Joseph said, “but my family and close friends know.”

“Sometimes in Massachusetts I thought I might ought to just wear a sign,” Cal said. “I got mighty weary of coming out, of folks being surprised. ‘Gay cowboy? What is this, Brokeback Mountain?’”

Joseph snorted. “At least you didn’t have random people explaining that you should be proud, since ‘two-spirit people’ are a long and honored tradition of Native Americans, seeing that we’re all one big homogenous group of noble savages.”

“I’m sorry I took advantage—”

“I kissed you,” Joseph said again. “I was half-expecting to get punched for it. I was just hoping the darkness would throw off your aim.”

“Don’t—” Cal began and stopped. He took a deep breath. “Just—forget it for me, will you? I thought we were going to die. I can’t—I’ve got too much on my plate.”

Joseph didn’t say anything for a time. Cal didn’t dare look at him.

“It was a kiss, Cal,” he said finally. “It was one hell of a kiss, yeah, but it was just a kiss, not a proposal of marriage. It barely even qualified as making out.”

“Joseph—”

“I’m not going to out you to the entire town of Vega, population twelve and three-quarters,” Joseph snapped. “I’m not going to out you to anybody. I’d think you’d know I’m not that much of an asshole, but since you don’t, I’ll say it. I’m not a MacGregor so I’m not sure what my word is worth, but it’s all I’ve got. Good enough?”

“I’m sorry,” Cal said yet again. He’d meant—he didn’t know what he’d meant. But he hadn’t meant to cast aspersions on Joseph’s character. He just needed Joseph to understand something he didn’t quite understand himself. He couldn’t go losing himself. The *Y Otra Cosa* needed him.

And he could get lost in Joseph all right. Cal felt certain he could spend a hundred years exploring Joseph and not come to the end of wanting to explore Joseph.

God help him.

Joseph couldn’t take it, couldn’t stand riding beside Cal, didn’t want to fall behind and stare at Cal’s backside. He prodded Delilah with his heels until she broke into a slow, reluctant run, and he passed Cal and left him behind. It wasn’t like he could get lost with the tornado’s trail wide as a house and right there.

Delilah was tired, though, and he didn’t want to get yelled at for abusing the horse. So when he was a good distance ahead of Cal, he reined her back down to a trot.

“You don’t let her slow down,” Cal had told him once. *“You tell her to. She’s got to know that you’re in charge.”*

Fucking Cal. Fucking stupid Joseph, for thinking it would be any different. Billie had warned him. Queers in Texas stayed in hiding.

That had not been the kiss of a man who wanted to hide. Fucking goddamn *Texas*.

Eventually Cal caught up to Joseph, but he didn’t say anything to Joseph and Joseph didn’t say anything to him.

The herd was fine, Wobbie told Cal when he and Joseph finally met up with Wobbie after an eternity of silent and distant riding next to each other. Wobbie reported that he’d gathered the hands and put them to riding the whole Limp Creek parcel to look for damaged fence or damaged animals. Cal nodded and turned Chisholm back to the tornado-wide path of destruction. Joseph followed, since he wasn’t told not to.

Riding the tornado trail took the rest of the day. Joseph had started taking pictures as the tornado moved away—just like Cal had said would happen—because as long as it was headed away it was awesome. Then he started taking pictures of the damage. Cal would need pictures for his insurance company, right? Might as well make himself useful, since he did work for the man.

Wobbie was unusually silent. Cal only spoke when he had to. Joseph rode out to the side of the others to get clear shots, and wondered if a funeral wouldn’t have been less somber.

“Whattaya reckon?” Cal said when they’d come to the point where the trail first began like the rampage of a giant that magically appeared out of nowhere. Which was pretty much what had happened.

Wobbie looked back the way they’d come and pursed his lips. “Two hunnerd thou,” he said. “And six months. Two hunnerd thousand in labor and materials, and six months to get her back to where she was.”

“Two hundred thousand,” Cal said like it choked him.

“We’ve had worse.” Wobbie slapped Cal on the arm, raising dust. “Go wash up. Call your momma—she don’t want to hear me sayin’ you’re fine, she

wants to hear you. Better yet, go see her. Let her see you. Tell her we got this. We've had worse."

Cal nodded and Chisholm started a slow plodding walk towards the windmill that was all Joseph could see of the ranch headquarters, the horse's head drooping as much as his rider's. Joseph tugged Delilah back from following. He was just a hand. He hadn't just taken a two hundred thousand dollar financial hit, and there was still light to work by.

"What should I do, Wobbie?" he asked as it started to rain. Joseph's eyes went to Cal, he dragged them back.

Wobbie shoved his hat back, looking Joseph over. "Shower quick," he said, "and get in that truck before Cal does. Only one tree betwixt here and Amarillo, and it don't need some sleep-addled cowboy wrapped 'round it."

"Got it." Joseph tugged Delilah's head around and prodded her into one more run.

When Joseph got in the truck, he was prepared for hours of waiting around. He had his laptop for photo editing, and two books in case he got bored with that. He had a jacket, some cash, change for the vending machine so he could buy a drink he wanted instead of what was handed him, and he had his cowboy boots on so he wasn't so short next to Lyle, and also so that if the man tried to pick on Cal, then Joseph could implant a Cal-bought boot so far in Lyle's ass he'd need a surgeon to get it out.

He thought maybe cowboy boots had narrow toes for just that reason.

Cal was so sunk in gloom that he didn't even fight when he got to the truck and found Joseph in the driver's seat. He just swore and got in, and before Joseph got the truck on the highway Cal was asleep.

By the time they got to Amarillo, Joseph was more than ready to give anyone who messed with Cal a taste of his new boots.

When Cal got out of the truck, though, Lyle MacGregor enfolded his little brother in a long hug, then dragged him off to the elevators. Joseph followed along until he could settle himself outside Ms. MacGregor's room. Lyle

wouldn't fight with Cal in front of her, he figured, so just outside was good. And if they didn't come out till visiting hours were over, he'd still be there to protect Cal from assaulting trees in his sleep on the drive home.

When Cal came out of his mother's room he didn't look any happier than he had going in. He was still avoiding looking at Joseph too. Joseph drove him home, Cal falling asleep before they got out of Amarillo and not waking till the truck stopped jolting in his front yard.

He didn't say good night, just muttered "thanks" and fled.

Before Joseph fell into bed, he looked out the window to see that the light was on in Ms. MacGregor's office.

At breakfast Joseph was assigned to ride with Wobbie for the first time since Cal came home. He was still in the truck before Cal that afternoon, without Wobbie's orders this time. Cal had a little more spark to him, but Joseph didn't argue and he also didn't budge, so he got to drive Cal to Amarillo again.

Over the next few days Cal went from despair to anger. He drove all the hands to work harder, and himself hardest of all. When the hands were done for the day he was still working, fixing the things around the ranch from his list. Joseph helped with everything he could, and still he was in the truck before Cal every night, though now Cal left right after dinner.

"Why?" Cal asked him the fifth night, after he woke up to the lights of Amarillo. "I've treated you like dirt."

Joseph shrugged as he drove. "You've got a lot on your plate," he said.

"Seems right foolish to put so much time into helping a man too stubborn and prideful to appreciate it."

"It's my time to waste."

Cal scrubbed at his face. "I—I'm not going to change my mind."

"Fuck off, Cal."

Ms. MacGregor had been moved to a "rehabilitative facility." Lyle no longer met Cal at the door—the facility was close to his office, so he visited at

lunch and brought his wife and kids after work, but they were all gone before Cal made it into town each night. At first Joseph stuck to waiting outside, until Ms. MacGregor caught sight of him and demanded he “get his rear inside and tell all about the ranch.” Now he came in with Cal, and provided corroboration and additional information as Cal told her everything about the day at the ranch.

He only had different information because he *still* was working with anyone but Cal every day. Joseph had come to dread the days he rode with Billie, since she kept trying to get the reason for the change out of him.

Joseph figured out ten minutes into the first visit that Ms. MacGregor thought Cal was hiding things from her. And Cal might be, and Joseph didn't want to start anything between them, so he was careful what he said and wondered if the family was auditioning for a reality show, with all the drama and secrets.

He was careful enough that even after his “fuck off” in the truck, Cal didn't take Joseph along when his mother dispatched him to have a talk with an “uppity” nurse. As soon as the door closed, though, she grabbed Joseph's arm and pulled herself and her wheelchair to him.

“Did something happen to Lupe?” she demanded.

“No.” Joseph shook his head. “She's fine. Why?”

“Consarn it.” Ms. MacGregor sat back. “Cal's getting skinnier,” she growled. “No reason he ought to be, with Lupe to feed him up.”

Damn. He'd thought he was imagining it. Joseph shrugged. “He's working pretty hard. I'd be surprised if all the hands aren't a bit skinnier, the way he works everyone.”

She ran an eye over him. “You're putting on weight. Muscle, I mean. Not quite the scrawny city boy I hired.”

Joseph grinned. “That city boy would be dead by now, ma'am.”

“You're not riding with Cal anymore? You two have a falling out?”

“No'm. I guess—” Joseph searched for, found an answer. “I guess he decided I know enough to be trusted out of his sight.”

“But you come with him every night.”

Joseph spread his hands. “I learned to drive in Los Angeles.”

She chuckled and leaned to grab his knee, pulling herself close again. Joseph remembered that she knew Cal was gay, and prayed—

“I’ll tell you what, Joseph,” she said. “I surely do hate jello.”

The door opened; she snatched her hand back. Cal came in to assure her that the nurse hadn’t meant to be patronizing and would stop. Ms. MacGregor snorted disbelief, but moved to quizzing Cal about the health and prospects of the kittens in the hayloft.

Apparently tabbies with big ears made better hunters.

The next night Cal woke up as Joseph turned into a Jack in the Box drive-through. Joseph ordered three milkshakes, strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate. He sneaked them into the facility in his empty laptop bag, and gave Ms. MacGregor her choice, the strawberry one. He took the vanilla. Cal eventually picked up the chocolate.

The night after that, Joseph pulled into the drive-through of a Dairy Queen, and though Cal insisted on paying, Joseph debated flavors with him long enough that Cal bought three sundaes just to make sure his mom would have a choice she liked.

He and Joseph ate the other two, of course.

On Saturday it was a week since the tornado, since the kiss in the cellar that turned Joseph’s knees to goo and set his libido on high. Sometimes while he worked beside Cal at the after-hours list, Joseph couldn’t look at Cal because he’d be remembering those hands on him, that body pressed against his, the thing Cal had done with his tongue, and if he didn’t look away quick and think of scorpions all around him or Shawn’s girlie mags or something, he’d be standing there with a hard-on making a tent in his jeans.

Sometimes Cal was avoiding his eyes too, but it had been a week and Joseph hadn’t brought up what happened once, so sometimes Cal relaxed and was just a stressed-out version of the man Joseph had fallen so damn hard for.

It almost pissed Joseph off. If the damn man had just gone on being an ass, he might have managed to fall back out of love.

Saturday night a truck came thumping into the yard as everyone poured out from dinner. The driver, a lean-faced man in a cowboy hat, leaned out the window and howled.

“Rip Tucker, what in Sam Hill are you doing?” Cal demanded.

“There’s a dance!” the cowboy shouted. “Didn’t no one tell you? Betsy Layton’s already there, lookin’ purty and a-lookin’ for you, Cal MacGregor!”

“Cripes, didn’t nobody tell the boss?” Billie demanded, wrapping an arm around Cal’s neck. “It’s a dance, Cal, and there’ll be girls and beer and Rip’s sworn off drinking so he’s the designated driver. Long as Gina don’t once mention the patriarchy, anyhow. She’s sworn she’ll talk with her fists if she needs to, so it oughtta be a great night!”

“You’re early, Rip! Let me get my dress!” Gina bolted for the bunkhouse, and half the hands ran after. Cal detached himself from Billie.

“I’m going to see Mom,” he said. “Joseph will represent the *Y Otra Cosa*.”

“I,” Joseph said, “don’t dance.”

“Killjoys, the both of you!” Rip called, climbing out of the truck’s window to sit on the door. “Cal, what do I tell Betsy? She’s set on filling up your dance card!”

“Tell her Mom’s got my dance card.”

“Mama’s boy!”

Cal flipped him off, walking to his own truck. Joseph outran him to get to the driver’s side.

Monday before supper Cal told Wobbie, who slipped the word to Joseph so he wouldn’t be sitting in the truck waiting all night, that his mom had called. Ms. MacGregor had taken her first round of physical therapy with a walker and she was “plumb tuckered out and ornery as a washed cat” so Cal wasn’t going into town.

Naturally that meant after supper Cal was back outside working on his “hole in the bucket” list in the golden evening.

“It’s like the song,” he told Joseph as they worked at moving cinder blocks onto the truck bed for transport to... something Cal wanted fixed with cinder blocks. Cal had kicked all the blocks, but he still wore gloves, so Joseph did too. “There’s a hole in the bucket, and the straw is too long to fix it, and the knife is too dull, and the stone is too dry...”

“Yeah, okay.” Joseph had heard the song. He’d also heard the dirty version, and he liked that one better. “And I get the stitch-in-time thing.” That was what Billie had told him about the jobs Cal was doing. They weren’t high-priority like what the hands worked at all day, but they’d save a lot of work later. “What I don’t get,” he said, swiping sweat off his forehead before he bent to pick up another block, “is how come—”

Something big, black, and hairy dropped out of the cinder block to land at his feet. It had eight legs. Joseph shouted and tossed the block.

“Holy shit, what the fuck, shoot it!”

Cal burst out laughing. Joseph scrambled into the truck bed as the thing reared up, waving two long hairy legs ominously. “Cal! Shoot it!”

“It’s just—” Cal gasped, still laughing, “—just a tarantula!”

“It’s a motherfucking spider the size of my face, will you goddamn shoot it? Sekhmet!” he yelled as the dog came over and Cal just kept laughing. “Sekhmet, kill!”

“Sekhmet, down.” Cal caught her collar as she approached the thing curiously. “Down.” The dog lay down, unworried, and Joseph decided he probably looked like an idiot standing on the truck, but the goddamn thing was *a spider as big as his face* so he stayed where he was.

Fucking Cal took off his hat and slid the brim under the spider. He cupped his gloved hand over the monster and walked off to put the thing down at the far corner of the fence behind the house.

“Lupe’s going to kill you for putting that thing in her garden!” Joseph warned.

“Lupe knows they eat bugs she doesn’t want around,” Cal said, coming back. “Like scorpions.” He walked to the truck and held out his hand, sweeping the hat back as he bowed. “Let down your hair, Rapunzel. The monster is vanquished.”

“Oh screw you,” Joseph growled, and jumped down. The work slowed after that, as he checked each and every block before he picked it up. Cal kept snickering but Joseph kept looking.

As they worked, the sun set into huge shelf-like clouds. Flaming orange and red shone around them. Joseph kept an eye on the glory when he wasn’t looking for spiders and thought about his camera but continued working. Finally Cal poked him.

“Quit wishing and go get your camera.”

Joseph tossed the block into the truck and darted for the bunkhouse. He took about twenty shots of the sunset, and then he wanted to add to the composition, so he begged Cal to stand in front of it. Cal grumbled, but Joseph said please and promised it would be great and they could get a print made for Cal’s mom and finally he did it. Joseph took three shots forcing the flash, then Cal turned his head, looking to see what Sekhmet was stalking over by the barn. He put his hand to his gun, and Joseph switched to burst shots because he knew if he could catch Cal’s silhouette just right he’d have utter gold.

He got maybe fifteen shots before Cal grumbled about time wasting and got back to hefting blocks. Joseph couldn’t wait to see what he had, but he worked until Cal declared it “too dark to see the spiders comin’.”

Asshole.

In his room Joseph put his camera on his desk, took two of the ibuprofen he’d learned to keep on hand, and went for a long hot shower, his second of the day. When he got back to his room, the light was on in Ms. MacGregor’s office. Joseph shook his head, wondering what the hell Cal was *doing* in there.

Didn’t matter. He had pictures. Too bad he hadn’t gotten a shot of the tarantula to scare his mom with, but hell, Wikipedia. Joseph hung up his towel,

threw on boxers and a clean T-shirt and eased into the bed. Getting his laptop and camera from the desk was an easy reach.

The black-silhouette shots were gorgeous. Three of them were just about perfect, in Joseph's humble opinion. He wondered if Cal would mind if he sent a print to his own mom as well as Cal's mom. And Playgirl magazine, and Gays on—

Yeah, he might be a bit overtired himself. Joseph turned to the shots where he'd forced the flash, so Cal's features were visible, though he stood in front of the sunset.

The pose wasn't as perfect as the others, but Joseph liked them better anyway. Cal looked almost relaxed, the smile lines by his eyes were back, and holy shit, the man was hot. Every bit of pudge had melted off him in the nearly a month since he came home. Every inch of him was built solid and made to work, and Joseph wanted those hands working on him, and that mouth, and... crap.

Joseph set aside the laptop and camera. He extended the magnetic telescoping tool intended for fishing dropped metal things out of engines, and flipped off the light. Closed it up and set it on the desk.

Goddamn. He wanted Cal to fuck him. Just bend him over something and fuck, Cal still in full cowboy getup and maybe wearing his gloves... and he wanted to fuck Cal. In the back of the truck, parked in the shade of what was left of the ghost-house, he wanted to fuck Cal with one leg over his shoulder and Cal grunting with every thrust and telling him to fuck harder because Cal was a tough little son of a bitch and he could take it. He wanted to suck Cal off in the tack room of the barn, wanted to watch Cal fall to pieces as Joseph fellated him. He wanted to make love to Cal down by the creek with a citronella candle nearby to protect sensitive bits from skeeters the size of Cessnas. He wanted to get in Cal's bed first like he'd got into the truck every night, and see if Cal tossed him out.

Light on the wall above his head told Joseph that Cal was still in Ms. MacGregor's office and suddenly more than anything else, Joseph wanted to go up there and smack Cal with his own hat. Then he'd lead Cal to bed, where

he'd forget all his fantasies just to hold Cal and make sure the damn stubborn man *slept*.

Cal flopped back in Mom's office chair and closed his eyes to the mess of papers around him. He'd never get it sorted. He'd messed it up so Mom wouldn't be able to find anything, and he already couldn't find anything, and he didn't damn well know what to do unless it was drop a match and claim the office on their insurance.

That he even thought that showed how stupid he was to even be in there. Cal opened his eyes on Wilf MacGregor's journals that would probably be first to go up, even before the modern papers. He turned his head to the pictures above the bay window, especially the one of Mom as a girl with her parents, her granddad, and her great-granddad, standing in front of the ranch house. Grandma stood sideways, showing the camera the small bump that was Uncle Skyller in her belly.

Cal let his eyes run down the row of pictures, naming names and going back in time. Konner MacGregor, Cal's own granddad. Taught Cal to rope, ride, shoot, and stand up solid. Storm MacGregor, great-granddad. He'd joined the navy, got all the way to Japan at the end of World War II, then come home to get the ranch shipshape. Zack MacGregor, great-great-granddad, fought in the trenches of World War I, came home and fought the Dust Bowl to hold the ranch through the Great Depression. His daddy, Kaden MacGregor, who was a trick rider for Buffalo Bill's Wild West and toured Europe, meeting two princesses and a pope before he came home to run the ranch. Wilf MacGregor, founder of the *Y Otra Cosa*, sitting for a painted portrait. The very last was Callan Mikel MacGregor, seven generations ago, Wilf's daddy. The last MacGregor not to call the *Y Otra Cosa* home until Lyle.

That was Lyle's choice. He'd always seen things differently.

Cal sat up and stacked all the bills on the desk into a pile, and put the plastic paperweight with a scorpion in it on top of the pile. Some were old and hopefully paid, others he knew weren't, so that pile might could sting. Now

the receipts—criminy, had Mom kept every receipt she got her hands on her whole life?

Didn't matter. He'd sort them later. Cal stuffed everything he could identify as a receipt into Great-Uncle Mikel's rucksack.

Talk about sorting. How did they even have space to walk, what with hanging onto everything that had ever been used by a MacGregor? It was a shock they didn't have a roomful of worn-out bandanas.

The loans. That paperwork was a pile all its own, and Cal hated to even touch it. The *Y Otra Cosa* had three loans against it, somehow. Cal had known about one, borrowing money to send him to school. The ranch counted as assets, so though they paid their taxes like everyone else, he hadn't qualified for financial aid. Why *had* he chosen Massachusetts, paying out-of-state tuition at a private college?

Because Lyle told him if he went too far he'd never come back, and Cal was determined to prove him wrong, that's why. And because he figured nobody was going to come visit him in Massachusetts, nohow. He could sow some wild oats with no one back home the wiser—only come to find out when Preston got grabby, Cal didn't have wild in him.

He'd thought. Joseph, though—Cal shook his head.

The other two loans, one taken out before he went to school and one after, Cal hadn't known about. The loans must be what Lyle knew. He hoped. Cal prayed there was nothing more to find.

All three loans were current when Mom went in the hospital, but if he paid Mom's bills so she kept getting care, he couldn't make the mortgage payments. And as soon as they fell behind—well, that's when the bills would really start mounting. That's when the creditors had a say in what he did or didn't do with the *Y Otra Cosa*.

To the right of the picture of Mom as a baby was the picture of Mom and Dad with Lyle three years old, and Mom standing sideways to show off Cal making her big.

Callan Stonewall, right there. Sixth generation of the *Y Otra Cosa* MacGregors. The one who lost the ranch, maybe.

Cal rubbed his face with both hands, wondering if he could make coffee without waking Lupe. There had to be a way to take care of Mom and still save the ranch. He just had to wake up enough to find it. Cal set the rest of the papers aside and turned on the computer.

Checking his email first was automatic. Cal deleted three from Preston unread. He almost deleted the one from Betsy, but just left it unopened.

Uh oh, insurance company. Cal knew they weren't going to send the settlement through email, but he dared for half a second to hope it was a "*pleasure doing business with you, the money is on the way*" email. Then he saw it wasn't.

"Your claim has been delayed." Hell! Cal skimmed the polite mouthings for the reason. *"We find we have no record on file of the purchase price of the property listed as 'destroyed', namely the Nine Tails tank and windmill."*

...they didn't have a receipt because the well was in place when the *Y Otra Cosa* bought out the Nine Tails ranch!

"Before restitution can be made, a correct estimation of damages must be obtained. Please acquire three (3) quotes from reputable businesses for the repairs required. Price quotes should be itemized and guaranteed for thirty days."

Cripes. There wasn't but one well drilling rig in Vega! And guaranteed? Any man who ever drilled a well knew better than to give guarantees. It was why digging for gold and drilling for oil were speculative ventures—you never knew what you'd find in the ground.

And who was supposed to pay to get three different companies out to the *Y Otra Cosa* to look at the well?

All right. All right. Cal had known their insurance agent since he was knee-high to the man. Mel Sheets wouldn't let the MacGregors get railroaded by paperwork. He'd just call Mel in the morning and—except the email said since

the Vega office had been closed, Cal would need to get his proofs to the Amarillo office by—

Cal closed the email and closed his eyes. Took a couple deep breaths and went on to one from Lyle, not that it was likely to be much better.

It was a forward.

Re: Is it worth my price?

Lyle—

Yes, that land is worth ten million easy, and Jack Snavelly knows it. He's seen all the maps and reports I have. He's maybe hoping the tornado on top of your ma's injury makes you all desperate. If Snavelly won't meet your price, you know I will. I'd have to put my grandmother on auction to make the payments, but the bat makes biscuits like horseshoes, so I'd not regret it. You want to go with a man who's trying to cheat you, or the man you know will treat you fair and square?

Let me know. I can have papers and a \$750,000 down payment ready in a week.

Tom Bellamy

Cal sat blinking at the screen. Ten million. Ten million *dollars*. He'd known the ranch was worth a pile, but he'd never tried to nail a figure to it.

Ten million dollars. For the land he walked every day, had ridden end to end, that he knew backwards and forwards. The land where he was born, and four generations of MacGregors before him.

Ten million dollars. It wasn't enough, anywhere near enough, could never be enough for the *Y Otra Cosa*. But did he even have a choice? Between the hospital and the tornado and the insurance company and three mortgages...

Cal closed his eyes, took a deep breath before he passed out cold on the floor. It wasn't enough air, so he took a few more.

He had two weeks before the first of the mortgage payments was due. If he could get the insurance settlement that fast, he could buy some time. Make payments to the hospital, pay the banks instead of getting the well fixed—he

could work around the Nine Tails pasture if he had to, till he could scrape money together to get the well redrilled. Then get a solar pump. Jenny McMurphy swore by them, especially seeing how the federal government might could hand out a grant that'd cover half the cost.

The insurance settlement. That was the answer. For that he had to prove the damages. He had poor Miranda's paperwork, the pedigree of the packhorse he'd cut loose to save himself and Joseph, Chisholm and Delilah. He had the receipt for the irrigation system. He needed to prove the Nine Tails well had existed, and figure out how to get the costs quoted and itemized.

Joseph. He'd been taking pictures the whole afternoon they rode the damage trail, snapping away till Cal might could have knocked him off his horse just from sheer ornery. All the documentation Cal needed, maybe, was in that little camera of his. Time-stamped, maybe, because nowadays cameras did that. Maybe even with the GPS coordinates in the file, 'cause cameras did that too now.

Joseph. Cal chuckled, thinking of the city boy meeting a country spider, and stuck his hat on. Joseph.

Once upon a time Joseph had been hard to wake up, but once you got enough bad news in the middle of the night... two raps on his door and he was out of bed, lurching to answer.

His alarm clock was by the door. The red numbers read three twenty-four a.m. Someone must have died. Joseph flicked the light on and snatched open the door. He squinted at Cal standing outside, that ghastly smile on his face and his hat in his hands. He was as tall as Joseph—wearing his boots when Joseph was barefoot. Had he even gone to bed?

"I'm so sorry," Cal said, looking away. "I didn't notice till I'd knocked that your light was off."

"Cal..." No one was dead. He wouldn't be apologizing for knocking if someone had died. "Cal, what the fuck? It's three in the morning!"

Now Cal looked at him, eyes wide like he didn't know. Damn man probably didn't. Over his shoulder, the light was *still* on in Ms. MacGregor's office.

"This is getting fucking ridiculous," Joseph growled. He grabbed Cal's arm and dragged him in, closed the door behind him. "This needs to stop," he told Cal. "You need some fucking sleep."

Cal put his hat on, shoved it down. "Don't think—"

"When's the last time you slept four hours in a row?" Joseph demanded.

"How's that any of your business?"

"You knocked on my door at three a.m. and made it my business."

Cal shook his head. "I was thinking of other things. I'm sorry. I'll see myself out." He started to turn but Joseph grabbed handfuls of his shirt and shook him.

"Stop it," he ordered again. "You're killing yourself, damn it, for what?"

Cal just glared at him. Joseph wanted to punch him, wanted to kiss him, wanted to toss him in the horse trough or toss him into bed. His bed, Cal's bed, any bed, and sit on him till he slept. And then snuggle him in his sleep.

"You stubborn ass," he said softly. "The ranch is *fine*. Anyone can see you're taking the best care of it anyone could, so stop killing yourself—" He stopped talking. Cal had that look in his eyes, that told him he was missing something. He wasn't getting it. "What?" he asked. "What is it? Is it your mom?"

"I need—" Cal stopped, licked his lips. "Joseph. I need the pictures. The ones you took of the storm damage."

"You came to me at three in the morning for *pictures*?"

"I've got—" Cal grabbed his elbow, squeezed. "Please. I've got to prove the damage. I need the pictures."

"Goddammit, Cal, you've lost your mind. You need *sleep*. Get the damn pictures in the morning!"

Cal went back to silent glaring. Joseph shook him again.

“You don’t know,” he growled. “You don’t have any idea how damn much I want to kiss you right now, or punch—”

Cal grabbed Joseph’s arms and spun, slamming Joseph’s back into the door. He stepped close, holding Joseph’s arms at his sides. “Ya think?” he breathed, his mouth so close to Joseph’s he could feel the puff of air as Cal spoke softly. “You think I don’t know,” he said, his breath warm on Joseph’s lips, “when you’re standin’ there all tousled and near naked?”

Oh God. “*Touch me,*” Joseph breathed, begged, ordered. Cal let go, stepped back. He looked for an escape route, but he’d put Joseph across the only door.

“I—sorry. I’m sorry. I just—the pictures. Please. And I’ll go.”

“What are you so afraid of?” Joseph demanded, not moving. “Thought your name was Callan, not Chickenshit.”

Cal made a fist and Joseph knew he was about to get his ass kicked but good. Then Cal buried his face in his hands.

“I like to have murdered you just now,” he said through them.

“Thanks for not.” Joseph took the step to reach Cal and pulled him into his arms. “Pretend I’m a friend. Lean on me.”

Cal leaned. Just a little, just resting his forehead on Joseph’s shoulder. Joseph stroked Cal’s hair and told him he hadn’t meant it—he’d never met a man as brave as Cal. Brave and smart and damn, but he knew *everything*. Determined, strong, funny... Cal’s hands dropped from his face, he buried it in Joseph’s shoulder as his arms went around Joseph and he held on. Joseph kept talking, telling Cal just how amazing he was. Eventually Cal chuckled.

“It’s like the cellar again,” he said against Joseph’s shoulder. “Here we are, we’re not dead—I didn’t go stark raving mad like for a moment I thought I might could—now how do I get out of this?”

Joseph smiled and stroked Cal’s hair again. “We’re friends,” he said. “Right? Even the mighty Cal MacGregor can lean on a friend once in a while.”

Cal lifted his head. “You go rattling on,” he said, “and I might get to thinkin’ I’m something special.” He laughed. “That’s not good for nobody.”

“You’re kidding, right?” But he wasn’t. Joseph took Cal’s face in his hands and the friend vibe between them vanished into intensity. “Cal, you’re *amazing*.”

“I’m stubborn as hell,” Cal said. Not like he was arguing. Like Joseph might somehow have missed noticing. “And selfish. And sometimes I’m just an embarrassment.”

“Cal...” Joseph shook his head, thinking of flowers and a blue teddy bear. “Whoever told you that didn’t want *you*. He wanted—wanted a pet cowboy or something.”

“I talk like a hick.”

“You talk like Cal MacGregor. It’s adorable.”

“I’m stubborn as two mules.”

“You get shit done. And I’ve watched you busting ass all over the place to take care of every person and animal on this ranch and a few off it, so don’t try to tell me you’re selfish.” Joseph tilted Cal’s head down with his hands, so he could kiss Cal’s forehead. “Any man with a brain at all would be proud to call you his. But right now I’m just calling you ‘friend’, all right? Come here.” He tugged Cal the half step to his bed. “I don’t trust you to go to bed if I send you back, since you’re stubborn. So I’m going to see to it you sleep.”

“Joseph, that bed ain’t wide enough for two rattlesnakes spoonin’.”

“We’re skinny.” Joseph put Cal’s hat on his dresser, then threw himself down and tugged Cal’s hand till he lay down on the very edge. Joseph wrapped his arms around and pulled him closer.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Don’t think. Trust me, and go to sleep.” He picked up the telescoping magnetic tool and flipped the light switch off.

“I still got my boots on!” Cal protested.

“You sleep just fine in the truck with them on.” From his experience driving, Joseph figured Cal would be asleep two minutes after he quit arguing. Joseph, though, wouldn’t get any more sleep. He was fine with that. He could spend three hours enjoying the feel of Cal against him, no problem.

As they lay in the dark, though, Cal grew more tense, not less. Joseph wasn't doing anything but playing with his hair in what he hoped was a soothing way, so it wasn't his fault.

"What is it?" he finally asked. Cal twitched.

"There's three mortgages on the ranch," he said like it had been torn out of him through use of torture. "What with Mom's bills and the tornado—it could wreck the *Y Otra Cosa*. I say could—that's if Mom's bills stop now. And they won't, unless I bring her home to get more crippled till she dies. The insurance settlement might could get me some breathing room, but the insurance company wants proof there ever was a Nine Tails well before they pay, proof of what'd cost to fix it—and Lyle's got some Amarillo oilman offering ten million dollars if we sell out, check in hand in a week."

Joseph goggled at *ten million dollars!* but that wasn't the important part here, so he shook it off. "You don't want to sell," he said. "So don't."

"I can't let Mom die young and crippled to save the ranch, Joseph. She says she's fine, but I reckon the doctor knows better, and he says she needs the treatment." Now, finally, it came flowing out of Cal, everything he'd been keeping bottled up while he worked himself nearly to death. "If I can't make the mortgage payments, they'll take the land and sell it out from under me. If I pay Mom's bills, I can't make the mortgage payments. If I pay the mortgage, Mom's care ends."

"Cal..." Joseph sighed, stroking Cal's hair. "I don't know her as well as you do, obviously. But I think losing the ranch would kill her. Can you see her retired? Puttering around tending rosebushes and cats? You and her are just alike—you need to be doing. If you put her somewhere nice and safe where there's nothing that needs doing, she will waste away and die just like you would. Tell me I'm wrong if you can."

"You ain't wrong," Cal admitted. "So I got to save both her and the ranch, only I can't. It's one or the other, so I'll lose both—"

Oh hell. Joseph squeezed Cal. "So sell something other than the ranch."

"It's months still to the roundup. The calves need to grow a mite."

“Sell something else.”

“Like what? The truck? The thing’s older than I am and not worth insuring more’n liability.”

“Cal...” Well, yeah. *He* didn’t know he lived in a museum. Cal just knew he lived with everything all his relatives had left behind. Like Mom with Great-Aunt Mina’s ugly porcelain dalmatians that turned out to be worth a hundred bucks. “That gun you carry,” Joseph said. “Your four-times great granddaddy’s. The book you loaned me says it’s one of the first revolvers Colt made. That’s got to be worth something.”

“I can’t sell—”

“There’s got to be stuff up there that you could. Or use it as collateral, get a loan on better terms than the others, to pay off the others.” Joseph tugged his laptop off his desk and woke it up, scrabbled a bit for the book, also on the desk. The laptop woke up to one of the pictures of Cal, of course, Cal’s face lighting Cal’s face in the dark room. “Colt Single Action Army,” Joseph read then typed.

The first link was Wikipedia. Joseph skimmed the article, pointed to the line about the inspector’s stamp that made the gun “most prized by collectors.” He searched again, clicking links until he came to an auction posting, and lay blinking at it.

“Three hundred and fifty thousand?” Cal breathed.

“See what you get for sharing your troubles?” Joseph said, trying not to sound blown away by what he’d found. That would buy Mom a house. Two houses! “You get *help*.” Joseph put the book back on the desk, closed the laptop and put it back. In the darkness he kissed the top of Cal’s head.

“So. Sleep. Tomorrow’s another day, Scarlett, and the land will still be yours.”

Cal shot coyotes with a gun worth three hundred and fifty thousand dollars?

Cal lay with his head pressed against Joseph's chest, listening to his slow heartbeat and so at peace he didn't know what to think. The ranch was safe, or would be. Mom was healing. Joseph thought he was amazing.

Maybe he could keep it that way. "What—" Cal breathed, "Joseph, if you could change one thing 'bout me, what would it be?"

"I'd make you be asleep," Joseph whispered. His hand closed in Cal's hair, tugging gently. "Sleep, Cal. Even you need rest sometimes."

Even you. The mighty Cal. Joseph worked beside him all day and into the night, drove him to town and back and never asked for nothing and still thought he was amazing. Cal reckoned he might ought to quit looking a gift horse in the mouth, but he had to ask one more question.

"If I was to ask you—sometime, not now—if I was to ask you to be my boyfriend, what would you be expecting?"

In the dim light from the house, he could see Joseph grin.

"Well," he said after a minute, "I guess I'd expect to get to kiss you a lot. I wouldn't expect to work with you all the time, but I'd want to at least sometimes. I wouldn't expect you to take me to the drive-in, but going swimming would be fun. I suppose I'd just follow your lead on how out we should be. I'd think we'd be fine on the ranch, but some people like discussing everyone else's business, so I don't know."

"You wouldn't never want to go on dates? Go to parties?"

"Not... really?" Joseph said slowly, like he was giving it thought. "I think... well, not parties, at least not often, unless you wanted. If I were planning a date with you, I'd want to—oh, take the horses and a picnic lunch somewhere you haven't shown me yet. Or maybe stargazing. Or... petting kittens, or something. You and me, not you, me, and a hundred strangers."

"That sounds... awful nice," Cal said, wriggling a little, careful not to kick Joseph, until he could press his face into Joseph's shoulder, that long shiny hair brushing his forehead. "I got one heck of a temper," he said softly. "You sure you wouldn't mind it?"

Joseph laughed. “If I were to give you a tribal name,” he said, “it would be Hidden Badger. All fluffy and adorable until somebody messes with you, then you kind of hunker down and get mean.” He squeezed Cal. “I love when you shove your hat down and get ornery. It’s sexy.”

Sexy. Not childish.

“Go to sleep,” Joseph breathed, resting his cheek on Cal’s head. Cal breathed deep and let it out and went limp.

It was a relief.

Joseph had thought he wouldn’t sleep then he woke to the soft chimes of his phone’s text alert. Cal slept sprawled across his chest, mouth open and adorable, and outside the first tentative light of dawn had come. Joseph scrubbed at his face and reached for the phone before it sounded again and woke Cal.

“*If you two aren’t ready to go public, you’d best roust Cal out,*” the text from Billie read. “*Lupe’ll be up any minute.*”

Oh *shit*. She must have heard the conversation on the porch, heard Cal come in but not leave—shit!

But she’d woke him up so no one else would know. Wonderful Billie! Joseph would thank her later. Now he brushed Cal’s cheek with the back of his hand.

Cal’s eyelids fluttered and he opened his eyes. He smiled. “Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey,” Joseph said, smiling stupidly back. He so didn’t want to, but—“It’s morning. If you don’t want—”

“Cripes!” Cal rolled out of the bed and onto the floor. He was up before Joseph could ask if he was all right, and headed for the door. He came back, though, as Joseph sat up, and leaned to kiss Joseph quickly. Then he snatched his hat and slipped out the door.

Joseph sat on his bed grinning at his door. Then he fell back into his bed and fell back to sleep with a smile on his face, and Billie had to drag him to breakfast again.

As the newest addition to what was essentially a large family, Joseph had never sat near the MacGregors during meals. That morning he was grateful for the arrangement, as it made it easier to avoid looking at Cal. Joseph got by on sneaked glances, doing his best not to meet Cal's eyes for fear of getting lost in them.

It was probably for the best that once again Wobbie announced Joseph wasn't assigned to work with Cal, but it was disappointing.

Not disappointing, though, was the way Cal smiled and ate, two things he hadn't been doing while he drank too much coffee at breakfast lately. Billie sat across from Joseph. She glanced at Joseph meaningfully, cast her eyes at Cal, and grinned. Joseph reminded himself she'd saved his butt twice just that morning, and didn't kick her under the table.

Joseph worked with Juan Carlos that day, fixing tornado-damaged fence and learning survival Spanish. For once, his work-fast-to-get-back-to-Cal method failed him, since the job was more than a day's worth. Working faster just meant he got more tired, but eventually Juan Carlos said they'd done enough and they rode back to the ranch. To ranch headquarters. In an entire day of riding and fencing, they'd never *left* the ranch. Joseph still couldn't quite wrap his mind around it. He wondered what it looked like from the air, like a helicopter tour he'd once taken over LA. Ooh, keep that in mind as a present for Cal—he bet Cal would love seeing the *Y Otra Cosa* from the air. Joseph thought about helicopters and noise, about small planes and altitude, and wondered if Vega had a hot air balloon tour service. Not frakking likely, of course, but he could dream of taking Cal up for one of those champagne brunches he'd seen advertised back home.

Cal was sitting on the edge of the porch brushing Sekhmet as Joseph and Juan Carlos rode into the yard. Cal looked up and greeted them both, but when Juan Carlos got down to pump water into the trough, Cal gave Joseph a bigger

smile just for him. Joseph grinned back and looked away, got down to pick up the reins of both horses so they knew it was okay to drink.

Joseph had never been willing to stay in the closet, not for any reason or any person. But this was different. It wasn't himself he was hiding, it was a sweet secret romance. He smiled at Cal from between the horses and Cal caught it, looking back to his work with a grin. Yeah. He could enjoy a secret held with Cal.

And Billie. She seemed to be keeping their secret, though. Her knowing took some of the fun out of it, but Joseph was not going to complain of having a protector. Far too many times in the past he'd needed one.

Juan Carlos took his reins from Joseph's distracted hands—at least he wasn't staring at Cal while distracted!—and led Athena into the barn. Joseph gave Cal one more glance and followed. He hurried through Delilah's care, but she'd mostly just stood around while Joseph worked so she wasn't in great need of attention. He put her in her stall and headed for the porch.

Cal had a brush ready. "Take Athos," he said. "He's a big puppy, but he won't take it personal if you catch a mat too hard."

"Got it." Joseph sat next to Cal and called Athos over. "Have I mentioned I love the names of all the animals?"

"It's a new generation," Cal said. "In Granddad's day they had names like Blackie, Brownie, Blaze and Star."

Joseph snorted. Cal showed him how to brush the dog, keeping an eye out for ticks. "Normally Lupe's next-youngest does this," Cal said, "but he's—"

"Visiting his grandmother this summer. I know. The other day I was dusting saddles in his place."

Cal chuckled. "Dust's an infernal nuisance round these parts," he said. "How was it out there today?"

Coming home to the man he loved asking about his day... Joseph thought he just might have found heaven, but he kept brushing around Athos' attempts to wash his face. "Saw a red-tailed hawk I think. Might have got some good shots. It's different working with anybody else—I feel like I have to be

careful, where I know you'll tell me when I'm doing too much sightseeing and not enough working."

"Try not to worry on it," Cal said. "We—me, Mom, Wobbie—know we work you all seven days a week most weeks, and most days over eight hours. Ain't going to complain if you take an hour to pull up a comfy bit of shade and have a siesta. Or spend the time other ways."

"Now I'm thinking of the next time you and I work together and those other ways," Joseph said softly.

Cal looked down at Sekhmet, but Joseph could see him grinning under his hat.

"How was your day?" he asked Cal.

"Irritatin'." Cal lifted a mat of black fur from Sekhmet's back, brushing it carefully from the bottom to detangle it. "Lafe."

"Ah." Yeah, Joseph could see how that would be. "Why not tell Wobbie not to—" he stopped, looked up. The truck sat in the yard. It was a Tuesday afternoon. Why was he hearing an engine?

"What—" Cal began, then he heard it too. He stood on the porch, looking off towards the highway. "Lyle," he grumbled, trying to dust dog hair off his clothes.

"Change if it matters," Joseph suggested.

"It don't." Cal took his hat off and knocked it on the post of the porch and dust fell from it. He ran his fingers through his hair and put his hat back on. Then he pushed it down hard.

Joseph bent his head over Athos and grinned. He kept brushing, in the hopes of having a front-row seat for whatever was about to happen. He even had the right boots on, though Cal didn't look like he'd need rescuing anymore.

As Cal waited for the truck, Billie and Bart rode up to the barn. Bart tapped his hat, but Billie looked from Cal to Joseph and grinned. His face safely hidden from Cal by his hat, Joseph stuck his tongue out at her.

A huge shiny red—or what had been shiny red, before it met the yellow dust of the driveway—pickup drove into the yard. It was one with a full-sized backseat, and it looked like it had never been used for anything but driving around. As a Californian Joseph was born a tree hugger, and he hated just-for-show trucks on principle. Cal might have felt the same, his lip curled.

Lyle climbed out of the truck dressed just like Cal from hat to boots except he hadn't done hard physical labor in his clothes. Cal went to meet him. Lyle laughed.

“Here you come, walking all stiff-legged for a fight!” He opened the back door of the truck. “Girls, say howdy to Uncle Cal.”

Cal stopped walking. Two little girls—not so little, maybe around ten—climbed down from the truck, both in cute sundresses and hats.

“Cal! Cal! Uncle Cal!”

“Now hold up!” Cal said, putting out his hands. “I'm all covered in dirt and dog hair!”

The taller girl stopped. The smaller tackled Cal's waist in a hug then climbed him like a tree. “Cal!”

“Leandra!” Cal kissed her cheek and set her on his shoulder. The girl wrapped around his head and Cal beamed as he leaned down to kiss the older girl's cheek, and Joseph melted. *This*. Cal and kids. He wanted *this*, so bad it hurt.

Billie and Bart came out of the barn as Lyle walked around the truck to help a woman in a smart red suit out of the other side. Cal still had Leandra wrapped around his neck like a face-hugger alien, but he went to kiss the woman's cheek until she stopped him with a hand up.

“We'll take it as expressed,” she said. She was blonde and immaculate, with a slim leather briefcase. Joseph imagined she was a shark in the boardroom. “Cal, we brought you some options.”

Joseph saw it. Cal stiffened, and the little girl nuzzled his cheek, and he softened again. Damn Lyle, had he found an advantage?

Well. That could be dealt with.

“If you’re going to talk business,” Joseph said, “the girls might want to check out the kittens in the barn. They’re about a month old, and awful cute.”

“Kittens!” both girls squealed. The little one leaped out of Cal’s arms, he caught her midair and set her down, and both ran for the barn. Lyle and the woman stared at Joseph like he’d been horribly rude, listening to a loud conversation held less than twenty feet away.

“Come on,” Billie said to the girls, holding out her hands as Bart dodged away from the incoming children. “I’ll show you.”

“Don’t let ’em get rumped, Billie!” Lyle called.

“Don’t dress ’em up frilly for the ranch!” Billie answered. She and the girls disappeared into the barn.

“Lyle—” the woman began.

“We’ll get them new dresses,” Lyle said. “Cal, I’m sure Enola would like to sit down.”

“Ain’t you always reminding me it’s your house same as mine?” Cal demanded, but he led the way to the porch.

“They’re going to want kittens,” Enola warned Lyle as she turned the cushion over in the rocking chair Lupe liked to sit in. The bottom of the cushion was clean enough it seemed; she sat down.

“We’ve got room.” Lyle lowered his large self to the porch swing, leaving Cal to stand, sit next to him, or sit on the porch itself. “Joseph, nice to see you. Want to take that somewhere else?”

“He’s fine where he is,” Cal said, leaning his shoulder on a porch post between Joseph and the visitors. “Lyle, you don’t get to show up once in a blue moon and start tellin’ the hands what to do.”

“This is family,” Lyle said.

“And he’s already shown he feels qualified to offer opinions,” Enola said.

“He offered a kindness,” Cal said. “If he’s offended your principles, I’m mighty sorry.”

Joseph bent his head over the dog and brushed. He got a face-washing as reward.

Cal knew he was being stubborn, and he didn't care. The more the better. Lyle thought he'd just drive up in his fancy truck with his pretty wife and great kids and start treating Joseph like hired help? Hell no.

"Fine." Enola reached into her briefcase. "Maybe if all the hands know the situation, you'll think about their interests too. Now. I've been looking into your options, since Lyle tells me you won't. He set up online accounts when Mother Jess was laid up last time, so we know where things stand."

Cal bristled, but he let her talk. Enola went on, rustling papers and explaining options ranging from selling most of the ranch to selling all of it, expounding on how Cal would be free to do whatever he wanted. He'd be young and rich and "not tied down." She didn't come out and say he could go somewhere more gay friendly, but Cal heard it and he guessed Joseph did too.

Joseph hadn't barely blinked at ten million, and he thought Cal would die off the *Y Otra Cosa*. Not that Cal had to consider Joseph's future, but—

"What's your suggestion if I want to stay right where I am?" Cal demanded. "Doin' what I'm doin'?"

Lyle took off his hat and fanned himself with it. He glanced at Joseph who was bent over Athos like it took all his concentration to brush a dog, then at Cal. Like he knew. "If the *Y Otra Cosa* weathers the storm?" he asked. "Well, then, I imagine you'd have to go ahead and marry Betsy Layton so as to raise up some more MacGregors, right?"

Athos yipped as maybe Joseph jerked the brush in a tender spot. Cal took his hat off, didn't hit Lyle with it, put it back on. Shoved it down.

"I reckon," he said, "that I'll run this ranch how I like and with whomever I like, till they plant me head down to keep me in the ground. You want to go against me? Bring on your lawyers. I'll make this porch my goddamn Alamo." He lifted his hat. "Sorry 'bout my language, Enola." He shoved it back down on his head.

“Cal—” Enola began.

Cal folded his arms and set his jaw just the way Lyle and his mom hated. Like Joseph said he liked. Lyle looked at Enola and shook his head.

“Momma! Momma!” The girls came running back from the barn, Skyla with a kitten in her arms outrunning Leandra who had to run back and pick up her hat. “Momma, look how pretty!” Skyla held up the orange kitten. “Can I have him?”

“You put him back!” Leandra caught up and smacked her sister with her hat. “Billie said he’s too young to leave his momma!”

“If he’s a month old, Billie’s right,” Lyle said. “Give him cuddles, Skyla, and ask Billie to put him back. It’s about time to go.”

“I’m staying,” Leandra announced as Billie came forward to take the kitten.

“You’re not,” Enola snapped. “Go get in the truck.”

“Serenity’s momma died,” Leandra said. “She’s lonely. I fed her with a bottle. I’m going to stay and take care of her.”

“Serenity?” Lyle asked, looking to Cal.

“Three-month-old filly,” Cal said. “Her dam was our packhorse the day we got caught out by the tornado. Poor Serenity’s left all day in the barn, most days without any other horses.”

Skyla gasped at “tornado” and cuddled the kitten closer.

Leandra nodded her head. “She needs me,” she announced. “I’m not going to ballet camp. I’ll stay with Uncle Cal and take care of Serenity.”

“Seventh generation MacGregor,” Joseph murmured behind Cal, so soft only he heard.

“You don’t have any clothes—” Enola began.

“We can find clothes for her,” Cal said.

Leandra threw her arms around Cal’s waist. “I knew you’d let me!”

“Cal, using the children—” Lyle began.

“Tell me you didn’t bring ’em just to soften me up,” Cal said. Lyle looked away. Cal picked up Leandra and she latched on like a cute leech. “Let her stay. Either she’s born for the life, or she’ll come runnin’ home in a week. No point fighting it.”

“No point fighting *her*,” Enola muttered.

Leandra stayed. Lyle and Enola and Skylia left, without the kitten. After supper Joseph and Cal drove into Amarillo, and from Mom’s facility they went to Lyle’s to pick up what Enola thought was a week’s worth of clothes for Leandra. Joseph tossed the suitcase in the truck bed while Cal got a full hug from Skylia since he was now clean enough to hug.

As soon as they were out of Amarillo, Joseph patted the seat beside him. “Why don’t you move over here?”

Cal chuckled and moved, buckling into the middle seat belt, setting his hat on the empty seat. Joseph drove one-handed, the other arm around Cal’s shoulders. He slowed the truck way down and turned the lights off, driving by moonlight. With the city and the moon behind them, all Cal could see forever was star-speckled sky and prairie. A cool breeze flowed through the truck, sweet with the scent of growing grass.

In the truck again, coming home from Amarillo. But unlike that day a month ago, Mom was on the mend and the ranch was safe. And Joseph thought Cal was amazing.

“Yeah,” Joseph said softly, lifting his hand to tousle Cal’s hair. “God’s country. I believe it.”

Cal leaned his head on Joseph’s shoulder and didn’t sleep the whole way home.

THE END

Author Bio

KD Sarge writes for joy and hope, and works for a living. She has tried her hand at many endeavors, including Governess of the Children, Grand Director of the Drive-Through, and Dispatcher of the Tow Trucks. Currently KD labors appreciated but underpaid in the public school system.

KD has somewhere between five and ten universes under construction, writes science fiction, fantasy, steampunk, smut (in many genres), and means to one day undertake a cosy mystery. She wishes, as always, that she had more time to research things.

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