

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

A HEART OF KLONDIKE GOLD

E. Davies

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

A HEART OF KLONDIKE GOLD

By E. Davies

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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 these authors 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's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, 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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[Morning mist background 6](#);

[Blue sunset and boat](#); [Sunset](#); [Sunset 15](#)

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A HEART OF KLONDIKE GOLD

By E. Davies

Photo Description

Two bearded men, one in a knitted cap and the other in an insulated undershirt, hold each other in bed. They look like they are about to kiss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two men traveled to the Klondike during the Alaskan Gold Rush in hopes of striking gold. What they found... was each other. Please tell me their story.

Please include the scene depicted in this photo at some point in the story.

No insta-love, cheating, or ménage and must have a HEA. I would really like to see enemies to lovers here but not required... and lots of sexual tension is preferred

Sincerely,

Heather C

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: blue collar, miners, store owner, enemies to lovers, slow burn, Klondike

Word Count: 19,058

A HEART OF KLONDIKE GOLD

By E. Davies

It seemed nigh-impossible for Edwin Brooks to be taking in the sight that lay in front of him. His mind could scarcely comprehend it, as simple as it was: the wooden buildings of Dawson. Muddy streets stretched out before him, and the shoddy boat beneath him seemed primitive compared to the luxuries that he knew awaited him after the long journey to reach the city.

About a hundred other crudely made boats had recently arrived or were going to land soon, and a crowd had gathered at the beach to greet the new arrivals. The sight of a proper city was so unfamiliar that Edwin briefly wondered if he'd remember how to order at a restaurant or get shelter at a hotel, or even shop for supplies.

The crowd's raised voices made him flinch. Though the lake crossing from the Bennett tent camp was short, the tent camp he'd left had been rough and not altogether friendly during the long winter of 1897-1898. He'd been one of the first to leave the camp as soon as the ice broke, and they could cross the lake to Dawson.

The Northwest Mounted Police were a familiar sight by then—just about every prospector had run into them at one point or another, checking to make sure everyone had supplies. So many of those who hadn't been turned back by the Mounted Police for not having enough supplies had either turned back on their own or died. The law-keepers stood on the beach, supervising as men unloaded supplies. Crates, bags, and sacks of goods were strapped firmly to boats and had to be piled up, then carted into town one at a time.

All Edwin could think as he stepped onto the beach and hauled his boat ashore was, *please, God, let me never see another skeleton.*

In the ten months since the gold rush had begun, he'd had ample time to consider that he might have been making a mistake. The first steamships had arrived from the Klondike in his own home city of Seattle with the news of the discovery of gold, and he'd received word from a childhood friend, Albert, that he'd split a claim with him if he was willing to put in an honest year's work on it.

Now, Edwin was ready to get to work. He was sweating in the early summer heat, though hauling goods was no trouble. Moving them all for months across the roughest trails mankind knew had toughened and hardened his hands. He was bearded, and his hair was shaggy, and he hadn't had a shower or relaxing bath in a long time.

"Supplies! Get your supplies at Northern, right down the street." A young man who didn't look like he'd ever seen the prospecting creeks was yelling from the edge of town, where the wooden buildings started to spring from the ground. This was not Seattle.

"Walt don't need no one advertising for him!" someone else yelled, but one of the Mounties approached the heckler and things quieted down.

One bag at a time, Edwin piled his belongings on the shore, then hauled his boat ashore. He had to find a place to store the boat that day since he had no doubt the prices of lumber were going to be high with everyone looking to build a cabin of their own. Maybe he could rent a place in town for the first week, until he started to get some gold dust out of the claim he now shared with Albert.

"Hello? Excuse me, sir," he addressed the Mountie who was overseeing the chaos.

"Yes?" the man answered, taking in his appearance. He must have looked a sight to the authority figure, after fighting for his life through wilderness, rapids, and mountains for so many months. His clothes had been torn and repaired too many times to count.

"I know a man here in town, Albert Carson. I'm looking for him. What would be the best way to find him?"

"Place an ad in the paper, or make inquiries at the bars," the clean-shaven man advised him. "I'm not familiar with an Albert, but the population has been swelling. If you visit the station when the rush is slower, we can check the records. Welcome to Dawson."

"Thank you kindly," was all Edwin could say. It looked like he'd have to find a hotel for the night, at least. Since he'd have to buy supplies, find Albert, and figure out where his claim was, he'd better get a room for a week while he was at it—and fast. Men were arriving by the boatload and setting about to find accommodations.

He'd been one of the first to leave the Bennett tent camp, but not the first to arrive here. Boating wasn't his strongest suit—really, he'd just been grateful

that his boat had stayed afloat as he crossed the lake. He'd had the winter to talk to the other men in the camp (and a very few women) who knew more than he did about constructing boats, and he'd started building as early as possible to make sure it would be waterproof. At least it had served him in that capacity, if not with haste.

"Klondike!" he had heard someone yelling from behind him as he landed, and he was answered by a few other ragged yells before they quieted under the watchful eye of the police. That was a welcome change, too—the officers' presence. Dawson City would treat him better than Skagway and the cesspits that lay between decent towns and the gold fields.

"Help move your possessions?" A deep-voiced man with a greased mustache gestured at his boxes and bags.

"I'll help! I'll help, sir. I'm faster than him." Another guy—cuter, younger, more eager-looking and with close-cropped blond hair sticking out from beneath a narrow-brimmed hat—approached at a trot. "And I can get you a room. He's barred from Bonnie's hotel." The look this young man gave him promised perhaps a bit more than help moving his possessions.

Oh, but Edwin's heart felt like it rose within his chest with relief. Of course there were other men like him up here! Surrounded by men, who doubtless outnumbered women by a good twenty-five men to every lady here, he'd had little doubt this would be the case, but he hadn't dared hope for more than finding a great prospecting partner. Seattle... was a different town.

"I'll leave you two to live within your means," the first man said, a hint of scorn in his voice as he moved off to another boat that was being pulled ashore.

Edwin's eyes widened as he glanced after him.

"Don't mind him. Roy's the meanest drunk, but I think he's mostly bitter. I'm Charlie."

"Edwin," he answered, and reached out to firmly shake hands. He didn't want what he thought Charlie might be offering along with the hotel room, as lonely as the last year had been, but a friend in the city might be handy for as long as he ended up staying here. Hopefully, that wouldn't be long. He was eager to prospect.

Charlie shrugged bags of navy beans, rice, and flour onto his shoulders with ease, then reached for his clothing sack. "The rest will be safer on the beach," he advised. "Basic supplies like this are the priciest."

"Are you certain?" Edwin glanced at his bags. There was a certain amount of honor involved in being on the trails together with the same group of men, women, and children—even tens of thousands of them—but here?

"Positive," Charlie told him. "Law is kept here, and the Mounted Police will stay within sight. We have to go *now* to get you a room, though. It'll be damn near impossible to rent a hotel room or even a run-down cabin if you wait much longer." He pointed down towards the beginning of the muddy street. "That's the hotel there." He seemed sincere, which swayed Edwin's mind on the matter.

"All right." Edwin nodded and shouldered the heaviest and most valuable of his bags. He had so little compared to how much he'd left with, that he figured a second load would get everything into his room.

Walking down the muddy street with Charlie, he smiled at the sight of horses around. They passed the boy who was advertising supplies at Northern, two women with tight corsets lingering around the outside of a bar, and a group of men who seemed to be haggling over the lumber in a makeshift boat.

"I'll need lumber," he realized aloud, his plans suddenly returning to mind. He had to find Albert, buy lumber, and haul it to the claim, then build a cabin. He'd try to find someone who knew Albert today. Tomorrow, he'd need enough supplies to live there for long enough to hopefully get some gold dust and build up his pantry for winter.

"Walt's store's the best-supplied, but he charges the most. Might be able to find some for less from the men coming in. Take their boat lumber, offer them less and fix it up yourself," Charlie told him, sounding a little out of breath. "Walt owns the Northern there. One of the Klondike Kings, they call him."

Edwin nodded. "Can you handle that load?" he asked, nodding at the bags Charlie carried.

"I've been hauling loads like this all winter while you were playing cards in camp," Charlie retorted with a grin. His shoulders were narrow, but he had enough muscles that Edwin could believe it.

Edwin chuckled and didn't comment upon the way Charlie's cheeks were flushed with exertion. Instead, he pointed up at the wooden building looming up before them as they tromped through the well-churned mud of the main street of Dawson City. "That the hotel?"

"It is indeed," Charlie confirmed, shouldering his way through the doorway so he didn't catch the corner of a bag and rip it open. "Mary?"

"Another new one, Charlie?" Mary greeted from behind the crude entrance desk of the hotel. Edwin wondered if this was the biggest hotel here—or the only one. It was possible Charlie ran a scam by steering travelers to the expensive hotel and taking a cut of the proceeds, but... he hadn't seen any alternative accommodations.

"Edwin here's looking for a room. I told him you might have a few left."

"You're a lucky one, Edwin," Mary marveled. "This is my second-to-last room. If you'd walked a bit slower..."

Edwin swallowed hard. *I need to take it. No time to check for other places to stay.* "I am, then. I'd like to stay for a week. Do you think that will be time enough to gather supplies before I find my claim?" he addressed Charlie.

"If you're quick to the store today or tomorrow."

By the look of the sun, he had a few hours of daylight left to find food—proper food, at last! Perhaps he'd best shop for supplies today while the armada of boats still crossed the lake. "All right. A week, then," he requested with a polite smile.

"Certainly. Five dollars, or a third of an ounce of gold dust," she requested, and he handed over some of the precious few dollars that he had left. He'd heard already that most people here traded in gold dust, not dollars. "Here is your key. Charlie can show you to your room. It's the corner room, Charlie."

Charlie nodded, shifting the bags on his shoulder and looking at Edwin. "This way."

Edwin picked the key off the rough-hewn board that served as the counter and nodded his thanks. *At least I still remember how to be polite to a lady.* "Much obliged, ma'am." He followed Charlie to his room, the familiar feeling of exhaustion starting to settle in. It was difficult to process all the noise and interactions and speed of the city, even a small city such as this, after so many months in the wilderness.

Opening the door to the sight of a simple bed, desk, and chair, he had to smile. A mattress at last... a real mattress. Edwin had never been so grateful for the sight. He didn't care if it was stuffed with pine needles.

"Edwin?"

He glanced at Charlie.

"We should hurry and pick up your other load," Charlie prompted him as he set down his bags, then pushed his hat back to keep it in place. "And I know a safe place to store your boat, if you want to keep its lumber for your cabin."

Edwin nodded, letting his bags thump to the ground and turning around to follow Charlie back towards the lakeside. Emerging from the building to the muddy, busy streets again made him cringe at the noise, but he quietly walked, eyeing Charlie now and then.

"Please do not mistake this for any sort of question of your character," he addressed Charlie as they reached his bags, still safe on the shore where he'd left them. "I merely wondered what you hope to receive from this. You provide so much help to a greenhorn unlikely to repay you tenfold yet..."

"A dollar and your goodwill," Charlie answered simply. "Dawson is a small enough town that I value every friendship I may form over a shared load." He picked up about half of the remaining bags, then cradled the crate that contained the remaining foodstuffs in his arms, waiting for Edwin to pick up his goods, too.

"Very well. You have more than earned both," Edwin told him. What sort of goodwill did he mean? Surely just friendship?

They were both quiet as they walked back to the hotel with the remainder of Edwin's goods, though Edwin cast a few sneaky glances at Charlie when he thought him not to be looking. In return, he was certain he felt Charlie looking at him when he was distracted by the sights of a main street, horses and carriages, and even a few children scampering around back of a building.

When they reached the room, his question was answered. Once he'd closed the door and set down the remainder of his bags, Charlie arranged his own bags around the room and set the crate aside, then straightened up.

"How long a year has it been without the company of others such as us?" Charlie asked, searching Edwin's eyes with a bright-blue gaze that seemed to see straight through him. He reached up to take off his hat and run a hand across his blond hair before setting it in place again, then wiped his face with his arm.

Edwin saw Charlie taking a quick glance up and down him, too. He knew he presented an interesting sight for a man like Charlie: his own patched clothes stretched tight around the muscles he'd developed since he'd bought the shirt back in Seattle.

Edwin hesitated, then shook his head slightly. "Long enough, but I doubt I seek what you offer."

"I understand," Charlie murmured with a small a frown. "Only a dollar, then. You will not be disappointed in this town if you know where to look."

Edwin nodded now, handing over a dollar. The warmth of Charlie's palm against his fingers gave him a moment's pause before he pulled himself together again. *I came all this way to make my fortune, not to get involved with a man, even such a handsome one... and certainly not for just a night.* "Thank you for your help, Charlie."

Charlie nodded and tipped his hat slightly, then let himself out of the room. Once he was gone, Edwin locked the door, marveling at the simple metallic click that meant safety and privacy in a room of his own for as long as he liked.

He sank onto the bed, resting his elbows on his knees and putting his forehead in his hands. For months, he'd dreamed of what he might do when he arrived in the gold fields, but now that he was finally there, and he'd beaten the odds, memories of his old life in Seattle returned.

Edwin still remembered sitting on the edge of another mattress, much like this, after he'd determined to change his life and escape the too-small city. He wasn't much for the bars and theaters, but when he did try to visit them, *he* had always been there. Edwin had even briefly resorted to nerve tablets to overcome the nervous anxiety and exhaustion that overcame him after each sighting.

Louis had been young, restless, and excitable, drawing the calmer Edwin out of his shell. He had also been more knowledgeable on matters of the body, which was particularly useful when it came to the bed they shared. He had enchanted Edwin for over a year, utterly fascinated him in mind and body until he abruptly called it off one gloomy April morning. Edwin might never know why, and thoughts of it had been absent during his trek.

The news of the gold rush had been welcome then. Edwin had abandoned his job as a store clerk for the prospect of finding his fortune and escaping his past at the same time.

Perhaps being in the unfamiliar wilderness with no reminders of the domestic life he had once enjoyed with Louis had been restorative. Now that he'd reached the Paris of the North, filled with Parisian fashions and theaters and saloons (and likely more that he had not yet discovered), his old city life was returning to him.

That determined Edwin's choice on how to spend the remaining hours of his day. He carefully hid the money he'd leave in his room, bringing only enough to cover some food, clothing, and lumber and stowing some extra cash closer to his body. He used the small bathroom to brush his teeth, changed to a shirt that was a little cleaner than the rest, and dusted off his cowboy hat and settled it on his head. It was time to discover what Dawson had to offer a prospector on his way to find gold.

"Albert?"

Edwin was convinced that even in a town as small as Dawson had been before the gold rush began in earnest, it could not possibly be his childhood friend dressed immaculately and serving behind the counter of Northern.

"God save me, is it you, Edwin?" Albert's youthful face concealed his true age of twenty-five, just a few months older than Edwin. When it was lit up with such joy, he seemed even younger.

They approached each other for a tight hug that spoke of the years that had passed, Albert reaching up to rub his palm over his own eyes for a moment. "By God, I thought you would never answer my offer."

"I merely came here in lieu of telegraph," Edwin joked with a broad grin, letting go of Albert and standing back to take him in. "I accept, of course."

Albert clapped his shoulder, beaming as he gestured around. "Whatever supplies you need, I will keep aside unless you plan to buy them today?"

"Is there a cabin at the claim site already? Lumber seems the most urgent," Edwin nodded. "Food next, and clothing and tools for panning and mining."

Albert still seemed overwhelmed as he nodded. "No cabin yet. I set aside a stock of lumber and tools already, but I have had little time to build, occupied as I am here."

"You work here, then? Why work for another man when you have a claim?" Edwin asked, his mind reeling. Come to think of it, there were plenty of able-bodied men here in town who rightfully could have been prospecting at this very minute.

Albert's face fell. "Gold is harder to find here than advertised. I have worked for others to find out how to mine it, but I lack the strength to dig the claim myself. I earn a steady wage working here until I can find a partner to work the claim."

Edwin frowned. That obviously meant him, and Albert's bad fortune hung over him ominously as he answered, "Will you be able to show me what work remains to be done?" Albert did look less apt to mine than to hold a glass and a cigarette.

"I hoped we could meet at the restaurant tonight to discuss an arrangement," Albert told him. "But I can sell you supplies immediately since they will scarcely last until the next shipment arrives."

Another clerk behind the counter—bearded, with intense brown eyes and thick, muscled forearms—cleared his throat. Edwin glanced over, realizing that a lineup of men waiting to purchase supplies had already formed. "Tonight, then," he promised, not wishing to further delay Albert from his work during this busy time. "Which restaurant?"

"Across the street, near Bonnie's hotel," Albert told him. "I will be free to meet at five."

Edwin nodded. "God bless you," he bade, then walked around the store to view the goods and prices. As he'd expected, prices were high, but he hadn't expected them to be this high. Lumber that he might have paid ten dollars for cost over a hundred dollars here, and beans that were a few cents a pound could cost fifty cents here.

He might have to change his plans to dine royally in town. His heart raced as he realized that some people had to be rich enough to easily afford these prices... and the expensive Parisian goods in other stores. He'd seen bottles of champagne cracked open in another saloon he'd passed by where men were wearing imported garments. Gold wasn't as hard to find as Albert seemed to be implying, then.

Edwin picked up a few basic foods and some new clothing, then brought the items to the counter to pay. He nodded his greeting to the other clerk, trying not to focus on how much more he was paying for these things than he would have anywhere else. "Northern living has its downsides, doesn't it?" he tried to make conversation.

The clerk grunted a response while Edwin dug his money out of his pocket. This one was much less friendly, but more attractive than Albert. Nothing against his friend, of course, but he'd never felt attracted to those boyish looks.

This man was far more within his own tastes: about as tall as him but stockier, built like a man who worked in the woods. A lumberjack, perhaps?

His muscles showed in the way the fabric pulled across his chest and upper arms. He was bearded like the other working men here, and his eyes were watchful. His full lips were pressed together in thought, and Edwin unconsciously licked his own lips.

It's been too long, but settle down. It'll be much longer still. "Expensive, that is," Edwin clarified, still trying to win over any sort of a response.

"You can pay the prices here, and be sure you're getting flour without grubs, or go down the street and take your chances," the clerk told him, his voice suddenly booming through the small wooden building. Edwin cursed his luck—this must be Walt, the owner himself. "My store has never overcharged anyone."

Edwin couldn't afford to make enemies on his first day. "I didn't—I didn't mean—"

"Three dollars and forty cents, if that's not too steep a price for this kind of quality," Walt cut him off. "You can pay your new partner there." He stepped out from behind the counter to talk to a man who was gesturing for assistance with the sacks of flour.

As Edwin paid, biting his tongue, Albert glanced around to make sure Walt was out of earshot, then leaned in to murmur, "I have more to tell you tonight, when I can."

With this promise, Edwin tried to let go of the minor incident. He walked back to his hotel room to arrange his food and take a proper inventory of his possessions. Everything he expected to need was in his bags, so he spent his afternoon bathing and lying on the mattress in his hotel room. No wonder they called this city the Paris of the north! All it lacked was electricity and indoor plumbing like new homes in his old city had.

After shaving, Edwin trimmed his hair a little with a knife, neatening himself up. He wouldn't look like a proper townsman yet, or perhaps ever, but he'd look more decent now until he could find a barber. It was nearly sundown, so he headed outside. He made a mental note to check his pocket watch, which he hadn't had an opportunity to check against a proper town clock in so long now.

When he arrived at the restaurant, he glanced around before spotting Albert already seated at a table across the room.

"Over here," Albert called out, and Edwin nodded, making his way around other tables of men and the few women gathered over food and whiskey. God,

for a sip of whiskey again! He must have looked half-starved, because Albert laughed and told him, "Rosie will be here shortly to take our orders."

"I'll eat whatever you're having," Edwin answered.

"Twenty-five cents for clam chowder and a large glass of beer," Albert told him.

"Oh, yes," Edwin grinned, rubbing a hand across his smooth face. It felt chillier in the room without the beard he'd just shaved off, but for early June, he couldn't complain. He knew the winter would be far colder. "Clam chowder! I haven't eaten like that in so long."

"Did you arrive overland?"

Edwin nodded. "If I'd known how treacherous the path would be, I would have saved another month's wages and paid for a steamship fare."

Albert winced. "I've heard many tragic stories," he told him. "I didn't expect you to drop everything and arrive immediately. I didn't even know if the message would arrive."

"You're my dearest childhood friend," Edwin answered with a shake of his head. "Your friend—I can't remember his name, with the red beard—sought me out at work and gave me your message. He told me... you'd said to tell me that Dawson gold was discovered, that you'd bought out his half-claim and would give it to me, if I would supplement your work."

Albert nodded. "That's more or less the story. He was my prospecting partner for the last year. He left Dawson a rich man and promised to send another partner he trusted as much as I trusted you, if he could not find you."

"I am glad he took the time to find me!" Edwin smiled.

Rosie, a modestly-dressed woman clearly named for her rosy red cheeks, came up to their table. "Hello, gentlemen. Albert, the usual order?"

"Yes, and the same for him," Albert nodded. "Thank you, as ever, Rosie." His eyes lingered on her face for a few moments. Edwin recognized that look from their schoolboy days.

"Anything for you," Rosie answered cheerily and headed off to give the cook the order.

Edwin raised his eyebrows, and Albert nodded slightly. They didn't need to exchange further words in public, particularly with the lady in question so close by.

"I hope you did not leave your heart with anyone?" Albert inquired in turn, looking worried. "As I said, I did not wish for you to depart at an inconvenient time."

Edwin glanced at the table for a moment. He hadn't wanted to bring up Louis. Even though it was an unspoken fact between them that his desires did not lie in women, Albert had always taken care to inquire after his personal life—a fact he appreciated more deeply than he could ever say, given that the trial of Oscar Wilde had made most people's heads shake over headlines just two years before he had left Seattle. "Actually, departing as soon as possible was best. I found myself... a bachelor again, not long before the arrival of the steamer."

"Oh," Albert frowned, then nodded. "You, perhaps more than I, will have an easy time of it here."

"So I have been told," Edwin nodded. "I'm not seeking attachments deeper than friendships at the moment, though... just gold," he confidently added. "And on this subject, did you have an even split with your partner? Why did you remain here?"

Albert sighed and gestured around the room with a broad sweep of his hand. "Gold dust blows away in this town. I've never been one for savings, you know that."

Oh, Albert. Edwin shook his head. He could find a fortune and spend it all on penny candy, whiskey, and Sears catalog goods.

"Walt! Come in, come in, sir," he heard someone calling out from near the doorway and turned to take a look.

At the sight of the very same bearded man he had unintentionally insulted just a few hours ago, Edwin cringed, but he knew what he had to do. "One moment," he requested of Albert and stood, approaching the man slowly to let him see Edwin before he got to him.

"Oh, the boy who thinks he can have the world for free," Walt greeted, his eyes hardening warily. "If you're here to complain about the price of clams, the lake's that way."

There was a burst of laughter from nearby tables. Even though Walt didn't seem to be approaching any table in particular, each seemed to be making a little space and acting agreeable in case he should choose to sit there. It seemed he was little more than a gold-dusted star of the town, then.

"I came to offer an apology. My comment was quick and rash, and I do not wish for it to reflect on my character or that of my prospecting partner," Edwin told him, keeping his head high and meeting Walt's eyes. "I have no doubt your goods are of high quality and worth the price, particularly given the costs and dangers of transporting them here. I was simply used to Seattle prices." *I hope that apology is well-worded enough to placate him.*

"A fine attempt at a reconciliation. A Seattle boy, are you?" It was hard to read what Walt thought. His beard seemed to hide the finer expressions twisting his mouth, and his eyes were calculating and not altogether friendly. "What did you do?"

"Yes, sir. I was a clerk."

"Like your prospecting partner. I hope you have better luck than him. He's a fine man to work for me, and rest assured I do not judge him by the company he seems to keep. Even those from Seattle."

Edwin bristled. "Do you have something against the city which would make you flee from it to the furthest corner of the earth and also insult its citizens?" he retorted, losing his conciliatory tone in favor of standing up for himself. If this golden man of Dawson thought he'd push Edwin into begging for forgiveness, he was wrong.

"Only the quality of man it produces, one prone to unfriendliness and a sense of entitlement to others' good graces," Walt told him.

"Then rest assured I do not judge your store by its foundation, either," Edwin retorted, aware that they were attracting attention. "The prices may be fairer than all else."

Walt's cheeks flushed with annoyance, and he reached up to fidget with his hat, then rubbed a hand across his face. "Very well. Let us keep our own company, boy. Good day, Albert."

"Agreed, sir," Edwin nodded and moved back to the table while Albert raised a hand slightly to wave in return.

There was silence for a few moments as Walt walked out of the restaurant before murmurs of conversation began again. Edwin kept his eyes on the table for a minute, waiting until all seemed more or less back to normal before he glanced up at Albert.

"I can scarcely believe you to be the same man I know," Albert murmured with a wondering shake of his head. "Regardless, your words are not unfounded, despite your unfamiliarity with him."

Edwin nodded. He would expect to hear that about the sort of man who attempted to extort more than a reasonable apology out of him and insulted him underhandedly at the same moment, but he did not wish to endanger Albert's employment. "I hope he is fairer in hiring matters."

"He is," Albert nodded. "He speaks truthfully when he says he will not judge me for my... association with you." He seemed sheepish to even speak the words.

"Well, when I take the rest of the gold from our claim, I will return to Seattle and stay out of that unruly beard of his," Edwin muttered.

Albert was startled into a laugh. "Staying out of his hair before then would be best, too. When we need to purchase supplies, I can take care of it."

Edwin nodded, despite the combative part of him that wanted to duke it out verbally with Walt again and show him just how wrong he was about "Seattle boys" (*men*, he thought indignantly—Walt had added another insult to injury there despite only looking a decade or so older than him).

It didn't take much to forget the argument when food arrived, and he enjoyed hot clam chowder and cold beer for the first time in months. He paid a few extra cents as a special thanks to Rosie for bringing him an extra-large portion to celebrate his first meal in town.

After they ate, Albert showed him along the wilderness paths to the claim site, letting him see the creek where he'd panned, the digging and sifting done to date, the map he'd drawn of the site, and the secret cache of lumber and tools he had on the site. They shook hands and swore on a fifty-fifty split of the profits from everything found at the site, and that Albert should support them and purchase supplies by working at the store as Edwin constructed the cabin and started digging up the ground while they could in the summer.

They had to pick their way back through the trees in the evening, using Albert's knowledge of the area and Edwin's knowledge of the wild to find the path, but when they got back to town, Edwin was prepared to enjoy a long, deep sleep in his hotel room. Walt's disapproval, and the enemy he might have made, scarcely registered in the face of the excitement of the next day and the riches that he could feel in the ever-frozen ground under his feet.

A hard week of working from dawn until dusk yielded a structure that Edwin felt he could live in quite easily. The cabin was a bare, cramped, one-

room structure, but it had a roof and a door. There was no way he wanted to buy windows and carry them all the way out here when they could so easily be broken and let in the natural elements.

He'd have to spend time later that summer on building a proper cabin with another room, a stove, and insulation for the harsh winters, but for now, he had somewhere to move to after his stay in the hotel was up. He was sure going to miss that mattress, though.

Hauling his supplies to the cabin took much time from Edwin's morning. To make matters worse, once he was inside and he'd unpacked his candles and matches, he realized that he was running quite low on them. He'd bartered some food for more matches at the winter camp, but accidentally losing a bag on the trail had meant he was without candles for a while. Edwin didn't want to wait for Albert to be finished with work to purchase candles, because it would be dark by then.

It's been a week. I should be safe enough, he reasoned as he emerged from the trail into the Klondike wilderness and made his way through the district of low-rent slums that he was fortunate enough to be avoiding and the red-light district immediately above it. The city looked like it was overflowing with new residents now: every hotel room was full; every cabin near the city rented; every room within it rented by at least one person. The bars were overflowing, and business was booming in Dawson.

When he found his way to Northern, he drew a breath before walking in. The same stale scent of hay, grain, and metal met him inside, and he saw Albert behind the counter... and Walt. There were at least ten other men crowded into the small store, and the shelves seemed far more bare.

"Ah," Walt spoke up as Edwin approached the counter with candles, matches, and a few other necessities. "Seattle boy. How are the northern woods treating you?"

Edwin gritted his teeth, meeting those deceptively pretty, brown eyes with his own calm gaze. According to the rumors he now knew from listening in on restaurant conversations and making conversation with others, Walt rarely prospected anymore. This made his muscular build surprising. For a man who held a fortune, physical exercise was usually optional. Walt still wore that slight smirk on his face that made Edwin want to knock it off.

He set down the candles and set the bag on the counter, glancing at the shelf of clothing nearby while he counted to five. The only clothes remaining were

winter clothes—a few knitted caps, thick undershirts, and gloves. “Very well indeed, sir. And yourself?”

Walt raised his eyebrows, counting the candles with a quick flick of his finger and writing down the total on his receipt pad. “Well, thank you. Plenty of men envy my... claim. One brazen greenhorn has built a cabin—or what he thinks passes for one under cover of night—along the very edge of his claim, against mine, but no matter.”

“At least you have a claim worth envying,” Edwin said in an airy enough tone that it could be mistaken for a compliment on the quality of his site, even though they both knew it was a slyer insult than that. Walt’s gaze met his, and Edwin couldn’t look away, the sparks of enmity crackling in the air between them.

“A discovery claim is worth its weight in... oh, you know,” Walt chose to answer with a smile hidden in his thick stubble, almost beard-length now.

Instantly, Edwin felt jealous, as he knew he’d been meant to. The right thousand feet of creek could yield a fortune in gold—which, he supposed, was why Walt was a big name in this town. Well, Albert’s partner had left without finding any mother lodes, so Edwin would start panning for one tomorrow. It wasn’t like he didn’t have time to spare, with Albert supporting them. Edwin cast a quick glance at Albert, who was studiously focusing on serving customers.

“That’ll be a dollar twenty-five,” Walt added when Edwin didn’t respond. “Or would you like the price in gold dust?”

Edwin dug coins from his pocket, picking out exactly enough, then slapped them lightly on the counter. The hollow thunk of them hitting the wood counter beneath his palm was his cue to draw his hand back, but just before he could, Walt’s fingers covered his own as he reached out to take the coins.

He paused as he felt those warm digits brushing against the backs of his knuckles, his breath catching for a moment as he glanced back up. Walt’s fingers were callused like a working man’s, and they felt gentle, which was a sign of danger, given their current relationship.

“Don’t push your luck, Seattle boy,” Walt advised him in a quiet murmur, then flicked his hand away from the counter with his middle finger and picked up the coins, dropping them into his drawer. “Next.”

Edwin's head spun as he emerged into the smells of the street—restaurant odors, horse manure, and a lady's perfume. He blinked against the light, then shouldered his bag of supplies as he set off to trudge back into the woods. It would be a good, long walk back to town and would eat up most of the rest of his day, but now he was set to live in the woods with only occasional fresh supplies.

With Albert staying in town and him working by himself, it was going to be lonely, but he was used to being alone after the last year's trek. He only needed his own company and that of the wilderness, sort of like the great poet, Walt Whitman, with whom he liked to think he had a lot in common, except for the ability to coherently write about his experiences with nature.

By the time he finally reached his and Albert's claim, the crude cabin looming into view through the hillside, he breathed out a sigh of relief. Home was here now. Here, he only needed to worry about God's creatures, great and small, and perhaps the occasional prospector wandering along the creek in search of an unclaimed site. He couldn't help but wonder if Walt was his new neighbor, but it seemed like too much of a coincidence. Nevertheless, he resolved to check out the claim posts of the site next to his and see if Walt's name was engraved upon them. Edwin had yet to see anyone working on the claim, but he'd heard them, and he hadn't been within sighting distance along the creek yet. He'd chosen to build higher up the hillside and stick to the wooded area in the hopes of not building on top of a gold lode.

Living in his new, crudely made cabin was nowhere near as luxurious as his week in the hotel had been, and he was going to miss having the luxuries of a hotel, but this place was his very own. Technically, he shared it with Albert, but he doubted that his friend—now a city man with a taste for caviar and whiskey rather than cold creek water and campfire beans—would spend much time here. Despite the downgrade in sleeping accommodations, he slept solidly and with a smile on his face. Tomorrow, he'd find his first gold.

The months-long trek to the Klondike was worth it all the moment Edwin found his first flakes of gold. Dressed in his old, painstakingly-repaired shirt with the sleeves rolled up, boots, and trousers, the summer heat bore down on him, but the creek water was still cold.

His boots slipped against the round stones underneath the water, and his hands were muddy from sifting through the silt, tightly gripping the bowl he used to separate gravel from gold.

When he was left with three small flecks of gold, his breath hitched in his throat. This was the ticket to his freedom—to financial security, perhaps to a life in New York or further afield, where life was better for men like him.

As gently as he could, he poured the remaining flakes and finer grit and sand into a tin cup to be picked through later, trying not to focus too much on them. A little gold dust was a good sign, but men brought ounces into town to be exchanged, not three flakes.

He'd enjoyed the moment, but hard work was at hand now. He had to try to trace the flakes back to a lode—a vein of gold running in the ground leading to the creek. Edwin hardly noticed time passing as the morning crawled on, and he panned what felt like entirely too much river rock and water. He was endlessly grateful that the journey had given him more strength than he'd ever had before, or his arms and thighs would have felt worn out far more quickly than they did.

By lunchtime, he thought he had figured out where the gold had been coming from, so he stood up, wiping his hands on his pants and stretching to get the knots from his back. A tonic for his muscles would have been welcomed, but he'd make do with something herbal if he could find it. He'd learned two or three herbal remedies from other travelers, though he had yet to test them.

As he glanced up the hillside towards the forested area where his cabin lay, Edwin scanned for pine trees with fresh green boughs that he could bring with him and strip during lunch. He found one, but in the process, his gaze fell upon the posts that marked the end of his claim and the start of the next miner's. That was downriver, and the direction of the claim he'd thought might be Walt's.

He trudged the few hundred feet towards the post, then squinted at the plaque.

The first few words caught his eye: *Walter Kennedy*.

"Oh, fuck," he breathed out, the word more than justified by the gravity of the situation. He had to be far more careful around Walt in the future. If this was his discovery claim, he'd discovered the creek and he had a thousand feet of it to sluice and mine at his leisure. Perhaps this was his main money-making source. Making Walt nervous about his fortune's security wouldn't do. He had to be friendly.

It was only after he'd cut off a bough, and proceeded back to his cabin to light a fire and cook a meal while stripping the bough, that another thought

occurred to him. Walt must have already known that this claim belonged to Albert—and if he'd met Albert here, that would explain how Albert had become employed by him. That meant Walt knew where he was, and he hadn't taken any further action to antagonize Edwin. The quiet words Walt had spoken about not pushing his luck rang in the back of his mind, though.

"Seattle boy."

Edwin startled, gripping his knife firmly and starting to raise it as he stood, then let out a quiet breath and lowered the weapon as fast as he'd raised it. "Hello, Walt." The man looked devilishly handsome and at home in the woods. Edwin hated him a little more.

Walt's stubble was growing out into a beard that was a light, but rich, brown. He had short, scruffy hair and a wide-brimmed hat on. His clothing looked cleaner and newer, though his shirtsleeves were rolled up and revealed those strong forearms that still looked like they could crush granite. The top few buttons of his shirt were undone, and a small amount of chest hair peeked out from the V-shaped opening. His face had the faintly reddish tint of sunburn on swarthy skin. He was stocky and handsome in all the ways Edwin would normally admire.

Instead, Edwin gritted his teeth. He folded up his pocketknife and pocketed it, then set aside the branch. "Can I help you?"

Walt nodded down towards the creek. "Saw you panning. You've got guts."

"What do you mean?"

"It'll take you about a decade to take out all the gold in the creek if you're working by hand."

Edwin shook his head. *He thinks I know nothing of prospecting.* "Have you managed to import a dredge already?"

Walt raised an eyebrow, then shook his head. "No. But steam or fire would still work better."

"I know," Edwin insisted, trying to keep his tone from being too heated. "I'm trying to find a vein first."

Walt nodded. "You have patience, then. Your partner's old partner, Tom... he didn't. He dug around a lot until he got lucky. I did much the same. I've got a steam system working to thaw the permafrost, though, and a sluice always running."

"I've never heard it." Edwin shook his head. "Well, I have heard some sounds, but I could never be certain what caused them."

Walt explained, "It's set up around the bend in the creek. This stretch is a lot dryer."

"Well, I work with what I have," Edwin shrugged. "And Tom worked hard enough—he got enough out—that I heard he's set up now. It's my turn and Albert's turn."

Walt rubbed his chin and nodded. "I thought you might be fleeing here for other reasons," he said, clearly testing the waters with this comment.

Edwin shifted his stance, making it clear by his posture that Walt was crossing into dangerous territory. "Like what?"

"Oh, nothing illegal," Walt assured him, though he seemed to have a hint of a satisfied smile about him with that answer. Whatever he'd been looking for, he'd gotten it. "But I came to warn you to be careful. There are a lot of thieves in these parts. Keep your knife close. Gun, too, if you have it. If you strike gold, you'll need them."

Edwin frowned. "I was never told that," he admitted. "I will. Appreciate the advice, sir. Just common thieves, not ones you know?" *Why am I still addressing him that way? We're both equal men when we're in the creeks with a sluice box.*

"The ones you're watching for now are unknown to you. Watch out for the other kind, too. And Walt will do."

"So when will I stop being 'Seattle boy' to you, Walt?" Edwin decided he was on safe enough ground to grin. He wasn't sure what to make of his answer.

"When you stop being one," Walt told him and turned his back, trudging off to his own claim. "Good luck with that," he added, not turning back to glance his way. It was an oddly cold ending to the encounter, and Edwin let out a long sigh of relief, trying to stay calm and not fire back a heated retort. Walt seemed like he was testing Edwin's patience deliberately, but he wouldn't give Walt the satisfaction of snapping at him again.

He put his frustrated energy into stripping the bough, which would become part of his bed frame when he built it. The needles would be boiled in water to make a tea for relief of joint and muscle aches – his own elixir of sorts.

After a meal and some of his pine tea, he felt restored and ready to get to work. Whenever he thought of Walt now, the same half-crazy, desperate desire

to prove him wrong sprang up within his belly. He needed to best Walt in the mines and in the gold buyers' shops now that he'd made his reputation as one with a grudge against the unreasonably wealthy Klondike Kings who endeavored to make a profit from those who had flocked to the area after them.

The rest of his day was spent furiously digging placer gold holes, searching for promising ground to light a fire upon that night. When he found a hole that yielded some small amount of gold, he decided to start there. Tom had stripped the claim land almost bare already and had dug up as much gold as he could from the other side of the site, but he'd never dug around in the area close to the border of his claim and Walt's.

Edwin could quickly understand why—the noise from Walt's claim could leave a man feeling inferior. Constant grinding or hissing, the hisses and rushes of water, the yells of men's voices relaying instructions and discoveries... it all quickly grated on his nerves. He tried his best not to feel too inefficient. Every prospector had to start this way, he reminded himself. A steam mining system would come later. In the meantime, he would sweat for his gold dust.

If Edwin had thought he sweated to earn his gold, it was nothing compared to Albert's poor skill. While he had gained weight and strength in the years since they'd seen one another, his childhood friend seemed to have grown skinnier and more accustomed to fine dining than hard work.

When Albert cursed and told him, "Sorry," for the dozenth time that morning after spilling gold flecks back into the river, Edwin sighed.

"I can see why Tom kept you in town, friend," Edwin told him. "You aren't well-suited to this work, are you?"

Albert looked ashamed as he shook his head. "For a man with his name on the claim, I have little to offer."

Edwin nodded. "You do well working for Walt, though." Albert had an odd expression on his face, so he added, "What troubles you about that?"

"Nothing," Albert admitted. "Just, supplies for this endeavor are more expensive than I remembered."

"A hundred dollars for lumber to build a sluice that will last all summer, or a dollar on a fine supper that will be gone tomorrow?" Edwin reprimanded him.

"I'd rather the supper."

Edwin shook his head. *He's not the same as I remember. I think his brief life of riches has softened him. Briefer still it will be if I can't find gold swiftly in this creek.* The weight of the work of two men had settled on his shoulders, but he accepted it gracefully.

"I don't think I should waste my time off work walking here to bring you assistance," Albert said and followed up with, "merely supplies."

"That would be best," Edwin agreed. "Your wages earn enough for supplies, and within two weeks, I expect to be bringing gold dust back to Dawson."

Albert grinned. "Two weeks is little time after so long waiting. Best of luck," he wished Edwin and leaned in to clap Edwin's back in a brief hug. "I will walk back now, I think. I have tasks of my own now that Walt has paid me. Oh. My apologies."

"For what?"

"Mentioning his name."

"He isn't the Devil," Edwin rolled his eyes, but he kept his voice quiet. The claims were close enough, and the water carried voices easily. "His name is not forbidden to any tongue."

"Nor to your mouth," Albert murmured, but Edwin did not grasp his meaning, and he let it go. "Good mining," he wished his friend.

As he watched Albert begin the walk back to town, Edwin didn't yet know that he would see few other people for some time, except men mining and working at a distance along the same creek. Most other claims seemed to be worked by two or more men, sometimes by six or seven at once. Some ran steam systems together, while others took shifts watching the night fires to thaw the ground.

Meanwhile, his own week was spent in fitful sleep shifts, checking and stoking the fire with scraps of wood that weren't fit for building, and as few large logs as he could manage while keeping the fire's intense heat burning.

When morning came, Edwin set about digging out as much thawed earth as possible. He knew his summer had to be spent extracting as much dirt as he could so that he could sift through it when it was too cold to dig up more. In the winter, it would be still colder and impossible to process, so there was a narrow window of opportunity now. He needed funds to live, though, so he processed as much as he could with the help of the sluice and the river water.

The week's work yielded a hundred dollars' worth of gold or so. It was just a few precious ounces, but still more than many claims ever saw. Little else of interest occurred except a persistent dream that seemed to tell him to continue on the course he'd set. In it, he would always be inches away from finding the mother lode of gold, only to give up; in the morning, he would wake full of determination to start fresh that morning and continue this quest for as long as it took to hit pay dirt.

Edwin had nearly run out of dehydrated potatoes and baking soda when he decided it wasn't worth waiting for Albert to come meet him. He had been absent from the mining site for some time now, and Edwin was worried that something may have happened to him. Besides, he needed supplies now, and he needed to compare money to see whether either of them owed one another—Albert's wages versus the gold he'd extracted so far.

He was only half a mile out of town when he met Walt walking out, his eyes alert and a frown furrowing his brow.

"Seattle boy," Walt greeted him, but he had something urgent in his eyes that caused Edwin not to walk straight past him.

"Back for another round of sparring? That's a sport now, you know. You might be better off seeking your fortune there," Edwin commented.

Walt paused, then shook his head without bothering to retort. "Remember what I told you about looking for unexpected betrayals?" When Edwin nodded, he said, "I believe it would be best to register your claim under your name. I've seen how hard you have been working for the past week."

"Albert would never betray my confidence," Edwin said simply.

A nostalgic smile curled the corner of Walt's mouth. "Suit yourself, Seattle boy. Your inexperience shows in some areas."

Edwin shouldered past him on the trail, brushing against Walt as he moved by. The brief, solid contact of another body, even one to whom he felt hostile, was strange after so many days in the wilderness with only rocks, branches, tools, and dirt under his hands.

When he reached Dawson, Edwin headed immediately to Northern. Albert was not there, so he visited him at his home. Upon finding him there, he entered and sat, trying not to stare at the stove and bed. Those were amenities to him now.

They quickly evened out their money—Edwin had made much more than either of them had expected, so he shared some of the gold dust.

“By the way, since I am working the claim every day, we should travel to Forty Mile and add my name to the claim,” Edwin nodded.

Albert hemmed for a moment and leaned back. “It will take a while to travel, and my days off are few.”

“Are you working for Walt today?”

“No, but...” Albert hesitated.

“Anything you can tell an old friend?” Edwin coaxed.

Albert smiled. “I’m seeing Rosie later today.” That explained why he seemed to be dressed up even fancier than usual. Edwin had just assumed that he was going out on the town to enjoy some show at an opera house or theater.

Edwin straightened up in his chair and smiled. “Well, why didn’t you say that? I’ll take my leave, then.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Albert assured him but stood up nonetheless. “I didn’t wish to cause you any... reason for envy.”

Edwin laughed. “You need not concern yourself,” he told Albert. “I am married to my sluice box!” They shared a moment’s laughter before Edwin added, “But I’m glad for you.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you next week, I’m sure,” Albert assured him.

Before Edwin knew it, he’d been politely ushered out to the street again. He shook his head and headed to the store to pick up supplies with the remainder of his gold dust, thinking about everything that had transpired that day.

The trudge back to his camp provided plenty more opportunities for thought. Walt’s words were haunting him now. He knew that, technically, he could be found trespassing on Albert’s property, but a quick visit to Albert would clear it up if anyone came to check claims. Others could not trespass, and he had never spotted any thieves working his mines in the night. Perhaps Walt was just trying to make him feel paranoid and cause him to lose more sleep. By now, it seemed a real possibility.

Several weeks full of solitary work and sweat (and a few unkind thoughts about his childhood friend) later, Walt showed up at his camp again. By then,

Edwin had had just about enough. He'd had weeks of fretting about Walt, wondering what he meant and whether it could hint at any harm to him. Now, he was showing up on his claim again?

"I think you should stop seeing me," Edwin decided to flatly address Walt, hoping to cut off any further conversation. Walt's laughter was not the response he expected. He furrowed his brow, an angry outburst ready to come out any moment, before Walt cut him off with a raised hand.

"I apologize. As much as I would enjoy another tirade from you, Seattle boy, it may be difficult not to see you given our proximity."

"Your claim is—"

"That one and half of this one."

Edwin honestly didn't know what he meant for the first few moments. He stared at him, then just shook his head. "You will have to be clearer in meaning."

Walt waved a hand at the land behind Edwin. "Albert has decided that city life suits him better. Rather than let him disappoint you, I offered to immediately purchase his half of this claim. I know I should have consulted you first, but... I assumed it would be better than being left without a partner."

Edwin sat down heavily on the log by his campfire site. *Albert? He's out?* After Edwin exhausted one hole completely of gold, the wealth had slowed. Had Albert decided that it wasn't profitable enough? Was he bored? Was he trying some fancy trick?

"Due to the complicated situation, I have arranged to visit Forty Mile with him tomorrow, preferably with your company, if you are agreeable to the situation. The registration will need to be changed."

Edwin shook his head slowly. "No—yes, I mean. Forty Mile. I can visit." No exposed gold at the moment meant he could leave the site safely without worrying about thieves. "Why did Albert... leave?"

For perhaps the first time since they'd met, Walt's expression was soft, even sympathetic. "For the past few weeks, I suspected it would happen. He has been occupied with city life and all its pleasures. Particularly of the female variety."

I should have known. "Men and their vices," Edwin muttered—by which, of course, he meant other men. The ones who courted and married women, who felt true affinity to them and a desire to raise a family with them and wished

their time be taken up by them. He had never been like that, and he had not even felt that way about men.

All he wanted was someone who wouldn't leave him.

"Every fucking time," Edwin muttered, then stood up, trying to shake it off. "My... new claim partner, then." He held out a hand.

Walt returned the handshake firmly, then reached out to touch his shoulder. "I will work this claim with you for the next week or so, see where you are. I can bring in some of my equipment. If you operate it while I'm in town, I assume we can come to a similar fifty-fifty arrangement as you held with Albert."

"I'd rather..." Edwin started, then trailed off.

Walt jerked his chin. "Be direct."

"I'd rather a partner who is present with me. I want someone to stay with me," Edwin admitted. He cleared his throat, then shifted on his feet. "It's... a lot of work. Even with equipment, work will go much faster with two. Though... I understand if the store takes up time."

"My hope was that the extra profits from this claim would cover the cost of hiring another man to work as a clerk at the store," Walt admitted. "That would free me up to accompany you in this. I plan to hire a man tomorrow. This is where I started, and working here is... what I enjoy most." Walt sank down to squat by the fire, which was scarcely needed in this heat except for producing cooked meals and tea.

"Why run the store, then?" Edwin could hardly believe they were having a civil conversation after having exchanged barbs at arm's length for so long.

"Good way to invest my gold. Smarter than most other ways."

Edwin nodded. "Makes sense, I guess." He resisted the urge to make a remark about fleecing new prospectors for their gold.

"I'll let you be for the day, then," Walt told him. "Meet us at the store at eight. Albert said he'd get up early." He looked dubious.

Edwin cracked a grin. "At least that hasn't changed." He rose to his feet again, assessing Walt for a moment before holding out a hand. They might never like each other, but they could be cordial to one another.

"Pleasure to properly meet you," Walt said as he shook Edwin's hand. His callused palm instilled Edwin with confidence that he'd be far more reliable as

a claim partner. If they didn't kill each other, they could easily get twice the gold out of this ground.

"And yourself. See you at eight," Edwin answered.

"Don't be late, Seattle boy, or this claim's mine." Walt dropped his hand and walked off, leaving Edwin watching him for a few moments. He didn't think Walt was serious, but then... he could well be. He wasn't going to take any chances.

It turned out that Albert and Walt were both on time, as was Edwin. They didn't exchange much conversation on the journey to Forty Mile. Edwin couldn't blame Albert for not wanting to be stuck in the middle of the barely-concealed bitterness between Walt and himself, though he'd expected more chattiness out of him.

The registration seemed confusing at first since they had to transfer it from Albert's name to split between Edwin and Walt, but it turned out to be little trouble. It was more relieving than Edwin had expected to be officially a half-owner of the claim on the title as well as in practice, though he had hardly expected it to be under these circumstances. They reached town in time for supper.

As they approached Main Street, Edwin looked at the other two. "I'm eating in town," he told them. "Would either of you care to join me?"

"I can't." Albert shook his head. "See you, friend." Before Edwin could really respond, he was hurrying off down the street.

"Well," Edwin murmured and gazed after him. "Must have a pretty girl waiting."

Walt didn't react to that comment, just shook his head. "I have plans. I can highly recommend the fresh fish at the saloon 'round the corner, though."

"Sure about that? I might test that out," Edwin told him.

Walt nodded. "Don't sleep in tomorrow, Seattle boy. It's an early morning of hauling ahead of us."

Stay calm. We're working together now. Edwin gritted his teeth, then let out a sigh. "Sure. I won't. Tomorrow, then." After Walt walked off, he made his way to the restaurant and saloon Walt had told him about to try the fish and enjoy a drink on the town.

The bar was even more crowded than most in this town with men of all kinds—some dressed in their finest clothes, while others were in patched shirts with suspenders about as dirty as they could get. The cleaner ones were more common, though. Most of the townsmen wore a good hat or had nicely-trimmed hair and mustaches. Only the prospectors seemed to have beards.

Edwin self-consciously rubbed a hand across his face, then moved for a table. When a young man came over to take his order, he asked for the fish dinner and a pint. As soon as he left, Edwin hardly had time to settle back in his chair. "Hello, friend." Edwin heard a voice that he recognized from somewhere.

He glanced up, then smiled at the fresh-faced, blond man in front of him. "Charlie. Hello."

"Mind if I join you?" Charlie was holding a pint of his own beer.

"I'd be pleased to have you." Edwin nodded his thanks as he was promptly brought a beer, then sipped it. "How has the summer treated you?"

"About as well as can be expected. The rush is slowing, but people are leaving, too. They always need help with their bags. And even the ones staying here need my services sometimes."

Edwin felt uncomfortable at the open discussion of what else Charlie did, so he cleared his throat. "Glad it's going well for you."

"What about you? Struck it rich yet?" Charlie asked, good-natured enough.

"Just about. Took out more gold than I thought my first few weeks, but it's slowed. I just got a new prospecting partner, though. He bought my old partner's half of the claim, and he has more equipment. Not hydraulics, but just about as good as you can get up here, he said." Edwin sighed, thinking of the learning curve. If it would save the back-breaking labor of digging up ground, though, he was in favor of it.

"Who's your new partner?"

"Walt Kennedy... *the* Walt Kennedy."

Charlie whistled softly and leaned back in his chair. "You must have done something right." Then, something seemed to click in his mind, and he straightened up again. "This old partner of yours, who was he?"

"Albert Brown. He works at Northern."

"Oh, I know Albert," Charlie murmured, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. "Mm."

Edwin knew enough to know when something wasn't right. "Yes?" he prompted. "I sense you may have heard something I should know."

"No, no," Charlie said quickly—too quickly. "Well, I'm glad for you that you're working with Walt. The man's bad luck with others does not extend to his finances. He's a charm for everyone else." He glanced over to a man who had walked in, then back to Edwin. "Work beckons. I'll let you enjoy your supper in peace," he said.

That's a mystery in itself, then. Edwin nodded. "See you around, Charlie." When he'd left, he shook his head, settling back to think and wait for supper. Even by the time he'd finished and headed back to his modest cabin, he could hardly imagine what was meant by all these riddles—Albert's sudden abandonment of him and the claim, his unwillingness to speak to him, Walt's friendlier demeanor but apparent bad luck, and something that Charlie knew. If it meant gold for him, he wouldn't question a thing.

The next morning was at least as full of work as Walt had promised, if not more. They had to dig to entrench the steam pipes, set up the fires to heat up the water and produce the steam, and set up a bigger sluice, since Walt told him they'd be digging up more dirt than they'd know what to do with.

For the most part, Edwin followed Walt's lead. His skill and knowledge showed in every metal pipe he twisted together with expert hands and each tidbit of information he left Edwin about why he was doing certain things. He still couldn't imagine exactly how to work all of this machinery, but he planned to watch Walt at work so that he'd learn how to do it himself.

There was something undeniably attractive about the man, especially when he was shirtless in the heat, sweat droplets trickling down his spine as his muscles flexed while they lifted, carried, and positioned equipment. Edwin hated himself for being so attracted to the man he most disliked, but a morbid fascination led him to take more glances than he needed to. His intention was not impure, but it wasn't strictly pure either, so he tried to put it out of his mind.

"Does this take the gold out much faster?" he finally asked Walt as they took a break to drink some cool creek water and splash it over their foreheads. The early July heat was getting to him more quickly than Walt, so he was glad that Walt had decided to have a break before Edwin grew sick from the heat.

"Night and day."

"Well, I was turning up plenty of gold by hand," he told Walt, his chest swelling with pride. *My claim's a good one.*

"But then it dried up?"

How did he know? Edwin frowned.

"You're green. You think there's a nice, juicy vein of gold that runs from the creek clear up to the hill. You think it's just a matter of digging along the vein, pulling out gold all the way." Walt wore a small smile and an air of disdain as he shook his head. "It ain't what they advertised in the outfitters' down in Seattle, boy. It's scattered all around. You have to blast it all up. Water jets are our next step. Spray it all down." Walt scooped water and let it run down his chest and back until he was cool.

Edwin bit his lip and glanced around the property. What if Walt was wrong?

"I've dug up half a dozen claims in this area. Three turned up nothing. One had a bit. One had placer gold only. Then there was mine, right next to this one. I know the gold in this hill," Walt told him. "If you want half of nothing, go ahead. But, you could listen to me and get half of a lot more."

Edwin finally sighed, wiping his wet hands through his hair. "Fine. I don't know what possessed you to take this over, other than the desire for more shiny dust in your pockets, but I concede that you know more about this hillside than I do."

"Only that?" Walt laughed. "This hill? All the goddamn world and the living I've done, and I know more about this hill, huh? You must think very little of me to think I'd be seeking more gold when I already have enough." He stepped out of the river and shook his torso like a dog to flick off water droplets.

Edwin hesitated and shrugged, shaking water off his hands into the river before stepping out, too.

In a flash, Walt turned on him and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, pushing him until his back was to the creek, his feet in the water. It was no real threat, the bottom being as shallow as it was and the current barely there, but the action was still a shock. He hadn't driven Walt to harsh words or blows yet.

Edwin's heart was pounding as he was held in place more by Walt's fierce stare underneath furrowed brows than by his fist. "What—"

"You know nothing about me. It's safe to say you should never assume anything about me, boy," Walt said, speaking slowly and clearly as if trying to

rein in his own temper. "Learn to appreciate a good thing when it stares you in the face." The hair along his forearms rippled as his muscles tightened. Then he hauled Edwin forward and away from the river before letting go, turning, and walking back up the hill towards the steam pipes.

Edwin stumbled forward, keeping his balance and staring after the broad-shouldered, stocky man. He felt almost sick to his stomach. Had he truly driven Walt to rage by implying that he was in this claim for the money alone? It was true, wasn't it? It wasn't like that was a bad thing—they were all there for gold.

The rest of the day was quiet, as was the rest of that week as Walt began to show Edwin how to keep the steam flowing and the ground thawing, how to dig up the dirt most efficiently, and how to sift for even fine gold particles. Each night, well before sunset, he'd trudge back to town for the night, and Edwin would be left with the oddly disquieting silence of the woods around him, only the sounds of miners a few miles away, felling trees or shouting in the early evening, breaking the silence.

Rather than feeling energized each morning, he felt anxious and restless until Walt arrived. It took him a few more days before he realized that he was used to the company now and being alone was unsettling. Walt's presence was spoiling him, and he was sure Walt would leave him any day now and return to work at the store. They spoke no more of the incident at the creek.

Not long after dawn one morning, as the short northern summer started to draw to a close, Edwin heard Albert's voice hollering his name. He dropped his shovel and hurried up the hillside towards the trail and the cabin. Walt didn't seem as surprised as he was, and he didn't follow.

"Albert," Edwin called when he was close, then ducked around the cabin to find Albert waiting there for him. "Hello."

"Edwin, my friend." Albert was dressed in good clothes and looked comically out of place in the woods. "I have news."

A baby? A marriage? Edwin nodded to encourage him to go on.

"Well..." Albert took the hat off his head and started to turn it about in his hands, a particularly nervous mannerism Edwin remembered. "I, er... an apology, first. I will have made right with God only once I have admitted to you that I was not a good friend."

"You have always—" Edwin tried to reassure him, frowning. He stopped when he saw Albert hold up a hand.

"In more ways than you know, I do not deserve you as a friend. The gold dust... well. Gold fever struck me. It drives a man mad," Albert emphasized. "I cannot stay here any longer."

At the claim? "Oh." *Up north.* Edwin rubbed a hand across his forehead. "Oh, I see."

"I leave today."

"Today?" Edwin exclaimed, unable to help the strength of his response. "I—I had no idea."

"My deepest apologies," Albert sighed, then shook his head. "I must be off to pack. I will write," he promised, "or send a message by wire when they put in service next year."

Edwin didn't know what he could do except reach out to hug Albert. In a few sentences, his only friend in the North—the man he'd come north for, who had seemingly become a stranger over just a few weeks—had changed everything. "Is that why you sold the claim?"

"Among other reasons."

Albert looked guilty as he pulled back from the hug, so Edwin assured him, "All is forgiven. Where will you go?"

"Chicago. I will start a new life," Albert told him with a smile. "I have saved enough to return a richer man."

Edwin reached out to take his hand and squeeze it. "I hope you find your dreams in your new life."

"And you." Albert nodded. "I can think of no one who deserves it more than you. I hope you find what you most need and what you most desire."

Edwin shook Albert's hand, then leaned in for another quick, tight hug. "We will meet again," he promised.

"We will." Albert drew back, then raised a hand to wave. "Good-bye for now, Edwin."

Once Albert disappeared from sight altogether, Edwin lowered his hand from waving and settled down on the log by his cooking fire. Now that Albert was gone, what kept him here? The gold fever alone. He would put all the strength he had into finding gold to earn Walt's respect and the dust he needed to restart his own life.

"He's gone, isn't he?"

Edwin hadn't even heard Walt approach, but he stayed seated. "Yes," he murmured back. *Pull it together. Time to get to work.*

"Condolences," Walt said, walking up behind him and squeezing his shoulder momentarily before sinking down to sit on the log next to him.

Edwin didn't protest or stand up like he normally might have, just turned his head to glance over at Walt. "Did you know?"

"He quit yesterday and told me he had to go. I thought he might have told you earlier, but..." Walt trailed off with a small sigh. "Glad he did now, at least."

Edwin shook his head. "They never tell you why. It's always just... somewhere else to be." *Oh, fuck, no. I'm not going to spill my guts to the man who hates me.*

After a long few moments of watching him oddly, Walt reached out to bump Edwin's arm with his fist. "Hey, let's take the rest of the day off and walk to town. I'll take you for dinner."

This wasn't what he'd expected to hear, but Edwin nodded. After meals of potatoes and rice, beans and salted pork, it was always a rare luxury to have supper in town. Even if Walt was feeling sorry for him, it was an excuse for a free dinner.

"All right," Edwin agreed, straightening up. "Let me change my shirt."

Walt nodded and waited as Edwin went into the cabin to change into a cleaner shirt, at least, then accompanied him along the trail towards town. They both knew the route by heart but pretended to be focusing on how to get there so they didn't have to make much conversation. The silence between them was comfortable, perhaps for the first time in the months they'd worked together.

When they finally reached the edge of town, it seemed closer to the creek than ever. New cabins and buildings had gone up around the edges of the town since Edwin's last visit, and he'd given up trying to figure out who anyone was. The population was simply too great now.

"I need to have a word with one of my men at the store," Walt told him. "You go on and wait for me." He gestured at the restaurant across from Northern, and Edwin nodded.

As he walked in, a woman greeted him and found him a table. He already planned to have the clam chowder, but he waited for Walt to join him.

It was little surprise to him when he saw Charlie approaching the table, but Edwin still smiled. *Still kicking around, then. He must make a fine living here.* "Hello."

"Edwin," Charlie nodded. "Hello. How goes the search?"

"It goes well. Walt has taught me steam thawing, and we are making remarkable progress," Edwin smiled. "And yours?"

"I never come up dry," Charlie told him, leaning against the table. "I heard that Albert left on the ship today." Edwin frowned and folded his arms, and Charlie sighed. "Sorry. That was hardly a soothing compress."

"Not really," Edwin agreed. Because his curiosity was piqued, he couldn't help but ask, "So, last time we met... what was that about Walt?" He glanced at the doorway, then Charlie. "If honor permits you to share."

"He would not like it," Charlie told him, sliding a little closer on the table. He needed no more encouragement, though—the glint of good gossip was in his eye. Charlie leaned down to murmur, "They had a public disagreement. Walt told Albert that his morals were slipping, that he was going to cheat a good man and a good friend if he continued on this path. He demanded that Albert give you justice and admit to God what he'd done."

The story hardly seemed plausible, but it would at least explain how Walt had ended up with the share so suddenly. "What was Albert going to do?" Edwin murmured back.

"My guess—your name was not on the share. He could have claimed everything on the land for himself."

Edwin's cheeks heated with indignation. "Albert wouldn't—" he spoke up loudly.

"Great men have done worse for less," Charlie told him, his voice still soft. It made Edwin go quiet as he started to remember Walt's subtle words. They hadn't been threats at all—perhaps they had been warnings. Walt had seen this entire situation unfold from the first moment he'd arrived.

Edwin finally just shook his head. "Thank you. I had no idea."

"Walt would never have told you. He gave up a year's wages for that claim, simply so that Albert couldn't take that dream from you," Charlie told him. *And before we started to extract that gold, he didn't know how much there was. There could have been nothing there,* Edwin added. *He could have given that up for nothing.*

Edwin didn't bother to ask how Charlie knew all this. In any city, those who knew the most were women and occasionally men in Charlie's line of work. He felt almost sick again now that he realized how much Walt had given up and how unlikely it would have been for Walt to ever tell him. All this time, he'd thought Walt conniving, not concerned. Walt was too good of a man to boast of what he had done. "Thank you," Edwin said again, quietly.

When Walt entered, Charlie stood up straight again. "Come to town more often, and I can show you the sights," he offered with a smile. "You would be surprised how much has changed since your arrival."

"I will remember your offer," Edwin promised. "Good-bye, Charlie."

Walt sat down once Charlie had left, cast a glance after him, then looked at Edwin. It was clear that he thought that interaction had been far different from the reality. Perhaps he even wondered if he was being tricked into anything.

"I know what he does, and I have no interest in it, but I won't judge him for it," Edwin told him outright. "He is a good man." He had swiftly decided not to tell him what he had heard from Charlie. Embarrassing him would not be kind.

Walt settled again, his shoulders sinking. "I know him. What I've heard would seem to confirm that. I spoke about supplies with my men at the store. I have some reserved for us to carry back to the claim."

"What sort?" Edwin asked, quickly distracted by the news.

"Tools to help insulate the cabin for the autumn. The summer months are nearly gone. With both of us working together, we can ready it for winter next week, or the week after, in perhaps three full days."

"Only three days?"

"Or four," Walt nodded, and Edwin laughed. In response to the laugh, Walt's lips curled up in a smile that warmed his face and made Edwin's stomach churn with pleasure.

"You seem confident, but I will believe you in this as in everything else," Edwin agreed. Conversation quickly turned to the details of how they would protect the cabin against the elements, and Edwin noted that, from the way Walt spoke, he intended to stay there. Edwin fell asleep dreaming of the close companionship that winter might bring.

The familiarity of weeks passing in Walt's daily company seemed entirely good, and Edwin paid little attention to his complacency. To his mind, the man's newfound respect for him was long overdue. Now that they found themselves conversing over work and sharing tidbits of knowledge about the land or the creatures upon it, life was far more comfortable. Walt occasionally checked on the men he'd hired to work on his discovery claim who stayed in that cabin, but they seemed far more self-sufficient in their knowledge of the job, to Edwin's shame.

If Edwin suspected that Walt thought as much of him at night, when Walt walked back to town to check up on the store after work most evenings, and Edwin slept in the rough cabin, he never said. Nor did Walt try to bring up the subject of Albert's absence. Nonetheless, they were perhaps as open and agreeable to one another as they ever had been when the accident occurred.

Edwin didn't even see it coming as he grabbed the steam valve handle to pull it open, gradually releasing the pressure from the steam driven to the hole from the boiler on Walt's property so they could dig up the thawed earth. It was no different than he had done many times before, but their conversation had him thinking about matters other than his job.

"If I could travel to another city," Walt mused over the question Edwin had posed, "I suppose it would be... New York City."

"Why?" They both waited for the earth to thaw enough for digging.

Walt made a huffing sound that meant he didn't like the way Edwin made him think about his answers. By now, Edwin knew it wasn't a serious threat. "Life there is about as different from here as possible, and it's on the east coast. I don't know anyone on that coast."

"Fair enough," Edwin agreed. "I have often thought of moving there," he admitted.

"Well, I'll let you know if I plan to move there," Walt told him. "A train from Vancouver to Montreal would be slow alone, and splitting a sea passage south from Montreal would be more tolerable with you than an unknown stranger."

"I'm glad I'm more tolerable than a stranger if New York life beckons," Edwin laughed as he gripped the handle to release the steam again. This time, the wind direction had changed. It was blowing the wrong way, meaning that a cloud of near-boiling steam would scald him directly with no chance of escape.

He'd only realize it later, but as he twisted the handle, the last thing he was aware of was a gust of cold wind against his face, the hiss of released air, and then... impact, and a warm body atop his own, and a sharp rock pressing into his spine.

Edwin grimaced at the sensation and jerked upwards, reaching under himself to cushion his back. The move pressed his body against Walt's, his mind spinning. Walt hadn't hesitated for a moment to throw himself atop Edwin and cushion him from the steam.

The sensation was most strange for Edwin—the man he'd more than once harbored a secret momentary desire for was suddenly far closer to his personal space than he ever had been, and he didn't mind it at all. Their chests pressed together through thick shirts, and Walt's gloved hand still rested atop his shoulder, their faces scarce inches apart. Walt had shaved last week, but already, his stubble grew in quickly, and Edwin could have sworn he'd felt the scrape of it against his cheek during the impact.

With the danger behind them, Walt pushed himself to his feet again and offered Edwin a hand. When Edwin was foolish enough to take it, Walt pushed him back down to the ground and stood atop him with a foot on either side of his legs, fury in his expression.

"If you cannot hold a conversation and concentrate on avoiding death or disfigurement, we will not talk from this point on, you idiotic Seattle boy!"

Edwin pushed himself into a sitting position, which made Walt take a step back to avoid having Edwin's face in his own private parts—as much as Edwin occasionally thought he would not mind that. "I didn't mean to."

"Of course you would not mean to, and then I would be responsible for your foolish actions," Walt snapped, but he offered a hand again, and this time, he pulled Edwin to his feet and brushed a hand quickly across his back to clean off twigs and dirt particles that his clothes had picked up from the ground. The touches felt sinfully good to Edwin, and he tried to see them as the touches of a good friend who was concerned about his safety.

"I'm sorry," he told Walt honestly, reaching out to take his arm. "I am."

Walt took a breath and let it out, then slowly shook his head. "As am I. You are new to this. I ought to have watched you more closely." Now that Walt mentioned it, he hadn't made eye contact since the conversation about moving had begun.

"Why weren't you watching?" Edwin inquired. "What made you lost in thought?"

Walt hesitated, then sighed, watching the pipes cool down. "I was thinking of what it would be like to move. I would leave everything I knew, unless I were lucky enough to have a companion like..." he hesitated again.

Edwin raised his eyebrows.

"Like you," Walt finished.

Edwin had not expected this answer. "Oh," he murmured, then smiled slightly. "I would be honored. If my time to leave this godforsaken territory is the same as yours, we can travel together."

"I did not wish to ask directly," Walt admitted, but he was smiling a little now. "It seemed impudent for one without a monopoly on your attention like Rosie had on Albert."

Edwin laughed, quashing the uncomfortable feeling that rose within him. *Don't let him discover me.* "I have no one with such a monopoly, so I am free to make such a contract. Furthermore, since the contract was made *before* any future monopoly, it will remain valid for longer," he assured Walt with a playful slap of his back.

Walt stumbled for a moment but laughed, too. "Cunning. Then I shall promise the same in return, friend."

Friend. The word held all the significance Edwin could have imagined that it, and several other words, could hold. To his knowledge, Walt had never referred to his having another friend in this town, and his reputation was such that Edwin knew he was unlikely to have any in secret.

In return, now that Albert was gone, Walt was the only one Edwin would count as a true friend. Even if they hadn't spoken at length about many matters, they constantly discovered new topics of conversation but did not try to rush into them all at once. There was a sense of having a lifetime to converse—except, perhaps, during this stage of their prospecting.

Once Walt deemed it best to switch to building, in case an early frost should catch them by surprise, two days passed in a flurry of activity as they worked in tandem to insulate the cabin with the best materials available from nature and a sense of determination. A well-insulated space was life or death in the Klondike, and neither of them wanted to risk anything else.

They both slept on the floor in sleeping bags, since the bed and rudimentary furniture had to be moved outside while they worked. They still changed separately and did not speak much in the mornings, but Edwin was comfortable with the routine.

On the third day, they spent the full day insulating the floor. Only when the sun set did they stop to carry the furniture inside, and they had to shrug on sweaters and hats. Even in this autumn month, a bitterly chilly night haunted them after the heat of the day.

Walt grunted once the furniture was in place, tugged at the knitted cap on his head, then looked around. "Looks like my first cabin did, a year or two back." Moments where he spoke of his past were rare, so Edwin stayed quiet to hear what came next. "I shared it with a man named Will. He left and took more than his share to gamble not even six months later, but those first six months..." Walt trailed off, sinking to sit on the bed frame.

Edwin came to sit next to him. "I had someone leave me once, too. Never offered a reason, really. When you asked what I was running from when I came here... that was it."

Walt sat just inches away, his shirt soaked with sweat and clinging to that defined, barrel-like chest. He looked like a statue, but the words that came from him were poetry.

"We're found all over, aren't we? Not in the big cities, but in the tiniest towns at the edges of the earth. We push back the corners of the map," Walt told him, his husky voice all that Edwin could hear in the silence of the cabin. He glanced over to meet Edwin's gaze from so close, not moving back or standing. "We don't just run away, though. We run *to*."

"Run to what?" Edwin felt compelled to ask, his lips parting. Walt's eyes wouldn't look away from his. The air between them felt too thick to cut with a knife, and the prospect of moving away seemed like walking through molasses.

"You tell me," Walt murmured. "You came here as one of many. What drove you?"

Edwin didn't have time to carefully choose his words. "I sought gold, of course. But I think I found it, regardless of how much this claim gives us."

Walt seemed to consider his answer carefully, then nodded. "I thought I struck gold twice. Only the second time, it left for Seattle and took my profits from the first time. I've been a lot more careful since then. I didn't wish to find

gold a third time until I was certain it would last a lifetime. I find myself... willing to make that a certainty now that I know the way that other men in Seattle think.”

“What way is that?”

“Open. Trusting. Honest to a fault, but willing to admit fault,” Walt murmured. “Edwin, you are not your mother city.”

“And you are not what the rumor-mongers said, Walt.” *I hardly know what to do. This isn't a ruse, is it?* Edwin doubted it, though. The honesty was in the way Walt's steady hands fidgeted against one another.

Edwin embarked upon the most significant journey of his life, with perhaps the greatest risk, when he reached out to take one of Walt's hands, soothing it from fidgeting by wrapping his own around it. “A lifetime would be easy to spend in your company.”

Walt's hands went still, and he watched Edwin's expression. “When I saw you with Charlie...”

“You were jealous.” Edwin made sure his tone was not one of accusation, but a simple statement of fact.

It took tremendous effort for Walt to put aside his pride and nod. “I was,” he admitted. “But then I realized... I hadn't made a claim.”

“I would give you the right,” Edwin said, his own voice a husky whisper. Walt's body was strong, his spirit stronger, but his heart was the iron that sealed the deal. Edwin's attraction was impossible to ignore any longer, and from Walt's words, the older, gruffer, even wiser man was apparently feeling the same.

“And I you.” Walt watched him carefully, their hands still clasped, then leaned in to press the first kiss in so many months against Edwin's lips, and Edwin's eyes fell closed. The warmth of Walt's lips stoked the fire of need within him, and Edwin quickly reached to run a hand along Walt's side, then across his back as their lips caressed one another's.

Edwin's touch was returned, as Walt's hands broke free from his to run up along his arms then squeeze his shoulders. He sank back against the sleeping bag on the frame, letting Walt shift until his weight blanketed him. They were both acting impulsively, and neither of them seemed to give a care to any other concerns as Walt leaned down over him.

For a near-stranger of whom Edwin knew so little, he trusted Walt completely. Perhaps it was because his past lover was a man he'd known the full history of, yet he had known nothing of his character until he had left. Walt had shared little about himself, but the parts of Walt that Edwin knew, he counted far more valuable than any reciting of biographical facts.

Edwin raised his arms, crossing his wrists above his head. Walt had him completely helpless, and a far lesser man would have taken advantage of the moment. Instead, Walt leaned down to cup Edwin's cheek with a hand, running his thumb along it before gently pressing another kiss to his lips.

They had as much time as they pleased and as many nights as they could spare together to explore, but that didn't stop Edwin wanting to do so now. It had been a while since Edwin had first felt the attraction, even if it had originally manifested as an intense urge to shy away from being vulnerable once more.

"Edwin," Walt whispered, which made him open his eyes. The scruff across his face made for a gorgeous, lightly bearded look now, and Edwin resisted the urge to touch Walt's face in return.

"Yes?"

"Since Will left... it's been months. Over a year..."

"For me, too," Edwin assured him. "Since Louis left me."

Walt nodded. "But you're certain about this?"

"Let me lay my claim, too," Edwin told him, his voice low. He certainly didn't wish to startle Walt off, after all.

The appeal worked, and Walt smiled, his gruff exterior cracking once more to show the softer side of him that so rarely shone through. "Of course." He kissed Edwin again, their mouths open, and the tips of their tongues starting to tease each other once more.

Edwin had never known such heat. The past times he fell into bed with someone seemed cold in comparison to the intensity with which he wanted to see them naked against each other, wanted Walt to kiss him and caress him and fuck him with the same tender, skilled care he showed in everything else. To have those gentle hands around him forever was a privilege.

Now, Walt focused on unbuttoning his own shirt and then Edwin's, sliding them off one at a time. Between clothing items, he pressed more kisses to

Edwin's lips, then to his neck and chest. He started to tease elsewhere, his tongue flicking across the skin of his collarbone and the top of his shoulder, the sensitive parts of his throat, and behind his ear.

Edwin moaned before long, losing track of his thoughts in favor of his senses. He was unable to resist reaching out to wrap his arms around Walt's bare back before unfolding them to run down across his skin until his fingertips caressed the rounded cheeks of Walt's bottom. What a fine one it was, too.

"Nnh," Walt breathed in return, so Edwin caressed and even squeezed lightly, kneading the muscled flesh before letting his fingers trail down to Walt's thighs. His hands slipped further up as Walt scooted down the bed frame and Edwin frowned.

Walt's purpose quickly became clear. The burn of hair bristles against his chest felt just fine after his hot breath ghosted across Edwin's nipple, followed by the dart of his wet tongue and then supple lips.

"Oh, God," Edwin groaned his approval, gazing down at the sight of that weather-beaten face paying such close attention to him. Walt kept teasing and tormenting that nub of flesh as every fiber of his body started to heat up, the nervous tension flooding him. A half-hysterical need for release was close at hand, especially when Walt switched to the other nipple, then lapped his way down his torso and back up to kiss him again as he slid their pants off.

They couldn't get naked fast enough for Edwin. He gazed down Walt's body, admiring it anew once no clothes covered it. The addition of his erect penis to their heated situation matched Edwin's own body's response, and as their cocks brushed together, even more nerves seemed to send a small electric shock through him.

Walt's stifled groan told him that he'd noticed that, so Edwin reached between their bodies to wrap a hand around both of their erections at once, slowly thrusting his hips up against Walt's body and gazing into his eyes to enjoy each little reaction to the movement. The way the skin around Walt's eyes crinkled with pleasure and his lips tightened spurred Edwin on to thrust against him two or three times more, until their skin felt too hot and tight.

Walt wet his fingers, wasting little time now in reaching between Edwin's legs to press up inside him. Edwin willingly responded by opening his legs further, still lazily thrusting against the sensitive flesh held against his own and enjoying the rush of heat this produced within him. The late summer night suddenly felt like the heat of midsummer day within him, and he knew he had to be sweating already.

Walt's other arm tenderly wrapped around him like he was protecting him, and he was watching Edwin's expression for signs of pain. Instead, Edwin only felt pleasure, eager for something thicker and less flexible than the fingers currently ensuring his comfort.

When Walt drew his fingers out, Edwin's breath caught. His heart still hammered within his chest, but the intensity of his desire to make his mark on this man—a man who had turned out to be his long-sought fortune—overcame any nerves.

Moments later, Walt gently unwrapped his fingers from around their cocks and reached up to kiss them, and Edwin's heart could have melted at the move. Walt noticed the effect that had had and smiled, taking hold of his own cock and wetting it some more.

The hot, thick tip pressed against his opening and quickly slid into Edwin, and Edwin let out a breath, his eyes fluttering closed briefly. It was a strange sensation after all this time, but he had hardly realized how much he craved it until now. The wait had been worth it, even if only partly intentional.

"Oh, you feel..." Walt trailed off, his words seemingly escaping him once he was fully seated deeply inside Edwin, completely filling him.

Edwin grinned, then wrapped his hands around Walt's hips. "Come on, Walt."

"Don't push your luck, Seattle boy," Walt murmured, but the playful return of the nickname that had long incensed Edwin only made him smile now. He set himself into a slow, careful rhythm at first and then sped up, his hips thrusting in measured, deep motions.

Every time he pushed inside, Edwin felt a burst of pleasure deep inside, somehow under his own cock. He felt like he was swelling even further, the sensation always uniquely erotic. "Perfect," Edwin breathed out, opening his eyes again to watch Walt's muscled body at work.

His forearms were braced against Edwin and the bed frame, his stomach and buttocks rippling with each thrust. The sight almost made Edwin spill over the edge of pleasure instantly, but he held out for at least a short while longer before he couldn't help himself. The tipping point was when Walt's broad palm started to stroke his cock in time with the thrusts, adding to his pleasure until he could think of nothing else but Walt inside and around him.

"Walt," he breathed in warning, wrapping his arms tightly around his new partner as he clenched around him, his entire body giving the signal that Walt

was his own for life. He threw his head back against the sleeping bag, his groan loud and guttural. His cock spurted his passion with vigor and coated both their stomachs as it settled and softened, and his involuntary twitches and clenches had stopped.

It took just moments more before Walt followed with his own orgasm, his expression contorting in such genuine, bone-deep pleasure that Edwin momentarily lost his breath at the sight. His lips parted and those intense brows furrowed as he saw the same pleasure that Edwin himself had just had. He kept thrusting hard inside Edwin until he was done. His own body released the mark of his passion within Edwin, filling him with warmth and the satisfaction of their mutual bond—a bond forged of sweat, blood, and honesty from start to finish.

“Oh, Christ, Edwin,” Walt panted as he tried to catch his breath.

Edwin grinned, waiting as Walt’s cock slipped out of him and nestled between his thighs. “That was better than any scale-weight’s worth of work here,” he murmured.

Walt breathlessly grinned in return, resting his weight upon Edwin as their sticky, hot stomachs pressed together. “From both sides of the scale, I agree.”

They didn’t say much more for a few minutes, each of them recovering from the sky-high bliss they’d experienced together, but Edwin didn’t miss the way Walt wrapped an arm around his shoulders to keep him close. In return, he kept an arm around Walt’s waist. The easy comfort of sharing a bed came as a far lesser surprise than he ever could have anticipated.

At last, Walt murmured, “We’ll bathe in the river tomorrow, before dawn.”

“Naked?” Edwin teased.

“Do they bathe clothed in Seattle?” was Walt’s retort.

Edwin laughed, the happiness that radiated from every part of his being settled deep in his heart. “They don’t slip away to the woods for trysts in Seattle.”

“They’re missing out on the best part of life, then,” Walt murmured, and the sincerity beneath his words made Edwin release a breath with contentment.

Edwin nodded. “Let’s not tell them. Don’t want everyone rushing up here again.”

Walt made a quiet sound of agreement.

"Besides," Edwin whispered, catching Walt's attention again with the quieter tone, "they could never hope to strike it as rich as us."

Walt squeezed Edwin against him and nodded once. "God finally blessed us. If I'd only known what it would take..." He went quiet.

They shared a comfortable silence for a few more minutes, watching each other in the flickering light from the candle that burned upon the table.

Edwin just smiled back at him. "Work to be done. Get the candle?"

Walt grumbled but lifted himself enough to blow a quick, hard breath across the room. The candle flickered but didn't go out.

"Guess your candles are too high-quality," Edwin teased.

A laugh rumbled in Walt's belly but he lightly pushed Edwin's shoulder. "Impudent as ever," he scolded, blowing again. This time, the candle went out, and he settled down again in the darkness, drawing the roomy sleeping bag around their bodies until they nestled into it together.

"That's why you fell for me, though," Edwin murmured. He could feel Walt smile.

"Work to be done tomorrow," Walt told him. "Go to sleep, Edwin."

Edwin squeezed Walt and settled in his arms until his cheek was pressed to Walt's strong forearm. "Good night."

Walt murmured back, "Sleep well. May tomorrow bring riches."

As he drifted off in Walt's arms, Edwin could hardly have cared less what tomorrow brought; tonight's new claim was all he could think about. With a man like Walt at his side, they could weather rich or poor soil, winter storms and frost, and the heat of August days. If Walt someday left this corner of the map, Edwin would follow, and he was certain that the reverse would be true. For him, that was enough.

The End

Author Bio

I'm E. Davies, and I focus on writing hot M/M erotica and erotic romance. My stories range from alien fantasy erotica to sweet holiday romances. Everything has an erotic twist, so you don't have to worry about my stories "fading to black" when the going gets good!

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