

jenny

Big Boots of Pain

*I'm getting bored with it,
I tell the typewriter
this constantly walking around
in wet shoes and then, surprise!
Somehow DECEASED keeps getting
stamped in red over the word HOPE.*

Anne Sexton "The Big Boots of Pain."

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Chapter 1

Jobeth watched the lean man reading the card. He'd been there for over an hour, out on the hot street. At first she'd thought he was a slow reader, taking his time. Even her Marty could read faster though, an' he was only seven. There was something desolate about the man. The strange word echoed down the years, and she heard her ma explaining about the crying woman: *Hush, Jobeth, leave her be. She's gone an' lost her baby. She'll be desolate for a time.* That was how the rangy man was. Like a woman who'd lost a baby. She got distracted by a customer, Mr I'm-the-big-cheese-in-these-parts Lamar, and when she looked up again, he was gone.

The space where he'd stood for so long looked awful lonely still.

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Ennis read and reread the word until it made no sense, until it sounded like one of those frenchie languages Alma had sometimes dragged him to see at the drive-in. He'd played a game with his brother once: say fuck a hundred

times. They did, till it became remote and distant, a thing of mystery and power. Like deceased. Deceased, deceased, deceased.

He had to call. Heard the reproach and hostility in the widow's voice but no... was there no grief? *He* was at the bottom of a mineshaft and not coming out any time soon. She sounded like the sun still shone. Her own private, winter sun maybe, but still shinning.

He needed a drink so didn't have one. Didn't want to dilute memories. He'd need them now. They were all he had. Two high-altitude fucks a couple of times a year reduced to passing shadows in his mind. Time would dilute them enough without his help.

So for once he was thinking clearly, and the pain, cutting as it did, gave him especially sharp edges. He had the first thought of many that would drive him over the next few months and shape all the months that were to come: Who had stamped his card deceased? It wasn't a clever thought, one of those college-type questions his Junior could have asked. One year of high school didn't get you those kinda smarts. It was good enough though: Who had stamped his card deceased?

Surely the card would have been delivered to the little widow, all sympathy Ma'am and any thing we can do. Knowing of the deceased or not, they'd have delivered it. And, of course, it had his return address at the top. It always did.

So, on the back of that first question, another one clung heavy like a wet woolly carried over a swollen river. Why had they sent him back his card with that one word deceased? Just like in the fuck game, deceased was taking on a whole lot of other meanings now and none of them were good.

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Ennis wasn't a man for making decisions. It was why they'd been as they were: drifting, unhappy, living on the scraps of Brokeback Mountain and memory. He couldn't decide or commit. He did now though—even though it was too late. He knew that. Maybe he was committing to the ghost because he couldn't commit to the man.

He climbed into his truck and began to drive to Texas. Not something they'd ever discussed him doing. They only

existed on the mountain. What would they have been in the flatness of Texas?

He arrived late one evening. Stunned, looking at the house. He knew Jack had prospered, their fortunes contrasting more and more as the years progressed. Expensive coats, always new jeans and boots, but he hadn't mentioned it. The man inside was worn just the way Ennis liked him.

This was a rich man's house. He felt grubby and inadequate, but hell, he'd felt that all his life, even in his own damn place.

The bell played a jaunty tune. Like the widow, it seemed inappropriately alive.

A man opened the door, a bull, beer gut proud and beefy. "Can I help you, son?"

"Beggin' your pardon, Sir, looking for Mrs Twist." Could he say the name? He tried it on his tongue and it tasted just fine. "Jack's wife."

“I know who Mrs Twist is. Although I’m liking to think she’ll be dropping that dumb-ass name sometime soon. What would you be wanting with my littl’ gal?”

Ennis kept his eyes downcast. He knew their gaze was the only disconcerting thing about him. Jack had told him so. Jack had also said *keep your powder dry, Cowboy*, although they had not been talking about the impact of Ennis’s devastating stare. The memory of Jack beneath him, grunting *keep your power dry, Cowboy; I’m close to shooting here* made him struggle, and his reply was curt even for him. “Thinking I’ll be telling the lady that, if’n you don’t mind.”

“Well, son, see here’s the problem: I do mind. So, you’d oblige me by getting off my goddamned—.”

“Who is it, Daddy?”

“Now, Lureen, don’t you—.”

“Ennis Del Mar, Ma’am. I’m Ennis Del Mar, an’ I’ve come to express my... tell you how.... Can’t tell you how sorry I am, Ma’am. For your loss.”

Ennis did not miss the glance between father and daughter. He wasn't a talking man or a clever one, but he was observant and thoughtful. He hadn't expected open arms, but he felt a little like his card now: stamped deceased and returned.

The big man puffed out some more and said carefully to his daughter, "Where are your manners, girl? Invite Mr Del Mar in. He's come a long way."

They knew his name. They knew where he lived. Ennis wondered, as he stepped into the place where Jack had left no mark at all, what else they knew.

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There was coffee and a chair but he hadn't liked to sit. He remembered that later. Some talk about cremation he didn't want to remember and ashes. But he didn't know how it had happened yet and had to ask. They told him of a car and an accident, but he was a little tyke again, all of nine, hearing the drone of flies laying eggs where a man's penis had been and should be still.

They were watching him carefully, as well they might. He felt he was doing something inappropriate. Screaming. But he'd never screamed in his life and didn't know how to let so much sound escape all at once.

There was only one final question. He'd driven over a thousand miles to ask it after all. "You got my card, Ma'am?"

Again a flick of the eyes to the bigger man. "Yes."

"Uh huh. Well then, I'm just wondering, Mrs Twist, who stamped it deceased?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Who stamped it deceased?"

The bull snorted forward, which Ennis later reflected had been a mistake. "Look here, Mr Del Mar, or whatever your name is—."

"Why didn't you write what had happened? Why just send it back deceased?"

“I think it’s time you were on your way, son. There’s nothing here for you.”

No, Ennis reflected bitterly. There never had been.

He returned to his pick-up. Found a youngster leaning on it. For a moment, in the dark, he had a familiar twisting in his guts, but it wasn’t Jack. Just like him, though, with his big beauty.

“You’re Ennis.”

Ennis grunted into the so-familiar eyes. “You must be Bobby. I’m real sorry ‘bout your Daddy. I knew him a long time, and he was a good man.”

The boy kept his eyes fixed on Ennis, fifteen years of confidence didn’t give much. Just enough maybe. He slid once glance back to the house. “They didn’t want you to come.”

“Huh?”

“My Mom and Grandpappy. They talked about you. Said they had to stop you coming here.”

“Why? Jack was a good friend, son. I wanted to pay my respects, is all.”

Lips licked nervously. Less resemblance now. “He’s not dead, Mr Del Mar. That’s why.”

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“Bobby? You come on in now.”

The boy kept his eyes fixed on Ennis. “I know he’s not.”

“Look, son. My ma and pa died when I were just a mite, and I wanted them real bad to be—.”

“No!” Eyes becoming frantic as the mother jogged toward them. “Can I talk to you later! Please! He’s not dead!”

“Bobby!” She turned to Ennis and held out her hand. Clear dismissal and off my property.

Ennis couldn’t drag his eyes off the nails, red and thick like scarlet blood boils needing to be pricked. “Ma’am, I’d

appreciate to visit the family plot. Pay my last respects, then I'll be on my way. Can you direct me?"

She turned and pointed and began to recite lefts and rights, relief in her voice. Ennis turned to the boy. "Thank you, Ma'am. I'll get along there now. Stay a while, if'n I may. Till I'm clear in my mind."

The boy nodded imperceptibly and wandered off, teenage and pockets and slouch.

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He climbed into his truck, reversed and took the directions she'd given him. He wasn't thinking; that would come later. Halfway there he pulled over, climbed out and retched coffee into the dirt-brown grass at the side of the road. Some came up his nose, making him cough, tears spilling into his eyes. "*Goddamn you Jack Twist!* What the hell am I gonna do without you?"

What indeed? He had Jack's boy running across the burnt land to keep an appointment with him, his heart full of the grief and self-delusions of childhood loss. Ennis didn't know much, but he knew about loss.

The boy reached him, panting, and leant hands on thighs, recovering breath. "I'm due for supper. Can't stay long. Can you help, Mr Del Mar?"

Ennis wanted to comfort the boy like he would have Junior: a hand on an arm, one stroke of hair. Couldn't. Not right. Not with a boy. He thrust his hands into his pockets. "Ain't easy son, but it'll get better, I promise."

"No!" The boy's tongue tripped up in his haste to speak. "See, there weren't no car. It was a beating."

No news, this news. He felt like he'd been there, so vivid had it played in his mind. "It was a freak accident, son. He died tryin' to—."

"You're not listening to me! He didn't die!"

"Son, he was cremated. Ashes lying right here where we're standing."

"No! That was the man with him!"

Ennis's blood ran cold, cold as it had seeing the bear on Brokeback Mountain. He wanted to run now, too. "You're joshing me now, boy, and I don't need this crap. Not today. How they gonna make up a story like that? Mystery fucking man no one misses buried instead of your Daddy?"

"No one did know who he was. That's just it. He was hitchhiking, from Mexico maybe. No one knew."

Ennis folded his arms but the world felt too shaky and he needed better balance. Unfolded them. Clenched fists.

Seeing he'd caused a shudder in the older man's certainties, the boy rattled his cage some more. "I can't read; they think I can't hear neither. I got real good hearing, Mr Del Mar. Been listening to my Daddy talk 'bout you all my life. Can't read, but I ain't stupid."

Ennis didn't look up. Weren't nobody else's business but theirs.

"He's not dead. They took him to a hospital, and he nearly died but he didn't."

Ennis staggered to the privacy of a tree and threw up the food that lay deeper in his belly, beneath the coffee. “He’s not dead?” *Little darlin’. Jack’s not dead.* But anger then. “Christ, boy, what about the nurses and doctors and shit? When he woke?”

The boy’s eyes were running, his nose too. “He didn’t. Wake up. Not right, anyways. They said he can’t speak and don’t know stuff. Don’t know who he is, so they made him someone else.”

Ennis grabbed the boy. “If you’re making this up, so help me God I’m gonna come back here and rip your fucking heart out. Where is he?”

The crying turned to shivering. “I don’t know. They put him away like they did to old Mrs Kempler when she wet herself in Church that Sunday. Said she’d be happier an’ she never came again. They’ve put him somewhere, but he’s not dead. He’s not here!” He fell to the ground and began seizing handfuls of dead earth.

Ennis watched for a while, thinking, then he crouched and laid a hand on the boy. “You’ve gotta help me now, Bobby.”

Tear-streaked and dirty the boy stopped. “How?”

Ennis gave a twitch of his lips that passed for his smile. “I can read real well.”

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It wasn't like one of the shows he'd watched with his girls, stretched out on the couch, drinking and thinking of Jack. He had to wait and be patient until the widow went out and the bull with her. Took two days. Longest ever, but he was used to waiting and wanting something he couldn't have. Two high-altitude fucks a couple of times a year; Jack hadn't understood how hard it was on Ennis, as well. He slept in his truck in a stand of trees close to the plot. No one disturbed him. No one visited the ashes. Would they have anyway? If they'd been Jack's? Perhaps they were after all. Perhaps he'd taken grief for certainty. He'd believed the boy over the evidence of his own eyes. But he didn't do Jack with his eyes, never had.

On the third day the boy came, excited, flushed. “They've gone to town. Be gone till lunch, Mom said.”

Ennis drove the boy back. They stepped into the house, which still had no scent of Jack. "That's Mom's desk." Hint of uncertainty now? The magnitude of allowing this stranger into their privacy.

Ennis nodded. "Could manage something to eat, son, if you've a mind."

Left alone he sat in the grand chair behind the grand desk and a tiny rueful snort escaped for the first time in a while. He'd lay a bet on the fact that Jack had never sat here.

Drawer by drawer he went through the files. He'd exaggerated to the boy. He couldn't read all that well. Hadn't learnt and didn't practise. He could tell farm equipment catalogues though. They were easy to dismiss. Harder were the bills and receipts, invoices and accounts. Figures swam in his mind, darted away like woollies skitterish in mountain storms.

He could read the word hospital. Sanatorium was harder, but he managed it.

I'm coming little darlin'; hold on.

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Ennis thought perhaps the boy did take after Jack after all. Stubborn asshole wanted to come too. He was a good boy though, only wanting to help. Ennis told him he was needed there, to be normal. Let the boy begin a lifetime of waiting.

He wasn't a sly man, never had been, never could be. He was close, but upfront in most things. 'Cept for Jack of course, but that weren't sly; that were nobody's business but their own. Still, he wondered where the widow and bull had gone, if they'd really gone to town. He knew horses, and horses spooked. Had he spooked them into going to this sanatorium place?

So he became sly, left the house cautious, drove cautious on a back road and parked some distance away, setting off on foot across the fields. Nice place, to hide someone. Even nicer to find them.

He could not see the widow's car so approached less cautious. He was out of place though. No hats. No flannel and boots. No smell of high places. He was all these things and felt eyes upon him. Best approach was upfront like regular folks, so he pushed open a heavy door and

walked into a cool, dark lobby. Woman in nurse-white looked up. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for...." But what name? Surely he wouldn't be here as Jack. Or Twist. "A job." He was used to saying that, had said it too many times over twenty years of quittin' to see Jack. He expected a frown and got one.

"I'm sorry. We are a private clinic, and we only take on staff recommended to us by the agency."

"Real good worker, Ma'am. Odd job just for a day or two would really get me out of a hole." He gave her the benefit of his eyes, looking up through long lashes. It had driven Jack wild that look, driven him to do things he wouldn't often do but Ennis particularly enjoyed. Seemed to work with her, too.

"Mr Ray might be able to use some help in the grounds. Wait here, please and I'll go ask."

Ennis held his hat loose in his hands, the desire to run through the place calling his name almost overwhelming. She returned with a man who worked out of doors. Ennis

felt easy and followed the weather-beaten figure to the door.

He discovered he'd arrived at lunchtime; that's why it had been quiet. Within half an hour the grounds began to fill up with ghosts, gliding in white and silent. He watched them without looking and shot to the man, "Who they got here?"

The old man was of the land, like Ennis, short in his speech. "The wrong people."

Ennis shivered but did not understand the reply. It just resonated with him: the wrong people.

"They broke the law?"

"God's, mayhap."

They went on working, Ennis carrying armfuls of branches, the man cutting and ripping them away.

"They drugged?"

“Some. Those that need it. Some got the zapping in the head. Won’t never need no drugs again.”

He’d banged his head on the mountain, had Jack touch him for the first time. Could feel the touch now in a shiver down his back. “Zapping?”

Man pointed like a pistol at his head. “Lobotomy. Good for the soul. Fucking perverts.”

Ennis didn’t understand. He went back to the trees, pondering these mysteries. Tried again. “Had a friend once got took to a place like this. Had an accident, bear got him, all beat up. Couldn’t remember his own fucking name.”

“Yup. That sort come here too. Never seen one from a bear though. Like to see that.”

“You got any in now? Accidents?”

“Don’t know, sonny. I just tend the gardens so the loonies can get their fresh air. Time for my smoke now; there’s some coffee, if you’ve a mind.”

Ennis nodded, stowed the gloves he'd been wearing and followed the man. Halfway to the hut he stopped. "Forgot my goddamned jacket."

He jogged away until the man was out of sight then approached a ghost. "Pardon me, you know of a man brought here maybe a week or two ago? Beat up bad." He indicated his face, nose, chin. "All busted up."

The ghost nodded, limp yellowing hair bobbing. Ennis felt a surge of hope. "Which room? Can you take me, friend?"

Frightened eyes. Ennis produced his smokes, and they were greedily stashed under the hospital white. They entered through a side door. Up some stairs and everything was of sickness, the smell overpowering. Ennis wanted to wrap his arms around them all and take them to the mountains.

His guide left him outside a door. He nodded his thanks, knowing that if this was the right one, no thanks were adequate.

He pushed and went in.

Jack was sitting in a window, his back to Ennis. He didn't turn or appear to hear him, but it was Jack. For various reasons, Ennis was particularly acquainted with Jack's back and did not mistake him now. His legs buckled, and he went down, felled like an old bear. "Friend?"

Jack turned, and Ennis was glad he was already down. Flies where a penis had been. This was bad.

One eye was swollen so tight it didn't look there. Nose was broken bad and yellowing. Worst was a large white bandage over his skull. Skulls didn't ought to be bashed. Ennis knew this. "Jack."

Jack's eyes rolled with panic like a mare rearing. Ennis held his ground although it cost him to do so. Just a hand held out, palm up, not offering sugar but something unseen, something that also held life and limb together. "It's me, Jack: Ennis."

There was nothing in the eyes; they were familiar no longer. What had been Jack, for Ennis, was gone. He didn't rightly know where or whether it could ever come back. Deceased.

Slowly he approached and crouched down alongside the man in the chair. “Do you know me, Jack? Can you hear me?”

Two questions. Too much. He patted the arm gently. “Do you know me?”

Jack shook his head, but it seemed to cause him some pain.

What now? This he had not reckoned when he came to Texas.

“I can’t stay now, darlin’. But I’ll come back.” Jack didn’t seem bothered one way or the other. Ennis felt tears prick for the both of them and backed away. “I won’t leave you here, Jack.”

He returned to his pick-up. Felt the old friend vomit rising but swallowed it down with his pain. *What have they done to you, Jack?*

He’d not been able to recognise his cowboy in the wreck of the man, but the parts of Jack he needed weren’t necessarily on the outside, or made of flesh and bone.

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The rest of the day was spent working with the man and scouting around, gathering things he needed. He needed two swift horses and the man he loved, but those would have to wait. For now, a hospital gown and some medical supplies would do.

He'd not reckoned on Jack not willing to come with him. He saw now the limp and the bandaged hand, which he had not seen at first. Jack was pale and tearful, confused but silent. When Ennis tried to get him to come, he resisted feebly. It was the first time Jack had resisted him anything.

“Hey, Cowboy, won't you come with me? This isn't for you, Jack—this place. You ain't deceased like they told me, but in here, you might as well be! Just us, Jack. Just take my hand.”

Jack did, and he felt like a child with a child's trust. Ennis put on the hospital gown over his own shirt and kicked out of his pants. He could feel the air on his backside, made him vulnerable. Maybe that's what it was for.

Two patients, they took the back stairs and emerged into a scented twilight. Ennis had brought the truck closer, but it was still far for Jack to walk. *When did you get so thin, friend?* In this, Jack was familiar again, the whipcord nineteen year old body Ennis had acquainted himself with on Brokeback that first summer.

“You gotta walk, Jack. Lean on me, friend. Rough going, but you’ve had worse. Remember the time you fell from that skittish little mare? Hit your damn elbow and couldn’t roll over the whole time we were together. We got inventive, Jack, remember?” The first time he’d ever alluded to what they did together when not riding or roping or camping, and it got Jack to the car.

Ennis drove for over an hour before he felt safe to stop and put Jack in clothes. He’d slept the whole time. Woken now, he cried out, wordless and terrifying, making Ennis start like something damned was on his trail. Perhaps it was just sleep.

He’d not slept much since reading that word deceased and the need for it stalked him now, creeping into the cracks in his defences. They had so far to go though, and he could not afford to rest.

He dreamt as he drove, on the endless straight roads, of a curve, just one, and saw it as a godsend, as if it were meant to be for him and Jack. Together they could miss that one curve and perhaps find a better place where the navigation of life was not so hard. They'd sure missed the maps when they were being given out.

He drove and dozed and drove and dozed, and all the time Jack slumped at his side, swollen and sore and silent.

He went to Cassie. She helped him for his sake, never suspecting the wedge she drove between them by helping this wounded man. Ennis left Jack there and fetched everything he needed.

Packing for Brokeback Mountain had become something of a routine by now.

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He drove them as high as he could to lessen the ride for Jack. Ennis wasn't sure Jack could ride a horse at all, but he had survived the long trip from Texas better than he'd hoped. Hope was all he had.

Parking up, he slid from his seat, much to do yet before they could start. But the place held him still. They were back. Twenty years coalesced, and he felt once more the surge of vitality that always returned on the mountain. He was nineteen once more. He would always be nineteen up here with Jack.

Ennis dropped his gaze from the heights and scuffed the dirt with a toe. He'd considered the effect of the mountain on Jack. But what about him? What the mountain meant to them, rip-roaring and going at it full throttle, might not be possible this trip. Not with this Jack. That, Ennis had not considered.

Too late for regrets now. He backed the horses from the trailer, began to pack them with supplies.

When he looked up, Jack was gone.

The panic was instantaneous worse than the asthma attack they had not been able to help in their little girl. He felt a tightness in his own chest and harsh breathing until he saw him, standing at the edge of the lake. He jogged over,

his heart a wild accompaniment to his footfalls. "Jack?" No reply. More hesitant now. "Do you remember Brokeback?"

Jack appeared not to.

Ennis could not hide his disappointment and turned away least his tears bring on Jack's. They needed to get higher, that was all. Whatever Jack needed, he always found it in the mountains with Ennis. He would find it now. A man of little learning and less faith, Ennis had nothing else to offer his friend.

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Resin and the sweet smell of honeysuckle followed them up the path, quiet footfalls and soft snorting from the horses. Jack was doing fine. His broken body moulded to the saddle. That wasn't something you forgot. It got colder as the sun intensified: that strange mountain contrast that Ennis relished. He didn't put his coat on, needing to save that for the cold night ahead. He didn't want to think about the night. He didn't want to think about how this was the first time riding up Brokeback trails he hadn't been thinking about the night to come. It was what he

always thought: anticipation of Jack's body sweeter than the air.

“You remembering, Jack?” Please, speak to me, friend. I ain't the talker between us, you know that. You always filled in my spaces, as I filled yours, in other ways.

Jack turned his head and looked at Ennis, a frown creasing his features. There was no recognition.

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Ennis took them further and more off the usual tracks than before. He was fairly sure no one would find them, come looking for them, want them. But he needed to be sure. Deceased. How long would they have paid those dollars every week to keep this empty shell of a man alive? Didn't do that with horses: shot them. Ennis shivered but told himself it was just the biting mountain air.

He put up the tent and built the fire and prepared the food. It was a familiar routine but one he was used to sharing with Jack, although none of those things were what they did first when they broke for camp.

It was come over him, just as powerful as always, and nothing but Jack's body would assuage it. Jack sat like a child, useless and wary by the fire. Pain and need drove Ennis. He stripped and went down to the river, washing himself in the icy run-off, coldness to his balls and cock that had too much heat of their own. Dampen the fires. Don't think about Jack. But how could you stop doing what you had lived by doing for twenty years: thinking about Jack. He thought about Jack when he woke. He imagined him alongside him during the day. He took him home to his loneliness at night and comforted himself in Jack's imaginary arms, wiping his spill on Jack's absent chest. He slept with Jack and he dreamt of Jack. But now, in the place that fed all of that imagining, he had to stop thinking of Jack.

He was glad it was dark when he returned. He was able to drag jeans over the boner that he had not been able to subdue, rejoin Jack at the fire and pretend that he was not dying a little inside.

"Take a look at you now, friend." Very gently, he unwound the bandage on Jack's head. Dipping his neckerchief into the simmering water, he blew on the heat for a moment then dabbed at the wound.

Jack put his hand up and winced. "Ow."

Ennis dropped the cloth. "Jack?" But however much he tried to get the man to speak again, there was obstinate silence. Ennis wondered why Jack didn't want to talk. He pondered this as he continued to dab gently at the damage. He guessed the answer was simple: Jack couldn't find the words to speak about what had happened to him. Ennis knew how that felt. *Friend, cowboy, little darling*: they were so inadequate. He didn't have words for what Jack had done to *him* either.

The eye was less swollen, the nose also. He would never be quite his beautiful Jack again, but so slim, so vulnerable in many ways, he was more his Jack now than the bitter moustached man ever had been. This man had no recollection of twenty years of being held on a string so tight that it strangled love between them.

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Jack ate everything Ennis gave him, which was a good sign. Couldn't heal if you didn't eat. It was getting cold, and they had none of the things that usually kept them

late by the warm fire. No talk, no songs. They had whisky though, and Ennis was no doctor. What harm could whisky do anyone? And he had stories. He had lots of stories he'd never told Jack. About the dreams and keeping him by his side through all the months they weren't together and missing him so much it was like missing a limb. So Ennis tried to find his own voice, to help Jack in his search for his. And for the first time, Brokeback slipped into the night with the sound of Ennis Del Mar talking and talking and talking.

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It was so hard. It was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do, 'cepting leave Jack that first time. This was harder than reading that word stamped in red on his card. Jack spooned to him, folding so neatly as he always did into the hollow of Ennis's hips. Jack's backside where it should be, pressing into Ennis's cock. Tarpaulin and horse blanket, smell of their clothes, heat rising between them, but Ennis alone.

Hot, scalding tears squeezed reluctantly from his eyes. Why was it he only ever cried over Jack? Even in that courtroom, hearing how he weren't to be a proper Daddy

no more, the tears had been for Jack and what they still could not have. He pressed his face into Jack's hair, smelling it deeply. Jack turned. They lay face to face. Ennis kept his eyes lowered, a split on Jack's lip to focus on. "You warm enough, buddy?"

Jack licked his lips, and in the gesture, Ennis saw the boy, Bobby. "Yeah."

He could control himself no longer. The tears he'd been shedding internally since standing on the sidewalk reading his card broke out like a river busting through a winter's beaver dam.

This isn't why he'd brought Jack to the mountain—to heal *his* pain.

It felt good though being held and shhh'd in arms he'd come to know better than his own.

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They awoke to a new day and old problems. First thing in the morning, finally warm and still sleepy, had always been their best time. Jack's injuries and stiffness malleable,

making him bendy and fun, Ennis randy in a way he couldn't explain unless he had dreams he couldn't remember on waking. Now Ennis lay with a dry mouth and swollen eyes from last night's storm. Jack sat with his back to Ennis, peering out at the day. "I'm starvin'."

Ennis sat bolt upright. "Jack?"

Jack turned and repeated in his dull voice. "I'm starving."

"You bet. I'm gonna make you a breakfast as would feed a big ol' grizzly. You wanna help?"

Jack nodded. "Sure."

In the absence of the one he wanted, Ennis made do with the one who was slowly emerging from this shell of a man. Something was better than nothing. He went discretely down to the river, on the excuse of fetching water, to relive himself. In both ways. Piss first, which wasn't easy through the swelling, then the other, with short, jerky fisting, which almost hurt it was so good. When he came, his back was arched, his legs planted apart, and the sperm shot out in a pale arch that glinted in the early morning sun. It was so quiet here in the

mountain that he heard it land, plop, plop, to the pebbly shore. When he turned, Jack was a few feet away, watching him. Ennis felt like one of his girls had seen, something he feared beyond all things, good father, good man that he was. But this wasn't a girl, it was Jack, the man he'd pushed his cock into, the man who'd swallowed his sperm more times than he'd sent it up into his wife's damn pussy. This was Jack who knew his cock as well as he knew his own. Jack was rubbing the front of his jeans, but his look was vacant. It horrified Ennis in the way of a nightmare, those blank eyes and that lascivious hand. He put his fingers on Jack's wrist and stilled him. "You need a wash, friend. Wanna brave the water with me?" Jack allowed himself to be distracted from his pleasure. Even naked he seemed to have forgotten what it was he needed, although his cock was semi-tumescent. That was solved by the coldness of the water. It took breath right out of lungs and shrivelled balls until they jumped high for safety. Ennis helped Jack wade into the deeper water, and they submerged for a moment to wet hair and faces. When he rose, Jack blew a stream from his mouth. "It's good."

The comments came naturally now, and didn't shock Ennis quite as much. They pleased him more though. "Yeah, it is that." Once acclimatised, neither was in a hurry

to emerge. They swam together to the other side of the pool and back then lay in the shallows, legs extended, water drifting lazily through toes. “Do you remember being here with me, Jack? Do you remember me now?”

“Yeah. I remember you.”

Ennis turned his head, but it seemed that Jack echoed more than confirmed, vagueness still disturbing in his expression. “Do you remember what happened to you? Who hurt you, Jack?”

Jack pushed off into the deeper water and submerged again. Ennis watched his pale body moving fish-like in the water for a while then went to start breakfast. This was only the first day. For the first time in their lives, this time together seemed to be dragging.

* * * * *

Ennis left Jack playing idly in the shallows, scooped up their dirty clothes, carried them back to the river. He squatted, pounding. Jack’s ingrained with blood rose vomit in his throat. He fetched a rock and hammered it repetitively into the stained material. Into his demons. A

sound in the shallows, and he turned. Jack staring at the material and the rock, raised to bash. He cried out and covered his head. "Don't!"

Ennis didn't. He waded out and wrapped his arms around the shaking man. "Hush, Cowboy, hush. You're safe now. Safe always with me."

"Ennis!"

Ennis felt he should welcome the calling of his name. He didn't. It was called by a man to a friend who had not come for him. "Hush, Jack, I'm here now." Jack was shivering. Ennis went for the practical and walked him out of the river, dressed and fed him. That cause of shivering he could stop.

* * * * *

They needed to get moving. The high meadows called Ennis. Held out a promise of something he needed like he needed their air to breathe. Jack hung onto the saddle horn with his good hand not going with the movements of the horse as Ennis had always admired. He sat stiff or slumped, slack jawed and silent, and so another day

passed in this half-life between deceased and what had once been.

* * * * *

Again, Ennis pushed them longer than was normal. He dreaded the night now. Dreaded where his fragile resistance might lead them. He'd taken Alma against her wishes many times, proving something, if only to her. He didn't want to do that to Jack. Not this Jack anyway. The other one.... For the first time in days Ennis smiled: the other one would never need forcing.

It was bitterly cold by the time they set up camp. Some food left from earlier, Ennis built the fire high for heat and sat Jack in its glowing warmth. He gave him whisky and biscuits, cold meat sandwiched between them. Jack chewed mechanically.

The darkness played on Ennis's mind now. Not welcoming as the night always was to him. Now it seeped into his mood, casting shadows where none had been. His reserves of good humour always low plummeted. He had no idea what to do, either with Jack or with himself.

White in the firelight caught his eyes. An unwrapping of a bandage. Jack flexed stiff fingers and winced. Ennis stretched out his hand. "Lemme see."

Jack let him probe around deep cuts that were still to heal. "Don't hurt so much now."

Five words lifted the weight off Ennis's shoulders. "I reckon that's the whisky, Jack."

Jack didn't reply. He stood and went out of the circle of light to piss. Ennis didn't ask to watch as he had once done.

* * * * *

It was always the worst of times to try and sleep: so cold from sitting outside that he could not feel toes. Jack solid against him helped.

The familiar smells of the tent, the sound of gentle flapping, a coyote in the distance, the horses snickering at the sound. Everything was the same and everything had changed. These were the times he found his voice: ridiculous endearments that Jack teased him about, crude

comment on their activities, rambling accounts of nothing much, just to make Jack laugh. It was mostly what he needed from Brokeback. Besides the obvious. He had nothing now, his companion silent and stiff, breathing deeply.

Ennis turned away from Jack for the first time ever and took care of himself. It didn't even feel good.

* * * * *

Jack was flexing his fingers again, smoking and testing the temperature of some water. He'd wanted to shave. Ennis took it for a good sign and heated the water, watching hypnotised as the blade dragged slow over stubble he could feel against his own skin. It wasn't what they did in bed that marked the difference; it was the stubble. He had Jack type sex with Alma. It was Jack's stubble grazing his cheeks that reminded him what he was and what he was doing with another man.

Jack showed the first sign of pleasure when his shave finished. He lit a cigarette and leant back, eyes closed. Ennis didn't like eyes closed. When they were on the

mountain, Jack's eyes were on him. It was just a thing, but he needed it.

* * * * *

"We'll hunt, Jack, catch us a nice deer maybe for supper." He tossed Jack a gun took it off him again when the eyes flared with fear. "Hey. Shhh. It's your gun, Jack. Just yours."

Jack didn't want a gun, but he went with Ennis, his limp hardly a limp now. Jack was pretty much Jack now from the outside. Ennis wished the mountain would do its magic inside sometime soon.

He shot a deer and butchered it. Jack played in the river while he did and wouldn't even look at the strips hanging from the rack Ennis fashioned. He ate the meat with relish though later that night under stars that held no sympathy for Ennis in their cold gaze. "I'm gonna crash, friend. You gonna watch the fire some more?"

Jack shook his head and pulled off his boots, hopping toward the tent. "Cold tonight," was his only comment on the pleasure of being with Ennis.

* * * * *

Jack's feet were icy on his shin, but he let them stay. He'd taken them between his thighs once to warm them and then neither had needed warming for the rest of the night. Now he left them cold and alone brushing his shinbone.

"You comfortable there, Cowboy?"

No reply from Jack, except his hand, which caught at Ennis's and placed it on his cock.

This time, entry into Jack was practised and slick, but the physical aside, this was new and terrifying, and Ennis was nineteen again and having feelings he couldn't name and desires he couldn't stop. Didn't want to stop. If he'd wanted to, he could have stopped it after that first night. They'd both known he wouldn't, that this was just how it was going to be from now on.

He'd gotten used to Jack's more ample backside. Now two hard globules fitted his palms like a baby's. He'd been afraid they'd hurt Jack here. Ram something in him, pull something out. He'd heard of both. Feared them for being

only half-understood. But Jack was smooth and tight and as welcoming as the trail that sucked them deep into the mountain.

* * * * *

Ennis found truth hard to separate from reality when sun opened his eyes. Except for his jeans, which were around his ankles. So much shame that first morning when he'd slunk away from Jack, knowing what they might now be.

"I ain't no queer." Ennis turned to the sounds of ghosts. Jack's mutinous face and his jeans missing entirely.

"Me neither." Jack seemed satisfied with the reply and pulled him back for more.

* * * * *

They reached the high meadows the following day, panting in the thinner air, horses steaming and skittish. The air was metallic and pure, pinching their ear tips and fingers. Jack complained about his hurts, and Ennis's heart overflowed with joy. Jack complaining was Jack returning.

The sex continued to obsess them, now not waiting to set up camp before they were at each other. Ennis was more cautious though, cautious of Jack's bruises and bones that broke too easy. Or was it because he was fucking a total stranger? He'd never done that before, had threatened to kill Jack if he heard *he* had. It was the best and the worst, and guilt was more potent between them than the smell of their sperm.

* * * * *

Five days at the very top of the world, hunting, eating, fucking and sleeping. Jack regained his muscle tone, not this good since he'd rodeo'd for a living way back when. Bruises faded, and although there were scars, they didn't alter his beauty. Not in Ennis's eyes who had looked beneath Jack's surfaces for too long to let spidery lines distract him.

But he remained a stranger. He spoke more, but only passing commentary on the day or the food.

After five days, Ennis didn't know what else to do. He was as high as he'd ever gone and beyond them there was only God. He contemplated that one day, cleaning his

rifle. But being a soft man at heart, he couldn't bear to think of the horses, fending for themselves.

On their final night, he tried again, lying deeply warm in sperm-soaked blankets. 'You gonna tell me what happened, Jack? Might help.'

'I don't remember.'

Ennis didn't believe him, but he didn't really know this man at all, so had no buttons to push. "There was another fella, they said."

"I don't want to talk about this."

"Maybe I do."

"Maybe ain't my concern, Ennis, now leave off and let me sleep."

* * * * *

They came down from God's playground to the rain and slipping horses and curses soaking them. Tempers flared where lighters would not. They were glad to stop, pitch a

tent, eat cold, be cold, no warmth between them now. Three days to come down and then there was the pick-up and the trailer. This was where they parted, were supposed to. That's how it went. Now Jack had to ride with him, but to where? He'd healed him, saved him most probably, but for what?

"Maybe you'd best go to your folks, friend."

Jack turned on some music, showing more interest in that than his life. Ennis didn't blame him; his wasn't looking too good either.

* * * * *

Not poetic, even Ennis could see a stark brittleness in Jack's house that matched the mood between them. He'd been driving all day, so had to accept an offer to stay: horses needed out and feeding. Didn't care about himself.

A woman came out onto the porch as they pulled up. She stood uncertain, tiny in faded blue in a faded place with faded dreams. But she did not faint or scream and Ennis reckoned they'd not been told. No deceased in red for them.

Jack embraced her and it was genuine. More so than he'd shown Ennis for all their violent lovemaking. Ennis was jealous, an emotion so startling in its heat that he gasped and held his side for a moment. It passed and he tipped his hat. "Ma'am."

She nodded then led the way inside.

* * * * *

They sat an uneasy grouping around a scrubbed table. Jack's father made of the scrawny leftover parts of the bull man. "Someone give you a beating, son?" He made it both sneering and hopeful.

Jack studied the table. "Better now."

The mother offered them coffee and something she'd baked. They accepted the coffee, were persuaded to the baking, and ate to fill the silences.

"How's Lureen and her folks? How's Bobby? We'd sure like to see that boy, Jack." She glanced at her husband as if requiring his permission to breathe.

Jack passed on family news in a monotone. Ennis watched for cracks, thought he saw some, some awareness of exactly what had happened, but the father was watching him and he could not concentrate on Jack with his usual intensity.

“Ennis Del Mar.” It was said as if a reward should be given for smartness. “Heard a lot about you over the years. Could say too much.”

Ennis had nothing to say to that.

Jack stood up swiftly, his chair scraping painfully. “I’m going up, Ma.”

She looked pleased. “It’s just as you left it, Jack.”

Every eye seemed to be on Ennis, asking him where he was going. He tipped his hat to the mother and said he had the horses to tend.

When he was finished, it was late, and the pick up was unappealing. Jack’s body was more so.

He tiptoed up the stairs like he had in Alma's house, twenty years and another life ago.

Jack sat in the moonlight, smoking, the door open, expecting Ennis. Ennis slipped in and shut it behind him. "Won't stay. Too much trouble for your ma. Ain't right in her house. Just wanted to say goodnight."

Jack nodded, not bothering to turn around.

Ennis twisted his hat in his hands, unsure. "I'll say it then: goodnight." Jack still watched the road disappearing into the distance, probably too far for him now, now that it was all over. "Jack, please." The word sounded unfamiliar; he'd not said it often and never to Jack that he could recall. "I'll be gone most like in the morning, 'fore you get up."

"Where are you going?"

Ennis came forward. "You need to let Bobby know." He'd told Jack of the boy's help, hoping to see pride. Even Bobby got the new Jack's indifference.

Jack rose and went to his desk, running his fingers over ink stains, tracing his childhood in their faint patterns. “Where are you going to go, Ennis?”

Ennis had no answer to this so sat on the bed, studying his hat.

Jack began to unbutton his shirt, sniffing under one arm, chose another, uncaring whether it gave Ennis any pleasure the way his torso caught and held the moonlight.

Ennis stood, his head low, defeated. “Will I see you this summer? When you’ve gotten things sorted with Lureen....”

The cry sliced the night into what had been and what was to come. Ennis cried out in primal response to the sound of such pain. Then he was on his knees with Jack in a tiny closet, not big enough for two of them, but they were one really, so they fit. Jack was pawing at a shirt, keening like a mother: desolate. It shivered Ennis’s back, stood his hairs on end. “For fuck’s sake, Jack, what?”

Jack balled up, hugging himself, hugging the shirt. Ennis saw that it was two, not one, one inside the other, and he

didn't need to see it was his shirt to get that this was them: one inside the other. Jack's nose was running, and when Ennis lifted his sleeve to wipe it, they were back making the blood on the other shirts once more. "Oh, Ennis."

Jack said all that needed to be said. It was reproach that Ennis had not been there for him. It was remembrance of what had happened and pleading for Ennis's strength to get through that, and it was the old fear of what they were and what they were going to do about it.

A shadow fell upon them, and Jack gurgled fear in his throat, his hands going up to ward off a blow that had nearly killed him for fucking too close to home. His father stood over them as if with a gun, but he had no weapon, no gun, and struck Ennis as the sad little man *he* would have been had he not met Jack. "You get out my house, faggots." The word was spat at them. They'd both heard it before, but not from blood, which was supposed to bind. Ennis helped Jack up. They were neither one of them steady. Jack would not let go the shirts. Ennis didn't want him to.

He helped him down the stairs and into a deserted kitchen, the father like a jailer, following.

Ennis wouldn't allow Jack to drive, refused to himself and pulled them into the empty trailer, which smelt that good smell of horse and shit.

Jack was crying, but it *was* Jack, so Ennis didn't mind. He held and wiped and hushed and waited. Jack blamed himself, but he blamed Ennis more for the tight rein he kept on him. He spoke rapid and fearful. How that desperation had turned him on to the stranger, hitching. What they'd done against the truck until Lureen's father had sailed by fat and fulsome in a car only a Texan could love. He'd seen: Jack with his pants around his ankles, the other man rutting into his little gal's man.

Next day, four men caught him and made him watch while they played nasty with the stranger. Ennis didn't need pictures painted; he had them in his head already. Flies buzzed well enough without Jack's assistance.

Then they'd turned on Jack, beating and kicking and saying things no man should have to hear. And they'd used Ennis's name, so Jack had known they'd been *sent* for him, knew that the stud-duck knew, that he had finally won and there was nothing Jack could do about it.

The hospital he did not remember at all. It was no matter. Not much to remember, darlin', Ennis told him.

They took the night hard in the trailer, no sleep for either, little rest. But Jack was back, so Ennis didn't mind. When the light came, he had to leave. Jack said he'd stay with his folks and that it would be all right. He was needed; a strong back would be traded for bed and board.

"When'm I gonna see you again, Ennis? Cain't have it to be too long."

"I've taken this time, Jack. Weren't easy."

"We gotta get together, Ennis."

"June? I maybe get a day. Maybe two? We ain't so far apart now. Easier."

Jack wasn't happy, but June it was. They parted roughly as always, unable to say what they felt, mostly unable to show it either.

The pick-up faded into the distance. Jack didn't watch it. It was a sight he didn't need to see.

* * * * *

Ennis didn't lose his job. Thought he might have though. Was glad. Few weeks and his little girl visited, not so little now, telling him about a man she loved clear and in the open. Made Ennis sad and happy all at once. Wedding in June, she said.

He sent a card to Jack. *Can't be June, friend. Got my little girls wedding. How you fixed for November?*

Jack's reply, *Goddamn you Ennis. November be cold as a witch's tit*, was taken as a yes, so Ennis had something to get through the year for.

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They met at a place Jack decided for once, edge of a river, good to leave the vehicles. Jack asked about the wedding. Ennis told him about a place called Aberdeen where his girl had followed the oil. Jack said Scotland? and Ennis shrugged. Jack said he was sorry, but Ennis thought he didn't sound it much.

Jack had changed. He was thinner, but his body was lithe not weak, lean and strong and tanned. Ennis had a surge of need for him so strong that they stopped off the trail and went at it full speed until Ennis breathed, "Needed that." Jack led the way, seemed to have an idea that Ennis had to go along with. Ennis was glad, riding and watching Jack's back in the clear mountain air, and didn't mind the tagging along.

They came to a rise overlooking a lake. House and barns, small cabin some way off behind a stand of pines. Ennis leant on his saddle horn, lighting a cigarette. He'd been meaning to quit.

"What do you reckon?" Jack nudged his horse next to Ennis's, legs brushing. "Like it?"

Ennis couldn't lie, but he sensed one of Jack's bitter accusations coming on. "Sure."

"It's mine."

Ennis backed his horse up a mite; Jack swung his around. "I went back to Texas, Ennis, this summer."

Ennis's blood ran cold, although Jack was here and looking fine, so nothing had happened.

"That were dumb! They dang near killed you, Jack! You don't remember, but when I saw you in that sanatorium place, you were more ghost than man!"

He dismounted, better to be angry. Jack did the same and came close. "Couldn't let them win like that, Ennis. What kinda man would I be? Hell, they tried to take that away from me, things they said, 'bout you, 'bout me. I said I'd stay gone, if'n that's what they wanted. Got me a little stake and took it. Was that so wrong?"

Ennis reckoned it wasn't, that Jack was owed that and more.

He turned back to the spread in the valley. "I cain't believe it. That's yourn? Kinda big ain't it? For one man." Didn't hear what he'd said until he said it then realised he hadn't meant to hint like a gal at something he wanted, wished he could take it back.

But Jack said, "I ain't alone, Ennis."

The old gut response hit Ennis like a blow from a fist outside a bar, 'cept he had no alcohol to dull the pain. He gasped and held his belly. Jack came closer but Ennis swung from the hip, felled him where he stood. Horses shying and backing around them, Ennis bent over Jack. "I told you! I told you, Jack! If'n I ever came to hear what I don't want to hear! And you tell me this!"

Jack staggered up, jaw red and bruising under his tan. Ennis faltered. This weren't Jack coming back at him, raw and angry and them fighting and falling out and wasting the short time they had which was never enough. Jack grinning at him made him see red, and he swung again, missed, was caught in a bear hug, Jack's laughter shaking him, too. "Ma, Ennis. Ma's with me."

Tumbling to the ground, he heard words that made no sense until later, lying in Jack's arms. "Died, no loss, hardly mourned and wanted a new start."

Jack led the way down the trail off the pine-lined ridge to the little cluster of buildings. He was chatting, proud and happy. Ennis was glum, raining on Jack's parade. He had his thoughts but they weren't Jack's business.

The house was small, but it was for Ma. She came out onto the porch, watching them descend, hand shading her eyes, a drop of blood red against white. Bright red, blood red, her dress was pretty and fluttered, made Ennis suddenly shy as he dismounted. “Ma’am.” Jack pushed him into the house, schoolboy showing off his prize. Colour bewildered Ennis, quilts everywhere and sewing out. “Ma’s in with the Church quilting bee, ain’t you ma?”

She stroked her work, proud knurled fingers happy on the softness. “You’ll take coffee, Mr Del Mar.”

Jack said they’d be back for some, dragged Ennis outside, the sun squinting their eyes despite November chill. Striding over the frost-hardening ground, hardening, he took them to the cabin out back, behind the pines, which whispered as they passed. Ennis didn’t want to hear what trees might have to say to him.

The cabin had ma’s quilts in, too, one on the wall and one on the big old bed, and a few things that screamed Jack and little else. “Go over to ma to eat; she sure cooks better’n me. Commuting for breakfast and supper again, Ennis, but not four hours.”

Porch of the cabin looked down on the lake, couldn't see the house from here. "Started with some stabling then took some hunting trips up the mountain. Guiding them. Good money, Ennis. City folk. Gonna start some breeding next year; got me a fine stallion."

Jack was bursting with everything, so Ennis took him to the bed and took the benefit of it, no one around, no one to disturb them. First time they'd had a bed for a while and both appreciated it, didn't miss the pine needles where pine needles shouldn't go. They lay mixed up and tousled, passing whisky and a joint between them, then went at it again until their bones ached.

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Ennis passed on the remainder of coffee. Jack punched his shoulder. "She won't know, fool." Ennis could still smell Jack, thought everyone would.

"What are we gonna do, Jack? Thought this week was for us to go up on the mountain. I ain't got but more than this week. Can't get away again till Spring."

Jack stopped, just past the stand of pines, his eyes on the house. Ennis knew what he was thinking but it couldn't be helped. Jack didn't say any more, didn't say what he'd hoped for or wished for. Hell, they were both nearly forty and had twenty years of pain behind them tellin' them that dreams and wished for don't count for shit.

Next day, Jack went up onto the Brokeback with Ennis, but the joy had gone. Only once did he say, "Could be sweet but you still don't want it."

Ennis said, "Nearly got you killed once, Jack. Won't have your ghost followin' me about."

"Twice a fucking year, Ennis! I can't do this no more."

"Better than getting deceased in red, Jack. You ain't known that pain."

Jack's face told Ennis that he had pain enough so they dropped it again and found level ground, talking about the trail or the horses but not about themselves.

* * * * *

Ennis couldn't get away in the spring. Send Jack a card: *summer?* Jack didn't reply right off but sent a card later, closer to the summer, one word and bitter: *fine*.

Jack's place seemed good to meet, so Ennis drove in late one summer's evening with the sun just setting behind the mountain. Too late to start up they spent the night in Jack's cabin. A whole night, and they didn't find it hard to know what to say or do. They ate supper with ma, but she was busy and bustling with a church group coming over, lots of cooking in the warm, bright coloured kitchen she and Jack had painted that winter. House smelt of biscuits and ham; Jack found whisky for them and lit a fire, even with the evening's warmth.

Ma had a real comfortable couch, and they sat down together after supper, mellow for once, not really like them at all. Jack eyed the kitchen. "She'll be in there now, hour or more."

Ennis pushed him off. "Ain't right, Jack, hush." But Jack was laughing and exploring inside Ennis's shirt. Ennis couldn't resist Jack when he laughed. *Quit it* wasn't said hard enough, so Jack didn't.

Kissing came natural after that, Jack's fingers in Ennis's hair, holding on as tight as he'd held reins once, riding just as proud. Ennis could taste whiskey and wanted more.

A knock at the door wasn't waited for answer, and a man stuck his head around. "Mrs Twist?" Saw them on the couch; they'd pulled apart but were close and rumped.

Ma came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands. "Reverend Sawly."

The man came in, followed by two women. "I brought the ladies over, save 'em driving in the dark." His eyes didn't leave the couch.

Ma smiled and offered them coffee then like a thought that blew in as casually as the wind on Brokeback, she said, "You ain't met my other boy, yet, Reverend. This here is Ennis."

Relief in a flood rose on the old face and a hand offered, big with smile and gladness. "Mr Twist, right nice to meet you." Ennis took the hand out of habit not realising yet that this sealed the lie.

Ma continued, pouring coffee. "Hoping Ennis will see fit to come help out now Jack's got the place going. Both divorced, Reverend, to my shame. Can't seem to raise them the way we was raised."

Reverend's wife, shaking her head, agreeing, eyeing Jack and Ennis. "Two fine boys, Martha, two fine boys. Had just girls, me. Always wanted a boy."

Ma smiled, nibbling a biscuit. "Boys can give you heartache Ellen, but they bring joy too. Don't know what I'd do without my boys. God blesses us, he surely does."

Jack and Ennis walked out into the gathering dark, not to the cabin but down to the lake.

Ennis skimmed some stones. Jack copied and beat him.

Ennis took a breath of Brokeback air. "I ain't gonna be Mrs Jack Twist." At Jack's look, added, "But I reckon Mr Ennis Twist ain't so bad. Least I get some good home cooking once in a while."

Jack let Ennis do pretty much what he wanted that night, out in the cabin where they couldn't be heard. Didn't have

much time for talk, but they made some plans. Mostly about paying the stud-duck back so it was their place, good and proper and forever. Theirs and ma's. Ennis's mother, the one he'd had taken away and could hardly remember, now returned like a ma he'd read in storybooks to his girls: perfect and his. His and Jack's. Brothers. Brothers and doing what they were doing spurred them to some new things, laughing at the wickedness.

Sun up, sprawled and wet, Jack said, "Why'd you give in, Ennis? Given up hoping. Be forty in two weeks."

Ennis lit a cigarette, passed it to Jack. "I couldn't stand it no more, so I fixed it."

* * * * *

Chapter 2

Ennis stood in the doorway of the cabin, jeans hanging low on his scraggly frame, hot coffee steaming in his hands and the sun rising pale over Brokeback Mountain. He could not think of a thing that he needed or was missing, and the fear of this contentment tightened a knot in his belly. Jack was about aching and needin' so bad he most times couldn't stand it; not this fullness that had settled into his belly like a fine meal and too much whisky.

The offending one wasn't helping. Ennis could see him out of the corner of one eye, sprawled like a whore across rumpled sheets. They'd rarely had a chance to sprawl, up in the coldness of Brokeback, tight in horse blankets to keep the warmth, sometimes out in the open, but then never sprawled, no time, never enough time.

"You gittin' up?"

A muffled reply, which Ennis knew would burn the ears of right-minded folk should they hear it.

The temptation to return to the bed was so strong Ennis had to leave the cabin, half-dressed and finish his coffee sitting on the chopping stump. He'd lose himself entirely in those sheets if Jack had his way.

Jack having his way was another source of tension in Ennis's belly; the knot tightened once more. But Ennis never *spoke* of what they did between the sheets, and he sure as hell wasn't gonna think about it either. Damn the whoreson sonofabitch and his newfound confidence. Sure, it was Jack's goddamned place, Jack's cabin. Hell, it was Jack's coffee, and he was sitting on Jack's stump. None of it was Ennis's, so Ennis reckoned it was pretty damn important he kept what *was* his. He wasn't turning over for *no one*, not now, not ever.

"What's got into you?"

Jack's words, coming so hard on the heels of the pictures and thoughts in Ennis's mind, didn't help.

"What goddamned time do you call this? An' can you put on some clothes like decent folk?"

Jack, scratching his belly, ignored him, except to mutter something about the recent state of Ennis's decency. "Race ya!" Then he was running and leaping, hooting and hollering into the icy lake. Ennis mood slipped away as easy as the coffee spilling from his cup. He hit the water full on, jeans an' all, and ducked down to the nakedness. He'd just been called indecent after all.

* * * * *

"Got a new huntin' group coming up next week. You wanna take them up with me?" Jack, drying his hair on an old towel, eased himself behind the rickety table he called his desk. He sorted through some paperwork and added, "Two folk from New York city; week's hunting and some nature watching, whatever the hell that is."

Ennis glanced up from his rifle, which he was cleaning on the big table. It didn't need it, but the job gave him the pretence of being himself. "You need me?"

Jack turned back to the paperwork. "Do as you want, Ennis. I could use the company if'n you want to come along. Ain't so much needing you."

Ennis didn't comment on this. He was reassembling the gun and it took all his concentration. Jack got up and shoved the desk away. "Fuck you, Ennis."

* * * * *

Jack was shovelling one of ma's breakfasts down his neck when Ennis came into the big house. He didn't look up.

Ma put a similar plate in front of Ennis, and they ate silently.

"Can you take me into town today, son?"

Jack nodded through a mouthful, swallowed and replied, "I need to get me to the bank. Big fat cheque for next week came this mornin". Gonna buy me those fancy boots I've had my eye on."

Ma glanced at Ennis but didn't say anything.

Ennis concentrated on his plate.

"What would you say to puttin' these New York gentlemen up here for one night, Ma, 'fore we set out? Was thinking

we could do the big bedroom over real nice and give them a taste of this here cookin' of yours."

Ma clattered the plates together angrily but said calmly enough, "Sounds fine to me, Jack. Ennis, when you goin' back to bring your things up? Been here a week, must be needing 'em to feel settled."

Ennis leant back. "Don't knows as I had much to worry 'bout, ma'am. Few jeans and shirts, I guess. Would like the pictures of the girls. Had a real nice one done of Junior in her weddin' dress. Maybe I'll go down next week." Sly glance to Jack. "Seein' as I'm not needed here."

Jack was reading the paper, and the barb didn't so much as penetrate.

* * * * *

"You coming?"

Ennis was in the barn, feeding the horses before letting them out. "Comin' where?"

"Town?"

“Uh huh. Thought you had big business dealings in the bank to be takin’ care of. Don’t need me tagging along.”

Jack came up close, wrapped his arms around the lean frame. “But then I’m planning to drink some whisky, till ma’s ready. Sure need my favourite drinking buddy.”

Ennis smiled, utterly unable to resist. He felt the old, familiar need rise, the one that took sense south. Jack pushed his mouth against Ennis’s neck. “You smell damn good, cowboy.” He slid his hands down inside Ennis’s jeans. “Feel good, too.”

Ennis twisted around, glanced in the direction of the house, then pushed Jack hard against a bale of hay. “Gonna feel me a whole lot better, friend.”

* * * * *

Ennis envied Jack his ability to separate what he did with him and who he was with ma and other people. Ennis couldn’t. Wherever he was, he felt people looking at him, knowing where he’d been. Looking at Jack, maybe, and

knowing what was deep up in Jack's body that didn't ought to be there by rights.

It didn't help that he still drew stares, still the stranger. *That must be the other Twist boy.* Made his face hot with shame, not sure whether this was for the lie or the need for the lie. Sometimes he missed Alma and what he'd had with her. Him, little wife and two littl' gals. Could have had a big brand NORMAL across their foreheads. Sure didn't have that now.

Ennis went to the bar and began drinking, waiting for Jack. Sat where he could see the door. Wanted to see him coming in. Got a real kick out of it when he did. Jack went straight to the bar and bought two more drinks. Came over, beer spilling over his fist. "Can I sit here, stranger?"

Ennis glanced around. "Fool."

Jack grinned, slopped some more and sat down, looked pained. "Hard chair."

Ennis retreated under his hat and drank his beer, chasing it hard with whisky. By and by the shame of *hard chair* faded.

“So, what do you plan to do with these city folk, up on the mountain?” Jack gave Ennis a little glance, and Ennis snorted gruffly, “As if’n I’d let you go up by your lonesome.” Jack pushed his foot against Ennis’s under the table, which gave them both more pleasure than he’d reckoned on.

“Last group I took just wanted to play cowboy.”

Ennis frowned. “Gettin’ wet an’ cold and eating beans for days?”

Jack laughed. “S why I gets me the money up-front. Cain’t guarantee the weather up on Brokeback, even in the summer.”

“I do recall.”

Jack leant back. “Yep. I reckon you do. So, what do you think to the T-Mar?”

“Huh? What that damn brain of yourn skipped onto now?”

“For our place. The new business an’ all. Gotta have a good business name. Learnt that from LB—an’ how to be a cheatin’ son of a bitch. T-Mar. Get it? Twist and....”

“I get it.” Ennis swirled his drink thoughtfully. “Thought Del Mar were good and buried.”

Jack laughed. “In my ass, maybe. That what you been sulking ‘bout?”

Ennis glanced around. “Will you watch that mouth o’ yours?”

Jack leant forward, hands possessively around his empty glass. “Goddamn you, Ennis! You’re getting right on my tits today. Ain’t no one around, and no one takin’ any bit’a notice of us.”

“That so?”

“Yeah, that’s so. Stop frettin’ like a gal. Jesus, cain’t I be seen out with you?”

Ennis felt the temptation like sweet sugar in his mouth, resisted but then gave in. “Seems to me you ought’a remember the consequences of bein’... seen out.”

For the second time that day, Ennis got a fuck you, accompanied this time with some spittle spray, and Jack went to sit on his own at the bar.

Ennis nursed his empty glass, needing it refilled, not needing Jack to think he was giving in and making up. Fuck him. Ennis went to the far end of the bar and summoned the barman. Weren’t Jack’s bar.

The place began to fill up with lunchtime drinkers. A few men hailed Jack, clapped him on the back or appeared to offer to buy him a drink. Real popular was Mr Jack Twist. He got to talking with an old guy for a while. Ennis talked to no one, but felt everyone’s stares. Two beers later (the whisky was fuelling his pissy mood an’ he didn’t take to the idea of walkin’ home), and a man sat down next to Jack. He ordered a drink and appeared to be looking at Jack in the mirror behind the bar. He was heavily bearded, and his forearms looked like they should have bears paws at the end: furry and dark. He said something to Jack, and

Jack flicked a glance at him. They took their drinks to a table.

Ennis glanced around the bar from the shadows of his hat, his gut rolling with sourness. He was half-hoping someone might object, some beer gut step up with righteous anger and order 'em out. He wouldn't have gone as far as tyre irons, but the hissed word faggot would have sounded real prutty right now.

As no one else was botherin' he reckoned he better do it himself. He went and joined Jack and his new man at the table. Jack look surprised, faltered in what he was saying, told the beard, "This here's my brother, Ennis," then added to Ennis in a voice that made it very clear he wasn't speaking to him 'cepting for this necessity, "This is Ed."

The man tipped his hat. "Nice to make your acquaintance. You been up with Jack long?"

Ennis kept his eyes lowered. "Guess that depends on your point of view, *Ed*."

The man glanced with a frown at the stress Ennis put on his name, then turned back to Jack. "Suspect you're not

comfortable talkin' 'bout this now—what with....” He did not say now that Ennis had joined them, but his meaning was clear.

Ennis gave him a full-on blast of stare. “Don’t mind me. Nothin’ Jack could be arranging with you cain’t be said in front’a me—brothers an’ all.”

The man was uneasy. “Don’t seem right.”

Jack looked angry, barely concealed. “All right, then. If’n he don’t mind, I don’t mind. What’d you say your price were?”

Ennis leant forward, incredulous. He wanted to ask, “*Am I sittin’ here, Jack?*” but that was the way they spoke on their own. Weren’t nobody’s business but their own. Ed stroked his beard, considering. “Git a better price in a bigger place, you know? Don’t have to sell myself short.”

Jack nodded. “Not asking you to, friend. Fair and square.”

“Give you a ride like you’ve never known. That’s worth a pretty penny.”

“If’n I didn’t like the look, I wouldn’t be sittin’ with you now.”

Ennis pushed his chair back. He shoved through some men milling by the bar and went into the bathroom. It stank of urine on floors and sweat. He’d have vomited without that smell, but it helped make sure it all came up. His throat burned from retching, and when he looked in the mirror, his eyes were all red with blood like he’d been crying.

The door pushed open and Jack came in. “You okay? You looked real—.” Ennis flattened him against the wall, fists balled into his shirt.

Jack flared with anger and brought his knee up instinctively. “What is your problem, Ennis Del Mar?” Ennis was gasping for breath on his knees, so Jack wasn’t expecting an answer. He bent down. “You better have one hella’f an explanation, cowboy, or you’ll be sleeping out with the horses tonight. You cain’t let me keep a secret, can you! You had to know. Well, now you do. Ruined the surprise. You can go whistle if you think I’m buying you something else on the day.”

Ennis climbed to his feet. His hat had fallen off, so he had nowhere to hide. “Wha’d’ya mean?”

Jack picked up the hat and began to wipe it on his sleeve. “Was thinking to git you a pretty littl’ mare that Ed’s been meaning to sell me. For your birthday, an’ all. Forty next month, Ennis, same as me. Seemed like something important. Twenty years one way, now maybe twenty years more the other.” He handed the hat back. “Leastways, that’s what I was thinking this mornin’. Not so sure now.” He left the bathroom, and the door shut with a surprising lack of force.

* * * * *

Ennis let ma sit up front with Jack. His head hurt, and he just wanted to slump in the back with his face shaded. He saw Jack glance at him once or twice in the mirror, but didn’t let on he’d seen.

“You two have a fight?”

Jack said yes and Ennis no at the same time, and ma chuckled. “Must be nice to fight. Never did. Can’t fight ‘gainst what’s always right.”

Ennis was minded to comment like father like son, but didn't want to hurt ma's feelings.

Jack let his mother off at the bigger house and drove around to the cabin. He began unloading some supplies. Ennis went to sit and smoke by the lake. He was so in the wrong he didn't rightly know how to make it right. Jack made it easy. He sat down alongside him and passed over some coffee with a large piece of pie. "Cherry. 'S only store-bought."

Ennis took both. "I ain't good at sayin' sorry, Jack. You know that. Reckon I acted like a damn fool back there."

Jack grinned. "Sounds like a fine apology to me, cowboy." He pulled Ennis's hat off, cupped his face and kissed him, tasting cherry pie and coffee. Ennis tasted so good Jack kissed him again, deeper and longer, hand straying pleasantly. "Did you wake up on the wrong side, maybe? Seems like you've been hurting all day, Ennis."

Ennis made a small snorting sound. "Don't rightly know what side is what after'n I've been fooling with you for hours."

Jack mistook this and, pushing Ennis onto his back, said in a low, tight voice, “I want you under me, Ennis. I wanna try it the other way round.”

Ennis pushed him off, hard. “Where’s this come from, Jack? Couldn’t believe it last night; don’t believe it now. Where’s this suddenly sprung from? Never done that! An’ I ain’t comfortable talkin’ ‘bout this business. You know that.”

“Maybe it was time you were, Ennis. You ain’t a novice at this now. We ain’t pretending anything here. I’m living with a man. You know that word I’m hearing, don’t you friend?”

Ennis scrambled to his feet. “Don’t you go and say it!”

“Queer.”

Ennis floored him. Jack went down hard, but before Ennis could walk away he said, “Queer,” again and earned a kick for his troubles.

* * * * *

Ennis spent the night in the barn. The next day he packed up his pick-up before sunup and headed back to his trailer. He wasn't sure whether he was collecting things or going home. He reckoned he'd decide on the way.

* * * * *

Jack watched him go, keeping out of sight of the window in case Ennis glanced back to see if he was being watched.

* * * * *

Ennis was back in four days. He couldn't stand it now. Being away from Jack was worse than being with the son of a bitch.

* * * * *

Jack was in the yard with a clipboard, checking off items that he had scattered around in the sunshine. He watched Ennis pull up.

Ennis swung down from the vehicle, strode over to Jack, grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into the cabin.

Jack hadn't said a single word before he was face down and unable to say much except, "Gonna shoot hard, Ennis; don't stop." Ennis had no intention of stopping. It was as good a way of punishing Jack as it was of loving him, and Ennis was happy not to have to work out which he was doing.

Jack appeared to take it as loving. He stretched out when it was over and pulled Ennis down on top of him, kissing and nuzzling. "Missed you. Weren't sure you were coming back."

"What would you have done, Jack? If'n I hadn't."

Jack grinned. "I reckon ol' Ed would be willing to plough me nice, if I asked prutty enough."

Planning to be mad, planning to keep up the argument for longer, Ennis was undone. He grunted, punched him fondly and rolled off to make a smoke. "What's all the crap in the yard?"

Jack rolled onto his belly and stole the roll up when it was finished. Ennis grunted and started fixing another.

“Equipment for the trip. They’re arriving tomorrow. You coming?”

“How much you gonna pay me?”

Jack sat up, frowning. “Pay you?”

“Yup.”

“You want payin’?”

“Yup.”

“You son of a bitch.” Jack snaked his hand down to where Ennis liked it to go. “You gonna ask payment for this an’ all?”

Ennis considered. “Might.”

They laughed and rolled and played around the edges of the new game. It was only later that Ennis said in an amused drawl, “S gonna be kinda quiet for us, up on the mountain, *brothers.*”

Jack sat up and stared at him. “Gonna have our own tent, Ennis. Don’t see that.”

Ennis laughed. “Like you’ve ever been quiet, littl’ darlin’, when you’re getting the pleasure.”

“Damn!”

Ennis rolled on top of him. “Thinking I’ll fill ya up now—keep you going when it ain’t on offer.”

* * * * *

The two men introduced themselves as Randy McDude and Dick Swing, saw the joke was entirely lost, so said more soberly, “Toby Wainwright and Martin Johnson. Good to meet you.” They were roughly about the same age as Ennis and Jack but looked like new tack compared to their worn leather.

Jack showed them up to the big room in the house, put their bags onto the matching single beds and told them what time supper was. Toby looked out of the window. “What passes for fun around here?”

Jack hesitated, thinking about Ennis's body. "Town's 'bout an hour, but we're startin' at sunup—maybe afore five—so I reckon you'll need some sleep."

"Five o'clock in the morning?" Martin paled. "Christ, I'm usually hitting the sheets about then!"

"Got to get high 'nough afore we make camp. First day's the hardest."

The mention of the trip ahead cheered the two men and seemed to divert their thoughts from the town. Jack capitalised on the change and offered, "Bar's open downstairs, when you're ready."

Ennis had termed it the bar: the corner of the room where Jack had put up some shelves and a counter. He hadn't meant it in a complimentary way. The visitors saw nothing amiss, however, and with whisky flowing, a fire blazing and Jack showing them the choice of guns, they'd seemed entirely content.

Ennis came in for supper, and Jack said, "You met.... This is my brother, Ennis."

They sat the five of them around the table, Jack outlining the route and explaining some of the things they had to know. Bears got some interest, and they paid more attention. When cigarettes were lit, Toby, eyeing Ennis, said, "How long have you two owned this place?"

Ennis normally let Jack do the talking. He was better at it. Jack was busy, showing Martin something on a map. "Not long."

"Have you always lived on Brokeback Mountain?"

Ennis considered this and answered truthfully, "Yeah."

"Your mother's really nice. These quilts are amazing. She could make a fortune in New York. I guess you've heard about the revival in naive American art?"

Ennis was fairly sure he hadn't.

"Does she sell them?"

"Dunno, you'll have to ask Jack."

Toby frowned for a moment then shrugged it off. "Okay."
He turned to Martin. "You ready for bed? Five o'clock is looking depressingly close."

Ennis said with inward amusement, "Five is when we set off. Reckon if you want some breakfast we'd best rouse you at four."

The visitors hastily stood and went up the stairs.

"You are a cruel man, Ennis Del Mar."

Ennis laughed. "Maybe I'm naïve."

* * * * *

The day was perfect. Jack woke first, now he had something to do, eager to be off. He prodded Ennis. "Gonna be a nice day, cowboy."

Ennis rolled and pulled him back. "Wish it were just us."

Jack surrendered to the need he could never assuage, managing to pant out between Ennis's thrusts, "Maybe we can head back up followin' week. Just us to please now."

Ennis rose higher on him, hard hold around his neck, bruising him. "You feel good, Jack."

"Nice an' tight?"

Ennis buried his face against Jack's neck. "No need to talk like that."

Jack let it drop. Ennis was good on the doing if he wasn't so good on the talking about it.

* * * * *

They were late for breakfast, ma serving the other two as Ennis and Jack came in. Martin looked up from his plate. "Sleep well?"

Jack appeared to hear nothing in this and replied cheerful enough. Ennis hesitated for a moment then tried to get over this thing he had about people knowing. "Less they were both glowing from the workout, there was no way

anyone could know. He could still feel Jack, soft and slippery around him; he always could right after, and it put him off wanting to dull the feeling by eating. He took some coffee and sat quiet, going through it again, especially the last part, which was always the best.

Half an hour they were saddled and moving slowly up the ridge that led away from the spread. Ennis rode alongside Jack, up front. Jack stopped to let the others catch up and murmured, "So...? T-Mar. What do you think?"

Ennis gazed down on the huddle of buildings, their cabin behind the trees. "Sounds good, darlin'. T-Mar it is."

Jack grinned, gave him one of his most favoured looks and turned back to the stragglers. "Let 'em have their heads. They know the trail. No need to be steering 'em. They ain't cows."

The men laughed, hearing the friendly tone and caught up.

They stopped for lunch by a stream Ennis and Jack knew well. They'd not fished it every year for twenty years. High on secret memories, they were good company, Ennis

relaxing enough to tell a few stories, Jack to attempt some cooking, although they'd brought cold supplies as well.

“So, what do you folks do in New York?”

Martin bit into a biscuit and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I’m in banking; Toby owns a club.”

“Golf?” Jack immediately blushed and mumbled, “Not in the damn city, Jack.” No one made fun of him, so he recovered enough to ask, “Married?”

“Martin used to be. You?”

Jack nodded. “The same. Me and Ennis both.”

Toby laughed. “I told Martin that I thought we had a lot in common.” Martin elbowed him, but he ignored it, chewing with the smile of some private joke.

Jack let the men doze after the food, stretched out in the sun, new hats tipped over their faces. He twitched his head at Ennis, and they went to reacquaint themselves with Brokeback. Jack grumbled after that all he got to see was bark.

* * * * *

The sun grew hot as they wound higher. They were all sweating, flies biting and making the horses swish tails and dance. They saw deer; Toby reckoned he saw a bear, and all agreed that the speck had been an eagle high overhead.

By the time the heat of the day sat heavy in every crack of the mountain, weighing them down like sorrow, they arrived at the first camp. It was by a river with a deep pool and high rocks Ennis and Jack had once jumped off in the middle of winter, because they were together and because they could.

Ennis helped Jack set up the camp, the routines so familiar they worked like one man. The city boys hit the river, stripping down and starting off cautious, gaining boldness and now leaping from the rocks.

Jack straightened and held the small of his back.

“You riding too hard, Jack?”

Jack winked. “You riding too hard, more like.”

Ennis shot him a private look back. “Them tents far enough apart you think?”

“You’ll have to gag me.”

“Reckon I can think of something might do that.”

Jack nudged him fondly. “So, what do you reckon to this as a life?”

“Seems real easy. Nice guys though. Can imagine some fancy city folks not be so easy to be with.”

“Yeah. Good lookin’, ain’t they?”

“Jack Twist!”

“Christ, I got eyes, Ennis. Only sayin’. Even you musta noticed.”

“Slick. Betting those haircuts cost more’n we’ve spent our whole lives at the barbers. Or Alma and Lureen.”

“It’s gone very quiet. Reckon I oughta go check? You wanna swim?”

“Yep, but I’m not gonna, nor you, neither.”

“Huh?”

“Jack, I’ll say this just once on this trip.” He hesitated. Jack wondered what he was going to say, something about them being responsible, not open, not upsetting the paying men. Instead, Ennis tipped his hat low and mumbled, “You’re mine, and nobody else gits to see you nakid.”

* * * * *

The two men had no such inhibitions. They strode back from the swimming hole, naked and streaming water. Much to Jack’s amusement and Ennis’s annoyance they didn’t see fit to dress until they were dry. They stretched out by their tent, side by side, Martin on his belly turned away, facing Toby and deep in conversation.

Ennis went off to relive himself. Jack stirred the dinner, half watching the naked men, half watching for Ennis to come back.

Suddenly, he lowered his eyes and fastened them on the pot. He frowned deeply and tipped his hat low, shading his face. Nonchalantly as he could, he got up and went into the tent.

When Ennis got back he looked for Jack then came in too. Jack pulled him down, hand over Ennis's mouth. Ennis shook him off. "Quit actin' like a damn-fool girl, Jack."

"They were kissin', Ennis! I swear to God, Martin bent down and kissed him, an' I'm sayin' tongues, if you get my meaning."

"Maybe it were wishful thinking on your part, friend."

Jack didn't dignify this with a reply. He flung himself down and folded his arms under his head. "I never thought to see it."

Ennis glanced at him and wanted to say something about it being unnatural but as he was considering doing the

exact same thing himself, he realised he was on shaky ground. "Ain't right." Was all he allowed.

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Don't know about that. Sure made me...." He pulled Ennis down and showed him exactly how it made him.

* * * * *

Supper was a surprisingly relaxed affair. When Martin sat down, he swung his leg around Toby's back and sat behind him. "Does anyone around here mind?"

Toby obviously didn't. Jack couldn't have looked happier. Ennis was over with the horses, and by the time he'd thought of a way to say he did mind, it was too late. Three against one and the meal went off like they were old friends. They steered clear of one subject, however, mainly because Ennis's face darkened every time the conversation strayed to personal matters.

The whisky bottles were produced. Jack was eyeing the newcomers with something akin to envy. He and Jack sat like that when they were on the mountain. Didn't seem

right to him that he had to sit by his lonesome. He glanced at Ennis and recoiled at the look that was shot back.

Ennis stood up. "I'm turning in."

No one else stirred. Jack refused to catch his eye, so he stomped off by himself.

Toby lifted his face to the firelight. "Your brother have a problem with us?"

Jack spluttered his drink, but it was Ennis's place to say what was wrong, not his. "How long you two known each other?"

Martin laughed. "A lifetime. It'll be six months tomorrow. Hence the trip."

"Six months?"

Toby nodded. "I know, hard to believe, isn't it? Longest anyone we know has made it."

Jack glanced at the tent. "Do you... live together?"

Martin nodded. "We're both out."

Jack pondered this for a while, not sure that he understood, afraid that he did only too well. It cheered him up to know that Ennis would have asked, "Out of what?"

He felt an overwhelming need for Ennis and rose, making his excuses. Just before he left the circle of firelight, Jack mumbled, "It ain't that Ennis is down on you. He's just a real private person. Don't want you to think that. You kin enjoy yourselves up here. This is *Brokeback*." He nodded goodnight, added that they weren't to go too far from the camp to piss, and climbed into the tent, sealing the flap behind him.

He pulled off his boots and tucked up alongside Ennis. "You still sulking or should I stay awake hopeful like?"

Ennis grunted. "You sure like talkin' to our new friends out there."

"Ain't you curious?"

"'Bout what?"

“Jesus, Ennis. We got ourselves two live homo-sex-u-als out there. Think of all the things they could tell us!”

“What you need to know, cowboy, I remember you picking up real quick with no questions needed.”

“I wanna know, Ennis. I wanna know... what I am.”

Ennis rolled over onto him. “How many times I got to say it, Jack? You’re mine. That’s all.”

* * * * *

If Ennis noticed that Jack took every opportunity to ride close to the men or be alone with them, he didn’t comment on it. Jack was like a boy again, like Ennis first knew him, jumping with life and his new enthusiasm. It made Ennis feel old. It made him incredibly horny, which was incompatible but pleasant to muse on as he rode along mostly on his own. The city pair seemed to have taken to Jack just as strong and treated him like a long-lost friend.

They hunted for the first time that day, looking for some fresh meat for supper. Ennis watched with wry amusement as they proved even worse shots than Jack and then stepped in and bagged a deer, ignoring the worshipful looks thrown his way. “Damn fools. Who gonna help me gut it?”

Jack offered, but looked wistfully at the other two heading off to swim. “So, what you learned about your new homo-sex-ual lifestyle, cowboy?”

Jack pushed him over. “Don’t make fun’a me!”

“I’m not! I’m real serious, Jack. You learned the colours for the Fall Collection yet?”

“Fuck you, Ennis Del Mar. An’ you seem to know an awful lot about it, if’n you ask me!”

“I lived with three women, Jack. ‘Nuff said.”

“An’ if you must know, I learnt some *real* interesting things.”

Ennis pretended to be engrossed in the butchery. Blood up to his elbows suited his mood. He wasn't going to ask, that was for sure.

Jack wasn't going to tell, neither.

* * * * *

It was the first time the newcomers had eaten steak that fresh. They talked some about how well it would go down in New York, the difficulty of getting it there fresh when Martin suddenly said, "Hey, Jack, why don't you and Ennis come and visit us sometime?"

Ennis's head snapped up, waiting for Jack's reply. Jack wobbled his hand. "We got the ranch, Martin. Cain't leave animals to go on vacation."

Toby frowned. "You don't vacation?"

Ennis suddenly snorted, "This here *is* a vacation, an' I ain't even had to quit to have it."

Martin hesitated. "Maybe you could come, Jack. Ennis could maybe hold the fort for a few days?"

Jack glanced at Ennis but got no help. To end the awkward conversation he mumbled, “Sure. Maybe.”

Martin totally misunderstood his reply and began making desultory plans with Toby: things they could take him to, people they wanted him to meet.

Ennis stared into the fire, silent, then suddenly said, “We ain’t brothers.”

A slightly stunned silence met his declaration, stunned from Jack at least.

After a moment, Toby replied amused, “Well, we kinda worked that out, Ennis. Although we were hoping you might be brothers and *still* fu...” Martin nudged him to silence.

“How long you known each other, Ennis?”

Ennis winced and shrank under his hat. “Twenty years, give or take.”

That did silence the visitors. Except for a whistled intake of breath from Toby and a soft curse from Martin.

* * * * *

Jack waited for Ennis inside the tent, naked under the rough horse blanket. He could smell a faint musky sweat from his armpits but reckoned Ennis would like him well enough. When Ennis came in, there was an initial awkwardness until Ennis said gruffly, “Weren’t havin’ you whisked off to the city like some fucking princess. Needed to be said.”

“You could have pissed on me, an’ rubbed your scent in.”

Ennis chuckled, a clear sign he was quite pleased with himself without Jack pointing things out. “You’re a fool, Jack Twist. Now, come here, and reacquaint me why I made a damn idiot of myself out there tonight.”

They kissed for a while, Ennis clearly appreciating the smell and the nakedness. He breathed deeply into the hair on Jack’s chest as he held him. “So, you gonna tell me or am I gonna have to beat it outta you? What you learn today?”

Jack grinned into Ennis hair. “Want me to show you?”

“I don’t know. You gonna do something womanish?”

“Would you mind if’n I did?”

Ennis, warm and warmed up, shook his head. “I reckon not.”

Jack reversed his position on the blankets then knelt over Ennis. Ennis grunted. “Got your big butt in my face, Twist.” Jack took Ennis into his mouth and pushed his own cock back between his legs. A mumbled, “Go on, then!” got Ennis going. He warmed up considerably as Jack eased off to lie alongside him.

“Christ, Jack, I can’t hardly concentrate on you if you do that.”

Jack withdrew his lips. “You’re doing just fine, Ennis, trust me.”

* * * * *

The next day, much to Ennis's embarrassment, they had become the ones studied. He could sense the double pair of eyes on him and wasn't surprised when Toby pulled his horse up alongside Jack and asked, "So, how did you two manage to stick together for twenty years? That's longer than most people I know have been alive."

Before Ennis could reply, Jack said bitterly, "We've have eighty three weeks together in all that time."

Ennis gave him a sideward look, and when they were together later Jack mumbled apologetically, "So, I counted. Nothing wrong in that. Got to missin' you so bad, Ennis."

Ennis didn't disagree. "We've got time to make up, that's for sure."

"Well maybe you'd better think of that instead of gettin' huffy with me all the time." Jack's pout matched his slightly whiney tone.

"Huffy?"

"You know what I mean!"

“Don’t remember no huffing last night.”

“Night’s don’t count, Ennis. You know that. Never did. Can’t help things then, don’t matter how much you hate me it jist comes over us.”

“Hate you? Jesus, Jack, what call you got to go and say somethin’ like that? Hate you?”

“You treat me like you do sometimes.”

Ennis dipped his face, shading it from Jack’s gaze. “Well, I don’t hate you, Jack. An’ I’m sorry if that’s how it seems.”

“How sorry would that be, cowboy?”

“Huh? What you thinkin’ on now, Twist? Don’t trust you.”

Jack laughed. “Simple question, Ennis Del Mar: how much you sorry?”

“I’m sorry enough to be real kind to you tonight, sure.”

Jack nudged his horse against Ennis’s. “Anythin’ I want?”

“You’re a whore, Jack Twist.”

“Is that a yes?”

“You kin take it anyway you want, now let me be, fool.”
Grinning Jack dropped back. Ennis, totally unaware of what Jack thought they had agreed to, rode higher onto Brokeback.

* * * * *

Ennis could sense a strange excitement in Jack and could hardly help the grinning himself. Jack in this mood was irresistible, and if they’d been alone he would have had him down on the dirt, going at it hard and fast under the stars.

He had to be content with Jack leaning against his leg, a concession Ennis was willing to make to the newly declared status, and listening to him talk. He was talking up a storm, telling about rodeoing and Texas, two things Ennis didn’t like to hear.

He got up to see to the horses and himself, pissing a stream into the woods, hearing Jack's voice as he pissed and letting a wash of desire harden him.

Jack was saying goodnight when Ennis came back, and they crawled into the tent, one after the other. Jack was on him, biting and feeling him, whispering nothings that meant everything. He pulled Ennis's pants down and grasped him, groaning with the relief of touching him at last. "Turn over, cowboy, been thinkin' on this ride for weeks." Ennis froze. Jack looked up. "No! Don't you tell me no, Ennis."

"Lower your fucking voice, Jack. Don't want every damn person in the State hearing our business."

"You promised!" He tried to wrestle Ennis over, would have made it too, except for the knee in his balls. "Oh, Christ." He fell to one side, gasping for breath to ease the pain. "You son of a bitch."

Ennis grabbed his shirtfront. "I've told you, Jack. That ain't gonna happen. What you thinkin' I am?"

Jack coughed, spat and replied, "Queer boy, butt-fuck."

Ennis hit him then hit him again. “Get outta this fucking tent, Jack.”

Jack, spitting blood and checking his teeth, said calmly, “It’s my fucking tent, Ennis.”

“Tomorrow, I’m going back down.”

Jack nodded. “How you gonna do that, Del Mar? My horses, too.”

Ennis reared back. “Do you want to take me all away, Jack? Why are you doing this to me?”

Jack grabbed him and pulled him close. “What am I trying to do, Ennis? What is it that’s so wrong with wanting to love you?”

“It ain’t love! It’s....” Jack let him go.

“So you don’t love me.”

“Don’t Jack, you know I do, though I don’t know’s I’d use that word.”

“An’ how do you show me, Ennis? How do you show me when we’re here, like this, on the mountain?”

Ennis sat back on his heels, wiping his mouth nervously. “That’s more what I want than what I feel ‘bout you. I show you when we...” He broke off and tried to kiss Jack. Jack wasn’t having any of it.

“What about what I need.”

“You’ve never needed it ‘fore this!”

“Never had you long enough to want it, Ennis. So took with being with you every time it clear blew me away.”

Ennis raised his eyes through his lashes, not consciously undoing Jack, but having the same effect. “I cain’t. I’m sorry, Jack, I just cain’t.”

Jack nodded and lay back down. “Best get some sleep, Ennis. Gonna push for the high meadows tomorrow, see if we can find us some eagles.”

Ennis lay down. He guessed a fuck was out of the question.

* * * * *

Jack didn't mention Ennis leaving the next day, and Ennis sure wasn't about to. He'd lain awake most of the night, imagining Jack with Martin and Toby, and him gone. He was staying.

They rode hard, the newcomers acclimatised to days in the saddle now. It grew hot. Toby removed his shirt and tied it to his saddle horn. He rode up ahead with Jack. Ennis squinted against the sun to see them, sensed the other one close by. "Your friend's gonna get himself burnt. Light's real powerful up here. Air's thin."

Martin laughed. "Yeah, but if I tell him, I won't get to admire him."

Ennis pulled his hat lower, not wanting to go there. Martin had other ideas. "You and Jack okay?"

Ennis spurred his horse to go ahead on the track, but the trail widened out slightly and Martin caught up. "Couldn't

help but hear raised voices last night. Hope we're not... disturbing you."

"Slept like a baby. Always do."

"Jack's a nice guy."

"Reckon I'd agree with you there."

"You must... worry."

"Worry 'bout someone being nice? Funny place that city must be."

"You know what I mean, Ennis. I've got one, too."

Ennis pursed his lips, studying his hands on the reins. Eventually he asked, though he'd rather go an' have another rotten tooth pulled, "One 'a what?"

"A man that takes a lot of loving to keep."

That was enough for Ennis. He kicked his horse hard and rode past them all, going up, far ahead where it was clearer.

It was silent, but the voices in his head gave him no peace.

* * * * *

Ennis wasn't a cruel man so he took no delight in Toby's pain that night. He even found some salve and offered it, but it was for horse ailments, so Martin turned it down. He fetched some freezing water in a bucket and produced a cloth, and a combination of those applied by his lover enabled Toby to get through the evening. He was looking ill though, and Martin took him to bed early with an apology to the others.

Jack poked the fire, sending sparks into the darkness. "I'm sorry. I weren't thinking. I should'a told him."

"You don't burn. Don't guess you thought 'bout it. It was my fault. I didn't insist."

"Shame, on their last night."

"Yeah."

“I’m guessing Martin will find a way to make him feel better.”

Ennis flicked him a glance. “You givin’ thought to going to New York?”

Jack poked the fire again. “I’m thinking of it. Can’t lie, Ennis: I’m giving it some thought.”

“I’m not happy with that, Jack. Can’t lie neither. Seems you ought’a ‘a learnt. Near got you killed, doing what you did. Still might when I remember to think on it.”

Jack looked up then down at the fire. “It ain’t like here there.”

“Every where’s like here for boys like you.”

“Toby says boys dance naked in his club. Men fuck while they’re dancing, everybody lookin’ on.”

“An’ you want that? Christ, Jack, what kinda decent folk do that?”

Jack replied stubbornly, “Don’t make me embarrassed Ennis for something I’m not shamed to be.”

“I ain’t never been but with three people, Jack, an’ you’re one of ‘em. Thought it was gonna be just you now.”

Jack dropped his head. “I didn’t say I wanted to do it, Ennis.... I just want to... know it’s there. See it with my own eyes. Like....” He closed his eyes and lifted his face. “Like you cain’t believe how beautiful the night on Brokeback can be till you see it with your own eyes.” He opened his eyes, the stars reflected in them then lowered them just as sudden. “An’ it’s beautiful because you’re here with me. My whole life’s beautiful now, Ennis, and if’n you’re doubting that’s how I feel then there’s nothing else I can do to make you know it.”

Ennis picked up the stick Jack had dropped and tossed it into the dying embers. “M’ybe there is.”

* * * * *

It was like their first summer on Brokeback, only now it was Ennis lying waiting for Jack, fear in his eyes. Jack slid

on top of him. "I'm gonna make this so slow, darlin' you won't feel no pain."

"Did I hurt you?"

"Yep. But we've got...." He held up the liniment, rejected for sunburn.

"That shit stinks like skunk, Jack."

"You wanna go without? It's your call."

"I don't want that crap on my butt, no."

"Well, okay. Then I suggest you turn over an' bite something."

Ennis sat up. "Shit, Jack, you sure ain't making.... Are you laughin' at me?"

Jack took his mouth, kissing him with the laughter. "Turn over, cowboy. Quit making me wait for ya."

* * * * *

Jack was knee deep in the river, naked and singing at the top of his voice when Ennis crawled out of the tent. He felt like a night creature had crawled up his ass and died, but he remembered the crawling up part and couldn't suppress a grin. He fastened his pants and walked gingerly down to the water's edge. "You gonna stop that racket any time soon?"

Jack put a hand to his chest theatrically and belted out the chorus even louder. Ennis splashed him. Jack waded over, cupping things. "You want some more of this, hey?"

"Stop it, you damn fool. Jack!" They wrestled in the water for Ennis's pants until they sensed they had an audience. Before they knew it the river was a mass of shouting men and splashing.

Toby was the first to surrender, lying on his back and floating. "Jesus, someone put me out of my misery. Didn't sleep at all last night."

Jack eyed the redness. "Still sore?"

Toby winced. Jack nodded sagely. "Ennis is a mite sore today as well."

* * * * *

It was their last breakfast, and they cooked most everything they had and feasted. Toby stretched out in the shade and fell asleep at last. Martin wanted to take some photographs so wandered off.

Jack stood up and offered Ennis the last of the coffee then sat down behind him, long legs stretched around him, pulling him back against his chest. “How you feel today, cowboy.”

“Not like riding, truth be told.”

“Didn’t mean that, Ennis. I know that pain. How you *feelin’*? ‘Bout me and things.”

“You going to New York?”

“I never was, darlin’. Got you to see me proper for once though.”

“I was seeing you, Jack. I was seeing you. But I kept thinkin’ I didn’t ought’a be seeing you. That make sense?”

Like if I closed my eyes on you for a second you'd be gone. This would be gone, and I'd be standing in that fucking street with that...."

"Hey! Ennis. Don't.' He propped his chin onto Ennis's shaking shoulder. "I ain't going anywhere, friend. Jus' you an' me."

Ennis rubbed his sleeve over his eyes. "Be good to get home."

Jack pushed back. Ennis twisted around. "Fuck." Jack nodded. "That's the first time we've ever wanted to leave the mountain."

"First time we've had something to go back to."

Jack embraced him again. "Christ I love you."

"No need to get all soft on me."

Jack laughed into his ear. "I remember some real soft talk from you last night, Del Mar."

“Yeah, well. No need to let the damn squirrels know our business. Shut that prutty mouth of yourn.”

Jack slipped his hand around. “Maybe I’ve found something I might not object to doin’ the shuttin’.”

“Hush, fool.”

Jack dragged Ennis’s hat right down over his face. “Fool for you, Ennis Del Mar.”

* * * * *

They broke out of the woods to a regulation campsite where Ennis and Jack had left vehicles and trailers earlier that week. The descent off the mountain was done swiftly and mechanically, but although the visitors did not say much, Ennis and Jack knew that their hearts were full. Couldn’t help it. Brokeback was just like that.

The parting was delayed by the buying of quilts. When the two had left, Jack, Ennis and ma sat around the big table in the house, drinking coffee and playing with ma’s money. She stroked it like she stroked her sewing, pride

and humility in equal measure. “Don’t seem right, Jack, to have so much for something so ordinary.”

“Ain’t ordinary to them, ma. It’s what they ain’t got, what we got easy. “S way of the world, I reckon.” He glanced at Ennis, for once without his hat hiding his eyes. “I reckon we’ve got plenty they ain’t, for all their fancy haircuts and city life.”

Ennis smiled, knowing the comment was directed at him. “Come on, cowboy, we’ve got tents to clean, equipment to sort. We’re running a business here, case you forgot.”

Walking back to the cabin, Jack leapt onto Ennis back, felling him. “My equipment’s ready for sorting anytime you feel ready, Mister Del Mar.”

* * * * *

A few weeks later, Ennis woke to being forty. He lay in bed thinking about how his daddy hadn’t even got near such an age. Jack had been forty for a week or two. Now he was there, didn’t seem so big. He guessed it was easy to get older when you had a sense of *having*.

He closed his eyes and willed himself back to the street, standing with deceased in his heart. Moved forward to think of a life lived in regret in an empty trailer. Jack shifted in the bed beside him. It was hard to concentrate on the misery. He moved into the sleepy warmth of Jack's body. 'Happy Birthday, me.'

* * * * *

Jack went for the mail, strolling in the sun, full of Ennis. Found a package addressed to them both, just Jack and Ennis, no last names, and took it back like it might bite. He let Ennis open it, as it was his birthday. It was from Martin, a picture in a slim frame. Eight by ten, it seemed bigger than they could imagine. Them, sitting on that last day, Jack behind Ennis, arms tight around him, kissing into his ear. Ennis full on smiling for once, his eyes full of Jack.

"Where'd he...?"

"That big camera thing, I guess. Better than binoculars."

Jack put it on the shelf, alongside the one of Alma Junior and her man that Ennis had fetched from his other life. Married couple.

Ennis lifted an eyebrow, not needing to comment.

* * * * *

Chapter 3

Jack had a letter

Jack had a black cloud over his head the size of all Wyoming.

Ennis didn't need one of Alma's fancy magazines to tell him that the letter and cloud were connected.

He didn't ask. Weren't his business till Jack made it so.

* * * * *

They were stacking winterfeed. Or Ennis was. Jack was sitting on a bale, chewing a nail and gloomy.

Ennis pitched, lifted, swung mechanically, glanced to Jack. "I'm not gonna ask, cowboy; so git over here and help."

Jack folded the letter. Unfolded it. "Shit, Ennis, why cain't you just pester the life outta me like a woman? Make it impossible for me not t' tell ya."

“Thought you might’a worked out why by now, Jack Twist; maybe noticed I ain’t a woman.”

Jack smiled, sunshine through the cloud. “Reckon I did once or twice last night.”

Ennis snorted.

“Bobby wants to come visit.”

Ennis laid down the fork and wiped his forehead, came to sit next to Jack. “How you feel ‘bout that? You ain’t seen him since....” Ennis never finished any conversation about the bad time. Cut him up too much.

Jack stroked Ennis’s thigh. “I’m here, Ennis. Ain’t leaving you none neither.”

After a time. “So, what you gonna tell ‘im?”

“I don’t rightly know.”

“No hurry. Think on it.”

Jack nodded with unhappy eyes.

Ennis didn't do Jack unhappy, glanced around, pushed him to the floor. Laid on him and drawled, "Seein' you ain't seen fit to work up sweat of yer own, you kin enjoy some'a mine."

* * * * *

"He's startin' college in four weeks."

"Jesus."

"Yeah."

"So? What you thinkin' on doin'?"

Jack passed Ennis his cigarette. Naked, filthy, laying still on the floor of the barn in streaks of dust-pitted sunlight it tasted real good. Ennis blew a long trail, saw Jack's body shaking. "Hey!"

Jack shook him off, turned his face away, tears streaking the grime. "He knows, Ennis. How'm I gonna face him?"

“Seems like it were only yesterday you were tellin’ me you weren’t shamed.”

“Christ, Ennis, how come you cain’t remember where you left your fucking pants most days, yet when it comes to shit I say, it’s like a goddamned FBI interrogation?”

“Jist sayin’.”

“I know you don’t like to hear this, and we ain’t hardly talked ‘bout it—.”

“An’ I’m thinking I don’t want t’ know it now.”

“—but I had my fucking pants around my ankles, side of the road, Ennis. My boy knows I take it up the arse. How you think that makes me feel?”

Ennis frowned. “How you know he knows? Cain’t see LB tellin’ ‘im. Shames a man like the bull to talk on it. Faggot is ‘bout all I reckon he told the boy.”

“Well, Ennis, ‘ness I’ve bin gettin’ upset ‘bout nothing all this time, that’s what faggot means.”

“Hell, Jack, everyone who don’t shit to the right like they do gits called that. All I’m saying is Bobby knows you didn’t git along with Lureen an’ LB didn’t like ya. He knows there was a man, cus they tried to pass him off as you. But I bet yer bottom dollar he ain’t got a clue what rightly happened to get you that beating.” He paused just right. “It don’t hardly seem possible to me, so how could it to him?”

Jack turned his head. “I’m hearing some bother there, Ennis. You still hurtin’ ‘bout this?”

“I’ll take hurt to my grave over it, Jack. Ain’t never gonna forget.”

“Shit! Ennis! Don’t say that! You’re goddamned breakin’ my heart!”

Ennis turned his head, faces together. “ I *want* t’ remember, darlin’. Want to remember the too tight fucking rein I held you on to make you need it so bad. Ain’t ever gonna forget. Ain’t ever gonna forgive m’self neither.”

Jack kissed him, long enough to taste. “You’re too good for me, Ennis Del Mar.”

Ennis laughed, tickled at the thought. “Wish Alma could hear someone say that ‘bout me. Tell you what, Jack Twist, you move into the big house with ma while he’s here. Leave me in the cabin and invite that boy a youn up here. I think he’ll surprise you.”

“You surprise me still, Ennis, after all this time.”

“Is that so? In that case—.” Ennis rolled on top of him and surprised him some more. Third time, and it wasn’t even fully day.

* * * * *

Saying it had been easy. Doing it was impossible. A few hundred feet became a thousand miles; a different bed, a different life. They were back leaving Brokeback with nothing to look forward to. Nothing to live for.

Ennis took it real hard, harder than he thought on or let Jack see. All Jack’s clothes, his things, moved to ma’s to make a fiction for the boy. Ennis moved into the barn to sleep, although he didn’t let on to Jack. Leastways there he

didn't have to try and be two people to fill the space Jack left in the bed.

"It's only gonna be for two weeks, Ennis." Jack was reassuring himself as much as Ennis, so Ennis went along with it.

"Sure. Cain't say I ain't lookin' forward to a little respite from your yabberin' and snorin'. Got a few aches and pains might git a chance to heal an' all."

"An' maybe if he goes in t' town or something we could—
."

Ennis frowned and stopped grooming his little mare. Leant against her, lighting a smoke. "How you work that out, Jack? He cain't never go into town. We've got ourselves a right situation here. Town's folk think we're brothers. Boy's gotta think we're jist friends. I'm wondering if'n this ain't the time that lie jumps up to bite us, friend."

"They do say lying's a sin."

Ennis laughed, a rare, clear laugh that went all the way to his eyes. “That’s the least of our problems, friend, if you believe in that hellfire crap.”

“Hush, Ennis.”

“Hush my....” He mumbled the last, to spare Jack.

* * * * *

It started badly.

Bobby said he was driving up, which confused them all. How could a mite like that drive all the way in some rusty old pickup? When Jack pictured it, he saw himself and twenty years past.

Bobby purred in, red and sleek, scream of European tyres. Jack rubbed his hands on his thighs. “Shit.”

Seemed to Ennis that Jack climbed out of the car. Jack as he had been once, before pain and years etched him. “Shit.”

Jack went over to greet and there was a hug, but it was bodies apart and hard slaps on the back, man to man and not blood.

Ennis hung back. Bobby saw him and came over, hand out. “Ennis. It’s good to see you again.”

“Likewise.”

The embarrassed silence from remembrance of first meetings was broken by ma. “It’s about time I met my one and only grandson. How are you, Bobby?”

“I’m doing good, ma’am. It’s real fine to meet you. Mother said to say sorry for your loss an’ all.”

She nodded sadly, but Jack and Ennis saw the truth in her eyes. “Come on in now. I reckoned you’d be hungry. Jack never stopped eating when he was your age.”

Ennis lifted an eyebrow at Jack. Jack frowned at him to be serious.

Maybe it wasn’t going to be that bad.

* * * * *

“You better call your mom, son, let her know you arrived safe.”

Bobby didn't look up from his plate. “Maybe later. She's out today.”

“What you want to do now?”

“Take a tour?”

Jack smiled. “Was hoping you'd say that.”

They saddled up, Jack very aware that Ennis was watching from the cabin.

The sun was hot, despite it being gone summer and not a breath of wind rustled the lake. “You fish?”

Jack laughed suddenly, reined it back. “Spent twenty years not fishing, Bobby, so I try to avoid it now.”

“Granddaddy loves fishing. We both do.”

“LB just be lovin’ that, I reckon. I remember him at the hospital first time he saw you. You’d think he’d had you hisself.”

“Whose cabin is that?”

“Ennis’s.”

“Oh.”

“We ain’t going that way, Bobby.”

“I want to see.”

“Don’t your ma ever tell you want don’t get? Bobby!” He reined in, waiting for him, watching himself in the dismount and the cocky stride.

Ennis came out on the porch, wiping his hands on a towel. Jack kept his eyes fastened on his saddle.

“Bobby.”

“Ennis. This your place?” Ennis nodded and stepped to one side. Bobby disappeared into the interior. Ennis

turned and leant on the doorway, watching him. “You’ve grown some. Hardly recognised you.” Bobby was looking for something, and Ennis could guess only too well what. “I never got a chance to thank you for helpin’ me like you did. Meant to write, but didn’t want your ma knowing.”

“I knew. You didn’t have to write. How is he?”

“Cain’t you see for yourself?”

The boy shrugged then saw the picture of Alma Junior. “Who’s that?”

“My oldest.” Ennis avoided his eyes straying to the empty spot next to it with no dust. “What do you want, Bobby?”

The boy squared his shoulders. “Nothin’. Just looking. You coming riding with us?”

Ennis shook his head. “I gotta work.”

* * * * *

“This here situation is a pig, Ennis Del Mar. An’ if you say one word ‘bout fixing or standing I’ll punch you down.”

“I’m kinda down already, friend.” Ennis stood up, brushing his knees. “I can’t do it. It’s like havin’ the babies listening to me an’ Alma.”

Jack flung his head back and stomped his feet.

Ennis wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “You best be careful or I’ll git confused which Twist is which if you go on actin’ like you was a kid. Time you were gettin’ back.”

“I’m checking the stock. Cain’t I check the goddamned stock now?”

Ennis brushed a kiss over his lips. “Twelve more days an’ you can check my stock with particular close attention, Twist.”

“An’ that’s supposed to help is it, Del Mar?”

“Jist wanted to give you a littl’ something to think on me.”

“With me sharing with my boy? Cain’t even wring one out, Ennis. Don’t laugh at me! An’ when did you get all with

the sassy talk? Bin tryin' to get you to say somethin' nasty for twenty years, an' you up an' pick tonight, when I cain't do nothing 'bout it."

"I gotta go, Jack. I'm needin' me some private time, if you git my drift."

"Fuck you, Ennis Del Mar! Fuck you!"

Ennis was still laughing when he got into the empty cabin. Then he stopped.

He sat down easy on the bed, hat between his hands, turning it. He had a bad feeling about something, but without Jack, his thoughts were so consumed with needin' him that he couldn't puzzle it out.

* * * * *

Ennis rolled over in bed and stretched for Jack. Forty, and he could still wake with wood to blunt an axe. What the hell...? He sat up, straw in his hair and scratching his face. Cock-stand was the only thing he'd got right that morning. First morning without Jack and lying in straw in a barn. He could see the house from here though. More important, he

could see Jack's window. Could see someone walking in front of it but couldn't tell if it was Jack or the boy. Ennis felt someone walk over his grave and couldn't shake the bad feeling.

* * * * *

"What ya doin' that fur?" The boy turned, stripped to the waist and chopping wood outside the cabin. "Where's Jack?"

"He's driven gran'ma into town. Said I'd be bored."

"So you come bothering me?"

"Am I bothering you, Ennis?" The sun was in Ennis's eyes. Felt blinded. "Can I trouble you for some water?"

The boy made himself at home, feet up on a chair, drinking the water. "Beer would be nice."

"Bit early innit? Put yer shirt on."

"Can I take a shower?"

“Sure can. Nice hot one back at the house.”

“So, you live here alone?”

“Ain’t so alone with yer daddy and his ma jist over there.”

“You see a lot of him?”

Inside an’ out, but I ain’t gonna git into this with you, brat.

“Time I was gettin’ back to work.”

“Do I remind you of him?”

Don’t need reminding. Got him. “Yes.”

“Mom said we could be twins.”

“Bet she were real pleased at that.”

“She hates you.”

“She don’t know me.”

“She hates what you are.”

“An’ you, Bobby. What do you think, because that’s what this nice littl’ chat’s re’lly been about.”

“S why I came.”

“Thought it might’a bin.”

“Don’t tell him though.”

“Nothing I keep from Jack, son. That’s jist something you got t’ know about me.”

“But I’m thinking you won’t be telling him just *how* I remind you of him....”

Ennis got up too quickly, lost the upper hand he reckoned he’d had till then.

“Time to go, Bobby.”

Bobby popped the stud on his jeans. “What’s yer hurry, Ennis? We got all day.”

* * * * *

Jack unloaded the supplies, went looking for the boy. Found him in the barn, grooming. “Hey.”

Bobby straightened. “Yer back quick.”

“Felt bad leavin’ ya.”

“I found things to do.”

“Good. You seen Ennis?”

“Nope.”

Jack frowned. “Not at all? Not that I—. Jist wanted to ask him something.”

* * * * *

He jogged up the step and didn’t knock. Ennis was stripping the sheet off the bed. “Hi, cowboy. What ya doin’?”

Bundled the sheet, and sat down. “Slept in the barn las’ night. Scratchy, thought this might help.”

“You’re gettin’ soft, Del Mar.” He glanced out of the widow, sat next to him and put his hand on Ennis. “Hope it ain’t spreadin’.”

“Quit it, Jack. I said quit it!”

“You’re spoiling my fun now.”

“Jack, I’ve been thinkin’. Might go up on the mountain for a few days—while the boy’s here.”

“Why? No call to go an’ do that!”

“Give you time to git to know him, maybe. We’ve got a long time ahead of us, friend. He only gits you two weeks. Think on it.”

“But it don’t stop me gettin’ to know him with you here!”

“Jack, you kin be one stupid son of a bitch sometimes. You know that? What ya doin’ right now? Sittin’ here with me when you ought’a be out with him.”

“Damn.”

“Damn is right, friend. ‘Sides, I could do with a few days. ‘Fore the winter gits us an’ we cain’t go up at all.”

“You ever get tired of being right all the time, Ennis Del Mar?”

Ennis wasn’t feeling all that right so didn’t reply.

* * * * *

Jack watched Ennis leave without watching him, a trick he’d picked up over twenty years of soaking the man into his own skin. He felt like he was being skinned, his top layer, which was Ennis, being peeled away.

“Where’s he going?”

“Jesus. You made me jump. What’s up?”

“Where’s Ennis going?”

“Up on the mountain fur a few days. Why? I gits you all t’ myself now. I was gettin’ jealous the way you two was hittin’ it off.” Jack grinned, thinking he’d please the boy, claim his attention.

“I didn’t mean fur it to happen.”

“What to happen? I don’t git ya.”

“Yesterday, when you were in town.”

Jack felt saliva rush into his mouth, but he prided himself that he kept on fixing the fence. “Go on, I’m listening.”

“I thought he wanted to talk ‘bout... you know, last year. An’ we were talking, but he—.”

“What, Bobby. Jist say it.”

“He said I reminded him of you. When he first met you. Wanted to know if I was like you in other ways.”

“I’m thinking you don’t mean rodeoing.”

“He said it wouldn’t hurt. That I’d like it.”

Jack fell to his knees. Bobby put a hand on his shoulder. “Leave me be!” Stood up. “Was it on the bed in the cabin?”

“Yeah.”

“An’ did you like it?”

“He made sure I would, but you’d know all ‘bout that, wouldn’t you?”

* * * * *

He couldn’t cry, and he couldn’t stop from crying. He was a need that he couldn’t define or end. Nothing helped. He went into the cabin and stood by the bed.

Finally, he went to the house and found ma. “I’m going up on the mountain. Kin you look after the boy for me?”

Ma considered him. “You don’t look well, son. Why you following Ennis? Thought this was to be Bobby’s time. You’ve got time enough for Ennis.”

“We ran outta time, ma. We ran out of time.”

He fetched his gun down and checked the action. Smooth, like Ennis.

* * * * *

The cold of the mountain hit within a few hours. Either that or the shaking was something else. He pulled his coat close and knelt to the track. Weren't like on the movies. Couldn't see shit.

He guessed where Ennis would head though. Place had seen a lot of fighting. Seemed right somehow.

His breath steamed out, the horse's too, ground felt hard. Mountain seemed real unfriendly. First time he'd ever been in it on his own. Absence of Ennis, inside and out, hurt.

* * * * *

He saw the tent where he thought it would be. Remembered times when he'd come back and find Ennis by the fire, supper on, smile on his face and such warmth in his heart that snow melted around them. The smoke trail was thin and straight up, painful and struggling in the air.

“Jack? Shit, what's wrong? Is it ma?”

Jack swung down. Now he was here, had no idea what to do. Hand on his shoulder. Turned and saw Ennis's eyes. Hadn't seen them clear for a while. Familiarity breeds contempt. Saw Ennis proper for the first time in a long while. "Oh, Ennis."

* * * * *

Ennis could not make Jack rise from the hard ground. Held him like he was protecting from a bear, his body for Jack's, over him and no harm. "What is it, darlin'? You gotta tell me, cus you're breakin' my heart here."

Jack lifted his face, snot streaked and red. Ennis's broken heart mended but melted, and he cleaned with his own sleeve. "Jist tell me, Jack."

"I didn't trust you, Ennis. I heard what he said an' believed him!" It set him off again, and Ennis could see nothing more useful was going to happen without coffee and time. "Come sit with me, Jack. Nothing that cain't be said on Brokeback, you know that. No secrets."

Jack allowed Ennis to help him stand, clean his face again and like a child be led to the fire. They sat, Ennis at Jack's

back where he belonged. “Tell me what happened, Ennis, when I was in town.”

Ennis sighed. “Friend, I don’t rightly know how. Didn’t want to have to. ‘S why I left for a few days. Was hopin’ it would sort without me. I’m a coward. I’m a goddamned coward. But then you know that. Who knows it more, m’be ‘cepting Alma. Shit, I hurt everythin’ I touch.” He removed Jack’s hat and propped his chin on Jack’s thick hair. “I think he was tryin’ to test me. See if’n I’d fall for it an’ hurt you. What did he say, Jack? Tell me.”

“Said you wanted him because he reminded you of me. Said you made it good for him like you do fur me.”

“Christ.”

“Yeah. Oh, God, what a fuckin’ mess. I did this, Ennis! I couldn’t keep my dick in my pants when it came to you, an’ I fucked Lureen up, fucked Bobby up, an’ now I’m fucking us up.”

“I reckon we both bear some blame when the weighin’ gonna be done. I’m sorry you had to hear that an’ be hurt

so by it, but Jack, don't beat yourself up 'bout believin' him. Remember Ed?"

Jack began to chuckle, but it was mixed still with grief, and the sound was so funny Ennis began to laugh, too.

When whisky had been exchanged for the coffee, Ennis kissed Jack and asked, "Why you changed yer mind, Twist? I'm thinking you didn't pack that gun for bear."

"You put those damn eyes of yours into action, Ennis. Undoes me every time. Jesus, darlin', I trust you with my life."

Ennis rocked him for a while, passing the whisky bottle back and forth, listening to the fire talk to them of twenty years of needing no one else.

"Ennis?"

"What, darlin'?"

"Why you stripping the bed?"

“Huh? I told ya, cus I’m sleeping in the barn on goddamned straw because of you.”

Jack smiled into the whisky bottle. “That’s good then.”

A wind picked up and made the tent flap.

“Ennis?”

“What, Jack? Cain’t you enjoy the peace an’ quiet for a while?”

“Why are you sleepin’ in the barn?”

Ennis snatched the bottle. “Cus I’m soft, Jack Twist. Fur you. Cain’t bear to sleep on my lonesome, an’ if you ever mention this ag’in I might have to take that gun to you.”

“What are we going to do about Bobby?”

Ennis was pleased to hear the *we*. “I ain’t sure it’s our place to do anything, Jack.”

“How you work that out?”

“He’s only a few months shy of when we first met. We weren’t boys, Jack; we were men, an’ we knew what we wanted an’ took it. It were in his eyes, Jack; he knew what he was doin’.”

“Cepting... we didn’t, Ennis. Are you tellin’ me that if you could go back and do it all ag’in, you’d still walk away from me without one regret and go marry Alma?”

“Trust me, Jack, it weren’t with no regrets. Not at all.”

“Answer me.”

“I cain’t. I’m not that man anymore, I guess. Cain only say what I want now, and that’s you.”

“But we could have done it different, Ennis. Jist because we were ornery stubborn bastards didn’t mean we were right. An’ Bobby’s not right, an’ we need t’ help him.”

“I think I’d best stay out of it, Jack, much as I like bein’ included in the save Bobby campaign.”

“Cain’t do it without you, Ennis. Don’t want to. Had me a real scare today. Made me see you different.”

Ennis snorted. “That I can believe.”

“Don’t make fun a me, Ennis. Had you *not* in me as I were riding up onto Brokeback, and it felt like I was dying.”

Ennis took a deep breath. “I never wanted you to feel that kinda pain, Jack, but it’s with me every time I think on the word deceased. Cain’t hardly remember anything ‘bout that trip to Texas or the hospital or bringin’ you up here to git some healin’. Think I was dead inside, ya know? So every time I wake by you or hear you fart or have to watch you cuttin’ your damn nose hair, I think that I’m in heaven already an’ that it don’t even matter that I think the one I’m *supposed* to be waitin’ for’s jist a lot of hellfire and hokum.”

“Ennis Del Mar, if you go on like this, you’ll talk more in one night than you spoke the whole damn time I known you.”

“If’n I go on like this, Jack Twist, I’m gonna be in serious danger of sayin’ something I planned on not never sayin’.”

Jack twisted around in his arms. “Am I hearin’ what I think I’m hearin’?”

Ennis pursed his lips and stared resolutely into the fire, not realising the effect of its brilliance in his eyes. “This here is under protest, but I love you, Jack Twist. Now it’s said, and no more need be said about it. Jack! Quit it! Quit it! We got ourselves a nice warm tent, you darn fool. Hell, your mouth is warm ‘nuff. If I’d known sayin’ it was gonna git you to do that, you’d have heard some love nonsense from me a long—. Christ....”

* * * * *

“I don’t want t’ go back, Ennis. It’s like all the problems down there but up here we’re jist free from it all.”

“Problems everywhere for the likes’a us, Jack.”

“Not in New York.”

“That what yer new best friend Toby say in his letters that you think I don’t know ‘bout?”

“We jist friends, Ennis.”

“Did I say you wasn’t? You’d know ‘bout it if I thought different, Jack Twist; jist you remember that. Come on, it’s near daybreak. No problem gits solved by stayin’ away from it.”

“That’s not what you kept tellin’ me all those years, all those times you stayed away from me.”

“Who said you were my problem?”

* * * * *

They rode in slow, sharing thoughts and concerns and no idea what to do. They didn’t feel old enough to know what to do, felt the same as the first time they’d rode off this trail, thoughtless and full of each other, hurting and loving.

Ma flew from the house, waving. They kicked to a gallop.

“He went up to look for you, Jack. I couldn’t stop him. He was real upset; said he’d done something dumb. Oh, Jack, he don’t know the mountain. He’s just a boy.”

Jack swung down. “Did he take a gun?”

She shook her head.

“Which horse?” She told him. “Equipment?” Again, a shake of the head.

“Shit, shit, shit. Sorry, ma. Ennis?”

“Let’s go.” Jack felt weight lift from his shoulder.

* * * * *

“Cain’t track him.”

“Lemme try.”

“Wait, what’s that?”

Ennis squinted hard. “Damn, Jack, I’m forty years old, cain’t see that far so good.”

“Let’s go. Shit for brains goddamned kids!”

“Jack....”

“What?”

“He was sorry. He was coming to git you and make it right. Things are gonna be okay, trust me.”

Jack closed his eyes. “I cain’t believe it, not yet. Seemed so bad what he did.”

“Jack, he’s your son, more than you know. Got your goodness. Sweet, like you.”

Jack was silent for a while. “You call me sweet again, Ennis Del Mar, an’ so help me....”

Ennis swiped Jack’s hat so it fell low over his face. “Sweet darlin’,” and spurred his horse on ahead out of reach.

“Twenty one years, Del Mar, an’ you don’t change one bit, ‘cepting for your crap eyesight!”

* * * * *

What humour there was still in them evaporated by midday. No sign of Bobby and no way to find him. They’d

never found the mountain hostile; it was their mother, and they'd suckled their love on her for twenty years. Now she'd turned on them, cold in their bones and in their hearts. At last Ennis called a halt. "Jack, git up. You cain't follow what ain't there."

Jack beat the ground with his fist. "Fuck!"

"Git up, Jack, an' listen to me. Jack!"

Jack reluctantly climbed back into the saddle. "What?"

"You gonna calm down an' be civil?"

Jack hung his head. "I'm sorry. Ain't got no call to take it out on you."

"Close yer eyes, cowboy."

"What?"

"Come on, trust me, darlin'. Close yer eyes. Okay, now, you're Jack Twist ag'in as he was when I first met 'im. You thinkin' on that? Remember how you ran like a wild thing? Always gettin' in trouble and makin' a noise and

complainin' and wantin' the world jist the way you though it ought'a be? Which way would Jack go, cowboy?"

Jack had his head tipped to one side. He seemed to be listening to something. He opened his eyes and scanned the trails ahead. "That one. Shit, Ennis, I'd take that 'un cus it's the hardest. Gotta prove I could do it."

"There ya go. That's the way he's gone too, I reckon."

They swung to the hard trail, had to dismount times and lead stubborn horses. Day started to fade in the west, spectacular but painful.

Then they saw it, coming out of the sunset, colour of blood.

Ennis swore. Jack saw.

It was blood.

The horse staggered, snickered, staggered, a routine of pain it must have had too long. What Ennis thought reins trailing were guts, slashed and being where guts never should. Insane and unable to stop, it dragged its life

behind, going down, heading for a remembered home it would never now reach.

Jack snatched his gun, dismounted in one fluid movement, tears unnoticed on his face. "I ain't never done this, Ennis. Oh, shit."

Ennis took the rifle from him. "You hold her, friend. Leave it t' me."

Jack couldn't, there was too much pain and panic, and he was knocked down, stepped on, blood slicking his hands, but eventually it was done and the pain ended.

They lost their horses in the process. Twenty years and more of horses, and they'd made a mistake, not holding while they shot.

Jack cried out. Ennis bent to his knees. Glanced behind, up, deciding. "We gotta git 'em, Jack. Cain't do this without 'em."

"No! We've gotta go find him, Ennis! Horse cain't have come far like that. Must be jist up there."

“Jack, if he ain’t, we’re fucked. Cain’t walk, ain’t got supplies. Jack! Stop!” He caught an arm. “Medical supplies’re on the horses.”

Jack watched Ennis’s eyes in horror. Saw the horror in them. He glanced once to where he wanted to be then began to run down the trail after the horses. It was getting too dark to see.

“They’re good horses, Jack. Won’t go far. Fuck!”

“You okay?”

“Damn near broke my fucking leg. Slow down, Jack, ain’t gonna help him none if we’re done in.”

“Ain’t gonna help him if he’s bleedin’ to death.”

Ennis didn’t like to say that if the bear got to him that wouldn’t be much of a worry.

The horses were coming back up the trail toward them, edgy and full of excuses. They remounted and swung west once more. Ennis held Jack’s rein. “Wait up, friend.”

“No! Ennis, we gotta go now!”

“I can’t see squat, Jack, so I’m sure as hell you cain’t neither. We got us a real bad situation here, cowboy. Jist take it slow.”

Jack nodded and side-by-side they picked a delicate way up the trail, fixing objects in a rare glimpse of moon and trusting to luck under cloud. The horses wouldn’t pass the dead, so they led them, hats shading frightened eyes.

Jack began to holler for Bobby, hoping at each call he’d hear, “Daddy,” but it never came.

“Jack.”

“No, Ennis! I know what you’re gonna say, but I ain’t stoppin’.”

“If we wait till light we kin follow the blood. Jack, we need to wait till light.”

Jack slid off his horse. Ennis was there for him. It was the worse night they’d spent on the mountain, and in twenty years they’d had some bad ones.

* * * * *

Sunup came early. Huddled together under a blanket, no tent, waiting with no sleep and little talk, they stumbled up, stiff with cold. Ennis put his hand on Jack's arm, made him look at him. "You know, Jack. In yer heart you gotta know."

Jack looked like the man Ennis found in a hospital. "What am I gonna do?"

"Yer gonna stand it, Jack, cus that's all ya kin do."

"You don't git it, Ennis. I never wanted 'im. Not like you and the girls. You've always put them first. Shit, I should know that; they came afore me, every time. But I didn't. I would'a left 'im, drop of my pants, if'n you'd once given me a slackin' of that fucking rein you kept me on. I never wanted 'im. I jist wanted you, so now I've got ya, I'm losing him. God's punishment on us, Ennis."

Ennis punched him down. "You quit it, Jack Twist. This ain't nothing to do with God or what you did or ain't did in the past. That's bullshit and you know it! Git off your

sorry ass and come help me look or so help me God I'll kick you while you're down." He stomped off, hoping Jack was fooled. Saved his shaking for when Jack was mounted and not looking. Sometimes Jack Twist needed some skilful handling.

They picked up the trail of blood. Ennis didn't want to hear flies. Wished he didn't have to see a man, no penis, in his mind. Didn't want that for Jack. Whole life, remembering Bobby after a bear.

"Lit me go up front, Twist."

Jack reined back and looked at him. Ennis shivered, looked at something else. Jack's eyes were full of hate. For himself, for Ennis, for Brokeback, for everything they were.

They both began to shout, and some miles on a shout came back. Jack looked to Ennis like the sun lived in him. They spurred hard and crashed through the trees.

He was trying to stand, a figure of mud and blood and warm, live skin. Ennis hugged him hard as Jack, and Bobby was laughing through crying. "Christ, Bobby, I'm

gonna beat the livin' crap outta you when we git back. What the hell you doin' comin' up here with no gun? Did ya git hurt? How'd ya—.”

“Fur Christ’s sake, Twist, let the boy speak.”

“He rolled me, Ennis. He jist came over and rolled and rolled me.” He fainted.

Ennis looked mystified at Jack. “Who rolled what?”

“M’be he’s delierious.”

“M’be. Git a fire going.”

Bobby came round with a cry. Jack held him and talked about nothing while Ennis got a fire going. “You sure you ain’t hurt, son?”

“He rolled me.”

“Bobby—.”

“The bear, Daddy, we kinda stepped on ‘im, and I fell off, and he caught the horse a swipe. He was screamin’

something bad and ran. I felt like I'd busted my leg it hurt so damn much, and the bear jist turned on me. Thought I was—." He took a deep breath and rubbed his sleeve over his face. "I'm so sorry, Daddy. I fucked things up an' when I thought that bear was gonna git me I wished I could say that to ya, afore I went an' died. But he jist rolled me. Over an' over like I was a goddamned log or something. Got me some crackin' bruises. Wanna see?"

They both did, and Jack's hands began to shake when he saw them. "Christ almighty, Ennis, look at 'em."

"You've been mauled, son. Mauled by a bear and survived. I reckon you've got one hellavu story to drink on the rest of your life."

"Why'd ya do it, Bobby?"

"Jack, not now."

"No, I wanta know. Why'd ya do it?"

The boy stared into the fire then glanced up at Ennis. "I was helpin' ya so you'd bring him home, but you up and

took him all fur yerself. You've had all the best of him all my life, so why'd you go and take the little I had as well?"

"Bob—."

"Let me talk fur myself, Jack. Boy deserves to know. It weren't like that, Bobby. I took him up the mountain to make him well an' then I left. Left fur nigh on the rest of that year. It weren't cus of me he didn't come back, son. He couldn't, given the way things was."

Jack waited, staring into the fire. "Life ain't a storybook, Bobby. It's jist the way it is, an' most of us spend our whole lives wantin' things we ain't never gonna have. I spent my whole life—." He licked his lips, took a breath. "My whole life wantin' Ennis. You've been wantin' something from me your whole life I ain't been able to give you because of that. Well, now I got Ennis, and m'be you kin have what you want too. You cain't grow sweet grass on bitter, empty land, son; it's gotta be rich and full. You git my meanin'?"

"I don't want to go back, Daddy. I cain't live with them any more'an you could."

“Shit, son, lookin’ like you do, I’m not sure I want you to go back to yer mammy.”

Bobby grinned. “Just as well I’m not here then. Just as well I’m visitin’ Huston with my girl’s folks.”

Ennis and Jack chorused, “Your girl?”

Bobby blushed. “Jist because I look like you....”

Jack huffed. “Don’t see how’s yer gonna pass off a bear mauling in Houston.”

* * * * *

Bobby and Jack rode one horse, and they took it slow with lots of rests. Camped one night, rough and ready, and made it back the next day. Ma was grey with worry. Jack thought she looked old, felt old himself, realised he could be a grandfather soon, didn’t want it.

He put the boy to bed, let ma fuss like she’d never been allowed to fuss him and went to find Ennis. Took him by the arm and took him to bed. Took him in another way too, not something they did very often, but special when

they did. Ennis, always so private and contained, opened up to allow him in.

Afterwards they lay tangled, Ennis in Jack's arms as it had always been, needing the only love he'd ever really been given. "You gonna let him stay?"

Jack tightened his arm. "No. That's what I wanted to talk on some with you, 'for I let him know."

"He's gonna take it hard, Jack. I don't mind, if you want... if that's why yer sayin' no."

"Didn't think you would, Ennis, but appreciate hearin' it. M'be I'm the most selfish man on earth, Ennis, an' I know I said all those foolish things 'bout being punished an' all. 'S easy to get foolish when yer heart's all tearin' up with worry. But this is my life. I waited fur long enough to have it. When that thing comes over us—an' I don't notice the need for it lessin' over time, cowboy—when it comes over us? I want to be able to scratch that itch, Ennis, good and proper. We earned this, darlin', an' I ain't gonna share it with anyone, not even Bobby.

“Yer very quiet, Del Mar. You thinkin’ what a grade A bitch I am?”

“I was thinkin’ that I maybe only now understand jist how hard it’s bin fur you all these years. I’m sorry, Jack. Sorry for all the hurt I gave ya.”

“Jesus, Ennis. You saved my goddamned life in that hospital. Paid it all back.”

“No, you got it all wrong, darlin’: I was jist savin’ my life.”

* * * * *

Bobby came down for breakfast the next day, stiff and bruised. Jack let him eat then said, “We got some talkin’ to do. You busy?”

They strolled side by side, divided only by time and Jack’s clothes hanging loose on his work-worn frame. Headed for the lake and began to walk the shore, skipping stones.

“You’re gonna tell me I can’t stay, aren’t you?”

“I’m not gonna lie to ya, Bobby, an’ say this is the best thing for you. People always lying to their kids like that. This is best for me. But ya know somethin’, son? You kin go out and live yer life *because* I’m here. Brokeback is like that, Bobby: real welcomin’ when you need it.”

Hands thrust in pockets they wandered on, slow, Bobby still limping. “Where’s Ennis?”

“Givin’ us some space.”

“What’s that?” Small tent on sweet grass and stillness on the water.

“Took me a fancy to learnin’ how to fish. Hopin’ you’d see fit to teach me. Be good to fish together when you come up in the vacations.”

Bobby closed his eyes, opened them and life continued. He grinned a grin he’d inherited from Jack. “What the hell is that?”

Jack picked it up. “What the hell it look like? That’s my fishin’ tackle.”

“Damn, that’s old! You can’t catch nothing with that!”

Jack began to laugh. Found he couldn’t stop. Knew it was going to be all right. “You’re wrong, son. It’s brand new. Ain’t never been used, but I caught exactly what I was fishing for with it, even if it took me twenty goddamned years.”

* * * * *

Chapter 4

“We’re gonna be broke come spring, friend.”

Ennis skimmed another pebble over the lake, grunted as reply.

“You hear me?”

“I hear ya.” He stopped his fun. Not had much fun for the first forty years of life so was used to its absence. The knot in his belly, begun to soothe under Jack’s insistent loving, came back, hard and fast. He stamped his feet. “It’s damn cold.”

Jack came up, wrapped his arms tight. “Spring ain’t till next year, Ennis. I ain’t sayin’ we’re broke an’ out on our asses now. Did you fear us leavin’ this evenin’? Goin’ our separate ways? Ma out on the streets, m’be only a quilt to keep her warm?”

Ennis turned, punched him so hard blood flew through the air, darkening pebbles where it landed. Left him on the ground and began to walk back to the cabin.

* * * * *

Jack left it a while, mostly because he was bleeding. Flow stopped and he followed Ennis back, hands pushed low in pockets. He went in, not looking at Ennis and put coffee on to heat. As he shrugged out of his jacket, he looked ruefully at the blood, then went to the bathroom to inspect his nose. “M’be I ought’a take up prize fightin’. Got me the nose fur it now.”

Ennis leant in the doorway, watching. “Don’t ever make fun a me, Jack. What’ve I got if I ain’t got this? This ain’t mine; ain’t something I kin control or *keep* mine. I’m here like a woman, Jack, an’ I cain’t stand that you git your fun on that.”

Jack watched him in the mirror. Replied into it, “We paid LB back almost a tenth what I owe him, Ennis. You and me earned that money equal, last few months. I’m sorry you cain’t see that. We pay it all back, an’ this place’ll be ours. Equal.”

Ennis closed his eyes, opened them, took the washcloth from Jack, dabbing gently. “You niver had to worry ‘bout money, Jack, not since you met Lureen. My whole life’s

bin like ridin' through rain: cold and hard, and you jist want it t' stop. I cain't joke 'bout it like you. This all I got now."

"Well m'be you ought'a stop hittin' it then."

Ennis's smile warmed them both. "I'm feelin' real bad 'bout that now. Kinda swellin'. You ugly as a hog."

"That so?"

It was unexpected, no less relished for that. Lovemaking, lately turned tender, slow, bed-soft and warm, now on the bathroom floor, heads jammed, scrabbling for purchase, tearing clothes and biting like cats for arousal. Ennis stabbed dry. Jack cried out, tearing, and they went at it on blood.

* * * * *

Jack paced; Ennis watched, knowing why he couldn't sit, feeling good to think on it.

"Assets."

“Well you should’a stopped me then.”

“Huh?”

“If your ass hurts, ya should’a said no.”

Jack blinked then aimed a kick at the bed. “I figure we make a list of our assets, Ennis. See what we got an’ ain’t got. See if we cain’t figure a way to make some money this win’er.”

“We got huntin’ parties booked?”

“Some, till back end September. Then I reckon it’s too damn cold to camp out. Ain’t no vacation for them in that. Bad nuff when yer *being* paid.”

“M’be we kin sign on fur some work someplace.”

Jack shook his head, put a hand on Ennis. “Yer too old, cowboy.”

Ennis took that as a challenge.

* * * * *

“Horses be okay. Got the winterfeed fur them. Guess we could hunt fur vitals.”

“An’ you could fish.” Jack’s lack of prowess with a rod amused Ennis.

“You ain’t ‘xactly helpin’, friend.”

“M’be we could sell ma.”

* * * * *

Jack held Ennis, arm tucked under his sleeping head, stroking fingers through sweat-damp curls. What would Ennis be if they’d had no parting since that first summer on Brokeback? Four weeks gone, and he was softening, hard skin being shed. More and more, Jack saw this Ennis: this quick, fun-loving man, willing to love. Still had the other one to live with, an’ all. Hard, mean, quick with his fists, anger in his gut. Flip sides of the same coin. Nose ached from one, ass from the other. Jack reckoned he was branded well and good.

He wanted sleep, like Ennis, but worry wormed awake in his belly. Ennis was right: too easy for too long. Didn't want to be his father: dried out and sour from poverty and disappointment. Had ma to look after. And Ennis.

Thought about Toby. Couldn't ask. Wouldn't ask. Thought about LB and a few months not paying. Wouldn't give the son-of-the-bitch that much satisfaction. Lit a cigarette. Smoke curls in the air, soft curls in his fingers. Didn't want to lose this. Thought about Mexico and the paying for flesh. Considered. Made him laugh and want to tell Ennis, but remembered his nose. Thoughts drifted to a tyre iron. Bobby. Pleasure at the fishing. And it came to him. Just as clear and brave as sunlight through cloud on Brokeback. "Ennis!

"Del Mar, wake up."

* * * * *

Ennis knew Jack's enthusiasms. Best go along, quiet, prisoner to his zeal. Soon blow over and be forgotten.

* * * * *

Wasn't forgotten this time. Jack persisted with the same tenacity he'd shown to Brokeback over twenty years. Still harking on it come October. Ennis needed to pull hard on the reins of this one.

"Jack. Stop."

Jack, carrying an armful from cabin to house, waited. Planned they'd live there with Ma, rent out the cabin for fishing vacations throughout the winter.

Ennis, leaning on the rail of the porch, watched the lake. "I ain't moving in with your ma."

"Ennis, we done decided all this! Only fur the win'er."

"No."

"No! What ya mean no! Bin planning this fur weeks!" Jack had ways of dealing with Ennis as well. He ignored him and kept on walking.

"Jack Twist, you take one more step an' we're gonna have a fallin' out o' this."

Jack took a large step, moon large, and kept going.

* * * * *

Jack slumped on one narrow bed, eyeing the other, scowling. Ennis, framed in the doorway, glanced behind and shut the door. “Could lend you a strap, friend, so ya don’t tip out at night.”

“Fuck off, Ennis. I got a fishin’ party arrivin’ in two days, so you best be outta that cabin. You had a problem with this, friend, you should’a raised it over the last four weeks. I ain’t sprung this on ya.” He flicked him a glance. “Not like you, springin’ bad surprises.”

Ennis sat on the opposite bed, took off his hat, twisted it in his hands.

Jack bounced his bed, raised eyebrows, hopeful. “Come on, cowboy. You need some help decidin’?”

Ennis looked up, sharp. “You got no respect, Twist.”

Jack stood, came close, backed off. “I’m sick o’ this, Ennis. What I done wrong now? You always on my case worse than Lureen, an’ she a grade-A bitch sometimes!”

Ennis stood, made the room shrink. “Got no respect fur me, fur ma, or fur your own goddamned wife, Jack. We cain’t live in this house all win’er. What we gonna do, huh? You goin’ give me up, Jack? You ‘xpect me to not have you fur the whole win’er?”

“Christ, Ennis, no. We kin.... When ma....” Seeing he was now so wrong he went for being right, came forward, belligerent. “Least I ain’t ‘xpectin’ you to live on two high-altitude fucks ‘tween now and spring. Got us beds an’ bein’ together. ‘S more than you ever gave me.”

“We ain’t together on this, Twist. I’ll be outta the cabin tonight.”

* * * * *

Jack refused to meet ma’s eyes over supper. She laid a third plate and told him to wait. Boy-small again, he waited.

Ennis came in, nodded to ma, ignored Jack.

Jack talked to ma about the fishing till she cleared and took plates to the kitchen. Awkward silence crackled louder than the fire.

“Cabin’s all clear. Like I said.”

Trying to show no interest. “You in the barn?”

“Nope.” Ennis stretched out and lit a cigarette.

Jack played with his glass. “I ain’t gonna ask.”

“Good.”

“Damn you to hell, Ennis Del Mar.”

Ma spoiled Ennis’s fun. “So, Ennis, where you stayin’? Don’t like to think of you in that old barn all winter.”

“No ma’am.” Furious glance to grinning Jack. “Campin’ out, down by the lake. Right prutty spot.”

Jack’s face fell. “*Without me,*” not said, but heard.

Ma got to worrying. Ennis and Jack regarded each other over the table, lines drawn. "I gotta get goin', ma'am. Got me a hike... now I'm commutin'."

Jack pushed his chair back, knew he was weak for this man and didn't care. "You want some company back, cowboy?"

Ennis took time with his hat. "Nope."

* * * * *

Ennis didn't arrive for breakfast and looked rough when Jack saw him at the cabin. Jack was sweeping out. He leant on the broom and lit up. "Mornin'."

Ennis nodded. "I'm goin' t' town."

Invitation or announcement? Jack fished in his pocket. "Got us the money fur next week. Kin you bank it?" He held it out, hoping desperately on it being invitation, brushed Ennis's fingers as it was taken. "Didn't sleep, friend. I'm feelin' bad 'bout this whole situation."

Ennis looked down. "Yeah." Pushed the cheque in his pocket. "Guess you ought'a."

* * * * *

Jack saddled up, went to find Ennis's camp. He was right. Prettiest spot on the lake. Through the woods, an easy walking trail, or along the shore, further but sweet. Wouldn't know the house or cabin existed from here.

He sat on Ennis's blanket, thinking, left food and a present. Rode up on the mountain, talking to himself.

* * * * *

Ennis arrived for supper. Jack was cooking, ma gone to a church evening. Ennis tossed his hat, saw the situation and retrieved it. "I'll eat in camp." The hesitation was painful. "Thanks fur the supplies. An' the whisky."

"I cain't eat all this."

Ennis hesitated some more. A log falling to flames decided him. He dropped his hat and sat down, Jack filling his plate. With ma gone, Jack ate his out of the pan.

Jack poured whisky and heaped more food to Ennis. He tossed a log on the fire. "Gettin' cold at night."

Ennis nodded, drained the glass. Jack refilled. "You manage pie?"

Ennis tossed back the whisky. "Depends on who baked it."

Jack fetched it, more cream than pie. Third whisky went down unnoticed.

Clearing the table, Jack watched Ennis on the couch, long legs stretched to the warmth, near sleep.

"Some might say we're wastin' what we got now, Ennis. Didn't wait twenty years to fight with ya."

"You wanna make out on the couch, Twist?" New voice Jack didn't like or get.

"We kin go upstairs." Glance at the door. "Don't want ma comin' in an'—."

“Christ!” Ennis was up and pacing. “This what we come to, Twist? Two ol’ nasties sneakin’ around? How kin you think on it?”

“I told you, Ennis, long time ago: I ain’t shamed by what we do. M’be you are. M’be that’s what twenty years were about. Not the girls, not *I gotta work, Jack*. M’be it were *I’m shamed by you, Jack and what I want t’ do in your body.*”

“Shut up!”

“No!”

“I said shut up!” Ennis grabbed him by his shirtfront. “It ain’t about shame! It’s about respect, and you ain’t never had none. I cheated on Alma, and I’m deeply shamed ‘bout that, but you... you.... You cheated on *me!*” It was said. Ennis couldn’t rightly work out why. Had nothing to do with moving into the house for the winter.

Jack put hands to Ennis’s wrists, slightly stronger, though he’d never use that. “I never did, darlin’, if cheatin’ done in the heart.” Stroked his thumbs over work-worn bones. “Kin you wait some minutes?”

Ennis pulled a hand free, wiped his eyes. “Wut for?”

“Need to find me some long-johns if I’m campin’ out this win’er”

* * * * *

Ennis knew no mention of the cold could now be made. Not ever, all winter. They lay huddled, too cold to sleep on hard ground. Tent flapped, blankets smelt of horse piss, but his world was back on its right axis, tilted just so. “You didn’t ask me, Jack. Jist ran on, thinkin’ I’d go along wi’ it. You don’t respect me.”

“This your thing ‘bout feelin’ like a woman a’gin? Because, friend, I’m thinking I jist let you prove you ain’t.”

“Christ, Jack, you think more wi’ your ass than you do wi’ your brain.”

“Guess that’s because I gits to use it more o’fen. I thought you’d jump at the idea, Ennis. We gits to pay the son-of-a-bitch back sooner, kin afford to eat and keep the place goin’, an’ all we ain’t got is the cabin fur a few months.”

“That how you see it, Jack? Jist a cabin?”

Jack sat up, hand on Ennis’s face in the dark, calloused cupping of stubble. “It ain’t *us*, Ennis? That what you think?”

Ennis held the hand, stroked the palm, felt for the pulse on the wrist. “You sure ‘bout that? We were Brokeback for twenty years, Jack. Never existed off the mountain. It were like you were dead then it were so bad. M’be we’re jist that cabin now, an’ if I ain’t got it then—.”

“Shit, Ennis, don’t, I cain’t stand it. You’ll tear the heart outta me, darlin’, I swear t’ God.”

* * * * *

“Ennis!”

Ennis shot bolt upright. “Coyote?”

“Huh?”

Ennis recollected. Punched Jack.

“I got me another idea.”

Ennis groaned, pulled the tarp over his head. Jack went under with him. Smelt of bodies: sweat and spunk. “We build us a new cabin. Here. Right on this spot. Pruttiest place on the whole of Brokeback, I reckon.”

Ennis shuffled over, facing Jack. Doubtful. “You ever build a cabin?”

“Jesus, Ennis, you rain on even the Pope’s goddamned parade.”

“An’ you go at life like it gonna work out jist how you want it, no regard fur the reality o’ the situation. Yer gonna take falls so hard, darlin’, that’s all.”

“An’ you ain’t never gonna git high, Ennis. You gonna stay down at the bottom of the mountain because you too afraid t’ climb up an’ see what there.”

They rolled onto backs, found cigarettes, opened the flap to night sky. Ennis watched stars, old friends, ice-cold light on his face. “If I climbed up a ways, would ya come meet me?”

Jack hugged him, rough and painful. “If I come down off my mountains, Ennis, will ya have that camp ready fur me?”

Ennis turned, his face cooling Jack’s, lips like sweet ice in summer. They explored, mouths deep, feeling tugs on balls that clashing tongues always brought. “Our cabin, Ennis. Kin you picture it?”

Kissing around stubble, smelling tobacco, “Kin you picture the work?”

Tonguing where Ennis particularly liked it, “Build it together, friend. Share the work.”

“Sweet hellfire, Jack, I cain’t say no to ya.” Urgent turning him, scrabbling to enter, and a feeling of being home already. No cabin needed.

* * * * *

They surveyed their work. “What time you expecting ‘em?”

“Noon. Looks good, don’t it?”

Ennis knew better bunkhouses, but was silent, trying not to be the damp always spoiling Jack's parades. Jack was in his good books just now. Smelt like Brokeback and aching anticipation of camps high on the mountain. He walked up behind, pressed them together, full light of day and no shame. Jack closed his eyes and leant back, soaking in the love. "M'be we should'a painted it up some."

"They comin' to fish, not admire prutty fancies." Jack's ear tasted of soap.

"See if'n I cain't pick us up an ol' boat this win'er."

"Damn fools'll probably drown 'emselves." Jack's neck tasted of fall sunshine and work, flesh hard to the bone when he bit at it. Jack stretched back, hands sliding behind Ennis, stroking. Ennis whispered into the licked-wet skin, "This don't wear out, do it Jack? Thought it might, now we gits it all the time."

Jack rumbled in his throat, rubbing on Ennis. "S like nature. Riper the conditions, better the growin'."

“You growin’ fur me, Jack?” Jack shifted Ennis’s hand down for answer.

A while and some exploring later, cotton over wood, Ennis sighed. “Ain’t the other fur me, Jack, that makes me blush t’ think on what we do; had that some with Alma, though ain’t sayin’ half as good. It’s this, under my hand and me here picturin’ it and thinkin’ on it. Where’d that come from?”

First conversation in twenty years about what Ennis thought on their sex. Jack took it easy. “Lureen never took no interest in it, after it give her what she wanted. Ain’t a woman’s thing, far as I kin see. Men the on’y ones like their cocks. Natural to like another an’ all.”

Ennis murmured into warm neck. “You argue like a preacher.”

“No damn religion I ever heard. Might’a gone to church more if sermon on the cock subject o’ the day.”

“Hush, sinner. I aim on havin’ you in the afterlife an’ all. Don’t want you crispy an’ peelin’.”

“Where’d you spring from, stranger? You killed off Ennis Del Mar? Because I’m tellin’ you, friend, he wouldn’t take to all this lovin’ talk. He be lookin’ to punch someone right about now, jist so he don’t have to feel the need a me.”

Ennis lowered Jack’s zipper, slid cold hand into heat. “Punchin’ never take the need away. Nothin’ did, ‘cepting Brokeback an’ slidin’ in t’ you.”

“You wanna take the need away now?”

“We jist got through makin’ the bed fur—.”

“When we ever need a bed, fool?” A glance around, habitual as breathing, then Jack popped the stud open on his jeans, letting them fall. Fists griping the porch rail, watching sunlight on the lake, Jack was taken. Still sloppy from a wake up call, he was ripe conditions. Ennis grew to fill the space.

* * * * *

The cabin wasn’t right. The cabin wasn’t as advertised. Their cabin. Jack apologised and promised refunds. Seeing

his hurt, badly hidden, Ennis felt murder in his heart, tasted and liked the flavour.

Jack took his hurt out on the wall. “Goddamned sons of bitches, Ennis! I told ‘em ‘bout the cabin ‘fore they paid. Right on the goddamned lake; fish fur the takin’. What more they want?”

“T’ prove they got more money ‘an us, I expects.”

“We’re sleepin’ in a goddamned tent! See us complainin’ there ain’t no fancy bathroom, ur kitchen app-li-an-ces. Fuck! What d’they think this is? New York fuckin’ city?”

“You wanna mess up the bed? Seems a shame t’ waste it.”

“Are you laughin’ at me, Del Mar, because that would not be a good thing t’ do right now.”

“Sure nuff, Jack.

“I’ll save it t’ tomorrow. Cabin still be empty.”

* * * * *

Ennis watched Jack biting his nail till the quick bled. Made him shiver. “When it gotta be ready fur the next uns?”

“Two weeks. What’m I gonna do, Ennis? I don’t know shit about appliances. That were Lureen’s department.”

Ennis poked the fire, wished it was Jack. “New York city. M’be you should ask your prutty friend up in New York city. I’m thinkin’ he knows more’n a man ought’a ‘bout appliances... of all kinds.”

Jack called, breakfast the next day. Magazines were promised.

Next day, a large black jeep rolled beside the barn. Grinning face, laughed. “You have no idea what it costs to mail magazines, Twister.”

* * * * *

Ennis felt small. Small man with small ideas. The land he understood. Horses and seasons and how hard it was to make a life, these he understood. Flying across a continent in one night because you could and because you were bored awed him. Awe silenced him. Jack was drunk on

the fun and being liked. They came with money and ideas. Smelt of life in a place where life was lived without deceit. Ennis envied and feared them, consumed by silence.

“Shit for brains, Twister, did you seriously expect people to live here?” Toby, kicked the cabin’s absence of appliance.

“Told ‘em it were simple.”

“Okay, Ad Reinhardt is simple, this is.... Never mind. Stand aside; genius at work.”

Jack glanced to Ennis. “Cain’t take all this from ya, Toby, though don’t think it ain’t appreciated.”

“How much are you asking for a week?”

Jack named a figure. “Okay, good.” Mock calculations in the air. “You owe us two free weeks twice a year for the next ten years. How’s that?”

“But, ya could’ve come for free, now we friends, an’ all.”

“Jesus, Twister, you are now a man of business; you don’t have friends!”

Ennis shook his head and left them to it. “Both damn fools as each other, if you ask me.”

Martin caught him at water’s edge. “Sorry. Tobes has... enthusiasms.” He took Ennis’s grunt of sympathy for encouragement to talk. “Christ, it’s pretty here. Have you any idea of the potential of this place, Ennis? Nineteen eighty four: leisure is the new Big Brother. You’ve got the horses, fishing; hell, skiing in a few weeks if this cold gets any worse. Tobes wants Jack to fix a hot tub on the porch, looking down over this view. You market it as steaming in snow.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t worry. It’s a designer thing—what he used to do, before the Cock Ring.”

“Huh?”

“The club? Toby’s club, the Cock Ring.”

“Cock fightin’ illegal in Wyomin’.”

Martin had no idea if Ennis was joking, but had a sudden flash of desire to be Jack and know this quiet man enough to tell.

* * * * *

The visitors slept in the cabin, Ennis and Jack in the camp, but they spent the evening sitting around a fire on the beach, swapping whisky and stories. Darkness and friendship dissolved twenty years of caution. Ennis, Jack sitting between his legs, claimed his property with fingers on neck and a twisting of curls.

Jack wanted Toby to talk about sex, but felt Ennis’s disapproval. Hushed the other two out of respect, till Ennis said, “Don’t bother me none; I ain’t listenin’ anyways.”

Only Jack knew, and not through anything said, that Ennis was. Benefits were had later that night. Jack, in Ennis’s good books and knowing it, made Ennis say things, do things. When dawn came, neither one could stand for aching, but there was frost so old bones were blamed.

* * * * *

“I’m gonna cancel next week’s guests. New stuff be here then. We put it in an’ kin take visitors furst week in November. How that sound?”

Ennis glanced around the cabin. Samples, swatches, books, orders, instructions. “He a right littl’ whirlwind of fuss an’ fancy, ain’t he?”

“He’s gonna *market* us to all his friends, too, Ennis. Solid bookings right through the spring, m’be.”

“Oh, an’ I kin see jist how you like the idea ’a his kinda friends, Twist.”

“I swear, Ennis, half the time I don’t know if yer more stubborn or more stupid.”

“Stupid? That real good, Jack.” Began to push and corral him to the wall. Thrust him hard. “What about when they wanna go t’ town, Twist? You thought’a that? Because folks round here ain’t stupid—like me. Two an’ two always make four. T-Mar gonna take on a whole new

reputation, an' I'll be findin' you in a irrigation ditch missin' my favourite part. You thought about that!"

"It ain't—."

"It *always* like that, Jack. Don't ya git it? There'll never be no place nor time when we kin go to the movies together, sit at a picnic, take a walk; Christ almighty, kiss like regular folk can. That ain't never gonna be fur us. You never see no animals survive if they different. Think on that littl' runt puppy ya carried all that first summer in yer saddle pack. You put 'im down and other dogs damn near killed 'im. Jist fur being different. An' that what we are, Jack, an' the sooner ya come to accept it, the better off you be."

"Christ, Ennis. Preferred it when you ain't talkin'."

"I always talk, Jack; I jist don't do it out loud like other folk. Can't see the difference—still the only fool listening, far as I kin see."

"I listen, Ennis. I hear ya." He kicked the wall. "Son of a fucking bitch."

* * * * *

The trees were so pretty they could have sold the place on red and gold alone. Two men and their wives came first. The men fished; the women painted and rode some with Ennis teaching them. The men went hunting, the wives into town. Such happiness, they wanted same time next year. Paid cash, more money than Jack or Ennis ever held. They scattered it on blankets and went at it, crumpling and staining, hot skin smelling of money and spunk.

They ordered the lumber for their cabin.

Following week, four men came. Old and quiet.

“What they doin’, Ennis?”

Ennis shook his head, didn’t want to know.

They did it again, whatever it was, following day.

“Shit, Ennis, I think they walkin’!”

Every day, boots, sticks and sacks until late, past sundown. Walking.

It worried Ennis more than the flying. “You think bein’ old an’ all they ain’t noticed they missin’ the horses?”

Ma was asked into town with them one night for dinner and a dance, told Jack she felt like a floozy but went anyway.

Money for that week fattened LB’s belly, sizable chunk off what they owed.

* * * * *

Middle of November, first snow hit hard.

Ennis woke to white, tumbled out of canvas and vomited, staining the purity.

“What’s up? Fuck Ennis, you sickin’ fur something?”

Ennis shook him off, wiped his mouth. “Always like this fur me, first snow.” He didn’t explain but went to sit by himself, hunched and small in the whiteness. Later took Jack so hard it was more keeping than taking.

Lake froze. Got so cold they had to move in with ma. Ennis didn't say a word; lumber for the cabin had arrived; he could see the stack from the window whenever he needed.

Brokeback was bound in snow and ice, still, waiting out for warmth. Stillness slipped inside, abstinence feeding intimacy. They took up cards, played for whisky and kisses sneaked under the covers of a shared single bed.

Lay tangled and watched the moon move across snow.

“We ought'a have a tub for our place, an' all, Ennis. Out on the porch so ya kin soak yer old bones. Reckon we ain't broke no more.”

Ennis, holding Jack's warm, naked body, thinking on abstinence and anticipation, grunted. “Reckon we never were.”

* * * * *

Chapter 5

Winter locked Brokeback down, a mythical place of frozen sculpture, human concerns tiny in the vastness of white.

Ennis and Jack lived in the house, occasional excursions to the barn or the camp when the urge took them. Beds and clean bodies gave away to muck and pounding on splintered floors, over rails, or on ground so hard it bruised. Some urgency overtook them, some need to combat the lifelessness of the world outside. Although never said, the endless nothingness of snow became to them the endless nothingness of their lives lived away from Brokeback. Inside, wrestling and rolling, thrusting and ejaculating, licking and tasting, they were muck, sweat and the essence of life.

The cabin stood empty some weeks, but they didn't move back. Ennis claimed it was too much effort. Jack wanted it kept for late bookings. Secretly, neither wanted the additional cleaning, allocation of those duties causing considerable friction between them.

Early December, ma got a letter from her sister. Given her loss, how sad she would be this time of year and other

things always said, she was invited for two weeks over Christmas. She wouldn't have gone, not liking her sister and not feeling any particular sadness, but the water froze in the pipes, her fingers ached too bad to sew, and her sister lived in Florida.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Jack and Ennis had the house to themselves.

Jack returned late from taking ma to the airport. A six hour trip on bad roads, two hours just to do the last few miles onto Brokeback, and tiredness etched beneath the faint Texas scarring. Ennis had spent the day clearing snow and fixing pipes, the cold splitting skin on his hands till they bled.

Jack stamped boots on the porch and shed them. Dark inside, just a huge fire burning, Ennis's feet stuck out one end of the couch. He was asleep, an arm thrown over his face, badly applied sticking plasters already peeling.

Jack's eyes travelled slowly down the lean body. Ennis Del Mar. Still hard to believe. For twenty years he'd wanted something that *could* have been. But it had been denied him. That was worse than having no possibility of it at all.

Ennis Del Mar had become for Jack a Holy Grail of happiness that if he strove hard enough he would obtain. And he had tried, year after year, willing to give everything up if Ennis Del Mar had but once said the word. Disappointment from silence nearly killed him. Ennis Del Mar held all the power. It was hard to believe it looking down at this tired, scruffy man with badly applied sticking plasters.

Jack leant over the couch and brushed the hair off Ennis's forehead. "You asleep?"

Ennis breathed deeply and opened his eyes. Jack wondered if, for one moment, similar thoughts went through Ennis's mind: how long they waited, how hard it was to believe that they were together now. He studied the tired face and concluded that Ennis probably did think these things. Maybe he felt guilt, too. Jack sincerely hoped so.

Ennis swung his legs down. "She git away okay?"

Jack nodded. "She's more worried about us. What's to eat?"

“Last I looked, the kitchen were over there.”

“Christ almighty, Ennis, I done drove since sunup. Ate crap on the road an’ I want something decent now.”

“I ain’t bin lyin’ around paintin’ my fucking nails, Twist. House don’t run itself!”

Jack nodded at the first aid attempts. “You okay?”

“I done worse.” He went to the kitchen, peeling off the bandages annoying him the most.

Jack heard an amused snort, went to see. Ennis indicated the refrigerator. “I don’t reckon we’re gonna starve, Twist.”

On every shelf neatly labelled bowls greeted Jack’s inspection. He pulled one out. *“Share this with Ennis. Its not all for you Jack.”*

Ennis poked him in the ribs, pretending to find fat, something that could now be said because it wasn’t there, which had not been said when it was.

Jack sighed and pulled Ennis into an embrace. Ennis eased away, but a few moments later, slid a hand around Jack's neck and pulled him close.

Jack tipped his head back, rubbing against Ennis's cheek.
"Why you always do that?"

"What?"

"Pull away from a hug."

Ennis moved away. "What d'ya call that then, fool?"

Jack caught his arm. "Face to face, Ennis. We never fuck face to face neither."

"Don't start with me, Twist."

"No one here but us, Ennis, an' I know the things you say when you squirting your spunk up my ass, so don't put on any fucking airs with me."

"Nice mouth, Jack. Real nice."

“Shit, Ennis, what is it with you? You ain’t got a little wife now you cain’t talk to about what you re’lly want! Ain’t nothing you kin say to me that’d embarrass me. I *know* you!”

Ennis pushed him to one side and made his escape. “You don’t know fuck about me, Jack Twist. Now, leave me be or you’ll be rattlin’ around this house by yerself tonight.”

Dinner was eaten in stony silence, not for the first time and they both reckoned it wouldn’t be the last. The food didn’t help. Warmed on the outside, both discovered lumps still frozen in the middle. Ennis pushed his away in disgust and lit a cigarette.

“Thought you were givin’ up.”

Ennis shrugged. “Life too short.”

“Will be m’be if you don’t give up.”

“Reckon we’ll both die young then.”

“I had *one* today, Ennis. One fucking cigarette.”

“That explains it then, because you in a right pissy mood, Twist.”

Jack leant back in his chair, regarding Ennis. “M’be. But m’be it’s because ‘a you. I’m gittin’ tired of it Ennis. I’m givin’ you fair warning: I’m gittin’ tired of it.”

“I’m goin’ out t’ the—.”

“Sit your ass down, Ennis! If ya take one more fucking step. I’m talkin’ to you!”

To Jack’s surprise, Ennis sat back down. His expression, though, did not invite confidences.

Jack combed his fingers through his hair. “Shit, Ennis, this ain’t the way we outta be talkin’ ‘bout this: you all angry now.”

“What you gotta say, Jack? Say it an’ I kin be on my way. One o’ us gotta think about the horses. They ain’t been fed yet.”

Jack gave him a look. "You the very devil sometimes, Ennis. Now you make me feel in the wrong." He pushed his chair away from the table. "Jist go."

Ennis watched him clearing the table with none of the urgency to leave that his previous declaration implied. Jack sat back down when he was done, pulled Ennis's pack of cigarettes across, held up two fingers, and lit one. Blowing out a stream of smoke, he took his saucer and went to the couch, stretching his legs to the fire. He heard the screen door slam with weary resignation.

* * * * *

Ennis took a long time settling the horses, checking on feed, clearing ice from water. He was stiff with cold when he returned, not taking time to dress warmly. His hands ached and bled again; the house, uncomfortably warm, sent blood too quickly to frozen extremities. Jack was sitting crossed leg by the fire, whisky and cigarette in hand, writing. Ennis didn't need to see the address on the letter. He made a lot of noise making coffee for one.

Not having Jack to talk with circumscribed Ennis's evening as he neither read nor had hobbies other than Jack. He

contented himself with sprawling on the couch picking at his ulcerated fingers. It paled as a fun activity after a few minutes. “Cain’t think what you fillin’ a whole page with, Twist. Ain’t nothin’ happenin’ on Brokeback worth mentionin’.”

“Ain’t tellin’ him about ‘bout Brokeback.”

Ennis stared at the lowered head, the fingers, the pursed lips. He stood and aimed a well-placed kick before going upstairs. “Tell ‘im what a dumb fuck you are, Jack Twist.”

* * * * *

For the first time they used both beds. Ennis pushed the second one under the window and was asleep, or feigning it, when Jack came in.

He stripped off in the freezing room and lay under blankets that smelt of Ennis. Ennis turned over, revealing a pale shoulder under moonlight.

Jack ached to make up, but felt he was in the right so resisted exchanging his cold sheets for rumpled Ennis-warm ones.

Through the cold, in a voice that sounded cold until Jack listened more carefully, Ennis said, “How kin ya know me, Jack, when I don’t rightly know m’self?”

Jack then wished he’d left the conversation to this time and this place. The darkness welcomed confidences. He left the bed and Ennis was waiting for him.

There were apologies to make best made with lips and tongues not used for speaking, but when they were done, Jack murmured, “Time’s past when ya could call this something else, friend.”

Ennis was playing with Jack’s hair, combing the dark locks through his fingers. Jack could feel the way it snagged on blisters and calluses. “It ain’t jist you, Jack.” The effort of speaking made his fingers clench. “I never spoke to Alma ‘bout... bed... things neither. Shit, I cain’t do this.” He climbed awkwardly over Jack and went to fetch cigarettes. Jack had the sense, for once, not to mention the quitting. Ennis sat crossed legged on the end of the bed, leaning on the widow ledge, staring out on deadness. “How d’ people learn t’ say things? I niver even thought on it till I met Alma. An’ then there was you on this damn mountain. An’

believe me Jack, you weren't askin' for sweet talkin' and romance. Had yer head turned by that fool in New York, if you ask me. I cain't spell most 'a what he tells ya."

"Yer gittin' cold."

Ennis conceded the point and rejoined him under the blankets.

Jack took a deep breath. "None 'a that explain why you cain't face me when we fuck. Cain't hug me neither. I'm tellin' you, Ennis, jist so's yer know, I take it personal that you cain't."

Ennis finished his cigarette with studied concentration, stubbed it out on some ice clinging to the inside of the glass then levered himself onto Jack. His eyes held some point on Jack's belly. When they tried to rise, they dropped back down, frown lines dragged as they lowered. Once, Jack would have held him and made it easy, turning for him and saying that it was all right. Not this time. He rubbed up Ennis's bony back then bit into his lobe, drawing blood. The shock brought Ennis's mouth to Jack's and although he tried, kissing, his eyes were no longer private. Once his gaze found Jack's it was more intimate

than the kissing or lying naked against each other, belly to belly. All his life, Ennis's eyes had been his words, telling his story for those who had the inclination to know. In the blue black light of moon on snow, their story was pained and fearful. Jack cupped one cheek, brushed his thumb over a closing lid, put Ennis's fingers to his chest and held them, precious, to hair and nipple. "Two men, darlin'."

Ennis's mouth seized him as if he were disappearing, sucking hard, holding his head and cramming them together. It heated up, sweat pooling onto Jack's belly, slip-sliding them sloppily together. Ennis's eyes, closed to the taste of Jack's mouth, opened and watched him even as they kissed and rubbed. He was still watching as he slid a hand beneath Jack's leg to lift. Later, when it was done, Jack's skin felt peeled from the power of Ennis's regard.

They had gone at it in silence until lowering, panting hard, eyes still fixed on him, Ennis croaked, "Yer the pruttiest thing I ever fucked, Jack; cain't think why I never enjoyed this afore."

Jack moved Ennis's hand to his belly. Ennis still watched Jack's eyes as his cracked fingers worked. Jack was the

first to look away with a cry and an arch that lifted them both. Sinking, Ennis breathed, "Shit, even pruttier then."

Jack finally allowed Ennis to lie on his chest with his thoughts once more his own.

More spirited the horse, more gentle and slow you took the breaking.

Ennis was coming along just fine.

* * * * *

Work habits didn't change overnight, even if they did.

Ennis rolled off Jack sometime before five, peeling more than rolling and stomped still half-asleep to piss in the sink.

Jack was already reaching for a shirt, and in the dark they stumbled down to boots and coats and the bitter cold.

Rising sun bled into the high places on Brokeback, God, a crazed painter with wild imagination.

Ennis stood in untied boots, coat loose staring up at the sight. Before Jack knew what hit him, snow in the face and Ennis hollering some nonsense that made his heart feel like the tops of the mountains.

They fought like the boys they had lost somewhere under women and work, Ennis faster and more accurate and seeming to enjoy more the wet damage he was doing to Jack.

Ennis used the barn for cover. Jack scooped up a handful and trod warily. Ennis was waiting for him around the corner, but no snow. He blinked in streaks of sun, dusting of freckles prominent. When Jack closed the space between them, Ennis hugged, awkward at first, but growing in ease. "See, ya damn fool, ain't nothing in this."

Jack tipped his hips forward, eliciting a grunt of discovery that there was more.

Jack's snow-cold face, wet and raw, slid into the warmth of Ennis neck, just above the collar. Ennis arms tightened, rough-rubbed up to Jack's neck, holding him on. Horses stamped in the barn, impatient for their attention. Birds alighted on the sacks of winterfeed.

They were rocking gently to music of their own imagining, Ennis almost humming in his raspy throat, the same low plaintive sound he made to his horses or his girls when they were sick.

Then shivering set in and they pulled apart, laughing and punching at each other to send blood back to hands and feet.

“You wanna take a ride af’er breakfast, Jack? Be sweet ‘round the lake m’be. Not too much snow. Horses sure use it.”

“Let’s take some making fur breakfast an’ cook if we find a littl’ spot.”

“You kin fish fur us, Jack, like one a’ those Eskimo types. Give me time fur a little catch up sleep.” Jack’s prowess with the rod had not improved with practise.

* * * * *

By seven they were ready, Ennis laughing as he mounted. “This so good it don’t feel legal.”

They rode side by side until broken shoreline sent them up into trails through the woods, walking in snow and leading. They talked about the horses and the ranch, the cabin and the one they were planning to build. A third way round the lake the shoreline got the sun early and all day. Snow lay in patches and easy to clear they made camp. They cheated with the fire, unloading dry wood they'd carried. Coffee and bacon watered their mouths on the cold metallic air.

“Be Christmas in a few days.”

“I reckon.”

Jack pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them, wiping wet nose on his sleeve. “You plannin’ t’ do anythin’?”

Ennis considered this for a while, mixing thought with smoke from his first cigarette of the day. “Nope.”

“M’be jist a tree. Seen plen’y nice ones this mornin’.”

“Be jist as nice left were they are.”

Jack let it drop. He didn't know himself what he'd do with a tree if they did dig one up.

* * * * *

Starved of good sleep and belly full, Ennis stretched out in the cold sun, pulled his hat low and folded in upon himself.

Jack took tackle and bacon for bait and stood at the edge of the vast whiteness. He wasn't easy stepping onto it, nothing he'd been told as a child, but something in his gut queasy. First step held like stone. Second one the same. He jumped up and down, figuring he'd take some ribbing and wet feet but nothing worse if it gave. He got no sense of water at all, just something vast and frozen and heavy with power. Slip-sliding and falling once or twice on a hip stiff from rodeoing, he went until Ennis was the size of his thumb. He covered him up. World without Ennis shivered him so he got down to the business of making a hole.

It was harder than he'd planned on and he didn't rightly like using the sharp end of a tyre iron. Although he'd never told Ennis, never planned on doing so neither, he'd

seen one of these being inserted where it shouldn't ever go and the screams and pleading in foreign words for a mercy that weren't coming came to him in dreams. Sometimes he wondered if the man had begged in English whether they'd have given him that mercy. Most times he reckoned not.

He was sweating hard and still only a shallow crater to show for all his work. He kicked at some loose ice for a while, cursing. Ennis was still the size of his thumb.

Snow covering the lake was beginning to melt, exposed and spread as it was to the sun. He took a skate to see how far he could go. Turned and skated another way. Tracks behind marked the lake, put his stamp on the world. On the next slide he fell and hit wet, his feet disappearing into the lake. Shock took his breath but, down, he was able to drag away from the horror. It boiled up through green slush like icy snot.

Heard a shout and as he climbed to his feet a hand seized his arm. "What the fuck ya doin'?" You sonofabitch. Ya jist disappeared an' I thought—." No need for Ennis to finish. Jack had thought it too.

“Thought you were asleep.”

“I kin watch you an’ sleep.”

Jack returned to the hole, cat-curious and unable to resist. “What the fuck is it, Ennis? Must ‘a bin some debris caught when it froze m’be. That sunk and left this?”

Ennis squatted on lean haunches. “It God’s finger.”

Couldn’t have surprised Jack more. “Huh?”

“God looks down on the world an’ sees somethin’ he don’t like? Pokes a hot finger down to remind us sinners what we got waitin’ fur us.”

Jack squatted alongside, studied Ennis, not the hole. “I love you, Ennis. How kin love ever be sinnin’?”

Ennis raised an eyebrow, pulled his hat lower over his eyes. “Don’t do to love too much, Jack. God a jealous sonofabitch. Takes away what yer loves the most. Sticks his goddamned finger down frum heaven jist to remind us he watchin’.”

Jack's heart started to pound back up to the speed it had been going when his feet went through. "Shit, friend, niver heard you talkin' on this afore."

"Yeah, well. Niver had time fur talkin' on Brokeback afore. Too busy tryin' t' stop the days turnin' over. Too busy tryin' t' remember all the things I were gonna tell ya. Every goddamned thing, Jack: Jack'll like that; gotta remember t' tell Jack that. Then it were meet an' part an' I don't rightly remember the times between. What I do remember, we weren't talkin'. Spent ma whole life thinkin' on talkin' an' niver quite gittin' there."

"Be nice if ya made up fur lost time, Ennis. I'd think that real sweet."

Ennis shrugged. "You git me started like last night, Jack Twist, an' I'll be talkin' up a storm of nonsense 'fore ya know it. Now, you gonna get those wet feet 'a yourn back to the house, because we've got chores, cowboy, and in my 'xperience, chores don't never do themselves."

* * * * *

That evening, they played cards on the floor in the front of the fire. Neither said it, but neither wanted to face the cold up top or the narrow cramped beds. Jack was thinking on a suggestion, but Ennis was fragile and he'd been jiggled some already that day.

"Thought I might sleep down here, Ennis. Brung the mattress. Shame to waste this fire."

Ennis laid a card and took a swallow of whisky.

"Course, you'd be welcome to join."

"M'be." He glanced at the windows.

"Ma's got good drapes, Ennis. Real thick."

"I got eyes, Twist. I kin see that fur myself." He flicked a dollar into the middle. "You playin', cus yer mind sure ain't on the game."

Jack caught his wrist. "Nope. It ain't."

"Quit it."

“Ain’t gonna. Thought m’be I’d gits me some more ‘a that sweet talk ‘a yours.”

“You can kiss my sweet ass and go wrung one out on yer lonesome. How’s that?”

Jack laughed. “That’s good, Ennis. You thinkin’ on me wrunin’ one out when ya said it?”

“Will you quit foolin’ round?”

“But were ya? I wanna know. How much you think on me, Ennis?”

“Spend most of the goddamned day thinkin’ what a fuck up you are, Twist, an’ puttin’ right all the things you do, like crap yer middle name.”

“So you thinkin’ on me all day. Tell me somethin’ you think ‘bout me.”

“I think you ain’t never gonna git that cabin built cus you an idiot.”

“Uh huh. An’ somethin’ else.”

“I think yer gittin’ fat a’gin like you was before I done wear some ‘a it off.”

“Yeah. An’ somethin’ else.”

“I think yer too big all round, Twist. Fill the world too much. Hole you leave’ll be awful big. Think I’ll jist fall in an’ follow where you go.” He kissed Jack slow with light flickering on saliva left in trails when they eased off to see eyes wide and widening. On cards and dollars, they paid their dues of kisses until kisses moved them on.

Jack scabbled with belt and buckle and turned.

Ennis turned him back, slid the pants down to knees and lifted both legs, lying on them with Jack folded beneath.

One hand, nails scratching the backs of Jack’s thighs, and he was out then in, shock of the pleasure never dimming.

Ennis’s face pressed into Jack’s jeans. Jack’s boots drummed on his head. He grasped a handful, front of Jack’s shirt, and used it to hold so he could ram harder.

They slid closer to the fire anyways, faded denim knees of Ennis's jeans ripping, rivets heating up and marking skin.

When Ennis finished, Jack was scarcely breathing, red, sweat soaked and fire warmed. He was crushed and the next day would bend, hands to knees and croak, "Jesus, Ennis, I'm done fur," when his back hurt.

* * * * *

Drapes were not even closed, seemed like shutting doors after bolting was done. The moonlight liked the colour of the room, quilt-warm reds and blue of a summer's day. Colour bled and blended like the two bodies on the dragged down mattress. Ennis, kissing Jack, his fingers opened up and bleeding again, his semen seeping out of where he'd sent it and wetting him, thought on blending. Seemed to him they were more than brothers.

Lips sore from stubble, they needed to quit the kissing, and Jack took the opportunity to say, "Might send a card to Toby an' Martin. You wanna sign it an' all?"

"Wu'for?"

“Christmas, Ennis. Send ‘em a Christmas card.”

“Card cain’t do no harm.”

“But a tree would?”

“Huh? I swear, Jack Twist, if you used yer brain fur thinkin’ ‘bout useful things ‘stead ‘a tryin’ t’ twist me up in yer littl’ schemes we’d be rich men b’now.”

“I want a tree, Enins. That too much t’ ask?”

“S your house.”

“That ain’t the point. Be prutty dumb t’ sit all by ma lonesome lookin’ at a tree. What ya gonna do fur Christmas if ya don’t git one?”

“I’m gonna git drunk fur three days an’ hope it goes away. Now, leave me be on this one, Jack. I’ve bin dancin’ t’ your tune enough, I reckon.”

The next day Jack drug a tree back behind his horse and stuck it in the living room.

* * * * *

The twenty-fourth arrived and Ennis, good as his word, went in search of whisky. He knew there was a bottle in the cabin and one he'd put in the barn for emergencies. He reckoned those and one they were part through in the house would keep him just fine for the time he planned to be gone.

The one in the cabin was missing. The one in the barn was empty. The one in the house had less in than he remembered.

"I'm goin' t' town. You wanna come?"

Jack thought about presents and grinned. "Sure. I knew y'd come round."

"Huh?"

They drove in companionable silence because of the mistake, Jack picturing Texas-sized boxes, Ennis anxious that he would not be drunk enough come sun down.

Separating and promising to meet in the bar, Ennis headed for the liquor store.

* * * * *

When he entered the bar, Ennis hit the atmosphere like a dirt shoulder he'd hit too hard once in the truck. He felt slowed down and threatened, wanted to right a wheel that weren't there to get back on track.

Jack was standing facing him, a big bull of man between them. Ennis, only seeing the back, thought LB and his blood froze. It froze even more when following Jack's look the man turned.

Time had not changed Aguirre much and Ennis reckoned the same thought was on Aguirre's mind as he studied him. "Well, Del Mar an' all. I'll be damned."

Jack pushed past the big man. Ennis could smell Texas-fear and wondered if it were him or Jack. They hit the sidewalk and turned any direction away from the bar. "Hey. Twist."

Jack stopped and folded his arms, head hung low. “I ain’t got no quarrel with you, old man. You leave m’ be.”

Aguirre strolled toward them. “You best wait up some there, sonny. Cain’t believe I run into the likes a’ you and peebrain here ag’in. Ennis fucking Del Mar, if I do remember rightly.” He saw the look that passed between them and the one thrown for possible listening ears as clear as if he’d seen it through his ten by fours. “M’be you ain’t usin’ that name now.”

Jack whirled around, not hearing anything from Ennis so taking the bull by its horns himself, wrestling it on his own. “I know the word fur you now, Aguirre. You a homophobic fuck. You ain’t got no—.”

Even the fist in his shirtfront brought no help from Ennis. “You hold on there, son, afore you say one more goddamned thing. You got no right t’ call me anything, and especially not that, if I’m suspectin’ what that mean. I niver had no problem with you an’ this pissant fuck up here dippin’ yer oars int’ any damn thing ya wanted, but I do have a problem when ya do it on my time. One thousand woollies you took up that summer, an’ you come down shy two hundred, and the ones ya did have

weren't the ones ya went up with. You was too busy wi' yer friend here givin' ya a one-gun salute. Yer selfish, Twist, an' I ain't got no time fur a man like that. Think more on yer cock than on yer duty, an' I'm thinkin' by the look 'a yer friend here, he knows 'xactly what I'm stayin'." He let Jack go, dusted his hands. "I hopin' we won't be runnin' into each other a'gin, Twist. Happy fucking Christmas."

The drive back was silent except for the clink of Ennis's bottles, which he'd begun on and drank steadily from as Jack drove.

Jack cast him glances, thinking on the packages he had in back. He'd noticed Ennis had none visible, although pockets were a possibility. He wanted to talk about Aguirre, the bad luck, the good luck. He wanted Ennis to laugh. He wanted Ennis, which struck him as odd seeing he was sitting there.

He unloaded, admired the tree for a while then went to find Ennis. One package held some shiny things and he knew, if he played Ennis right, he'd get some help in the hanging.

Ennis was by the lake, smoking and drinking, resting his weight on one hip, much bigger than thumb size now and growing.

“Cold out here, cowboy.”

“Won’t feel it soon.”

“I’m gonna cook. Bought a turkey an’ some trimmin’s.”

“Ain’t hungry.”

“But yer gonna be later. Com’on.”

“Leave me, Jack. I don’t want yer company t’night.”

Jack shuffled his feet in the snow, standing in Ennis’s tracks as he had all his life. “It’s Christmas, darlin’. Our first together. Got you some—.”

“Don’t ya hear me, Jack?” Ennis pushed him hard, down in the snow and stood over him. “I cheated ‘em every Christmas, Jack, took their childhood from ‘em jist as sure as I took love from Alma. Every Christmas Jack, livin’ wi’ you in m’ head ‘stead of them, wishin’ they weren’t there

s' I could be with you. I was walkin' around without them in my heart, Jack, because my heart was always too full 'a you. Stole their littl' Christmases Jack, an' now what I got? Leave me be."

Jack climbed to his feet. "Ennis, ya done got me. Ain't a ghost now. You kin have yer Christmas wi' me. What we both wanted all this time! Com'on, darlin' gitting cold out here. Yer shiverin'."

Ennis shrugged him off and stepped further into darkness. "Don't need ya, Jack. I got God's finger keepin' me warm."

* * * * *

Chapter 6

Ennis sobered after three days and only because the whisky ran out. It was a hard returning. Reckoned he'd caught a chill, remembered lying in snow, and ached all over, nothing to do with amber poison still inside. Felt like his wrist broke; couldn't move it and hurt like hell when he tried. The bed stank where he'd pissed in it, but he figured it could have been worse.

He lay under the window where he could see Brokeback and wondered how long he'd lain there. Remembrance came slow and hard. He'd done something bad, but it eluded him for the present.

That he had missed Christmas was a given with three days growth of beard and a smell to scare horses. He coughed weakly and his eyeballs ached. A shivering set in even under blankets.

It was the first time he'd escaped since coming to Brokeback permanent. For that was what he'd done: continued the inevitable pattern of his life. He never stuck to anything long. For the first time, hitting him hard and quick like a rock-spiked snowball, it came to Ennis that

perhaps all he'd ever wanted from Brokeback was the occasional high-altitude fuck. Perhaps Brokeback, like everything else in his life, had been kept deliberately temporary: Alma, kids, jobs. Jack. Perhaps he only had enough inside this thin beat up body for temporary. It occurred to Ennis that he'd been taught the value of temporary by a curve in the road when he was ten. Maybe he had started up with Jack because they were unlikely ever to meet outside the twice-yearly fuck-dates, and that fucking was all he had asked for or given.

Maybe this was where he'd gone wrong now. Two-fucks-a-year Ennis Del Mar thought he could live the Wonderful Life right here on Brokeback Mountain. He should have known a curve would come along sometime soon.

Ennis needed to piss, felt there wasn't much point bothering one way or the other, and went where he lay.

Hot liquid, squeezed from his eyes, made smaller tracks on the pillow.

* * * * *

When he woke again, he was on the couch by the fire, naked but wrapped, shivering and retching. Nothing came up but sadness, and he cried some more, self-pity and sickness in equal measure.

Jack squatted down and offered him water. “You got a fever, Ennis, ‘s all. You bin real sick.”

Ennis’s mouth was stuck. He swallowed the water. “How long?”

“Fifth day. Bin a pig—had t’ call the doc out one night. Said ya had an infection in yer lungs. I told ya to give up those damn cigarettes.”

Ennis wasn’t easily fooled, and heard a great deal behind Jack’s friendly tone. “Kin I git up? Fuck the devil; how’d I do this?” He held up his wrist.

“Were like that when I found ya.”

“Found?”

Jack’s eyes skittered away, and when he said, “On the ice,” Ennis saw they’d slipped and hit hard.

“Christ, I’m sorry, Jack. Cain’t remember.”

“I’ll git yer clothes. Ma’s home tomorrow—‘for I forgit.”

So soon? Ennis realised he’d spent their whole time together either bitter, drunk or sick. “I’m real sorry, cowboy. I’ll make it up t’ yer.” He turned to follow Jack’s progress and saw the tree.

* * * * *

Ennis dressed like an old man, using only one hand.

“Kin ya eat something?”

“Jist some coffee m’be?”

He sat at the table, head in hands. There were three cards: shared one from his girls, which blurred when he tried to read it; Bobby to both of them; and one that played a tune when he opened it and read *It’s fucking Christmas, Twister. Get laid, get happy, love Tobes. ps, use the enclosed soon.* It contained an open ticket to New York City on American Airlines. The card continued to play its Merry Christmas tune.

Jack brought coffee, sat at the table and lit a cigarette, squinting at Ennis. “Soon as ma gits here, I’m goin’ t’ New York fur a few days. Reckon you be well enough to take care ‘a things here?” He made it sound like Ennis had a bad case of the clap. Made him feel like it, too.

Ennis toyed with the ticket, wondered what Jack would do if he tore it up. “What if I said I were real sorry?”

“I’ll be glad to hear it, friend, but ask you t’ remember to check the mail every day, ‘case someone wants the cabin.”

“Jack, this ain’t fair.”

“I bin wiping yer ass fur two days, Del Mar, cain’t see the fair in that neither.”

“I bin sick! Fuck, Jack, yer cold as a witch’s tit t’ me! I bin acquainted wi’ your shit fur twenty years. Think on that.”

Jack pushed back his chair. “I gotta pack.”

“Jack! Goddamn!” He coughed and felt a lifetime of smoking coming up. “Fuck the pope, I’m dying here,

Twist!” Jack jogged up the stairs. “What’m I gonna do without ya?”

A disembodied voice replied, “You kin open yer fuckin’ Christmas presents, if yer want, friend.”

* * * * *

Ma arrived by cab as far as town; Jack met her. By her expression, Ennis reckoned she’d heard the highlights of Christmas, but she began to fuss around him, and he surrendered to the only warmth he’d been offered for many hours.

Jack came down with bags.

Ennis struggled up, a cough rattling his water and making him need to piss. “Jack, I’m askin’ ya; I’m fuckin’ beggin’ ya. Please. Don’t take this trip.”

“Why?”

“Huh?”

“Why, Ennis? You too sick t’ come, so jist seems real fortunate I gits sent a ticket and you ain’t.”

“Stop it, Jack, I don’t rightly know you like this. I did what ya wanted... in the sack. I tried. Jack, I tried!”

Jack set the bags down and came over, embraced him. “Yeah, you tried, Ennis. I gotta go now or I’ll miss m’ flight.”

“M’be I ain’t gonna be here when you gits back! M’be I don’t want t’ be knowin’ what you done in New York City.”

Jack hesitated. “Ya cain’t leave ma in the middle ‘a win’er, Ennis. If yer gonna leave, take her t’ town first.” He swung a bag onto his shoulder and strode out.

Ennis called his name, but coughing took his voice. He had not found it by the time the pick-up was out of sight.

* * * * *

Ennis was sick proper then. His fever soared so high ma called the doc again. Doc said hospital, but was persuaded

by her uncompromising, unstinting care. She nursed him with stockpiled love. Her store cupboard overflowing, Ennis got love-fat on affection. On the fourth day, he woke with weak sun on his face and a sense of being well. Until he remembered Jack.

He had only a hazy notion of what men of a certain disposition did with other men, besides what he did with Jack, which he never thought of in the way of disposition but just their business. When he did think on it, it was Alma's voice in his head. Ennis thought about Jack in New York and heard *Jack nasty*.

* * * * *

He'd been put in ma's bed, big and wide and comfortable as her love. She brought up her sewing for company, and he cut squares for her, methodical and exact. He'd never had softness like this his whole life and wondered how, without it, he got the little niceness inside that he had. She told him about the Pentecost; bible stories passed the hours, but on the second day of feeling better he was crawling out of his skin and sickening for something else.

Jack had hired a boy to tend the horses. Ennis took his first walk to the barn, which nearly killed him, and paid the boy off. He tended their horses with the same care he'd been given.

He wasn't as recovered as he thought, and that night, over supper, tears came. With shaky hands, he covered his eyes, mumbling apology. Ma slammed down her fork. "You a stubborn fool, Ennis Del Mar, worse than t' other one, an' that sayin' something."

Ennis had nowhere to go and could not escape his misery.

"Hush, quit that! Yer dripping in the Lord's good food. Go look in the barn."

"I jist—."

"Well maybe use yer eyes this time."

* * * * *

The tent and all Jack's camping gear were missing.

* * * * *

He reckoned the ride would kill him, but not seeing Jack would kill him anyway. Story of his fucking life.

The air snagged some damage in his lungs, making him breathe shallow and sharp. If he went with the horse, it wasn't too bad. Worst was his wrist, not the pain, but a gradually returning remembrance of punching ice. What he'd have done with a hole he didn't want to think on.

He didn't want to think on other things, but did, his mind clear as Brokeback air. Fever and absence of Jack had branded the truth on him, hot and hard and painful.

He found Jack's camp where he'd known it would be. One time they'd done Brokeback by pick-up, camping close to tracks, Ennis's horse going lame a few days before. Ennis rode to the first camp they'd made that year, and Jack was there, tent pitched on snow but real close to the pick-up for shelter.

Jack looked old, grey and cold. Ennis reckoned he probably looked worse. He dismounted, clung to the saddle till dizziness passed then sat by the fire. "Bitchin' furst Christmas we had, Twist."

Jack's welcome was as cold and biting as the air. "Ma told ya."

"Guess she likes me." No humour in Jack Twist. Ennis asked, eyes to flames, "Do you? Because, if ya do, yer the only one sittin' around this fire who do. I spent our whole lives hurtin' you, an' I'm sorry fur each an' every time. But here's the thing, Jack, here's what come to me when I were sick and missin' ya." He shuffled his feet, lining up sticks like thoughts. "I knowed what I was afore I mets ya. Knew afore I met Alma an' wanted her real bad because 'a that. Didn't want to be like Earl an' killed worse than an animal fur lovin' wrong. Took me that job on Brokeback deliberate, t' keep me outta trouble till I could marry Alma and git respectable. But I swear t' God, Jack, there you were, my herder for the whole fuckin' summer. Knew if I let m'self, I'd never come off the damn mountain. So, Jack, it weren't you I've bin keepin' on a tight rein, it were me. I quit everythin' I turned m' hand to: marriage, kids, proper home, jobs and you. Quit ya regular, twice a year, so you cain't swallow me whole being so 'xactly what I want. I ain't nineteen no more, Jack, knowin' something I don't want t' know, bein' somethin' I scared t' be. I'm forty years old, an' I got you. So, hell, I'll say it, Jack Twist. I'm queer.

I'm damn queer fur you, an' this ain't a one-shot thing. This is it fur me, an' if you don't come home an' let me be real sorry for a real long time, then I might be out punchin' that damn ice ag'in. An' just so ya know, I bin real sick an' squattin' on m' ass in the snow ain't gonna do me no good." Twenty years of words all at once exhausted him. He felt Jack's hands, was moved into the pick-up slow and easy, shivering so bad even Jack's arms couldn't warm.

Jack's breath on his neck worked better. "Littl' darlin'. Don't know if I'm madder at you or ma."

"I'm bettin' my makin' it up t' yer'll be more fun."

Jack turned his face away. Ennis felt a lump of dread in his belly, flash flood coming and no way to stop it. "I found ya on the ice, an' yer heart had stopped beatin'."

"Cain't be so, Jack; jist the cold an' yer numb fingers, most like."

Jack shrugged. He knew what he knew. "Thought I'd lost ya. Ticket come the next day. Didn't stop lovin' ya; I were

just bitchin' mad wi' ya. You damn near killed yerself Ennis. After all this time an' me needin' ya like I do."

Ennis turned to look out at the snow. "Why didn't ya go?"

"Cus'a the tree."

Ennis turned back, sweating, although he was chilled to the bone. "The tree."

Jack took one of Ennis's hands like it was strange and new and not something he'd had intimate acquaintance with for more than half a lifetime. "Did ya read the card from Alma Junior and Jenny? Said they missed ya and told ya some funny stories about that place Scotland where Jenny with Junior fur the holidays. Asked if you remembered the tree you brung in one year and sat up all night makin' a whole bunch'a shiny things fur 'em while they was sleepin'. Said it were their best Christmas. Christ, don't do that, Ennis. Bin enough sadness, I reckon. I jist wanted t' say I should 'a thought 'bout how this yer furst Christmas so far from yer girls an' how ya'd feel 'bout that. But I went on in a Jack Twist way: like the fuckin' world revolve around what I want. I'm selfish to the core, Jack. Lureen right 'bout me there. So I gits to thinkin' as I drivin' to the airport, an'

when I done thinkin', I come up here. Didn't tell ya cus I'm mean, an' I'm still bitchin' mad at ya fur dying on the ice and leavin' me behind."

They weren't up to kissing, Ennis coughing and hot, Jack guilty. The intent was there. It drew them closer than lips meeting, for hearts had free rein to feel all the connection. After a time, Jack released Ennis from a sweaty embrace and dug in his pocket. "I got somethin' fur ya."

Ennis rubbed his face. "Jack, I ain't got—."

"It ain't nothin' t' do wi' Christmas. Even I ain't that stupid." He held out an envelope. For one cold-chill moment Ennis thought it was a matching ticket to New York. He took it, not wanting it.

"What it fur then?"

"Lovin' ain't a sin, an' I ain't gonna live my life like it were." He opened the door. Cold flooded the cab. "I love Ennis Del Mar!" shouted to Brokeback mountain. The mountain made no reply. It probably knew that already.

Jack closed the door. "I was selfish because I was bitter an' sad, an' I got no use fur that now."

Ennis held a ticket to Aberdeen in Scotland.

* * * * *

Jack shuffled nervous and out of place in an airport arrival lounge. Foot to foot until one hip ached and he swapped. Foot to foot, waiting. Ennis had been gone three months. Two weeks with his girls, and then when Jack called he'd been told Ennis had gone travelling, the coffee-pot not big enough now, and that Jack would understand.

Three months was okay. He'd endured longer than that every year for twenty years, wanting and needing and loving Ennis Del Mar.

A few passengers appeared. Businessmen first, always somewhere to go faster than the rest. One glanced at Jack. Mexico glinted in dark eyes and Jack looked away, shamed. When he searched again for Ennis though, arousal honed the hunt. Three months weren't okay at all; three months had been a slow death, sleeping wrapped in Ennis-scented sheets, crazy and sad. He wanted to save

the hot need, all Ennis's, but eyes fastened, predator-like, on another man, long and fine, striding through the lounge, a prize stallion ready for breaking. The New York beauty with long, unkempt curls and leather jacket clinging just right roved Jack's eye. The New York he'd exchanged for a ticket to Scotland. Jack swore and looked down, maddened and guilty, held hat to the front of his jeans where the three months betrayed him. Joy at the thought of seeing Ennis was tainted.

The beauty stopped, and for a stranger seemed mighty pleased to see Jack. He dropped his bag and strode over, lifting him. "Darlin', you fuckin' darling."

"Ennis?" He shied at another embrace, pretty mare with a low startle point and nervous eyes.

Ennis looked around. "I reckon no one gonna mind, an' if they do, they ain't no acquaintances 'a mine anyways. You here t' take me home or gawk at me?"

* * * * *

"Spring looks prutty."

Jack nodded, went along with this conversation that was not the one they needed to have. “Snow still up on the mountain though. Had us a real storm last week.”

“How’s ma?”

“Same as when you left, I reckon.”

Ennis glanced sideways at him. “An’ you?”

“As ya see, I guess.”

Ennis grinned. “You okay then.”

Jack couldn’t help smiling in reply, and Ennis nudged him. Jack took a breath to ask. Ennis murmured, “When we gits on Brokeback, Jack. Not afore,” and Jack had to be content with that.

* * * * *

They drove past the house and headed for the cabin. “Cancelled a fishin’ party. Told ‘em we had a double bookin’.” He glanced at Ennis. “Wanted it jist us. Was I right?” Ennis nodded, distracted. Jack looked away, sharp,

breath caught in his throat like a fishing hook: Ennis looked like he didn't know the place.

* * * * *

Ennis peeled off his clothes, dropped them in a heap and went to the bathroom. Fancy shower he'd never used before washed the trip from his body. Bathroom business had always been their personal business, private men brought up modest, but Ennis heard Jack, seized his arm and pulled him where they'd not been before. No desire for talking, rough cotton scrubbed Ennis's skin as they wrestled and fought. Ennis wanted Jack's clothes off. What Jack wanted off Ennis was less tangible, but a struggle for all that. Three months and tightly wired, they misfired, bagging no game.

* * * * *

Jack brought coffee to the porch, leant on the rail, watching the lake. He found two cigarettes.

"I done give up."

Jack could have done without that right now. He lit one and took some nicotine. “I got to know, friend. You git what I’m sayin’?”

“You wanna walk some?”

Jack’s throat squeezed shut. “Jist tell me!”

Ennis turned and leant on the rail, back to the lake. “I wus wrong when I said there ain’t no reins on this, Jack. Took me an ocean t’ see it, but the reins you got me on? Shit, they so tight I cain’t rightly breathe. Felt that tug ‘a yours clear over the ocean.” He saw Jack’s face. Strode to him and forced an embrace that could not be broken. “I done had three people in m’ life, Jack, an’ one of them’s you. Once I tasted you, didn’t want no one else. That don’t change wi’ miles. Them reins? You kin tighten them any time you want, cowboy.”

Jack thought of Mexico and pretty rodeo boys, Texas foremen and a lifetime of lying to Ennis. “I’m tellin’ ya straight, Ennis. I don’t believe ya. I don’t know you! You ain’t the same. Don’t smell the same, don’t talk the same. Hell, you don’t even look the same.”

“I grew my fuckin’ hair and exchanged mah hat for a prutty jacket. An’ I seen some things. Seen a whole world out there that ain’t this place. Changes a man, an’ I done some thinkin’. That’s all!”

Jack took off, running through the snow to the lake.

Ennis let him go. It wasn’t the leaving that was important; it was the coming back. He’d just proved that, after all.

* * * * *

Jack returned while Ennis was eating. He came in, snow cold and wet. “Why ya ain’t written? Three months, Ennis, an’ furst I heard wus *comin’ home, come meet me!*”

Ennis snorted, amused. “When I ever writ ya, Jack? You’d think fur sure I were cheatin’ on ya if I up and wrote prutty words.”

Jack couldn’t argue against that.

“You gonna eat?”

Jack grabbed his arm.

* * * * *

It wasn't love; it was still confrontational and aggressive. Jack needed to prove things. Ennis wanted them proved. In the struggle and the sweat, slick fluids under fingers and familiar tastes on tongues, he told Jack things he'd seen, things he'd done and things he had not done. Jack punished and pleased and was given what he needed to be sure. In the darkest hour of morning, more one body than two, Ennis said, "Everywhere I went, I see people punchin' holes in ice, lookin' fur something they ain't never gonna find. Whole world of sad, lonely people out there, Jack. Niver see'd it before."

"Before you wint on this trip?"

Ennis licked along Jack's jaw line. "Fool. Before I got t' lovin' you."

After some considerable negotiation, done with muscle and might, it was decided how it would go from then on. After a while, Jack began to laugh. Ennis twisted around. "Fine time t' be laughing. What the hell so funny, Twist?"

Jack pushed his fingers into the long curls he couldn't get enough of, pulled like reins and bit Ennis's neck. "You ain't changed on the inside, leastways."

* * * * *

The day after Ennis returned, spring came early, a brief flare of warmth. Snow around the house and cabin melted, land turning to dark stickiness, clinging to boots. Ennis missed most of this; a man of the land and seasons and the natural passing of time, he was defeated by jet lag. He slept long into the day, was grumpy and quiet when awake and bitched and moaned about Jack. Jack could not have been happier. Ennis bitching and moaning, in his bed, was a secret source of satisfaction: curls and confidence aside, Ennis was now pretty much what he had always been.

Jack's body was satisfied too. Ennis had no problem taking his declaration *I'm queer fur you* to its logical conclusion. They coupled frequently, fully naked, bright light of day in the cabin, and Ennis requiring Jack's eyes upon him just as ardently as he required his seed.

Bed intimacy naturally led to closeness in daily life, and with Ennis more able or more willing to talk, they fought less and had fewer secrets.

It was with some surprise to Jack then that Ennis said one morning, stealing an occasional drag from Jack's cigarette, "M'be ask those friends 'a yours t' come visit."

Jack turned on his side, facing Ennis, thinking. His need for New York had lessened considerably since I'm queer for you had been established. Ennis was blowing lazy smoke rings to the ceiling, hair damp and sticky. Jack grazed his eyes down the lanky body, trail-worn and used. "They prob'ly busy."

"Ask 'em. Owe them fur the cabin and a ticket, I'm thinkin'."

"M'be they find it too quiet here. Ya know."

Ennis raised an eyebrow and blew a perfect ring. "Reckon we could find somethin' to liven it up."

Jack's eye caught movement with dismay. Ennis rolled on him and gave him the benefit of the arousal.

* * * * *

Ennis didn't let it drop. Jack avoided doing what he'd been asked, and it simmered between them until the following week. Moved back to the house because of a fishing party, they were both in when the telephone rang. Ma answered, passed it to Jack who turned his back to Ennis and spoke low. Ennis continued eating until he'd had his fill then stretched over Jack's shoulder, plucked the handset from him and made the invitation himself.

* * * * *

Jack was squatting by the lake. Ennis watched him for a while from the porch of the house: a small dark shape against ice. When he was ready, he buttoned his coat and walked leisurely, stopping only to adjust the tarpaulin on the stack of lumber by the barn.

Jack must have heard him coming, didn't turn. Ennis squatted behind, caught him roughly in a headlock. "If we want some fun t'night, I guess it's gonna be the barn; 'less you thinkin' on riskin' frostbite." He cupped between Jack's legs. "Warm m' hands, bud."

Jack lurched to his feet then came back and aimed a kick at the laughing Ennis. “You know I’m pissed wi’ ya.”

Ennis stood up, brushing his butt then tackled Jack, swift and hard, down onto frozen, muddy grit. “But yer fun when yer mad.”

Jack rolled them, him on top, pinning Ennis’s arms. Breath steamed between them. “You thinkin’ you top dog now, Del Mar, jist because you done had yerself some travellin’?”

Ennis considered, brought up his knee, threw Jack off, scrabbling back on top. “I always top dog, Twist; I jist kept quiet ‘bout it outta respect fur yer feelings. You rethinkin’ this queer thing now? You wanna git yerself another littl’ wife ‘stead of a man?”

Jack began to laugh, and the game was ruined. “Lureen scared the balls offa me.”

He snapped Jack’s jeans open, pushing an icy hand into his warmth. “They still there, far as I kin tell.”

“Why’d ya invite ‘em, Ennis? You pissed me off doin’ that.”

Ennis slid his hand under Jack’s bunched coat and shirt.
“You wanna git into this some more or argue?”

Jack considered for a moment. Ennis helped him decide, finding a nipple and twisting it.

* * * * *

The day Martin and Toby were to arrive, Ennis woke early and lay watching dawn track slowly across the ceiling. He’d woken with familiar need, the warmth between their squashed bodies inflaming desire. He put his mind back to the possibilities of the day. “I’m goin’ t’ town. You want somethin’?”

Jack turned with some difficulty in the single bed. “Ennis, ya cain’t buy—.”

Ennis nudged his hips forward, kissing began, and Jack did not finish his warning.

* * * * *

They arrived lunchtime, with a fresh flurry of snow. Jack jogged down the steps to greet them, Ennis absent most of the day. As Jack helped them carry bags into the cabin, he appeared. Jack paused, waiting to see which way the wind was blowing. Ennis leant against the doorframe, arms folded, taking comments on his hair with a slow smile. When the conversation died, he switched his gaze lazily to Jack then back to the visitors. "Ain't this nice."

Jack grabbed his hat and nudged Ennis. "Leave 'em be to settle in, m'be."

Ennis sloughed off his nudge. Toby's eyes flicked from one to the other. "Am I sensing trouble in paradise?"

"Jack an' me bin lookin' forward to yer visit. Thought we'd m'be have some fun."

Jack caught his arm more forcibly. "Ennis."

Ennis turned his eyes slowly to Jack's. "Cain't deny it, friend. You always thinkin' on fun wi' 'em." He suddenly twisted his arm around, gripped Jack's sleeve and tugged him out. "Come on, I got us a littl' surprise in the barn."

More polite than eager, Martin and Toby followed.

* * * * *

Shafts of sunlight speared through cracks, streaking the three standing. Jack seemed ready to skitter at some unseen danger, but a vein of mutinous anger held him fast. Ennis rose from a box he was exploring and came close to Toby. Too close, closer than a man ever stood with another. He wrapped his arms slowly around the thin waist and buckled something behind. "There. Suits ya." He did the same to Martin. By the time he came to Jack, he was laughing, mostly at Jack's expression.

Martin put a hand on Ennis's arm. "I don't get it."

Ennis slid back the huge barn door and indicated the stack of lumber. "Thought we'd have a cabin-raising, friend." He tapped the purchase around Martin's waist. "Bought you a fancy tool belt, an' all."

* * * * *

Martin and Toby refrained from noticing Ennis's black eye that afternoon. It didn't seem to fit with the hot glances

and frequent touching. They could not conceive that Jack had punched him for love and for fun and for the delight of seeing Ennis laughing, so confusion kept them quiet. They were too busy working, anyway. For the first time they came to realise the difference between bodies honed in gyms and bodies formed by the land, Ennis and Jack carrying twice the weight twice as often.

The taskmaster allowed a break after a few hours. He sent Martin to the lake to fill a pot for coffee then followed him down. "You okay?"

Martin gazed at the mountain reflected in the lake, rubbing blisters. "I'm building a cabin by a lake on a mountain with friends. We've got whisky, coffee and cake. Jesus, Ennis, this is the quintessential American Dream."

Ennis snorted. "I'll take that as a yes then" He glanced behind at Jack and Toby fooling with some wood. "I'm real sorry, by t' way."

Martin closed his eyes and the sun took a turn around the world before he replied. "We didn't want to tell you. Does Jack know?"

Ennis watched the man's profile. "Most likely not. I see the same thing in London an' all over. Jack'll prob'ly think it jist bruising. He's acquainted wi' bruising."

"They think you catch it from blood. There'll be a cure by the end of the year, they say; so we're not worrying." He rubbed his eyes with the heel of one newly calloused and dirt ingrained hand.

"You gonna fill that pot proper or jist drip in it?"

Martin's smile was as weak as sun through cloud. "How many funerals have you been to Ennis?"

Ennis squatted down to disturb the reflection in the water, which was too perfect for this moment. "Some. M' folks. Couple ranch hands got kicked or trampled."

"We've been to almost thirty since last fall."

They were quiet together for a while, skimming some stones and watching ripples, until a holler from the site. Ennis took the pot, began to fill it. "You still wanna do this thing? 'S gonna be hard."

Martin stretched. "And, like, Toby and I have a problem with hard?" He nudged Ennis, and Ennis felt no need to move away.

* * * * *

They spent the evening on the beach as had become the routine. A large fire blazed, defeating some of their shadows. Toby was telling a story about bears fighting in the club. Martin was laughing at Ennis and Jack's expressions and explained. Jack told a story about a bear; said it was the first time he ever touched Ennis, tending his wound over another fire on Brokeback in another lifetime. Ennis's thoughts ran to Aguirre and he thanked Toby for teaching Jack choice expressions; so they swapped a few more, coarse laughter ringing out over the lake. Toby wanted to know about Jack's scars, so Ennis told them, saying Jack was a fool and would get the story wrong. Death crept close to join them at the fire then. Ennis swung one leg behind Jack, pulling him close. Toby lay with his head on Martin's lap, pale and thin in firelight. They talked of the cabin and of the future, and Ennis laid his cheek to Jack's, stubble to stubble. In the darkness, Jack put questioning fingers to wetness but Ennis shook his head for quiet. Jack stayed silent, kept his hand on

Ennis and took over the talking. It began to snow, soft flurries invisible until they hit the light then illuminated for a second before dying. They watched, silent, passing the whisky, helpless.

* * * * *

The next day, Martin and Toby were woken by the sound of horses.

Ennis, tying knots, pulled his hat low over bloodshot eyes and said gruffly, "Cain't have you slaves gittin' all angsty on me. Thought we'd go up on the mountain fur the day, see us an eagle m'be."

Spirits returned, as he'd hoped, when they began to climb. The air was as sharp as sap, sun warm despite new-laid snow, larch so spring-green it hurt the eye to look upon.

They stopped for lunch by a river. Toby dared Jack to jump, so he did, casting off clothes and plunging through thin ice at the banks. Martin hissed, "Shit, he'll be freezing."

Ennis snorted. "Jack Twist always bin easy to warm up."

* * * * *

They left at the end of two weeks, promising to come back in the fall and help finish the cabin, a promise that was not kept.

When they received Martin's card, not saying deceased but another word, the same however it was written, Ennis took Jack up on the mountain for a few days. Grief was best done together and alone.

* * * * *

They bought dark suits for their first visit to New York, not how it was supposed to be. The morning of their flight, in a cabin almost uninhabitable but something they'd needed around them like memory, Ennis began to pack. His hands brushed a pair of shirts, one inside the other. He pulled them out, went past Jack still sleeping and onto the porch, leaning on the rail.

Blood. It soaked their sleeves still, his and Jack's, indistinguishable. Twenty-one years had passed so fast it

hardly seemed faded. For the first time, Ennis saw those decades not as waste and disappointment and needing something he could never have but as providence, some intervention in their lives. Blood was nothing more than a stain on a pair of old work shirts.

Humbled, thankful, he lifted his eyes skyward, not to heaven, but to Brokeback, which had held them safe and which still rose high and mighty and as enduring as love.

The End.

