

**A Prairie Dog's
Love Song**
ELI EASTON

Acknowledgments

Much thanks to Jamie Fessenden for beta reading this story and for his continued encouragement of my romance-writing self.

My boys love cowboy songs, and I've quoted two in this story. "Don't Fence Me In" is a great American cowboy standard with music by Cole Porter and lyrics by Robert Fletcher and Cole Porter. "I Remember You" is a haunting cowboy love song, songwriters: Brandon Barnes, Brian McKnight, performed by Slim Whitman. The original versions are in the public domain and have been covered by multiple artists over the years.

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JOSHUA BRAINTREE stared at the laptop screen with a mix of shock, arousal, and stone-cold *pissed*. It was an emotional brew that might have been at home on, say, a badger that'd been lured by female badger scent only to find himself locked in a trap.

Joshua shut the lid of his laptop. Opened it. Shut it. Opened it. He punched the drawer of his desk, which did nothing for his hand and not a hell of a lot for the drawer neither.

Opened it.

There, on the screen, was a video trailer featuring Ben For-God's-Sake Rivers, his best friend's little brother, naked, and *doing things* with a blond god who was hung to put some of Joshua's bulls to shame. Damn if Joshua's eyeballs didn't wanna just plop right out onto the keyboard and maybe crawl around screaming for a bit, though what exactly they'd be screaming he couldn't rightly say. It was a toss-up between *Gimme more!* and *I need to kill somethin'!* and *Joshua Ellen Braintree, you goddamn blasted idiot of a fool!*

He closed it.

His walkie-talkie buzzed, causing Joshua to jump off the seat of his chair a good inch, scramble to close the already closed laptop, and check in a panic for audio sound coming from the video, even though he'd turned the audio off ten minutes ago and the video wasn't running anyhow.

Smoothing down his hair in an effort to calm himself, Joshua picked up the walkie-talkie.

"Yup," he answered, sounding two octaves lower than usual.

"Boss, 's that you?" It was Charlie.

"Yup."

"Oh, okay. Listen, the kids have started showin' up, so... ya comin'?"

"Ain't Nora here?" Joshua grumbled, shirking his job for probably the first time in ten years.

“Well, yessir, she’s here, all right. Ya want I should tell her ya ain’t comin’? ’Cause that Samuels girl is pitchin’ a fit again, ’n’ the Reston boys are tryin’ to climb the fence ’n’—”

The fever that had taken over Joshua’s brain thanks to that damn video now faded to a dull, warmish ache. Charlie’s words pulled him back down to the real and the now and life as it was known on Muddy River Ranch. Joshua pushed a shaky hand through his long, straight-as-sin mess of hair. He grunted into the walkie-talkie, in an assenting sort of way, went to the door of his office to leave, came back, *unplugged* the damn laptop, and headed out to the stables.

IT WAS mid-October, and the aspens around the stables were covered in leaves that twinkled and shone like gold coins in the sun. The sky was the deep blue that was just about Joshua’s favorite color in the whole wide world. But even the perfect fall day didn’t make him feel any better, ’specially not when the Reston twins were seeing who could bust a leg first by jumping off the corral fence. Nora was busy comforting Lily Samuels, who stood by the corral gently wailing. And Charlie was leading a couple of saddled horses out of the stables, probably in a bid to give Billy and Bobby something to do other than risk their dang fool necks.

Joshua stopped for a second, taking it in—the day, the ranch, the Montana mountains rising in the distance, and the downright miserable start to his Saturday riding class. The thought that hit him hard was *Ben should be here. He’d have the Reston boys gigglin’ and followin’ him around like puppies in two seconds flat.*

Which was a strange thought to have, because Ben had worked the riding class with Joshua for only a few months before he got “too busy,” and that was over two years ago. But Joshua felt Ben’s absence real hard all the same.

And then he realized that Ben never *would* be here like that, not ever again.

So he wasn’t in the best frame of mind as he strode up to Billy and Bobby, leaped over the corral fence, and grabbed each one of them with an arm around the waist. Joshua marched toward Charlie and the horses, his arms full of wriggling ten-year-old boys.

“Hey, Joshua!” Billy said cheerfully, going as pliant as an old hound under a belly rub.

“I’m gonna tell!” Bobby screamed, though what he’d tell wasn’t real clear. He struggled against Joshua’s iron-hard arm.

Joshua grunted and, reaching the horses, shoved Billy at Charlie and swung Bobby up onto the saddle himself. Bobby looked down, his mouth opened to complain some. Then he blinked at the expression on Joshua’s face.

“Okay,” Bobby said, suddenly meek as a lamb. “But can I please ride by myself? I ain’t no baby.”

Joshua’s gaze flickered down to the horse, Trisket. She was old and gentle and the look in her eyes told Joshua she wasn’t feeling anything but supremely lazy today. It was Bobby’s second lesson, and they’d already done the leading-him-around-the-arena thing.

Joshua took Bobby’s hand and placed it on the pommel, gripping it hard. “Hang on,” Joshua instructed. “And keep them reins slack. Just let ’er walk.”

“Yessir,” Bobby said politely.

Joshua let them go. Trisket placidly walked the perimeter of the arena, and Bobby didn’t pull on the reins. Joshua’s gaze fell back to Charlie, who was holding on to Dusty. Billy was seated in Dusty’s saddle.

“What’s the matter, Boss? Ya sick?” Charlie asked.

“Nope.”

“’Cause ya look a bit peaked. Yer mouth is all set in a line so ya cain’t hardly see yer lips a’tall. And yer sort of flushed like, on yer throat, and ya have these lines—”

“Charlie, I ain’t no heifer, and you ain’t doin’ no health check.” Joshua growled. “Take Billy round once, then let ’im go alone if he wants.”

Charlie grumbled in his cantankerous way. “Sure thing, Boss. Take care ya don’t get stung, what with that bee in yer bonnet.” He started leading Billy around the ring.

Joshua took a deep breath and turned to Nora and Lily. Nora had her hands on Lily’s shoulders now, Lily had stopped crying, and they were both looking at Joshua a bit warily, like they didn’t think he’d bite, but they weren’t entirely sure.

Joshua forced a smile and went over to them. He vaulted back over the corral fence.

“Mornin’, Sunshine,” Nora said sarcastically, looking at him with one eyebrow lifted in a question.

Joshua grunted a nonreply and squatted down on his haunches next to Lily.

“Ready?” Joshua asked the little girl.

She shook her blonde head, her big brown eyes dead serious. She reached out and snagged a fistful of Joshua’s shoulder-length brown hair. Joshua sighed inwardly. She was seven but looked a year younger. She was a fragile thing, and her folks had hoped the riding would be a confidence builder. But last week, at her first session, they hadn’t managed to actually get her on a horse.

“Let’s go find a friend,” Joshua said, carefully tugging Lily’s hand free from his hair—*ouch*—and then holding those harsh little digits to lead her inside the stables.

Nora followed. “Can we find a friend for you too?” she quipped enthusiastically. “’Cause you sure look like you could use one.” Joshua ignored her.

Joshua had known Nora since they were kids. She’d been a few years ahead of him and Chet in school, and then she’d gone off for four years to college. She came back and bought the town diner with some windfall or another. It kept her busy, but she still came to help with the kids every Saturday morning. When the days were long, she’d sometimes stop by for a trail ride after the diner closed. She said horses were one of the reasons she’d moved back to Clyde’s Corner, and she wasn’t gonna let her business keep her from enjoying them. She was large, blunt, and gregarious, and Joshua loved her to pieces. But sometimes she was a mite too smart and a load too honest.

“How ’bout this horse, honey?” Nora said, going over to the first stall. “This is Jasmine. She’s a real sweetie, just like you.”

Jasmine was an old Shetland. Her owner had wanted to get rid of her, and Joshua took her for just this reason, as the gentlest possible creature for timid new riders, but also because he had a hard time turning down any horse that was about to be put down.

Letting go of Joshua's hand, Lily passed Nora and Jasmine without a second glance. She went directly to the third stall where a large white horse poked out his nose.

Nora gave Joshua a rueful look. "Women. They always like 'em big."
Joshua snorted a laugh despite himself.

He went over to Lily. Valmont was one of his rehabilitation horses. Not only was he big, but he could be violent, and Joshua hadn't worked it out of him yet.

"This is Valmont," he told Lily. "He's too big for you. Horses and riders need to sorta fit one other, like clothes. Jasmine'd fit you just right."

Lily dug into Joshua's leg with both hands. Her little fingers were surprisingly painful, like cat's claws. She looked up at Valmont with big eyes.

"He don' like me," she said shakily, clearly meaning the horse.

Joshua blinked and frowned. "Uh—"

"I can't ride him 'cause he don' want me to."

Valmont leaned his head down and sniffed at the strange little blonde thing curiously.

"Let's go pet Jasmine," Joshua tried, feeling a bit desperate. But Lily just clung to him and to that spot, like she was rooted deep in the ground somewhere, like maybe she was part oak tree.

"No! I wanna ride Valfront, but he don' like me."

Joshua looked at Nora helplessly. Outside, there was the slam of car doors as more parents dropped off their kids.

Good Lord, he just couldn't handle this today, not *today*, when he barely had a grip on himself as it was.

It was kind of like that badger—the further he got from that video he'd just seen, the less the *aroused* part of his brain was fired up, and the more room he could devote to being just plain mad as hell. Despite the distractions of the horses and the kids, he felt it creeping up inside him like rising floodwater.

He was mad at the company that made those videos, for luring in gorgeous young boys. He was mad at Ben for putting all his bits out there without, apparently, giving it a whole lotta thought. He was sure as hell mad at Henry Atkins, who'd leaked the news about the porn all over town like

the low-belly snake in the grass that he was. But mostly, Joshua Braintree was spitting mad at himself.

He was mad at himself for waiting too damn long, for getting caught up in the ranch and not tending to a certain business that he should have been attending to. He was mad at himself for letting time slip by like a wolf in the night and steal a prize right out from under his nose while he was no way, no how paying attention. Instead, he'd been off doing numbers and working like a dog to get his horse business running after he took over his daddy's ranch. He'd thought he had time. He'd thought Ben was still a boy.

Well, the video had cleared up *that* notion good and proper.

And Joshua was mad, too, for letting down Chet, his best friend, who was in Afghanistan doing a man's work, and who should have been able to count on Joshua to keep his father and his little brother taken care of in the ways that mattered. And Joshua had fallen down big-time on that one.

Nora must have seen some of that in his face, because she gently pried Lily off his leg and gave him a worried smile.

"I swear, whatever's eatin' you sure has one hell of an appetite. I'll take the little Missy Miss here. You go on and get the Carter kids goin'. They should be easy."

Joshua grunted. He took a deep breath and turned to lead out two more horses that Charlie, bless him, had already saddled.

BY SOME miracle, Joshua survived the morning class without either killing anyone or sticking a label marked "bona fide asshole" on his forehead. He spent the afternoon with the horses. He had three horses he was rehabilitating at the moment. They needed daily interaction to get used to him and used to the way things were gonna be. And they needed him to be calm and confident. Knowing that helped Joshua push down his own frustrations, for a few hours at least. And it always eased his mind to work with animals. They were so much simpler than people. They sure as heck didn't do things like run off to Vegas to make porn.

But by the time the day was done and the sun was fading over the horizon, it dragged Joshua's hard-won calm down with it like it was a daytime critter that hibernated in the dark.

So when Joshua was finally all alone in his house, and it was dark, he closed up the curtains in his office real tight, locked his office door, even though he lived alone, and dug up some earplugs he hadn't used in two years. He went back to that website, *Boys 2 Boys*, and this time, instead of watching a preview, he gave them his credit card number, selecting a "one month only" plan. Then he watched every single video that Ben Rivers, aka "Caleb," had ever made, starting with the first one two years ago.

Every one of them broke his heart a little more as he saw the changes in Ben, witnessed Ben's first time with a guy caught on camera, his first kiss, first blowjob, first top, even his first bottom. He watched Ben's expression as he took a man inside him for the first time (being Ben, he looked determined and sort of fascinated by a new challenge). He watched Ben grow in confidence, get fitter and tanner, become a star. And all of it was caught forever in Technicolor.

Those moments, those intimate moments, those *firsts*, were supposed to be Joshua's, and they'd been stolen as surely as if cattle thieves had raided his pastures. That made him so angry and upset his teeth ached.

The videos also made him hard enough to drive fence posts.

He cried a little that night, a few old painful, rusty tears. And he came. Three times.

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“Hi, EVERYONE. This is Caleb. Caleb, can you tell us how old you are?”

Caleb smiled real wide. “I’m eighteen.”

“Tell us a little bit about you.”

“Well, I live way out in the boonies, and I’m a cowboy.”

“No kidding? A real cowboy?”

“All my life,” Caleb drawled. He gave the camera a sexy, shy look.

“So you actually work with, like, cows?”

“Yup. And horses. I done it all. Even went on a monthlong cattle drive with my brother and his best friend when my dad bought a whole herd from a ranch in Idaho. It was plumb awesome.”

“Yeah? Looks like you built good muscle tone doing work like that.”

“Sure did.” Caleb flexed his arm, showing an impressive bicep under his T-shirt.

“Why don’t you take that shirt off and show us?”

Caleb removed the shirt playfully and flexed for the camera.

“Very nice. What do people tell you is your best feature?”

Caleb looked shy. “Well, heck, they don’t really. But I guess girls like my eyes and my smile okay.”

“What do you think is your best feature?”

“I have a big dick.” Caleb smirked.

“I bet people would like to see that, cowboy. Want to take off your pants?”

Caleb did want to. He turned for the camera, showing off his fine ass and then his hard eight-inch cock as instructed. He climbed onto the bed.

He stroked himself, making it last, looking right into camera with a gaze that was part come-hither and part bashful-boy-being-naughty.

He nailed the money shot—moaning and hitting his chin with thick, creamy ropes.

“Cowboy, I think I can speak for our clients when I say that I hope we see a lot more of you. You’ve got it, kid.”

Caleb winked at the camera and licked a splash of come off his fingers. “Thanks, y’all. See you soon.”

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THE NEXT morning, Joshua's white Chevy pickup pulled into Fred Rivers's ranch as soon as it was decent, which was the business end of 6:00 a.m. He pulled under the iron "White Buffalo Ranch" sign (which Joshua had always thought was a mite fanciful for a ranch) and up the long drive that curved to the house. The cottonwoods that lined the drive were bright orange this time of year, and even though he'd seen it a hundred times, Joshua allowed himself to appreciate how beautiful the ranch looked—open space, well-maintained dirt road and buildings, lots of shade-producing vegetation, sturdy fences, a rambling old-style house, and not one damn glimpse of any buildings or people that didn't belong to the ranch—exactly how it should be on a man's property.

And in looking it over with a fresh eye, he was thinking about Ben, and how Ben had left this. He clenched the steering wheel hard enough to hurt.

Fred must have heard him coming, 'cause he came out the screen door as Joshua parked. Joshua got out, and the two men stood face-to-face just looking at each other for a long moment, having a silent conversation about regrets and the wrongness of things. Then Fred spoke up.

"Got coffee on," Fred said.

"Good," said Joshua.

They went inside.

They were silent as they poured the coffee and took the mugs back out onto the porch. They settled into a couple of rocking chairs to watch the pink-and-orange dawn.

"I don't know how I didn't see it comin'," Fred said at last. "He started goin' to Vegas 'bout two years ago. Said he got hired as a model after submittin' some stuff online. And later, when I asked about pictures, he said it was mostly runway stuff and not picturey kind of stuff."

Joshua grunted.

“He did show me some pictures once, and they was real good. He looked good. But I guess them pictures I saw were just the decent ones.”

Joshua said nothing. He’d seen pictures like that on the B2B website. They liked to dress the guys up in sports clothes and such and then get ’em naked, photo by photo. It appealed to the whole “unwrapping a package” sort of mentality, he reckoned. There were a whole mess of decent pictures of Ben, but there were even more that were nice in other kinds of ways, ways a father wouldn’t appreciate.

“My stars, I’m a damn fool,” Fred repeated with self-disgust. “What boy that age makes the kind of money he was makin’ doing *runway modelin’* in Vegas? He was makin’ ten grand a trip! And I didn’t even *think* about porn. I suppose I could have been stupider about it all, but I don’t rightly see how, not without sawin’ my brain in half.”

“Me too,” Joshua said. Because he’d been just as dumb. Ben had been working part-time at Joshua’s ranch in high school, even though he had chores for his dad too. Then suddenly Ben had been too busy for that. He’d been doing some traveling, some kind of “modeling” work somewhere, Joshua had heard. But Joshua had—shit, he’d assumed it was cowboy stuff like for rodeo posters or magazines or *something* like that. That had always been Ben’s thing. He should have dug his nose right into it and sniffed out the facts. But he hadn’t.

“Chet’s gonna be fit to be tied.” Fred snorted in disgust.

“Yup.”

They drank some more coffee.

Joshua cleared his throat. “So Ben left?”

Fred sucked at his front teeth, which was usually a warning sign, or at least it had been when Joshua and Chet were growing up, that they were about to be in a world of hurt.

“Yup. He took everything he cared about. Left me a note. He ain’t comin’ home, Joshua. And with Chet gone, I don’t... I don’t know how I’m gonna live with that.”

“Goddamn Henry Atkins,” Joshua growled.

Because Joshua had known, the minute Nora had told him about that ruckus in her diner, that it was gonna be this bad. The fight was already legendary in town, a nasty brawl involving Henry, Ben, flying bits of blueberry pie, a couple of punches, loud accusations that had shocked

nearly everyone in the little town of Clyde's Corner, and at the end, a distraught Ben, in tears, storming out, getting in his car, and leaving tread marks on Main Street.

"I need more coffee." Fred grunted, as if it were whiskey and he needed to get drunk. They went inside, and both poured some more.

"You wanna see the note?" Fred offered.

"Yup."

Fred led Joshua to Ben's room. The room still had all the stuff Joshua remembered so well—a shelf full of 4-H and Junior Rodeo awards and blue ribbons, posters showing pro rodeo riders, horses, and one of a cowboy walking his horse home across a pasture at sunset. Joshua had always thought that particular poster was a bit of a giveaway, seeing as how the cowboy's back was to the camera, and his ass was so prominent in the threadbare jeans. Hell, the picture would have been less lewd if the man had been as bare and blushing as the day he was born.

Joshua blinked at the poster again. Come to think of it, the guy kind of looked like *him*.

But these were a boy's things, and they'd been left behind. Joshua could feel it, feel the emptiness. The room was like the ghost of Ben past or something. His spirit wasn't there anymore.

Fred picked up a piece of paper from Ben's dresser and handed it over.

Dad,

I'm moving out for good. I'm sorry to leave you this way, but I guess you'll hear soon enough why I have to go. I done some things that you won't like, and now everyone in town knows about it. I guess it's good 'cause it forces me to make a decision I've been trying to make for a long time now. You know I can make real good money in Vegas, and I'm saving up and everything. I'll go to college, I guess, once I have enough saved. But for right now it's a damn good job, and I hope you can understand that and forgive me.

Love,

Ben

Joshua read it over a couple of times and sighed. He rubbed his jaw.

He and Fred just looked at each other for a bit. Joshua had never seen Fred look so old. It was a bit frightening.

“I don’t like what he’s done, Joshua. I can’t say that I do.”

“Yup.”

“I ain’t.... Have you seen any of it?” Fred looked down at the floor.

“I looked it up.”

Fred scratched his head, his face torn, like he really didn’t want to ask what he needed to ask.

“Tell me straight up—how bad is it?”

Joshua gave that some consideration. “Well, it’s with other guys.”

Fred blushed and looked out the window. “I heard that. Could have figured they don’t pay you that kind of money for messin’ around with a Playboy centerfold. Even Ben ain’t *that* good-lookin’.”

“But... for what it is, it’s kinda classy,” Joshua added.

“Yeah?” Fred looked at him hopefully.

Joshua struggled to think of an analogy Fred would understand. “The company he works for is kind of like the Wranglers of gay porn.”

Fred smiled faintly and looked a little nauseated at the same time. “That’s... good.” He looked at the trophy shelf. “Ben always did have to be the best.”

He sighed, and his eyes darkened. “You know, the sex.... I guess I can live with that. I don’t like it, but I can live with it. God knows, I made some mistakes with my pecker when I was Ben’s age. But what really scares me....”

Joshua waited.

“You hear stories. Do you think they have him doped up to do those things? Is he on drugs? And then there’s diseases, AIDS. When I think about that, I just don’t think I can stand it. Ben was always such a good kid. He’s my baby.”

Fred’s voice choked a little, surprising the hell out of Joshua. Fred had always been one tough old son of a gun. Joshua pretended not to notice.

“Ain’t no signs of drugs in those videos,” he said firmly.

Fred nodded, looking relieved. “I didn’t see any signs of it either, when he was home, but....”

“And them places do testin’. For diseases and such. Pert sure.”

Fred blinked at him hopefully and nodded.

In silence, they wandered back out to the front porch and stood looking at Joshua's truck.

"I can't hardly ask you...", Fred began. "But Chet's not here, and Ben probably wouldn't appreciate his old man showin' up."

"Already bought tickets." Joshua grunted.

Fred looked relieved. "You're a good friend, Joshua."

Joshua felt like the biggest hypocrite on the face of the earth. There was no way in hell he could tell Fred the truth about what he thought about those videos, or why he had to go to Vegas. But it didn't have as much to do with being a good friend to Chet as it oughta.

He got into his truck and started home. He spent most of the drive trying to figure out how he was gonna break the news to Charlie that he was taking a little trip. He could only afford to be gone a couple of days. He hoped it would be enough.

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“WHY DO you love it?” Ben asked.

“Love what?” said Joshua.

“This.”

Joshua knew what Ben meant. Ben was his best friend’s kid brother, and all three of them were lying out under the stars in their sleeping bags. Above them the sky was so full of stars it looked like someone had spilled a bucket of sand across the sky, and every single grain had gotten perfectly separated and was glowing. The campfire was still warm at their side, and the night was a crisp fifty degrees. From off in the darkness came the soft sounds of the cattle they were moving.

All was well, and there wasn’t a damn thing to be done except sleep the sleep of the just, get up in the morning, have some coffee, and ride all day in the most breathtaking scenery on earth.

“Who said I loved it?” Joshua argued, just to be ornery.

“You do. You know you do.” Ben rolled onto his side and looked at Joshua.

Even at fifteen, the boy was a looker—blond, like Chet, but with big blue eyes instead of Chet’s brown. Ben looked shy and sweet—till he opened his mouth. The boy talked like a high-speed train and had more energy than a mechanical bull set on “death defying.”

“Guess so,” Joshua admitted. He glanced at Chet, a bit embarrassed to say it out loud, but Chet was already asleep and snoring softly.

“Tell me why?” Ben insisted. “I mean is it, like, the big open spaces? Or bein’ your own boss? Or workin’ with horses? Or—hey! You know what I like the best? I really like calvin’ season. I used to get up really early every mornin’ in the spring and run out the pasture to see the newborns.”

“You still do,” Joshua teased. In truth, he did too.

“’Cause, I dunno, it’s like, you know the herd is healthy when they’re havin’ lots of babies. And you did that, right? I mean, not that you got the

cows *pregnant*, but you gave 'em a good life and a big pasture and good food, and then they have babies, and *they're* healthy. And it makes you real proud. Like in *The Lion King*. Circle of life.”

“Yup,” Joshua agreed with a tiny huff of a laugh.

“Plus they're cute as the dickens. The calves I mean. Dad always let me pick any one I wanted every spring. 'Member Sparky? God, I loved that bull.”

Joshua remembered. Sparky was the biggest, blackest, meanest-looking Angus bull anyone had ever seen. You walked into his pasture, and you were taking your life in your hands—and maybe waving it in front of a taxiing 747. But Ben had raised Sparky for 4-H and showed him at the state fair, and that damn bull loved the boy like he was sunshine and green grass and plump heifers all rolled into one. He'd run up to Ben at full speed, stop, and lift his chin up, begging to be scratched.

“Sparky was a fine-looking bull,” Joshua agreed. And he was. He'd won two championship titles. Sparky was now living the life of a pampered stud on a ranch south of Helena.

“And I mean, just look at this,” Ben said, waving his hand around haphazardly at the sky. “Wouldn't it suck to live in a city? I hear you can't hardly see the stars at all 'cause of all the lights.”

“Yup.”

“So what is it? That *you* love, I mean?”

Ben finally stopped talking and listened. He was lying on his side just a few feet away and looking at Joshua like he really wanted to know. Joshua turned his head a little and studied Ben.

He supposed this was one of those mentorish sorts of talks older men had with younger boys where he was expected to impart pearls of wisdom. And he supposed he could rightly fuck it up real bad if he was flip about it. Even though Joshua was only twenty-one, he'd been working the family ranch full-time with his father since he was eighteen, which was practically a lifetime. And before that he'd grown up with it, just as Ben and Chet had. Ben was just six years younger, but the gulf between fifteen and twenty-one was wider than the Montana sky.

“What you said,” Joshua said, clearing his throat. “But mostly... freedom.”

“Freedom?” Ben snuggled a little closer.

“I know what needs to be done, and I do it. No one’s makin’ me punch a card or lookin’ over my shoulder. I’m not stuck in a building. I’m outside. I’m free.”

Those weren’t the right words. They hardly made a dent in something as vast and as perfect as the Montana wilderness, or the beauty of his family’s ranch, or how Joshua felt about it. It was like, once you’d gotten the *open* inside you, anything less felt like it could strangle a body until it had squeezed all the life out and you were just a shell. A lot of people lived like that, he reckoned. Becoming more a shell year by year, stuck in jobs they hated, maybe marriages they hated too.

Not him. Montana, the animals... they filled him up inside, every day.

“Yeah,” Ben said with a sort of hushed awe, as if he understood all that, even though Joshua hadn’t said it. He flipped over onto his back and looked up at the sky. “You ain’t never gonna leave it, are ya?”

“Nope.”

Ben looked over at Chet. “He will.”

“Chet wants to see things,” Joshua agreed.

“He hates muckin’ the barn. He’s a big old baby about it.”

Joshua could have said more. Chet had been his best friend since grade school, and he understood that Chet dreamed of seeing faraway places. Joshua knew there were exotic lands that sure would be a sight to see. But he also thought it was possible that a man could travel over every spot of this earth only to realize that the best place was the one he’d left. And he thought maybe a place got inside you, and that *made* it the best, because you belonged to it, were rooted in it, like the grass or the trees. And he thought maybe, too, there was a lot of peace in appreciating what you had, in watching the small changes that happened season by season in just one special place instead of watching fleeting moments go by in a million places you didn’t really know and never would.

But that all seemed so fanciful. Joshua didn’t say anything.

“I love it too,” Ben sighed, craning his head back to look at the stars.

Joshua grunted. He knew that. Maybe that was why he liked Ben so much, more than he’d ever be willing to admit. “It’d be good for your dad if you stuck.”

“Yeah.”

Ben sat up then and scooted himself like a mummy a little closer to Joshua so that their nylon-and-batting-covered legs were touching. Joshua looked up at him with a quirked brow.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" Ben sang softly, dragging out the note.

Joshua snorted and glanced at Chet. "Hush. You'll wake 'im."

Ben broke off the note long enough to say, "Nah, Chet sleeps like the dead," and went back to *"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."*

Joshua covered his face in his hands.

"Oh give me land, lots of land under starry skies above..." Ben sang.

Joshua groaned.

"Don't fence me in!"

"Ben."

"C'mon, everybody sing!"

"I ain't singin'."

Joshua peeked through his fingers at the boy. Ben loved old cowboy songs, which their town radio station played 24-7. His head was tilted back, and he sang the song soulfully. He was being a little silly. But only a little.

"Don't fence me in!"

Ben's voice was warm and clear in the night and right pleasant. He wasn't mugging now; he was singing sweetly. Joshua sighed and gave in to it. He looked at the fire, and his lips tugged into a smile. Ben shuffled around, and his head landed on Joshua's stomach.

It was nice like that.

Ben reached the end of the song and started over. This time Joshua couldn't resist laying a hand on Ben's arm and joining in. "Oh give me land, lots of land under starry skies above. Don't fence me in!"

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“DEAR SWEET baby Jesus,” Baxter said. He was looking out the window at something, and by the tone of his voice, it wasn’t the sprinkler system.

Ben was busy humming *I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry* and rigging the gray bedroom for tonight’s shoot—making sure all the cameras had fresh batteries, the stashed mics hadn’t been buried in bedding, smashed, or clogged with come, and the room had been well cleaned (it had). Baxter, who was supposed to be helping him, wasn’t.

Five days ago, Ben had gone from occasional star talent to permanent gaffer boy. When he’d shown up on Sunday, cried out and feeling like a lost lamb, Frankie had stepped up. Ben didn’t want to go back home? That was fine. He filled Ben’s calendar with video shoots for the next two months and penciled in behind-the-scenes work around his shooting schedule.

B2B only did three video updates a week, and the same guy couldn’t be in more than one of those, no matter how popular. It was called “overexposure,” which was kinda ironic, when you really thought about it. Anyway, there were only so many sex scenes for Ben to film. But Frankie was all shoulder to cry on as he offered Ben side work and a place to stay. He was currently stashed at one of the apartments B2B rented for out-of-town models, and he could stay till he arranged his own place. He was grateful.

Grateful for a place to land, but not over the hurt of it all. It still stung like a bullwhip had cracked against his chest. Repeatedly.

Ben still didn’t understand how Henry Atkins had found out about it. When Ben had first been recruited, after having clicked on an ad for “male modeling” on Facebook, he’d been cautious. But B2B had flown him out to Vegas to check them out, and he was impressed by the operation. The Vegas house was a gated ten-thousand-foot faux pueblo McMansion, with lots of bedrooms, a big common room with video game controllers, and a pool and cabana out back. And there were always so many cool guys hanging around. It was glamorous, but it was like a big family too.

After that first trip, Ben really wanted to do it. He'd always loved attention, always loved being in the show ring. And this—well, this wasn't about showing animals anymore. This was about *him*, his physique, his sex appeal, his ability to perform on camera. And it was a helluva lotta money and, well, *sex*, an opportunity to experiment around a little, try some new things. It was hard to beat that with a ten-inch stick.

And he couldn't see how anyone from home would ever know about it. Who in the conservative little Montana town of Clyde's Corner would be looking at gay porn? Most folks didn't even have high-speed Internet yet. And even if someone was looking for stuff like that, B2B was just one of many gay porn sites. And even if someone *did* see him, wouldn't they be too ashamed to admit it? Ben had thought he was pretty safe.

For a while, he'd had it all. He could have his simple life back home and fly out to Vegas a few days a month, film three or four scenes, and get topped up with sex and money. It was like he was Clark Kent back home and Superman in Vegas. He got reams of fan mail. He was a bona fide star—the number two ranked model on B2B. That was something.

If it had been starting to get just a *little* bit old... the fluffing and the waiting and having sex with guys who acted completely uninterested the moment the cameras turned off.... If he'd started thinking once in a while about hanging up his old Caleb spurs, about having sex between just him and someone he really cared about, *off camera*, well, the opposite had also been true. He'd begun to realize that maybe Clyde's Corner wasn't going to be it for him for the rest of his life after all, that maybe he was too odd a peg to fit into the nice round holes there.

And man, that really sucked.

Now the decision was made. Because Henry Atkins hadn't just *seen* Ben Rivers as Caleb, B2B star. He'd shouted out the details in front of the entire population of Nora's Diner. That horse had done jumped the fence.

Ben's heart was leaden as he took the batteries out of the hand cam and tested them. Twenty percent.

"Baxter, can you go see if there are any more D cells in the supply closet?" Ben asked.

"I can't move. I'm paralyzed by love. No, delete that, it's just that my dick is stuck to the window."

Slightly annoyed, Ben went over to see what Baxter was going on about. He knew that, whatever it was, it had to be male. Baxter was not a model, though he wanted to be. He was strictly staff. He was too thin, too fem, and too gay to be on camera. B2B took their “Straight boys having gay sex” tagline seriously. And if not every model was as straight as they claimed to be, they had to at least look the part.

“Dear God, *please* tell me he’s going to be filming with us! I’ll give up all my Halloween candy to charity, I swear!” Baxter gushed.

Ben looked down at the driveway where Devon, a huge blond Adonis, and B2B’s number one model, was talking to some guy.

Some guy. Ben blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the brighter light. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. The guy’s back was turned, but....

Oh. Lord. Ben would know those fitted, worn Wranglers, those long, long legs, that amazing ass, and those crazy broad shoulders anywhere, even if the view of the man from the window were such that Ben could only see the top of his....

Stetson.

Ben’s hand flew to his mouth. He stopped breathing.

“I know, right?” Baxter said with a gloat. Then he did a double take at Ben’s face. “Caleb? What’s wrong?”

The man below turned and glanced up at the house. It was. It was Joshua Braintree. Joshua Braintree was standing in the ever-loving driveway. At B2B porn studio. In goddamn Vegas. It just didn’t fit. It was kind of like seeing a sow and her piglets walking down the Vegas strip.

“Oh balls,” Ben groaned, backing away from the window.

“*Caleb.*” Baxter put out a soothing hand. “Is that your brother or something? You want me to—”

But Ben was already running out of the room.

THE FOYER of the B2B house was open to the second story. A railed hallway ran along the upper level, and it was perfect for things like dropping stuff on someone’s head, mooning, practicing your cruise ship royal wave, and, of course, eavesdropping.

Especially if you sank down against the hallway wall, you could hear everything without being seen, and you could get a view of the foyer by lifting yourself up a bit, as long as the people below weren't looking up.

Ben sank down against the wall. His palms were sweaty, and his heart was hammering so loud it probably sounded like rain to the people downstairs.

Maybe Joshua wouldn't come inside. Or maybe Frankie'd just tell him to come back tomorrow. Or maybe—

The front door opened.

"Wait here," he heard Devon say. "I'll go find Frankie."

Ben dared a peek. Joshua was standing by the front door. He took off his hat and wiped his brow, ran a hand through his hair. *Damn*, he looked fine. His hair was light brown with natural gold highlights, straight and thick. It was layered and down to his shoulders. He'd worn it that way since high school, and it suited his chiseled features. Joshua Braintree was *a man*, and despite all the studly boys that ran around B2B, this was a different level of macho altogether. Because it was *real*. Joshua Braintree didn't *try* to be anything. He just *was*.

Ben barely registered it when Baxter slid down next to him.

Baxter elbowed him. "Your brother?" he mouthed. He made a "hot" gesture by fanning himself with his hand.

Ben shook his head, his mouth pinched tight. *No*.

No. Not his brother. Ben could only wish it was Chet. Chet would ream his ass and maybe drag him to the airport by his ear. Something like that, Ben could get mad about, he could fight and defend himself. *That* he could handle.

But *this*. If there was one person on earth Ben didn't want to know about the porn, even less than he'd wanted his dad or Chet to know, or even Mrs. Barnaby, his sweet little old Sunday school teacher, it was the man standing in the foyer below. Ben felt his insides shrivel. He closed his eyes and thunked his head back on the wall. *Please, God, let this be a nightmare*.

"Hello." Ben heard Frankie's voice.

"Hey" came the reply. Ben cringed at the deep bass authority in that voice, even as the hair on the back of his neck stood up in response. *Oh, Lord*.

“Found him out on the drive,” Devon said. “Thought you might be open to meeting him. He’s hot.”

Oooohh, Lord. Devon. Devon was gorgeous, but also a few bottles short of a full case. He seemed to think—

“You’re a little mature,” Frankie was saying doubtfully. “But you have a good look. How old are you?”

“Twenty-six.” Ben heard the slight trace of amusement in Joshua’s drawl.

“Hmm.... That *is* a bit old, but I have been wanting to mix it up a little now and then.”

“Could be nice for a change, right?” Devon said.

“Are you willing to show me what you’re packing?” Frankie asked.

Ben put his hand over his mouth in horror. He *had* to look. He peeked over the edge of the landing in time to see Joshua get sort of bigger and *loom* over Frankie.

“Sure. I’m packin’ a helluva right hook and a boot labeled Y-O-U-R-A-S-S.”

Ben huffed out something that was part laugh, part scream. All three of the men in the foyer looked up. Joshua’s eyes met his. Ben stood up and ran for the bedroom, and just as he reached it, Frankie’s voice rang out, loud and a bit strangled.

“*Caleb!*”

BEN TRIED to get out of it. He really did. But Joshua told Frankie he was gonna wait right outside, and wait he did. Ben could see him from the bedroom window, just standing in the driveway, relaxed as sin, as if he had all the time in the world to just stand there and contemplate life.

Ben sighed. Joshua was like that. He could outwait the most stubborn horse, a weeklong thunderstorm, or even a zombie apocalypse.

“I can call the cops if you really don’t want to speak to him,” Frankie offered. He put a sympathetic hand on Ben’s shoulder as they looked out the window. “This *is* private property.”

Ben shook his head. Siccing the police on Joshua would be like pissing on a Christmas tree.

“I’ll go,” Ben said. And down he went, dragging his feet.

IT TOOK less than an hour. Joshua expected as much. Ben was the sort that, once something got a foothold in that rapid-fire brain of his, he couldn’t let it go. So the idea that Joshua was standing outside waiting to talk to him would have itched and itched until he just *had* to scratch it, no matter how much he didn’t want to.

Ben came out. He looked so damn good. He wasn’t huge like the blond giant Joshua had met at the gate. But he was a good-sized man—*man*, Joshua thought; *he’s a man now*—who was clearly in a profession where his body was his chief asset. He wore a fitted T-shirt and nylon shorts, like maybe something you’d swim in. His blond hair was more straw than dark honey now, bleached by the Vegas sun, and his skin was a warm golden brown all over. His body was very lean. He’d been spending a lot of time in the gym.

He looked fit, no doubt. But Joshua missed the softer, more boyish Ben who’d carried a little bit of weight on him. Joshua was a cattleman. It was in his blood to think a bit of heft meant a healthy animal.

Hell, he missed the old Ben, period. Joshua swallowed.

Ben’s deep-blue eyes had a hard time staying on Joshua’s face, and a raspberry blush was visible on his throat, even through the suntan. He was embarrassed.

“Hey,” Ben said, coming to a stop three feet from Joshua.

“Hey.”

Joshua’s gut twisted as he tried to figure out what to say. He’d come to take Ben home, but now that he was here, he felt a little lost. This was a world he didn’t understand, with this dry heat and the fancy flesh-colored house, in this landscape where everything was clean cement and clean little rocks and a few sparse cacti and palms—in this world with beautiful, perfect boys like Devon.

For a moment, Joshua felt self-doubt. What if Ben *belonged* here? Then Ben shot him a look from under his eyelashes. It was filled with guilt and regret.

No, Joshua reminded himself. He knew who Ben Rivers was. Besides, Joshua was selfish enough not to give a good goddamn what was “right” for

Ben. He just wanted him home.

“You stayin’ here?” Joshua asked, his voice rough.

“Nah. I’m in an apartment.” Ben looked down at his bare toes. He flexed them on the hot cement.

“Can we go there?”

“Why?” Ben looked up, surprised.

Joshua nodded at the big house. “Wanna talk in private.”

Ben looked at the house too, seemingly torn. “Joshua, I ain’t goin’ back. I can’t. And you won’t talk me into it, so there’s no point. I’m sorry that you came all this way, and I appreciate it, I do. But I have a job here. And it’s a good job. And I know you don’t get it. And you probably hate me right now and think I’m all slutty and everything. But it pays real good money and....”

As Ben rambled he had a serious, resolved expression on his face that Joshua didn’t like at all. Ben was working himself up, talking himself into a position that he’d find it hard to back down from, the way an animal sometimes worked itself up to being mad. And seeing him standing there in the sun, looking so young and sweet, Joshua didn’t think he could stand it if Ben got his mind fixed on the wrong course. So he stopped Ben’s words by stepping closer to him and wrapping his arms around him, pulling Ben against his chest.

Ben was startled for a moment, but he didn’t fight it. He was a good half foot shorter, and Joshua put his face in Ben’s hair. He smelled clean and warm, like a hot summer day, with just a hint of chlorine. Joshua held him chastely, like a brother might have done, and waited a good while till Ben finally relaxed and surrendered. And even though it wasn’t a usual thing for them—he’d maybe hugged Ben twice before in their entire lives—it didn’t feel strange. If Joshua was honest with himself, it felt purely wonderful.

“Go fetch your things, and let’s talk at your place,” Joshua said quietly. He gave Ben a squeeze and let go.

Ben heaved out a long, shaky breath and, without another word, went inside to get his stuff.

JOSHUA FOLLOWED Ben's car for twenty minutes to a cluster of matchbox apartment buildings that looked as new as everything else in this city. There was such a strange, empty feeling to the place. Joshua supposed this would be a good place to run to if you were escaping something and needed to build up a new identity, or maybe if you just wanted a life as clean and simple and scorched free of meaning as you could find.

Joshua hated it. He would die in a place so stingy with green living things. His soul would become as dry and blank as the apartment buildings. Maybe that was the point. Maybe for some folks, that was an improvement.

Joshua left his rental car in a guest spot next to Ben's and got out.

"Come on in," Ben said in a resigned voice, heading for a building.

The inside of the apartment was as generic as the outside. Beige furniture and a modest TV filled up the living room, and there were two beige stools by the kitchen counter.

"Wanna soda?" Ben asked, heading into the open kitchen.

"All right." Joshua took a seat on one of the stools.

Ben got them each a Diet Coke, and they drank in silence for a bit, Joshua sitting at the counter and Ben standing in the kitchen. Ben wouldn't look at Joshua much, but when he did, it was warily, as if he was a stray dog and Joshua was a dogcatcher. He still wore that shamed look up high on his cheeks. Joshua waited, biding his time.

"Reckon you know about the videos and everything," Ben said, breaking the silence.

"Seen 'em," Joshua agreed calmly.

Ben looked downright horrified. "You *watched* 'em?"

"Yup."

"Oh, *Lord*."

"All of 'em." Joshua took a drink of the soda.

Ben turned his back to Joshua and put his face in his hands. "You really watched *all* of 'em?" he asked in a small voice, as if he just couldn't believe it. "Why?"

"Had to see the lay of things," Joshua drawled matter-of-factly.

"I'm—I'm not ashamed of 'em," Ben said defensively.

"All right."

“I have a lot of fans. A lot. I’m one of the most popular models on the site,” he insisted hotly.

“Well, I reckon.”

Joshua was sure that was true. From what Joshua had seen, Ben might not have the biggest cock in B2B’s stable, or even the most impressive body. But it was impossible not to fall in love with his innocent can-do enthusiasm, his charming mix of bold and shy, and the sweet, honest look in his big blue eyes. It was his spirit that put him in another class from those other boys altogether—a prize stallion among draft animals. And doing the videos hadn’t robbed him of one ounce of that sweetness, thank God. There was nothing deadened or jaded about Ben Rivers.

Ben finally turned around, his cheeks red. “What do you want, Joshua? Why’d you come?”

“Ben, this ain’t the place for you. Nothin’... nothin’ grows here.”

Ben looked conflicted. “I know. I don’t much like Vegas. But I reckon I’ll work steady for a couple of years and stash all my money away. Then I can go to college, maybe someplace green, like Vermont. Thought maybe I’d be a vet or somethin’.”

Joshua stared at him. *Oh, for Christ’s sake.* He spoke carefully.

“You wanna live someplace you hate for two years, to save up money, then go to school for six years or more, all so’s you can eventually live someplace green and work with animals?”

Ben grew redder. He folded his arms. “That’s not... that’s not what I....” Then, firm, “I can’t go back to Clyde’s Corner.”

“Hell, Ben! No one’s gonna crucify you cause you done some porn. Try to get in your pants, maybe,” Joshua admitted reluctantly.

“But Henry Atkins—”

“Is a bona fide jackass. He’s just pissed ’cause no one’d pay him to take off *his* Levi’s.” *Put ’em on, more like,* Joshua finished in his head.

Ben frowned worriedly. He shook his head. There was something else, something deeper. Joshua could see it in his face.

“Is it... bein’ gay?” Joshua asked.

“I ain’t gay!” Ben shot Joshua a look that could melt horseshoes. “It’s gay for pay. That means we just do it for the money.”

Joshua huffed. “Ben, I know what men look like havin’ sex. And if you ain’t taken to it like a duck takes to water, I’m Dolly Parton.”

Ben wouldn't meet his eye. The silence dragged out. And dragged out. "I guess I might be bi-curious," Ben said quietly.

"What?"

"I said I could be sorta bi-curious," Ben said loudly. "That's someone who's fundamentally straight but is curious about sex with men."

Joshua grunted his opinion of that. "You've been checking out my ass since you were eleven years old, Ben. That ain't curious, that's *convicted*."

Ben looked all sorts of embarrassed, but he didn't argue. He took a cell phone out of one of the pockets of those nylon shorts and fiddled with it, a set look on his face. Joshua supposed he was gonna ignore the conversation for as long as Joshua would let him.

And Joshua, who was no way, no how a talker, suddenly reached the end of his limited tether of both patience and vocabulary for the day. Hell, maybe for the year. He could feel it inside—his breaking point resounding with a loud *snap*!

He suddenly knew what he had to do, what his body was telling him. And he'd ignored those signals for far too goddamn long where Ben Rivers was concerned, because Ben was his best friend's kid brother, because he was young.

That was how they'd gotten into this messed-up, addle-headed situation in the first place.

Joshua stood up and moved around that endless kitchen counter with grim determination. The look on his face must have been something to see, because Ben glanced up and then shied away from him like a nervous filly. But Ben didn't move fast enough, and in a heartbeat, Joshua had grabbed him, picked him up, and thrown him over his shoulder.

"Joshua!" came the indignant protest.

Maybe at that moment, as far as Ben was concerned, it coulda had a different outcome. Maybe he figured Joshua was gonna carry him out to his rental truck and dump him in it, force him to go home. Or maybe he thought Joshua was gonna give him a swat or two, like Ben's dad or brother might have done if they were here.

But what Joshua did was carry Ben through the apartment, opening a few doors until he found the bedroom. He took the squirming man-boy into that room and tossed him on the bed.

Ben looked up at him with a shocked expression as Joshua ripped open his shirt, toed off his cowboy boots, and then went for his belt.

“You’re gonna feel mighty overdressed in about ten seconds,” Joshua told him. “So you’d best get a move on.”

“Wh—what are you doin’, Joshua? You ain’t gay!”

Joshua didn’t bother to answer. He just dropped his denims, shoving his white cotton briefs down along with them, and let Ben get a good gander at how not gay he was.

Ben shut up then, watching as Joshua separated himself from every last stitch of clothing. Ben’s eyes were the size of a harvest moon, and he didn’t move a hair till Joshua was completely naked. Anger and desire mingled in Joshua’s blood, along with a need to stake his claim, to make Ben his without any wiggle room for doubt. All of that had Joshua hard as an iron spike, and he stood there a moment, unashamed, just looking at Ben, letting the boy see his intent. He took a step toward the bed.

Suddenly, Ben scrambled up and ran for the door, purely panicked.

Joshua crossed the room in two strides and managed to get a hand on the door and push it shut just as Ben was opening it. Ben slumped against the wood, his back to Joshua. He was shaking.

Joshua figured Ben was having what you might call a defining moment. To let a man have him, to let Joshua have him, was a big deal. It was maybe the biggest thing Ben had ever done. In those videos, Ben could pretend it was for the money, could do it “for the fans.” He could do it with those false-named boys who also swore they weren’t gay. They joked about it afterward, probably, not meeting each other’s eyes. Hell, maybe most of ’em *were* as straight as they claimed to be. For ten thousand dollars, most men’d screw a light socket.

But this.... There were no cameras and no money on the table now, just them. And Joshua was no nameless boy. He was a man Ben had idolized since his youth, and them having sex would mean something. Maybe it would mean more than Ben could stomach right now, when he was so determined to run away from everything that smelled like home.

Ben’s hands were on the door, palms flat, and slowly Joshua reached out, so slowly, and loosely held one wrist, and then the other. He rubbed his thumbs along the insides, where the thin skin didn’t hide the pulsing veins, just rubbed gently and made soft hushing sounds until Ben’s shaking stilled.

His breathing slowed and then grew harsh again for another reason altogether.

Joshua pressed in closer, letting Ben just barely feel him along his back, with only Ben's soft clothes between them. He felt the tension between them stretch unbearably thin, but he softly nuzzled Ben's nape, nothing more. He waited, even though it liked to kill him to do so with Ben right there in front of him like that, all of Ben, so solid and real and smelling like a warm summer night.

Joshua could hear their breathing in the room. He felt his own blood singing, and Ben's as it pulsed in shuddering staggers in his wrists.

Until, with a low moan, Ben turned in Joshua's arms, pulled him in, and kissed him.

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BEN HAD thought he was experienced at sex. Hell, he was a *porn star*. Most of the time he was right proud of that, winking at waiters or giving women on the street a sly smile and thinking *I am a sex god*.

But truth be told, in his personal life, he'd only had sex with a couple of girls back home and a couple of girls here in Vegas when the gang had gone out to party. And the boys... that was only on camera and, yeah, all right, one furtive blowjob after hours given to a guy who pretended it hadn't happened the next day. But this....

Ben had never felt anything like this.

Joshua was large and warm and sure, somehow managing to be both passionate and slow at the same time. He kissed like it was the morning, noon, and night of sex, and there was no hurry to get anyplace else. Ben reckoned he could even come like this, given enough time, or maybe he'd just expire out of sheer want, with Joshua's mouth sucking lightly at his, Joshua's tongue stroking him in short, luxurious caresses, and Joshua's body so solid and hard against his. Joshua's hands cupped him confidently, one behind his head and one at the small of his back, and didn't move.

Ben felt safe. He felt cherished by this *man*, this older, experienced man who really seemed to want him, the real him, Ben Rivers. He felt.... God, he felt horny as hell.

Ben suddenly remembered that he had hands and that Joshua Braintree, the man who had starred in Ben's own personal wet dreams for years, was pressed against him, stark naked.

With a moan, Ben let go of his death grip on Joshua's back and ran his hands up the smooth planes, up to those weight-of-the-world shoulders. He felt their wide, muscled contours greedily and then ran his fingers down, down (*God, his skin was soft*) to that solid waist, down to spread across the firm curves of that ass.

That ass. Joshua had apparently noticed the way Ben had stared at that ass. He couldn't help it. Growing up, Joshua had been in and out of Ben's house as often as the family dog, all rangy and firm, with that deep voice and deeper sense of quiet and calm. Ben had mooned over Joshua for years, and that was part of why he'd done the porn thing. He figured he was never going to have Joshua, thought he was as straight as a fence post, and Ben had needed to get away from all of that, to explore what he might really want out in the real world. God knows, it wasn't something he could explore as Ben Rivers of Clyde's Corner.

Ben gripped that ass firmly now (*Lord, thank you for answering my boyhood prayer*) and tried to push Joshua back toward the bed. Joshua's cock was big and hard against his nylon shorts, and Ben wriggled into it impatiently. He pulled his mouth away.

"You gonna just kiss me all day long, or do ya know how to use that thing?"

Joshua groaned and laughed at the same time. He spun Ben around by his hips and tossed him onto the bed again. Within seconds, he had Ben's shorts stripped off and his T-shirt over his head.

"Damn! Glad I never went up against you in calf ropin'," Ben said breathlessly.

Joshua snorted and crawled over him on all fours, his eyes all dark and sexy as hell. Ben shivered.

"What do you want?" Joshua asked him, studying Ben's face.

Ben reached up to all that smooth skin and tried to pull Joshua down on top of him. He might as well have been trying to push a boulder. So Ben arched up his hips, which proved just as unsatisfying with Joshua braced above him like that.

"Joshua."

"Tell me, Ben."

Ben didn't want to. How could he put into words what he wanted from Joshua? There weren't enough words in the dictionary, or time left in his life to say them, even if he could sort out what he wanted exactly, and he couldn't. So instead, feeling devious, he slid his arm under Joshua's and found his cock, hard and overripe and moist at the head, hanging below his belly. Ben teased and stroked it, looking up into Joshua's face. Joshua shut

his eyes for a moment and made a strangled sound deep in his chest. He looked at Ben again, and Ben stroked faster.

It was the weirdest sensation. It almost felt to Ben like he was touching himself. Every stroke he made brought him closer and closer to coming—just knowing that it was Joshua he was touching, feeling the sexy-as-hell heft and weight of him at last, seeing the pleasure in those soulful brown eyes, the jaw clenched in an effort at control. *God, yes.*

“This what you want?” Joshua gritted out. “Want me to come like this?”

“No,” Ben said, stopping at once. It was good, but it wasn’t what he wanted.

“Tell me.”

For such a quiet man, Joshua was being awfully insistent on talking, Ben thought, annoyed. But Joshua nuzzled into Ben’s neck, sucking lightly and licking there, like a baby calf suckling at its mother. And maybe it was the love-soaked lust that spiked through Ben at the sensation, or maybe it was the fact that Joshua wasn’t looking at him anymore, but Ben found the words.

“Just hold me,” Ben said, which wasn’t what he’d thought he was going to say. He’d thought he was going to say *Everything, I want it all*. Or maybe *I want you inside me*, because he did, or even *Fuck me*, just to be sassy. But once he’d said the words, they seemed just right.

This wasn’t for the cameras. They didn’t have to do *A*, then *B*, then *C*, then *D* with the perfect come shot at the end. This was just him and Joshua, and Ben wanted—*God*, he just wanted it to be real.

Joshua seemed to understand. He lay down next to Ben on his left side and tucked Ben into his chest. Then he reached down with a big, callused hand and wrapped it around them both.

Ben sighed. *Yes*. Joshua kissed him again, and it was like drowning in fire, all the cells of his body awake and yearning at the same time, for the same thing. No, nothing had ever felt like this, love and lust all wound around each other like mating snakes, hearts and bodies in a sort of mutual frenzy. Even the way Joshua’s cock felt against him was right—they were about the same size, and what parts of Ben’s shaft weren’t stroked by Joshua’s hand were perfectly sliding against the root of him, the undersides

of both heads rubbing just right against each other, in that most sensitive spot, over and over.

Ben couldn't stifle a cry. Nothing anyone had ever done to him had felt as good as this, and this was just... hell, this was nothing. So why did it feel like everything?

Joshua kissed Ben deeper when he cried out and quickened the pace. His hand was moving, that confident grip, and their hips were moving too, faster and faster. And Ben felt his orgasm approaching like a pickup on a country road doing eighty miles an hour.

"Close," he gasped, pulling his mouth away.

Joshua grunted and crushed their mouths together again, and Ben came like that, making animal sounds into Joshua's mouth. He felt Joshua shudder and pulse against him even as he was still shaking.

BEN WENT to fetch a towel to clean them off. And then Joshua pulled him back into bed and cuddled Ben against his chest. Joshua felt a sense of peace he hadn't felt in days, not since he'd heard about the blowout in Nora's Diner. It was gonna be all right.

He felt a tiny catch of doubt. Wasn't it?

"Come home, Ben," Joshua said, gripping Ben's arm a little bit tighter.

"And then what?" Ben asked quietly.

"What'd ya mean?"

"I mean, what's gonna happen if I do? You and me gonna sneak around and do this on the side once in a while?"

Joshua thought about it. "More'n once in a while," he teased.

But Ben shook his head and pulled away. He sat up. His face was serious as he thought it over.

"If I am.... No, I guess I can't argue about it. I'm *gay*."

"Okay," Joshua said carefully.

"And *if* I'm gay, then I'm gonna be that. I don't want to be sneakin' around and hidin' it."

Joshua frowned. "Ain't nobody's business."

Ben picked at the sheet, not meeting Joshua's eyes. "But *you* hide it. Lord, Joshua. I had no idea, and nobody knows you as good as Chet and me."

Joshua tried to find the right words to explain how things were—how they'd always been. "It's like... prairie dogs."

Ben quirked an eyebrow at him.

"You see the holes. 'N' you know the dogs are around, even if you don't see the dogs themselves."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"Gay. Cowboys. They're there. Like a lot of single cowboys, they go into Billings once a month, only they ain't there to see women. There's no point in flingin' yourself around in public, 's all."

Ben looked confused. "But why would you wanna do that?"

"Do what?"

"Only have what you really want once a month? Go around actin' like somethin' you're not?"

Joshua grunted. "Easier, 's all. People have fixed notions. No point buckin' 'em."

Ben looked forlorn. "I shouldn't have to choose between doin' the job I love, and bein' in the place I love, and bein' with the *person* I love." He sighed and looked Joshua in the eye. "But I reckon I do. I can't go back there. It's not just the porn. I—I have to be myself, live out loud. And I have to be able to be proud of what I done and who I am. And I can't be that in Clyde's Corner. Folks there will never accept me."

Joshua felt a cold numbness in his chest as the words sank in. He could see in Ben's eyes that he meant it. Joshua had thought them making love would change everything, that all he had to do was stake his claim. Now he realized it wasn't so. Point of fact, it might have just made things worse. Because if he couldn't have Ben now, it would kill him.

He sat up and took Ben's hands in his. "Do you hafta live *quite* so loud?"

Ben nodded seriously. "That's who I am, hoss."

Joshua sighed. That simply wasn't possible, and that was okay. It was worth what you had to give up, to live like they lived. But how could he make Ben see that? He struggled to find the words.

Ben studied his face, and he must have read Joshua's mind anyhow, because his eyes grew bright with tears.

"It's okay. I know you came all this way. And I—I can't hardly believe that you're really gay and that you want me and all. And I—" His voice broke. "I guess you're just about everything *I* ever wanted. But... I ain't no prairie dog, Joshua. That just ain't me. Just like you're you, and you ain't never gonna change or leave Clyde's Corner. So please, go home now before you break my heart."

"Goddamn it, Ben."

But Ben got out of bed quickly, went into the bathroom, and locked the door.

Joshua lay on the bed for ten minutes, trying to think of what else to say or do to make Ben understand. There was just a way certain things had to be. And he couldn't see how it could be any different, not when he thought about Clyde's Corner and his life there, the ranch, the horses that needed him, and his program with the kids. His life was like a rushing stream, and he knew every rock and twist and turn that made it up. It had so much momentum that it seemed an impossible thing to try to up and reroute it. To make it into, say, a little pond instead. The Joshua Braintree folks knew back home—he was a good cowboy, a good rancher, and a good man. He liked that man. He didn't know how to be someone else.

So finally he got up, put on his clothes, and left the apartment.

His chest was so tight he could hardly catch his breath as he drove down the freeway. And for the first time in his life, Joshua knew what true heartache felt like. It was much worse than it sounded. It felt like someone had taken a big old pair of shears and cut away part of his soul—maybe a third of it—and he was left limping around with what was left. And what that missing piece of his soul contained was Ben—a big part of his life that *should have been* and now never would be, a road block on a major artery of his life, shut down before it even started.

As he got on the plane, he felt like he'd failed Chet and Fred, failed Ben, and failed himself too. But he was goddamned if he knew how to fix it.

CLYDE'S CORNER did not feel the same when Joshua got home to it. It seemed smaller and dimmer now—a bit like a prize horse he'd paid good money for only to discover it had colic.

His home, Muddy River Ranch, was big and open and beautiful... and empty.

Joshua didn't much know what to do with his heartache, so he worked. He was up before dawn, and he worked till dark. He spent as much time with the horses as he could. In the evenings he watched the news, had three or four shots of whiskey, and went to bed by eight o'clock.

A couple of times, when he first got home, he logged on to B2B, unable to help himself. On their blog he saw some candid snapshots of "the gang" out to dinner or horsing around at the pool. Ben was in those shots of beautiful boys, and he smiled. The resolution wasn't good enough for Joshua to tell if the smile reached his eyes or not.

Mostly, Joshua kept looking to see if there was a new Caleb video up. He wasn't sure why it mattered so much, but it did. Each time it wasn't there, it felt like a crushing weight had been lifted off his chest, and he could breathe a mite better. But then the worry would just start building again.

Of course, he figured Ben would keep filming. It was the high-paying job he'd moved to Vegas for, after all. But after Joshua himself had touched Ben and kissed him, the thought of anyone else doing it was enough to make him want to take out his dad's old shotgun and blow a hole in something. So after a few days of this torment, he deleted his Web history, determined never to go back to the site again.

It was better not to know.

Sometimes he told himself that Ben would come to see reason, that he'd come home. And sometimes, Joshua knew better.

November came, and they got their grain delivery for the winter. He and Charlie and a hired man spent the first few weeks of November checking fences. The primary money-maker for Muddy River Ranch was still the cattle operation his daddy had founded. They raised Belted Galloway and Randall Blue Lineback for sale as breeding stock. They had to keep the herds separate, and there were miles of fence to maintain. Heavy snow could take out a whole section if there was a weak spot and you didn't know it was there. And a fence with a section down was just about useless.

Charlie worried and fussed at him like an old mother hen.

"I swear to God, Boss," he said one day. "Ya ain't never been a talker, but lately, if ya'd a had to rub two words together to make a fire, you'd a done froze to death."

Joshua just grunted.

"And yer clothes are startin' to hang on ya like a scarecrow. Ya ain't eatin' enough."

"I'm fine," Joshua said.

Charlie rubbed his forehead. "I'm plumb worried. You'd best go see a doctor. Losin' weight like that.... It could be the cancer. Ya need to be checked out."

"Christ on a crutch, I ain't got cancer," Joshua growled. "Now just secure that dang post, would ya?"

ONE SATURDAY, Joshua drove into town to the hardware store and overheard Henry Atkins having an argument with Margaret Reynolds in the parking lot. It sounded like it was about Margaret's cattle brand for the Red Poppy Ranch again, which Margaret's family had had since the dawn of time, and which Henry had later decided was too much like a logo some fancy pants in Chicago had designed for him. He'd even sued her over it—and lost. Now he was giving her more grief.

Henry was Joshua's age, and he'd been a big bully for as long as Joshua could remember. Course it didn't help that his parents were the meanest rednecks in the county. Henry's icy-blue eyes were piercing and arrogant, and his black hair and beard were wild as a mountain man's. He leaned toward Margaret, trying to use his size to intimidate her.

Joshua snapped. In a blinding rage, he stormed across the parking lot, grabbed Henry's arm, and planted a right hook across his jaw. He had just enough sanity left to check the force of the blow, but it was still a hard hit. Henry, all 250 pounds of beard and blubber, went down with a cry. He lay on the asphalt looking up at Joshua as though he was stone-cold mental—which was a pert fair assessment.

“Joshua Braintree!” Margaret cried in shock.

“What the hell's the matter with you?” Henry managed, or something that sounded a bit like it through all the quivering. He spat blood.

Joshua turned around, got in his truck, and drove home.

Sheriff Taylor pulled up about an hour later. Joshua nodded him inside and fixed him a cup of coffee.

“So you gonna tell me what in the Sam Hill possessed you?” the sheriff asked. “You know you can't just go around assaultin' people. It's a crime.”

Joshua nodded. “Reckon you'll arrest me.”

Sheriff Taylor rolled his eyes at the ceiling. “Well, firstly, you've never been in trouble before, so I'm inclined to be lenient. And secondly—what the hell did Henry do this time?”

Joshua shook his head.

“Joshua?”

“Long time comin', 's all.”

The sheriff waited, looking at him patiently, but Joshua didn't say another word.

The sheriff sighed. “I think Henry's more terrified of you than anything at the moment. I can probably get him to drop the charges. But I'd sure like to know what this is all about. Not that Henry don't give people enough reason to hold a grudge, but not many punch him in the face.”

Joshua looked down at his hands. “Won't happen again, Sheriff.”

Henry Atkins did not press charges.

THE SECOND week of November, Fred called and invited Joshua to Sunday dinner. Joshua suspected it had something to do with Charlie and his big mouth, just like Charlie had started bringing by pies and cakes that his wife

had baked. But he went, because he knew Fred was struggling too with Ben gone, and he could use the company.

They didn't say a lot that Sunday afternoon. They sat on the porch after dinner, and Fred talked about the weather and the most recent news from Chet. He handed over the letters Ben had written him, three of them so far. Fred never had taken to e-mail, so Ben had written him longhand. They were bright, chatty letters that said a whole lot of nothing.

Joshua didn't comment on 'em, but he read each letter, over and over. He held them in one hand, sitting there on the porch, and pretended he wasn't letting his eyes drift to the neat print, time and again, while Fred talked about something else.

Clyde's Corner just wouldn't understand me, each letter said, somewhere in the flow of words. And on the last one, *I ain't been doing the videos so much lately*.

Ben never once mentioned Joshua.

Joshua drove home that afternoon with Ben's scribble scorched across his brain like a brand. *I ain't been doing the videos so much lately*.

For the first time in a few weeks, Joshua logged on to B2B, dreading it yet unable to help himself. He was sweating, his hand barely able to operate the mouse. The "latest videos" page loaded. He held his breath.

There wasn't a new Caleb video. The last one was dated before Joshua's trip to Vegas.

Joshua let out a sigh that sounded like the haunting cry of something lost in the wilderness. He shut down his computer.

God, he just wanted Ben.

AT THANKSGIVING Joshua and Fred decided to save themselves a load of hassle and go to Nora's Diner. She always served turkey with all the trimmings on Thanksgiving Day for folks who had no place better to go.

As they pulled up in front of the diner, it sure was a pretty picture. The first snow of winter had come, leaving a white inch of powder all over town. Main Street had been decorated the day before Thanksgiving, as always, and live branches of long-needled pine wove around the town's old-fashioned black iron lampposts. Red bows were affixed to the top of each garland. A Christmas tree sat in front of the town hall, already decorated,

but waiting to be lit in a ceremony that happened every year the day after Thanksgiving. And there was a banner hung over the street that said Clyde Corner Christmas Dance Dec 23 Macy's Park.

It was home, and it was beautiful. But it hit Joshua that Christmas was coming. Christmas was coming, and he wouldn't be with Ben, not this Christmas and probably not any other Christmas either. He swallowed against a burning ache in his throat.

Fred had come up to him at some point and laid a hand on his arm. "Hey, did I tell you that I got a letter from Chet? He's got a month's leave, and he'll be home for Christmas."

"That right?" Joshua smiled at the old man. "That's mighty good news." He hesitated. "Will Ben come home to see 'im?"

Fred's smile faltered. "Ben seems... real determined not to come back. I reckon he's still embarrassed about Henry tellin' everyone in town about those videos. Chet's gonna fly out to Vegas after Christmas. I dunno.... I may go too."

Joshua nodded, looking away. He hadn't thought he had any unbroken space left on his heart, but he felt it crack all the same.

Fred squeezed his arm. "Come on. I've got a real hankerin' for that turkey."

NORA'S TURKEY looked and smelled mighty fine. Fred attacked it voraciously, and Joshua tried to put up a good show. But all he could think about was what Fred had said—that Ben didn't wanna come back, not even for Christmas, not even if Chet was gonna be here.

The more he thought about it, the worse Joshua felt. Ben wouldn't come back to Clyde's Corner, not ever. Joshua hadn't realized he'd been holding out so much hope. His gut twisted like someone had turned his stomach inside out, acid rose in his throat, and his hands got hot and damp. He picked at his food, and when Fred excused himself to use the little boy's room, he signaled Nora to come take his plate away so he could pretend he'd eaten it.

She took one look at all the leftover food and slipped into the booth across from him. She put the round coffeepot, which was always attached to her hand like a catcher's mitt, on the table and gave him a grim look.

“Honey, you have *got* to get over this thing. Is it love or money?”

Joshua huffed.

“I ain’t heard of your ranch bein’ in trouble,” Nora mused. “And folks love to gossip when the bigwigs are bloodied. So I’m guessin’ it’s love. Damn, but that bitch can be cruel.”

Joshua smiled wryly in agreement.

Janelle, a pretty teenage girl who had been a fixture at Nora’s for the past three years, came over to snag the coffeepot.

“I got it,” she told Nora with a wink. “You go on and sit a spell.” Janelle went off, looking exceedingly capable.

Nora sighed. “I hate to sound like my mother, but can’t you eat a bit more of this? There are children starvin’ in Ohio, you know.”

Joshua frowned at the plate and then shook his head. No, he really couldn’t.

Nora got up. “All right, hon. But you’ve about played out that gloomy Gus routine. Come Saturday, you and me are gonna have ourselves a come-to-Jesus meetin’.”

Knowing Nora, she meant it.

THE SATURDAY after Thanksgiving was the last session of their fall riding class. The kids were busy with other things come Christmastime, and the weather was getting colder than a snowman’s pecker anyhow. There wouldn’t be another class now till spring. Maybe by then Joshua would have patched his heart up enough so it didn’t ache quite so bad all the time and he wouldn’t have to fake every smile.

Charlie was taking the Reston boys and the Carters out on a trail ride. Joshua would have gone, only the Carter parents were going along, and they were excellent riders. And Joshua had just one last chance with Lily Samuels. Nora had begged off too—determined to speak to Joshua alone, if he was any judge of that vulture-ish look in her eye.

Nope, there was no doubt that Nora was circling the corpse.

“Come on now,” Joshua said gently. He lifted Lily up and put her on the back of Jasmine, who stood waiting with all the enthusiasm of a sack of potatoes. “Hold on,” he told her.

Lily held the reins limply in one hand and the pommel in the other. Joshua led her around the ring. He felt plumb awful that this was as far as he'd gotten the little girl in seven long weeks. But her heart just wasn't in it. Even now, her chin was on her chest, and her lips stuck out in a pout. She was miserable.

Joshua rubbed his eyes tiredly.

Nora, walking at his side, chuckled. "It's just like lookin' in a mirror, ain't it?"

Joshua turned his head to look at her in surprise. "Huh?"

Nora nodded at Lily. "You've looked like that since, oh, October or so."

"I ain't that bad."

"No, sir, you're worse. You just don't see it."

Joshua didn't answer. He kept walking Jasmine around nice and slow.

"You got to talk to somebody, Joshua," Nora said. "And I reckon I'm your best option. I'll even waive my consultin' fees long as you give me your Boy Scout pledge to be honest, truthful, and brave."

Joshua snorted.

"We already established that it ain't money. What happened? You set your cap on someone who's married or somethin'?"

"Nope." Joshua tried to change the subject. "How's the diner business?"

Nora sighed. "You're slipperier than a greased pig, cowboy. The *diner business*, since you asked, is fine and dandy. Or it would be if I didn't keep losin' all my best help. Janelle's been accepted to UM Helena. She'll be the fourth solid worker I've lost since I started."

"Sorry," Joshua said, and he was. He liked Janelle.

"I'm gonna miss that girl like a house afire," Nora said ruefully. "How's a small town supposed to survive when all their best and brightest run away?"

Joshua stopped walking Jasmine as a surge of sharp-toothed misery shot through him. Damn Nora. He marveled at how easily she'd found his sore spot and dug her nails right the hell into it.

"Tracey Graham, Shelly Debar, Martin Rivalak..." Nora was saying. She'd stopped right along with him but was caught up in her own thoughts.

“Them and a dozen more last year. I swear it’s like this town is a water bucket full of holes.” Nora shook her head in disgust.

“Ben Rivers,” Joshua said.

“And Ben. Lord, Ben was a good boy, even if he did get into that video sex thing. Can’t say as I blame him. What a cutie-patootie! You know, he was one I thought’d stick. He was always so into all that cowboy stuff.”

Joshua just looked at her and waited.

Nora frowned in confusion. Then her brow cleared, and she got a real sad look in her eyes. “Oh. Oh, hell. It’s *Ben*.”

Joshua blinked hard and fast as his eyes got hot. He started walking Jasmine again. Nora laid her hand on his arm.

“I shoulda known. This all started right when Ben left town. I’m so sorry, Joshua.”

He didn’t say anything.

“But honey, can’t you just go get that boy and bring him home?”

Joshua looked at her, surprised. “You’d be okay with that?”

Nora laughed. “Well, what the good goddamn hell does that matter? It’s your life, nobody else’s. But in point of fact, yes, I’d be okay with it. Shit on a soap, Joshua. I ain’t *that* old and narrow-minded. I did live a spell in Minneapolis, you know.”

“Then you’re the only one.” Joshua looked into Jasmine’s soft brown eyes and petted her nose, just to feel something good under his hands. He hesitated. “I... I got the horses and the kids to think about. If folks knew....”

Nora harrumphed. “Well, pardon me, but that load stinks worse than half the patties in your pasture. Joshua, your daddy, at the age of fifty-five, met a woman he was crazy about, and two months later he turned the ranch over to you and moved to Florida.”

Joshua frowned. He didn’t see the connection.

“Do you think it was easy for him to leave everything he’d ever known? Give up this place, and bein’ close to you? He did it because when you love someone, really and truly, that becomes the most important thing. So important that you just—you work out the rest, no matter what.”

Joshua’s scowl deepened. God, he hated change. Why couldn’t things just stay the way they were? Only he reckoned things had never been the way they oughta be—him and Ben, together, here on this ranch.

And for a moment, Nora's blunt words gave him a spark of hope, like maybe it could be that simple. Then he remembered that Ben didn't want to come back to Clyde's Corner anyhow. He'd made that clear. Joshua started to open his mouth to tell Nora so, when he was interrupted.

"Joshua?" came a tiny voice.

"What, Lily girl?"

"Can I get down now and maybe go say hi to Valfront?"

Joshua took a deep breath, brought back to what he owed this little girl. Namely, *fun*, which he'd done a piss poor job of providing thus far. He felt terrible.

He handed Jasmine's reins to Nora. "Tell you what, I'll go bring him out here to say hi."

Joshua went into the stables and saddled Valmont. He was downright huge for a horse, but Joshua had been working with him for nearly two months now, and he'd calmed down a lot. Whereas before he might have saddled nice as you please, then suddenly bucked a rider off, or taken off at a gallop, trying to drag someone to their death, there was no sign of that in him now. Joshua's patience had calmed the horse, and the bond they'd formed was mutual—Joshua was good to Valmont, so Valmont wanted to please Joshua.

Joshua clicked his mouth and led Valmont out to the riding arena. He really was a spectacular animal, pure white, with blue eyes and a little bit of gold in his mane. Joshua led him over to Lily, who was still seated on Jasmine's back.

With wonder, Lily reached out her hand, and Valmont nudged his nose under it, nickering at her softly.

"I don't think he likes me," Lily said, her constant refrain for these past weeks.

"He likes ya," Joshua said. "He told me so when he nickered just now. Wanna ride 'im with me?"

Lily was torn. She looked at Valmont with hopeless love, but her lip trembled. Joshua got up onto Valmont's back and held out his arms. "Come on."

Lily hesitated just a moment, then reached up. Nora helped swing the little girl from Jasmine's back onto the saddle in front of Joshua, where she snuggled in her butt and sat up straight, tense with excitement.

“Ready?” Joshua asked.

Lily nodded fervently.

Joshua squeezed his legs a tad, and Valmont took off at a slow pace. Joshua could feel the excitement radiating off Lily in waves as they paced the magnificent horse around the arena.

She turned her head to look up at Joshua, and her face was glowing. She wore the biggest grin he’d ever seen, like she’d just been made prom princess and rodeo queen all rolled into one.

“He likes me!” Lily said joyfully.

Joshua smiled down at her, feeling a ray of sunshine pierce his moody old heart. At last, he’d done something right for the munchkin.

And as he rode Lily around the arena, something struck him.

I can't come back to Clyde's Corner because they don't want me.

Well, shit.

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THEY HELD the Clyde's Corner Christmas meeting on the first Saturday of December. It was a planning session for the Christmas Dance—who'd be bringing chairs, who'd string up the lights, who was donating what door prizes and what dishes for the buffet, and a dozen other urgent details. The answers to those questions pretty much went the same way every year, since the same people volunteered, and there hadn't been an original idea since 1921.

Well. Folks liked Christmas traditional like that.

The bribe for attending this meeting was a town Christmas party, complete with baked goods from the ladies, pies from Nora's, hot chocolate, and Bill Lamont's hard cider (and that *was* almost worth showing up for). The other reason to attend was that, if you didn't, you were likely to find your name on something you didn't want to do—like trash duty or drunk patrol.

No one wanted to be on drunk patrol, because then you couldn't get drunk.

Joshua never went to the Christmas meeting, because it wasn't his sorta thing. And anyhow, he did the same job for the dance every year. He brought a team of horses decked out in jingle bells. If there was snow, he hitched 'em to a massive old red sleigh that spent most of the year parked at the town fire hall. If there wasn't snow, then he brought an old hay wagon of his own. During the children's hour, he gave rides. Chet and Ben used to help him out with that. And usually, by the time the kiddies went home and the band started, Joshua would excuse himself to take the horses back to the ranch. Every year, Chet tried to talk him into coming back for the dance. Once in a while, Joshua did.

But that wasn't how it was last year, because last year Chet had been in Afghanistan, and it had just been him and Ben on the sleigh. And that wasn't how it was this year, because this year, Joshua Braintree showed up at the Christmas meeting.

He sat in the middle of the chairs they'd set up in the town hall. The Temple family, being good Catholics, took up nine chairs to the left of him, and a very large farmer named Meyers took up two chairs on his right. He listened to a lot of talk about buying new bulbs for the light strings and using town funds for the cider and other stuff he didn't give a hoot about. And all the while, Joshua's arms were folded, and his stomach was in so many knots he could have started his own tack shop. He was sweating so bad, the back of his shirt got damp, and he had to wipe his upper lip on his sleeve every few minutes or so.

And finally, when Joshua didn't think his nerves could take it anymore, Mayor Thomas asked if there was any new business. From the way he said it, and the way everyone was eyeing the table of goodies like it was a row of cancan girls and they were a pack of randy sailors, nobody expected there to be any.

But Joshua stood up. "I got somethin' to say." His voice sounded funny and hollow in his own ears.

Mayor Thomas looked at him with surprise. "Huh. Is that right? Well go on, Joshua. You've got the floor."

But Joshua wasn't content to stand in the middle of the chairs like that. If you were gonna do something, you might as well do it right. He made his way past the knees in his path to the center aisle, then went and took the podium.

He looked out at a sea of faces, mostly blank or mildly perplexed. But at least people seemed to be listening.

Joshua cleared his throat. "You all know we're losing a lot of younger folks to the city. Not too many teenagers want to work as hard as you gotta to be a cowboy or run a ranch."

A few adults nodded. A few teenagers rolled their eyes.

"Ben Rivers done left us, even though he was the finest cowboy we've seen come up round here in a dog's age."

A few people looked uncomfortable, but a few more nodded in agreement. These people knew Ben.

"Now, I'd like to convince Ben to come home where he belongs. But he's of a mind that you all won't want 'im here. I'd like to be able to tell him that ain't so. But see, there's three things you need to be able to accept about Ben...."

Joshua took a deep breath. His heart was beating so fast he thought he might pass out, like one of those fainting goats that just couldn't take an ounce of excitement.

"The first is, he's been filmin' some porn in Vegas. It pays a hell of a lot of money, and I guess he didn't figure anyone would even know about it."

There were a few murmurs and a few pinched faces, but mostly, this wasn't news.

"The second thing is... he's filmed that stuff with boys, and I reckon he kind of runs on that side of the pasture. So there's that."

The murmurs stopped abruptly.

"And the third thing is—well, it's my intention to court him and hopefully get him to live and ranch with me. So y'all will have a couple of homos in the area. If any of you got a problem with that, you can just say it to my face right now."

Joshua looked out into a herd of shocked faces. Mouths were agape and bodies were frozen. Old Mrs. Turner tapped her hearing aid as if it was acting up. It was so quiet you could hear the distant barking of the Jenkins' old mutt Hoover, and they lived over a mile away.

Yup. Deadly quiet.

"Reckon that's all I got to say." Joshua left the podium and walked straight down the center aisle and out the door.

JOSHUA WALKED to his truck, got in it, and started it. He paused for a moment, looking at the town hall doors. But no one came running out of the church yelling and screaming, or even just to stand and stare at him all frowny and demented like those kids in *Children of the Damned*. It was as still as a boneyard.

Joshua pulled out and started home.

Well. He'd done did it. And there was no taking it back now.

He rolled down the window and stuck his arm out. The two-lane road was dark, and the stars were bright. The night was cold, but that felt all right. Good, even.

He didn't feel anxious at all, he realized. Not anymore.

He felt free.

JOSHUA WAS nearly home when it occurred to him that maybe he shoulda told Fred first. Fred hadn't been at the meeting tonight, but he'd hear about it. No doubt.

Cursing himself for a fool, Joshua turned around and drove to Fred's place. He pulled up in front of the ranch house but didn't get out of the truck. He figured he might be in need of a quick getaway.

Fred came out drinking a beer. He came over to the window.

"Joshua?"

"Doc's been after ya to get that gallbladder out," Joshua said, by way of a greeting.

Fred looked at him like he'd gone mad. "I reckon. What's that got to do with the price of tea in China?"

"I think Christmas'd be a good time."

"You're fussin' at me about havin' my gallbladder out? At Christmas? Joshua, you must be drunker than a skunk."

"Nope."

"Well why on God's green earth would I wanna do that?"

Joshua looked Fred in the eye. "To get Ben home."

Fred looked back for a long moment, confusion and a reluctant knowing on his face, like maybe he was seeing something he had a suspicion was there, but he'd been hoping otherwise all the same. "Is there somethin' you came here to get off your chest, Joshua Braintree?"

"Yup."

"Well, speak up; I'm listenin'."

Joshua licked his lips and looked out the windshield. "Ever seen me with a woman, Fred?"

Fred thought about it. "No, I can't say that I have."

Joshua grunted.

Fred thought about it for a bit, rubbing his face now and then and shaking his head, as if NASA had said the moon was green cheese, and he

knew he had to believe it, even if he didn't quite know how to make himself.

Finally he said, "What about Ben? How does he feel about it?"

"I reckon I botched it up pert bad down in Vegas," Joshua admitted. "Now he needs convincin'."

Fred shook his head. "My stars. Seems like I understand the world less and less every day. Why two fellas would wanna pair up when there's so many nice-looking women out there...."

Joshua didn't bother to answer.

Fred sighed. "Gallbladder."

"Yup."

"Do I actually have to *have* the surgery, or can I just *say* I'm a gonna?"

Joshua shrugged as if to say it wasn't his place to tell Fred how to mind his business.

"My stars," Fred repeated, shaking his head. He sounded slightly disgusted. "Have you spoken to Chet about this?"

"Nope."

"You'd best do that. Jaysus. Guess that explains why you been moonin' around like a lovesick calf. Had us worried half to death, you damn fool."

Joshua didn't deny it.

"Next time Chet calls, I'll tell him to ring your cell. He needs to hear this from you."

Joshua nodded. He didn't look forward to that conversation, but he knew he and Chet would survive it. Chet had a big heart.

"I want you to know, Fred.... If Ben'll let me, I'll be good to 'im."

Fred snorted. "Oh, for the love of Pete! He ain't my virgin daughter." He took a long drink of beer and grumbled. "First porn, now this. If I didn't like you so dang much, Joshua Braintree, I'd kick your fanny to Tulsa. I may decide to do it anyhow."

Joshua smiled. "Well, I reckon."

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WHEN JOSHUA got back to the ranch, Nora was waiting for him on the porch. He greeted her with a tip of his hat and held the door open for her.

“How’s about you get us some coffee so we can sit out here?” Nora said. “I’d like to pretend this is my view for ten minutes.”

So Joshua made them some coffee, and they sat on the old porch swing.

Nora was right. It was a sight worth staying bundled up for. The ranch was covered in a thin blanket of snow, and Charlie had put up the wreaths on the stable and the front of the house. The small white lights they left up around the stable all year long were lit up and shining against the snow, and the big sugar pine in the front yard was lit up too. For the first time, Joshua felt like Christmas might be coming after all.

“I s’pose you’d like to hear how it all imploded after you made that grand exit of yours,” Nora said.

Joshua grunted.

“Okay, then. Well, right away some of the real religious folks, like the Temples and the Montgomerys, they said they were not at all happy ’bout the idea. But then Jessica Temple said she reckoned that if you were gonna sin, better to do it in the open, and if you all wanted to live like a real committed couple, and not be carrying on all loose and all, then that was better than it might be.”

Joshua thumped his head back in the rocker and looked at the moon.

“Then Henry Atkins stood up and said that if he wanted to consort with homos, he’d live in the city.”

Joshua growled a little.

“Then Sheriff Taylor stood up and asked Henry how he’d known about Ben’s porn in the first place. Henry went into a long-winded story about a friend visiting him and recognizing Ben on the street—get this, his friend *the vice cop*—as if Henry had ever had a friend in his entire sorry

life. Sheriff Taylor just let him play that rope out. Then the sheriff reminded Henry that they'd confiscated his hard drive once for that logo dispute he'd had with the Red Poppy Ranch. So he knew damn well what Henry got up to on the Internet, and maybe he oughta think twice before he went throwin' stones at gay houses."

"No!" Joshua said, shocked.

"Swear t' God. Henry turned purple and stomped out right about then. He was followed by Linny Davis, who ran out sobbin'. She had her cap set on you in a big way, poor thing."

"I ain't said two words to her since high school."

"Yeah, well. She always did have more hope than chest."

"Then old Jenks stood up. You know how crazy he is about Old West history. He said cowboys humped each other all the time, back in the day, cause they were on the trail so long, and there weren't any women. And some of 'em even paired up for keeps, living together like two old bachelors—wink, wink—so he didn't see how we could get all uppity about it, like it weren't something real men did, when that was 'part of the history of the true West.'"

Joshua grunted.

"And Amy Wentworth said she wrote gay fan fiction for some TV show called *Supernova* or somethin', and that she already shipped you and Ben. Then Madge said all the arguing gave her a headache. And Bill said maybe *he* should go into porn, 'cause they likely didn't have headaches all the time. And about then Ike said 'better a good-looking boy like Ben than sheep.' And I swear that was aimed at someone in particular, I just know it, but I can't figure out who."

Joshua had a few ideas, but he didn't say them.

"Then folks started eatin', and that was that."

Nora paused to take a breath. "I never woulda guessed some good would come outta Jenks reading all them Western history books. But I think folks took what he said kinda serious. Like, if it was some modern laxitudiness comin' into town, that was one thing, but hell, if the old boys done it...."

Joshua grunted. "Nora, what's the gist of it?"

Nora patted his arm. "Joshua, you're a fine human being and good rancher, and most people have never heard you string more than three

words together in your life, so folks know this is important to you.

“The gist of it is, not everyone’s gonna be dancing at your weddin’, and I reckon you’ll lose a few customers. But no one’s gonna run you outta town, shoot your livestock, or spit on you at Mickey D’s. You bring Ben home, you two’ll be fine.”

Joshua shook his head. He should have felt relieved about that, but now a new concern was born, and it ate at him with sharp little teeth.

He looked down at his rough hands. They sure weren’t polished and fine like the boys of B2B.

“Now that I put my intentions out there, what if I can’t get Ben to come home? Or what if he comes home and he don’t want me? I’ll look like a fool.”

Nora eyed him up and down. “Honey, don’t take this the wrong way, but you are one seriously hot piece of sausage. Now that you’ve outed yourself, if Ben don’t take you up on it, we’re gonna have queer cowboys linin’ Main Street trying for their shot.” She snorted. “Hell, maybe we’ll start us a gay pride parade.”

Joshua could almost picture it. And suddenly, it didn’t seem like such a bad idea.

BEN GOT off the Greyhound bus and looked around the parking lot. His dad's truck was there, but Chet wasn't waiting for him in it like he was supposed to be. Ben put his bags in the back and looked around, but there was no sign of his brother or the keys. He checked his phone for messages, feeling disappointed. Chet knew what time his bus got in. Hell, it was weird enough that Chet wouldn't come pick him up at the airport in Billings, and that Ben had been told to take the bus to Clyde's Corner. But his dad's surgery was tomorrow, so maybe Chet was busy at the hospital. Then why hadn't he left the keys in the truck?

The bus left. Ben found himself alone, and he shivered. He'd missed the cold, crisp air of Montana, but his blood had lost the feel for it. He cautiously walked to the end of the parking lot so he could peek down Main Street. There was a good foot of snow on the sidewalks. Main Street looked so pretty in the dark, with the garlands and lights, and the big tree all lit up at Town Hall. The street stretched off farther toward the lights of Gibbon's Theater and Nora's Diner and, farther down, Macy's Park. There were a lot of people on the sidewalks tonight, just hanging out. And there were a slew of lights down there at the park and wafts of music too. Ben suddenly realized—it was the night of the Christmas dance.

His heart gave a miserable little thump like a dog too worn out to do more than shift its tail. He used to love the Christmas dance, all the decorations and the food, the music and the dancing. He danced with every girl in his class, and some of the older ladies too. He'd act all polite and gentlemanly, and they ate it up like cornbread and cream.

It hurt bad knowing he wouldn't be welcome there now, that people would stare and whisper. This was why he hadn't wanted to come home. He couldn't bear it. And he couldn't bear seeing Joshua, not when Joshua had just walked away from him without even *trying* to change his mind.

Ben had almost given in a dozen times in the past few weeks. He wasn't as proud as he'd sounded that day, and his will was weak. Being

Joshua's dirty little secret was better than not having Joshua at all. But then there was the whole town's opinion of him that kept him away. And besides, Ben didn't think he could stand it if Joshua only wanted him as an occasional fuck buddy. He'd said he'd watched the videos. Maybe he just thought Ben was easy. Maybe it had just been sex after all, even if Ben's heart wanted him to believe it was more.

That's when Ben saw the man on the horse coming down Main Street.

JOSHUA HAD decked Valmont out with a soft blanket in Christmas red, a black collar with jingle bells, and red ribbons plaited in his tail and mane (that had been all Nora). Against the horse's white hide, the red looked real festive. Joshua had decked himself out too, in a red button-down shirt under his heavy black wool coat and new jeans. He wore his best black cowboy hat.

He was so nervous as he rode up to the bus station that he thought he was gonna expire. But when he saw Ben standing there, watching him approach with wide, confused eyes, a kind of peace took root inside him and helped still his nerves a little. Ben looked seven kinds of wonderful standing there in his canvas and sheepskin jacket and looking very unsure of himself. But when Joshua drew closer, he saw Ben accept that it was him, and he saw the look of happiness and want that came over Ben's face, even if just for a moment.

Joshua stopped Valmont with a light tug on the reins and swung himself down.

He stood looking at Ben, and Ben looked at him.

"Where's Chet?" Ben asked.

"Wanted to fetch ya myself," Joshua said.

"Why?"

"Gonna take you to the dance," Joshua said with calm certainty.

Ben looked a little panicked and shook his head. "I can't. I don't wanna see anyone. They'll all be lookin' at me and.... I just can't, Joshua."

Ben started to back away, but Joshua reached out and took his hand and held it firm.

"Ben."

Ben took a deep breath and met Joshua's eyes.

“I missed ya. We all missed ya. Give us a chance.”

Joshua didn't know how Ben would answer. But he held Ben's hand warm and sure and gazed into his eyes, trying to let his calm love and certainty shine through. Ben's shoulders dropped as he relaxed a smidge.

“You really think it's okay?”

“Yup.”

“What about Chet?”

“He's there.” Joshua tilted his head toward the park.

Ben took a deep breath. “Okay. But if it's weird, I'm leavin'.” He started to walk toward the park, but Joshua didn't release his hand.

Joshua nodded at Valmont. “Said I'd come to fetch ya.”

He tugged Ben toward the horse and then got up himself, not releasing Ben's hand. He tugged again.

Ben looked befuddled. “You want me to ride with ya?”

“Yup.”

Ben looked around nervously. “Ain't that gonna look a little... queer?”

Joshua laughed, suddenly giddy. He wasn't sure why it seemed so funny, but it did. “Up, cowboy.”

Maybe it was the big grin on Joshua's face, but Ben relented and put his foot in the stirrup. He swung up to sit behind Joshua. With a soft mouth click, Joshua turned Valmont toward the park.

He could feel the moment when Ben realized how close they were, and how long it had been since they'd felt each other like that. Ben buried his face into the back of Joshua's coat, and his arms came around Joshua's waist. Joshua placed a hand on Ben's and rubbed his thumb gently across it. A wave of joy and desire swept through him. Just touching Ben again like this was worth everything.

“You didn't come back for me,” Ben said. It was muffled against Joshua's coat.

Joshua swallowed. “Reckon I had to work through some things. Ain't easy for an old dog to learn new tricks.”

“An old prairie dog?” Ben snorted.

Joshua smiled. “Yup. Look, Ben.”

Ben looked up as they rode into the heart of town. Couples and families were standing along the sidewalk, here and there, watching them

approach. Ben drew a breath.

“Joshua, there are *gay men on Main Street*.”

“Yup.”

Joshua tipped his hat to Sammy and Dale, who’d come over from Billings. They waved and smiled at Ben. Dale had his arm slung over Sammy’s shoulder, and they were decked out in their cowboy bar finest. A bit farther down were the Hernandez brothers. Both twins were gay, and both held hands with their respective twink dates. And then they passed Emmanuel and Rodger, with their two adopted kids. The family waved happily.

Joshua felt a surge of pure gratitude to Sammy for pulling the small cluster of support together. They were all men Joshua knew from The Loft in Billings, and it was real good of them to come to Clyde’s Corner to help make Ben feel more comfortable.

Ben, hell. To make *Joshua* feel more comfortable.

“Holy shit,” Ben said softly. Joshua held Ben’s arm more firmly and turned his head to look at him. Ben’s eyes were wide, and they shone a little too bright in the glow of the Christmas lights. “You did this?” he whispered.

“Yup.”

“So... the whole town knows? I mean... about me? Us?”

“Yup.”

Ben sniffed. “Um... okay.”

He sounded like he didn’t know what the hell to think or how bad it might be, or if Joshua had done the best thing ever in the history of the world, or screwed up on a run-the-entire-herd-off-a-cliff kinda scale. Frankly, Joshua wasn’t entirely sure himself. But he slipped his fingers through Ben’s and squeezed.

AT THE park Joshua hopped down and helped Ben dismount. He tied Valmont’s reins to a lamppost while Ben stood and shook a little, from the cold and from feeling all discombobulated.

Nora, looking festive in a red boiled-wool coat and an ivy-covered headband, came up to Ben, beaming. She gave him a hug.

“Welcome home, Ben. It’s so good to see you.”

Ben hugged her back, hard. “Thanks, Nora.”

He held her for a long time, kind of like a lifeline. And by the time Ben let her loose, there was a line of people waiting to say hello. The mayor and his wife shook Ben's hand and then Sheriff Taylor, and then Linny Davis, in what appeared to be a heartfelt example of being a gracious loser. Chet was there, looking all dignified and handsome in his uniform. He swung Ben around like a lasso and made it clear he wasn't mad none. And Fred hugged Ben too, looking a little shamefaced at not actually being in the hospital.

By then Sammy and Dale and the other cowboys from Billings had arrived at the park, and everyone set to dancing. Joshua stood back and watched it all while Ben gabbed.

He was aware that not everyone in Clyde's Corner was thrilled about what had happened to their Christmas dance. About half of the town ignored Joshua's friends, and the other half was being twice as friendly to make up for it. Bill Lamont went around pouring hard cider out of a jug and handing cups of it to the visitors with a loud welcome. Sheriff Taylor was introducing himself with hearty handshakes. And old Jenks was having a field day. He held long, rambling conversations with anyone he could get his hands on about the history of homosexuality in the Old West. Joshua overheard him asking Sammy if he'd ever had sex on a cattle run, and what kind of gay sex exactly was practical in a bedroll, because the history books weren't real particular on that point.

And then there was the cluster of teenage girls who stared at him and Ben all sappy like, as if they were a passel of puppies.

Well. Joshua reckoned it was a start. They all had a lot to get used to.

When Ben finally ran out of people to hug, Joshua walked up behind him and stood close.

"You okay?" Joshua asked.

Ben turned. His eyes were shining, and he had a goofy sort of smile on his face. He sniffed and swiped at his nose. "Thank you, Joshua. This is... this is the best Christmas present that anyone could ever have given me. Just knowin' that I can come home again when I want to, that folks don't hate me. It means a lot."

"I was kind of hopin' you'd feel that way," Joshua said.

They just looked at each other. Joshua was feeling a little nervous and shy, and it seemed like Ben was too. And then the band started playing "I

Remember You.”

Ben smiled so big he looked twelve years old again. “Dang, I love this song.”

Joshua held out his hand.

Ben glanced around nervously. “You know, one good thing about us comin’ out as a couple, at *the Christmas dance*—no one’s gonna be talking about the porn anymore.”

Joshua huffed a laugh. “I reckon that’s so.”

“You don’t have to prove anything more to me, you know,” Ben said, his face growing serious.

But Joshua didn’t drop his hand. Sammy and Dale danced by and smiled at them. Across the platform, the twins were two-stepping with their male dates as sweetly and chastely as you please.

And the song *was*, after all, Slim Whitman. Ben, being Ben, held up his chin boldly and placed his hand in Joshua’s.

Joshua thought he’d pulled off looking brave. But it took courage, a lot of it, to pull Ben into his arms and dance a slow two-step in front of the whole town. This was a side of himself that Joshua had always hidden, and it was kinda terrified of the light of day. He wasn’t the sort to put himself out there, let folks see his heart. But this was for Ben, and as Nora had pointed out, if Ben needed him to walk through town naked, well, then Joshua would. It was as simple as that.

And then it didn’t matter. What mattered was that Ben Rivers was in his arms, looking as handsome and real as anything and gazing up at Joshua like he hung the moon and the stars. The song was so romantic it wove a spell.

You’re the one who made my dreams come true, a few kisses ago.

Joshua pulled Ben close and breathed in the scent of his hair.

“I can’t believe you did this for me,” Ben whispered.

Joshua was silent for a bit, trying to work out the words he wanted to say. This was tough too, but he figured as long as he was leaping off cliffs tonight, he might as well get it all over with in one go.

“If you think I’d let the best-ropin’, best-ridin’, best-lookin’ bi-curious cowboy ever to be born in Clyde’s Corner move away without a fight....”

Ben pulled away to look at him. For once, Ben was just silent, waiting.

“Stay with me,” Joshua said roughly. “Us marryin’ ain’t legal, but if we vow to each other, the paperwork don’t matter none. I can put you on the lease of the ranch and... well, whatever else makes sense. Only say you’ll be mine.”

Ben looked a little shocked, and he blushed down to his coat collar. “Ain’t it kinda soon to be talkin’ like that?”

Joshua firmed his hand on Ben’s back and nodded at the mayor as he swept by with his wife. “Nope. See, I’ve had this notion about you and me since you was seventeen. I shouldn’t have expected you to read my mind or wait till I was ready to do somethin’ about it. I am sorry for that.”

Ben smirked. “You’re a little slow on the draw there. I was ten when I got that same notion.”

Joshua just stared into Ben’s eyes, waiting for an answer.

“I’m yours,” Ben said quietly. “After you came to Vegas, I couldn’t stand to make no more videos. Frankie was fit to be tied.”

“I know,” Joshua said. “And I ain’t been to Billings.”

Ben got a mischievous glint in his eye. “You ain’t ‘been to Billings’ since *then*? Not even by yourself?”

Joshua chuckled low and dark. “Not hardly. I was pinin’ for a certain cowboy, and that can take the sap outta ya.”

Ben’s gaze dropped to Joshua’s lips. “Mmmm,” he rumbled. “Sounds like an emergency rescue is in order, cowboy.”

Oh, hell. Joshua was suddenly all sorts of overdressed and overwarm, despite the December chill. And the Christmas lights and the dancing and the town librarian dressed up as Santa Claus were all festive as heck, but there was such a thing as priorities.

Ben’s eyes grew kinda dark and dreamy. He pulled Joshua in tight enough to feel that they were both suffering from the same malady. He nuzzled into Joshua’s neck like he just couldn’t help himself.

Joshua stifled a moan. “You keep that up, and you’re gonna remind people ‘bout the porn.”

Ben laughed. “Then you’d best take me somewhere private before I do. Tell me we ain’t takin’ the horse all the way back to your place. A white stallion is romantic and all, but that is one long, cold ride.”

Joshua grinned. “I figured we might be in a hurry. I brought the trailer.”

“Thank God!”

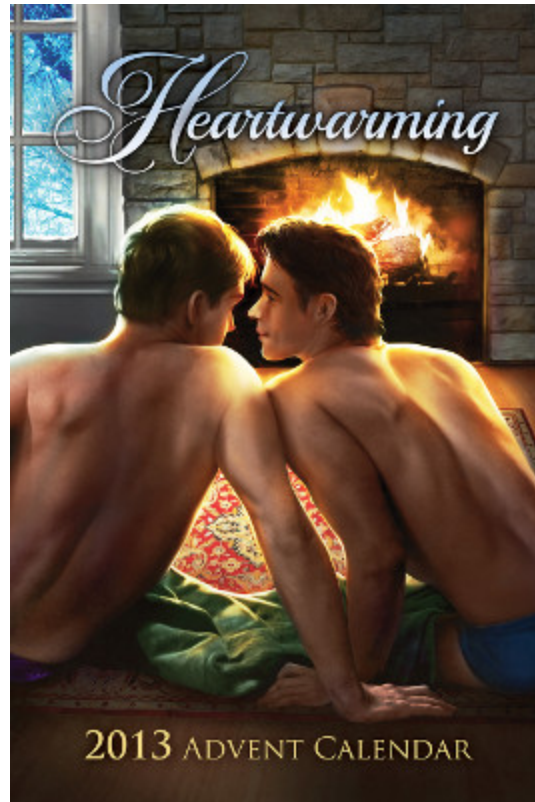
They stopped dancing, and Ben just held him tight on the dance floor for a minute, his blue eyes shining. As Joshua looked into those eyes, the future seemed to stretch out in front of him as wide and open and clear as the Montana range.

“Let’s go home, hoss,” Ben said.

*When my life is through
And the angels ask me to recall, the thrill of it all
Then I will tell them I remember you*

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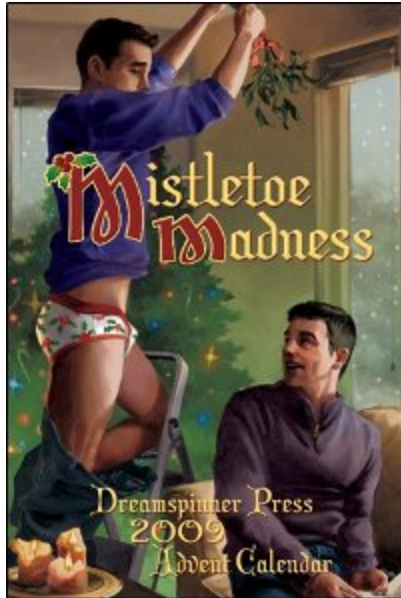
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As an avid reader of such, she is tickled pink when an author manages to combine literary merit, vast stores of humor, melting hotness, and eye-dabbing sweetness into one story. She promises to strive to achieve most of that most of the time. She currently lives on a farm in Pennsylvania with her husband, three bulldogs, three cows, and six chickens. All of them (except for the husband) are female, hence explaining the naked men that have taken up residence in her latest fiction writing.

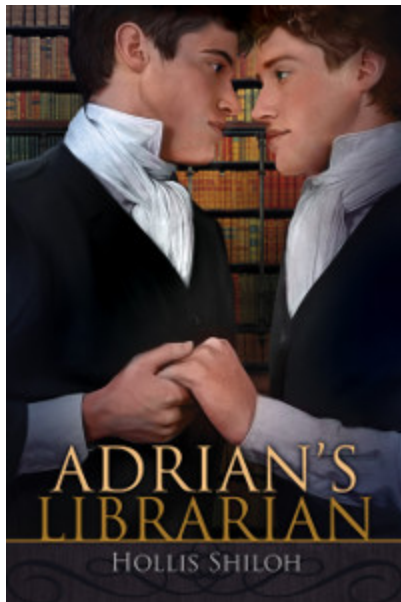
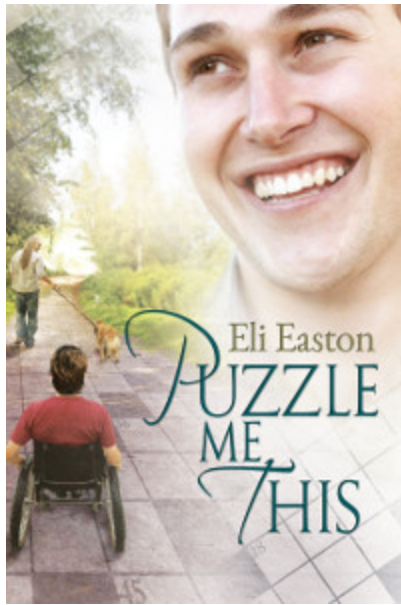
Her website is <http://www.elieaston.com>.

Twitter is @EliEaston.

You can e-mail her at eli@elieaston.com.


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