

Prologue

Joe Black was from so far on the wrong side of the tracks they weren't even visible. Ellie Ruel was from the very right side of the tracks, so far up in society everyone was born with silver oxygen tanks instead of silver spoons. They were in desperate, irrevocable, no-end-in-sight love with each other. They were a modern day Romeo and Juliet. They were 17 and 15. They were also about as ignorant of the facts of life as two amoeba. Two really stupid amoeba.

So naturally Ellie got pregnant.

As often happens in great teen-age love stories, the families got involved, and the greatest love of the century descended into a finger pointing squabble about who was supposed to be responsible for using protection and who would be responsible for the results of their passion — me.

The Blacks answered the first question by beating the shit out of Joe for being too stupid to use a condom, then threatening to sue the Ruels for being too sticks-up-their-asses to explain the facts of life to their daughter.

The Ruels answered the second question by checking Ellie out of the hospital 5 hours after I was born and sending her off to some exclusive girls' boarding school without ever letting her hold me.

When the county wanted to file the birth certificate, the clerk discovered I was still listed as Baby Boy Black, which is nicely alliterative, but a crappy name. Joe's parents said, "Leave it. Serves the little bastard right."

Joe was pining for Ellie, but got his head out of his ass long enough to protest, "No son of mine is going to be named Baby Boy!" Yay, Joe.

He glanced at the names on the birth certificate. Joe. Black. Ellie. Ruel. Joe was out, that was his name. Black was out, already my last name. Black Black would just be dumb. Ellie was definitely out. Even though Johnny Cash sang about giving a boy a girl's name, Joe wasn't about to call me Ellie. That left Ruel. Easy to spell. Fits on most forms, especially that pesky birth certificate the county wanted to file. I was now official. Ruel Black.

Joe's parents raised me reluctantly — well they fed me and clothed me and made sure a tractor didn't run over me — until Joe was 18 and I was almost 1. Before the ink was even dry on his high school diploma they handed him his suitcase, me, a diaper bag and told him, "That little bastard is your mistake, and by god you're fuckin' well gonna take care of him yourself. Don't let the screen door hit you in the ass on your way out." Are they wonderful grandparents or what?

Being Texas and oil country, and Joe being a big strapping kid with a strong back and even stronger work ethic, he got a job working as a roustabout in the oil fields. In my fourteen years, he must have worked every oil field between Texas and Alaska, finally settling at the big one in North Dakota.

Joe discovered he could make more money in the oil fields by being a bouncer in the bars (re: whorehouses) than being a roustabout. It was also cleaner and since he was tired of coming home greasier than pig snot every night, he became a bouncer. Joe was good at his job, being bigger and meaner than pretty much any of the roustabouts who came to whore and drink.

Joe hated school so I didn't go. I learned whatever the adults around me taught me. Joe worked hard and expected me to do the same. As soon as I was old enough he got me jobs delivering stuff, and as I got bigger the jobs got bigger. Between Joe and me we made decent money, enough to keep a roof over our heads, food on the table, and clothes on our bodies.

It was the good life until late one November night when a tractor slid on a patch of ice, dropped a load of 24" pipe on Joe's pickup, and killed the best bouncer and worst father in the state of North Dakota.

I missed him so bad my gut hurt, but I didn't let it show — Joe taught me that.

Six hours after I took all our savings to plant my father in the frozen North Dakota ground the cops informed me I couldn't live alone, and they were shipping me and all my worldly goods off to my next of kin. Shit. I didn't know I had a next of kin, but they dug through records until they had found one.

Ellie Ruel Weatherby.

My mother whom I had never met. Who had returned to her perfect upper crust life after recovering from that little mistake she made when she was fifteen. Who had gone to college and gotten a perfect 4.0. Who had married a widower law-enforcement professional 10 years her senior who had 3 perfect daughters. Who had promptly started churning out perfectly beautiful brown-haired brown-eyed baby girls, her own little mini-mes. Who had become the perfect wife of the sheriff in a small Wyoming town. Who hadn't told her perfect husband about her single mistake 14 years earlier. Who didn't know I was coming.

Perfect.

1 — If This is Thursday This Must be Wyoming

I was in my third cop car in seven hours, and I was as sick of riding as I was of hearing incomprehensible police chatter. The North Dakota State cop had handed me off to the South Dakota State cop, who passed me over to the Wyoming State cop. In a few minutes she was going to release custody of me to a Wyoming county mounity from Wolverin County (when one giant county was carved up into two huge counties a hundred years ago spelling was optional).

The Wolverin County Sheriff was going to escort me to my new home. *oh, joy.*

Wyoming State Trooper Lynne Masters looked at me — again. "You sure you're all right, Sweetie?" she asked — again. "You look kinda peaky." I guess she was what you'd call the mothering sort, though you couldn't prove it by me. My experience with women was limited to whores, strippers, and the occasional bartender.

I answered — again, "I'm fine. Just sick of riding in cars."

"Do you need to stop for some fresh air?" I shook my head — again. "Well, only about ten more minutes." She patted me on the shoulder — again.

Except for her initial and obligatory sympathy remark — "I'm so sorry about your dad, Sweetie." — every twenty minutes for the last two hours she had asked if I was alright, and I had reassured her I was. I could practically set a clock by her. I was looking forward to the fourth car just to stop the sympathy flood.

As we exited into the rest stop, the site of my final transfer, she spoke again, "You feel free to tell the Sheriff if you need to stop. He'll understand."

"Thanks."

At the rest stop, she pulled into a slot at the far end of the parking lot. That meant a long trek through six inches of fresh powder to the facilities. I was glad I had work boots on, trainers would have been soaked in minutes. I was also glad my pants were kind of high water. Kept the cuffs dry. *silver linings, ruel, silver linings.* I'd been psyching myself up with such sparkling little pep talks since the North Dakota cops had informed me they were shipping me off to my nearest kith and kin — the woman who had given me birth fourteen years ago and promptly abandoned me. I'd never met her, and she didn't know I was coming, but everyone assured me she would be thrilled to have me. Uh huh.

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Jim followed the rest stop signs off the interstate, grumbling under his breath. He was normally a patient man but the last twenty-four hours had stretched him pretty thin. And now this!

Why the heck couldn't the States transport the kid clear to Trask instead of forcing him to come all the way out here to pick him up? Sure he felt sorry for the kid, just a couple of days past burying his father, but his own plate was already full with the fatality fire last night. He should be back in his own county supervising his deputies, not half-way to South Dakota playing babysitter.

He saw the State Trooper's car at the near end of the rest stop parking lot and pulled in beside it. Trooper Lynne Masters got out of the driver side door and waved. At least it was Lynne, someone he had more than a passing acquaintance with. He picked up his hat from the back seat, stepped out of his unit,

and screwed the hat down tight so it didn't go walkabout in the ever-present wind.

"Hey, Lynne. See you got babysitting duty, too." He approached with his hand out for a shake.

"Yeah," Lynne laughed. "Just my luck. First day back from popping little Frankie out, and they assign me a road trip." She shook his hand.

"How's Frank holding up?" he asked. He and Frank had been partners before he quit the State Patrol and ran for county sheriff.

"Poor baby. He says he sleeps less now than when he was in Iraq dodging bullets."

Jim laughed. "He'll get no sympathy from me. Tell him when he's had seven of them he can complain."

Lynne motioned behind him, "Here he comes."

Jim turned and saw a tall scruffy kid, dressed in too-small clothes, a too-light jacket, with a tangle of hair trailing down his back and a flame tattoo coming up out of the neck of his t-shirt. Oh, boy.

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When I came out of the men's room shaking my hands dry — no paper towels — there was a Wolverine County Sheriff's car parked next to the State car. Last ride. *thank you, God.*

I could see a tall man, about my height, talking to the Trooper. She said something, and he laughed. *good sense of humor. maybe he'll be tolerable.* I came up behind them and stood waiting. I might have had a shit father, but he had taught me SOME manners.

Trooper Masters saw me and motioned to the Sheriff. He turned and his name badge caught my eye as I reached out to shake his hand. I froze as the name registered — Weatherby. *oh, shit.* My un-met mother's husband. He smiled and shook my hand, his eyes barely flicking to the flame tattoo coming out from under my shirt and curling around my neck.

"Welcome to Wyoming, Mr. Black. I know it's been a long trip, but only a couple more hours and you'll be home. Go ahead and get inside. Kinda nippy out here." He turned back to the Trooper, and she handed him my file. "Thanks, Lynne. Tell Frank hi from me."

"Will do, Jim. By, Sweetie," she said to me. "You'll be OK." Then she got in her unit and pulled back onto the interstate.

Sheriff Weatherby climbed into the truck and tossed the file folder into the center console. "I'll look at that when we get closer to Trask. So I know where to drop you off." *yeah, uh huh, probably a long drop off a short cliff once you see the address.*

"How long 'til we get there?"

"Just shy of two hours unless we run into something I have to stop and handle." He smiled at me, and I saw laugh and sun lines at the corners of his light blue eyes. *bet you're not smiling tomorrow, copper.* He laid his hat on the back seat and buckled his seat belt then gestured at me.

"Buckle up. Otherwise I have to give you and me a ticket. Be kinda hard to explain to my deputies." He radioed in his location, then shifted into drive and circled under the interstate before pulling onto it going

the opposite direction from the Trooper. Ten minutes later we exited onto a state highway and headed west.

"I'm real sorry about your dad. That must be rough." The requisite sympathy comment.

"Uh huh," I said noncommittally. *please, God, not another two hours of this.*

"So your mom's out of the picture?" *shit, he really is flying blind today.* I shrugged.

"Bet you're anxious to get to your new home. Get settled."

"Not really." He looked at me with sharp blue eyes then glanced at the red file folder.

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Jim watched the silent kid out of the corner of his eye. He looked older than the fourteen the state dispatcher had told him, but that was probably because he was so big. Near Jim's height but not as heavy. Tough-looking kid. Tattoos! And that hair! Oughta be interesting to see the good citizens of Trask react to that!

Jim glanced at the file and wondered if he should have looked before they started back. Dang, he hated surprises. Hadn't even had time to read the fax North Dakota sent. Heck, he didn't even know the kid's first name.

About ten minutes from home the radio warbled, "Sheriff, we got a problem."

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I'd been seeing signs for Trask for maybe ten minutes when the radio garbled out something. The sheriff answered with questions and some more incomprehensible cop talk, then reached over and flipped on his lights and siren. He braked and turned the steering wheel sharply without slowing the truck, flipping a one-eighty in the middle of the highway, then raced back the way we had come.

"Sorry, Mr. Black. Gotta take care of this."

'This' turned out to be a domestic dispute involving guns, knives, horses, cows, sheep, and a flame thrower, although I never did see the flame thrower used. On a ranch in the middle of nowhere — well, in all honesty this describes a good portion of North and South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming so it's pretty useless information — Sheriff Weatherby parked the rig near the highway-end of the long drive to a house. Flipping the shift into park and turning off the key, he hopped out and hustled around to the back of the truck. After some digging around in a large metal tool box, he came back pulling his coat on over a tactical vest, then he unlocked and removed the shotgun bolted to the floor and checked its load. He checked his handgun and re-holstered it, then looked at me.

"Stay in the truck. Do not under any circumstances get out of the truck. Understand?" I nodded. "Good." He removed a radio from under his seat, checked the battery and clipped it to his belt, then shut the door and motioned me to lock the truck.

I watched him walk up the long driveway, figuring it would be an hour or so before he came back, and we went on to my doom — I mean my new home. *prison's more like it.*

Four hours later it was dark, and I was still sitting in the truck, getting stiffer and colder by the minute and having to go something fierce. It had been a long time since that rest stop. When I couldn't wait any longer, I unlocked and opened the passenger door. I was going to piss out the doorway and shut the door, never leaving the truck. Obedient to a fault, that's me, leastways when I don't want to piss off my only way out of this damn place. No pun intended.

I opened the door, turned to stand on the running board so I could do my business, and came face-to-face with a cow. Well, actually, it was a lot of cows. A whole herd of cows and a flock of sheep were milling around mooing and baaing, generating a fair amount of noise and a lot of manure and stink. I hadn't heard them or seen them surround the truck, but there they were. I quickly did my business and retreated back inside the cab, but they were so close I couldn't shut the door. I think the dome light attracted them. Like moths only bigger — with hooves and tongues up their noses. *oh, shit, that is gross!*

So there I sat, probably draining the battery on the sheriff's truck, trying to figure how to get the cows away from the door so I could close it, when the driver's door opened and the truck sank down on its springs a bit.

"About damn time," I said as I turned toward him, and found myself staring right into the double barrels of a shotgun. It wasn't the sheriff. I was so focused on the two holes in the universe six inches from my nose I didn't even notice the make and model of the gun. Shotgun barrels up close tend to focus the concentration.

I glanced briefly at the large bearded man holding the stock to his beefy denim-clad shoulder, then back at the barrels. He reached for the keys, then noticed my door was open.

"Shut the damn door," he gestured with the shotgun.

"Can't. Cows." I leaned back so he could see the other occupants of the doorway. I'd had guns pointed at me before, but it had always been in a bar where I had my feet on the ground and some maneuvering room. In a truck cab was a new one for me.

"Well, move 'em," he ordered.

"I tried. They won't move." He started shoving me out the door, using the shotgun as a prod.

"Well, git out there and make 'em." He jammed the barrels into my kidneys. It hurt, and I got mad.

I turned toward him. "Listen, Asshole, first of all, I'm not supposed to leave the truck. Sheriff's orders. Second, do I look like a cowboy to you? I don't know jack shit about cows and sheep. You want them moved so bad, move them your own damn self."

The ratchet of a shotgun pumping is really loud in the confines of a truck cab, especially since double-barreled shotguns don't pump — usually. *lucky me. a gunsmith.* I almost joined the cows and sheep in manure production. But I am nothing if not stubborn — Joe said it was one of my best qualities — so I crossed my arms and looked right down those double barrels.

"Shoot, if you want, but I'm not wrangling any damn cows or sheep."

"Well, shit, if you ain't a brave one." The man smiled at me then turned and planted his filthy cowboy

boots in my ribs and shoved. I sailed out the open door and landed on a couple of sheep, which ran out from under me and dumped me on the shit-covered ground. He fired one barrel over the head of the herd/flock and the quiet gathering turned into a moving barbecue-on-the-hoof, which stomped and ground me into the filth in their eagerness to be far away from the noise.

As I lay there trying to decide if the pain I felt was broken bones or just bruises and humiliation, the guy with the modified shotgun stole the sheriff's truck. The herd/flock had fled back up the driveway, leaving me a clear view of the truck headed down the drive and onto the highway.

I stood up, futilely brushing manure from my jeans, trying to come up with some silver lining, however tarnished it might be, for this scenario, when the herd/flock returned from their flight and ran full length of me again. I had a vague impression of several men on horseback racing after the truck before a cow stepped on my head, and all my impressions got mixed up.

The next thing I was clear about was a sheriff's deputy flipping me over like a burger on a grill. "Stick a fork in me. I'm done," I muttered as she wiped manure off my face.

"Here," she said, holding out a water bottle. "Rinse that shit out of your mouth before you swallow it." I puked instead. "Well," she laughed, "that gets it out, too." She handed me the bottle, and I rinsed and spit a few times. I figured everything I ate for the next week would taste like shit. Literally.

"Thanks," I rasped, handing her the bottle back. She grasped one filthy hand and pulled me to my feet.

"Anything broken?" She started running hands up and down my arms and legs, checking for broken bones, ruptured blood vessels, dislocated joints. She seemed unconcerned she was getting shit all over her hands. When she started running her hands over my chest and back I moved away from her.

"Aren't you supposed to ask that before you haul me upright?" I asked.

She laughed, wiped her hands on her pants, and nodded. "Yeah. I keep flunking my first-aid exam." My eyes must have widened a bit. "Just kidding. Hell, Kid, you're way too easy."

A shotgun blast jerked us both around toward the highway.

2 — Their First Mistake was Thinking

We could hear shouting and handguns discharging, but we might as well had our eyes shut for all the good looking did. I held my breath, waiting. I'm pretty sure the deputy wasn't breathing either.

After a small eternity, we heard the rumble of the truck engine, and headlights bloomed down the highway a few hundred yards. The headlights got closer and turned into the drive. Some men on horseback cantered past, leading a horse without a rider, but in the dark it was impossible to see who the men were. Clenching her jaws, the deputy said nothing and placed her hand on the butt of her 9mm.

The engine sounds came closer, the truck pulled up beside us, and Sheriff Weatherby stepped out of his truck, which was missing the front windshield. He pulled the handcuffed bearded man out of the cab behind him and shoved him at the deputy, "Take this ass to lockup. Brady will bring the other idiot in." She grabbed the man by one arm and started walking back up the driveway.

He turned and looked at me. "I told you to stay in the truck." He gestured at my clothes, liberally plastered with manure front and back. "See what happens when you don't follow orders."

I turned and started walking toward the truck. "I didn't leave the truck voluntarily. I was evicted." I reached the passenger door and started to open it.

"Stop!" the sheriff commanded. "In the back."

"Excuse me?"

"You are not getting cow shit all over the inside of my unit. Bad enough I gotta explain the blown out window. I'm not explaining cow shit."

I climbed into the bed of the truck and sat at the front with my back to the window. "It isn't cow shit. It's cow and sheep shit. Seems like a Wyoming sheriff ought to be able to tell the difference."

He snorted out a laugh, got in the front, and shifted into drive to continue on up the driveway to the house. After parking the rig and turning off the engine, he got out of the cab and slammed the door.

"Stay here a minute. When we've got all the jackasses accounted for, you can come in and shower all the shit off." He thumped the side of the bed, then walked up to the ranch house. It was a big rambling two story monstrosity with a lot of size but very little style. It looked like it had been added to haphazardly, and with no appreciable carpentry skills, whenever the family needed more room. There was nothing homey about it; it was just big and ugly, and I suddenly wondered if all Wyoming ranch houses looked like this.

The temperature must have been near freezing, and I sat huddled up trying to hold in whatever warmth I could. Snow had started falling as we drove toward the house, and my jacket, too light for this winter weather, was caked with rapidly-freezing shit. I could feel the manure harden as the snow drifted into the bed of the pick-up then was whisked back out by the rising wind. *hell, by the time they've rounded up all the usual suspects i'll be a ruel-cicle.*

A Good Samaritan saved me from my cruel fate. My teeth were just starting to chatter when I felt the

sharp edge of a knife blade caress my Adam's apple. "Get out of the truck, Sonny Jim," a whiny female voice commanded, "or I'll give you the closest shave you've ever had."

"I already shaved today, Bitch," I snarled back as I started to stand. The blade dug a little groove through the manure and into my neck. *shit! i'll probably get tetanus.*

"Don't stand," she hissed, "just crawl up and over the side." As I moved slowly over to the edge of the truck bed, the knife shifted from my throat to behind my left ear and dug another groove through the manure and skin.

"Slow! And keep your hands in sight."

"Seriously? How do you think I'd crawl with my hands hidden? Shit, Lady, at least think before you threaten me." *i'm being kidnapped by a fuckin' idiot.* I maneuvered up and over the side of the truck bed while Ms. Einstein kept the knife behind my ear.

"You smell like shit," she said conversationally. She grabbed my arm to pull me away from the truck and swore, "What the hell do you have on your sleeve?"

While she was distracted looking at the manure on her hand, I took a step forward, moving myself away from the knife tip, then I turned and slapped her across the face with the shit-covered sleeve of my jacket. She shrieked and dropped the knife, swiping at her face in a desperate attempt to wipe the manure off. It didn't work.

I slugged her hard enough to knock her on her ass then snatched up the knife. Her shriek had drawn attention and badges came swarming out of the house, drawing their weapons and pointing them at me. And screaming.

"On the ground!" boomed all around me. "On the ground now!" *oh, for fuck sake.* I dropped the knife and went to my knees then my front. *at least i'm down out of the wind.*

"Clasp your hands behind your head. Cross your ankles. Now!" I obeyed, but no one cuffed me. A few approached but quickly backed off when the aroma of my close encounter of the cow kind hit their nostrils. They kept their guns trained on me, but there was a lot of whispering along the lines of — "You cuff him." — "I'm not cuffing him. You're the superior officer, you cuff him."

Meanwhile I was lying on the snowy frozen ground rapidly turning into a frozen manure burrito. My teeth were chattering again, but the good news was the slice on my throat and the puncture behind my ear weren't bleeding anymore. *silver linings, ruel, silver linings.*

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Jim was talking to dispatch on the radio when the screaming and shouting started outside. What the heck?

"Sorry, Jose, sounds like all hell just broke loose outside. I'll get back to you when I can."

He hung the radio on his belt, placed his hand on the butt of his revolver, and stormed out the door ready to kick some ass. He really needed some new deputies!

He saw the kid on the ground on his stomach, hands laced behind his head and ankles crossed. All the deputies had their weapons out trained on the manure-covered fourteen-year-old, while Lola Stanbrick lay to one side moaning.

What the hell?

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"What the hell is going on here?" snapped Sheriff Weatherby.

"We got another one, Sheriff, but we haven't been able to identify him yet. No one wants to get close enough on account he's covered in shit. But we caught him red-handed with a knife threatening that lady." He gestured to my assailant lying moaning on the ground. One of the deputies holstered his weapon and approached the woman to render first-aid.

"Leave her!" the sheriff ordered. "And put your guns away. That," he gestured toward the semi-conscious woman, "is no lady, that's Stanbrick's wife, you morons. And this," he gestured toward me slowly freezing to the rocks and dirt of the ranch yard, "is a civilian I was transporting."

He approached upwind and squatted near me. "You OK, Mr. Black?"

I tried to turn my head, but I think some of my hair was already stuck. "Yeah. I'm good. Can someone help me up? I think I'm frozen to the damn ground."

As two reluctantly drafted deputies approached, trying to figure how to get me unstuck, the woman suddenly sat up and pointed a shaking manure-covered finger at me.

"I want to press charges against that man. He slapped me with a shit sleeve."

Everybody within hearing froze. I could hear some snorts, the sound of someone trying to stifle a chuckle, then someone laughed, and the ranch yard exploded. People were laughing and snorting and howling so hard they had to grab hold of each other to stay vertical. The two men who were supposed to be helping me up dropped me back onto the snow and mud as they held their sides and doubled over, laughing too hard to catch their breath. Even the sheriff was wiping his eyes. Meanwhile, I was refreezing to the ground. The woman started swearing like a roustabout, which set everyone off again.

By the time everyone had control of themselves, I was stuck fast. The sheriff ordered a blanket brought out, and two deputies held it around me in a makeshift windbreak/modesty screen while another hapless deputy laboriously cut my frozen clothes away with large garden shears — the scissors they tried broke on the frozen shit.

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Jim left two of the more competent idiots cutting the kid out of his shit-covered frozen clothes. He had to hand it to the boy, he kept his head, even while his teeth chattered, and he was slipping into hypothermia. Tough kid!

Inside the ramshackle house he took the stairs two at a time, found the bathroom, and turned the shower on full blast. Tough or not, the kid was going to need defrosting.

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When they finally had me freed from my stiff clothes and wrapped in the blanket, I was almost too cold to

walk. Half lifting half dragging me they got me into the brightly lit house and up the stairs to a bathroom where Sheriff Weatherby had started the shower. Steam had already filled the bathroom and was beginning to drift out into the hall, making the whole scene look like a low-budget monster movie. I stumbled into the bathroom, and the sheriff helped me removed the blanket and get into the shower. *dear Lord, I will never take hot water for granted again.*

I scrubbed my skin pink and washed my hair three or four times. By the time I turned off the water it had started to cool. A towel as big as a blanket and so thick and fluffy a small dog could have gotten lost in it was lying on the edge of the sink, and I grabbed it and wrapped it around me. *holy hell, it's nice to have something covering me that doesn't stink.* I was drying my hair when the sheriff knocked and entered with my backpack. I wrapped the thick white towel around my waist and held out my hand.

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Jim got the shivering kid into the shower, then went out to his windowless unit to get the boy's backpack. He'd need a change of clothes for sure. The pack was surprisingly light when he picked it up. He considered looking inside but couldn't justify the snooping, so he restrained his curiosity and took it into the house.

He waited outside the bathroom door until the water eventually stopped. He must have run that hot water heater empty, Jim thought. Wonder if even that warmed him up. He rapped the door with his knuckles and entered.

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"I figured you'd be needing this," he said as he handed it to me. "As introductions to Wyoming go, this one will probably be at the top of the bizarre list." He suddenly stopped talking and stared at my tattoos. He gestured in my general direction.

"That's a lot of ink for a fourteen-year-old."

From the backpack I pulled out my second-to-last set of pants, t-shirt, and boxer briefs. "One a year since I was nine. I was going to start sleeves this year, but Joe got flattened, so that's probably out." I turned my back on him, dropped the towel, and pulled on my underwear since he didn't seem inclined to leave. Didn't bother me. Modesty was pretty low on Joe's list of stuff to teach me, probably right after what to wear to afternoon tea and right before proper use of a salad fork. That's when Weatherby saw the screaming eagle stretched across my back from shoulder to shoulder with flames shooting out of its beak and up around my neck.

"Holy Mary Mother of God," he whistled. "That is a lot of eagle."

I pulled my t-shirt on. "A dare," I said simply, "when I was twelve." I pulled on my pants, and looked around the bathroom.

"Oh, hell! Where are my boots?" I turned and looked at the sheriff. "Please tell me they didn't cut my damn boots off!"

"No, but they're in pretty bad shape. I assigned one of the numb nuts from the lower end of the county to clean them up. We'll put them in the back to dry out. They should be OK by the time we get to Trask."

"Good. That's the only pair I got." Sitting down on the toilet lid I pulled on my second-to-last pair of

socks. I hastily ran my fingers through my tangled hair, not that it did much good, then wrapped it and retied it with a rawhide string.

"I guess I'm ready." I slung my much lighter backpack over my shoulder and padded down the stairs. When I looked out the open front door at the snow falling and the slushy snow-mud mixture on the ground I sighed and sat down in the middle of the floor to take off my socks.

"What are you doing?" Sheriff Weatherby asked, perplexed.

"I only have one more pair of socks. I'm not going to ruin these in that damn muck."

"Leave them on, your feet will freeze. Put your clean pair on in the truck and wash the others when you get settled."

"NOT one more CLEAN pair," I emphasized, "one more pair PERIOD. I ruin these, and I'm down to one pair. My feet will wash cheaper than buying more damn socks."

He stared at me like he'd never heard of such a thing. *i guess in his world kids don't get down to their last three sets of clothes. oops, make that two sets.* When he realized he was staring at me like an animal in a zoo or some new species of bacteria, he reddened and turned away, either embarrassed for me or himself. I wasn't sure which.

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Jim turned away when he realized he was staring at the kid like some exotic animal. What the hell? Only two pair of socks. I'll bet those were some of his last clothes, too. What kind of father only provides his kid with three pair of socks?

He walked away from the boy to distract himself from his increasingly angry thoughts and found himself in the kitchen. Grabbing a kitchen towel off the rack, he wet it with warm water. Back by the front door he tossed the towel to the barefoot boy.

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He disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a damp towel. Tossing it to me he said, "Here, you can use that to wipe your feet," then went out the door without waiting for me to answer.

I tried to put as little of my feet into the muck as possible, but they were still crusted and freezing by the time I got to the truck. I sat on the running boards and wiped as much crap from my feet as possible with the towel before climbing into the cab. Once inside I fished my socks out of my pocket and put them on. They only made my feet marginally warmed, but some is better than none.

The sheriff reached over, grasped my chin in his gloved fingers, and tilted my head back and forth, looking at the thin slice on my neck and the puncture behind my ear. "We'll get that looked at before we deliver you to your family. When was your last tetanus shot?" I shrugged and tried not to wince at his use of the word 'family'. "You'll probably have to get one. Shit and open wounds make a bad combo."

He reached for the ignition but stopped and looked from me in my t-shirt and jeans to the broken-out front window and back to me. Then he hopped out of the truck and returned to the house. When he came back a few minutes later he had several thick woolen blankets, which he tossed to me before climbing back into the driver's seat.

"Gonna be a cold drive home. Best wrap up good."

I twisted around to toss my backpack onto the back seat and saw something sticking up out of the truck bed. Getting up on my knees I looked through the back window.

"Is that a ... a flamethrower?" I looked at the sheriff.

"Yeah. Stanbrick is an idiot. He picked up some book," he rummaged around behind the seat and extracted a battered copy of a book encased in a plastic evidence bag, "about building your own flamethrower. I don't know if it's legal or not. Until I find out one way or the other I'm impounding the damn thing."

I stared out the back window, fascinated by the devil device in the bed of the truck. I've shot lots of different types of guns, but a flamethrower ...

"Buckle up," the sheriff instructed. "Let's get home. I radioed in and told Jose to contact your relatives and let them know what happened so they don't worry."

"Oh. Good."

3 — I've Got, You've Got, We've All Got a Secret

=====

In spite of the blankets and the heater on high, by the time they got to Trask Jim could hear the kid's teeth chattering, but he never uttered one complaint. Tough kid. Jim's girls would have whined the entire drive back. Was it because they were girls or because the boy had had a rough life? Crap, he hated when kids paid for their parents' incompetence or apathy.

=====

By the time we got to Trask, I was thanking God for the blankets the sheriff had given me. Even with them my face and toes were like ice, but I'm sure I wouldn't have survived the trip without them. When we pulled up to the jail, only one car was in the parking lot. The night duty deputy probably.

I took my socks off again. Grabbing my backpack from the back seat, I swung out of the cab and headed into the low brick building. *if i don't have frostbite before this is over i'll be damn surprised.* I couldn't see much in the dark, but it looked newer, not tired like some jails in smaller towns. Of course, maybe that was just oil boom towns. Inside it smelled of bleach and wax, but it wasn't unpleasant. Some of the places I've lived smelled like an outhouse on a hot day; bleach and wax was the breath of heaven in comparison.

"It's too late to take you to your relatives tonight. We can grab some shut eye in the office and drop you off when it gets light. Hope you're OK with the floor." He pointed toward a cubicle behind the half-railing that separated the public and official spaces. "That cubby has carpeting. Might be marginally softer than the tiled floors. Bathroom's down that hall. I'm going to call the wife and let her know I won't be home tonight."

"You don't have to stay on my account," I protested. "I'm used to taking care of myself."

"Not going to happen, Mr. Black. You're a civilian and a minor. I'm going to have enough to explain in my report as it is." He pointed again at the carpeted cubby, and went into his office and shut the door. I leaned against it, trying to make out what he said, but it was all murmurs, nothing distinct. Giving up, I turned toward the bathroom. After washing off my frozen feet, I put my socks on and headed to the back cubby, suddenly very tired. I was almost asleep before I'd rolled the blankets around me.

=====

Jim shut the door to his office and tossed his hat on his desk. Shit, he was tired. And his night wasn't over yet. First, he called his wife.

"Ellie? Hey, Honey. Did I wake you?" She sounded sleepy, but she often waited up for him so he wasn't sure.

"No, Sweetie, you didn't wake me. I was waiting up. Everything OK? How did the babysitting go?"

He sighed. "Not over yet. We got side-tracked to a domestic out to Stanbrick's and just got back. I'll have to drop the kid in the morning. That's why I was calling. To let you know I'm staying here tonight."

"What's the boy like, Jim?"

"Fourteen, big, scruffy. And tough. Ellie, Baby, I gotta go. I've got a report to write then I have to figure out where this stray belongs. I'll call you in the morning."

"OK. Try to get a little sleep. I love you."

"Love you, too, Darlin'." Jim hung up, sat down heavily, and wrote his report. He'd learned if he didn't write it immediately the details slipped away. Signs of getting older he supposed.

After reading the after-action report about the fatality fire, he was going through the notes and phone messages from the day, looking for the fax report about the kid. When he found it, there was a yellow sticky-note right in the middle of the report with Jose's distinctive scrawl in red. Darn! Red wasn't good.

'Sheriff, better read the kid's file. Now!' Well, crap! Jim got up, visited the facilities, grabbed a Coke out of the refrigerator in the employees' lounge then settled back in his chair to read the information in the red file folder Trooper Masters had given him almost eleven hours ago.

=====

The sharp slap of paper on wood startled me awake. Blearily I looked around, trying to figure out where I was. Gray carpeted floor. Gray carpeted walls. Wooden desk legs. Black broughams size twelve. Dark green pants.

I followed the pants legs up past a belt and a dark green shirt to a very pissed off face. A familiar face. I rubbed my eyes and tried to focus my brain. *where the hell am i?* I struggled into a sitting position, still processing my surroundings. I saw my work boots sitting next to the desk, unlaced and looking a little the worse for wear, and the whole horrible previous twenty-four hours finally strolled into my mind. *oh, yeah.*

I squinted against the fluorescent ceiling lights and suddenly realized what Sheriff Weatherby was holding in his hand. The red file folder. *well, shit.*

"Should I say 'good morning', or 'why the hell did you wake me up'?" I might as well get the discussion off to a rousing start.

"Jose left me a note," he held up the hand not holding the file, showing a yellow square of paper clinging to it, "about contacting your 'relatives' when we were late last night. He suggested I read your file, and he was right. It was damn interesting reading. Especially the name and address of next of kin!" He was building up a good head of steam by this point, his face turning a nice pink color, like he'd been out in the fresh air. He slapped the folder hard against the desktop again. It sounded like the distant crack of a rifle. "You want to explain to me why we spent nine hours together, and you never once mentioned who you are?"

"Since you obviously didn't know when we met, how would you have liked me to put it? 'Well hello, Sheriff Weatherby, how you doing today. It's nice to meet you. My name is Ruel Black, and I'm the bastard son your wife never told you about, and I'm coming to live with you.' That would have made a lovely conversation.

"I'm a minor, Sheriff. Everyone keeps telling me they know what's best, so I figured I'd just let the adults sort it out. Once they get theirs fuckin' heads out of their asses and started telling each other the damn truth! Far be it from me, a mere child, to spill the beans." I rolled up in my blankets again, and turned my back on him. "I think the person you should be pissed at is your wife."

He stomped his way back to his office and slammed the door, but it didn't latch. I could hear perfectly as he vigorously punched the buttons on his phone. I could also hear every word of his conversation. *and i*

don't even have to leave my nice warm cocoon. thanks, sheriff.

"Hey, El, sorry to wake you." pause "No, no, Sweetie, I'm fine. Something has come up, and I need you to come down here." pause "Yeah, I know it's five in the morning. I've been up all night." longer pause "Ellie, if this weren't important ..." pause "Ellie! Trust me. This is NOT something you want me to wait and discuss with you when I get home." pause "You will be back in plenty of time to get the girls off to school." pause "Sarah and Amanda can ..." pause "For crying out loud, Ellie, they're sixteen! They're old enough to watch the other girls and get them ready for school." longer pause again "Yes, I know I said you would be back in time, but if you aren't they are big enough to do ..." pause "Ellie! Come down here now!" The conversation was obviously over.

well, that was interesting. started off nice and friendly and ended snarky. oh, yeah, this is gonna be good. silver linings, ruel, silver linings.

I drifted in my blanket burrito for a while until the smell of fresh coffee pulled me out. Gingerly I picked up my battered boots and sniffed. A faint whiff of eau de bovine was still detectable, but what the hell. Work boots weren't supposed to smell like perfume. Besides if anyone was close enough to my boots to smell them they were too damn close. The rawhide laces were pretty stiff but softened up as I worked them through the holes. Then I followed my nose toward the smell of coffee. *please, God, let there be a donut or something.* My growling stomach was reminding me I hadn't eaten since lunch the day before.

A small tubby Hispanic guy was sitting at the desk next to the half-rail demarcation between the public and official spaces. On a credenza behind him was a commercial-size coffee pot cheerfully burbling dark grounds into liquid alertness, and right next to the coffee pot was — *thank you, dear Lord* — a box of pastries.

He looked startled to see me emerge from the carpeted cubicle and fumbled on his belt as if reaching for a pistol. I jerked my hands up in mock surrender.

"Whoa, Hombre. No need for hostilities. Just give me a cup of coffee and a donut and nobody gets hurts." I smiled my best 'hey buddy' smile, but he still popped to his feet like he'd been pulled up by strings.

"Sheriff!" he hollered toward the closed office door. "Who the hell are you?" he directed at me. I opened my mouth to answer, but a bunch of stuff happened at once, and I never got to finish.

The sheriff jerked his office door open and snapped, "What?" at the hapless dispatcher.

The front door opened and a small, angry brown-haired woman stomped in and saw me. She gave me a perplexed look, as if she couldn't quite place me but knew she knew me from somewhere. I could see the exact moment recognition hit her. Her eyes widened, her mouth dropped open, and she went completely white. Then she just folded, from vertical to horizontal in one graceful crumple. The dispatcher's phone rang.

And the radio crackled to life. "HQ, this is Unit Three. Davenport's horses are out again and rubberneckers on the highway caused a five-car pile-up. Ambulances are on the way. I could use some back-up!"

I started laughing. *oh, yeah! this just gets better and better.*

=====

Jim was brooding at his desk, trying to sort out what he would tell Ellie and what he would demand to know, when Jose hollered from the dispatcher's area. He jerked the door open and snapped at the man, then all hell broke loose.

Ellie came in the door seriously pissed and ready to rip him a new one for the way he'd spoken to her on the phone. She never even got past the barrier when she took one look at the kid and folded like an accordion.

Jim started toward her, cursing himself for losing his temper with her, but before he could get there the phone rang. Then the radio went off with a report of a pile-up out on Crazy Man Road.

And the damn kid stood there laughing. Jim saw red.

=====

It took the sheriff a while to sort the mess out.

To his dispatcher — "Jose, get on the horn and get every available unit out to Crazy Man Road."

To the fire department — "Shelly, can you send an EMT to my office? Ellie fainted and I'd like her checked out. No, Shelly, I'm pretty sure she isn't pregnant again" He looked over at me and spoke again, "And send a tetanus shot with whoever comes. No, Shelly, I'll explain later."

To the person on the telephone — "Sheriff's office, can you hold please."

"Shut the hell up." This last was directed at me as I sat in an office chair watching the chaos and laughing occasionally, between sips of coffee and bites of pastry. He also slapped the pastry out of my hand.

"Those are for the deputies, not some snot-nosed pain in the ass!"

I looked at the cream filling smushed on the floor like some tasty Rorschach test. "Real mature, Sheriff," I needled him as he squatted beside Mrs. Weatherby gently patting her cheeks. "Didn't your mom ever teach you to not waste food?"

"Get a paper towel and clean that mess up!" he ordered me, still patting his wife on the cheeks.

"You made it, you clean it up! I'm not your damn servant!" I stomped back to the restroom and slammed the door. *damn high and mighty son of a bitch! who the hell does he think he is ordering me around. he's not my damn father.* I sat on the toilet seat and dropped my head into my hands. *dear God, i miss joe so much. why'd You have to go and let him get flattened?*

4 — The Running Man Might Be Me

=====

Jim picked Ellie up and took her into his office. Placing her gently on the green leather-covered couch, he went and got one of the blankets he'd commandeered for the kid the night before. Ironic, he told himself, as he covered his unconscious wife with it. "Come on, Honey. Wake up. Please." He patted her pale cheeks and wondered how well he really knew this woman who had captured his heart when he thought he'd never give it away again. Shit, what a mess!

He thought of the fourteen-year-old boy, currently hold up in the bathroom and wondered if he was as tough as he appeared or if it was a protective shell. Then he looked at his wife and hoped she was tougher than she seemed. They were both going to have to be.

Dear, God, give us strength, he whispered as he strode through the outer office area toward the restroom. Reaching it he pounded on the door.

=====

Pounding on the door snapped me out of my pity party. "What!"

"Open the damn door. I need some water!" The Sheriff sounded worried. I filled a cup with water, dampened a handful of paper towels, and opened the door.

"Is she OK?" I asked as offered them to him.

"What the hell do you care?" he flared snatching them out of my hands and turning back to the front area.

"Oh, I don't know," I snarked as I followed him, "maybe I don't like the idea of the sight of me putting anyone into a coma. Even the woman who abandoned me when I was just born!" The space by the front door was clear of unconscious female so I figured they'd moved her into his office. I raised my voice a bit as he disappeared through the door, closing it in my face with a nice solid clunk. "Kinda hard on a guy's ego." *asshole!*

A few minutes after six a short round man arrived carrying an old fashioned doctor's bag. Dispatcher Jose punched some buttons on the intercom on his desk. I could hear it buzz through the closed office door. "Sheriff, Doc is here. Want me to send him in?"

In answer, Sheriff Weatherby swung open the door, and welcomed the doctor with a firm handshake. "I didn't expect you to come personally, Doc."

"All the EMTs were busy with that fiasco out on Crazy Man Road. I was feeling pretty useless, so I thought I'd trot along here myself. What happened?"

As he escorted the doctor into his office, he glared at me over the shorter man's head. I held my hands out and shrugged my shoulders, clearly communicating, 'not my fault.' He glared anyway, so I flipped him the bird clearly communicating 'up yours, copper'.

=====

Ellie was stirring as Jim and the doctors came through the office door. Jim shut it quietly but firmly, trying to keep a grip on his fraying temper and nerves. He knelt beside her holding her hand as silent tears rolled down her pale cheeks. Jim knew this was going to test them, beyond anything they could imagine.

Doctor Barry poked and prodded Ellie's head. He checked her pupils and her reflexes. Then he took her pulse, blood pressure, respirations. And he talked to her, asking questions to test her cognitive functions.

"I think you're going to have a sore head, but that's all. My big concern is why you fainted. We should probably run some tests to rule out some possibilities." His eyes twinkled as he asked, "Any chance you're pregnant again?" She shook her head.

Jim drew a deep breath. "Ellie had a shock. It was my fault. I didn't want to talk about it on the phone, and I lost my temper and yelled at her. I should have prepared her for it, but ..." Ellie put her hand on Jim's, reassuring him.

"I had a baby out of wedlock, Seth, and gave him up for adoption. He turned up here unexpectedly. It was such a ... I wasn't prepared to see him."

"Ahhhh," Dr. Barry said understandingly. "Well, you stay down for a bit. A little rest and you should be as right as rain." He patted her hand, picked up his overcoat and bag, and headed for the office door. Jim walked him out.

=====

Fifteen or twenty minutes later the doctor and sheriff emerged from the office, the sheriff looking relieved and the doctor, holding his overcoat slung over his left arm while his right hand held his little black bag, was talking.

"She's got a big goose egg on the back of her head (who knew goose egg was a technical term), but she should be OK. Unless you want to bring her in for observation, I think she's OK. Keep an eye on her though. Bring her in if she acts unusual or anything." *you mean like freaking out because she saw the mistake she made fifteen years ago standing in her husband's office?*

"Thanks for coming, Doc. I'll keep an eye on her."

"Jim?" The doctor had stopped and placed his black bag on Dispatcher Jose's desk. From it he withdrew up a syringe filled with clear liquid. "The tetanus shot? Ellie didn't puncture herself, so ... ?"

"Oh, yeah, it's for him." He flapped his hand at me. The doctor cocked his head my direction. His gray eyebrows rose toward the thick shock of gray curly hair covering what appeared to be a perfectly round head.

"You," Sheriff Weatherby pointed at me, "take Dr. Barry back in there," he motioned me toward the cubby I'd slept in, "and show him your cuts." He shook the doctor's hand firmly. "Thanks again for coming personally, Seth. I appreciate it." Then he turned and disappeared back into his office, closing the door softly but firmly behind him.

I vanished into the cubicle with the doctor right behind me. As he looked at my throat and ear, rolled up my sleeve, commented on the Celtic knot tattoo with the words "Tada gan iarracht" ('nothing without effort' in Gaelic) on my left shoulder and bicep, swabbed my bicep with alcohol, and gave me the shot, I was straining my ears toward the sounds coming from behind the closed office door. *i can just imagine that conversation.*

The doctor packed up his bag, then stood there looking at me for a moment. "Keep an eye on both of

those, especially the puncture behind the left ear. Any sign of redness or swelling, and tenderness, have your mom ..."

I interrupted immediately and vehemently, "She isn't my mom!"

He looked at me again, thoughtfully. Finally, he shook his head once, and finished his advice, "Call me or the Urgent Care Clinic at the first sign of problems. Your ste ... the sheriff has the number." He picked up his black bag and left the cubicle. A few seconds later I heard the front door open, accompanied by an "Adios" from the dispatcher, and then close quietly. Soft murmurings could be heard from behind the sheriff's closed office door. *guess they told him. wonder how they spun it.*

For lack of anything better to do, I got some more paper towels and cleaned up the pastry the sheriff had removed from my custody. *asshole!* Jose, the dispatcher, was watching me warily as he answered the phone and fielded radio calls.

"What's the matter, afraid I'm going to steal another fuckin' pastry?" I snapped.

He shook his head. "Nope. Just wondering who the hell you are. Mrs. W. is a rock solid lady. Never figured her for the fainting type."

isn't that precious. they've even got a pet name for her. that's just so damn cute i could vomit. I kept my thoughts and my identity to myself. Not my story to tell.

I finished cleaning up the mess and tossed the paper towels. The quiet talking was still going on behind the sheriff's closed office door, but it was getting louder. We could hear an occasional word. Oh, yeah, Dispatcher Jose was eavesdropping just as hard as I was. He was just morbidly curious. My interest was more self-preservation.

I was sure and for certain if the Weatherbys refused custody I'd wind up in the foster care system. I didn't much want to be here, but I'd be damned if I'd get shunted into kid limbo. I'd fuckin' run first.

5 — Family Ties That Bind

=====

Ellie was sitting up when Jim re-entered his office. He pulled one of his green leather-covered visitors' chairs around to face her. Taking a box of tissues off his desk and handing it to her, he sat in the chair, so close to her their knees almost touched, and waited. The silence stretched thin, taking his patience with it.

"Before either of us says anything," Jim finally broke the protracted silence, "I apologize for losing my temper with you. On the phone. If I'd kept it, you would have been better prepared. I take full responsibility for that, and I am so sorry, Ellie." A few more tears leaked out of her eyes. She wiped at her face with a tissue, then blew her nose. Jim pulled the office wastebasket over close.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I'm probably going to need that." Another long silence followed, stretching out to a small eternity. Finally, Jim spoke again.

"I guess the first logical question is, why the hell didn't you tell me, Ellie? Did you think I wouldn't understand? Do you distrust me that much?" The hurt in his voice was palpable, and she winced. She seemed to pull in on herself, wrapping her arms around her torso like she was trying to hold in all the thoughts and feelings that were threatening to overwhelm her.

"No! Jim, no! I don't distrust you. I just wanted ... I didn't want ... I was afraid."

"Of me? Of my reaction? What could possibly make you so afraid you didn't trust me with something so huge?" His blue eyes sought some sort of answer in her brown ones. Not finding one he dropped his gaze.

"I was fifteen. My parents said the baby had been adopted by a good family."

Jim snorted, remembering the details in the red file. More silence.

"I was fifteen, Jim. I wanted my life back!" She wiped her eyes again. "I walked away from the hospital, never seeing the baby. I never even knew it was a boy until today." She looked at the closed door of the office. "He was your babysitting job?"

"Yeah. Ironic isn't it?" She nodded, looking away from the door.

"I've thought about ... him. Sometimes. But it was like another me. A lifetime ago." She bowed her head, ashamed of what she said next. "I just wanted to put it out of my mind, like a bad car accident, and forget it." She raised her head and looked her husband in the eyes.

"The baby was out of my life. I never saw the need to tell you. It had nothing to do with us."

Jim snorted derisively. "Guess you figured wrong!" He looked down at his hands, thinking, wondering. "You said you were afraid. You never said of what." This pause was so long Jim looked up, wondering if she was going to answer. Ellie was looking out the office window, thinking.

"You're just so ... so damn honorable. I wanted that part of my life closed. Done. When we first met I was afraid if you found out you'd insist we contact the child. Establish some kind of relationship. I didn't want a stupid mistake when I was so young to come between us. And once I kept quiet then, there wasn't a good time to bring it up, and I gradually put it out of my mind. Like it happened to another Ellie Ruel when she was young and stupid."

Jim had no answer to that. When he and Ellie met he was self-conscious about being a single dad and overly aware of throwaway kids, those whose parents were gone or just didn't care. He had often gone out of his way to get these kids help. Would he have insisted they have some relationship with the boy? Even if they thought he had been adopted into a good home? He didn't think so, but that was ten years ago. He sighed. What a mess!

The next silence seemed heavy, like the air was heavy with thoughts, emotions. He felt like he could drown in what wasn't being said.

"The question we have to answer is — now what?" Jim finally put voice to his thoughts. He pulled the North Dakota police report out of the file.

"You are his only kin, according to the North Dakota Staties. So, we have two choices."

"Two?" Ellie asked, almost too tired to think clearly.

"One, we take him into our home, which means we have to explain to the girls exactly who he is." Ellie blanched again.

"Two, we refuse custody, you sign over your parental rights, and he is placed in foster care." Tears started making their way down Ellie's cheeks, tracing over pale flesh again. Jim sat back and waited. When the tears began to abate, he spoke.

"You have to make the decision, Babe. I can't do it for you." He leaned forward and captured one of her hands. "But whatever you decide I'll stand with you." His brain was so tired he couldn't have honestly said what he wanted her to do. Good thing it was her decision. Then he was ashamed of himself for his selfish thoughts.

Another small eternity passed as Ellie thought. She thought about all the reasons she'd walked away from the baby fourteen years ago. She thought about their daughters and what kind of impact this would have on them. She looked at her husband of ten years and wondered what this would do to their marriage, to them as a couple.

Then she thought of the glacier-blue eyes she'd seen when she came through those doors just a couple of hours ago. Eyes so much like Joe's yet not. Hard cold eyes in so young a face. She wondered how much of that hardness was her fault and if taking the boy into her home would soften the hardness or absolve her of her responsibility for it.

"Jim."

He watched her face, somehow knowing what was coming and already resenting it, then hating himself for the resentment. Shit, he had always thought he was a bigger man than that. Well, he damn well would be! He had to be if his family was to pull through this monumental cluster fuck.

"I have to take him. I basically threw him away before. How can I look myself, our girls, in the face if I do it again?"

"If you take him for the wrong reasons, Ellie, it will be worse than turning him over to the system. Take him because you want him, not to save face with anyone, least of all the girls." She flinched a little at his harsh words, but he didn't repent them.

"I have to take him. Taking him is the right thing to do," she said flatly. He sighed.

"No, Ellie. WE have to do it. But Ellie, a word of warning. This kid isn't like the girls. You push, he will push back." Jim knew how stubborn his wife was, how she always knew she was right. Doing his duty, he'd warned her, but he doubted it would do any good. She would probably have to learn the hard way. He hoped he and the girls would survive her pig-headedness.

He moved the visitor's chair he'd been sitting in around to the other side of the desk, then went to the office door and opened it.

=====

The Weatherbys were in 'conference' for over an hour. Dispatcher Jose and I could hear a fair amount of crying, a lot of murmuring, and long periods of silence. Sometimes a male voice would rise in volume, sometimes a female. Once in a while the two would run over the top of each other, talking at once and neither being heard. *i'd give anything to be a fly on the office wall. hell, it's me their talking about. seems i should be able to hear it.*

One hour and seven minutes later — yeah, I timed it, so sue me — the office door opened and the sheriff motioned me in. *come into my parlor said the spider to the fly.* I went.

Sheriff Weatherby pointed me to a green leather-covered chair in front of his desk and shut the door quietly behind me. Mrs. Weatherby sat in an identical chair, but it had been pulled around to the same side of the desk as the sheriff's chair. *ah, a united front.* I sat, then the sheriff sat in his desk chair. Mrs. Weatherby's eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, but she appeared calm. As soon as her husband sat she took his hand in hers. *oh, isn't that sweet. gag!* I noticed he was holding her hand, but this was one pissed man. With a gun. *oh, boy. i hope you're pissed at her and not me, copper.*

I said nothing, just looked at them and waited. This was their show. As adults they thought they had all the power. That was fine with me. I always preferred the sneak attack against more powerful opponents. They looked at each other then at me, waiting for me to say something, to start the ball rolling. They were going to wait a long time. I knew how and when to be quiet — Joe taught me that.

Mrs. Weatherby looked hungrily at me, like I was a buffet and she hadn't eaten in a really long time. I could see her looking and cataloging me — black curly hair tied into a twisted snarled tail with a strip of leather and hanging to the middle of my shoulder blades, glacier-blue eyes under arched black eyebrows and surrounded by thick black lashes (the whores said I had lashes any woman would kill for, if you can trust a woman who tells every man between her legs what a fantastic lover he is), tattoo flames climbing up from the collar of my t-shirt and circling around the right side of my neck, the bottom curve of the Celtic knot peeking out from the lower edge of my left sleeve. Her gaze froze on the tattoos, and I noticed the hungry look replaced by puzzlement and something else. Repulsion, maybe? Disgust? The urge to get soap and water and a scrub brush? *take a good look, lady. you don't like it, tough shit.*

=====

Jim watched Ellie inventory the boy, taking in the hair, the clothes, the scruff of five o'clock shadow, and the tattoos. Her gaze froze on them, and it was all Jim could do to not put his head in his hands. Here it comes, he thought. Her fixit syndrome. Ellie never met a problem she wasn't convinced she could fix.

The kid sat, saying nothing. His cold blue eyes were surveying the room as Ellie surveyed him, but Jim could tell he was aware of her critique. He is one damn cool customer, Jim thought.

=====

I used the time Mrs. Weatherby was studying me to look around the office, to learn what I could about the enemy. You don't think this was war? You try being a helpless kid without rights, without power, being jerked this way and that by the law and adults who think they know what's best for you. Then see if you still think this wasn't a war!

On the bookshelf behind the desk was a grouping of photos. Sheriff and Mrs. Weatherby with a whole herd — pack? flock? gaggle? murder? — of girls. Blonde-haired blue-eyed girls and brown-haired brown-eyed girls. I counted three blonde girls, perfect little clones, in what was obviously a wedding photo, then each successive photo showed the addition of a brown-haired girl, until there were seven girls in what looked like the most recent photo. *seven girls! holy shit, i have to live with seven girls?* I counted again. *three step-sisters and four half-sisters? well, hell.*

"Your name is Ruel." Mrs. Weatherby broke the silence first.

"I know."

"Why?"

"It's on my birth certificate?"

"Why did your father ..."

"His name was Joe, or did you forget that when you forgot about me?"

She looked steadily at me while her hands seemed to have a life of their own. One was holding her husband's and playing with his wedding band, the fingers of the other were polishing a small knothole in the wooden surface of the desk, over and over.

"You aren't going to make this easy, are you?"

6 — Tattoos are a Mother's Nightmares

"Why should I?" I kept my face impassive, giving nothing away — Joe taught me that. I saw the sheriff's eyebrows raise just a bit.

She drew a deep breath. "Why did Joe name you Ruel?"

"It was the only name on the birth certificate that made sense. Baby Boy was alliterative but stupid. Joe was his, no way he was giving it to me. Black was already my last name. He wasn't giving me a girl's name so Ellie was out. That left Ruel and the doctor's name, which was totally illegible, more like a squiggle than a signature. He liked Ruel Black better than Squiggle Black so Ruel it was."

"Oh. I thought maybe ..." she glanced down at the desk and back at me.

"You thought he deliberately gave me your family name? Sorry to disappoint you, but no. It was a process of elimination by a disinterested kid."

She nodded once, accepting this. I couldn't read her, couldn't tell if it was important to her or just a question to break the tension.

"What did Joe tell you about me?"

"He didn't talk about you. Why the fuck should he?" I couldn't tell what surprised her, Joe not telling me all about her or my language. I didn't much care, either way.

The sheriff was obviously uncomfortable and angry with this whole process, but he had apparently made a decision to stand by his wife, so he sat quiet, holding her hand. But it didn't mean he wasn't alert, ready to take my head off if I treated his lying little princess with anything but the respect due her. *bring it on, buddy-boy.*

"I wouldn't blame him if he spoke badly of me. It was as much my mistake as his, but he bore the brunt of it, thanks to his parents." She spoke as if having me was a mistake like choosing the wrong colored carpeting or something. And she blamed Joe being stuck with me on his parents. Apparently running out on me when I was five hours old didn't have anything to do with it

"Joe never called me a mistake. He told me once I was the best thing that ever happened to him." *granted he was drunk at the time and denied it the next morning, but a lot of drunks get mean and hit their kids so I took it as a good sign.* I let that information sink in.

"Do you hate me?" she asked bluntly.

"I think you're a coward, a weakling. And I think you were selfish, running out on Joe and leaving him to raise me alone." I looked at her and her husband and the photos of the perfect family, and tried to fit me or Joe into that image. It was like trying to put a Chevy engine on a Harley — didn't fit.

"No. I don't hate you. You have to think about someone to hate them. Someone has to be important to you to hate. Truthfully, until the cops told me I had to come here, I'd forgotten you even existed."

She looked down at the desk top again. *she doesn't quit rubbing that knothole she's gonna wear right through the wood.* When she looked up her mouth was a thin firm line. *she's pissed! the bitch hasn't thought about me in fourteen years and she's pissed at me!* I smiled coldly at her, and she looked surprised.

"You want to know the truth?" I asked.

"Of course."

"I look at you, your husband, and the photos of the seven little mini-mes lined up there on the bookcase," she and the sheriff both glanced behind them, "and I try to imagine what my life would've been like if you and Joe and me had been a family, and I'm coming up completely blank. I can't imagine Joe and you together. I can't imagine being raised in your life. It would be like a damn straight jacket. Your fuckin' tight-ass world would have killed Joe and smothered me." She and the good sheriff both looked a little grim at that. "Joe's well out of it. Guess I'll find out if I'm right about me."

"You are very much like your fa ... like Joe. Straight spoken unvarnished truth."

"That's one of the nicest things you could say to me, lady, comparing me to Joe."

"My parents told me you had been adopted by a nice family."

I snorted. "And you believed two upstanding people who thought it was a good idea to sneak away from a five-hour-old baby? Get real, lady!"

"We didn't sneak!" she shot back.

"Did you tell Joe or his folks you were leaving? Did you tell the nurses or the doctors or the hospital?" She flushed and looked down. "You left without telling anybody and stuck Joe and his folks with the bill and me! Don't get all high-and-mighty with me, lady. Joe didn't talk about you, but the one time I met his folks they told me plenty. They might've been nasty mean people, but they at least took care of me until Joe finished high school!"

I think she finally realized I wasn't buying any of her innocent routine. She looked at me openly.

"I can't say I'm happy to see you, but that is knee-jerk selfishness."

I interrupted her. "That makes two of us, lady. I can think of a lot of places I'd rather be than here, including where I was." She blinked a couple of times, then continued.

"You being here means I've got to explain to our girls that I made a stupid mistake," she looked at my hard face and pushed on, "I made bad decisions when I was young, and now I have to face the consequences."

"Oh, yay. I always wanted to be the consequences of a bad decision." I put as much sarcasm as I could into my voice.

She turned a little pink but continued, "Now I have to convince seven girls to not do something I did. Do

what I say, not what I did. I know all parents have to say it to ... "

"You're wrong. All parents don't tell their kids that." I interrupted the flow of clichés and assumptions, wondering if she really ever knew Joe at all or if he'd changed that much. "Joe pretty much let me do everything he did. Maybe when we know each other better I'll tell you about him teaching me how to put on a ..."

"Somehow," the sheriff interrupted me this time, "I don't think this is something any of us need to hear."

"More secrets, Sheriff?" He flushed at my accusation.

"If you are going to live with us, we need to talk about how to make your transition into our home easier." I narrowed my eyes at her, but she either ignored me or didn't see. Probably ignored.

"I think you will be much happier here if you strive to fit in with the rest of the community."

"What do you mean fit in?"

"Trask is a conservative town in a conservative county, and you will transition into the community better if you fit in more, look more like the other kids." *good, lord, she sounds just like that social worker lady that came and talked to Joe about his 'parenting style'.*

"Did you study social work at college?" My apparent detour from the logical progression of her thoughts got no response.

"Define fitting in," I said. She beamed like I'd agreed. *good lord, lady, what little world do you inhabit? 'cause it sure ain't reality.*

She looked me up and down, as if trying to decide where to start such a monumental task.

"Well, your hair. Boys around here don't wear it long, so a haircut for starters."

"No. Next?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"I. Said. No." I narrowed my eyes right back at her.

She looked at her perfect husband for guidance. He gave her a look that, if I were going to interpret it, looked very much like 'I told you so'. Apparently her mini-mes never defied her edicts.

"All right, a compromise. I know this transition — *again with the social work words* — is going to be hard for you, so we'll take little baby steps. — *she can't seriously be talking to me* — We'll start with just a trim. Maybe to your shoulders. Until you get used to the change. That will make the final step easier." The beaming again. She'd come up with the perfect solution to begin fitting me into her perfect world.

"No. No haircut. And why are you talking to me like I'm either brain dead or retarded?"

She looked at Sheriff Weatherby again and he shook his head, almost imperceptibly at her, hopefully

telling her to back off and not that I was hopeless. She turned back to me not beaming quite so much.

"And you're clothes," she continued as though the haircut was a done deal and looked me up and down, "are more radical than the kids around here wear. The grunge look isn't really in anymore, at least not here."

I looked down at my too-short worn jeans and too-tight almost-thin-enough-to-read-through t-shirt and back at her. "This isn't a fashion statement, lady. It's all I have."

She seemed genuinely relieved. "Oh, good. Good. We'll take you and get you some new clothes. Pants and shirts that fit, decent shoes, that sort of thing. Good." Her enthusiasm was setting off alarm bells in my head.

"Jeans and t-shirts. I don't wear any of that Yuppy shit."

"Well, we'll have to see what the dress code is at school. And you'll want some long-sleeved collared shirts to cover the ... the ... uhm ... " she nodded vaguely at my neck and left bicep. *good grief, she can't even say the word tattoo.*

"Tattoos. They're called tattoos. You're talking about dressing to cover my tattoos?" She nodded. "They're part of who I am, lady, I don't dress to cover my ink. And we don't have to 'wait and see'," I made air quotes. "I wear jeans and t-shirts. Period!"

She looked at the sheriff again. This conversation was clearly not going as she had hoped. I got the feeling she had her own way most of the time, so I was definitely throwing a monkey wrench into her well-laid plans, and she didn't know how to handle it.

"If you're so embarrassed to have people see me we could just get a big bag and put it over my head. Or maybe one of those burkquas the Muslim women wear. Cover me from head to foot." I stood and gestured from the top of my disheveled curly head to the bottom of my eau de bovine work boots. "This is who I am, lady. You're gonna have to deal with it, 'cause I'm not changing who I am for you or anybody."

In her face I saw the war she was fighting with herself. She was obviously a woman who ran her little fiefdom with conviction and an iron fist in a Velvet glove. Undoubtedly in her perfect world her word was law and no one argued with her. But she didn't know me or how to handle my defiance, so she was trying to find balance between working her way into my life and just grabbing me by the scruff of my neck and saying, 'I'm your mother and my word is law'.

Finally, her decision made, Mrs. Weatherby stood, very much the take-charge mother figure, a role I'm sure she was very used to.

"Well, I think we've gone as far as we can here and now. Ruel, grab your thing and let's go home. Jim," she turned to her husband, "you need to come help me get the girls from Mrs. Caruthers house then come home and get some rest. We have the rest of the day to figure out how to fit a boy into a house full of girls and what to tell them when they get home from school." She looked at me, "We can visit the school Monday and get you registered. I'll need the name of your school in North Dakota to get your records transferred." Into her neat little organized world, I dropped my next bomb.

"I don't have any school records."

"Everyone has school records, Ruel." She looked so confident, so in charge, I confess to taking great delight in dropping the rest of my bomb.

"I never went to school."

7 — School Days, School Days, to Hell with the Golden Rule Days

I watched Mrs. Weatherby drop back into her seat like an egg dropping out of the northbound end of a southbound goose. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish I'd caught the one time Joe took me fishing. I had to throw it back, because we didn't have a fishing license and that was the only way the Game Warden would let Joe off without a damn big fine, but it looked just like Mrs. Weatherby, only with scales.

well, that went well.

"Ne ... never?"

"Nope. Never been to school. I was too busy working." I lounged in my green leather-covered chair and smiled, enjoying her discomfort. *silver linings, ruel, silver linings.*

"But ... But ... But every child goes to school. It's the law." She looked at her sheriff husband for confirmation. He nodded, yep, it's the law.

"There aren't too many kids in the oils camps. No kids, no schools, and no truant officers."

"But ... but I know some of the workers have their families with them. There must be schools. There MUST be." Her orderly mind couldn't grasp anyplace in the USA that didn't have schools and, of course, the law.

"Those workers live in town, not in the camps. Joe bounced at the whorehouses and strip clubs in the camps. Not at the bars in town." The landed fish was back and was turning bright pink.

She stopped gulping and just stared at me, analyzing this strange creature who had landed in her orderly world.

"Ellie? You OK?" Sheriff Weatherby placed a concerned hand on his stunned wife's shoulder and shook gently. "Honey?" She turned her head slowly and looked at him as if she'd never seen him before. Then just as slowly she turned back to me. Then she exploded.

"WHAT the HELL was that man thinking?" She came up out of the chair like a baseball out of a pitching machine and got right in my face. "Of all the IRRESPONSIBLE SELFISH ASININE things to do. Of all the STUPID, IDIOTIC, MORONIC ..."

I got right back in her face. "SHUT UP! JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!!! You STOP TALKING ABOUT JOE like that. YOU weren't there. You don't know a FUCKIN' THING about our lives. I was DOING FINE making a GOOD living WORKING HARD, before the STUPID COPS pulled me out of MY LIFE and shipped me off here to Bumfuck, Wyoming. So don't you DARE CRITICIZE JOE for doing the BEST he could by me!"

The sheriff tried to calm me down, while his stupid wife stood there white as a sheet with tears running down her face. But I didn't care. And I didn't stop.

"YOU'RE a great one to call JOE IRRESPONSIBLE AND SELFISH. While you were having YOUR

FUCKIN' education HANDED TO YOU on a FUCKIN' silver platter, Joe was working his BUTT OFF keeping FOOD on our table and a ROOF over our heads. While you were DATING and going to PARTIES, he was finding people to WATCH ME while he WORKED. Do you have ANY IDEA how HARD it is to find ANYONE to look after a BABY in an OIL FIELD? Everyone is WORKING HARD. But he ALWAYS found SOMEONE. And when he wasn't WORKING HE didn't shuttle me off to someone else. While YOU were FUCKIN' AROUND ON THE FUCKIN' RIVIERA and buying new CLOTHES, he KEPT ME WITH HIM." I was so angry I was shaking, but I was starting to run out of steam. And I was pissed I'd let them see they got to me.

"DON'T YOU EVER criticize Joe to me AGAIN, lady! HE taught me how to WORK HARD and take PRIDE in a job. How a MAN ALWAYS does the job RIGHT. How FRIENDS are worth TREATING right. How to fix things and MAKE DO when you can't get new and how you DON'T HAVE TO HAVE every fuckin' thing you see to be happy. A HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATED TEEN-AGER taught me the most important part of being a MAN is KEEP YOUR WORD, FINISH the JOB in front of you, and TAKE RESPONSIBILITY for your actions. He might have been NOBODY'S idea of a good father, but he was MY FATHER, the ONLY FAMILY I had and NO DAMN BITCH WHO RAN OUT ON HIM gets to criticize him!?"

I turned and slammed out of the office, ignoring the stares of the deputies gathered in the outer office, and marched straight back to the cubby I'd slept in, only to find the Deputy who'd wiped the shit off my face the night before, sitting in the desk chair writing a report. That jerked me up short.

"You OK, Kid? You look kinda pale."

"Shut up!" I snapped at her. I grabbed my nearly-empty backpack and strode back to the sheriff's office doorway.

Without looking at Sheriff or Mrs. Weatherby, I spit out, "I'll be outside." Then I stalked out the double front doors right into a snowstorm. *shit*. I was frozen within minutes, but I didn't go back inside. I just stood, waiting for the sheriff and his wife. I was glad they didn't take long. I couldn't feel my toes or fingers by the time they got outside. I refused to look at either one of them. I was fuckin' furious with these — assholes — judging Joe and me.

=====

Ellie stood staring at the empty doorway where a hurt angry fourteen-year-old had been seconds before. She turned to Jim, stunned at the anger the boy had flung at her.

"Jim?"

Jim drew her into a hug and shook his head. He loved his wife, but dear, Lord, she was pig-headed.

"Ellie, for once you need to hear this — I told you so. This boy is not going to bow to your rules. You might have the girls under your thumb, but this kid has been raised in one of the roughest environments there is. To him you aren't the Commander-in-Chief like you are at home. You're just the woman who gave him away. You're going to have to learn a new way of relating to him. And you're going to have to earn his respect, not demand it."

"You make me sound like a dictator," she objected, wiping her eyes with her hands.

"You are, and kids NEED rules and clear direction growing up. But this kid has a whole different outlook

on life. What we know about normal kids isn't going to work. We're off the charts and navigating by the seat of our pants with this one." Jim hugged her once, hard, then said, "Come on. We need to go. I'm pretty sure he'll stand out there all day, turning into a snowman, if we don't."

Pushing through the double doors, they saw Ruel standing on the sidewalk, staring at the street, snow gathering on his uncovered head and shoulders. Ellie started toward him, but Jim stopped her. Shaking his head, he pointed her toward the family van.

"Leave it, El. Give him time." Then he headed toward the loaner unit, shaking his head. Joe Black might have raised the boy, but he sure had his mother's stubborn streak. Only question was, who was more stubborn, and would HE survive the clash.

=====

Sheriff Weatherby motioned me into the cab of a unit he was using until his got a new windshield. I managed to get the door open using my stiff fingers, but I couldn't even feel the damn seatbelt let alone buckle it. I stared stonily out the front window while he buckled me in, not acknowledging him in any way.

His wife glanced once at me before getting into a dark blue van and pulling away into the swirling snow. The sheriff pulled out of his parking slot and followed her through the streets of the small, neatly laid out town to a yellow clapboard house near a large brick building that said 'Trask Elementary School' on a sign over the front door.

"We've got to stop and pick up our two youngest daughters, Faith and Hope." I ignored him. *i might have to live with these people, but that doesn't mean i have to talk to them.* He got out of the unit and opened his wife's car door, then together they walked up the snow-covered walkway to the cheerily painted blue front door. *this place is so damn adorable I think I'm gonna hurl!*

I watched through the front window as the door opened and the Weatherbys went inside, the door closing behind them to keep the wind and snow — and me — out. They were inside long enough I was starting to worry about my toes and fingers again. Eventually, though, the cheery blue door opened, and the Weatherbys came out, each carrying a small snowsuit-encased bundle, the sheriff's slightly larger than his wife's. They went to opposite sides of the van, opened the doors, and each buckled their bundle into a car seat that looked only slightly less complicated than those used for the astronauts in the space shuttle.

Mrs. Weatherby got in the van, started it, carefully looked both ways, and pulled out into the street. The sheriff kicked the snow off his boots before climbing into the cab of the loaner unit. He looked over at me in my worn too-small jeans and t-shirt and no jacket, huddled into my seat, trying to keep from succumbing to hypothermia, and went a little pale.

"Shit, Ruel, I'm sorry. I plum forgot to leave the rig running and the heat on. I'm not used to having anybody riding with me. Well, hell, this isn't a very good way to start off being your stepdad is it, trying to turn ..."

I interrupted before he got anymore out. "You're not any kind of my dad, step or otherwise! I don't need a father! I had one!" My words and tone were venomous. *i'll be damned if i'm going to let these people be anything to me. to hell with them!*

His words froze in his mouth, and he flushed dark at the words I hurled at him. Then he started the truck

and cranked up the heat and pulled out after his wife.

"I know you're hurting right now, Ruel, but you ..." I interrupted him again.

"You don't know a fuckin' thing about me! You didn't even know I existed twenty-four hours ago, so don't pretend you give a shit about me!" He pulled the car over to the side of the road so fast I almost got whiplash. *maybe i shouldn't piss off the guy with the gun.*

Sheriff Weatherby turned off the truck and shifted in his seat so he could look at me. His light blue eyes were as cold as a winter sky.

"You're right. Yesterday I didn't know you existed. You coming here was as unpleasant a surprise for me as you learning you had to come was for you. I'm angry with just about everybody and everything right now. So I probably shouldn't even be talking to you, because I'll probably say something I'll regret. But I'm going to say it anyway and apologize later if I screw it up." He said all this in one big breath, so he paused long enough to breathe.

"I'm going to cut you some slack, Ruel, because I know you've been dealt a shit sandwich. I was eleven when we buried my father, but I had a mother and grandparents who cared about me, so I won't pretend to know what you feel. But I DO know what it feels like to lose a dad, so don't give me that 'poor little me' crap! You're not the only one who's been hurt like that! And I worked as a roustabout one summer when I was in college, so I have some idea of how you grew up."

"Only lasted one summer?" I sneered at him. Apparently my instincts for self-preservation had taken a vacation along with what little control I had over my temper.

"Yeah. I only lasted one summer," he smiled slightly. "The pay was great but the life style was more than I could handle. I know enough about it to know your dad was tough as nails to work there. And you must be too, to grow up there. Coming here must be like moving to the far side of the moon. I get all that. No matter what you think, I do understand you are going through a hell of a lot for a fourteen-year-old. And I know I'm not your dad. I'll never try to be your dad." I opened my mouth to speak and he put one large hand over it.

"I really am holding onto my temper by a hair, Boy, so don't push me!" I closed my mouth.

"I get you got a temper. Do you understand I have one, too?" I nodded. "You also need to understand that as mad as I am with my wife right now, she's still my wife. And my daughters are my daughters. No matter how bad you've had it, you're a stranger, and I will choose my family over you. You understand that?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I got it! I'm nothing to you. I'm on my own. Nothing new there. I've been on my own since I was ten!"

"Good. Now, so we don't kill each other in the next few weeks, we need to lay some ground rules. Just to make some boundaries clear for both of us. Agreed?" I shrugged.

"I won't call you son or call myself your stepfather, stepdad, or any other reference to being related to you. Agreed?" Nod.

"You will refrain from using the word fuck or any rendition of it within hearing of my wife and daughters and, preferably my own, although that last is negotiable within reason. Agreed?" I hesitated and thought about what he offered in trade. Reluctantly I nodded.

"What else do you want to have in this agreement?" he asked. I was surprised and showed it.

"I figured it'd be you telling me. Isn't that the way adults usually screw kids over?"

"This is an agreement. Not a manifesto. Two-way street."

"I chose how I look. Clothes, hair, the works. Agreed?"

"As long as it doesn't violate school dress code, agreed."

I shook my head. "Un uh. I choose. I'm not having some fu...reaking teacher telling me what to wear."

"Ruel, the school dress code is non-negotiable."

"Then I don't go to school."

"Also non-negotiable. How about as far as is possible you decide what you wear? That's the best I can do on that." I shrugged and nodded.

"You don't call my wife or any other woman a bitch. Agreed?" I thought about it then nodded.

He started the truck again, which was good because I was about frozen. "I think that's enough to start." He pulled onto the highway and followed his wife's fading tire tracks through the falling snow. "If one of us wants to add to it, both have to agree. Agreed?" I nodded.

The Weatherbys lived about twelve miles west of Trask, in a big house. There seemed to be some property with the house, plus a barn, a garage, and an assortment of other outbuildings. We pulled into a graveled driveway and turn-around and, looking at the large rambling structure surrounded by winter-brown grass and the remnants to a flower garden, I knew not all Wyoming ranch houses looked like the nightmare construction from last night. This house was no particular style, but in my own head I knew this house was a home. I just didn't want it to be my home. I wanted no part of it.

We caught up to Mrs. Weatherby as she parked the van close to the walkway leading to the house. The sheriff got out of the truck and hustled up to the dark blue rig, opened one of the side doors, and extracted one of the kid-shaped bundles from the space-age car seat. Mrs. Weatherby got the smaller one free, and they carried them up the walk and through the door.

I slowly got out of the unit, pulling my backpack out with me and drug my feet up the walkway. It was freezing cold outside, and the wind was blowing the snow all over, and I had no coat, but I was pathologically reluctant to go into that house. It felt like a giant maw waiting to swallow whatever was left of Ruel Black down into its gullet, where it would digest him and change him, spitting back out a new 'acceptable' version, a shadow version, of who I was now.

I squared my shoulders. I was no coward. I faced my fears — Joe taught me that. And I wasn't some wuss

who caved to pressure to be someone I wasn't. I might have to live here, but I was going to live here as Ruel Black, son of the best bouncer and worst father in North Dakota. I held my near-empty backpack tighter and started up the walk to my future home. I'd almost reached it when the maw — I mean the door — opened and Sheriff Weatherby poked his head out.

"You're gonna freeze to death out there without a coat. Get in here and get warmed up. You're turning blue." He held the door wide welcoming me into light and warmth. *well, hell, joe. i am freezing, and you always said don't look a gift horse in the mouth. of course, you were talking about free hookers, but i guess i can stretch it to cover accepting shelter from the woman who abandoned us both.* I walked through the door.

8 — Nothing But the Truth Can Hurt

I barely got through the door when I was confronted with two brown-haired brown-eyed mini-mes. One was short. The other was really short. Both looked at me like I had two heads and possibly two tails.

I looked at the Sheriff for some clue what to do in the face of two such intense stares. He just smiled at me, clearly abandoning me to my fate. I looked back into the solemn brown eyes. The really short one had a thumb in her mouth. *are short females like tall females? how the hell do i talk to a female who isn't a hooker?*

"My name is Faith," lisped the short mini-me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Ruel."

She smiled, showing a missing front tooth. "I'm almost six. How old are you?"

"I'm fourteen." *ok, questions are good. i can answer questions.*

"I like to dance. Do you like to dance?" She did some imperfect little-girl pirouettes. *huh. I didn't know little girls did that. i could talk dancing. i knew a lot of dancers.*

"I don't, but I know a lot of women who do." I heard her dad shuffle nervously behind me as I looked around the room. *wonder where she dances. not here obviously.*

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Your pole," I said, continuing to look, wondering if there was a room somewhere. I mean, she's short. A pole her size could be anywhere. Maybe it's portable, and they move it wherever they want it.

She put her miniature fists on her hips and asked, in a tone very much reserved for people too stupid to live and sounding remarkably like her mother, "WHAT are you talking about?"

I looked at her standing there all indignant. "Your dancing pole, of course. I've never met a dancer yet who didn't have a ..."

A large hard-knuckled hand twisted itself into the neck of my t-shirt, managing to catch a good portion of my hair trailing down my back. The hand jerked me away from the indignant mini-me staring me down and began pulling me toward a closed door on the opposite side of the living room from where I'd entered.

"Ruel and I have to talk, Faith. Run tell Mommy we might be a little while." Opening the door, a very angry sheriff shoved me through into what was possibly his home office. One look told me the guy was basically a slob. No wonder he kept the door closed. Kicking the door shut behind him, he shoved me forward and pushed me into a rolling office chair with such force it slid away from him and dumped me on the floor. He stood over me, breathing hard and clearly ready to rip me a new one.

"What the hell do you think you were doing?" he demanded.

Pulling myself up on the desk in the corner, I rubbed my tailbone and turned on him, "What the hell are

YOU doing?" Then I looked around the crowded cluttered space. "Shit, Sheriff, you're a closet slob. Does the little woman make you keep the door shut so ..." He gave me a shot to the shoulder hard enough to shove me half-way onto the buried surface of the desk, sending papers slipping and sliding to the floor like giant confetti.

"I asked you what you thought you were doing with my daughter!" His face was so red I thought he was going to stroke, and was so close to mine I could have given him mouth-to-mouth without moving more than an inch. He clenched his hands into white-knuckled fists, and I could see in his eyes he wanted to hit me, so I looked him in the face and waited, daring him to punch a fourteen-year-old kid. I knew how to take a punch — Joe taught me that.

He deflated as suddenly as he had exploded. Unclenching one fist he passed his hand over his face, maybe trying to wipe away the anger. The redness drained from his face leaving it an unhealthy gray. I toed the chair toward him and he sat heavily.

"You called my five-year-old a pole dancer. Did you think that was funny?" He scowled at me.

"She started it, talking about dancing. What the hell was I supposed to think. I wasn't trying to be funny. I was just trying to talk to her, and it was your own damn fault anyway."

"Excuse me?!" His eyebrows shot up into the dark hair drooping slightly over his forehead. "How is that my fault?"

I turned my back to the room and looked out the tiny window. I was debating with myself, trying to decide how honest to be, or whether a smart ass remark was better. But like it or not I had to live with these people. Pissing them off too much wasn't going to get me anywhere but into the system. Joe always said, 'DO WHAT YOU GOTTA DO, KID', so I went for honest and hoped I didn't regret it later.

"I asked for some clue on how to talk to your daughters, and you threw me under the bus."

"What are you talking about?"

I turned and looked at him. "I was asking for help in there, and you blew me off." He looked confused. I turned back to the snow globe scene outside the window.

"I don't know anything about little girls. I just figured they were shorter versions of other females. She said she liked dancing. The only dancers I know are strippers. I figured that's what she was talking about. How the hell was I supposed to know she was talking about something else? It's not like I know anything about girls!"

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Jim sat frozen and silent, staring at the boy's stiff back. The kid had called it right enough. He was pissed, resentful that this kid was invading his quiet orderly life, bringing chaos and uncertainty. But instead of dealing with it he'd tried to cover it up with a smile, all the while enjoying the kid's obvious discomfort when confronted with two little girls. Maybe he was the bastard instead of this discarded fourteen-year-old.

=====

"You're serious?"

"As death and taxes."

"But, you said Joe hired people to look after you. Some of them must have been women." He was trying to normalize what was clearly not normal.

"Do you know what kind of women work in the oil fields, Sheriff?" He shook his head. "Strippers and prostitutes. My babysitter was whichever whore was vertical and not wrapped around a pole. Sometimes they changed hourly. Whoever wasn't with a client got me. If everyone was busy they'd find a room with an empty corner, lace my bottle with NyQuil, and go about their business."

I was glancing over my shoulder at his pale face, when a soft sound jerked my head around toward the door.

"Oh, Baby," Jim Weatherby breathed.

oops!

With her right hand on the door as if just in the act of opening it, Ellie Weatherby stood frozen and weeping. Her brown eyes were bottomless depths of misery locked onto my own brilliant blue ones. Her left hand covered her mouth, stifling the sobs that leaked nearly soundlessly from between her pale lips. And she was pale, nearly as white as she had been in the Justice Center in Trask when she'd first seen me.

The sheriff jumped from the chair and reached her side in one long stride. He wrapped his arms around her and tried to lead her from the room, but she kept a death grip on the door, forcing him to either wrench her free by main force or wait her out. He waited.

I didn't look away. I don't even know if I could have looked away. I don't know how long she had been standing there. I didn't like her. As far as I was concerned she was a selfish coward, and I wasn't feeling too bad she had heard the truth. *guess the truth hurts, huh, bitch.*

We stood staring at each other for a couple of lifetimes, she in her husband's embrace and me alone by the window. *a good metaphor for our lives.*

"Jim, please," she said softly, trying to remove his arms from around her. After studying her pale resolute face, the sheriff released her, then looked at me with a plea showing clearly in his pale blue eyes. He stayed in the doorway, hands hanging uselessly by his side, ready to jump to her rescue again if it proved necessary.

Ellie Weatherby turned toward me, her face still damp with tears. It took her three steps to reach me, and, without a word, she wrapped her arms around me and squeezed, as if she were trying to force good in and bad out.

I stood with my arms at my sides, stiff as a statute, not responding to her. She rested her head against my chest, and her fresh tears began to soak the thin material of my t-shirt. *shit, lady, get a grip!* Finally I couldn't take it anymore.

"I don't need your sympathy, Mrs. Weatherby." I squirmed enough to work my arms free from her death grip, and pushed her away from me. "I don't need or want your sympathy!" I repeated loudly. "Enough

with all the touchy-feely shit! Stop!" Tears still dripped slowly down her face, and she reached for me again.

I held my hands up. "Stop it! Stop, damnit!" She stood with her arms half raised, clearly still wanting to hug me. "Sheriff, do something!"

Huskily he said, "First thing to understand about women, Ruel. They are touchers. It's best to just go with the flow." But he did move forward to intercept his wife, pulling her outstretched arms around his own waist. Maybe he was remembering my true confession moment.

"First thing to understand about Black men. We aren't!" I snapped angrily and retreated as far across the tiny room as I could, putting the office chair between me and Mrs. Weatherby's seeking arms.

From the shelter of her husband's restraining arms, she finally spoke. "Oh, Ruel, I am so sorry. To be raised that way. You really must hate me for not being around. I hate me for not being around." She hung her head with obvious shame. "I don't know if I can ever make it up to you or forgive myself."

"Stop!" I threw the command into the room as sternly as I could. "Darnit, give it a rest, lady. Shit! I told you, I don't hate you. Until Joe got flattened I thought I'd had the best childhood ever."

"But you missed so much. I'm so sorry I wasn't ... "

"Will you stop this shit! I can't miss what I never had. It's done. Over. Drop it! Shit, I only told the sheriff that to explain why I didn't know how to talk to your kid. I don't need all this fu...reaking drama."

"Ellie," the sheriff said, "don't we have some decisions to make before the girls get home?" *good distraction tactic.*

She pulled away from her husband. "You're right, we have to figure out where Ruel is going to sleep and how to explain my ... him." She passed her husband, heading toward the living room, wiping her cheeks with the hands.

"Thank you," I said simply.

"What for?" she asked, looking back over her shoulder.

"For not calling me a mistake again."

9 — No Place Like Home on the Range

She blushed a deep fuchsia, then gave me a watery smile and went on into the living room.

"Jim, Ruel, come on. We have a lot of things to do and only a few hours to do them." Back to the take-charge mother. Sheriff Weatherby looked at me and tilted his head toward the living room.

"Best we just cave now and follow instructions like good little soldiers. Otherwise, the repercussions are phenomenal." He preceded me through the door. *all friends together. shit!* I followed reluctantly.

"Jim, go find Charlie and get that twin bed out from up in the barn. See if it's in good shape or needs fixing." Sheriff Weatherby turned smartly and exited through the front door, snagging his coat from the coat rack as he passed, into the cold and snow, a soldier sent on a mission by his commanding officer.

"Ruel, come with me." She turned and walked into the kitchen where both mini-mes were having a snack of apple slices. They still looked at me like I had two heads but might now be sporting a third tail.

Mrs. Weatherby opened a door almost invisible against the wallpapered wall because it had been papered to match. She reached out and pulled a string hanging from the ceiling, turning on a single light bulb, and by the dim light I could see stairs descending into the gloom of a basement. At the bottom of the stairs she threw a switch, and the basement was flooded with light. It gleamed from the enamel surfaces of a washer and dryer, and disappeared into the darkness toward the back of the large space.

"There are some cardboard boxes over in that corner," she pointed right, "near the workbench. Get them and bring them upstairs, please?" She retreated back up the wooden steps without waiting for me to respond. *damn bossy bitch.* I moved toward an empty workbench I could just make out in the shadows. Stacked neatly beside it were half a dozen assembled cardboard boxes. Picking them up, I walked to the bottom of the steps, flipped the light switch with my elbow, and climbed the stairs, peering around the boxes so I didn't take the fast route back down.

In the kitchen, the mini-mes had finished their apples, and Mrs. Weatherby was scrubbing their hands and faces while they grimaced and tried to pull away.

"There are two possibilities for your room," she said as she scrubbed. She set the really short mini-me, who'd poked her thumb in her mouth as soon as the scrubbing stopped, on the floor, while the short mini-me jumped off her chair by herself. Mrs. Weatherby walked through the living room toward the stairs, motioning for me to drop the boxes by the office door, then mounted the staircase to the second floor. With her arm she gestured left down the hallway.

"All the girls' bedrooms are down there. Everyone is doubled up except Grace; she has a small room to herself." She pointed to a door opposite the head of the stairs. "That's the upstairs bathroom — double sink, tub, shower, toilet. We remodeled a few years ago combining the old bathroom, which was originally a trunk storage room when the house was built, with a very small bedroom, almost a closet really, to make a nice large bathroom. A practical necessity with so many girls."

She moved right from the stairs, the opposite direction from the girls' bedrooms. "That," she said, indicating a door on the left side, "leads to the attic. It's unfinished, just storage. It's freezing cold in the winter and a furnace in the summer."

She moved to the door on the right side of the hall and turned the knob, opening the door to reveal a very fancy bedroom. The bed had four posts, one at each corner, and a ceiling of fabric that matched the curtains and the bedspread. The carpet looked new and hadn't seen much wear. Everything in the room was new and fresh and matching and — pink.

"This is the guest room. This is one possibility for your bedroom." The room was flowered and the bed had a roof and the room was — pink. *hell, i'd get inside and not be able to move. double hell, i wouldn't be able to breathe.*

"Uhm. No. I don't want to deprive your guests." I didn't give a shit about their guests, I just didn't want it. I got claustrophobia just standing in the doorway. *please, God, let there be another place.*

We left the shrine to good taste and guests, Mrs. Weatherby carefully closing the door after we exited. "If you want that room, Ruel, we will find another place for guests," she said, but I could tell she was glad I'd said no. *gay.* We went back down the stairs and she turned toward the office. She grasped the doorknob, looking at me before she twisted it.

"I know you were in here earlier, but that was when you just thought it was an office. I know it's a horrible mess, but try to imagine it cleaned out with a bed and dresser." Taking a deep breath, she opened the door like a real estate agent trying to convince the buyer that fixer upper didn't mean total disaster.

It was small but no smaller than a lot of the rooms I'd had in warehouses and bigger than some. *i better not tell her that. probably set off another round of damn hugs.*

I looked around, noting the small window that had reminded me of a snow globe earlier, a closet practically hidden behind a large brown metal filing cabinet, and built-in bookshelves running around two sides of the room from the closet in the corner of one wall around under the window in the adjacent wall and to the corner, forming a ten inch-wide ledge about two feet off the floor. I touched the ledge which, except in a couple of places, was all that was visible of the bookshelves. *what i could do with these!*

By scuffing aside some of the debris on the floor I could tell the floor was not only not carpeted, but it was unfinished wood. Not rough but definitely unfinished. It seemed odd in such a well-cared for house. "What did this room used to be? Before it was an office."

"This used to be the paymaster office for a stage line that started here and branched off from the mainline that ran from Billings to Cheyenne." Sheriff Weatherby entered the crowded little space. "My great grandfather started and ran it, so the paymaster was located here. That window," he pointed to my snow globe, "used to be a metal Dutch door. Great Grandfather would open the top half to issue pay vouchers. When my grandparents moved in they replaced it with a window. The door was narrow — to cut down on chances of robbery — which is why the window is so narrow. You can see the waves in the glass. Original to the window. Grandma kept saying she was going to put in a larger window and turn this into her sewing room, but she never did." He touched the ledge. "My dad used to display his model airplanes on this ledge."

by the way he talks about it, like it's a damn history book, i know he doesn't want me to have his messy little office, but it would make such a cool bedroom. shit. they don't even want me here. why do i care if they like my choice? because they'll throw me into the system if i piss them off too much.

"Uhm, what about the attic? I don't mind heat and cold." I avoided Sheriff Weatherby's eye so he wouldn't see how much I wanted this little room. I'd already pissed off the guy with the gun enough today.

"Ruel, the attic has unfinished floors and ceiling. Just rafters and ceiling joists. We'd have to haul in some 4x8 sheets of plywood before we could even put a bed up there."

"The basement?"

The sheriff leaned against the door and looked at me — hard. "Mr. Black, what's going on? You've been offered two perfectly good rooms. Why not the guest room?"

"It's pink. And for your guests," I added quickly, remembering what he'd said about family came first.

"And this room?"

"It's your office."

Sheriff Weatherby stared at me for a bit then — "Ellie, can I have a minute with Mr. Black? Maybe you can tell Charlie where that bed frame was last you saw it." She looked from one of us to the other, started to protest, and finally shook her head and left.

"Sit." He pointed to the rolling office chair that had unceremoniously dumped me on my ass earlier. "I'm going to tell you a story." I rolled my eyes and sat gingerly on the bucking chair. He perched on the edge of the avalanche-prone desk.

"Once upon a time a young man was offered two fine bedroom choices ..."

"Sheriff, I ... "

"Shut up! I'm telling this story. The young man seemed an ungrateful brat because he refused the two fine rooms. But in reality he was being tactful. The first fine room, the vaunted Guest Bedroom," he lowered his voice dramatically, "was decorated to within an inch of its life and gave every man in the high plains states the heebie jeebies." He voice went back to normal volume. "The other room was part of his host's family history and the young man would not deprive the heir of such a room.

"How am I doing so far?"

"Pretty good. Do you do card tricks, too"

His voice sank dramatically again. "The host had made it his 'office' at the insistence of his loving wife because it held so much of his family's history. What the wife and the young man did not know was the host hated the small historic room, and that is why his office was such a fucking disaster, — *cool. the uptight sheriff was swearing* — so he wouldn't have to actually use it."

"But why?" I was playing it cool, but he was drawing me into the history of the room with his story.

"Because my great grandfather was a right bastard. He beat his wife and children, cheated on his marriage vows and pretty much every business dealing he ever had. My grandfather never used this room. Too

many bad memories. His ranch office was in what is now the master bedroom. My father was never around his grandfather much so he succumbed to the charms of the room and used it. I refuse to use it for other than paper storage. Hell, most of the papers in here are junk."

"But you're too young to even remember your great grandfather. Why not enjoy the room?"

He looked at me for a bit, as if making a decision. "His name was Philemon James Weatherby." *poor guy*. Then he looked at me again, waiting. I thought about everything I'd see here and at the County Justice Center. The nameplate on the sheriff's office door popped into my head — P. James Weatherby.

"Holy shit, you're named after him!"

"Very good. When I was a boy, my parents called me Phil. My grandfather always called me Jimmy. I had a ferocious temper, used to get into fights all the time. Even put some kids in the hospital. Grandad sat me down one day and told me about his father. Everything! Which is something he never did with my dad."

"Why not? Maybe he would have named you something else."

"Grandad never saw the need. My dad was the mildest, most gentle man I've ever met. He was a dreamer, not an angry young man. He was killed in a tractor accident when I was eleven. Started day dreaming and drove the tractor right into the river. It was spring, the river was high. He never had a chance. My grandparents and my mother raised me. Grandad finally told me about his father because he said I was headed the same way if I didn't turn my life around. I did. That day. I never went by Phil again. And I never set foot in this room again until the day I packed up my dad's things.

He looked around the cramped dusty space and gave a little shiver. "I know it's stupid, but the room feels cursed, like if I spend time in it I'll go back to that angry destructive boy. I figure, why take the chance."

"Doesn't your wife notice you don't use the room?"

He looked down at the floor. "Until I finally got it too cluttered to use, I'd come in here, close the door, then sneak out the ... " he paused and actually looked around the cramped space like someone was hiding in the stacks of old magazines eavesdropping, " ... the secret passage."

I barked out a laugh. "Yeah, right. You expect me to believe that?" I smirked at him to let him know I wasn't an idiot, but he didn't grin back.

He pointed to the inaccessible closet. "The closet floor lifts up. There's a ladder that leads to the basement. I used to climb down and sneak out the basement door. Go sit in the machine shop and talk to Charlie."

"You're kidding? Why did a ranch house need a secret passage?" Now the almost invisible-closet drew my attention like a magnet. *damn. i really want this room!*

"Not ranch house. Paymaster's Office. Remember I told you my great grandfather was a cheat?" I nodded. "That was his escape, in case his cheating ways caught up to him — with a gun. He told the family, when he built it, it was in case of robbery. Grandad didn't buy it."

"Cool, but why didn't you just tell your wife you didn't want to use the room?" I gestured around to all the junk. "This is a lot of effort to go to just to NOT use a room!"

He sighed. "That's a story for a other day. The point of TODAY'S story is, you can have this room. I don't mind. And I'd rather see you here than choking to death in the 'perfect guest room from hell'. So," he waved a hand around the room, "yes or no?" I hesitated, trying to decide if he was serious. "You want to visit the 'guest room' again, just to help you decide?"

"NO! Good lord, no! I accept your offer to sacrifice your office just to make me feel welcome." I said sarcastically then looked around at the clutter. "How long will it take me to go through all this? I'll be sleeping on the floor a long time or will have choked to death in the 'guest room' by the time I've sorted it all out and packed it."

"That's the beauty of fake clutter. We should be able to box it up in a few hours. I'll haul it to the basement, telling my beautiful wife I'm going to clean a corner down there for my office. We'll move the desk, chair, and file cabinet down there, pile the boxes in neat stacks, and every time Ellie is out of the house for a few hours I'll have Charlie burn a box or two. Eventually no more boxes, my new office is nice and organized, and you have the cursed room." This last he said with way too much glee.

"You know, Sheriff, for a cop, you have a very devious mind." I was trying to be snide but a tinge of admiration crept in.

He smiled broadly. "THAT is why I'm a GOOD cop!"

"And I'm safe from the curse," I asserted.

"How do you figure?" he asked, standing from his perch, clearly ready to rid himself of the room's burden.

"Because my name is not Philemon, thank God!" I stood, too.

"I'll go tell Ellie her beautiful guest room is safe. Then we can start packing up this crap. I'll get Charlie to help." He looked up to the ceiling, crossed himself, and intoned, "Thank you Baby Jesus."

"You Catholic?"

"Nope," he said as he left my new bedroom.

10 — There is Nothin' Like a Pissed Off Dame

I followed the sheriff out the door to fetch the cardboard boxes Mrs. Weatherby had me bring up from the basement. Instead of heading to the kitchen to tell Mrs. Weatherby her guest room was safe, he detoured to the front door and threw it open just as an older man reached it carrying pieces of varnished wood. He brought the pieces, which turned out to be an unassembled bed frame, inside and leaned them against a living room wall.

Sheriff Weatherby gestured to the older man. "Ruel, this is Charlie Weston. Charlie, Ruel Black." I shook hand with the short wiry man, noting the permanent grease stains under his fingernails and in the creases of his knuckles.

"You're a mechanic," I said with certainty, nodding at his hands, which were also callused and rough. He laughed the raspy laugh of a heavy smoker.

"Guess that's no secret," he chuckled.

"What do you work on," I asked. He gave me a look, probably wondering why a kid would be interested in what an old man did.

"Most anything. If it's mechanical I work on it."

"Charlie is our foreman," the sheriff explained. "He keeps the ranch end running while I'm busy chasing bad guys."

"Ranch?"

"Yep. The Weatherby place isn't real big, 'bout 2500 acres but big enough to grow some alfalfa, run some cattle, a few horses." He looked at the sheriff. "I'm gonna go out and work on that old Jimmy, but you best be prepared to admit defeat. It's too old. Can't be fixed."

"Charlie, wait. I have some inside work we need your help with. We're cleaning out my office to make a bedroom for Ruel." Charlie's eyebrows rose, whether from the unexpected news about the office or wondering why the Weatherbys would be making a bedroom for a stranger I wasn't certain. He nodded once. *a man of few words. i like that.*

Sheriff Weatherby was right. In spite of the two mini-mes running around under our feet, loading and moving the boxes of junk was quick, especially with Mrs. Weatherby and him loading and Charlie and me hauling. We'd started about 10:00, and by noon the room was almost empty. It goes pretty damn fast when everything just gets shoved in a box. Mrs. Weatherby took her two daughters with her and left about 11:30 to make lunch — I mean dinner, and Charlie, the sheriff and I finished loading the last few boxes.

Charlie refused to stay to eat, saying, "My missus packed my favorite lunch, and by jingo I'm gonna eat it. Not every day she makes pasties with her mama's recipe." He disappeared toward the barn promising to bring the mattress with him when he came back to help move the furniture downstairs.

As Sheriff Weatherby and I headed toward the kitchen, he stopped me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Faith likes horses, dancing, and rabbits. In that order. Talk about any of those and you're gold." His

attention shifted away from me and toward the kitchen where we could hear high-pitched little-girl voices.

"Here's your chance. Dinnertime."

Dinner was — interesting. I've never eaten with two mini-mes, one five (the short one) and one two (the really short one with the thumb addiction). Small children (the thumb) are messy. There was at least as much soup and grilled cheese sandwich bits on the table and the mini-me as inside her, maybe more. Faith, the five-year-old who likes horses, dancing, and rabbits (in that order), was marginally neater than Hope, the two-year-old. But she was slower, so slow that Hope fell asleep in her soup bowl before Faith was half finished.

I watched Hope's head lying in the soup bowl with her mop of hair spilling all around her head like a curly brown chia pet. The position looked uncomfortable.

"Is she alright? She won't drown, will she?" Sheriff Weatherby looked at her briefly, lifted one side of her curly hair to check the level of soup in the bowl, and shook his head.

"Just a dribble in the bottom," the sheriff reassured me. "She's fine."

"Won't she have a stiff neck when she wakes up?"

He was wiping soup and sandwich pieces from the vinyl table covering around the limp kid. "No," he shook his head, "kids are basically boneless, all cartilage. Positions that would send me to the chiropractor don't phase them at all."

=====

As Jim wiped the table he watched the boy watch them. He wondered if the kid had ever before had a normal home-cooked meal at a table. Curiosity softened the glacial eyes as the boy watched the two little girls. How deprived was a kid if watching two children eat was so foreign to him? And how strong did a kid's character have to be to resist the inevitable pull toward bitterness and cynicism such deprivation inevitably produced? Tough kid.

=====

Having cleaned up as much of the table surface as he could around the little girl lying in her soup bowl, the sheriff exchanged the dish cloth for a fresh washcloth, dampened it, and began washing Hope's hands. Gently he picked her head up and removed the soup bowl, then washed her round pink-cheeked face, although currently it was red-cheeked from the tomato soup. Still holding her head he swiped the cloth across the table surface that had been under her bowl and head. One-handed he tossed the dirty cloth into the sink, effortlessly picked the child up out of her high chair, and carried her out of the room.

The whole process fascinated me. Until today I'd never seen a little kid closer than across a restaurant and that probably a handful of times since the restaurants Joe and I usually went to didn't allow kids.

Mrs. Weatherby was tending to Faith. The process was less complicated physically but much more demanding mentally as Faith sprinkled her bites with questions, comments, observations, and demands, which explains why she was eating so slow. Finally her mom took a kitchen timer and set it for ten minutes.

"Faith, Sweetie, when the timer rings lunch is over."

"But Mommy, I might not be finished."

"Then you had better stop talking and eat." Then Mrs. Weatherby got up and began cleaning up the kitchen, wiping the counters and stove, washing the dishes, and putting food away.

"He isn't finished either." She pointed at my lunch. She was right. I'd been so fascinated watching the two mini-mes I almost forgot to finish my own lunch. I still had half a sandwich and some soup left. I looked at the timer and started eating.

Frantically Faith looked at the timer — seven minutes left. "Wait! Wait! Uhm. If I beat you, you have to sing me a song. For my nap time." She looked at me pleadingly. "Please." I sat back and stared at her. What the???

I looked at her mother, "I don't know any songs a five-year-old should hear. If you win you'll have to teach me a song before I could sing to you? What do I get if I win?"

"I'll sing you a song." She clapped her hands, delighted with her choice.

"Agreed."

"Mommy, you have to say ready, set, go." Faith instructed bossily. Her mother just looked at her until Faith said, "Please."

"Alright," Ellie Weatherby said dramatically, "contestants raise your spoons. Ready. Set. GO!" It wasn't much of a contest because my hands were steadier, and my mouth is much bigger. Faith shrieked just as the sheriff came back from putting Mini-me the Really Short to bed.

"Faith! Inside voice!" *what the hell is an inside voice?* He glanced significantly at the dejected mini-me. She tried to look properly contrite but couldn't hide her grin at beating me. When her father stopped 'glaring' at her, she clapped again and turned to me in triumph.

"You have to sing to me!" she crowed triumphantly. "You lost!"

"After you teach me a song," I shot back.

"Come on, Monkey," Sheriff Weatherby said, holding out his arms to Faith. She hopped up into them, and he carried the triumphant lunch contest winner off to bed. "Come along, Loser," the sheriff commanded, "I'll teach you how to put Miss Noisy down for a nap."

By the time I'd learned the song (something about spiders and rain) to Mini-me the Short's satisfaction and sung it to her twice, she was drooping.

When I got back downstairs, a plastic-wrapped mattress leaned against the wall with the assorted bits of wood that supposedly would somehow become a bed frame, and Charlie was hauling the bucking office chair down to the basement. I grabbed one side of the desk and the sheriff grabbed the other and we man-handled it into the kitchen. Getting it down the basement steps was another matter entirely. It took Sheriff Weatherby, Charlie, Mrs. Weatherby, and me to get it positioned correctly to negotiate the turn at the bottom of the stairs. Then it took Charlie, the sheriff, and me to lift and move it down. And that was after

we took all the drawers out. *if they ever need to get this sucker out, i'm gonna be gone that day.*

After Charlie and I muscled the metal filing cabinet into the new basement 'office' Charlie went back to the shop to work on the old pickup. He nodded to me, shook hands with the sheriff, and went back into the cold, taking the pile of plastic Mrs. Weatherby had stripped off the mattress. At least the snowing had stopped. The sheriff and I took the last two boxes down the stairs (I didn't count trips up and down, but I'm pretty sure it was around a thousand).

Sheriff Weatherby and I stood in the doorway, looking at the empty room. It was dirty. Dust bunnies skittered around every time we moved, and every horizontal surface had a gray silt frosting. Even the small window, which had looked so clean when it was my snow globe was dingy.

I nodded my head toward the now visible closet. "Anything in there?" The sheriff pulled open the door to reveal a lot more dust bunnies, thick dust underfoot, and enough cobwebs to decorate a whole neighborhood at Halloween. Nothing else, not even hangers. He pointed silently at the floor and mimed opening a trap door.

"Out!" Mrs. Weatherby ordered, and started bringing in every cleaning device know to civilized man — er, woman — including the vacuum cleaner, a mop and a big pail of water, window cleaner and rags, and a long-armed feather duster. She pushed us both out the door muttering something about men, and shut it firmly behind us.

Thumping and laughing upstairs announced nap time was over. The mini-mes charged down the stairs so fast I was sure they'd fall and roll like cannon balls. Once they had negotiated the stair mountains they began some sort of race that involved running in circles and bumping into their dad and me every time they passed.

"They're energetic after sleeping, aren't they?" I observed as Hope bounced off a wall laughing.

"Yeah. Sometimes I wonder if letting them sleep — ever — is such a good idea." He watched as they pinballed around the downstairs. "Ruel, I'm going to run down to the shop. Charlie had something he wanted to show me. Can you tell Ellie I'll be back in a few minutes?" He grabbed his coat off the rack and took the front steps two at a time, leaving me standing there with my mouth open.

I headed toward the bedroom, where Mrs. Weatherby had just started the vacuum cleaner, to tell her the sheriff had gone to the shop, when Faith began shrieking from the kitchen. *what the hell?* I stomped through the dining room doorway toward the kitchen, ready to give Faith a big loud 'inside voice' lecture - I still didn't know what the hell that meant but it had worked for her dad - when she shrieked again, and this one didn't sound like fun shrieking. It scared me so bad I think I levitated from the dining room into the kitchen without touching any of the floor between.

Hope was calmly sitting on the floor by the kitchen table sucking her thumb while blood ran down the side of her face. Faith, who appeared to be unharmed, was standing in front of Hope with her hands over her mouth screaming. She was almost as white as her mom had been earlier, and I figured she'd topple over before I reached her.

Scooping her up I said sympathetically, "Faith, shut the hell up!" When she didn't stop I held her out at arms' length and said, "STOP!" in the same voice I used to break up bar fights. I guess the loudness, or the

tone of voice, got through. She stopped as if I'd thrown her power switch.

Then, with me still holding her up in the air, she put her tiny fists on her hips and said, "You said a bad word!"

"Yeah, whatever. Deal with it," and I set her down on a chair with a thump. "Sit! Zip it!" She glared at me but didn't start up with the siren again.

Hope continued to sit, watching the exchange, not saying a word. *idiot, of course she's not talking. she's got her thumb in her mouth.* Of course, I didn't know if she COULD talk because I hadn't heard anything out of her mouth except giggles. I grabbed what looked like a clean towel from a rack by the sink and knelt by the bleeding Mini-me the Really Short.

"Hey, Hope, you OK." Nothing. *maybe she didn't talk yet. when did kids start talking?* Pulling the silent bloody girl onto my lap I wiped the blood from her face, trying to get a look at the source.

"I'm just going to clean this up. See why it's bleeding. Did you hit you head on something?" Nothing. *maybe she's a mute.* The dry towel wasn't working, so I scooped Hope up and set her on the counter next to the sink, then I got the towel wet and wiped her head again. Finally I could see a three-corner dent in the baby-smooth skin of her forehead.

"What the fuck did you do, Mini-me?" I prodded gently. "I think you're gonna need a stitch in that." I turned toward Faith who sat right where I'd plunked her, arms crossed, a mommy-sowl on her face.

"Faith, what happened?"

She scowled harder, if that's possible, "I'm not talking to you. You told me to shut up. And you said bad words!" She poked her stubby little nose into the air, the perfect picture of indignation.

I picked Hope up off the counter, and she pulled her thumb from her mouth with a soft pop, put her chubby little arms around my neck, looked at me with her melting-chocolate eyes surrounded by her soft shining curly crown, opened her little pink rosebud lips and said, "Fuck." *well, hell! i so do not need this shit.*

Deciding to dump this mobile disaster into the capable hands of their mother, I pressed the towel against Hope's bleeding forehead and told her to hold it there, grabbed Faith the Pouter around the waist with the other arm, and headed out of the kitchen. Just as I walked into the living room, Faith began shrieking again, and Hope began talking — two words over and over. *i'll probably be sleeping in the barn tonight. what the hell was the sheriff thinking? i'm a bouncer not a babysitter.*

A noise to my left worked its way through Faith's siren-like wail and my distracted thoughts, and I began to turn, thinking Sheriff Weatherby had heard his angel swearing like a roustabout and was standing there ready to finish the smack down he'd been tempted to visit on me earlier. I got a clear impression of a purple backpack coming in at eye height then — —

11 — Truth or Face the Consequences

=====

Jim found Charlie bent over the engine of the battered green 1949 Jimmy pickup. "How's it going, Charlie?" he asked hopefully. Charlie kept telling him it wasn't fixable, but Jim just couldn't give up.

"Same as always. It ain't." Charlie pulled his head from under the hood. "What's going on, Jim?" Jim's knew he wasn't talking about the truck. Charlie had been with the Weatherbys a long time, since Jim was in high school. He was practically family and deserved to know before the whole town did, which wouldn't take long given the size of Trask.

Jim perched on a pile of lumber and told Charlie the whole sordid story.

"Whew," Charlie whistled. "That must have been a shock, reading that file."

"No shit! I read it three times before it sank in."

Charlie peered at him thoughtfully. "You and the missus going to be OK?"

"Yeah, I think we're good."

"What about the girls?" Charlie asked. The Weatherby girls were like his own daughters.

"We haven't told them yet. It'll probably get ugly. Some words ... " Jim pointed toward the ceiling " ... wouldn't be amiss. " Charlie nodded then said something Jim wasn't expecting.

"What about the boy?"

"What do you mean?" Jim asked, clearly puzzled by the older man's tone.

Charlie looked at him hard.

"I mean, what are you doin' to protect that boy from seven spoiled girls suddenly havin' a rival fer yer attention?" Jim started to protest and Charlie cut him off. "Jim, I know how much those girls mean to you. The moon and the stars. Suddenly, you got a son." Jim looked startled to hear Charlie put it like that. Would Ruel ever be his son? Sure didn't seem like it right now.

"So I repeat, what are you doing to protect that boy from the jealous fallout that's coming? Cause it's coming, Boy. And that young'un might look and act and sound tough, but he's still a fourteen-year-old boy who just lost his dad and has been thrust into a foreign world. Best you be looking out for him. Otherwise you're gonna lose him before you even have a chance to know if you want him."

=====

"Is he dead?" Faith.

"No, Faith, he isn't dead." A voice I didn't know.

"He looks dead." Faith.

"He isn't. See, he's breathing." A different voice I didn't know. *a bunch of people i don't know.*

"He said bad words." Faith.

"From the looks of him, I don't doubt it. Faith, where are Mom and Dad?" A third voice I didn't know. *maybe it's a convention. what the hell am i doing at a convention?*

"I don't know. Hope an' me were playing, then Hope runned under the table and bonked her head. An' it started bleeding. Then he came in and told me to shut up and said bad words." Faith again. *hope! shit, she needs a doctor. i gotta get up. gotta get my eyes open first.*

"He looks homeless. Manda, don't you think he looks homeless, like those people on TV? Maybe he wandered in looking for food and decided he'd kidnap the babies for ransom." This last was in a higher pitched voice than the other voices I didn't know. Younger?

"I'm NOT a baby!" Faith, super indignant.

"Kidnapping doesn't happen in the middle of Wyoming, Merri. How would he even know they were here and alone?" Back to a previous voice I didn't know. Manda?

"Hell." Hope. *at least she's talking, right? probably not a concussion then. that's good.*

I finally managed to squeeze my right eye open and squinted up at a circle of faces, three blonde clones and four brown mini-mes, including Mini-me the Short, scowling, and Mini-me the Really Short with a bloody towel against her head. Hope smiled around the thumb in her mouth. The other six frowned, especially Faith, who still had her indignant look going.

One of the bigger blonde clones cocked a loaded backpack at me. "You move, Mister, and I'll clock you again." The first voice I didn't know.

The other bigger blonde grabbed my bloody shirt front, ripping the thin fabric, and yanking my suddenly throbbing head up off the floor. "Who are you and where were you going with my little sisters?" The third voice I didn't know. Manda.

I glanced at her small hand twisted up in my now-worthless second-to-last t-shirt. "What the fuck did you tear my shirt for? I only have one more. Shit!"

"Shit," Hope piped in unhelpfully.

"Where are Mom and Dad?" demanded the smaller of the three blonde clones. "If you hurt them!" She drew a small fine-boned fist back to put emphasis to her unfinished threat. The second voice I didn't know. *shit, i'm getting good at this.*

I glanced around the circle of blue-eyed brown-eyed faces, and my scrambled brains started fitting pieces together. The daughters! I was looking at the full might of the Weatherby offspring.

"You guys are a helluva lot bigger in person." Maybe that didn't make any sense because it got me a lot of confused stares, as opposed to the hostile stares of a minute ago. *maybe I'm making progress.*

A noise I'd been hearing, that I'd assumed up until now was my ears ringing from being knock silly with a book bag, stopped. *guess that wasn't my ears.* The clones and mini-mes must have heard it stop, too, because they all looked toward my closed bedroom door.

"Vacuum," I injected into the silence. A door opened, then —

A lot of voices began talking all at once, high-pitched feminine voices that were grating on my overly-sensitive, recently unconscious ears. The hand twisted in my torn shirt released me, dropping my head back to the carpeting with a soft thunk, the circle of clones' and mini-mes' faces disappeared to be replaced with a circle of feet, and into the clamor a tiny voice said, "Fuck."

Dead silence.

Taking advantage of the lull, I rolled over and got to my hands and knees. I still couldn't open my left eye, and I noticed with detached interest, that red drops were plopping from my nose to the carpet, creating a Jackson Pollock sort of effect. Hey, I'm poorly educated, not ignorant.

"Someone want to explain what the heck is going on here?" Sheriff Weatherby's deeper voice started the feminine clanging again. *damn!*

"QUIET!" *yay, sheriff.*

"Ellie?"

"I was cleaning. I had the vacuum going."

"Sarah?" I rolled my head a bit so I could see who he was talking to. The purple backpack. Voice one.

"We walked in the door and this ... this person was manhandling Hope and Faith. Hope was bleeding, and Faith was screaming. So I hit him with my backpack."

"Do you have any school books in there?"

"Four." The sheriff sighed.

Dirty jean-clad legs squatted beside me. "You OK, Mr. Black?" *deja vu.*

I chuckled a rather nasal chuckle. "Yeah. I'm good. At least I'm not stuck down with frozen shit." He snorted a soft laugh.

"Yeah, there is that." He reached under my arms and pulled me to my feet. I swayed a bit, and he helped me shuffle to a chair and sit. I raised my good eye and looked around the circle of angry, hostile, indignant (Faith) faces until I found the oldest pair of brown eyes, which were mostly confused tinged with a bit of concern.

"I heard Faith shrieking so I went in the kitchen to tell her 'inside voice', whatever the hell that means, and found Hope with a bloody head. I got Hope cleaned up and figured you should see it 'cause I think it needs stitches. I was carrying them into the living room when Tyson," I gestured at the backpack clone, "gave me a round house to the head."

"Hell," Hope contributed. I dropped my sore head gently into my hands.

"Amanda, go get the first-aid kit," Mrs. Weatherby directed. I heard her move and looked up as she picked Hope up and took her into the kitchen. One of the taller clones, voice three — Manda, no, Amanda — came out of the short hallway leading to the master bedroom with a plastic container the size of a carry-on suitcase, and took it into the kitchen. It had a large red cross painted on the side.

"That's a helluva first-aid kit," I commented conversationally.

"Daddy," Miss Indignant inserted, "he's been saying bad words. And now Hope is saying bad words. Are you gonna wash his mouth out with soap? That's what Mommy always says to you when you say bad words!" Faith the Vocabulary Cop.

"Faith, enough." The sheriff sighed again. "Girls, take your things to your rooms, then get changed and do your chores. We'll talk about this when Mom finishes giving the walking wounded first-aid." All the clones and the two bigger mini-mes, who I decided to demote from mini-mes to brownies, just stood and stared — glared? — at me.

"NOW!" They scattered in a loose grouping up the stairs but took the time to stop at the top and shoot daggers down at me. *family. yay.*

"Come on, Dangerous Dan, let's get that eye and nose looked at." He helped me out of the chair and pushed me gently toward the kitchen.

Forty minutes later ten people were gathered around the large dining room table — ten Weatherbys and one Black, who was holding ice on his nose and left eye. To say I felt slightly outnumbered would be like saying China has a few more people than America. Sheriff and Mrs. Weatherby arranged everyone around the table evenly, except Hope, who slept in the Sheriff's arms and Faith, who sat by her mom, but the clones and brownies chose to cluster together as far from me as they could get. Them vs. me. *bring it on, mini-bitches*

Sheriff Weatherby looked at his wife expectantly. This was her story. She stared down at the shining wood of the table, obviously well-loved and polished within an inch of its walnut life, seemingly gathering her thoughts. I stood.

"I'm gonna go get cleaned up." I gestured at my torn bloody shirt and dusty jeans. Her eyes were grateful, but I gave nothing back. *we're not friends, lady.*

"Use the bathroom in the master bedroom," she said. "Soap and shampoo are in there. Use whichever towels you want. They're all fresh." I moved toward the living room doorway.

"Ellie!" the sheriff protested. I held up my hand.

"No. This is a family discussion. I don't belong." I walked into the living room, snagged my sadly depleted backpack from where I'd dropped it when I'd come through the door hours — days? years? eons? — earlier, and headed down the short hallway and into the master bedroom.

If I was worried she made the sheriff sleep in a larger grander version of the guest room my worries were groundless. The room was calm, peaceful, done in shades of greens and tans, with bits of bright blue here and there. One reluctant point for Mrs. Weatherby. The bathroom was light, airy, and freaking huge! It

had a walk-in shower with a glass door and shower heads on three walls, a regular bathtub with little nozzles on the sides (a Jacuzzi?), double sinks set in about an acre of marble counter tops, a make-up dressing table area (similar to but smaller and more tasteful than some I'd seen in the North Dakota warehouses — *wonder if i should tell her that?*), and some gadgets I had no clue about.

I started the shower then stripped out of my clothes. The shower at the ugly ranch house the night before felt like a million years ago and, although this hot water wasn't as life-affirming as the night before, it still felt amazing.

I stood and let the reviving hot liquid stream down my body. First I washed my screaming eagle clean, then I methodically scrubbed the dirt and sweat from the Celtic knot hiding the gunshot scar on my left bicep and shoulder, the American flag Joe had given me for my thirteenth birthday on my right bicep, the British dragon on my left hip disguising the hatchet scar I'd gotten when I was nine, and the Chinese dragon covering the compound fracture scar on my right thigh. I scrubbed everything in between, too, but I knew from experience if I scrubbed the tattoos thoroughly everything got washed.

I dried off with the soft tan towel hanging on the rack by the shower, then wrapped it around my waist and dug my razor and shaving cream out of my backpack. I might be only fourteen, but thanks to Joe, I'm a big kid and have black-like-a-raven-wing hair, and thanks to early puberty I've had to shave daily, for over a year now, if I don't want to look like a gangster.

Delicately navigating around the backpack bruises, I scraped off the serious scruff I had going, having last shaved the morning before I left North Dakota, then ran my fingers through my tangled black curls before wrapping them up with my rawhide string. I seldom bothered with a comb because it never did any good, and it was next-to-impossible to get a comb through my hair anyway. A little deodorant, a little tooth brushing and I looked like a new man, well, as new as I could look with a swollen nose and rapidly blackening left eye. I felt better, that's for sure.

I dressed in my last clean clothes and threw my torn bloody t-shirt and dirty jeans, socks, and boxer briefs into my backpack. Then I used the towel to wipe out the inside of the shower and the sink I'd used — just like the 'ladies' had taught me — and put it in the dirty towel hamper.

Having dawdled and stalled as long as I could, I left the bathroom ready to face the world, or at least the part of it that contained Weatherbys. *shit!*

12 — A Pretty Damn Full House

The house seemed too quiet when I left the master bedroom. I poked my head into the living room before entering, just in case guided missiles were headed my way. Nobody.

Hearing some sounds coming from my bedroom, I walked to the open doorway and peered in at the sheriff and Charlie trying to assemble the varnished wood bed pieces. The smaller clone sat on the floor helpfully pointing out every time they tried to join two pieces that didn't belong together. The sheriff saw me and motioned me in with one hand while waving his other vaguely at the jumble.

"Your bed. Or it will be if Charlie and I can figure out what we're doing. This thing has been in the barn for seven years. We might be missing some bolts."

Charlie and the clone looked at me. His eyes were pleading, 'please get these two out of here' and hers were shooting daggers. *well, up yours missy!* I shot daggers right back.

"It's my bed. I should be doing the work." I sat down on the beautifully clean floor beside Charlie. "I'm sure Charlie and I can figure it out." Blondie snorted, but I ignored her. I looked at the pile of wooden pieces and various nuts and bolts and began sorting. "Where is everyone else?"

Sheriff Weatherby sat back on his heels, "Ellie and Merri and Beth are fixing supper. Sarah and Amanda are watering and feeding the horses and mucking out the barn." The expression on my face must have told him I didn't have a clue what the hell 'mucking' was. "They're cleaning the old straw out from the bottom of the stalls and will put fresh down."

I wrinkled my nose. "You mean straw that's full of shit?"

Blondie snorted again. "You get grossed out by manure, you're not going to last here very long," she snarked. I stared at her then laughed. I laughed until the tears came. The sheriff started, too, and soon we were both rolling on the flooring holding our sides. We tried to catch our breath and were partially successful until I squeaked out, "Grossed out by manure!" which set both of us off again.

Blondie folded her arms over her chest and glared at me. I know she wasn't Mrs. Weatherby's biological daughter, but she'd gotten her glare down pat. Or maybe all women can do it.

I lay on my back gasping, trying to catch my breath, while the sheriff lay beside me gulping air like a beached shark. I finally wiped the tears from my eyes and rolled over to get to my knees. Blondie's light blue eyes were about two inches from mine. Our noses were practically touching and from this close I could see a sprinkling of tiny barely-visible tan freckles across each of her porcelain pink cheeks. I'd never been this close to a female my own age. Her blue eyes widened slightly. *wow!*

She hissed out, "Boys are so immature!" then got to her feet and stalked from the room. *what the hell?* I rolled back over and looked at Sheriff Weatherby.

He shrugged. "Don't look at me."

We both rolled over and managed to get to our knees. The sheriff kept going until he was vertical. I stayed on the floor beside Charlie and resumed sorting bed parts.

"I'm going to go find that spare rug," he reported and walked out the door.

"Thank you, Baby Jesus," Charlie breathed. "Those two were starting to drive me crazy. Jim's a helluva peace officer, but he's got about as much mechanical talent as that mattress. And that young 'un! She might draw like an angel, but she got her mechanical gift from her daddy." I snorted but kept sorting.

By the time the sheriff returned carrying a blue area rug, Charlie and I had the bed frame assembled and pushed close to the wall to the right of the door. The sheriff unrolled the rug and put it beside the bed, covering a portion of the unfinished wood floor, which was worn smooth and shiny from years of feet. Charlie wrestled the mattress in, dropped it onto the bed frame, and nudged it straight with one denim-clad leg. I grinned. *hell if it isn't starting to look like a bedroom!*

Good smells were coming out of the kitchen, and my stomach rumbled like a coal train, long and loud. The soup and sandwiches at noon seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Sounds like your throat's been cut, and your stomach don't know it," Charlie said. "I'd better git on home before the missus feeds my supper to the hogs. See you tomorrow." He clapped his hat back on his head, snagged his coat from the rack by the front door, and headed out into the dark.

Sheriff Weatherby slapped my shoulder and jerked a thumb back toward the short hallway. "Come on. Let's get you some sheets and pillows." He headed toward the master bedroom but stopped at a narrow door I'd seen earlier. When he pulled it open I saw it was a big linen closet and held a lot of sheets, pillowcases, blankets, and pillows. *i guess it takes a lotta sheets to outfit nine people. guess that's ten, now.* He thrust some sheets into my hands and grabbed some blankets and a couple of pillows.

Then he turned to another door I hadn't seen before because it was at the end of the dark hall. He turned the knob and opened it to reveal a small bathroom. It had a toilet and a pedestal sink, and tucked neatly under the stairwell was a small shower with a clear plastic accordion door.

"Technically it's called a powder room, although I've never seen any powder in it. It's for company, like when we have someone over for dinner. I figured you might like to use this instead of traipsing up the stairs and having to share with a passel of girls.

I inspected the tiny room. The shower was small, but I've used way smaller. The small mirror over the sink hid a minuscule medicine cabinet but was plenty big for my few toiletries. Over the toilet a small shelf with a small towel rack beneath it currently held a fancy fingertip towel, but was big enough for a hand towel, and the shelf could hold a bath towel.

"It'll suit me fine. Thank you, Sheriff."

At the door to my bedroom — *damn, that sounds nice* — I took the blankets and pillows from the sheriff. "Thanks, Sheriff, but I can make it myself. Been doing it a helluva long time." I turned toward the room, but he placed a hand on my arm, stopping me.

"Ruel, since you're going to be living here, and we've kind of signed a peace treaty, seems kind of formal to be calling me Sheriff all the time." I stiffened, ready to shoot down what I thought was coming. *that sure as hell didn't last long!* "How about Jim? Think that would work for you?"

I relaxed. *oh*. "I think I can manage that." This man had been square with me so far. I wasn't feeling the warm fuzzies, but I was happy to have a roof over my head and a place to sleep. Like Joe always said, 'EVERYTHING CHANGES, KID, YOU GOTTA GO WITH THE FLOW OR GET SWEEP AWAY'. My father, the whorehouse philosopher. It would be childish to not be grateful. I nodded at Jim and went into my bedroom to make my bed.

By the time Mrs. Weatherby called me to dinner, my bed was made, my toiletries — fancy word for what little I had — were in the tiny medicine chest, and I'd gotten a hand towel and bath towel out of the linen closet and placed them on the towel rack above the toilet. I was officially moved in.

In the dining room, my reception was a mixed bag. Jim and the two mini-mes were happy enough to see me. Guess Faith had gotten over her indignation at my colorful vocabulary. Mrs. Weatherby and the brownies seemed pretty neutral. The clone contingency was making it clear I was not welcome. *bring it, bitches*.

Mrs. Weatherby took my arm and said, "Ruel, I promised you introductions. Sarah (*older clone, purple backpack*) and Amanda (*other older clone, first-aid kit*) are sixteen and twins. Grace (*amazing blue eyes, manure, freckles*) is fourteen. Merri (*brownie, called me homeless*) and Beth (*brownie, doesn't talk*) are eight and are twins. *huh, two sets of twins in one family. weird*. And you already know Faith and Hope."

I fake-smiled and did this kind of finger half-wave. Nothing.

Dinner — they call it supper — was awkward. That's sort of like saying the ocean is wet. Sheriff — Jim — and Mrs. Weatherby tried to keep the conversation going, but the clones weren't talking, even to their parents, the brownies seemed more confused than anything, — *maybe eight is kinda young to understand this shit* — and nobody was mentioning the 500 pound elephant in the room. Or in this case the 6' 2" 190 pound bastard son. I figured either get the topic out in the open or it was going to be a long cold four years before I was out of this icebox and on my own. I put my fork on my plate and placed my hands on the table. I spoke to the clones.

"Look, you don't have to like me or even talk to me. I don't want to be here any more than you want me here, but I don't have any choice. The law says I can't live on my own so it's either here or foster care, and I'm not spending the next four years in kid limbo just to keep you three happy. I'll do my time, we can avoid each other like the proverbial plague, and when I turn eighteen I'm oughta here. My bedroom is downstairs, yours are up. My bathroom is downstairs, yours is up. Hell, we don't even have to eat at the same time. You can eat supper, and I'll eat dinner on my own. The next four years will just fly by." I helped myself to more mashed potatoes and meatloaf, picked up my fork, and started eating. I'd said my piece. The ball was in their court.

"We always eat supper together as a family," Mrs. Weatherby said. "Even if Jim is on a case, he makes it home most nights for supper. THAT," she looked around the table at the sullen faces, "does not change." Three pair of sulking blue eyes dropped to their plates, but I distinctly heard a soft feminine mutter, "some family".

Mrs. Weatherby flushed but said nothing, trying to keep the fragile peace. I, on the other hand, didn't give a shit about the feelings of these pampered princesses. I threw my napkin on the table and stood, shoving my chair back so fast it caused a screeching noise on the floor, that got everyone's attention.

"You," I pointed at every one of the three pouting faces, "are a bunch of spoiled brats. You have no idea how good you've got it. You come home every night to this beautiful warm house, to nice food, nice clothes, parents who give a shit if you're safe and warm and fed. Parents who care enough to take you for doctors' appointments and make sure you go to school, who care enough for your damn physical comfort to even spend money to make a nice big comfy bathroom so you don't have to, God forbid, wait in line to go.

"And your mom makes one mistake when she's a kid not even as old as some of you, and suddenly you're too good to talk to her? Hell, I'm talking to her, and if anyone in this room has a right not to it's me! You're pathetic and ungrateful!"

Sharp female voices rose around the table, speaking over one another, saying variations of the same theme — me, me, me. "And never told us!" "Lied to us!" "Hypocrite!" "Telling us not to do stuff she did!"

I shook my head in disgust. "I thought the hardest thing about spending the next four years in this house was going to be having to look every day at the face of the woman who abandoned me when I was born, but I've changed my mind. Looking at her is going to be a pleasure next to looking at three spoiled judgmental self-centered princesses like you! I'm outta here!"

I turned on my heels to stomp out of the room when a soft little sound stopped me cold. Hope, Mini-me the Really Short, was crying. Her mom reached out for her, but the little beggar turned away from her mother's open arms and reached up for me.

"No," popped out of her little pink mouth, the first non-swear words I'd heard her say. *well, shit!* I reached over and picked her up out of her high chair. She put her little pudgy arms around my neck, snuggled her sweet damp pink little face into my collar bone, and whispered, "Fuck."

13 — Meet Joe Black's Ex

I lost it. The past few days caught up with me — losing Joe and my freedom, being packed off to a life that was as foreign to me as living on Mars, anger at being forced to live with the woman who abandoned me as a baby, and now being cuddled by this warm sweet-smelling swearing little mini-me. I just lost it. I held Hope in my arms and went through the living room into my new bedroom and shut the door. I paced the tiny floor, three steps up, three step back, held onto Hope and let the tears flow.

I hadn't cried since I was three. Joe'd had no idea how to be a father. His only example, his own father, had sworn and hit, not much of an example for a twenty-year-old father of a toddler. So Joe swore and yelled a lot, but the first time he hit me I broke. Well, my arm broke. It scared Joe to death, and he cried the whole time I was in the emergency room getting it set. My arm hurt, but I didn't start crying until Joe did. I cried because he did. That was the only time I ever saw Joe cry, and it's the only time I remember crying. Until now.

The tears had stopped, but I continued to pace. Hope had fallen asleep, and my arm was going right along with her. Who knew munchkin-sized mini-mes were so damn heavy. I looked around my new room and knew I'd landed on my feet right enough. The room was probably the nicest one I'd ever had, clean, private, some personality and history, and in a nice house with a nice family — well, the sheriff and the mini-mes were nice, maybe the brownies. *sorry, joe, but the truth is the truth.* I wouldn't be waked up at night by loud drunks and louder sex (whorehouses have really thin walls), probably wouldn't have people trying to get into my room by mistake, wouldn't have to sleep with a gun under my pillow for when people tried to get into my room on purpose, and didn't have to pay rent.

I'd never minded my life. Hell, it was the only life I knew. But standing in that small clean room, holding a warm damp little person, I felt my shoulders relaxing. A knot in my gut untie. I was determined to stay me — Ruel Black, Joe Black's son, because no matter what Joe hadn't given me as a father, what he had given me was everything he could, and not many fathers could say that — but that didn't mean I couldn't appreciate what Jim — *i suppose i have to include mrs. weatherby in that* — offered me. *this is a pretty damn good silver lining.* Like an echo in my heart, I heard Joe say, 'GOT THAT IN ONE, KID'.

A soft knock on my door stopped my reverie and my pacing. "Come in." Mrs. Weatherby opened the door. Her cheeks were a little pink, probably from the fallout of my meltdown.

Gesturing at the dead weight in my arms, she asked, "Want me to take her? It's past her bedtime."

I shook my head. "I can carry her up. No sense waking her."

We started up the stairs, her leading. "Mrs. Weatherby?" She stopped and looked back. "I'm sorry about the swearing. I'll work on it." She put up a hand to stop my apology.

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that. Hope will forget in a few days if she doesn't keep hearing it." We reached the top of the stairs and turned left down the hallway toward the mini-mes' bedroom. "In the chaos I didn't get a chance to thank you for taking care of them. You kept your head, which is more than a couple of our girls do."

"It happened so damn fast. One minute they were chugging around through the house, and the next Faith was imitating a steam whistle. I'm sorry I didn't watch them closer."

"Ruel, there is no way to watch kids twenty-four seven. Accidents happen."

"I don't want you to think I'd let them get hurt on purpose." She stopped outside the little girls' bedroom door.

"Ruel, I never assumed you would do such a thing, and I don't blame you for the accident. Stuff like that happens with kids." She opened the door and stepped aside so I could enter. I laid the sleeping child on the bed, and watched her mother replace her clothes with pajamas and tuck her in with swift practiced moves.

"I hope me opening my big mouth in the dining room didn't make more problems. I know it wasn't my place to say, but I just ... they ... " I paused to gather my thoughts. I don't normally have trouble saying what's on my mind.

"If you're trying to be tactful, don't." She stood and looked at me. "Ruel, I know we started badly. I am a control freak, a perfectionist. I am sorry I implied you needed to be a different person to fit in here."

"Actually you said it outright," I corrected her.

She said quietly, "You're right. I did. What I want to say is, I apologize for trying to turn you into something you aren't. Seeing you in Jim's office, looking so much like Joe, I was angry. Having you around will remind me of a time in my life I've tried to forget."

She looked down at her sleeping daughter. "You were right. I was a weakling, a coward. I never saw Joe again, after we found out we were pregnant. My parents took over everything as soon as I told them. They arranged the doctor, the hospital, everything. And I let them. As soon as you were born the nurses whisked you away, even before you cried. I never protested. I wanted my life back. I was stupid enough to think once you were gone, everything would be the way it was before, like all my problems were your fault. But I was wrong. When my parents took me out of the hospital and sent me away to school, I realized my old life was gone. I wasn't the same inside anymore. " She sat down on Hope's bed and looked at her hands.

"My parents told me you had been adopted and went to a nice family. I chose to believe them. I chose to not consider the alternative because I wanted to put you out of my mind and go on with my life." She smiled a bit. "But God has a way of settling accounts. Of giving us second chances to accept responsibility for our mistakes and fix them."

I hissed through my teeth, ready to blast her, but she held up her hands and stood.

"I don't expect to be your mother, Ruel. I gave up that right fourteen years ago when I followed my parents out of that hospital. But maybe eventually we can manage friends?"

I stared down at this small brown woman, standing straight and tall — well, as tall as someone five three and a bit can stand — and asking for a chance to be a part of my life, however small. I had unexpected power here. *dear, God, what do i do? 'A MAN DOES THE JOB IN FRONT OF HIM, KID'. thanks, joe.*

"I can maybe manage acquaintance. I don't know about friend."

"And do you think you can manage Ellie instead of Mrs. Weatherby?"

"Not yet," I said quietly. She was trying, but I didn't trust her. She might not be a monster, but she still turned her back on me fourteen years ago.

"Well, maybe someday. A day at a time might be all either of us can handle right now."

"A wise man once told me DO THE JOB RIGHT, KID, THE REST WILL TAKE CARE OF ITSELF." I smiled a little at the memory.

"A very wise man. Who taught you that?" I watched her eyes as I told her.

"Joe taught me that." She smiled.

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When Jim walked into the Wolverin County Justice Center the next morning he interrupted a gab fest. He figured it was about him, because it turned off like a faucet when he came through the double doors. Hanging his coat on the brass coat rack on the wall just inside the half-rail divider, he turned and eyed the deputies and his dispatcher.

"Anybody want to say anything, you'd best say it to my face. I hear any rumors floating around I'll take my displeasure out by assigning everybody to night shift!" The deputies looked silently at each other, but Jose the dispatcher stepped forward.

"Already lots of rumors about the boy, Sheriff. Tell us what you want us to know, and we'll put those rumors to rest pronto."

Jim looked at these people he worked with every day. They deserved the truth, if only so they'd get on with their jobs and stop wasting time speculating.

"The boy's name is Ruel Black. His father died in an industrial accident over in North Dakota. Ellie is his biological mother. He's our son now. That's all anyone needs to know. Now, let's get to work. We've got a fire fatality, a weird domestic, and irresponsible horse ownership to sort out." He started into his office and turned back.

"Darcy?" The deputy who had wiped shit off Ruel's face looked up.

"Yeah, Boss?"

"Find out if it's legal to build and own a flame-thrower, will you?" Then Jim went into his office and closed the door.

=====

14 — What Not to Wear Wyoming-Style

I went to bed not long after Mini-me the Really Short and slept like the dead. The next time I moved it must have been ten o'clock. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd slept so late. *probably the last time i bounced for a club.*

I woke up facing the wall, realizing I really had to go. I'd draped my pants over a straight-backed wooden chair by the door as a reminder to put them on before venturing out of my room. I was already the family bastard, didn't want to add flasher to the list. I tossed the covers off and rolled over, preparing to grab my pants and get to the bathroom for some relief, and found myself staring right into two pairs of brown eyes, one pair right above a rosebud mouth full of thumb.

Thinking pretty damn quickly for just having waked up, I grabbed the covers and pulled them over me. I figured the mini-mes didn't need to see me in my boxer-briefs, especially since I'm a fourteen-year-old male who had just awakened and had to pee. No way this side of hell was I explaining THAT to these two miniature Weatherbys.

"Uhm, hi. Good morning."

"Mommy said to come get you so you could eat before we go shopping," Faith said in her best bossy voice. "You need to hurry up or you don't get any breakfast! And you'll have to wash all the dishes. And make all the beds. And ..."

Interrupting her list of dire consequences, I cocked my head at her and gave her my best lie detector stare. "You sure she said all that, Faith?" Faith bobbed her brown curls up and down vigorously. I kept staring. She kept bobbing.

"OK. Just hand me my pants then leave, and I'll get dressed. Then we can ask your mom if you missed anything."

"Why do we gotta leave?" she asked, cleverly avoiding the rest of what I said.

"Because I'm a boy, and girls and boys don't watch each other get dressed."

"But Mommy said you was our brother, just like Sarah and Manda and Grace and Merri and Beth and Hope and me are sisters and we watch each other get dressed all the time." Her logic was faultless but incorrect, but what grabbed my attention was a word that had never been applied to me before. Brother.

I guess I stared. Apparently she took this to mean I agreed with her. She brought her dark-chocolate eyes within eyelash length of my glacier-blue ones and whispered, "I never had a brother before," and stared right back at me. Mini-me the Really Short broke up the staring contest, which was good because my eyes were starting to water, by climbing up onto the bed and working her way between Faith and me.

Gently she patted me on the cheeks, one thumb wet, one dry, and tugged on my nose — with the wet thumb. I smiled and reached for the covers again. Remembering just in time my usual morning condition, I pointed to the door.

"Out, so I can get dressed."

"But ... " Faith started to protest.

"Faith, brothers — *weird even saying that word* — aren't like sisters. Brothers need privacy when getting dressed. Go tell your mom I'll be out in fifteen minutes." When she didn't move, I sat up a bit and pointed again. "Out. Now." Pouting she flounced dramatically out the door, just so I'd understand how peeved she was with me. *sheesh!! little drama queen*. Hope patted my cheeks again, both thumbs dry since she'd wiped the wet one on my cheek, and slid off the bed. The thumb went back in her mouth, and she followed Mini-me the Short out the door.

"Close the door," I called after them, but either they didn't hear, or they ignored me. *shit*. Either way I was stuck in my bed too far from the door to close it or to reach my pants. *please, God, let everyone be gone*.

Glancing out the open door only showed me a thin slice of living room and a wall. Praying no one would see me, I hopped out of bed — *shit, that floor is cold* — and swung the door shut. Now I was really cold and really really had to go. Hoping around my room trying to pull my pants on I was praying I got to the bathroom in time.

I shot out my door, around the corner into the short hall, and made it to my toy bathroom — barely. I was standing before the porcelain goddess enjoying one of the best feeling in the world when the bathroom door opened, there was a decidedly feminine gasp, and it swung shut again. *well, shit*. At least my back was to the door.

I washed my hand and face, brushed my teeth, and shaved, all the while hearing muffled footsteps and muttering out in the short hallway. I didn't hurry. *seriously, there are other bathrooms in this house*. After applying deodorant and running my fingers through my shaggy mop and wrapping it around with my rawhide string, I decided I'd made the intruder wait long enough, and opened the door.

The youngest clone — Grace, right *amazing blue eyes, freckles, shit* — stood fuming by the door to the master bedroom. She was tapping one small foot as I emerged from my bathroom. *my bathroom, princess*.

"You need something, or were you just hoping for a peek at my butt?"

She sputtered and turned bright pink. She turned and paced two steps, the turned back to me, shaking a finger in my face and still sputtering. She sounded like a boiling-over tea kettle. I leaned casually against the bathroom door and waited her out.

"What the heck were you doing in there so long? I had to use Mom's and Dad's bathroom."

I peeked around to be sure no mini-mes had snuck up on us. I was watching my language for them, not this spoiled brat. "What the hell do you think I was doing? Going to the bathroom, washing my hands and face, brushing my teeth, shaving ..." She interrupted my perfectly sequential rundown. *now I have to start over*.

"I don't mean what were you doing in there, I mean what were YOU doing in THERE?" Well, that certainly cleared that up.

"What the hell are you talking about. It's a bathroom. What do you think I was doing?"

"It's the powder room. It's only supposed to be used for QUICK business, not an all-day marathon!" She was working herself into a lovely righteous snit. Too bad I had to snip her snit in the bud.

"Wrong! It's not the powder room anymore." Her mouth gaped open. "As of yesterday it's my bathroom. So I don't get bastard cooties all over the throne room upstairs. You know, the one your ungrateful lying parents spent a few thou on to make it acceptable to all the princesses in the house?" She started sputtering again. Realizing my fifteen minutes was running out, I pushed past her to go get dressed.

She grabbed my arm as I passed, then blushed and let go. She was staring at the Celtic knot on my left bicep and shoulder, right above where she'd grabbed me. Then she stared at my chest. Then she turned redder, pushed past me, and disappeared through the living room and into the kitchen. *girls are weird.*

When I came out of my bedroom, tucking my last worn-thin t-shirt into my second-to-last too-small jeans, Mrs. Weatherby, the brownies, the mini-mes, and Blondie were in the living room putting on coats, hats, gloves, and scarves. They looked like an advertisement for Columbia outerwear.

"Are you ready, Ruel?" Mrs. Weatherby asked. "I know you haven't had breakfast, but I thought we could grab something at the cafe in town."

"The rest of us had breakfast hours ago," the bathroom monitor informed me in her best snarky voice. "WE can have lunch."

"Grace, don't be rude."

"It's OK. Sorry I was so slow. I was interrupted," I looked right at Grace as I said it, "and it took me longer than I thought it would." She turned away, but not before I saw the blush begin to creep up her neck. *blondes blush really pink* "You didn't need to let me sleep so long. I'm not a guest."

"You had a long few days, and you looked exhausted when you went to bed. It doesn't hurt to sleep in once in a while." Mrs. Weatherby smiled at me. "Don't get used to it. Unless you're sick it doesn't happen often around here."

"Well, I guess that was my one chance then. I don't get sick." A tug on my pant leg informed me Mini-me the Really Short wanted me to pick her up. She was so bundled up she looked like a pink Michelin Man, only shorter. I picked her up and turned toward the door.

"Guess we're ready." Everyone except Hope and Faith looked at me like I'd just escaped the looney bin.

"You don't have your coat on," Mrs. Weatherby informed me. The clone and the two brownies snickered, obviously thinking I was the dumbest person they'd ever seen, not only too dumb to come in out of the rain but too stupid to know a seven degree Wyoming day called for a coat.

Looking the snickering girls right in the eyes, I said matter-of-factly, "I don't own a coat." Mrs. Weatherby blanched a little and the snickerers shut up. *take that, princesses.*

Their mother turned to the coat rack by the door and dug through the assortment until she found a dark brown canvas Carhartt coat with a hood. It was obviously old and well-worn. She held it up to me, measuring it against my long arms.

"It's old, but still plenty warm. It's one of Jim's work coats, but he won't mind you borrowing it. If it fits." She handed me the coat and took Hope. I slipped it on, noting it was a little short in the sleeves, but had enough room in the shoulders. It was really warm and smelled like hay and wood.

"Thanks. I appreciate it." I pulled the hood up and reached for Hope.

"Would you mind taking Faith?" Mrs. Weatherby asked. "She's harder for me to carry."

"What about it, Mini-me?" I addresses the purple Michelin Man miniature. "Think you can get along with me long enough to get to the car?" She rolled her chocolate-brown eyes at me and held up her arms. She was heavier than Mini-me the Really Short, but not by much. The fragility of both the little girls amazed me. If I were their parents I'd wrap them in bubble wrap and put them on a shelf somewhere safe. Parents must have more courage than I do to let two such vulnerable people out in the world. My respect for parents, especially Joe, rose a notch. *parenting must be the hardest job in the world.*

Blondie showed me how to buckle Faith into the astronaut seat while her mom buckled Hope in. Then the clone and the brownies scrambled for seats, leaving me to ride in the very back seat where my knees were jacked up around my ears.

Apparently entertaining small children on a twenty minute ride requires fifty-two verses of a song popular with some big purple dinosaur. After five minutes I was ready to kill the dinosaur. After ten I was ready to kill myself. Personally I think the song was written by the CIA as a torture device and is being tested on parents across the country. It worked on me; I would have told every secret I ever heard and thrown my proverbial grandmother under the bus. It does not work on small children. They love it. Maybe THEY work for the CIA.

We pulled onto Trask, Wyoming's Main Street twenty-one minutes after we left the house and about seventeen minutes after we left my sanity somewhere in a snow bank beside the road. I couldn't get out of that van fast enough.

"What's the matter? Kids too tough for you?" sniped Grace as we got Faith out of her car seat.

I leaned in so close to her ear my lips were almost kissing it, and whispered in my most seductive voice (and I learned seductive from women who are PAID to do it well, over and over and over), "I'd rather hear a dozen whores screaming 'oh, god, yes, YES' than listen to one more verse of that fucking song." Grace's breath hitched in her throat. Then I picked up Faith and followed Mrs. Weatherby into the clothes store she'd parked near. I looked back at Grace and winked. She went as pale as the snow except for two bright spots of color high on her cheeks. She looked like a mannequin with a really bad paint job.

Shopping should be an Olympic sport, right next to the decathlon. One of the heats could be trying on clothes with six females giving advice. It would be the endurance portion of the event. I tried to stay cool, but after thirty minutes of them vetoing everything I picked and trying to get me to dress like Yuppy hell, I blew.

"Enough! No more! Everyone out!" I hustled all of them out of the store. "Go do something — anything. I'll meet you ... " I looked around the small downtown and spotted a cafe "... over there in thirty minutes."

Mrs. Weatherby had been referring to a long list of 'necessities', and she thrust it into my hand just before

I ejected them from the store. "Get everything on here," she said, just as I shut the door on them and their protesting.

I took one look at the list, crumpled it up, and threw it into the garbage. The clerk who had been helping us, clapped and gave me a high five. Then we got down to serious business, how to get me enough clothes to satisfy Mrs. Weatherby without looking like a damn GQ model. Twenty-five minutes later I had a week's worth of boxer briefs, socks, long-sleeved t-shirts, short-sleeved t-shirts, and jeans. In deference to Mrs. Weatherby's insistence I needed something dressy I bought a pair of cargo pants and a long-sleeved cotton polo shirt. I tossed two long-sleeved flannel shirts onto the pile.

"What else?" I asked Rob, the clerk, because he had heard Mrs. Weatherby repeat The List of appropriate clothes approximately 1067 times. He began to recite The List, but I held up my hand.

"What else do I NEED?"

"Shoes and a coat." I pawed through the coats until I found a dark gray heavy winter coat with a hood and sleeves long enough to reach my wrists. Rob threw in a watch cap and a pair of wool-lined leather gloves. Then I tried on work boots until I found a comfortable pair with steel toes and waterproofed leather. Rob insisted I'd need a pair of trainers, so I found a pair that fit and didn't cost an arm and a leg.

I looked at the huge pile. "I need to put half this back. That's enough clothes for at least two people." Since I'd never had more than three of anything in my life, the pile looked enormous and over-the-moon expensive.

"You actually only got about half what she has on The List. You put it back and she's gonna be back in here directing again." He looked at me imploringly. "Please! For both our sakes, take the stuff. I don't know if my sanity can take more of those six!" He looked so pathetic I burst out laughing.

"OK. OK. Far be it from me to be responsible for driving another man insane. Bag it up." It filled four large plastic bags with the store's name imprinted on the side. I looked at the bags then the snowy walk to the cafe.

"How the hell am I going to get it all over there then back to the car?"

"Just leave it here. Pick it up on your way back."

"Really?" I must have sounded skeptical. He laughed.

"Boy, can I tell you're new around here. Ain't nobody in this town gonna rip off Ms. Weatherby. Everybody's scared of her husband. Besides, everyone likes her. A real nice lady." *interesting. i'd have said he was a real nice man, and her, not so much. perspective, i guess.* He looked at me curiously, waiting for me to share how I knew her. I didn't.

"Thanks. I appreciate it. Uhm, about paying?"

"Taken care of. On her tab."

I started for the door. "Thanks."

"You might want to put on your coat and hat and gloves. That is why you bought them. Right?" Rob grinned at me. Instead I slipped into the borrowed Carhartt.

"I'll wear this until I get home. Payback for driving us both crazy." I grinned and pulled open the door.

"You're braver than me," he said, as I pulled the door shut behind me.

15 — All Not Quiet on the Western Front

I had barely entered the cafe when Mrs. Weatherby pounced. "Did you get everything on the list? Where are your bags. Why are you still wearing that coat? I told you to get a new one. And a hat and gloves." She started to scoot out of the booth. "I'd better come see what you got. Men are just no good at shopping." The clone and two brownies were thoroughly enjoying my payback for tossing everyone out of the store.

I held up both hands to stop Mrs. Weatherby from moving any further. "Whoa! Enough already!" She suspended forward motion and the verbal onslaught. I snagged a chair from a nearby table and placed it at the end of the booth and sat.

"I got everything I need. Draw a deep breath, you're gonna pass out from oxygen deprivation." Five pairs of eyes stared at me with one clear message, men didn't know anything about shopping.

"Tell me everything you bought," Mrs. Weatherby commanded.

"Excuse me?" I asked in the exact same tone she had used with me in the sheriff's office when I told her no haircut. *ye gods, was that just yesterday?* Her eyes widened at my tone. If they could have Grace's, Merri's, and Beth's eyebrows would have crawled up into their curly hair — blonde, brown, and brown respectively. I doubt if they had ever talked back to their mother. *live and learn, princesses.*

"What happened to not trying to turn me into something I'm not?"

"I did say that, didn't I?" I nodded. Taking a deep breath, she said, "I apologize. Let me rephrase that. Please tell me what you bought. And may I have the list back so I can be sure you got everything." Now the clone's and the brownies' mouths were slightly open in shock. Apparently their mother unit didn't back down and apologize very often. Like maybe never.

"Jeans, t-shirts, underwear, coat, hat, gloves, boots, shoes, pants, shirts." I rattled the purchases off with precision and very little detail. She gave me the look she'd given Faith at dinner the day before. It very clearly said 'you forgot something'. Faith had caved and added 'please'. I am not Faith. I did not cave, and I didn't add anything. Instead I asked a question.

"So, are we going to eat or what? I'm starving." In the ensuing clamor of protest I caught a waitress's eye and gave her the universal 'come here' sign, a wiggling forefinger. She came. While the female contingency was loudly protesting my lack of descriptive fashion information, I ordered breakfast.

"I'll have the Rancher Special, pancakes instead of toast, and can you double the meat portions?" She wrote and nodded. "Oh, and can I have coffee, black, and a tall oj?" By now the booth was quiet. *thank you, God.* I smiled at Mini-me the Short and Mini-me the Really Short. They were the only ones not snooping into my shopping life.

"Did you guys get lunch?" Two brown-curl'd heads shook in unison. "Are you hungry?" Nod. "What do you want?"

The waitress waited patiently while the mini-mes looked at the menus, for all the world as if they were reading them.

Faith spoke up first. "I will have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and an orange soda, please." In the face of her mom's pursed lips, she retracted the soda and substituted milk. Mini-me the really short nodded 'me, too' without removing her thumb from her mouth.

The waitress chuckled at bit, and that broke the spell. Mrs. Weatherby and the three girls side-tracked from their criticisms of my shopping and ordered lunch. I figured my reprieve would be short. It was.

Ellie Weatherby was not only observant, she was persistent, like barnacles clinging to a hull persistent. "Where is the list. That doesn't sound like everything I had written down."

"I threw the list away." The gasps almost sucked the oxygen from the room. "I got enough for at least two of me. Four bags worth. What could I possibly have forgotten?"

"Something dressy?"

"Check!" I saluted smartly. Her glare spoke loud and clear that being a smart ass was not going to fly. I just stared at her.

"What did you get?"

"Pants and shirt, Master Sergeant." And I threw another salute. She scowled, and I stared. *moving on.*

She fingered the coat hanging on the back of my chair. "Warm outerwear?" She was catching on and getting more general in her inquiries, no doubt hoping to not have to drag the information from me one garment at a time.

"Coat, hat, gloves, Sergeant." Another salute.

"What kinds of pants and how many." She smiled to let me know she was catching onto my smart-assness. I stared back and her grin faltered a bit. *sorry, lady, we're not best buds*

"Jeans. Seven."

"Shirts?"

"Yes."

"What kind and how many?"

"T-shirts long-sleeved. Seven. T-shirts short-sleeved. Seven. Flannel long-sleeved. Two."

"Underwear ditto."

"That's kinda personal." I dead panned.

She reached out and smacked me lightly upside my head, and my eyes went wide. She gasped and put a shaking hand over her mouth, her brown eyes huge in her pale face.

"Oh, Ruel, I am so sorry. I ... I got carried away."

"Don't worry about it. You just caught me by surprise. I've had worse."

She burst into tears and rushed toward the restrooms. The brownies burst into tears and fled after her. Hope and Faith started sobbing but were trapped in their kid seats. The clone picked Hope up, and I picked Faith up. Then, while patting Hope on the back and trying to calm her, the clone opened up and let me have it.

In a furious whisper, so as not to upset the mini-mes more, "Are you crazy or just plain stupid? Mom was trying to be nice, make you feel like you belonged. And you go all mean and nasty on her. You are such a jerk. What did she ever do to you?" *seriously?* I had been feeling kinda bad up until then. Now I was just mad.

Also in a whisper, since I'd finally gotten Faith to stop crying, "You mean besides abandoning me at the hospital when I was five hours old? Besides writing me out of her life while she went into full mother mode with three girls who weren't even related to her? You mean besides promptly churning out perfect little replicas of herself while I was being raised by whores?" With every question Grace's face had gone paler. By the time I finished the light tan freckles were standing out starkly on her ivory cheeks.

"I wasn't trying to be mean!" I hurled at her, still whispering, "I was trying to tell her it was alright. That it didn't bother me. Sorry if my reassurances don't meet your exacting standards! I didn't have the benefit of a gentle upbringing in a perfect family! And if I remember right all you perfect daughters were pretty pissed at your oh-so-perfect mother last night! Now if you'll all stop crying long enough I'll go apologize!"

I was so furious, my throat hurt from trying to shout while whispering. I turned from looking at the clone, afraid I'd forget to whisper instead of shout, and found Mrs. Weatherby standing right behind me. *shit*. She was pale, but her eyes were dry. The two brownies were right behind her, their brown eyes red-rimmed and damp.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. I only meant the tap didn't bother me. I'm sorry if it came out the wrong way." I set Faith in her child seat and turned away from the Weatherby women, intending to leave before I forgot to whisper and blasted all the Weatherby females out of pure frustration, and saw the waitress holding our orders. *well, hell*.

"Everyone sit down and eat. We're not letting perfectly good food go to waste just because we can't keep our emotions in check." Mrs. Weatherby in full in-charge mode. We sat.

If I thought dinner — sorry, supper the night before had been awkward, it was only because I hadn't gone through lunch — sorry, dinner today. Faith chattered happily, but she was the only one who spoke until everyone finished. The females didn't actually eat much and had to ask for to-go boxes. I cleared my plate. 'EAT WHEN YOU CAN, KID. YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN THE NEXT MEAL IS', Joe always told me.

"I'd like to look over your purchases, Ruel. Just to make sure you got everything you need." It was an offer, not a demand. *what the hell, guess it can't hurt*.

"Only if you make the clone and the brownies wait in the car," I agreed, reluctantly.

"But, Mom, how are you going to know if what he bought is OK?" the clone objected. "And stop calling me a clone!" she flung at me in true spoiled princess peak.

"Who are you, the fashion police?" I flung right back. Then I winked at her, and she blushed. *and the deputy thought i was too easy.*

After the disgruntled Weatherby minors flounced out to the car, taking the mini-mes with them, Mrs. Weatherby pulled every item out of the carefully stuffed bags and looked it over. It didn't take all that long because every item in each category was identical to every other item in that category. When she had finished, she sat surrounded by piles of clothes looking a bit lost.

"Uhm, Ruel, everything is black."

"No it's not," I objected. I picked up the two black-and-gray plaid flannel shirts. "These aren't black." I pointed to the dark gray coat. "That isn't black."

She looked at me uncertainly, "You should have some color. Something, anything besides black, just to add some variety."

I just looked at her. "You told me you wanted me to be myself." I waved a hand around at the piled shadows of fabric. "This is who I am."

She finally nodded in agreement. "Alright. But there are a couple of items you still need." I started to protest and she held up a hand. "You need some pajama bottoms. And a robe." *oh, yeah.*

I nodded and turned toward Rob, to ask if he had any in black. Before I could open my mouth, she stood, moved toward a display and held up two blue items.

"Pants or shorts?" I tried to look around her for some in black, but she shifted into my line of vision and shook the cellophane-wrapped objects at me. "PANTS OR SHORTS!" I sighed in defeat and pointed to the shorts. "Good!"

She handed Rob the shorts, put the pants back, and dragged me off to the bathrobes. There weren't any black ones so I chose a dark green. The fabric was so soft I wanted to wear it home, but Mrs. Weatherby pulled it from my hands and placed it on the counter. While Rob was adding the new items to the already enormous total, I repacked the four plastic bags.

"Thank you." I said as gracefully as I could. "I'll get a job and pay you back." She started to protest, but I over-rode her. "Mrs. Weatherby, I've bought my own clothes since I was ten-years-old. I don't like having somebody else pay for them, and I will pay you back." In truth it was charity, and I hated charity, but I knew I needed them and didn't have the money right now.

"I'd rather you didn't." I stared at her, and she sighed and handed me the sales slip and went out the door carrying one bag.

I looked at the total and nearly had a heart attack. *i'm going to be in debt until i'm a hundred.* But I put the

slip in my pocket, picked up the other three bags, and went out to the car. *i will pay it back — joe taught me that.*

16 — Beauties and the Beast

The mini-mes slept on the ride home so I didn't have to shoot the damn dinosaur. The clone and the brownies chattered, but I stared out the window. I was used to a lot of alone time, and the chatter and the constant presence of other people was starting to get to me. I needed some serious distance between me and the ever-present Weatherbys, or I was gonna blow a gasket.

When we got back to the ranch, I helped Mrs. Weatherby bring the two sleeping mini-mes into the house and up to their beds. Then I took my new clothes into my bedroom, dug \$25 out of my meager stash, and went searching for Mrs. Weatherby. She was in the kitchen, her head in the refrigerator.

"Mrs. Weatherby?" Pulling her head out, she straightened and gave me her full attention. I placed the worn bills in her cold hand. "My down payment." She opened her mouth to protest, but I turned, brushed past Grace, and went back to my room.

I sat on the bed removing tags and such, preparing my new clothes for washing. Mrs. Weatherby offered to wash the clothes for me, but I insisted on washing machine lessons.

"Mrs. Weatherby, I've been washing my own clothes since I was ten. Just show me how to use the machines."

"If you've been doing it so long," snarked the clone, "why do you need lessons?"

"Because I've never used a machine that didn't need quarters to run, Miss Clone," I snarked back. I spent the afternoon shuttling between my bedroom and the basement, washing and drying my stuff, then folding it and putting it on the built-in bookshelves nearest the closet.

"Wouldn't you rather have a dresser, Ruel?" Mrs. Weatherby asked.

"No." I gestured around the small bedroom, "A dresser would take up a lot of space. I like it feeling open. The shelves are perfect." She brought me some hangers and I hung up my jeans, cargo pants, and coat. By the time the older clones were home from their weekend jobs, and Blondie and the brownies (sounds like a sixties singing group) were helping their mother with supper, my new clothes were all stashed on my shelves. *now i just need some books to make it feel like me.*

Jim came home just before six and poked his head in my open door. "Wow. Starting to look like somebody lives here. How was your day?"

I was lying on my bed wishing I had something to read when he arrived. I rolled my eyes at him. "Seriously? You want a report from a guy forced to go shopping with SIX females? How many ways can you say excruciating?"

"That bad, huh?" he asked, then laughed all the way to his bedroom. *asshole.*

Supper was marginally better than the night before. The clones were not sulky and pouting, but they still ignored me. *oh, dear, how many ways can i say i don't give a shit?* Faith chattered at Hope, and Jim and Mrs. Weatherby caught up on their day. That left me to eat and listen, which was fine because I was talked out.

When supper was over I stood and started stacking dishes to take into the kitchen. Sometimes when I was working as a bouncer, I'd help bus tables during the slow times. I had just finished scraping and stacking the plates, when Sarah arrived at my elbow and took the stack out of my hands.

"That's our job. We don't need YOUR help." She disappeared into the kitchen with my stacked plates, so I started collecting silverware. Amanda whisked them out of my hands with a snort.

"Seriously, get lost! We've got it and don't need YOUR help," and there went the silverware. *wonder if clone three will take the glasses. only one way to find out*

I have large hands, so I gathered the glasses and, by dint of long fingers and a strong grip I managed to clutch five glasses with each hand. I turned and started into the kitchen when Grace tried to take them from me.

"Will you stop!" she demanded. "We don't want YOUR help. Just go away!" The problem was I had a pretty good grip on the glasses and was almost to the kitchen doorway. There was no way for the clone to take them without me setting them down or dropping them and no closer surface than a kitchen counter.

"For fu...reak sake, get the hell out of my way and let me take these into the kitchen before I drop them! Holy hell, you three are pricklier than porcupines." I shoved past her and placed the glasses on the counter next to the sink. "Now I'll leave you three princess clones to your job."

I turned to go, but Sarah stepped between me and the doorways, and Grace and Amanda came up on either side of me, trapping me between them and the counter. Then the barrage started.

"You know, you would do everybody a favor by just going back to whatever HOLE you crawled out of!"

"You aren't wanted here and you don't belong! You'll NEVER fit in!"

"You're like putting a pig in a tuxedo and taking it to a dance. Might be dressed right, but it's still a PIG!" This from Grace who'd spent the day with me. *guess that whole bonding thing didn't happen.*

=====

Jim and Ellie had put Faith and Hope to bed and were in the living room considering whether or not to watch a movie, when they heard raised voices in the kitchen. Jim stepped to the kitchen doorway and saw a scene that shredded his heart. He heard a small gasp from Ellie and knew she felt the same.

Sarah, Amanda, and Grace had surrounded Ruel, trapping him between them and the kitchen counter. His beautiful daughters, pride of their lives, were hurling cruel hurtful words at the boy.

The boy listened quietly while they threw their barbs, his eyes turning hard and cold, looking for all the world like a St. Bernard being beleaguered by three extremely angry Chihuahuas.

Dear, God, Jim thought, Charlie was right. We're going to lose him before we even have a chance.

=====

I waited to see if there was any more. From the satisfied looks on their faces I could tell they really thought they had zinged me good.

"Oh, wow! Guess you really told me, didn't you? What happens now?" The smug looks on their faces slipped a bit, and they looked uncertainly at each other.

"What, you didn't think past the Zing! part? Oh, I know — I should run weeping to my room, pack my meager belongings, and slip tearfully into the cold snowy night, never to be seen again. How does that sound?"

The smugness slid a little further toward confusion. I shook my head, stepping away from the counter and into their space. I leaned forward just a bit and dropped my voice conspiratorially.

"If you want to run a guy off, you've made a good start. Most guys will run screaming into the night to get away from a shrewish woman — Joe taught me that." Their eyes got bigger.

"What's the matter, princesses? You can dish it, but you can't take it?" *girls are definitely weird.* I lowered the volume even more and dropped my voice into a lower register.

"But if you want to SCARE a guy off, words aren't gonna do it. You gotta throw some damn punches. And if you want to scare me off, you're damn well gonna have to win any damn fight you start." I looked at the clones, not one of whom stood over five foot five. "Trust me, little clones, that damn sure ain't gonna happen." I ended on a growl.

"I did it before," Sarah of the purple backpack asserted boldly, "I can do it again."

"You sucker punched me when I was distracted trying to take care of the mini-mes. I don't suppose you stopped to consider you might have missed me and hit Hope?" Her face paled, and I knew she hadn't thought it through. "Or I might have fallen and landed on one of them instead of just dropping them?" All three paled a little.

"You can toss the nasty words and names around all you want, Girlies, but you got nothing to back them up with. All they're doing is adding to the ugliness inside you. And I'm not going anywhere. Now if you will excuse me —" I stepped toward Grace, the smallest, grabbed her firmly around the waist and hoisted her into the air, pivoted and set her down next to the counter in my previously-occupied place of honor, and moved toward the doorway. "— I need some fresh air. Something is spoiled in here."

I passed Jim and Mrs. Weatherby standing in the door to the dining room. Mrs. Weatherby was as pale as her daughters, her mouth set in a grim line. Jim nodded once to me and gave me a thumbs up, then turned his attention back to his daughters with a frown as grim as his wife's. *glad i'm not in the clones' shoes right now.* I cast a look over my shoulder, and from the looks on the princesses' faces, I think they were wishing they weren't in their shoes either.

I found a bookshelf in the living room, tucked between a narrow side window and what turned out to be a coat closet. A few of the titles caught my eye, so I snagged a James Patterson, a Craig Johnson, and a CJ Box and went to my room. The only light was on the ceiling so I lay on my stomach and started the Craig Johnson, all about a Wyoming county sheriff. Go figure.

A few minutes before ten I took my shower and got cleaned up for bed. I put my new sleep shorts and bathrobe on, feeling like an idiot, before I went back to my room.

As I turned the corner of the living room headed toward my bedroom, Jim called to me from the couch. He and Mrs. Weatherby were watching a movie, something about buckets, and he paused it to speak to me.

"Ruel, I want to apologize for that ..." I interrupted him.

"You don't need to apologize. You didn't do anything. Don't worry about it, Jim, my skin is tough and so are my feelings." I was turned toward my bedroom, when Mrs. Weatherby spoke.

"We leave for church at 8:30. Except for Faith and Hope, breakfast is everyone for themselves."

"No." I said firmly but politely. "I don't do church." Her husband reached out to stop her protest, but he was too late.

"Ruel, everyone in this house goes to church together. Just like we eat supper together. As a family." Her tone was firm, brooking no argument.

"Not me." I repeated. She was on her feet now, ready to do battle for her convictions.

"Ruel, I'm willing to cut you a lot of slack, but ..."

"Well, that sure as hell didn't last long!" I snapped. Her expression turned grim at my swearing.

"What exactly does that mean?" she asked angrily.

"So much for wanting me to be myself!" I stalked into my room and slammed the door. *i can't believe i fell for her line of bullshit.* Not bothering to turn on the light, I threw my robe across the chair and crawled into bed. *idiot.*

=====

Jim watched the frustration, the anger, the sheer stubbornness wash across Ellie's face. Putting his head in his hands, he shook it dramatically and groaned. "Ellie. Ellie. Ellie."

"What?" she snapped as she turned away from the boy's bedroom door. "We are responsible for him now, Jim, and he has to accept we will have certain expectations, certain standards he needs to meet." She was in full I-know-best mode. Beyond reasoning.

He stood, shut off the TV, and took the popcorn bowl and their glasses into the kitchen. After tossing the 'old maids' into the garbage, he placed the dirty bowls and glasses in the sink. Shutting off the light over the sink, he stood looking out at the ranch. His ranch. The snow was reflecting back the sodium vapor light over the barn door and on a pole near the driveway entrance to the road, making it seem bright outside. He sighed. Dear, Lord, keep us sane, he breathed in his heart.

"I did it again, didn't I?" Ellie had come up behind him. She leaned one hip against the counter near the sink.

He turned to face her, leaning his hip against the sink. "Yeah, you did."

"I've parented for ten years, Jim, and I think I've been a good mother." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in close and resting his chin on her head.

"You have, Ellie, the best."

"But everything I thought I ever knew about parenting is flying right out the window with this boy. Is it BECAUSE he's a boy? Are boys that different from girls? I feel like I'm flying blind. Even the first year, when I was suddenly the mother of three girls, I was never uncertain. I just knew what to do. But with him ..."

"Yes, boys are completely different from girls. And no I don't think it's just because he's a boy." Jim drew Ellie under his arm and looked out the window again, thinking how to make his stubborn wife understand the kind of life the kid had lived up until now.

"Ellie, do you remember how different Trask was from what you were used to? How strange it felt compared to your home town and where you went to college?"

She nodded. "I felt like I was in a foreign country. The language was the same but foreign. So many new terms. Different clothes, different food, different smells."

"Take how foreign that felt to you, and multiply it 1000 times. THAT is probably how foreign our home, our lifestyle feels to Ruel. He has no frame of reference for this kind of life. He has no previous experiences to base understanding on."

Ellie looked at him in the reflected glow from the snow outside. She looked surprised by what Jim was telling her. He nodded his head, confirming what he said.

"It's more like being on another planet in another galaxy. He has no reason to trust us, Ellie, anymore than we would trust an alien. Try to remember that when dealing with him. The more you push, the more he will resist and pull away. You push hard enough and long enough, and we will lose him." He kissed her forehead and left her standing in the dark.

In the living room he knocked softly on the boy's bedroom door. No answer. Sighing, he went on to bed, praying for the boy and for his stubborn stubborn wife.

=====

17 — The Great Escape is Good to Go

I heard one light tap on my door about fifteen minutes after I got in bed. I ignored it. Five minutes later came another knock and a soft "Ruel?", but I ignored that, too. *i can't believe i let them sucker me in! i am so stupid! a bed and some clothes and i'm a complete sellout!* I didn't fall asleep for a long time.

The next morning I put on my robe before poking my head out my bedroom door. The house was quiet, empty-quiet. I did a quick tour of the downstairs. Nobody. *good!*

During the night I had decided how I was going to spend the Weatherby-free time, so I quickly got dressed in my old jeans and t-shirt and inhaled some cold cereal. My next stop was my closet. I pulled out the few clothes in there and laid them on my bed.

Kneeling, I looked at the closet floor, trying to find some sign of the trap door the sheriff had told me about. I had to run my fingers over the unfurnished wooden planks before I found it — a tiny notch on the right side of the small floor, between two planks. To my eyes it just looked like a small gap, possibly caused by one plank warping. My touch told me it was a man-made gap, just big enough for a thin tool, maybe a chisel or large screwdriver.

I hopped to my feet and made a bee-line to the front door. Grabbing the worn Carhartt coat I'd borrowed the day before, I put it on then slipped and slid to the barn. A workshop took up space at the back of the cavernous building, near a garage door set into the left-side wall.

In the middle of the neat tidy space sat an old green pickup, its engine lying in pieces on the workbench along the back wall. The sight of the parts lying there, greasy and dirty, begging to be fixed, made my fingers itch. I loved working on engines, and thanks to Joe's friends I had a lot of experience at it. But that wasn't my goal right now.

Looking over the tools, clean and neatly hung on the pegboard wall behind the bench, I searched for just the right — *ahh, there it is*. Hanging at the far left end, covered with dust and obviously not used much, hung an old 12 inch straight-tip screwdriver. I took it down and could see right away why it wasn't used. What should have been a smooth straight tip was missing one corner, making it less-than-desirable for screwing but more than adequate for my purposes.

Holding my 'pry bar' tightly so I wouldn't drop it in the snow, I slipped and slid back to the house, hung the borrowed coat back on the coat rack, and hurried to my room. I didn't know how much time I had before the hoard descended on the house, and this was a private project.

I dropped to my knees beside the open closet and inserted the tip of the screwdriver into the gap. The trap door opened easily, and when it was open a few inches I could see a metal handle mounted sideways to the edge of the door. Dropping the screwdriver on the floor behind me, I grasped the handle and pulled the door open. The screeching would have done a horror movie proud, especially one where the stupid teen-agers are going into the basement of the creepy old house while everyone in the audiences yells, "Don't go down there, you morons!!!" *i'd better find some oil or i'll wake the whole house using this*.

It was too dark to see, so I ran out to the kitchen and began throwing drawers open, searching for a flashlight. Nothing. *come on, everyone has a flashlight*. I hadn't used the back door yet, but between the kitchen and the back door there was a sort of enclosed porch with cupboards and such. Flipping open the cupboard doors, I saw a huge Maglite and extra batteries on the lowest shelf of the cupboard closest to the kitchen. *organized as always*. I grabbed it, checked that it worked — *as if she'd have one that didn't* — and flew back to my room. It was almost ten o'clock, they'd left at 8:30, figure a half hour to get the hoard into the van and drive into town, a half hour back. *how the hell long does church last? an hour?* I figured I had maybe a half hour, more if they went to Sunday School.

The bright beam from the Maglite showed an iron ladder bolted to the wall, and a LOT of cobwebs. At first glance I didn't see spiders, but I looked long and hard. *does wyoming have poisonous spiders? would they be awake in this cold?* If there were any, they were hiding well.

I needed something to clean out the spider webs. I pulled my head out of the hole and looked around. *ah ha!* Grabbing my backpack I dug out my dirty clothes, and there at the bottom lay the torn bloody remnants of my second-to-last too-small t-shirt. It was stiff with Mini-me the Really Short's dried blood, but it would work just fine. Jumping up, I ripped back into the kitchen, found a broom, and hustled back to the open trapdoor. I tied the shirt around the bristle-end of the broom and began cleaning away the gray blowing strands of spider silk. Despite the number of webs, it took a surprisingly short time to clear them away, probably because I didn't care if I got dirty. Good thing, too. By the time I had worked my way down the ladder I was gray from head to foot with dust, spider webs, and rust flakes from the ladder. *i need a steel-bristled brush*.

I glanced around, noticing I was in the corner of the basement past the workbench, the part that had been in dim shadows even with all the lights on. Without the lights, it was nearly black. The boxes from the office, now my bedroom, stood tall and proud, creating a wall between this far corner and the rest of the room. *wonder if the sheriff planned it this way to hide the ladder?*

After I climbed back up the ladder, I pulled the shredded filthy shirt off the broom, which I put back in the kitchen. Then I stood on the front porch and shook and brushed as much of the dust and crap off my clothes as I could, but I was still pretty grungy. I might be royally pissed at the Weatherbys, but I wasn't going to put this filthy body inside the sheriff's coat, even if it was a work coat. Instead I hopped off the porch and slipped and slid out to the barn in my t-shirt. *brrrrrrrrrrr.*

In the workshop I found a steel-bristled brush and a squirt-bottle of oil. Confiscating these I imitated a slip'n'slide all the way back to the house, only landing on my butt once in my hurry. Back in the bedroom I carefully oiled the hinges, working the trap door open and shut until it was quiet as a whorehouse at high noon.

After tending to the hinges, I worked my way down the ladder, scrapping each rusted rung with the steel brush then using the shredded shirt to wipe on then wipe off a thin layer of oil, to protect the rungs. I knew I had to be running on borrowed time, and I wanted to clean up before the invasion began, so I worked as fast as I could. I glanced up the clean ready-for-use ladder with satisfaction. Tucking the filthy rag into my belt and putting the scratchy brush in my back pocket, I prepared to climb my morning's work.

I had my left foot on the bottom rung when a cold pressure behind my right ear froze me where I stood. I'd felt this particular sensation one other time, when a nasty drunk got the drop on me and pulled his Colt .38 Super and stuck it right against my forehead, his finger on the trigger. That day Joe had come to my rescue, teaching the drunk roustabout two things. One, never pull a gun on Joe Black's kid when Joe was standing right there. Two, an eight-shot Mossberg 500 Persuader pump action shotgun trumps a Colt .38 Super any day of the week.

Unfortunately for me, Joe was two states away buried in the frozen North Dakota dirt. And I didn't have a Persuader.

"You just freeze, mister. You move sudden, I move sudden. You got it?" I almost pissed my pants with relief when I recognized Charlie's pack-a-day voice.

"Charlie? Mr. Weston? It's me, Ruel." I didn't move, sudden or otherwise, while I introduced myself again.

"Ruel? What the hell you doing, boy. I almost shot first and asked questions later." The cold pressure was removed from my ear, and I began to breathe again. Turning my head just enough to see the old mechanic in the dim basement light, I also saw the short-barreled chrome-plated S & W .357 Magnum revolver in his steady hand.

"Well, that would have done the job," I said, nodding my head at the hefty hand-gun. I turned to face him. "You always go armed?"

"Pretty much, especially when I'm by my lonesome out here. How come you ain't in church with the rest

of the family?"

"Don't do church. Not my family. What're you doing down here?" I waved my hand around, indicating the basement and this particular dark corner.

Charlie waved back at the stack of boxes. "Burning duty. Jim wanted me to start on the backside of this here wall and burn a couple'a boxes every time his missus is away. Figured church'd give me least a couple hours." He glanced at a steel watch on his left wrist. "They gonna be home about 12:30 so I got time to do one more."

He waved his hand at the restored ladder. "Jim told you about his escape hatch, 'eh?"

I nodded and placed one hand on a shiny rung. "Yeah. Figured I'd get it cleaned up."

"Why?" Charlie's tobacco-brown eyes studied me. *bet they don't miss much. truth or lies?*

"In case I need to run." If he told, he told. Lying doesn't come easily to me, so I figured I'd stick to the truth when I could. He watched me, speculating.

"You think it's gonna come to that? It that hard to stay in a nice house with three squares a day?"

"The house is fine. The food's good. But it starts feeling like a prison, a straight jacket, I'm outta here. Mrs. Weatherby —" I hesitated. Charlie had known the Weatherbys a long time. If I trashed her, I could write him off as a possible ally. *truth or lies?*

"Mrs. Weatherby is probably a fine woman and a good mother. But she's never been a good mother to me, and I don't need her to start now. I been taking care of myself mostly since I was ten and all the way since I was twelve. I know right from wrong. I'm a hard worker. I take responsibility for what I do." I paused again, caressing the steel rungs I'd spent the better part of the morning cleaning. "I don't like to be pushed. And I don't like to be squeezed into a shape I don't fit. I know the sheriff is trying, but that doesn't help when she's pushing and pulling." I looked at the old man, hoping he understood but not caring if he didn't.

"Ellie Weatherby IS a fine woman and good mother, but she does like to be at the wheel, steering. And she's as stubborn as a mule. I'm thinking she passed more than a fair share of that along." I scowled — *i'm nothing like her, old man* — but he kept talking. "Dig in and hold yer ground. My guess is she'll get it eventually." He placed a grease-stained hand on my shoulder. "Don't give up on this family, boy. It's a good one. One of the best I've seen."

He turned back toward the wall and picked up a box. "Gotta get this burnt. Yer secret's safe with me, boy. Jim useta come see me when he was hiding out in his 'office'. Company's always welcome." Hoisting the box onto his shoulder he walked away from me and the wall. Floating back through the gloom I heard, "You got 'bout forty minutes afore the family gits home."

I climbed back up my ladder — *my ladder* — and closed the trap door, then put the old screwdriver on the floor against the back wall of the closet where it would be hard to see. I took clean clothes into the bathroom with me, stripped off the filthy ruined ones and wadded them into a ball. *i'll have to ask Charlie where the burn barrel is*. In the shower, I scrubbed until I got the rust and grime from underneath my nails and out of my hair.

After I got dressed in my brand-spanking-new clothes, I hung all the clothes back in the closet. Then I put on my new coat and took the steel wire brush and oil bottle back to the barn, careful to not get them against the clean new fabric.

I had added the rest of my dirty too-small clothes to the wad of clothes I'd worn cleaning the ladder and had it with me, hoping I'd see Charlie so I could ask about burning them or throwing them away. I lucked out. He was beside a small outbuilding about twenty yards behind the barn. The little building leaned rather than stood, and I wondered how it withstood the constant wind.

"Charlie!" I called as I got closer. The mechanic had just tossed the last of the papers from the box into the burn barrel and was tearing up the box to toss in next. When he looked up I held the bundle of clothes up.

"Where can I pitch these old clothes?" He motioned to the barrel, and I tossed them in. The fire sputtered a bit, then caught and took the last remnants of my pre-Wyoming life skyward in flames and smoke.

17 — Ten Things I Don't Like About You

I watched the flames for a bit, enjoying the heat and the smoke-smell, trying to decide if I was sad my old life was disappearing. Remembering I still had to put the Maglite back, I slid back to the house and put the Maglite back in its home next to the batteries. By the time the family got home I was sitting on my bed reading, all signs of my secret cleaned up and hidden away.

The sheriff rapped lightly on the doorframe of my open door and said, "Looks like you stayed busy while we were gone." I looked up and nodded but didn't say anything. He came into the room a bit further, glancing around. *wonder if he wants the room back?*

=====

Jim saw the distrust and hardness were back in the boy's eyes and sighed quietly. As much as he loved Ellie he was seriously pissed at her right now. He knew this whole situation was stressing her. Heck, all of them. But she was an adult, dang it. Why couldn't she act like one and cut the kid some slack.

He'd told the boy his family came first, and it did, but how did he reconcile his love for his family with concern and growing affection for this throw-away kid?

Dear, God, where do I go from here?

=====

"Look, Ruel, I know Ellie can be kind of ..." he paused as if seeking a word that was kinder than some I would use "... overwhelming when she thinks she's right." I still said nothing, waiting to see where this was going.

"I'm asking you to give her a chance. Give all of us a chance. Yesterday sure didn't show us at our best, and I hope you won't judge us based on a few instances of bad behavior." *bad behavior? sheesh!!*

"I'll keep what you asked in mind, Sheriff." His face fell a bit when I called him that. *probably shouldn't tar him with the same brush, but damnit they're his daughters and wife. seems he could keep them in line!*

"What happened to Jim?" he asked quietly. I looked down at the book as I answered.

"Joe once told me 'EVERYTHING CHANGES, KID, YOU GOTTA GO WITH THE FLOW OR GET SWEEP AWAY'. Seems the flow just isn't running that way right now." I looked up and regretted the disappointment I saw in his blue eyes. *but damnit I don't have anyone to look out for me but me.* "Maybe the flow will change again, Sheriff, but I don't think that's up to me."

He looked at his hands for a bit, then looked me in the eyes and nodded once. "I can see how it seems that way to you. I'm damn sorry about that. I was really hoping you were getting comfortable with us."

"I'm grateful you and Mrs. Weatherby took me in instead of shipping me off to kid limbo and washing your hands of me. I know you could've done that easy enough. And I'm grateful for the bed and the new clothes, and three squares a day." I stopped. He looked at me, expecting me to go on, but I was done. I'd thanked him for what I could be thankful for.

"And the family?" He swept his hand back over his shoulder, indicating the rest of the Weatherbys.

"The mini-mes are amazing. As for the rest?" I shrugged. "Not my family."

He looked so sad, I almost retracted what I said, but it was true, and I had decided I was sticking with the truth, as much as I could - Joe taught me that. The weird thing was, cutting myself off like this made me sad, too. Like I'd been hungering for a nice big meal and saw a feast all laid out, just for me. But the price was more than I was willing to pay. I wasn't digging into any feast that cost me myself.

The sheriff sighed deeply and nodded again. Just before he turned away he said, "Sunday dinner is our big meal. It'll be at one o'clock sharp," then he walked away. If anyone had asked, I'd have said his step was a bit slower and his shoulders a bit slumped. *damn, i like him. but i am not going to lose myself. it's all i have left. damn!* Truth was, my shoulders slumped just a bit, too.

=====

Jim sat on his bed and took off his church boots. Then he stood and removed his suit and hung it carefully as Ellie liked him to. His tie went on the tie rack, and his shirt went in the laundry hamper. He pulled on a clean pair of jeans and a clean shirt, sat down again and pulled on a comfortable pair of boots.

All the time his body was on autopilot, his brain was locked down tight. He was afraid if he let his thoughts loose, they'd rampage all over his family. The girls and Ellie. This had been his family, his life. And he had always thought his life was good, complete. Then three days ago — No! He wasn't going to think about that. Ellie and the girls were his life and they were enough. They had to be. Asking for more was just greedy. Maybe he should have talked Ellie into signing the kid away. Probably be better for everyone. Except the boy.

He pulled his hands down over his face, trying to wipe the anger and resentment away, trying to wipe the sudden tiredness away. Ellie entered, and he automatically smiled at her.

"Dinner in ten," she said, pulling off her church clothes and pulling on comfortable jeans and a sweater. Slipping her slim feet into sheepskin slippers, she paused and looked at him. "Jim? What's wrong?" She placed a fine-boned hand on his brown hair, still thick and free of gray.

He pulled her onto his lap and nuzzled her neck through her soft brown curls. "Nothing. Just tired. I didn't sleep well last night." Snuggling her in close, he kissed her cheek and asked, "So what fantastic feast did you fix today?"

"Roast beef with potatoes and carrots, salad, chocolate pie." His stomach growled, and they laughed at the timing. Ellie kissed him thoroughly and stood.

"Maybe you need a nap after dinner."

"Maybe." He smiled at her as she left, but it disappeared when she was out of sight.

Dear, God, what am I going to do? He'd never felt so lost.

=====

Mrs. Weatherby looked in my open door but didn't enter. "Ruel, dinner in five minutes." I nodded, to let her know I heard, but I didn't look up from my book. She stayed a bit, uncertainty practically radiating off her.

"Did you need something else?" I asked. She shook her head and left as quietly as she'd come.

I heard female feet on the stairs then going into the dining room. Time to eat. *yay*. I closed the book and stood just as Hope scrambled into my room. She had on a ruffled frilly poufed dress that stood out from her chubby toddler body so far she looked as big around as tall.

"Mini-me, what the heck are you wearing?" She twirled around causing the flounced shirt to stick straight out from her waist, showing purple netting underneath. She had enough fabric in the dress to clothe a dozen kids. Since her thumb was in her mouth, I took the twirl for her answer. 'Look, Ruel, this is my over-the-top girlie dress my mom put on me. Do you like it?'

"You look quite ravishing," I said and bowed when she did another twirl. She beamed around her thumb and held one arm up. Apparently I was now supposed to transport the frills queen to dinner.

I picked her up and she reached her chubby little arms around my neck. *please don't swear, please don't swear*. She snuggled in against my neck and whispered "Roo." *roo? what the hell is a roo?*

"She likes you." The voice sounded amazed. Grace was standing in the doorway with a puzzled look on her face, like she couldn't figure out what Mini-me the Really Short could possibly see in an unwanted unwelcome interloper.

"Yeah. No accounting for taste." I brushed past her and carried Miss Poufy into the dining room. I tried to put her into her high chair but the frills and ruffles just bunched up around her. She looked like she'd been stuck into the middle of a fabric artichoke.

I looked at Mrs. Weatherby, hoping she had a solution to this excess of flounces. She smiled and just stuffed them down around the little girl. *huh! that's how you do it*.

The food was good. The conversation not so much.

The clones were talking about school work and friends and a dance coming in a couple of weeks. The brownies were begging to stay at some friends' house the next Friday night. Mrs. Weatherby was trying to talk to me about going to school to get registered the next day. I just nodded occasionally and continued eating. Hope was eating and painting her high chair with the carrots and salad dressing. Faith was bossing Hope around, well she was trying, but Hope just kept smearing. The sheriff was mostly silent, and that bothered me more than the senseless chatter around me.

I tuned everyone out and talked to myself, trying to sort through my feelings.

why am i angry with him? he isn't responsible for his wife being a bossy pushy bitch. but he is responsible for his daughters being mean shrews. i mean, he raised them, didn't he? except his wife has been raising them for ten years, so they were only four and six when she got her claws into them. does that mean i can let him off the hook? he's been pretty nice to me, and he didn't have to. i've come in here and screwed his whole life up, and he's still been nice. shit! A MAN IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HIMSELF, joe always said. is he responsible for the people around him? joe never said i was responsible for him. hell, most of the time he wasn't responsible for me. i was. shit. what the hell do i do?

"Ruel!" The voice was sharp. I looked up and saw everyone but the mini-mes staring at me. The clones and their mom looked peeved, the brownies uncertain. The sheriff looked aggravated, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at his wife. *hmmm. maybe this shit is as hard on him as me*.

"What?" I answered in the same tone of voice. The brownies' eyes got big. The clones' eyes narrowed. *ooooo, scary*. I narrowed mine back at them, and they almost gasped. *shit, gurlies, if you can't take it don't dish it out*

Mrs. Weatherby looked at me and waited, probably for an apology. I stared at her and waited.

"Ruel, that's a disrespectful tone."

"It's the same one you used with me."

"Don't use that tone with my mother!" one of the clones, Sarah I think, spat out. Before I could respond, the sheriff jumped in, his tone sharp as a knife.

"That's enough, Sarah! You are already on thin ice after that stunt last night! This conversation doesn't concern you so keep quiet!" Sarah looked shocked and dropped her eyes to her plate. Amanda and Grace also looked down, maybe hoping he'd forget their roles in the attempted smack-down last night. The brownies' eyes got even bigger.

Mrs. Weatherby looked like she was going to say something, but one look at the sheriff's angry face changed her mind. *maybe he does try to rein them in*. She took a breath, maybe calming herself down?

"We were talking about school tomorrow. Since you haven't been to school I'm not sure what will happen. I think we should be prepared for anything. They might want you to take tests. They might want you to start at a lower grade. We'll just have to wait and see." I nodded my head and went back to eating. Clearly this wasn't what she expected.

"I don't want you to be nervous or worried. I'll stay with you while they decide what to do. You won't have to face this new experience alone." I shrugged. Still not making her happy.

"Do you have any questions? Any concerns? Jim and I are here for you. Any questions you have the girls can answer. — *yeah, i can see they're dying to help* — We want to help you make this transition. I know it's a big step for you." Nodding didn't work. Shrugging didn't work. So I sat and stared at her, waiting for her to run down so I could finish my food before it got cold.

I think she finally got it and stopped talking. I waited a minute to see if she had anything else. When she didn't start talking again I started eating.

"Do you have any questions?" I shook my head and sighed.

"Are you worried about anything?" Shake.

"Nothing?" Shake.

She sat back and stared, clearly disbelieving me. I kept eating.

"Ruel, we can't help if you don't tell us what your concerns and questions are." I finally put my fork down. I was obviously not going to get to finish dinner.

"I have no concerns. I have no worries. I am not nervous. I do have one question."

She beamed. "Anything!"

"Can I finish dinner?"

She threw her napkin on the table.

The clones threw their napkins on the table.

She stood, shoving her chair back.

The clones stood, shoving their chairs back.

The brownies thought about it, but kept looking at the chocolate pie and voted to abstain. I looked at them and gave them a very small smile and got one in return. *progress.*

The sheriff rolled his eyes and dropped his head into his hands.

I started laughing. It was so completely ludicrous, so over-the-top drama queen, like some badly acted play, I couldn't help it. I couldn't catch my breath. The tears started rolling down my face. Finally I laid my head on my arms on the table and giggled. *i think i'm hysterical.*

=====

Jim was trying hard to restrain himself, but this unbelievable display by his wife and oldest daughters was real close to pushing his last button. Of all the arrogant, inane, ridiculous . . .

The boy's explosion of laughter cut his thoughts short. He looked at him in surprise. Ellie had been pushing and pushing, trying to mold this big, rough, tattooed kid into her idea of a teen-age boy, his daughters had gotten downright nasty with him. And he still had enough confidence in who he was to laugh at their ridiculousness. Tough kid.

=====

A high-pitched giggling brought my head up off the table. Hope was giggling around her thumb and bouncing in her high chair. Then Faith started. Then the sheriff started. Soon the brownies joined in. And we were all gasping and laughing and wiping tears while Mrs. Weatherby and the clones stood, indignantly watching. The looks on their faces made me laugh even harder. *jeez, ladies, get a life.*

With a soft pop, Hope pulled her thumb out of her mouth, and everybody froze, waiting for her verbal contribution. *please don't swear, please don't swear.* She bounced some more, still giggling.

Then she stopped and held her arms out toward me and pursed her little rosebud mouth. *please don't swear, please don't swear.*

"Roo." *what the hell is a roo?*

All noise in the room stopped dead. Everyone stared at me, open-mouthed, even the sheriff. The clones' and brownies' eyes opened so wide white could be seen all around the blue and brown irises. Mrs. Weatherby's mouth was actually hanging open. Faith's mouth was a little round 'o'. And Sheriff

Weatherby was grinning at me like I'd won the Super Bowl single-handed.

"What the he...eck is a roo?"

The sheriff plucked the really short mini-me out of her highchair and handed her to me. She patted my cheeks with food-covered hands and burred, "Roo."

"I'm sorry, Mini-me. I don't know what a roo is." I looked around the staring silent group. *come on, people, you know the baby better than i do.*

The sheriff knelt by my chair and put a large hand on my shoulder. "Ruel. She's saying Ruel," he said softly.

18 — Trust is Something to Talk About

Hope kept patting my cheeks and saying "Roo" over and over, while everyone stared at her, marveling. Seems she didn't actually talk much. She said 'Mama' and 'Da' but not much else, except to repeat my ill-timed swear words.

The Weatherbys explained they had taken her to a couple of specialists who both told them if she could laugh she would talk — when she was ready. Sheriff Weatherby was content to wait. Mrs. Weatherby, consistent with her nature, was constantly talking to her — 'say dog, can you say dog, Hope?' — sure that if she could hit just the right word, show her just the right item, she would magically start talking.

Apparently I was the right item, and 'Ruel' was the right word. It didn't make Mrs. Weatherby very happy with me, but she was happy enough with Hope's talking, until she realized swear words and my name were all she was ready to say. *that's the way to make them like you, ruel, hi-jack their baby's vocabulary.*

After dinner Sheriff and Mrs. Weatherby went for a walk while the clones watched Hope and Faith. *who goes for a walk in the snow on a ten degree day? probably people who have seven kids and are never alone.* The rest of them were sitting in the living room while I sat on the floor just inside my bedroom.

I was leaning against the doorjamb of my bedroom doorway, watching Hope run around the living room saying Roo and something suspiciously like poop. Mrs. Weatherby had assured everyone Hope did NOT say that word, but I said it was better than shit, which earned me several glares. *maybe not.*

The clones were treating me marginally less like a leper by condescending to stay in the same general vicinity as me, although this didn't extend to actually talking to me, just ignoring me with less animosity. The brownies seemed more inclined to treat me like a person, even talking to me a bit. They were perched on either side of my doorway like little brown birds, asking questions.

"You really haven't been to school?" asked Merri, the one who thought I looked homeless.

"Never been."

"Can't you read?" asked Beth, the very quiet one. I think I'd heard fewer words from her than Hope. Of course that was probably because she didn't swear, so I'm not sure that was a fair comparison.

"Yeah, I can read. I'm not illiterate." They both looked blank. "Illiterate means not able to read."

"Can you do numbers?" Merri asked.

I nodded. "Yep. Not fancy complicated stuff, but I can add, subtract, multiply, divide, do fractions and percentages, measurements, figure money and earnings. Practical stuff." More blank looks. "Practical means they can be used for real stuff, not just for school work."

"How did you learn if you didn't go to school?" Beth almost whispered. I couldn't decide if she was shy or just overwhelmed by the noisier more opinionated Merri.

"People taught me. People who worked with my dad, his friends. People like that." Merri lost interest in my boring life and wandered over by the clones, who were doing something female with their fingers and

toes. Whatever it was it stunk!

Beth was squatted beside me like she might jump up and fly away. The more we talked the more she relaxed, and finally she sat beside me and leaned against the other doorjamb.

"What kinds of things did they teach you?" She turned her soft brown eyes on me, brown eyes so similar to Mini-me the Really Short, but different, more dark chocolate than milk chocolate.

"Well, I learned math from some ladies my dad worked with. And a man who - *how the hell do I explain a pimp to an eight-year-old?* - uhm, supervised them taught me how to read. He had been a literature teacher in some college in the south before he got into ... uhm, supervising. He really liked books. I learned to like them from him."

"What's literucher?"

"Written stuff. Anything that's written is basically literature. It's a fancy word for books, plays, poems, even magazines."

"Oh. I like literucher, too, then. I like to read." She said this so quietly I almost didn't hear her, like it was a secret, or she was ashamed of it.

"Me, too." I smiled at her. "I like to read. I'm not real fast, but I can read most things. What's your favorite thing to read?"

"Nancy Drew."

"Why her?" She blushed and looked down.

"Because she's brave and has adventures." Her voice was barely louder than a breath. "What else did you learn?"

"Well, my dad's friends taught me to shoot guns, and how to fix stuff, like engines and appliances. They also taught me how to drive."

"Did your dad teach you anything?" She was actually interested. That was a new experience for me. I thought a bit. *what had joe taught me?*

"He taught me a man finishes the job in front of him. A man keeps his promises. A man takes responsibility for his actions. He taught me friends are more important than things. He taught me to be myself, to not be ashamed of who I am. He taught me to fight, because he said people who can, have to do for people who can't, and that sometimes means doing their fighting for them. So I needed to know how." Her eyes were as big as saucers, and I suddenly realized it was completely quiet in the room.

Merri had been reading to Faith and Hope, who was almost asleep, but now they were all staring at me. They looked uncomfortable and confused and angry. *at me? to hell with them.* I ignored them and turned back to Beth.

"Do you like to fight?" she whispered.

"No. I don't know too many men who know how to fight who LIKE to fight. It's just something that's sometimes necessary."

"Have you ever been hurt in a fight?" Her soft voice was intense, and I wondered why.

"The worst I've ever been hurt is when your sister clocked me with her backpack Friday." I touched the scrape on my nose and the mostly yellow black eye. I smiled to let her know it was OK, but she looked at me with such intensity.

"Promise?" *what the hell is going on?*

I took her cold little hands in mine, covering them as if warming them up. "Beth, I promise. I've never had worse than the black eye and bloody nose Sarah gave me on Friday." She looked at me so hard. Then suddenly tears spilled over and ran down her rosy cheeks.

"Hey. Hey. What's going on? You all right?" She just looked at me, and my heart about broke. I gathered the little brownie up into my lap and wrapped my arms around her.

"What's going on Brownie Beth?" She giggled a little at the alliterative nickname. Then she hiccupped.

Snuggling against my chest, she whispered me a story of fear.

"My daddy has to go after bad guys all the time. I'm 'fraid when he goes out. Mama says he's fine and the other girls tell me I'm silly, but I'm still 'fraid. I don't tell 'em anymore 'cause they laugh at me. Even Merri. And Mama says I'm not trusting God for Daddy being safe." She looked up at me, a little fear in her dark chocolate eyes. Was I going to laugh, too?

"Beth, everyone gets afraid sometimes. Even your mom and sisters. I'll bet they're afraid of stuff you aren't afraid of." She smiled a little and gave a tiny nod. "Different things make different people afraid."

"Are you ever afraid?" she whispered.

"Yeah."

"Of what?" she looked at me, trusting I'd tell her the truth. So I did.

"I was afraid when Joe died, because my whole life changed. I didn't have a home or a job anymore. And I was afraid of coming here. I don't know any of you or anything about living in a family." There wasn't a sound in the room now except Hope's even breathing as she slept on the couch.

"But you know what you can do when you're afraid for your daddy?" She shook her head making her silky hair fly back and forth, brushing my arms.

"God knows everything, so pretending you're not afraid is silly. He already knows. I figure the best thing to do is just tell Him. Admit it. I don't think He thinks you're not trusting Him by being afraid. I think He's waiting for you to be afraid so you can tell Him, 'cause that shows you trust Him enough to tell Him."

"Really?" A little smile peeked though the tears like a little brownie rainbow.

"Yep. Your daddy knows what he's doing when he chases bad guys, but everybody can use God's help. So when you say, 'Hey, God, I'm afraid for my daddy out chasing bad guys', God probably goes," — I dropped my voice a couple of octaves — " 'Wow! I'm glad that little Brownie Beth told me she's afraid for her daddy. Reminds me to put a couple more guardian angels on the case.' Then he calls up St. Peter and says, 'Pete, put Michael and Gabriel on the Weatherby case. He's out chasing bad guys again and needs some backup.' "

=====

Jim and Ellie walked in the door just in time to hear the boy's version of trusting God. Holy cow! Here was a fourteen-year-old — who the good Lord knew had very little reason to trust anyone — telling a frightened eight-year-old — who had very few reasons to not trust pretty much everyone she knew — to trust and making it sound like the simplest thing in the world.

The rest of the girls were silent, watching and listening to a boy they claimed to hate. As the kid ignored them and focused on Beth, Merri and Faith went and squatted beside him, listening hard.

Jim looked at Ellie. Her eyes were open wide, maybe really seeing this cast-off child for the first time, not as a wrong she had to make right, but as a boy who needed time and space to grow into the man he was already becoming. A fine man. A strong man.

Dear, God, can she start treating him as a good man in the making and not as a project who needs her iron will pushing him into respectability? As a child to love and accept?

=====

By the time I was finished with my God-talk, Beth was giggling, and Merri and Faith were perched in front of me listening. Clapping from the front door startled all of us.

Sheriff and Mrs. Weatherby were standing there, red-cheeked and covered with a powdered-sugar dusting of fine snow. *guess it's coming down again.* Outside the window, the sky was almost dark.

"That, Mr. Black, is the finest explanation of trusting God I've ever had the privilege of hearing. And an excellent reminder to pray for law enforcement." He helped Mrs. Weatherby out of her coat and hung it on the coat rack. Then he shed his own coat and hung it beside hers. Hope was waking up, and he scooped the warm sleepy girl up and cuddled her against his chest.

"Ruel?" Mrs. Weatherby spoke.

"Yeah?" I answered warily. The last two talks I had with her hadn't gone very well.

"I thought you didn't believe in God." The words were blunt, but the tone was curious.

"Where the he...eck did you get that idea? I never said I didn't believe in God!"

"But the argument about this morning." She looked genuinely confused.

I set Beth to one side and stood. "I believe in God, Mrs. Weatherby. I just don't believe in church. What time do I need to be ready in the morning?"

"Since I have to go we'll take the car. Be ready to leave by eight o'clock."

I nodded my head, went into my room, and closed the door. I didn't go out again until almost eleven, after everybody had gone to bed. The thought of school and spending every day locked in a box with a jillion other people was giving me the willies, and I needed some space with just me in it. *better grab some downtime while I can.*

I got ready for bed, then decided to shave to save myself time in the morning. I was just finishing when I heard a soft little noise outside the bathroom door.

"Roo?"

Chuckling I opened the door and saw Hope in her pink feety pajamas grinning around her thumb. I picked her up and she presented me with a very wet thumb, offering it like a lollipop.

"I'm not really into thumbs, but thank you." She popped it back in. *i wonder if it has any flavor?* "What are you doing down here? I know your mom put you to bed hours ago." I was trying to talk softly so I wouldn't wake up her folks, but the sheriff heard me. He opened their bedroom door and slipped out into the hall. *huh. i wouldn't have taken him for stripped pajamas.*

"Sorry. I was trying to be quiet."

"Hope, what are you doing out of bed?" He took the little pink fuzzy bundle from me and started for the stairs.

"NO!" She was so loud he almost dropped her. "ROO!" I stood rooted to the floor. *what the hell was going on with mini-me?*

The sheriff handed her back to me. "Guess you get to tuck her in."

She wrapped her little arms around my neck, and I was waiting for a repeat of the day before when she swore. Instead she hugged me like her life depended on it and said, "Roo."

"Mini-me, you should let your dad tuck you in." *shit! they were really going to hate me. they're gonna think i stole their really short mini-me. damn!*

Sheriff Weatherby placed a large warm hand on my shoulder. *he does that a lot. i tried to resent it but couldn't.* "Ruel, we've put her to bed approximately fifteen hundred times. I think we can let you have the privilege once in a while."

"But ... but, Jim, I'm not trying to take your daughter away from you. I don't even know why she's suddenly so fixated on me!" He registered my use of his name but seemed to hear the note of panic in my voice and stuck to the subject, trying to reassure me.

"Little kids are like the winds of Wyoming, blowing all different directions . Something attracts them and they go with it for a while. Then they find something else and go with that. Right now it's you."

"Great! Your family already thinks I'm butting in where I'm not wanted. Now they're gonna think I'm stealing Mini-me. This ought to make me really popular." He just smiled at me and turned me around toward the stairs.

"We'll survive. So will you. Go put her to bed before she wakes everybody up. Get her down quick, less chance of being stoned by the angry villagers."

"Thanks. That really makes me feeling better." Hope was already drifting off.

"Go," he said quietly. So I went. Just before I reached the bottom of the stairs, he said, so quietly it was more thought than words, "You'll always be wanted here, Boy."

=====

Jim smiled when the boy used his name. Maybe he could let his mind think about the unthinkable after all.

The sight of his youngest cuddling up to her tall, rough-looking half-brother and quite obviously melting the protective ice around his lonely young heart gave Jim hope the rest of the family would soon follow.

The kid already had Hope and Faith in his corner. After tonight, Jim was pretty sure he had Beth and possibly Merri. Now for the three ice princesses.

As the boy took Hope back to bed, Jim breathed out, "You'll always be wanted here, Boy."

Dear, God, thank you for this throw-away kid who is teaching me what trust really means.

=====

19 — School House Rock and Roll

I knew there was a reason Joe didn't like school. It started off with me ready to punch someone's light out, and ended with me feeling like a brain-damaged chimpanzee

I think adding one stranger into her usual routine threw Mrs. Weatherby more than she would admit. She sent me back to my room three times to change before she remembered everything I owned looked the same.

"Can't you wear your cargo pants and polo shirt?"

"That's for dress, Mrs. Weatherby."

"Well, at least put one of the flannel shirts over your t-shirt." I looked down at the long-sleeved t-shirt she'd had me change into.

"A flannel shirt over long sleeves? I'll roast!" Jim had already gone to work, so my one ally was unavailable. Interestingly enough, help came reluctantly from an unexpected quarter. Grace.

"Mom, leave him alone. Everything he has is lame. Let him wear what he wants." *ok. not a rousing endorsement, but i'll take what i can get.*

After breakfast, which was about as organized as two amputees trying to run a three-legged race, we stuffed the mini-mes into their snow suits — think stuffing cooked spaghetti down a straw — and the six of us got in the van four times. Beth forgot her book report, then Merri forgot a library book, then Ellie had to go back in for the snack bag she'd packed for the mini-mes. It was probably a good thing the clones elected to ride the school bus. Who knows how many times we'd have been in and out of the car before getting away from the house.

After a rousing fifty rounds of the damn purple dinosaur, we dropped the brownies off at the grade school and the mini-mes off at the disgustingly cheerful yellow house with the bright blue door. I got four hugs and three wet cheek pats before Hope would let go of my neck and enter the house. *just me and mama weatherby. yay*

The high school was a tall modern building set back-to-back with the elementary school, which was first through eighth grades. As we drove around the block to the school visitors' parking lot, Mrs. Weatherby started on the reassurances. I cut her off early into the first, "Now, Ruel ..."

Holding up my hands I short-circuited her spiel. "Mrs. Weatherby, I'm fine. Don't start!" She clamped her mouth shut, but I could tell the effort was costing her.

There was a security guard just inside the double front doors to the high school's main lobby. He was an older guy with military-short iron gray hair and a little paunch just starting to hang over his belt. He stared up at my long hair and the tattoo flames curling around my neck and my morning shadow - turns out shaving at night left me looking like I hadn't shaved at all - and made a face. Then he smiled at Mrs. Weatherby.

"Morning', Ellie. What're you doin' here this fine crisp - *it's minus 3* - mornin'?" He looked up at me from

his very straight-backed five foot seven, clearly ready to take me out if the fine lady at my side even hinted I was bothering her. *sheesh! get a grip, old man!*

"Good morning, Walter. How is Della?" She took his weathered hand in hers, genuinely interested in his answer.

"She's fine, Ma'am. Little pained with the arthritis in this cold snap. She'll be right as rain the temp gets back up a bit." *to what? zero?* "What brings you over to our side of the yard?"

She gestured at me. "Ruel, this is Walter Perley. Walter was a deputy until he retired two years ago. Walter, this is Ruel Black. Ruel just came to live with us, Walter. I'm getting him registered today." *i notice you forgot to mention i was your son, mrs. everybody-loves-me weatherby.*

Walter beamed at her. "Well, if you and Jim don't take the cake. Seven beautiful daughters at home and still generous enough to open your home to the less fortunate. Seems like you'd have enough on your plates without adding a troubled foster kid into the mix. You will sure have some stars in your crowns when you greet the Good Lord!" *i think i'm gonna hurl.*

Before she could reply I smiled coldly at the old man. "Yeah. I'm jist so lucky I got me a genyooine saint for a foster mama. Dunno what I'd do 'thouwt her'n mister Jim. 'Spect I'd still be turnin' tricks over't the Bakken." I slung one long arm around Mrs. Weatherby's embarrassed shoulders and drew her tight against my side.

"Come on, mama Ellie, we gotta git me registred so I kin larn to read." I pulled her away from the security guard, leaving him with his mouth hanging open so far I could see the dangly thing in the back of his throat and the wad of brown juicy tobacco tucked between his cheek and yellow teeth. *damn. that is gross!*

We had barely rounded the corner out of sight of the shocked man, when she rounded on me furiously. "What the hell — *whoa. the perfect mother just swore. high five to me!* — do you think you are doing? That poor old man will think we've taken a juvenile delinquent into our home! He's a terrible gossip! It'll be all over town by noon!" Her face was bright red with rage, and her eyes were squinting at me like they'd like to squash me flat.

"Well, look at it this way 'mama Ellie', at least he won't be telling everyone your bastard son has come to live with you. Silver linings! Is this the office?" I pulled open the glass-fronted door that clearly said 'Wolverin County Consolidated High School Administrative Office in neat gold lettering — *holy shit! do they have to fit that onto a business card? the writing must be too tiny to read without a magnifying glass!* — and went inside. Reluctantly, she followed.

The office was bright and airy with soft green walls, industrial carpeting on the floor, and plants and small trees placed around the space to make it feel homey. The effect was ruined by the gray metal desks and filing cabinets, beige computers, and fluorescent lights buzzing in the drop-down acoustical tile ceiling. The whole thing had a schizophrenic feel and made my teeth itch.

"Mrs. Weatherby," a tall thin woman with dyed red hair and penciled eyebrows, greeted cheerily. "Right on time as always. Is this the young man? Please, come right this way. Mr. Hatfield is waiting for you in his office. He's very excited to meet you, Mr. Black, he's never had an completely unschooled student

here before. He sees it as an excellent opportunity. Right in here." She finally stopped talking when we reached a light-colored wooden door with a brass plaque that read "T. F. S. Hatfield, Wolverin County Educational Superintendent, Wolverin County Consolidated High School Principal. *hell, he must have to print on both sides of the business card.* She opened the door and stepped aside as we entered.

"Mr. Hatfield, Mrs. Weatherby and the boy are here," she announced importantly to the squat little man behind the desk. Then she withdrew, closing the door behind her.

The little man stood, and I could see he was even shorter than I thought, easily shorter than Mrs. Weatherby, and almost as wide as he was tall. If he'd been wearing purple ruffles instead of a three-piece brown suit he would have looked just like Mini-me the Really Short in her Sunday finery, only uglier. The thought made me smile, which the little man took for friendliness. He smiled broadly, though it didn't reach his eyes, and held out his hand.

"Mrs. Weatherby!" He shook her hand heartily then turned to me and held it out. "And Mr. Black!" He shook mine heartily, and I returned it in kind. He winced a bit.

"Sit, please," he said, gesturing at the two brown vinyl-covered visitors' chairs in front of his expansive oak desk. *no gray metal in here.*

"Mrs. Weatherby, let me say first how much we enjoy your daughters here at W.C.C.H.S. They are excellent students. So well respected by their peers and the staff. You must be very proud of them." *i wonder if his suit was brown to start or got that way from talking to so many parents?* "And I'm just as confident that this young man," he waved his hand jovially at me, "will prove to be the kind of young person we've come to expect from the Weatherby household." *holy shit, he talks more than the whatever-she-is out there.*

Mrs. Weatherby looked a bit flustered at all this over-the-top praise. The man sounded like he was running for re-election. *hmmmmmmmm. maybe they elect their superintendents. or maybe he's got his sights set on something else. or maybe he's just a professional brownnoser.*

"Uhm. Thank you, Mr. Hatfield. That is very kind of you to say. Now, about Ruel ..." he interrupted before she got any further.

"Yes, Mr. Black, you present quite a challenge to us here at Whuches."

"Excuse me," I interrupted him. "Whuches?"

He chuckled amiably. *if i don't kill him first, that fake laugh is going to kill me. seriously, does he think anyone is fooled by that shit?* "Just a little inside joke here at W.C.C.H.S." *yeah! very little.* Mrs. Weatherby shook her head at me slightly to let me know oh, so subtly to behave myself.

"Now, Mr. Hatfield, back to Ruel. What do we need to do to get him into school?" Ever the concerned mother, she looked seriously, thoughtfully at him.

"Well," he rubbed his chin and sat back, as if pondering the complexities of intergalactic travel, giving this universally important problem the complete focus of his obviously staggering intellect. *does anyone really buy this guy's con?*

"I've been giving this little conundrum my full attention since you telephoned me on Friday. I see this as an opportunity to demonstrate to the community we here at Whuches are committed to main streaming even those educationally disenfranchised by home schooling." *what the hell does that drivel mean? wait a minute! home schooling?*

"Mr. Hatfield, you've made a ..." Mrs. Weatherby began, but I cut her off. At this rate we were going to be in this claustrophobic office all day.

"I'm not home schooled!"

"Well, certainly not any more, but ..."

"I was never homeschooled. When the hell would my father have home schooled me? He was working all the time." Mr. Hatfield looked pained at my swearing.

"Mr. Black, swearing is not acceptable here at Whuches. It is cause for demerits and detention." He looked at me severely to let me know I was in for some serious trouble.

"Then it's a good thing I'm not a student here. And at the rate we're going I never will be. I'm not home schooled. I've never been home schooled. And what the hell is detention?" *might as well aggravate while I can.*

Mrs. Weatherby gave me a very stern 'Now, Ruel' look, but I ignored her. Mr. Hatfield flushed a blotchy dull red color but managed to collect his scattered thoughts enough to speak in full blown pompous-ass mode.

"Young man, such language and disrespect will not be tolerated." he reached into a file cabinet behind him and pulled out a small paperback booklet, which he thumped down in front of me. "That is the W.C.C.H.S. Handbook. You will read and memorize it, then sign and date the Student/Faculty agreement and turn it into this office by tomorrow morning."

I flipped through the booklet and tossed it back onto the desk. "This is for students. So far, I'm nothing but a disinterested party. So unless you have more to say about how I become a student at this," I glanced around with a sneer, "fine institution, I'm not signing a damn thing!" Mrs. Weatherby put her hand over her face, probably trying to pretend she hadn't come in with me.

Practically foaming at the mouth, the apoplectic Mr. Hatfield punched a button on his phone and the disembodied voice of the skinny woman from the outer office answered. "Yes, Mr. Hatfield?"

"Miss Pennyforth, please ask Mr. Worthington to step into my office."

"Certainly, Mr. Hatfield."

Having accomplished his administrative duty, Mr. Hatfield sat and glowered at me. I'd read that expression in books before, but I didn't know what it meant until now. *cool expression.* So I glowered right back at him. I'm surprised Mrs. Weatherby didn't get sunburned from all the glower flying around her.

Whether to have something to do or to distract herself from the dirty looks Mr. Hatfield and I were exchanging, I don't know, but Mrs. Weatherby picked up the student handbook and began to read it. About two pages in, she gasped a bit and shot me a furtive look.

"What?" She turned the book and showed me a paragraph.

No student shall acquire any visible tattoos during the school year for which this signed agreement is valid. Violation is punishable by one hour of detention per violation.

"So?" She looked pointedly at my neck. I placed my index finger under the word 'acquire', and looked back at her.

"Ahh!" the little dictator said with wicked glee, "I see you have reached the part about ..." he paused for dramatic effect, "... tattoos!" He practically spat the word. "Obviously Mr. Black will have to wear turtlenecks or high-collared button shirts to hide those ..." another dramatic pause, "... flames!"

"Oh, you mean these?" I asked, pulling my t-shirt neck aside to display more of the disgusting ... tattoos! I let go of my shirt and shook my head. "Ain't gonna happen." I took the handbook from Mrs. Weatherby's hand, turned it toward him, and pointed at the word 'acquire' with my middle finger.

"It says acquire, not display."

I think he was saved from a seizure by the arrival of a tall thin man with longish almost colorless hair and a thin mustache.

"Ah, our new student. Ruel, from the Hebrew meaning friend of God. How do you do, Mr. Black." He shook my hand almost solemnly, like meeting me was a great honor. Then he turned to Mrs. Weatherby.

"Welcome, Madam. It's always good to have the wife of our esteemed sheriff grace us with her presence." I thought he was going to kiss her hand, but he only shook it carefully, as if she might break. Then he rubbed his hands together, honest-to-god rubbed them together. *weird*.

"Thank you for notifying me, Mr. Hatfield. Come along, Mr. Black, Mrs. Weatherby, and we'll get started." He bowed slightly to Mrs. Weatherby and flourished a hand at the office door. Mrs. Weatherby blushed slightly and stood, a bit uncertain about what was happening. Not being the shy type, I just asked outright.

"Started with what?" The tall man, Mr. Worthington I assumed, looked genuinely perplexed.

"Why with your placement, of course. Didn't Mr. Hatfield explain? Since you have no previous schooling or records, we must start from scratch. That means IQ tests, placement tests, all those pesky things we do to determine where a student should be within the system." He still stood with one hand still flourished toward the door.

"Of course," Mrs. Weatherby responded. "Come along, Ruel." She smiled at Mr. Worthington as he escorted her out the office door.

"Mr. Black."

I turned back toward the squat little man smiling behind his too-big desk.

"Yeah, Mr. Hatfield?" I leered back at him.

"The handbook." He gestured at the booklet lying abandoned on his desk.

"Maybe we should wait and see if I can even be a student at this fine institution. Maybe you'll luck out and I'll be too stupid to go here." He smiled broadly at my statement. As I exited I gave him my parting shot. "Or too smart."

20 — The Right Words According to Jim

The following six hours were a blur of papers and questions. I'd never written my name so many times or filled in so many tiny circles in my life. I finally told Mrs. Weatherby to go get the mini-mes and go home. I'd catch a ride on the school bus or with the sheriff.

By three o'clock my fingers were stiff and sore from holding a pencil so long. My butt was sore from sitting on a wooden chair so long. And my eyes were blurry from reading too much too-fine print. I also learned something about myself. Staying inside for hours was torture. Mrs. Weatherby had packed me a lunch, so I stayed in the testing room while I ate. I didn't care if it was below freezing outside and twelve miles to the Weatherby place, I was tempted to walk back just so I could be outside.

"I've called your mother ..." Mr. Worthington started to say, but I interrupted him.

"She's not my mother!" I flung the statement at him, and he flinched a bit.

"Sorry. I've called Mrs. Weatherby and told her you would be late. She said you should go to the Justice Center and catch a ride home with Sheriff Weatherby when you finished.

The last test took almost three hours. By the time I finished it was dark outside, and I could barely hold the pencil. I dropped it onto the desktop again and stared at my angry red hands. *i think i actually have blisters.*

"Do you need a ride to the Justice Center?" he asked as I reached for my coat.

=====

Jim stood in the doorway watching the boy's head bent over the desk. His pencil was racing across the test form, as if it had a mind of its own. The teacher was watching the kid intensely, and Jim wondered what that was all about. Maybe it was the shaggy curly hair or the tattoos curling out of the top of his t-shirt and around his neck. Those was going to be a strange sight to a lot of people in Trask.

Jim hoped the boy would be OK in this new environment. It had to be alien to anything he had experienced before. So far he'd taken a lot of new experiences in stride. School could be rough even for kids used to it. The boy would have to be as tough as Jim thought he was to get by here.

=====

"No need," said a familiar voice. Jim was standing there, holding his keys and his hat. "I just got off and thought I'd stop and see if Ruel was finished. Looks like my timing was pretty good." He stepped up and shook hands with the teacher. "I'm Jim Weatherby."

"Yes, of course. I know your face from the election posters. I'm Silas Worthington. I'm so sorry to keep young Ruel so late, but since we are running under a time crunch, trying to get him placed as soon as possible, I thought it important to finish this test." He seemed anxious for Jim to understand why he had kept me. *maybe it's because he carries a gun.* The thought made me smile.

"No problem. I know Ruel doesn't mind hard work." He turned to me. "You ready to go? Hope will probably have a screaming fit if you aren't there to tuck her in."

I half-waved to Mr. Worthington and followed Jim out into the dark and cold. I stopped and stared up at

the cloudy night sky, breathing in and letting the lightly falling snow coat my face. It stuck in my eyelashes and melted onto my cheeks, but I didn't care. *dear, God, i don't know if i can do this.*

=====

Jim realized the boy had stopped and turned to look. He was standing with his face upturned, catching snowflakes on his cheeks and eyelids. He could hear him sucking in the cold crisp air. The sheriff waited. Eight hours confined inside had to be hard on a kid raised as Ruel has been, but the boy didn't complain. He just closed his eyes and breathed in.

Jim suddenly wished he had met Joe Black. A kid himself when he became a father. A young man still when he died. And yet here stood the son he raised by himself, a strong tough kid, taking on a whole new life, struggling to remain himself. Joe Black must have been quite a man to raise such a boy.

=====

"Tough day, huh?"

I looked at Jim in his uniform and thought about Joe in his 'uniform'. Two very different men. Both good men in their own ways. *dear, God, i miss joe so much. i wish he was here to give me some advice. or just to listen. who do i talk to now? DO WHAT YOU GOTTA DO, KID. thanks, joe.*

"Jim?"

"Yeah, Ruel?"

"I don't know if I can do this?" *i hope i got this right, joe.*

"What do you mean?" Jim looked at me, waiting.

"This school thing. I felt like I was suffocating, spending the whole day inside. Sitting. Writing. Reading. It felt..." I hesitated because I really hate complainers, but I really needed someone to hear me, "...it felt like my insides were being scoured with a steel-bristle brush. Like all the stuff that makes me, me was being scrubbed away." I ran out of words to say what I'd felt all day, so I stopped.

Jim looked at me a while, hopefully thinking of something wise that would help. Something Joe would say.

"I wish I had some magic words that would make that feeling go away, Ruel, but I don't. Any change is hard, and big changes like this are the hardest." Jim sighed and looked up at the cloudy night sky, the snow catching his face as it had mine. "I guess the best I can say is do the job in front of you, taking it one day at a time. Right now this whole situation is new to all of us. I think that's all any of us can do. One day at a time."

I smiled. *close enough, joe.* "Thanks, Jim. That'll help."

21 — The New Normal is Over-rated

It was almost seven o'clock before Jim and I got back to the ranch" He shut off the truck and opened his door. In the illumination from the dome light, he looked at me thoughtfully. "Ruel, are you worried about the tests?"

I shook my head. "Not really, but I was wondering about that last one. It wasn't about knowing anything. It was more like seeing if I could think."

Jim shrugged. "Damned if I know. I got through high school and college by cheating off Darlene, my first wife. As soon as I got that degree in my hand I swore never again!"

"Didn't like school much?"

"More like I'd have rather been doing something else." He grinned at me in the dim light. "Sound familiar?"

"Something you and Joe have in common. He didn't much like school either."

Jim smiled at me. "I think I like having another thing in common with Joe."

"Another thing?"

"Besides you." He smiled, and I smiled back.

Mrs. Weatherby had kept supper warm — thick homemade minestrone soup, crusty homemade peasant bread, a salad with about every vegetable I'd ever seen and a few I hadn't. Dessert was big chocolate chip cookies, homemade of course, with ice cream. I ate until my new jeans were tight.

My dinner companion, besides the sheriff, was a sleepy Mini-me the Really Short in her pink fuzzy feety pajamas. She sat on my lap working on her thumb and trying hard to stay awake.

"I tried putting her down, but she just kept yelling 'Roo'," Mrs. Weatherby reported, not too happily. "All the girls tried, but apparently she was determined to wait for Roo!" She looked aggravated.

"Sorry," I mumbled around a mouthful of bread. "If I could figure out how to make her stop I would. Can't be any fun for you when she gets so stubborn." She opened her mouth to say something, but Jim started coughing up a lung and sidetracked her. While she was patting him on the back and getting him a glass of water, he looked at me and winked. *well, i'll be a son of a bitch. he might be alright after all. good call, joe.*

Hope was almost asleep by the time I finished supper, so I took her straight up to bed. As I tucked her in, I wondered about how weird my life had gotten in the last week, and realized Joe had died exactly a week ago. My heart clenched as anger and sadness warred in my chest. I walked heavily down the stairs, missing Joe so much my gut hurt.

Mrs. Weatherby had added a small bedside table and a lamp to my room. Now I could read without lying on my stomach. She and Jim were in the living room trying to finish the movie about buckets, and on my

way through to the bathroom I stopped.

"Thank you for the table and lamp," I said. She smiled, satisfied at her contribution to my room.

"You're welcome, Ruel. I know how hard it is to try reading in bed when the only light is in the ceiling. And you'll soon have homework to do. I wanted to make it easier for you." *ahh, an ulterior motive. oh, well, it's still nice to have.*

=====

Jim and Ellie were watching The Bucket List, again, when the phone rang. Ellie glanced toward it, annoyed, and waved him toward it.

"Go on. It's always for you or one of the girls."

Jim picked up the handset. "Weatherby residence."

"Sheriff?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

"Yes."

"This is Silas Worthington? We spoke this afternoon when you picked Ruel up?"

"Of course, Mr. Worthington. What can I do for you?"

"Well – I have finished checking Ruel's tests and..." the man paused, making Jim wonder what was wrong.

"Mr. Worthington, why don't you just say what you have to say?"

"The test Ruel was taking when you arrived was the standard IQ test given to all entering freshman." The man sounded nervous, and Jim started worrying a little. He knew the boy was smart. He could tell just by talking to him. So what the hell was this guy's problem?

"Yes," Jim said, trying to urge the man to get to the point.

"Sheriff, I don't know if you are aware of this, but the IQ test we use divides IQs into levels."

"Yes," Jim said, trying to suppress his impatience.

"Those students scoring between 85 to 100 are average, 100 to 115 is above average, 115 to 130 is high intelligence, 130 to 145 is superior intelligence ..."

"Mr. Worthington," Jim interrupted, "is there a point to this lesson? We don't care what Ruel's IQ is."

"I'm sorry, Sheriff, it's just that we've never had anyone like this at W.C.C.H.S. before. It's very exciting for me. Of course, you understand we don't tell the students what their IQ scores are. Many take it badly."

"Mr. Worthington!" Jim snapped, "The point please."

"Oh, I am so sorry. IQ scores above 145 are considered exceptionally gifted. Some even call them genius level."

"And?" Jim encouraged the talkative man.

"Ruel's score was in the high 150s - 158 to be exact. Sheriff Weatherby, less than thirteen one hundredths PERCENT of the population falls above 145 points."

Jim was stunned into silence. The boy had a genius level IQ? Holy shit.

"Sheriff, I'd like to start Ruel in one of our advanced classes when he starts school tomorrow. If that is OK with you and Mrs. Weatherby. I know he can handle it, even though he's never been in school before. What do you think?"

Jim stood silent for a moment more, still trying to adjust to this news.

"Sheriff?"

"Oh. Sorry, Mr. Worthington. I was trying to take this all in. Uhm, yes, sure, anything you think would be best for him. We just don't want him overwhelmed right off the bat."

"Of course, Sheriff."

Jim hung up and looked at Ellie's questioning face. Then he told her.

=====

I couldn't believe how stiff I'd gotten from sitting all day. I could have stayed under the hot water all night, but Jim pounded on the door, then poked his head into the room.

"Ruel, Mr. Worthington called. You start school tomorrow. He wants you there early so he can walk you through your schedule. Ellie says you need to be ready to walk out the door at eight. Best get to bed." He closed the door. *lucky me!*

Mrs. Weatherby dropped me off at the high school at 7:30 the next morning, after telling me about eighty times to not worry. Truth be told I was a little nervous. I know Jim said take it a day at a time, but I still wasn't convinced I could do this school shit. Sitting inside all day seemed like torture, right up there with but not quite as bad as that damn purple dinosaur.

Inside the front doors the security guard, Mr. Perley, regarded me with righteous suspicion, conveying very clearly he was keeping an eye on me. I waved and gave him my best juvenile delinquent smile. *gotta get my fun where i can.* He glared at me and put his hand on the can of pepper spray in its holster where a gun probably rode when he was on the force. My grin got wider.

Mr. Worthington met me at the office door and shuttled me aside into a cramped cluttered space with 'Educational Counselor' stenciled on the door in gold paint.

"Come right in, Mr. Black. I can't tell you how excited I am to have you in school here at W.C.C.H.S. Ms. Colfax and I spent last evening devising a class schedule that we think will get you caught up in all your basics while challenging your fine mind." *dear, Lord, does everyone here talk like this?*

"We are confident you will move quickly from basics to standard to AP classes quickly, but we need to cover all contingencies, so that's where we'll start." By now I was so confused I just nodded to keep the

ball rolling.

"First period is a short one. Rm 102. Home room. 8:00-8:30. Announcements. Roll call. Coach Runsford. Second period. Rm B-3. Math Basics. 8:45-9:30. This covers through pre-algebra. Mr. Selfers.

Third period. Rm 110. American History. 9:45-10:30. I believe they are starting the Revolutionary War. Ms. Dahgliesh.

Fourth period. Gym. PE. 10:45-11:30. Coach Runsford.

Lunch. 11:30-12:30

Fifth period. Rm 207. AP English. 12:30-1:15. We are just finishing Medieval English Literature. Mr. Worthington. *well, shit.*

Sixth period. Lab A. Biology I. 1:30-2:15. They are just starting sexual reproduction. Ms. McCarter. *hah. that oughta be an easy one*

Seventh period. Rm 104. Spanish. 2:30-3:15. Mr. Gomez.

"Do you have any questions about the classes?" He smiled liked he'd just given me a big present. *more like a big headache.*

"Do I get a map or something? So I don't get lost?"

He handed me a bad copy of a copy of a hand drawn floor plan. The room numbers were barely legible. I squinted at it for a while, then looked up at him.

"You gotta be shittin' me. This is the worst damn map I've ever seen. You'd have to already know where the rooms were to figure this thing out." He took it and wrote some room numbers in with his pen and handed it back. I handed it back. "Maybe you better put an X so I know where I am now." He did. *holy hell. haven't they ever heard of a computer?*

"Any other questions?"

"What is AP English?"

"Advanced Placement. Your language scores were very high. AP English is more like literature and creative writing than regular English classes." Since I didn't have a clue what regular English classes were like, I had to take his word for it.

"And you teach it?" He nodded modestly.

"What is PE?" He looked shocked I didn't know.

"Well, Physical Education, of course."

"Still doesn't tell me anything. Can you give me specifics?"

"Well, I believe the freshman boys are currently playing volleyball."

"Playing? You mean I have to waste an hour a day playing? Why can't I just skip that and get out an hour early? I'm gonna be in this damn place over seven hours a day. That's like a job without any pay. I believe that's called slavery. Forced work without pay."

Instead of looking distressed at my language or suggestion, he beamed at me like I just told him he won the damn Publisher's Clearinghouse.

"I told Ms. Colfax you were creative. Thinking outside the box. This is just wonderful." *what the hell is this guy smokin'?*

"Let's see. Schedule. Map. Oh, yes!" He handed me a slip of paper and a combination lock. "Your locker number and lock. And ..." He reached to a shelf behind him and picked up a copy of the Student Handbook. *shit!* "Please read the handbook today, read and sign the agreement, and return it to me before you leave." He handed me the thin little booklet.

"Now, do you have your supplies? Everything you need to jump right into those classes with both feet?"

"Well, I have the handbook. And a lunch. What else do I need to get through seven hours of forced labor?" He looked horrified.

"But you need pens and pencils, notebooks, notebook paper. Oh, dear. Let me think a moment." He tapped one thin finger against his pursed lips as he considered my inadequate preparation.

While he did, I started reading the damn handbook. Then I figured what the hell, and turned to the agreement.

"Mr. Worthington, there's stuff in here about parents. Shouldn't it say guardians or something? I don't have any parents." He took the agreement and added 'or legal guardian'." I pulled it toward me, borrowed his pen, and signed it.

"Oh, my. You'd best be off to class. The teacher in each class will give you your books and any syllabus used in the class. But, first ..." He went to a closet, rummaged around a bit, and came back with a spiral bound notebook and a couple of pencils and handed them to me. "This will get you started today."

"Thanks, Mr. Worthington. That's real nice of you."

He stood and reached to shake my hand. "Good luck, Mr. Black. It is an honor to have you here."

I left his office, found my locker and put my lunch and coat in it and locked it, and followed the crappy map to Room 102 and my first day of school. *dear, Lord, give me strength to not flip out.*

22 — If This is the First Day of the Rest of My Life, It Sucks

Room 102 was about half full when I entered. The teacher was a fairly large guy, maybe my height but he probably had me by forty pounds, not muscle. He had on a sweat suit and a whistle hanging around his neck. I looked at the schedule Mr. Worthington had given me. Coach Runsford.

I hesitated at the door, unsure what to do. Did I introduce myself, take a seat, stand there and wait to be noticed. *shit. i should have asked mr. worthington.*

Kids were streaming past me through the doorway, bumping into me or turning sideways to avoid touching me. I heard a muffled, "Oh, this is just great!" and turned around to see Grace standing behind me. She glared at me, but I smiled and winked at her, and she blushed bright pink.

Pushing past me she muttered, "Asshole!" and sat at a desk at the back corner of the room. Two other girls, both blondes but harsher-looking than Grace's soft golden blonde curls, snickered at Grace. She heard them and blushed more. One of the bottle blondes (if there's something you learn growing up around whores is whose hair color is fake) swung her skinny ass toward me, trying to look seductive. *sorry, honey, i've been seduced by pros.*

"Hi," she breathed in a bad imitation of Marilyn. "You're new. I'm Annabelle and this," she waved vaguely at her friend standing behind her popping gum, "is Milly. And you are ...?"

"Gonna be late." I brushed past the fakes and approached the teacher's desk. "Excuse me, Coach Runsford?"

"You're new." *gee, people, is it that obvious?*

"Yes, Sir. I'm Ruel Black. Mr. Worthington said I was in this homeroom." Yesterday I didn't have a damn clue what a homeroom was, but I have a good memory, and I can bluff with the best of them.

Coach Runsford looked at a yellow sticky note on the front of a list of names. It clearly had my name on it. "Oh, yeah, here it is. Black. You'll be sitting between Anders and Cutler." He looked up at the room and bellowed in an outdoor voice if I ever heard one.

"Everyone from Mr. Cutler to Miss Weatherby move one desk back. We have a new student to fit between Mr. Anders and Mr. Cutler. Now people! We only got thirty-one minutes to get through today's business." All the students except the first two shuffled back one desk, leaving the third desk in the row closest to the door vacant. Coach Runsford waved me toward it.

"Sit. Let's get this mobile hormone feast on the road." With that he picked up the list and began calling roll.

Aimes

Anders

Black

Cutler

And on and on through seventeen students ending with —
Weatherby

He tossed the list of names onto his desk, stood, and came around to the front and perched.

"We have a new student today, Mr. Ruel Black. Mr. Black, please tell us something about yourself. To help us get acquainted." He pronounced my name Roo-ell' instead of Rool. He motioned me up. *well, hell!* Reluctantly I stood.

"It's pronounced rool," was the first thing out of my mouth. The teacher's eyebrows rose a bit. "What do you want to know?" Sensing a challenge he stood, and I noticed he wasn't as tall as I'd thought, maybe an inch shorter than me.

"Where you lived before, why you moved, what kind of things you like. Information that helps us get acquainted with you." Out of the corner of my eye I saw Grace squirm. I had two choices. I could tell the truth and blast Mrs. Weatherby's reputation to the Wyoming wind or —

"I just moved here from North Dakota. My dad died and the Weatherbys are my foster family. I like tattoos, guns, reading, and fixing stuff. That what you want?"

A 'sultry' female voice from the back of the room said, "You can fix my stuff anytime you want, Ru-el!" There was a bunch of snickers and a couple of cat calls. I turned toward the voice. One of the blondes — Annabelle — was smiling at me like I was lunch. I smiled back like she was a whore in one of the cheaper whorehouses I'd lived in.

"Why? You break it?" More catcalls and laughter. She flushed an ugly blotchy red, not pink and rosy like Grace.

"Do you play sports?" Coach Runsford asked, eyeing my size and muscles.

"Never been much for games," I replied, turning away from the bleached bitch and giving him my full attention. "What did you have in mind?"

His eyebrows rose a fraction again. He tried to stare me down, but looked away first. The key to a staring contest is let your eyes go unfocused. Looks like you're staring hard, but you're just looking off into space — Joe taught me that. He picked up another paper from his desk, and I took that as my cue to sit down.

"Alright, people. The morning announcements." The coach read off a list of boring, inane announcements about the lunch special, Thanksgiving break, the Homecoming Dance, and a bunch of other stuff that didn't matter or make sense to me. Apparently, they didn't to anybody else, because the rest of the kids started writing or reading or talking.

The boy with floppy dishwater blonde hair, sitting in front of me, turned and held out his hand. "Lyle Anders. Good one on Anna-banana."

"Ruel Black," I said, shaking his hand. "Anna-banana?" He leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"When we were in eighth grade, Annabelle did a condom demonstration in Life Health class using a banana. She was trying to show off how experienced she was, but she ripped the shit out of the condom. Got a good laugh. Ever since then she's Anna-banana."

"She should have used a long-neck beer bottle. No sharp edges." I glanced around the humming room. "You know everybody here?" He nodded.

"Yeah. I've lived in Trask my whole life. My dad's the postmaster. Where'd you live in North Dakota? I got cousins in Jamestown."

"Too far east. I lived on the southwestern edge of The Bakken, closer to Montana." I nodded at Grace. "What do you know about Weatherby?"

He looked surprised. "You live with 'em. Don't you know anything about 'em?"

"I just met 'em Friday."

He looked up and saw Coach Runsford sitting at his desk staring at the clock, then he looked at Grace and leaned in close again.

"She's kinda quiet. Always struck me as kinda shy. She spends a lot of her free time drawing. I don't think she has lots of close friends, except Suzie Pierce, but she's in a different homeroom. I guess she's nice enough, just not real outgoing. Some of the kids think she's stuck-up, mostly other girls, but I think they're just jealous 'cause she's so pretty and doesn't even try. And she's a really good artist. You should see the stuff she draws." He stopped suddenly and blushed. I think he realized he'd revealed more than he wanted to.

A bell rang, and he motioned me up. "Come on. Time for class. What do you have next?"

I picked up my lone notebook and pencils then pulled the crumpled class schedule Worthington had given me out of my pocket. "Room 3-B. Math Basics." He snickered a bit then blushed again when he saw I wasn't laughing.

"Seriously?"

I nodded.

"Oh. Sorry about ... you know."

I shrugged. Wasn't like I didn't know I wasn't the sharpest ax in the wood pile.

"That's in the basement. Come on, I'll show you the stairs down."

Room 3-B was easy enough to find since there were only three classrooms in the basement. When I entered there were just ten desks in the tiny cramped room. The teacher's desk was a folding table and chair.

The man who sat there was young, like I-just-graduated-from-college -and-this-crappy-job-was-the-only-one-I-could-get young. He looked enthusiastic enough, but maybe that was the book he was reading — *WYOMING CRIMINAL JUSTICE CODES AND REQUIREMENTS*. His eyes lit up when he saw me, and he rose and came around the desk holding out his hand.

"Mr. Black. Sheriff Weatherby told us you were starting today. I didn't think I'd have the privilege of meeting you. What are you doing down here?" He grasped my hand and shook it like we were long lost best friends.

"Do I know you?" I asked, returning his shake. The five other students in the room were staring at me with indifference.

"No. I'm a part-time deputy. Hoping to make full-time come next examine period," he held up the battered book by way of explanation. He gestured around the dismal space and repeated, "What are you doing down here?"

"Looking for Room 3-B. Basic Math. If you're Mr. Selfers, I'm in the right place." He looked surprised but recovered quickly.

"Of course. Take any vacant seat. This is the whole class right now. It tends to fluctuate." He returned to his 'desk', and I grabbed an empty chair in the second row. Another bell rang, and he handed me a ratty math textbook, and turned to face the six of us.

"We have a new student. I want everyone to introduce yourself, then we'll dive into the wonderful world of fractions and decimals." He pointed to the behemoth who sat in the farthest back left corner. He had a folding chair and a card table instead of a desk, because he never would have fit into a regular desk.

"Hulk Matthews." His voice sounded like gravel rolling around in an empty oil drum. *seriously, who names their kid hulk?*

"Stiffy Schmidt," said a scrawny scruffy little guy with greasy blonde hair and a giant hole in his right ear. I couldn't see the left one. *and hatfield thought my ink was bad. shit! stiffy?*

"Pat, we talked about inappropriate nicknames. Knock it off." Mr. Selfers said without any attitude. The runty little guy snorted a weird laugh and shrugged.

"Rhonda Bellamy," the only girl in the room said in a nasal flat voice. I looked closer and realize she had the same features as a kid I knew in Alaska. His name was Timmy, and his mom was one of the skankier whores, constantly coming clean from whatever her most recent addition was. She'd been a serious drinker when she had Timmy, and he'd been born with fetal alcohol syndrome. Rhonda had the same not-quite-right look. She smiled, and I smiled back.

"Warren Welding." Another big kid, not as tall as me but bulkier, mostly fat, sat right in the middle of the room, his desk pulled away from all the others. He looked at the desktop as he spoke, not making eye contact with anyone. He was dirty and smelly, his too-small clothes looked like they'd never been washed. He had a fading bruise on his right cheek and an ugly round burn mark just showing under the edge of his t-shirt sleeve.

I recognized all the signs. Joe had laid a beat-down on more than one asshole who thought being bigger than his kid gave him the right to hit them. Popping a kid when he was an idiot was one thing. Hitting him because you were bigger was cowardly. Joe couldn't abide cowards.

The last kid was sitting right behind me. I could smell the weird sweet smell of pot on him. His head was

down on his desk, and I think he was snoring softly. Mr. Selfers moved up beside him and shook his shoulder. The headful of snarled brown hair came up off the desk, and bleary red eyes looked around vaguely.

"Huh?"

"We have a new student, Ian. Introduce yourself."

He looked at me and grinned. "Hey, Mr. Selfers, look, a new guy. How ya doin'?" He held out his hand. "Ian MacIntyre. Nice to meet ya!" I shook his hand and grinned back. He was so damn cheerful it was impossible not to respond.

Mr. Selfers nodded at me. My turn.

"Ruel Black." Short and concise. Just like everyone else.

The introductions were the high point in the class because I already knew fractions and decimals. I listened and did the assignments, but mostly I watched the other students.

It was easy to figure out why Rhonda and Ian were in this class. Rhonda couldn't handle anything more, and Ian was too stoned to care. I found out Hulk (whose real name was Ellord — *hell, i'd change it, too*) was a football player and wrestler who needed a passing math grade to stay eligible, and he could just about manage it in Math Basics. Pat "Stiffy" Schmidt was twitchy. He jerked and stood and sat, he squirmed in his chair like he had piles, and he drummed his fingers and pencils to the point where I was ready to snuff him just to stop the damn noise.

Warren was harder to figure. By the end of class he hadn't said another word, and he didn't do any of the assignments or participate in any way. He sat in the middle of the room, staring at his desk, and the rest of the class moved around him like water moving around a rock.

Just before the bell, which I was beginning to really hate, Mr. Selfers passed out granola bars, a little positive reinforcement. The others gobbled them like they hadn't eaten since — ever. Warren didn't. He carefully tucked his into a pocket on his filthy overalls. The bell rang and everyone but Warren stood and rush toward the door, eager to be free from this gray concrete bunker. I placed my still-wrapped granola bar on Warren's desk and left. At the door I looked back just in time to see it disappear into the same pocket.

American History was a lot like Homeroom but longer. Mostly the same kids, including the bleached-blond bimbos (nicely alliterative), Lyle, and Grace. The teacher, Ms. Dahgliesh, was nice enough but a little too perky for my taste. She spent the first ten minutes grilling me about my own history. I thought Grace was going to crawl inside her backpack, terrified I'd 'spill the beans'.

"So, Mr. Black, how do you pronounce your very interesting first name?"

"Rool."

"Is it a family name?" I could see Grace go white.

I shrugged. "It's what my father chose. You'd have to ask him, but he's dead, so guess you can't." Grace breathed a little.

"Do you know what it means? Its origins?"

"Hebrew. Means friend of God." *thank you, mr. worthington.*

"Are your Jewish? Do you come from Jewish stock?" I shrugged again.

"What did your father do? What did his people do?" *jeez, lady, get a life, preferably someone else's.*

"My dad worked at The Bakken. Don't know about his family." I was bordering on rudeness in my answers, trying to get her to stop.

"What did he do there?" She seemed pathologically interested in my life, and it was starting to get a little creepy.

"A lot of different stuff. Roustabout. Bouncer. Security. Mechanic." *of course, not all of them were his job, but he did them, so it's basically the truth.*

"Why did you wind up way over here in Wyoming if you lived in North Dakota? Seems putting you in foster care there would have been more efficient." Grace's light blue eyes were wide with fear.

I sighed. "Ma'am, if I could figure out how bureaucrats thought I'd run for President." She laughed and clapped! Like I'd just said the most amazing thing, instead of smartassing her.

"Nice rejoinder, Mr. Black. The rest of you, THIS is what history is. Peoples' lives. The rest of it, the events we seem so fascinated with, are all just happenings in peoples' lives. Keep that in mind as we study the conflict that turned a handful of disparate colonies into one of the greatest nations on earth. Open your texts to chapter seven, and let's get started." She handed me a textbook and started talking.

The class went by quickly, because it was interesting. Ms. Dahgliesh made it interesting, alive. *maybe school won't be so bad after all.* I thought too soon.

I didn't actually participate in the next class. Seems I had to have gym shorts and a specific shirt. So I sat on a wooden bench and watched thirty-two short tall fat thin quiet mouthy teen-age boys run a few turns around the gym then spend a half hour chasing a white ball around the room. Occasionally it was hit over the net in the middle of the room, but mostly they chased it. I'd never seen volleyball before. If this was it, I didn't think much of it.

Coach Runsford sat beside me, while the other kids attempted volleyball, and talked about the sports teams at Whuches. *shit.*

"You're a big kid. Too late for football this year, but we got basketball and wrestling this winter, track and cross country and baseball this spring. Be a shame to waste a big kid like you." And on and on. I kept telling him I'd never played sports. Hell, I'd barely seen it on TV. Joe and I didn't have one, and when I was in the bars that did, I was working, not watching.

Finally I held my hands up in capitulation. "I'll think about wrestling, at least I know how to do that. But I've never done it as a sport so don't expect much." He beamed. *holy shit! all these people needed a life.*

"Great! Great! So, if you never competed, how did you learn?"

"A friend of my dad used to wrestle in college. He taught me, but he didn't teach me anything about competition or rules. Just the moves." He nodded his head encouragingly.

"Good! Good! Do you know when he was in college? What college? What years? That might tell me if he was any good. How much I still have to teach you or unteach you."

"Nebraska. He graduated in 1990." Coach's eyes got bigger, then he grinned like he'd won the lottery.

"Excellent! Excellent!" I noticed he repeated words a lot. "Nebraska was fifth in 1990. Excellent!" Without another word he hopped off the bench and hustled into his office. Snatching up a paperback booklet he hustled back out and thrust the book into my hand.

"The wrestling team directives, eligibilities, rules, moves. Read that, and I'll talk to you about it after Thanksgiving. We have tryouts the first week in December so we can start getting everybody in shape." He grinned at me again and clapped me on the shoulder. "Excellent! Excellent!" Then he hustled off to yell at the ball chasers and ended the class making everyone run turns around the gym again.

I went to my locker to drop off the books I'd accumulated and get my lunch, then tried to follow the shitty map to the cafeteria. My stomach was growling like a demented alley cat. Wistfully I looked outside as I passed Mr. Perley and the front doors. I was getting claustrophobic being cooped up inside so long, but it was snowing again so I was doomed to eat inside, too. *damn snow!*

The cafeteria was maybe half full with more kids filtering in all the time. There was a teacher at each of the three entrances; two to keep an eye on everyone and the third at the one outside door to keep anyone from sneaking out. *yep. just like a prison.*

I looked around, studying the kids studying me. A school this small it figured word was getting around about the rough-looking smart-mouth tattooed new guy. So I let 'em get a good look. COMING INTO A NEW JOB, KID, IT'S BEST TO LET 'EM KNOW RIGHT AWAY WHO THE BIGGEST BADASS IS. SAVES TIME LATER. Joe always said. Job. School. Same difference. So I stood in the doorway, longer than I needed to find a table, and let 'em look. Then I moved over to the table right in the middle of the room, surrounded by empty floor space and empty tables, and sat across from Warren.

He was carefully and methodically unwrapping the granola bars and never in any way acknowledged I was sitting there. So I ignored him, too, and unpacked my lunch. Three bologna sandwiches with lettuce, tomatoes, and mustard, two bags of chips, an apple, a banana, and two cookies. I unwrapped one sandwich and opened a bag of chips.

As I ate I surveyed the half of the room I could see — the doors into the school, the hot lunch line, the doorways into the kitchen, and about half the tables, never looking at Warren, who meticulously ate the two granola bars.

"You're smart, you know, keeping quiet, watching, learning. Not like these other noobs, flapping their

gums, making so much noise they don't have a clue what's going on around them." I took a few chips, and continued. "Shit. I wish I knew half as much about these dweebs as you do. Sure would make being new easier." I finished my sandwich and chips, then placed the rest back in the paper bag. Then I stood and turned toward him.

"Warren, I know you don't owe me, but I'm new and I don't have any friends. My foster mother always packs enough food for three of me. She thinks 'cause I'm a big guy I eat a lot, but I don't. If I take this home she's gonna be all over me like white on rice, trying to figure out if I'm sick, trying to feel my forehead." He never looked at me, but out of the corner of one eye he was looking at that sack like it had gold inside instead of a couple of OK sandwiches.

"If you could help me out, I'd owe you one. Could you find someone to eat the rest of this for me so I don't get the third degree when I get home? I hate to throw away food." I held the bag out, afraid I'd overplayed my hand. His head dropped a fraction, and I figured that was it. I'd insulted him.

From behind me I heard a snort, then an arm reached around me and snatched the bag out of my hand.

23 — Sometimes Standup Guys Win

"Stinky-Warren don't need charity, Newbie. See how fat he is. He gets plenty to eat. Now I, on the other hand, can always use a little extra. Gotta keep up my strength for the field, ya know." Apparently this is what passed for wit here at 'Whuches' because some other voices laughed uproariously, like this guy was a real stand-up comedian.

I turned slowly, looking over the grabby newcomers. Four football players stood there, smirking at each other like they were God's gift to the world, or at least that little portion of it that contained 'Whuches'. Two of them were taller than I was, two of them were wider, but I could see into their eyes, and none of them were Joe Black's son. I smiled. *oh, please, dear, God, tell me this is the welcome wagon.*

While they were smirking and stroking each others' egos, I reached up and simply took the bag back. I put it behind me on the table, next to Warren. A crowd was gathering around us, lookey-loos and hangers'-on who wanted to see something, anything to relieve the tedium of their school-bound lives. Guess I was elected.

Murmuring started when I relieved the jock-jerks of the bag and got louder when the head jerk tried to reach around me to take it back. Using his own momentum against him I stepped aside and, placing my hand on his back, helped him continue moving past me and straight for the floor. He hit flat on his stomach, like a belly flop onto linoleum instead of water, all the air whoofing out of him. The other jock-jerks were too stunned to move, and the audience fell silent, waiting for the retribution they just knew was going to be visited on the new guy.

And waited.

And waited.

I squatted beside the guy on the floor, still whooping and trying to draw a breath.

"Relax. Stop struggling, just relax. You just got the wind knocked out of you. Give your diaphragm time to recover." I placed a hand on his back as I talked. "Relax, Dude." I could feel the tension flow out of his shoulders, then his back. Finally he was able to suck in enough air to stop his panic.

He flopped over on his back, and I stood and held a hand out to him. He slapped it aside and one of his less-than-helpful friends pulled him upright. I shrugged and moved back, between them and Warren, who had pulled the bag close to himself and was secreting the contents away into his overall pockets. The jerk leaned over, hands on his knees, getting his breath back. When he stood, his face was so red I could practically see steam rising from it.

"You're dead!" The jerk shouted, pulling a beefy arm back to punch my lights out.

I just stood, watching him, arms relaxed at my sides. Watching his center mass I saw the telegraph a second before he threw the punch and moved aside as it rushed past my head, pulling the jerk off balance and dropping him to the floor again. That's when he saw what I had seen a moment before. Mr. Worthington and a small woman with cocoa-colored skin and a tight skull-cap of black hair had entered the cafeteria just as he swung. *great timing, mr. worthington.*

I spent the rest of the lunch period sitting in a chair in the schizophrenic office, while Mr. Worthington, Ms. Colfax (the short woman), Coach Runsford, and Mr. Hatfield debated the issue. The jerk, also known as Devon Hatfield, the principal's nephew, was in the nurse's office resting. *seems a big muscled football player shouldn't run out of breath so fast, but i've never played football, so, what do i know?*

Mr. Hatfield was determined to suspend me under the Zero Tolerance for Violence policy, but he had no proof I had fought. No bruises, scrapes, or blood anywhere on me. No witnesses who said I had thrown a punch. On the other hand he had a whole cafeteria full of students and five teachers as witnesses that his darling nephew HAD thrown a punch. However, Devon Hatfield was a star football player and something called Homecoming was this next weekend. If Devon was suspended for fighting, the Fighting Wolverines had less than a fighting chance of winning the football game.

The clock ticked closer to class time, and the voices in the office got louder. Finally I turned to Miss Pennyforth and said, "I'm gonna be late for class."

She looked at the clock, then at the closed door, then at me, then the clock.

"Ma'am, the handbook is pretty specific about excusable tardiness. It doesn't say anything about being held without bail in the principal's office while teachers debate my fate. If THEY make me late I'LL get detention. Does that seem fair?" She continued to rotate her eyes through the cycles until I had to look away. I was getting a headache just watching her.

Two minutes before the warning bell, the office door opened and Mr. Worthington stepped out. He motioned for me to follow him, and we left the office.

"Thanks. I thought I'd be there all day."

"I am not going to let Mr. Hatfield keep me from teaching my class over such a ridiculous charge. It isn't over, but my educated guess is the matter will be dropped. You did nothing wrong, and for the first time in several years W.C.C.H.S has a chance to win their homecoming game, so they won't want to suspend Devon. Stalemate."

"Whatever. Just so I am out of there." I'd forgotten Mr. Worthington taught my next class. *lucky me.*

There wasn't a single person I knew in the AP English class. Mr. Worthington waved me to an empty seat, and stood at the front of the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a new student, Ruel Black. Please stand, Mr. Black, and tell us two things that make you unique from everyone else in this room." *ok. that's a different way of introducing myself.*

I faced the class. *two things that make me unique?* The students in this class looked more alert, more interested, than in my previous classes. Wonder if it's the AP thing? I drew a deep breath.

"Well, I don't know any of you, so I am only guessing these things are unique to me. This is my first ever day of school, and I can swear in nine different languages besides English." I sat down. Fourteen faces looked at me. Fourteen curious faces. *hmmmmm*

"When you say your first day of school ever, do you mean formal schooling, school here, or .. ever?" asked a girl with jet black hair and black lipstick.

"Ever."

"How can that be?" asked a thin boy with straight light brown hair and gold-rimmed glasses.

"My father didn't like school so he never sent me."

"But, it's the law," said a very round pretty girl with braids and braces.

"Where I grew up, nobody cared."

They looked at each other, obviously unsure what to say to these dogmatic statement.

"How did you learn to read?" This came from a girl who was about Merri's and Beth's size. I realized, looking at her, she was a little person.

"Someone my father worked with taught me."

"Aha!" said the first girl. "That constitutes schooling!"

I shook my head "I learned. That doesn't mean I was schooled. The word school implies a set or formal course of instruction. There was nothing set or formal about it. He read to me, and when I asked what a word was he told me. He never sat me down and started teaching me to read. He shared, and I learned." Mr. Worthington watched all of us closely, but didn't say anything to try to direct the conversation.

"THAT is schooling," she argued.

"Did you go to school to learn to talk?" She shook her head and started to say something. I cut her off. "To walk? To feed yourself? To dress yourself? To brush your teeth?" She shook her head. "You learned, you were even taught, but it wasn't school. I've learned a lot of stuff, like we all have, including reading and doing math. But I wasn't schooled. They just happened as I was living." The room was silent.

"Can you speak nine different languages or just swear?" A thin boy of medium height and completely bald asked this.

"Just swear. I learned from some of my dad's friends, just by listening to them." He grinned at me.

"Cool. Can you teach me?" I nodded, and his grin widened.

AP English was the best part of the day.

The boy who wanted to learn to swear was Jesse Gordon, and he was bald because he had just finished chemo-therapy for bone cancer. When I approached him after class about learning to swear, he wheeled himself out from behind his desk, and I saw he was missing his left leg above the knee.

I stared for a minute, then said, "Jebati!"

"What?" he asked, looking puzzled.

"Your first lesson. Jebati. J.e.b.a.t.i. It's Croatian for fuck!" I gestured at his missing leg. "Looks like a good one to start with."

The big grin came back. "Jebati?" I nodded. "JEBATI!!!" he shouted into the room.

Heads turned, then Jesse and I were the center of a group of chattering kids, all wanting to know what he said. All my life I've learned stuff. Whatever Joe's friends wanted to teach me I learned. I enjoy knowing new stuff, but this was the first time today I'd seen other kids who wanted to learn as much as I did.

Instead of answering them, I looked at Jesse. "Your word. You want to share it, that's up to you." He grinned again.

"Jebati is Croatian for fuck." Soon the whole group was shouting JEBATI at the ceiling and dancing around like maniacs.

Mr. Worthington did interfere this time. "If you all don't hurry to your next class, you will be exulting in your new word in detention. Scoot!"

It turned out Jesse and Margo, black hair and lipstick, had biology next, so we walked and rolled to Lab A to begin learning about Human Sexual Reproduction. Grace was in my class, too, but except for her less-than-enthusiastic greeting just before homeroom, we hadn't spoken all day. We didn't speak now.

"You're new," Ms. McCarter, the teacher, said.

She was a severe handsome woman somewhere between thirty-five and infinity, with short brown hair and a no-nonsense attitude. I learned she was also the girls' PE teacher, and I could definitely see her running her students around the gym until they dropped. She reminded me of Sheila, the hooker who had been my twelfth birthday present from Joe, after he showed me how to put on a condom correctly. *i probably shouldn't tell her that.* Sheila was one of my favorites right up until Joe got flattened, and the pimp threw me out of my room at the whorehouse. *i should probably keep that to myself, too.*

"Yes, I am. I've noticed that all day." I never smiled, but one corner of her mouth twitched.

"Glad you've been paying attention. Did you pay attention long enough to learn your name?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Ruel Black."

"Rool? Not Ru'el?" she asked, looking at a note on her desk.

"Yes, Ma'am." She made a notation on the note.

"You a military brat?"

"No, Ma'am. The military is not responsible for any brattiness on my part. That is strictly my own doing." She studied me for a long moment, long enough for me to notice the classroom was very quiet.

"Are you always a smart mouth, Mr. Black?"

"No, Ma'am. Certainly not in math, and possibly not in biology since I've never studied it before. I think I might be in English and history, though." I was looking calmly at her the whole time I was answering her questions. I was trying hard to come across casually, non-threatening, which is important when you stand eight or nine inches taller than someone, especially a woman.

"Well, Mr. Black, your presence gives us something of a dilemma. We usually work in pairs. You have unbalanced the numbers."

"I've been called unbalanced before, Ma'am, but I've never taken a whole class with me. I don't want to cause problems. Maybe I could just work alone?"

"That means twice as much work, Mr. Black. Doing the experiments and recording the results."

I already knew the answer, but I asked anyway. "What are we studying? Maybe I already know enough about the subject it won't be too bad." She looked at me hard, trying to determine if I'd set her up.

"Human Sexual Reproduction." Twitters raced around the classroom. Ms. McCarter threw one look over my shoulder, and the noises stopped. Then she stared right into my eyes and said quietly, so no one else could hear, "Do you think you could do the experiments alone, Mr. Black?"

"That depends on what they are and what I have to record." I stared back, somehow knowing what was coming. I don't know how I knew, but I did.

"Sheila says you are a very fast learner, Mr. Black. But I think this one time we'll see if anyone wants to add you to their group. And Sheila says to tell you hi, and you are missed." *holy mary mother of God*. Ms. McCarter morphed from the sister of my favorite hooker back into my biology teacher. I stood with my back to the class, giving myself time to smooth the surprise from my face.

"Any volunteers to absorb Mr. Black into their group." Jesse and Margo raised their hands, and just like that we were a threesome.

Truthfully, studying Human Sexual Reproduction isn't nearly as interesting as it sounds. And the experiments in the syllabus the teacher handed us sounded boring. I know from experience that watching cells divide under a microscope isn't nearly as much fun as getting the sperm to the cell so it CAN divide, but that was probably more hands-on than the school board wanted freshman to get. Too bad.

"Just one more class, and I've survived a whole day at school," I told Jesse and Margo as we gathered our stuff. Well, they gathered their stuff. I picked up my notebook, biology text, and syllabus. Oh, and my pencils. Can't forget those.

Spanish. Room 104. Mr. Gomez.

"Remind me why I'm sitting here listening to some guy I can't understand," I asked Lyle.

"Foreign language is required for graduation," he said, trying to figure out where Mr. Gomez was reading in the text.

"Does it still count if I don't have a clue what's going on? Does just attending count?"

"We probably have to actually pass. Ahh, here it is." He pointed to a passage in the textbook, which was all in Spanish, and I tried to follow along. I knew a lot of swear words in Spanish, but somehow I didn't think those would get me through this class.

As I put on my coat and took my books out of my locker, I was as tired as I'd ever been bouncing in bars or working on giant engines. I realized, as I juggled all the books and syllabuses — syllabi? — why everyone had backpacks. I had the one I'd brought my few possessions from North Dakota in, but it was in my room at the ranch. So I stacked and balanced the books carefully as I walked out to the bus.

I hadn't ridden the bus before, but I just followed Grace. I got on the same bus she did and got off when she did. *i'm glad she wasn't going somewhere else today.*

The walk up the snowy drive was a challenge. The books kept trying to dive off into the frozen slush and fresh powder. I somehow managed to get all the way to the porch before I lost the math book into a deep drift. *well, damn!* "JEBATI!!" I shouted, and smiled. Jesse was right. It felt pretty damn good.

Grace was just ahead of me, and when I shouted she started, slipped, and lit on her ass on the frozen walkway. *well, shit.* I moved to the porch and dropped my books, then got my hands under her arms and hauled her to her feet. I tried dusting the snow off, but she shoved me away so hard I slipped and lit on my own ass.

"Damn it, Blondie, I was trying to help. Next time I'll leave you sitting and let you freeze your ass ... " I never finished my sentence, because a big icy snowball hit me square in my still-sore nose from about two feet away. Hard! Instantly I felt warm liquid run down over my mouth and chin. I stuck my tongue out and tasted blood.

24 — And I Have Promises to Keep

"What the hell did you do that for? Damnit, Grace, you made my damn nose bleed! If you broke it I swear to hell I'm gonna take you over my knee and spank the holy shit out of you!" I scooped up a handful of icy snow and packed my nose, hoping to keep the swelling and any impending black eyes away. *shit! i'm just getting over the damn black eye that bitch sarah gave me. shit!!*

I ignored Grace, standing there with her blue eyes wide and staring, and got to my feet, holding the snow to my nose, and walked into the house. Mini-me the Really Short came in at warp speed and about groin height. Her beautiful curly brown hair hit me just at the base of my zipper followed by her hard little head. The curls did nothing to soften her head.

I dropped the snow and grabbed my crotch and bent over, which brought my nose in contact with Hope's head and made lights flash in my vision. I dropped to my knees and fell sideways, clamping my lips with my teeth tight enough to draw blood, in a desperate attempt to not unleash on Mini-me the same vocabulary I'd used on Grace.

My vision narrowed like a tunnel, and my focus zeroed in on my groin. I could hear a lot of chatter, but not much if it made sense, until I heard, "Roo?" in a sad weepy little voice.

"It's OK, Mini-me. I'm OK," I grunted out. I felt soft little hands patting my face, and I clamped my teeth down again when she patted my cheeks and my nose indiscriminately. Over and over, she patted and said Roo. My eyes were watering as she 'comforted' me.

I could feel someone trying to undo my belt, which I found alarming but couldn't sort out why. I heard Grace off in the distance, crying I think, but the next voice I heard was Charlie. *thank you, God!*

"Gracie, stop bellowing and go get somethin' cold. Ice. Frozen peas or corn. Somethin'. Ellie, stop trying to examine the boy. He don't need females checkin' his privates." Then in a gentler voice, "Hope, honey, can you go get Roo's books off the porch for Uncle Charlie?" The patting stopped, thank God, and whoever had been fumbling at my belt stopped.

Charlie helped me to my feet and into my room. Mrs. Weatherby was going to have to clean her rug. That's the second time I'd bled on it in four days. Charlie handed me a towel, which I held to my nose while trying to get my coat off. My new coat. *well, shit!*

"Mby coat!" I moaned. "I dot blud ond mby coat!"

"Ellie can clean it. Stop fussin' about yer damn coat, Boy." His voice was harsh but his hands were gentle as he helped me out of my coat and then my pants. "You wanna check and see if there's any damage or you want me to?"

I held the towel to my nose with one hand, turned my back to the old mechanic, and pulled my shorts down. My dick was OK, but through the dark curly hair I could see my balls were turning a light shade of blue. *well, damn!*

I must have groaned, because Charlie said sympathetically, "Probably not the first time. Sure as hell won't be the last." I was pulling my boxer briefs up when he hollered out my bedroom door, "Gracie girl, where

the hell is that ice?"

I heard Mrs. Weatherby say, "Here's the peas and corn, Charlie. And you didn't have to holler at Grace! She's in her room crying her eyes out!"

"She should be!" he said acidly. "I was watchin' from the barn door, Miss High-and-mighty Ellie Weatherby. That girl a yers hit that boy full on in the face point blank with an ice ball. So, don't be given me no lecture 'bout not hurtin' her feelin's. She's responsible fer alla this." And he shut the door in her face.

I wasn't comfortable standing, and I sure as shit wasn't comfortable sitting, so I pulled my blood-spattered t-shirt off and crawled into bed in my underwear. Charlie handed me a bag of frozen peas for my nose and one of frozen corn for my groin, but I switched them. Peas seemed more appropriate for my balls. He left and came back with four pain pills and a glass of water. I tossed back the pills, drank the water, and sank back on my pillow, suddenly exhausted. I don't even know if Charlie got out of the room before I drifted off.

I woke up when someone pulled the covers back and reached for the thawed peas. It was dark in the room, but from the light coming through the open door I could tell it wasn't Charlie changing the ice pack. I reached to push Mrs. Weatherby away and touched something much softer and smaller than Mrs. Weatherby. A sharp intake of breath confirmed I hadn't been touching the lady of the house.

"Damnit, Grace, what the hell do you think you're doing?" She shoved my hands away and reached for the thawed peas, but she didn't touch peas. An electric shock went right through my groin, and I was instantly in a condition that was NOT good a couple of hours after a groin-head collision. I jerked away from her and pulled the covers back over me. *shit! fuck! shit that hurts!!*

She stood by the bed, hands stretched toward me, suspended in the act of reaching for the peas. I pulled the peas out from under the covers and threw them on the floor, then I threw the thawed corn on the floor.

"Take them and get out!" I said, throwing the words at her as hard as I'd thrown the vegetables to the floor. She didn't react, just stood in mid-reach. "GET OUT!!" The tone of my voice finally penetrated her ears, and she turned and fled, not even taking the vegetables with her.

I curled around my exceedingly painful erection and wished she'd left something cold. *holy mary mother of God that hurts!!!!*

The bedroom door opened again. I was hurting too bad to even throw her out again. Maybe she'd come back for the vegetables, or to bring me more ice. *dear, God, i hope it's ice!*

"Ruel, you awake?" Jim's voice didn't have any sympathy in it. Family comes first, he'd told me. I am nothing to him.

"Yeah." My voice was muffled by the pillow.

"What the hell did you say to Grace? She flew out of here like seven bats from hell were after her!" He was every inch the angry father. *bet he'd be real happy to hear the bastard he let into his house had touched his angel's breast then got a hard-on!*

"I don't want her in here. I told her to get out." I kept my back to him. No way I wanted him to see me face-on right now.

"She was trying to help."

"She's helped enough today. Any more help like that and you might as well haul me off to the hospital and get me a permanent room." I glanced over my shoulder at him. "Is Hope OK?"

His face was backlit so I couldn't see his eyes, but his posture was stiff and his voice cold. "Hope is fine. She was upset you couldn't tuck her in. Ellie's trying to get her to sleep right now."

"Shit!" I let my head fall back to the pillow. "Give me a couple of minutes, will you? I'll go up and tuck her in."

"Don't do us any favors!" he spit at me!

I rolled over, making sure to take the covers with me. "Back off, Sheriff! I'm sorry I hurt your princess' feelings, but she damn near broke my nose when I was just trying to help her. So forgive me if I'm not too sympathetic to her crying jag." My anger was doing the job of ice. My groin was now free of any telltale bulges. I threw the covers aside and stood, sucking in a breath as my bruised crotch sent pain shooting into my abdomen and down my legs. *shit!*

I grabbed the pants Charlie had tossed aside and carefully and slowly pulled them on. Not bothering with a shirt, I stalked out of my bedroom and up the stairs, ignoring the stares from the clone twins, sitting in the living room doing homework. *shit. homework! one day in school and i'm already behind!*

I turned down the hallway toward the mini-mes' bedroom when the bathroom door opened and Grace stepped out, dressed in some kind of short ruffly dress. *shit, it's a nightgown! well, damn, could my timing suck any more.* Ignoring her I kept on down the hall to the open doorway where I could hear quiet little sobs and an occasional "Roo."

I leaned my head against the doorjamb, calming my anger, pulling back from the rage I was feeling. When I was calm, I pushed the door all the way open and stepped into the room. Hope's eyes lit up, and she flew out of the bed toward me. I was prepared this time, and I scooped her up before she could cause any more damage.

"Roo!" She patted my face, avoiding my bruised nose. "My Roo." She put her soft little arms around my neck, and I carried her back to bed and tucked her in. I sat on the bed beside her, and touched her angel-soft cheeks.

"Mini-me, can you do something for me?" Her brown curly crown bobbed up and down. "When I can't tuck you in, like for naptime or sometimes at bedtime, can you be a good Mini-me and go to sleep for your mom?" Her little face puckered, and I smoothed it with a finger.

"What if I'm gone for school, or I get a job and don't get home until late? You need to go to bed on time. It's important to get lots of rest 'cause you're growing fast. Growing takes lots of sleep." I knelt beside her bed so my face was right by hers. "I'll make you a promise. You go to bed when you're supposed to, no matter who tucks you in, and when I do get home I'll come straight up and give you a goodnight kiss,

even if you're asleep."

She looked at me like she wasn't sure about that.

"You know what my dad said?" She shook her curls. "He said DON'T MAKE A PROMISE UNLESS YOU KNOW YOU CAN KEEP IT, KID. If I promise you something, Hope, I'll keep that promise!"

She looked at me with her milk-chocolate eyes and smiled. "K." I kissed her forehead, got two face-pats in return, and she closed her eyes. Within seconds her even little-girl breathing was filling the room.

I dropped my forehead to the bed and breathed. *thank you, God.*

Mrs. Weatherby sat the whole time, not saying a word. When Hope was asleep, she got up and left, still mute. I sat with Hope for a bit, calming my own head. *what a day!*

When I got downstairs, there was a light on in the living room, but it was empty. I poked my head in the kitchen. Nobody, but there was a note on the table.

'Ruel. Supper in the fridge.'

I opened the refrigerator and saw a plastic-wrapped plate with meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Taking the plastic off, I popped it into the microwave, then put silverware and a napkin on the table, and got myself a glass of water. When the microwave dinged I sat and ate. Even warmed over, Mrs. Weatherby's food was good. A guy could get fat eating like this everyday. Maybe wrestling was a good idea. I'd have to ask —

Suddenly my appetite was gone. I couldn't ask Joe. The sheriff was pissed at me about Grace, so I couldn't ask him. Charlie? I doubt he ever played sports. I threw the rest of the meal in the garbage, washed and put away my dish and silverware, turned out the light and went to my room.

I saw my books piled haphazardly on the ledge closest to the door. Pulling the notebook out where I'd written the assignments, I started on homework, for the first time in my life. Whoopee.

It went pretty fast. I didn't do Spanish because I couldn't even understand the assignment, and Biology was all labs right now. Math was easy and went quickly. AP was reading so I saved that for last. History was reading and answering questions. By the time I finished that it was after eleven, but I still wasn't sleepy. I figured a nice hot shower, then I'd read my AP and get to bed by midnight.

In the bathroom, I checked my nose. Sorta purple and swollen but not broken. *thank you, God.* Broken noses were — well — a big pain in the ass. So to speak.

I got the water as hot as I could stand it and just stood under the spray, letting it hit me like hot needles then slide down my chest and back in a heavenly warm cascade. The shower was small enough I could have probably slept right there, but I had AP to study. *five more minutes.* I had just shut the water off when the bathroom door opened and Grace slipped in, shutting the door quickly behind her.

The shower door is a clear plastic accordion, and for a moment we stood there staring at each other. Grace's eyes slid from my face down over my chest and stomach. When they started heading further south I turned my back.

I said in a furious whisper, "What the hell are you doing in here? I'm already in trouble because you stormed out of my bedroom crying. Your dad finds you in here and I'll be sleeping in the barn, if he doesn't just shoot me and bury me under a rock!"

She didn't say anything so I glanced over my shoulder. She was staring at my butt.

"Grace!" Her eyes jerked up to mine. She was pale and her blue eyes looked like pools of sky above her lightly freckled cheeks. "Grace?" She turned her back, so I reached out and grabbed my towel. Wrapping it around my waist, I stepped out of the miniature shower and waited.

"Please don't tell my mom and dad I touched you. It was an accident, I swear."

"Grace, your dad is already pissed I made you cry. I'm not stupid enough to tell him something like that. I know it was an accident."

"Then why did you get so mad?" she whispered, turning to face me. "You were so angry. You scared me." *shit!*

"I'm sorry I scared you. It's just ... when you touched me I ... Fuck! When you touched me it ... excited me. And after getting hit in the ba ... groin, it hurt like hell!" Her eyes widened and involuntarily dropped to my crotch, then she jerked them back up like they'd been burned.

"I'm sorry about your nose," she whispered. She reached out a tentative finger, but I stepped back, and she dropped her hand.

"And I'm sorry I swore at you. Now you better get out of here, or accidentally touching is going to seem like a kiddy matinee next to the fire works being in here will cause." She nodded once and turned to leave.

"Grace." She looked back at me. "I would never hurt you, no matter how mad I got." She turned back toward me, reached up and kissed me on the cheek, and left. *Shit! Now I was hard again. damn, that hurts!*

I got about four hours of sleep, between reading my AP assignment and having to ice my groin again. The good news is I got everything put into my backpack, so I didn't have to balance the leaning tower of books anymore.

The next morning Grace wasn't talking to me again. Everything was back to normal.

24 — A Thanksgiving Family Reunion is Just Asking for Disaster

Life settled into a sort of routine at school the next few days. Lyle examined my nose everyday, commenting on the changing shades of purple. I made two lunches everyday and dropped one on Warren's desk, along with my granola bar, on my way out of math. AP English continued to be the high point of each day, followed closely by history. For me, biology was a hoot, because of the weird undercurrent of secrets Ms. McCarter and I shared. Spanish was a complete mystery, and I figured putting in my time was the best I could do. I finally got all the necessary supplies to keep my backpack loaded and my teachers happy. And one morning I woke up to find a set of W.C.C.H.S. official gym shorts and t-shirt lying on the chair in my room, so I could run laps and chase the volleyball around the gym with the rest of the freshmen boys. Yay.

On the home front, it was less routine, more chaos. Sheriff and Mrs. Weatherby had been asked to chaperone the Homecoming Dance so they were trying to find babysitters for the brownies and the mini-mes for Saturday night. Sarah and Amanda were lobbying fiercely that it wasn't 'fair for their parents to leave the raising of these small impressionable minds to other people'. Translation — this was the first year they had been allowed to date, thus their first Homecoming Dance (these two words were ALWAYS capitalized, even in conversation). They did NOT want Mom and Dad anywhere near their parade. Grace and some of her friends were going as a group.

"I'll do it," I said Thursday morning at breakfast. The sheriff and I were still pissed at each other, but the chance to stick it to the clone twins was too good to pass up. Sheriff and Mrs. Weatherby looked at me, surprised. I had said maybe five words since the whole nose/groin/crying debacle Tuesday night, and those had been mainly to Mini-me reassuring her I would keep my promise.

"But ... aren't you going to the dance?" Mrs. Weatherby asked.

"No." My peripheral vision caught Grace glancing at me then dropping her gaze.

"Don't you like dances?"

"Don't know. Never been to one. Not going to this one. This 'homecoming dance' seems like a date kind of thing, and there's nobody I want to ask. So, not going. I'd be happy to watch the mini-mes and the brownies."

Sarah sat across from me, out of her mother's and father's line of sight, vigorously shaking her head. Amanda sat beside her mouthing 'no'. I smiled broadly at both of them and turned to their parents.

"In fact, I'd love to watch them. We can play Candyland (a game they loved and that killed my brain cells) and have a snowball fight. Hey, maybe they can take their bath in the Jacuzzi." That got a lot of enthusiasm from the short Weatherbys. "With your permission, of course. And I'd watch them real carefully while they were in there. And I could read to them before bed."

"And sing?" Faith asked.

"And sing. But you'd have to teach me some more songs."

"Can we listen to songs?" I knew where this was headed and briefly debated how many verses from the

damn dinosaur were worth watching Sarah's and Amanda's evening crash and burn. I smiled wider.

"As many times as you want!" By now Sarah and Amanda were glaring at me, but I just smiled serenely back. *payback's a bitch!*

In the end, Sheriff and Mrs. Weatherby accepted my offer to babysit the brownies and the mini-mes Saturday night so they could fulfill their parental obligations to their darling daughters. I also offered to babysit the mini-mes during the game Saturday afternoon, after reassuring the astonished household I didn't give a flying fu...ig about the game.

I managed to survive the insane enthusiasm and school spirit the rest of the week. I was looking forward to the weekend. The sheer number of people around me every day was overwhelming. I was praying for one day above ten degrees so I could eat outside, by myself.

Saturday was completely uneventful, except for me having to restrain my homicidal tendencies toward the damn dinosaur. As I tucked the mini-mes into bed, it seemed unbelievable I'd gone the whole day without injury or death threats. In the ten days I'd known the Weatherbys I'd been stomped into cow shit, threatened with a shotgun and a knife, frozen to the ground, savaged with a backpack, threatened by three miniature Barbies — *thank you, brownies, for introducing me to this deformed humanoids phenomenon* — almost been expelled, attacked by a maliciously thrown ice ball, and nearly been castrated by an adorable two-year-old. *wow! wonder if i'll survive to eighteen?*

Sunday morning the sheriff and his wife drug two very surly sixteen-year-olds and the rest of the clan off to church, and I spent the morning helping Charlie work on the Jimmy. After Sunday dinner I spent the rest of the day and evening alone in my room doing homework and reading. The dining room table, would have been more comfortable, but the isolation was heaven.

Holidays were never big with Joe and me, except as a chance to earn extra money. The guys who had families or girl friends always wanted the days off, but an oil field is a 24/7 operations, so Joe and I volunteered to cover as many shifts as we could. Many a Thanksgiving or Christmas, Joe and I each worked a twenty-four hour shift, covering three or four bars apiece. The money was great! I couldn't remember a single holiday Joe and I ever celebrated. Even my birthday was just a present before we went off to work.

I knew Thanksgiving was in November sometime, but I didn't realize it was this week. I also didn't realize the school week was just three days. *hallelujah!* My jubilation lasted until Mrs. Weatherby informed me the sheriff's younger sister, husband, and four kids were coming. *shit! more family! oh, wait, they weren't my family. hallelujah!*

"You'll just love Peter and Evie and the kids!" Mrs. Weatherby gushed Monday night as she rushed around cleaning an already spotless guest room and changing the sheets on the bed, even though I'm pretty sure nobody had slept in it since the last time she'd changed them.

"Kids?" I tried to ask casually as I held my arms out for the 'dirty' sheets. I'd finished my homework and volunteered to help.

"Yes. They have the loveliest family. Annie is fourteen. She and Grace are such good friends. Jeffy is twelve. *jeffy? poor kid.* He is so going to enjoy having a boy cousin. Lily is eight. She and Merri and Beth

have such fun together. And, of course, Belle. She is such a sweetie, but she and Faith tend to clash." She paused in her rushing around and looked at me conspiratorially, "Between you and me, I think she resents Faith being so bossy." *no!!!! really? why would anyone resent faith being bossy? wait a minute ...*

"Hold it. You're telling me there are going to be TEN girls here Thursday?"

"Not just Thursday, Ruel. Pete and Evie live in Denver. They will come Wednesday afternoon and stay through Sunday morning. They always go to church with us and leave right after dinner." *ten girls for four days? holy shit!*

"Where in hell do you put six more people?" She seemed unperturbed at the increase in surplus population.

"Pete and Evie will sleep in here, of course." She swept her hand proudly around the very flowery pink room. *poor pete!* "Annie will sleep in Grace's room. Lily will share with Merri and Beth. Belle might sleep in Faith's and Hope's room, but last time she slept in here with Pete and Evie." She turned toward me, a hopeful look in her eye. "I was hoping Jeffy could sleep in your room with you?"

I tried to picture Jeff (I refuse to call any twelve-year-old boy Jeffy) and me in that twin bed and failed. Joe and I had shared beds a few times, so I wasn't squeamish about it, but I didn't think we'd fit.

"It's pretty small. Barely enough room for me. How big is he?"

"Ruel, there is plenty of room. His bedroll will fit very nicely against the bookcase wall opposite the door. You might have to fold it to get to the closet, but that should be easy enough." *bedroll? oh.*

"Oh, yeah, that should work. Yeah, sure. I'd be happy to share."

Wednesday when we got home from school, there was a big silver van with Colorado plates parked in the turnaround. As soon as they saw it all five girls picked up the pace. I let them. So far my introduction to family hadn't been an overwhelming success, and I wasn't convinced this gathering of non-family would be any different. When the girls got closer to the house, three girls came running out the door, and they all engulfed each other in hugs.

A fourth, a boy, stood hesitantly on the porch, scanning the group. *ah, i've been outed.* When he saw me his eyes lit up, but he still hesitated, probably unsure how this unknown element — me — would welcome a new pseudo-cousin. *yay.*

I strode past the gushing girls, shaking my head, and took the porch steps two at a time. He had dark hair and eyes and stood at least a head shorter than me. No surprise there. Joe had been tall, and puberty had hit me early. He watched me come up the steps, wariness and eagerness warring in his rosy-cheeked face.

"Hi," I said, sticking out my hand. "I'm Ruel. You must be Jeff." He grinned with relief and shook my hand.

"Yeah. Jeff." He said it like it was a new word for him, and like it was a relief to NOT be called Jeffy. I pushed the door open and shouldered my bulging backpack through.

"Come on, I've got to drop this stuff off before I become permanently deformed. A word of advice. When you get to high school, hire a Sherpa to lug this shit around for you. It weighs a ton." I heard talking in the kitchen but ignored it and went directly to my bedroom.

Jeff looked around, amazed, while I dropped the backpack on the foot of my bed and shrugged out of my coat. I hung the coat in the closet and turned to my new 'cousin'.

"Mrs. Weatherby thought your bedroll would fit nice right there." I gestured to the floor space next to the built-in bookcases along the closet wall. "There's plenty of room in the closet if you need to hang anything up. Plenty of shelf space for other stuff. If you have a suitcase it can sit on the chair."

"This is a wicked room!! I've never been in here before. This is so cool!" He ran a hand along the ledge created by the top of the bookshelves.

"Yeah." I thought about two guys arrayed against ten females, not counting parents, and decided Jeff and I had to stick together. "Where did you used to sleep when you came here?"

He waved a hand at the bedroom door. "On the living room floor. It's a real pain when the girls would giggle and chatter like a bunch of magpies!"

It was like his talking about girls flipped some curse switch. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than my bedroom door popped open without any warning, and a beautiful dark-haired girl waltzed in as if she owned the place. She looked around like a prospective buyer, running her fingers over the bookcase ledge and peering out the little window.

"You're right, Grace. This is the MOST amazing room, and it isn't any smaller than yours." She whirled toward Grace, her dark eyes lighting up with an idea. "You should SO ask your parents for this room. You'd be down here on your own, like a little apartment." She clapped her hands, "You could use that cute little powder room. You'd never even have to go back upstairs."

Jeff was rolling his eyes, and I stood there fuming until I saw Grace's light blue eyes twinkle with some secret. *ahh, the girls want to play games.* Amateurs should never play professionals.

The beautiful girl, Annie I presume, whirled toward me so her long straight hair swirled around her like a silken fog. She was beautiful and knew it and was working it to her advantage. She looked at me with big luminous dark eyes and wet her lips, preparing to address the lowly bastard son. *oh, honey. you have no idea who you're playing with.*

"You must be Ruel." She held out one slender manicured hand. "You wouldn't mind trading rooms with Grace, would you? You seem like such a young gentleman, and it would be such a gentlemanly gesture." Then she smiled a dazzling smile, filled with perfect white teeth. I took her hand and grinned like a great white just before it eats the surfer, then drew her hand up against my chest, pulling the rest of her up against the rest of me, and looked down into her beautiful face.

I lowered my baritone to a bass and said, "I'd love to trade, if you're part of the deal." I looked up at Grace's startled face and Jeff's laughing one. "Would you two mind giving us a couple of hours alone to discuss the arrangements?" Then I looked back to a less-sure Annie. "And to keep the record straight, I am not now nor have I ever been a gentleman. It's lots more fun that way." She was trying to tug her hand

away, but mine are bigger and stronger. They engulfed hers, and I held her fast. She was indeed beautiful and, what with me being a healthy fourteen-year-old male who was used to getting some regularly and hadn't had any in a couple of weeks, she could feel my body responding to her beauty. Her eyes got even wider.

She looked toward Grace, seeking help. "Uhm, Grace?"

I lowered my mouth to her ear, so close my lips were brushing the skin, and changed my voice to the one Sheila always said sent shivers down her back. "Unless you are prepared to go all the way, Little Girl, you should be more careful about the vibes you give off with that beautiful fuckable body." She shivered and goosebumps rose along her arms, but she didn't pull away. "Are you done playing games, or should I ..." I stopped talking and kissed her ear and then her neck just below her jaw. She shivered again, and with a half-sob half-moan, pulled her hand free and fled.

Grace fled after her, and I shut the door. "I think I need a lock on that thing," I said conversationally. Jeff stood with his mouth hanging open.

"What did you do? I've seen her turn guys into putty with that act. She can get anything she wants. I've seen grown men get all drooly when she does that. It's kinda creepy, actually. Like she's Vampyra or something." He glanced down at my zipper and made a face. "She got to you, too! Dang!" *dang? seriously? this kid needed some swearing lessons.*

I adjusted myself and grinned. "Jeff, I'm a guy. Pretty much any reasonably good-looking female 'gets' to me. Doesn't mean anything except my pants get tight." He looked uncertain. "Trust me. I got a little wood. She got a lot embarrassed. It's an even trade. Now, why don't we find your suitcase and bedroll and get you settled?" He grinned and nodded.

"Oh, about 'dang'." He blushed a little.

"My mom is death on swearing. I'd probably even get in trouble for dang."

I grinned. "I think I have a solution. Does your mom speak any foreign languages?" He shook his head. "Good. Let me share a couple of words I know."

25 — The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas had Nothing on Where I was Raised

We managed to avoid the 'family' until supper. The female minors, minus the three littlest ones, ate in the kitchen and the rest of us ate at the big-people table in the dining room.

After supper all the females except the three smallest disappeared into the kitchen to cook. We'd just eaten so it seemed weird to me, but what do I know? Pete, who was a detective with the Denver PD and seemed pretty cool, and Jim took the shorter females on a walk, leaving Jeff and me to entertain ourselves. We bundled up and went out to the shop, where I showed him the Jimmy pickup sitting forlornly scattered around the workbench, and we talked.

"What did Mrs. Weatherby tell you about me?" I finally asked. Might as well get the dirt out in the open.

"She said she had you when she was fifteen, and you grew up living with your dad. Then your dad died, and you came here to live. Sorry about your dad."

"Thanks." *ah, the sanitized version*

"Is it weird living here after living with your dad?" Jeff seemed genuinely interested, but I didn't know how much I could tell him without giving the whole mess away.

I leaned against the workbench while he perched on an old chair Charlie kept in the shop. I watched Jeff as he looked around the shop. I barely knew him, but I already liked him. Before coming here I'd never had a friend my own age, and I'm not sure I could count Joe's buddies or the whores as friends, so maybe I'd never had a friend, period.

"Jeff, can you keep a secret?" He looked at me for a while, not answering right away. I liked that. It meant he was considering the question seriously.

"I won't keep a secret that might hurt someone. Or about anything illegal." He looked at me seriously, "But I know how to keep my mouth shut. My dad taught me." I smiled. Like Joe and me.

"I can't answer your question without you knowing how I grew up, but you can't tell your family. It's none of their business, and it's not my place to tell them. That's for Jim and Mrs. Weatherby to tell. But it's nothing that is illegal or will hurt anyone. Can you agree to that?" He thought a bit then nodded.

"Living here after living with my dad is like moving to Mars. I've never lived in a house before. I've never been around other kids before. I've never been to school before. Suddenly I'm living in a house with nine other people, seven of them kids. I'm going to school with more kids. I suddenly have people trying to turn me into something I'm not, and there are a hell of a lot of rules to follow." I paused and drew a deep breath. This next was the hard part, but I couldn't say it to the Weatherbys.

"Some days I feel like I'm suffocating. Like I'm going to wake up and be somebody I don't know and won't like. I miss my dad so bad it makes my guts hurt. I never thought about the way I was raised, and now I see this whole different way of living, and I'm pissed at my dad because he left me to face all this shit alone, and I'm pissed at him because I see all the stuff I missed. But the way I was raised made me who I am, and I LIKE me." His eyes were wide from all the shit I'd laid on him.

"I guess what I'm saying is my thoughts and feelings since I came here are fucked up so much, sometimes I feel like I'm going bat-shit crazy."

He just sat, probably trying to take in all the shit I'd tossed at him.

"Probably sorry you asked, huh?"

He shook his head. "No. It's just weird. You and I were raised so different, but some of the stuff you feel, I feel, too. I get ... pissed at my folks for not telling me stuff I think I have a right to know and for telling me stuff that just confuses me."

I stared at him for a bit. "What kind of stuff do they not tell you?"

"Like, I know all about sex, the mechanics. We get that in health class at least once a year, but they won't talk about what it feels like to, you know ... like you were earlier." He blushed a little.

"What kind of stuff do they tell you that confuses you?" He looked at me funny. "Jeff, I don't know what kinds of things parents tell their kids. When I asked Joe a question he answered." He nodded, like he understood that.

"Well, they tell me to always tell the truth, then they lie about stuff like Santa Clause and how happy they are to see someone when I KNOW they can't stand that person. I think my mom and dad are pretty cool, but sometimes I get so mad I could just scream. OK, like the swearing." Now that he'd started he was on a roll. "Mom comes unglued when I even say crap, but Dad swears and she just shakes her head at him. And drinking coffee. They tell me drinking coffee is bad for me, but I can drink a Mountain Dew, which has like a jillion times more caffeine than coffee. It doesn't make any sense!"

I knew regular parents didn't tell their kids stuff because they thought they knew better than their kids, which struck me as kind of arrogant. And if they didn't answer their kids' questions, there were plenty of other kids out there who would fill in the gaps with some weird shit. The disinformation and flat out lies I heard floating around the hallways at school would fill whole books.

"Getting hard is sometimes kind of uncomfortable, but mostly it's great, too, sometimes at the same time. If it goes on too long it hurts like hell. But taking care of it feels unbelievable."

He nodded then said, "One of my friends' big brother said just getting ... hard was as good as having sex. That's why guys did it all the time." I burst out laughing, then shook my head at Jeff to let him know I wasn't laughing at him.

"Any guy tells you that, you know 100% certain he's never had any. It feels good, but nothin' like having sex! And only if it doesn't last too long. And guys get wood because it's hardwired into our brains. Anything a guy sees that reminds him of sex, which is pretty much everything, will get him hard. Maybe as guys get older they can control it, but so far," I gestured at my zipper, "it pretty much does what it wants. I've just learned to not listen."

"One guy in eighth grade said guys NEED sex like they need food. If we don't get it our balls fall off. And we can't control it so the girl has to control it, has to keep saying no, 'cause guys just can't." *another idiot who should be castrated then shot.*

=====

Jim enjoyed Pete's company. They'd been friends since Pete married Jim's sister. When they got back from their walk with the three bundled-up little ones, Ellie called from the kitchen, "Jim, could you go find Ruel and Jeffy? Tell them we're having sandwiches and fresh-baked cookies." So they unwrapped the girls, snagged a couple of cold ones, and headed back outside. They wandered toward the dark barn, not hurrying, enjoying the cold and each other's company.

"Must have been a shock when you found out about this kid, Jim," Pete said, breaking the silence.

Jim nodded. "A huge shock. Lord I was mad. At Ellie for not telling me. With North Dakota for dumping this problem in my lap. I was even pissed at the boy for being born!" He took a sip of beer.

"Was?" Pete asked, sipping his own cold brew.

"Yeah. Pete, I've never met a kid like him. He's smart, scary smart, but he doesn't even realize it. He's tough, sometimes as hard as nails, but you should see him with Hope. He's so gentle, like he's handling spun glass. He's rough around the edges, hell, his edges are so sharp you could cut yourself on them sometimes, but there's a weird level of sophistication, maturity in him. And an innate kindness. I wish I could have met his dad. Joe Black must have been some kind of man to raise such a boy." Jim looked up at the clearing sky. Gonna be cold tonight.

"You sound more enthusiastic about him being here than Ellie."

"Ellie sees him as a mistake she has to fix. Since she can't change the 'mistake' she made, she's determined to change the kid. You want to talk about the immovable object meeting the irresistible force! I figure she will come to her senses and accept him for who he is, a good kid trying to become a good man in spite of his upbringing," Pete gave him a piercing look and raised one eyebrow, "or the kid will do a runner."

"Which do you hope?"

"I really like this kid, Pete. I'd like him to stay, become family. I'm not getting my hopes up, but if Ellie runs this boy off, send up a lot of prayers, because there are gonna be some fireworks." This really drew Pete's attention.

"Wow! That's more serious than I would have figured. You and Ellie have always been rock solid. And you've only known this kid a couple of weeks."

Jim looked at his friend and brother-in-law. "I feel like I've know him my whole life, Pete, like he belongs."

Jim and Pete approached the open barn door and heard Ruel say, "That's bullshit, Jeff!"

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"That's bullshit, Jeff. A guy can control himself as much as a girl can. And any guy who lets his dick lead him around has piss for brains. Guys who say that kinda shit just don't want to take responsibility for their actions. Blame it all on the girl. Put all the responsibility on her. What an asshole! Guys like that think they're owed just because they have a dick. Joe used to have to haul guys like that outta the warehouses all the time 'cause they'd beat on the ladies, thinkin' they ..." I stopped cold, suddenly aware of Jeff's large dark eyes on me. He looked like I'd slapped him. *shit. guess i should have been more specific about how i was raised.* I waited in silence for what was coming.

"Your ... your dad worked in a ... a ... one of those places?"

Keeping my voice low and flat, I detailed for Jeff the more colorful parts of my childhood. He winced once when I talked about my babysitters and the Mickeys in my baby bottles. And he actually covered his eyes when I talked about sleeping behind the stage the strippers were dancing on or on the floors of various bar offices. I talked as dispassionately as I could about a nightly beer from the time I was six, with a whiskey chaser added when I turned nine. I explained that we lived in the whorehouses, getting a discount on rent because we worked there. Then I stopped and waited.

"You ... you worked there? How? You're just a kid?"

"I'm big for my age, and I'm Joe Black's kid. He and his friends taught me firearms, and self-defense moves. Once I knew enough to do the job, I filled in when someone was sick or gone. The owners trusted Joe, and if he said I could do the job, I could do the job."

"Uhm. Uhm, did you ever ... you know ... uhm." He turned bright pink, dropped his eyes, and asked in a whisper, "Did you ever have ... uhm ... you know with one of ... them?" He couldn't look at me he was so embarrassed.

"Yeah. Joe got me one for my twelfth birthday." His eyes shot up like they'd been jerked on a string, and they were as big as saucers.

"Holy shit!" he breathed out.

I looked at the gutted pickup and said, "Guess this changes things," and sighed. "Jeff, I'll understand if you think you have to tell your folks. You didn't bargain on hearin' about this kind of shit. I won't hold you to what you said." I stood away from the workbench and turned toward the door. "I suppose we should be getting back inside. It's dark out."

"Ruel, wait!" Jeff stood up and looked at me hard. "I won't tell. There was probably a whole bunch of illegal stuff, but it's not like my dad could do anything about it now. And it didn't hurt anybody but you." I held up my hand and stopped him.

"First thing you need to know, Jeff. Don't feel sorry for me. I had a weird childhood. I'm figurin' that out since I moved here, but I don't regret it. Like I said, it made me who I am, and I like me. And I had more than a lot of kids. Joe never beat me. He made sure I had three squares a day and a roof over my head. He taught me how to work hard, and he taught me a trade." I smiled at Jeff's look.

"He was too young to be any kind of proper dad, at least the way Jim and Pete are, and he didn't have a lot to give me. But what Joe Black had, he gave. 100%. All the time. Joe gave me everything he had, which is more than most parents give. They hold back some for themselves, but Joe gave me everything. He taught me everything he knew. He included me in everything he did. A lot of it might not have been the best for me, but he didn't know enough to worry about that. He just gave it all. So don't feel sorry for me!" He nodded.

"The second thing you need to know is I don't apologize for who I am. I'm Joe Black's kid, through and through. I'm uneducated and rough around the edges, I have more to learn than most kids, but I also know more than most kids. I am who I am, and I'm not changing who I am. For anybody. If you can live with who I am, I'd like to be friends. If you can't you can still share my room if you want, but you don't have to spend time with me. No hard feelings. Your call."

We stood in the gloom of the barn, looking at each other. A middle-class city kid and a lower-class roughneck, both wondering if there was any common ground to build on. Jeff moved first. He stuck out his hand. I took it, and we both smiled. A noise at the barn door drew our attention, and Jim and Pete stood there holding beers and staring at us. *shit. i wonder how much they heard?*

"Well, jebati!" Jeff said.

26 — Tell Me Your Secrets, I'll Tell You My Lies

Jim and Pete stood and stared, saying nothing. Jeff took his cues from me. *smart kid*. I just waited. Joe had taught me how, and I was good at it

"Sounds like a serious discussion," Jim said, breaking the increasingly uncomfortable silence. He glanced at Jeff but stared hard at me. Some of the stuff I'd told Jeff, Jim didn't even know.

"Yeah, it was. We were getting to know each other. Seemed like something family should do." I kept my eyes on Pete, waiting for his reaction. No matter what Jeff said, if his dad decided I wasn't fit company for him, that would be that. Pete looked at me for what felt like a long time. Then he glanced at Jeff and back at me.

"Sounds like some stuff a guy should ask his dad, Jeff, not another kid." He was talking to Jeff, but he was looking at me, laying the blame where he thought it belonged. Jim stood quiet, saying nothing.

"I have asked you, Dad, but you haven't answered me. So I figured I'd ask some other sources."

"And you figured a ..." he paused like he couldn't figure out quite what I was. So I supplied a word for him.

"Bastard?" I never looked away from Pete's eyes, but I heard Jim suck in a breath.

"I was going to say kid who's been raised in a whorehouse, but bastard will do," Pete responded calmly. Jeff stepped forward, and I reached out and touched his arm to stop him, but he shook me off.

"That's not fair, Dad. You eavesdrop on a bit of conversation and think you know what's going on, but you don't. You're always telling us to get all the facts, don't jump to conclusions, but here you are jumping. Is this one of those 'do what I say, not what I do' times."

"What wrong conclusions did I jump to, Jeffy?" I saw Jeff wince at the childish name. Pete looked at me.

"Are you a bastard, Mr. Black?" I nodded.

"Were you raised in a whorehouse, Mr. Black?"

"Yeah, I was raised in a whorehouse. I was raised lots of places, Mr. Reeves."

"Are you telling me, Mr. Black, that my son should take sexual advice from ... you?"

"I was answering an honest question about something I have personal knowledge about. Are you saying anything I told Jeff was wrong? That I misspoke or lied to him?"

"That's not the point, Mr. Black."

"Then what is the point, Dad?" Jeff asked. "I was curious about stuff you won't talk about. So I asked Ruel. And stop calling him a bastard! You've told me a jillion times a person can't help now they're born, just the choices they make after that. Are you saying that's not true? Is it like the other lies you and Mom

tell?"

For the first time Mr. Reeves shifted his whole focus to Jeff. "When have we lied, Jeff?"

"Lots of little stuff. 'Oh, Mr. Halley, how nice to see you.' Santa Clause. Coffee is bad because of the caffeine, but Mt. Dew is OK. Mr. Dicks has a new job, that's why he and Mike's mom aren't together right now. Jason Holt is going to a private school, interesting name for State Juvie." By the time Jeff ran down, Mr. Reeves looked slightly ashamed.

"Jeffy, ..."

"Stop calling me that! I've told Mom a jillion times I'm too old for a baby name! My name is Jeff!"

His dad looked at him honestly, maybe for the first time ever. "No. You aren't a baby. When did you get so grown up?" He rubbed his hands down over his face and sighed. "I guess it's time for me to grow up, too."

He looked at me, and I braced for more venom, more hate. "I owe you an apology, Ruel. I see so much ugliness on my job, Evie and I have tried to protect the kids, keep them innocent, that we've forgotten to let them grow up. But they went and sneaked off and did it anyway. Jeff, you shouldn't have to ask other people, even new — experienced — friends stuff your dad should tell you."

The two men moved toward us. Pete stopped in front of Jeff and put a hand on his shoulder. "I also owe you an apology, Son. I promise to try to answer your questions from now on. Even the ones that make your mother blush." He smiled at Jeff who grinned back. Pete looked back over at me. "It wasn't pleasant, but thank you for the wake-up call, Ruel."

"You OK?" Jim asked me quietly. I nodded. Truth be told I was missing Joe pretty bad after talking about him so much. He'd only been gone two weeks, but it felt like a lifetime ago, and it felt like five minutes ago. My gut hurt as I watched Pete clap Jeff on the shoulder before they turned to walk back to the house.

"Ruel?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry for coming across all Papa Bear the other night when Grace came storming out of your room." I shrugged.

"It's OK. You were working with the information you had. Just like Mr. Reeves. Sometimes we open our mouths when we should be thinking first. I yelled at Grace because I was hurting. Even though it was a lot her fault, I shouldn't have yelled. I apologized, and she apologized for the nose, so we're good. It's OK." Jim looked at me funny.

"What?"

He smiled, "You sure you're only fourteen?"

I grinned. "Joe always said it wasn't the years, it was the miles. Of course, he was talking about the

hookers, so maybe it doesn't apply here."

He grinned and clapped me on the shoulder much the way Pete had done Jeff. This time I didn't even try to resent it. Maybe I was growing up a bit, too.

"Let's go see if there are any cookies left."

"Cookies! We're standing here solving the problems of the universe and there are cookies inside? Sheriff Weatherby, you need to get your priorities straight!" I took off in a loping run toward the house. As I passed Jeff and his dad I hollered, "If I get to them first you can kiss those cookies good-bye!" Jeff ditched his dad and took off after me. There weren't too many cookies left by the time the old guys got to the house.

The evening was a perfect family evening. We sat around the fireplace talking and laughing (Grace and Annie sat as far from me as possible), the kids playing games, the adults talking of important events. There was popcorn and hot cider, munchkins chasing each other, and older kids giving little kids noogies and piggyback rides.

After an hour I was ready to hurl it was so damn sweet. I was sitting on the floor, leaning against the door to my bedroom and wondering how long I had to socialize before I could escape the saccharin atmosphere when Mini-me saved me.

She had been chasing Faith and Belle, and then they had been chasing her, when she took a tumble and banged her forehead on the doorjamb between the dining room and kitchen. Her wails filled the house, and Ellie and Evie jumped up and rushed to the injured baby. Faith and Belle began sniffing and tears ran down their cheeks so Jim and Pete jumped in to cuddle their sad little munchkins. The older girls were sort of fluttering around looking for something to help the situation.

Suddenly above the sound of crying and soothing parental sounds rose one little voice in crystal clarity. "Fuck!" All noise stopped dead.

Every Weatherby eye in the living room zeroed in on me.

"What?"

"Ruel!" Jim began.

"I swear, I haven't said anything around her! I swear!!" The Reeves were all looking at the Weatherbys, waiting for some kind of explanation, when the perfect little voice began to wail again, and another word came forth.

"Roo," followed by soothing murmurs. The wails grew louder. The Weatherbys continued to stare at me. The Reeves continued to stare at the Weatherbys.

Jeff nudged me. "What the jebati is a roo?"

"Roo!" followed by more soothing murmurs. And even louder wails. And more stares.

"ROO!!" The little crystal voice had become a shriek drowning out the soothing murmurs and drawing all stares toward the dining room.

I got to my feet and went into the dining room. Hope was struggling in her mother's lap, while her Aunt Evie was trying to hold a cold cloth to the huge bump on her head. She was sobbing as if her tiny mini-me heart would break until she saw me. Then she held out her arms and sobbed, "Roo," so piteously it brought tears to her mother's eyes. Of course, those might have been tears of anger that the mistake she thought she had put behind her fourteen years ago had hi-jacked her youngest child's affection.

I picked up my little groupie, and she threw her soft chubby little arms around my neck, laid her soft little face against mine and whispered, "Fuck." *oh, Lord. mrs. weatherby is gonna kill me. jim is gonna kill me.* I heard a noise behind me.

Everyone from the living room had followed me into the dining room and had witnessed Mrs. Weatherby's embarrassment and heard Hope's sweet little swear word. *well, jebati!*

27 — Yours, I Wish He Wasn't Mine, and Ours

I sat in the dining room, holding Hope while Mrs. Weatherby and Mrs. Reeves fussed over her. Everyone else stood around and watched, commenting on Mini-me's limited but interesting vocabulary. I didn't bother defending myself when Mrs. Weatherby and the clone twins blamed me over and over, at volume, for the swear words without also giving me the credit for the other few words she could say. Who said life was fair?

Apparently Hope had finally had enough fussing, because she turned her face into my chest and whispered, "No." Taking my cue from Her Imperious Mini-me, I stood and walked away from the whole group. The mothers' mouths dropped open in perfect sync, and all the noise stopped as I left the dining room. By the time I got to the top of the stairs, Hope was a limp heavy bundle.

Mrs. Weatherby had followed me and changed Hope into pajamas and put her to bed without speaking to me. I think her grand scheme to convert me into a normal teen-ager was being derailed by her anger at me intruding between her and her baby. I couldn't blame her.

"Mrs. Weatherby," I began, but she turned on me in a fury.

"Get out!" she whispered.

I held up a hand, "Please, Mrs. Weatherby, I just wanted to ... "

She shoved me hard in the chest. "Get. Out!" she whispered furiously. "She might want you when she goes to bed, but I don't want you anywhere near her at any other time! Do I make myself clear? You are NOT to come near her!"

I dropped my hand and left. Jim was standing in the hallway right outside the door. He touched my shoulder briefly when I passed him, then went into Hope's room and closed the door.

=====

Jim watched Ellie brush curls back from Hope's forehead, then brush a hand across her own cheek. He moved up beside her and rested a hand on her shoulder. It was trembling.

"I want him gone, Jim. I can't deal with it. I made the right decision fourteen years ago, and I should have stuck with it. He has no place in our home or life."

Jim drew in a slow breath. "Why do you want him gone, Ellie?"

"I'm the wrong person to raise him. I can't help him. I don't know how."

"What kind of help does he need, Ellie?" Jim spoke softly, massaging Ellie's tense shoulders as he talked.

She didn't answer his question but asked one instead. "Can you find out what I have to do to sign my parental rights away? Assign them to the state?" He drew another slow deep breath and repeated his question.

"What kind of help does he need that we can't give, Ellie?" She turned under his hands, staring furiously at him.

"I don't want him here. Isn't that enough?" Her eyes were dark and angry. "Are you going to find out what I have to do or not?"

"This isn't just about you anymore, Ellie. This is about the whole family. If we take this step, it should be because it's what is best for the family."

"It was my decision to bring him into this house, and it is my decision he go!"

"It was your decision he come here, because him coming here had the biggest impact on you. If he leaves it will impact all of us. We all should have a say."

"Fine!" She stood suddenly and strode to the door. "Let's decide!" She twisted the knob and disappeared into the hall.

Jim followed, suddenly very tired of Ellie's pig-headedness. He sighed and prayed for wisdom.

=====

The living room fell silent as I descended the stairs, but I ignored all of them and went into my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. Not bothering to turn on the light, I flopped on my bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking with dread about the next four days, especially the 'big family dinner' tomorrow. There was a light tap on the door, then it opened and Jeff came in. He closed it behind him and sat on the chair, staring at me in the dark.

Finally he spoke. "That was so COOL!"

"What?" I looked at him in surprise.

"Nobody, and I mean nobody, EVER gets the best of Aunt Ellie. She is like the Terminator. She says jump and everyone says how high? She's like a Drill Sergeant. I wish I had a camera. The look on her face when Hope wanted you and then said ... well, you know, the 'F' word. That was priceless!"

The awe in his face made me grin, but I wiped it off.

"This isn't a joke, Jeff. She is seriously pissed at me. I'm threatening her relationship with one of her kids." He still looked like it was the best practical joke ever. I sat up on my bed.

"You don't get it. If I piss her off enough, she could kick me out. Send me into the system."

"What system?"

"The foster care system."

"I thought that was for kids without parents, or whose parents were bad."

"She could sign away her parental rights. Have me declared unmanageable, dangerous to the other kids. Hell, if she worded it right she could probably get me sent to juvie."

"Uncle Jim wouldn't go along with that, would he? That's a lie. He's a policeman. He wouldn't let them lock you up because Aunt Ellie's mad, would he?" Even in the dark I could see his eyes widen. Guess

juvie trumps a practical joke.

"He told me when I came, no matter how mad he gets at her, she's his wife. He will choose his family over me every time. I don't matter to him, Jeff. I don't matter to any of them except Hope. If I left Hope would cry for a couple of days then forget me. It wouldn't take the rest of them an hour. No one would care a fuck if I disappeared." I glanced briefly at my closet and flopped back on my bed. If it came to that, I'd run. *maybe i should pack my backpack, just in case.*

Jeff sat quiet, maybe trying to digest a life where no one cared if you were around. His shoulders slumped, and he sighed. "Well, jebati! I'd miss you, Ruel. This is the first Thanksgiving that hasn't completely sucked since I was little."

Sounds in the living room drew us to the door. We cracking it open and heard Mrs Weatherby talking.

=====

Jim listened in disbelief as Ellie asked his sister and her family to please give them some privacy for a family meeting. Pete looked at Jim hard, then ushered his family upstairs.

"Your mother has something important we need to discuss," Jim said, motioning the kids to sit down. He sat and looked at Ellie. It was her show now.

She looked suddenly unsure, and Jim's hopes rose. Maybe she would see how pig-headed and selfish she was being.

"I don't think having Ruel here is working. It isn't good for the family, and I don't think it is helping him. I would like to help him find a family that fits him better. To do that we need to place him with Child Protective Services so they can help him. Your father," she looked significantly at Jim, "says everyone should have a vote since he has been here a few days."

The girls looked at Jim then one another. Grace raised her hand.

"I don't understand what that means, to 'place him'."

Jim spoke before Ellie could. She was painting too rosy a picture for his taste. "It means your mother would sign over her parental rights, renouncing all claim to Ruel as her son, and he would be placed in the foster care system. He would be placed with a foster family or, as often happens with older kids especially boys, he would be placed in the state youth facility until a family can be found or until he turns eighteen."

The room was silent. Ellie was looking daggers at him, but he ignored her. They would have to hash out their problems later. Right now his concern was the kids — all of them.

"I don't want him to go," Beth said quietly. She nudged Merri, who just shrugged, looking at her mother's angry face.

"I would like him to stay," Jim said. "Who else?" Grace raised her hand slowly, earning her a dirty look from Sarah. "Sarah, knock it off. Everyone has a right to her opinion. Anyone else?"

Faith was looking from one face to the other. "Daddy? I don't understand."

Jim knelt beside her, hoping he could explain to a five-year-old. "You need to tell Mommy and me if you

want Ruel to live here or not."

"Where would he live?"

"We don't know, Faith."

"Would he still be my brother?"

"No."

"Then I don't want him to go."

"Anyone else?" Jim asked. No one said anything.

Ellie smiled. "Who would like him to leave?" She, Sarah, Amanda, and Merri raised their hands. "It's a tie. This was a great idea, Jim. It didn't solve the problem at all."

"It isn't a tie," Grace said quietly. "Hope would want him to stay. That's five to four."

"Hope is a baby. She doesn't understand the situation so she doesn't get a vote," Ellie said with a bit of a snap.

The eight Weatherbys sat and said nothing. The quiet was deafening.

=====

I shut the door quietly and pulled books out of my backpack, then filled it with three sets of clothes and the last of my cash. Jeff watched me without saying anything, until I put my watch cap and coat on. I placed my gloves in a pocket and opened the closet door.

"Jeff," I turned to him, "I need you to keep a secret, at least as long as you can." He looked at me, the backpack, and the closet.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving. I'm not gonna to be responsible for messing up this family. You heard them. They are dividing over whether I should stay. I'm not gonna do that to Jim. This family means the world to him. I'm just a stray he was forced to take in, so I'm removing myself from the equation. No me, no problems."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked. I smiled and thumped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Don't tell them I've gone until you absolutely have to."

"Won't they notice first thing in the morning?"

"Tell 'em I'm sleeping in. And tell 'em I was pissed about the way Mrs. Weatherby talked to me so I'm not coming out of my room even for dinner. Tell 'em ..." I hesitated. What would convince them it was me and not Jeff making up stuff. "Tell 'em I said I didn't want any fuckin' family dinner, to hell with 'em. That should convince them. With any luck I can hitch a ride and be long gone before they get suspicious."

"Hitching a ride isn't safe!" Jeff protested.

"Jeff, I'm big enough and smart enough to take care of myself. Believe me." He looked so uncertain, I realized I had no right to drag him into it.

"You know what, don't worry about it. Just don't say anything. You don't have to lie for me, just don't tell them anything. Make them find out for themselves. Can you do that?" I could tell he was unhappy about the situation, but he nodded. Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out a few crumpled bills and some change, and handed it to me.

I looked at the money and him. "Are you sure?" He nodded, and I put the money in my pocket. "I'll pay you back."

I got on my knees and shoved everything off the closet floor. Using the old screwdriver I pried the trapdoor up and leaned it back against the closet wall. I dropped my backpack through, and turned to look at Jeff. His eyes were wide with surprise. I grinned.

"When I'm gone, can you shove this junk back into the closet?" He nodded.

I climbed down the ladder, pulling the trapdoor shut behind me. As I descended I could hear Jeff sliding the stuff back into the closet. *good man*. At the bottom I picked up my backpack and put it on. Stepping around the diminished wall of boxes, I walked to the outside basement door, opened it quietly, and went through. I shut it behind me, and walked slowly around the house, staying in the shadows until I got to the packed snow of the drive.

Settling my pack snug on my back, I strode down the driveway to the plowed road. The sky was clear and the stars were bright. A perfect night for a getaway.

28 — Escape from Tomorrow Isn't Easy

It took me two hours and three hitched rides to get to the truck stop near the closest Interstate. Using a little bit of my precious money I bought some trail mix and a sandwich and bottled water. Then I began hitching. Within an hour a long-haul trucker, against every company policy and common sense, gave a ride to a scruffy hitch hiking kid trying to get home for Thanksgiving. I said I didn't like to lie. I never said I wasn't good at it.

=====

Jim didn't sleep well, so instead of getting up when Ellie did he tried to grab some more sleep. Ten minutes later, he gave up and got up. Happy Thanksgiving, he muttered, as he showered and shaved.

He could hear the TV as he came out the bedroom door, but when he got to the living room, no one was there except Faith, Lily, and Jeff, watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

"Jeff, where is Ruel?" Jeff started a bit, then jerked his head toward the closed bedroom door.

"Sleeping in. He tossed and turned all night," he said, turning his eyes back toward the TV. So did I, Jim thought.

Instead of going into the kitchen where he could hear adult voices, he walked up the stairs to his daughters' rooms. He knocked on Grace's door.

"Come in," came a muffled voice. Grace and Annie were sitting on the bed, probably talking until he interrupted them.

"You're not watching the Parade?"

"I didn't feel like it this year. We're just hanging." Grace gave him a sad little smile. Damn! He nodded and smiled back and closed the door. He moved on to Sarah's and Amanda's room and knocked.

"Come in." When he opened the door, two pair of light blue eyes stared back at him.

"Mind if I come in?" They looked at each other and shook their heads. Like clones, he suddenly thought, and smiled a bit. Ruel got that in one. He entered, and Amanda moved over to Sarah's bed, leaving him alone and isolated on hers.

"I'm sorry it got so tense last night," he said, just to get the ball rolling. "We haven't had a chance to just sit and talk about this whole thing. Can we do that?" They both shrugged.

"Can you tell me why you want to send Ruel away?"

They looked at each other, and he wondered if he should have interviewed them alone.

"It's just ... creepy," Sarah said. Amanda nodded.

"Creepy?"

"Knowing Mom was with some ... guy before you," Amanda clarified.

"And had a kid!" Sarah added. Jim sat for a minute, mystified and sad.

"So you would throw a boy out of a good home and consign him to an unknown future, because you don't like the idea of Mom having had sex with somebody besides me?" He could see the eeeeeewwww coming before they opened their mouths.

"You aren't bothered by the fact that I had sex with your mother before marrying Ellie?" Another eeeeeewwww moment.

"Doesn't that strike you as hypocritical? And shouldn't you be mad at Mom, not Ruel? If anyone should leave, shouldn't it be Mom, for keeping it a secret? For lying? Why should he pay for something he had no control over?"

They were shocked at the idea of Ellie leaving. "But, Daddy, she's our mom!!" they both protested.

"No," he said quietly, "she isn't. She's your stepmother. She's Merri's and Beth's and Faith's and Hope's," he paused, "and Ruel's mother. Biologically, he has more claim on her than you do."

"But ... but she's MOM!" they both wailed at once, and flung themselves into his arms. "She's our mom. We hardly even remember our mother."

"You've had two wonderful mothers. Great women. Amazing women. And because you're jealous and creeped out, you want to deprive a boy who hasn't done anything except lose the only parent he's ever known and been sent here against his will, of the chance to have parents, a family, a home." He pulled away so he could look them in the eyes.

"Do I have that about right?" The wails got louder and the tears fell faster. He held them until they quieted, just as he had when they were little. Finally they pulled away.

"We're sorry, Daddy. Everything just got so weird. Ellie having a kid before all of us. A boy in the house. All the changes just got so scary!"

"How scary do you think it was for Ruel to be sent to live with a family he never met, with the woman who never wanted him?" He stood. "Maybe you should think of all that before you vote someone out of the family." He left them sitting and hopefully thinking.

At Merri's and Beth's door he stopped. Through the door he could hear them arguing.

"It's mean to send him away!" Beth said.

"But Mommy doesn't want him here!"

"But Daddy does!" Beth objected. He could hear her sniff quietly. "Don't you like him?"

"Of course I like him. But I don't want Mommy mad at me. Daddy will be sad, but he won't get mad," Merri said, sniffing a little herself.

Jim felt movement behind him and knew without turning it was Ellie.

"Interesting discussion, don't you think?" he said over his shoulder. "Merri voted with you because she thought you'd get mad if she didn't." He turned and looked at her stricken face. Pulling her into his arms, he rested his chin on her head.

"I love you so much, Ellie Weatherby, but you are dead wrong! You are as jealous of that boy as Sarah and Amanda, and you are angry at him because Hope is infatuated with him right now, and you were

embarrassed in front of Pete and Evie, and you are using that anger and embarrassment to frighten our daughters into sending away a boy they like. I love you with all my heart, but right now I don't like you very much. And if you send that boy away ..." he pulled back and looked at her long and hard.

"If you send that boy away because you are too much a coward to let him into our lives, because you are jealous that our daughters are starting to care for him, because you are afraid of the changes happening to the family since he got here, I don't know if I will ever respect you again. Or forgive you." He turned and walked away, down the stairs, and out the front door.

=====

The trucker dropped me off at Breakfasts 'n More in Billings. I hadn't much cared which way I went, so north had worked fine. I used a little more of my cash to buy the cheapest breakfast Breakfasts 'n More had. When the waitress brought my bill, I asked her about work. Being Thanksgiving Day but too early for the dinner crowd, the restaurant was almost empty so I figured she had time to talk.

"Know anybody who's hiring around here? I'm not afraid of hard work."

"What can you do?" she asked, refilling the coffee cup I held up.

"I'm a first rate mechanic. I can fix anything electrical. I've worked as a bouncer. I'll pretty much do anything from scrubbing toilets to roofing to detailing cars." I took a sip of the coffee and smiled, letting her know I liked it. She looked toward the kitchen, then back at me.

"Wait here," she said, disappearing through the kitchen doorway. I was almost finished with the coffee and had started digging bills out of my pocket to pay for the meal, when the cook came out.

"You know electrical?" he asked in a thick Mexican accent. I nodded and he motioned me to follow him. In the kitchen, he pointed to the commercial dishwasher.

"Broke this morning. No electrician until tomorrow. Be a busy day. You fix it, I pay \$200. Cheaper than a holiday electrician. You can't fix it, I hire you to wash dishes. Throw in dinner free. Breakfast, too. OK?"

"I'll need some tools. Screw drivers, wire clippers, stuff like that." He gestured toward a janitor's closet where I found a tool box. *happy thanksgiving to you, too, God.* I took the tool box back to the dishwasher and got to work.

=====

Jim was standing on the porch when Pete came out and handed him his coat. Jim nodded thanks and shrugged into it. Then Pete handed him a mug of coffee.

"Problems?" Pete asked, sipping from his own mug.

"Ellie's jealous of Hope's attachment for Ruel. She wants to dump him." Pete whistled.

"Kind of extreme, isn't it?"

"Ellie kinda sugar-coated what she told you and Evie. I think you figured that out from what we overheard Ruel telling Jeff last night. Ellie's parents convinced her to walk out on him. They left him in the hospital when he was five hours old. She wanted her old life back. Her parents told her he was adopted by a nice family and she chose to believe them."

"And suddenly he shows up here, and everything she chose to believe turns out to be a lie."

"Got it in one," Jim said. "I said the kids deserved a say. The vote split — four to four."

"You're missing one."

"Ellie says Hope doesn't get a vote because she's a baby."

"Isn't that kind of disingenuous since Hope's attachment is the reason for the dumping in the first place?" Jim just nodded and took a sip of coffee.

"When he first got here I told Ruel no matter how mad I got at Ellie, she was my wife, and I'd choose her and my family over him. That's when I figured no matter what was thrown at her, Ellie would keep a level head, she'd be fair. Now, I'm having to eat my words."

=====

By ten I had the dishwasher fixed, \$200 in my pocket, and the promise of a turkey dinner to come. Then the busboy called in sick, and Felipe, the cook, hired me to bus tables.

I washed up and changed into clean clothes in the men's bathroom, tied an apron around my waist, and went back to work. *and merry christmas, Lord.* At the rate God was dropping blessings in my lap, I figured I'd be past St. Patrick's Day and headed toward Easter before I got out of Billings. *praise the Lord and pass the washrag.*

=====

Jim and Pete were still standing on the porch when Ellie called them to dinner.

Inside, everyone was assembled in the dining room for the blessing, when Jim realized Ruel was missing. "Jeff, is Ruel still in the bedroom?" Jeff looked startled, then nodded his head.

"Please go get him," Ellie said. Jeff shook his head.

"I can't. He said he didn't want to come to dinner." Ellie's brows drew together, and she let go of Sarah's and Annie's hands, a determined set to her compressed lips.

Jeff spoke quickly, with an apologetic look at his mom, "He said 'I don't want any fuckin' family dinner. To hell with 'em.'"

Evie looked aghast at her son. "Jeffy!"

"It's Jeff. And I'm just telling you what he said. He seemed real mad about something last night, and he was still mad this morning."

Jim said, "Leave him alone, Ellie. I'll talk to him after dinner. Let's bless the food."

"Dear Lord, Thank you for all you have given us this past year. Forgive us when we forget just how fortunate we are to have home and family. Help us remember to extend that fortune to others. As Jesus told us, when we feed and shelter even the least of his children we are feeding and sheltering Him. Give us the wisdom and loving hearts to follow this command. In Jesus name, Amen."

When he looked up from saying the blessing, Sarah, Amanda, and Ellie were gone. Jim smiled, and

reached for the carving knife.

"Who wants light?"

=====

By two o'clock, I was thinking the bus boy had been smart. My feet hurt. My back hurt. I was so I hungry I was tempted to eat leftovers off the plates I was bussing. During a brief lull, about three, Felipe piled at plate high with turkey and all the fixings, and sat me at a back table.

"Next rush probably three thirty or so. Eat now!" He went back into the kitchen, and I ate everything on that plate, even the damn parsley.

=====

Sarah, Amanda, and Ellie rejoined the family just as some were considering seconds. They filled their plates, and the girls went into the kitchen while Ellie took the empty seat by Jim.

"Everything alright?" he asked around a mouthful of dressing. She nodded but said nothing.

Jim was visiting with Evie, seated on his right, wondering if he'd have room for pie, when Hope looked up from playing with her mashed potatoes, suddenly realizing someone was missing.

"Roo?" She stopped painting her high chair and looked at everyone. "No Roo?" She began squirming in her chair, so Jim got a wash cloth from the kitchen and washed her hands and face. Pulling her carefully from her high chair so her artistic endeavors didn't wind up on her dress, he set her on the floor, and she wandered into the living room.

He took the wash cloth and Hope's mucky bib into the kitchen and returned carrying a pumpkin pie and a cherry cobbler. He was dishing up a huge piece of each for Jeff, when he heard Hope in the kitchen.

"No Roo?" What the heck? he thought, and pushed open the kitchen door. Hope was walking around the kitchen table looking at all the girls.

"No Roo?" she asked again.

Jim scooped the little waif up and said, "Hope, Ruel is in his bedroom. You wanna go see him?" She shook her head.

"No Roo."

"Sure he is. Come on. Let's go see him." Lifting her high onto his shoulders, something that usually made her giggle, he ducked her under the lintel of the kitchen doorway into the living room and froze. Hope wasn't giggling, and Ruel's bedroom door was open.

Jim set Hope down and stepped through the doorway into an empty bedroom. The bed was made, Jeff's bedroll was folded neatly, and there was no sign of Ruel.

Hope grabbed his leg and said, "No Roo."

=====

29 — Nothing Bad Can Happen if You Haven't Done Anything Wrong

=====

"Jeff!" Jim's voice rang through the dining room. Jeff jumped and looked at his uncle, guilt written all over his face.

He swallowed hard. "Yes, Uncle Jim?"

"When did you last see Ruel?" Jeff opened his mouth, but Jim held up a finger. "The truth!"

"Last night." Evie and Peter looked at their son like they'd never seen him before.

"You lied?" Pete said. Jeff looked down and nodded. "Why? Why would you do that, Jeff?"

Jeff looked at his mom and dad, then at his aunt and uncle. "They were going to send him away anyhow. Why should they care?" he said angrily.

"We heard them talking, after they made you go upstairs. They were arguing and voting. Aunt Ellie said it was so Ruel could have a family that could help him, but that's a lie. Ruel said she was mad 'cause Hope likes him better than her. He said she could tell everyone he was dangerous and send him to juvie if she said it right. He said Uncle Jim told him he'd always choose his family over him. That nobody would care if he disappeared. And this family meant too much to Jim for Ruel to cause it to break up over him. So he left." Tears were running down Jeff's face as he finished. He dropped his head onto his arms and sobbed.

"It isn't fair. He didn't do anything and Aunt Ellie hates him and wants to throw him away. And Uncle Jim won't do anything because he loves Aunt Ellie more'n Ruel. And his dad is dead and he hasn't got anybody. It's not fair!"

The girls had come in from the kitchen and were gathered around the edges of the crowded silent room. In the silence, they could all hear Hope sobbing in the living room.

Jim left the dining room, anger raging in his heart, mostly at himself. He knelt by Hope sobbing softly on the couch. "Hope? Mini-me?" She looked up.

"Roo?"

"No, Baby, but I'm going to find him. I promise."

She patted Jim's cheek and smiled through her tears. "Po's?" He nodded. "'K."

Jim grabbed his coat and walked out the front door toward his official unit. He opened the driver's door just as Pete reached the passenger door. He nodded at Pete, and they got in and drove away from the silent house.

"Unit One to Base. Over."

"Base to Unit One. I thought you had today off, Sheriff. Over."

"I do, Darcy. We have a missing kid. I need an BOLO on Ruel Black. Age 14. 6' 2". 190 lbs. Black curly hair to mid-back. Bright-blue eyes. Black jeans, black t-shirt, dark gray Carhartt coat with hood. Identifying marks - tattoos - screaming eagle on back, shoulder to shoulder with flames wrapping around

neck; Celtic knot with words, left shoulder and bicep; American flag with ' In God We Trust', right bicep; Medieval dragon, left hip; Chinese dragon, right thigh. Require protective custody only.

"You get all that? Over." The radio was silent for a minute.

"You saying your kid is missing?"

"Get that out now, Darcy, and patch me through to the state police."

=====

By the time the next busboy came on at midnight, I'd been working for eighteen hours. I was dog-tired, but I had almost \$500 in my pocket, and I'd gotten three free meals and all the sodas and coffee I could drink. Stan, the cook who came on at four, dropped me off at the truck stop on I-90, and I stocked up on trail mix and bottled water.

I sat in the McDonalds for almost four hours, ordering French fries often enough so they didn't throw me out, hoping to catch a ride. Only three truckers stopped in, and all refused to give me a ride, so there I sat. I could have stood over by the pumps, but it was colder than a well diggers' ankles outside, and I wasn't interested in frostbite. Traffic would pick up in the morning. I could wait.

About four-thirty, a Montana State Trooper came in for coffee and to stretch his legs. Probably for some company, too, trying to stay awake. He was young and, judging by the shift he'd drawn, on Thanksgiving no less, I figured he was new to the job, low man on the totem pole.

He was visiting with the woman behind the counter, like he stopped in often and they were friends, but every so often he would glance at me, casually, like he was checking out the other customers. Probably a cop thing. I did the same thing when I was bouncing in bars. You got a feel for troublemakers. That also meant I knew how to stay under the radar, so I minded my attitude, not doing any of the twitchy stuff that attracted attention.

After thirty minutes or so the cop got back into his unit, but he didn't pull out. Instead he looked at a flyer clipped to his dash, looked at me, and made a call on his radio. *shit! they knew i was gone and the sheriff had issued a bolo. had to happen sooner or later. just wish it was later.*

Grabbing my sack of snacks, I thanked the woman behind the counter and headed outside. I decided to wander over toward the pumps. See if I could snag a ride before I froze solid.

"Hey, kid, hold up." *shit. the cop.* I kept walking. "Kid, I said stop." He sounded antsy. Not good with newbie cops. I stopped and turned partially toward him.

"Sorry. You talking to me?" He walked toward me, his hand hovering near his service revolver.

"You got any ID?"

I shook my head. "Lost my wallet. I been trying to get home. Don't suppose you could give me a ride?"

"What's your name?"

"Jim. Jim Harper."

He pulled a folded flyer out of his coat pocket, opened it, and held it out so he could compare whatever was on it to me. *shit!* He shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. I think your name is Ru-el Black, and you're wanted over in Wyoming." *what?* He drew his gun and aimed it at my chest.

"Drop the bag. Hands on your head. Feet spread. NOW!" He keyed his mike with the hand not holding the 9 mm and spoke into it. "Jensen to dispatch. I got that BOLO out of Wyoming. I'm at the McDonalds at the Pilot Center on I-95. Send back-up. Over."

As he talked on his mike, I dropped my bag and followed his instruction. At least I wasn't covered in shit.

"Listen, Trooper Jensen, I'm not wanted for anything. I'm just running from a foster home, trying to get back to my mom. She's outta rehab but they won't let me see her. Come on, give a guy a break, will ya?" As I tried to lie myself into the Trooper's good graces, three more cars pulled up, complete with lights and sirens. *what the hell? all this for a runaway? unless jim told them something else.*

Two more Staties and two city patrolmen piled out of the cars and drew their weapons. *what the hell is going on?* Trooper Jensen holstered his weapon, while the others kept me covered. They did it buy the book. Jensen never stepped into their field of fire, and they were spread so they wouldn't shoot each other. Just me.

Jensen pulled his cuffs out, "Place your left hand behind your back." I did and he snapped on the cuff. "Now your right hand." I did. Snap! The other officers holstered their weapons. Jensen took hold of my right arm above the elbow and walked me over to his car. Opening the back door, he placed one hand on my head and gently pushed me down into the back seat.

"Trooper Jensen, what did I do?"

One of the other officers opened the other door and placed his hand on the butt of his gun, letting me know he was prepared to use it if I gave Jensen any trouble. Jensen leaned me forward and attached my cuffs to a metal ring in a hole in the seatback. Then he leaned me back and attached the leg manacles, which were secured to a ring in the floor of the car, to my ankles.

The troopers shut both of the back doors, then gave each other high fives and big grins. They'd captured a dangerous criminal. Me.

30 — 'Love Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry' is a Crock

Jensen transported me to the State Police District 4 Headquarters, where getting me out of the car was the exact reverse of getting me in. Jensen walked me into the building, while two other troopers kept their hands on their holstered weapons and their eyes on me.

"Someone want to tell me what I'm being arrested for?"

Inside I was finger printed, strip-searched — my wad of hard-earned cash generated a lot of excitement — cavity-searched, given a threadbare too-small gray jumpsuit, and put into a holding cell. As the guard locked the cell door, I turned and asked again.

"Why am I being arrested? What did I do? Shouldn't you have a Children's Services Representative here? Is it legal to lock a minor in an adult jail?" None of my questions got answered.

The guard just grinned and shook his head. "Nice try," he said as he walked away. *nice try? what the hell is going on?*

I sat down on the hard bench-like bed to think and actually fell asleep. I guess being up over twenty-four hours will do that. A loud clanging noise jerked me awake, and I felt like I hadn't slept at all.

A different guard unlocked my door and motioned me out. Once in the hall, one guard stood with his hand on his gun while the other handcuffed me, put leg irons on, then attached them both to a waist chain. The restraints were so over-the-top I was getting scared. *what the hell do they think i did?*

The two guards walked me slowly down the gray hallway, slow being the only way you can walk with leg irons, then turned me into an interrogation room. Once inside they seated me in a chair bolted to the floor, unfastened the waist chain and attached my handcuffs to a rod bolted to the table in front of me, which was also bolted to the floor, and attached my leg irons to a rod bolted to the front legs of the chair. Double checking to make sure the restraints were secure, they left.

I sat long enough my butt went to sleep, and I had to pee. When the door opened I was praying it would be Jim, but it was some woman in a bad suit and a worse haircut.

"Are you from Children's Services?" I asked. The haircut and clothes told me this person had to be some kind of civil servant.

She snorted, and fished a cigarette out of her pocket. Flicking a lighter, she lit up, ignoring the 'No Smoking' signs on all four walls. Blowing a lungful of smoke at me, she narrowed her eyes, and shook her head.

"People like you make me sick. You want to explain this?" She threw my almost-\$500 on the table.

"That's mine. I worked hard for that. Why the hell am I sitting here in shackles? I thought it was illegal to put a minor in an adult facility?"

She ground her cigarette out on the table, and lit another one. "Save your breath, Mr. Black. You're no more a minor than I am, and belonging to The Flaming Eagles is enough reason for me to arrest you, let

alone escaping from custody in Wyoming." *ok, ruel, wake up. this is a shitty dream. just wake up.*

"What the hell is in those cigarettes, lady? I'm fourteen, and I'm a runaway. I didn't escape from custody, and I'm not a member of anything called The Flaming Eagles, whatever the hell they are."

She rose and stalked around the table until she was standing behind me. Grabbing the neck of my jumpsuit she yanked hard. The cheap fabric ripped, leaving my torso bare.

Thumping a finger against my back, she said, "And what do you call this, Sonny?"

"Uhm, a tattoo. You know, one of those drawings you get by sticking an inked needle into your skin over and over. I'm sure you've heard of them." Suddenly a sharp pain in my back made me jump. *that bitch put her cigarette out on my eagle!* Reacting instinctively, I jerked my head back and felt a satisfying crunch as my skull met her nose.

She shrieked and pulled away from me. Almost immediately the door flung open and two guards rushed in. One of them moved the bleeding woman into the corner of the room, and the other swung around behind me and forced my head to the table with his baton. He held me there until the first guard had removed the woman. Two more guards came in to help him unfasten me from the table, reattach all my restraints, and move me back down the hall to my holding cell.

"That bitch burned me with her cigarette!" I yelled, but they weren't interested in anything but getting me locked up again. They removed my restraints and thrust me into my holding cell and slammed the door.

As they locked the door, I yelled again, "That crazy bitch burned my back. Look!" I turned my back to them, and one of them looked.

"I don't see anything, Asshole. That little assault is just gonna add to your sentence."

"What sentence?" I yelled as they left. *shit! what the hell is going on? God, what is happening?*

I ran my hands through my hair, trying unsuccessfully to shove down the panic building inside my chest. I wanted to run, burn off the nervous tension building in my muscles and my mind, but I was in a 10x10 cell. Finally I dropped to the floor and began doing push-ups. I did them until my arms shook, then I flipped over, ignoring the pain in my upper back where she had burned me, and did crunches until my stomach hurt. Then I flipped and started over. Eventually, I was too exhausted to move. I fell asleep on the dirty concrete floor in the middle of a push-up.

Someone cuffing my hands behind me woke me up, bringing my panic and fear back in full force. My arms and stomach were sore from too many too-frantic reps, and my back was sore from the burn. The guard pulled me to my feet, and moved me out into the hallway.

"No leg irons? No waist chain? Did I suddenly get less dangerous?" My fear was running my mouth, but he didn't answer me. I was beginning to wonder if I was speaking English.

"If you put me back in with that psycho bitch who burned me I'll bust her nose again!" No response. *maybe i'm dreaming, and i only think i'm talking.*

Instead of putting me into an interrogation room, the guard, singular I noted, took me to a restroom. He removed my handcuffs, opened the door, and motioned me in. Inside all my stuff was lying on the counter by the sink, including my wad of bills.

I washed my face, then took off the torn jumpsuit and dressed. Before putting my shirt on, I twisted around, trying to see where the bitch had burned me. I thought I could see a round mark in the middle of the eagle's eye, but I couldn't be sure. I pulled my shirt on carefully. I finished dressing, stuck my money in my pocket, and picked up my backpack and coat. Adrenalin was still coursing through my veins and dumping lactic acid into my muscles, heightening my fear, but I was trying to breathe through it, trying to calm myself down.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, the guard motioned me down a nicer hallway than any I'd seen before. The guard pointed at the open office door at the end of the hallway, waited until I was almost inside the office, and left.

Jim was standing in front of a desk, talking to a man seated behind it. He turned when he heard me. His face was haggard, his eyes red-rimmed like he hadn't slept all night either.

"Thank God! Are you alright?" I didn't answer. I just moved forward into his arms. He wrapped me in a huge hug, and I let him. We stood that way for a few minutes, neither of us saying anything. Finally, he pulled back and looked at me.

"Are you OK?"

"Some psycho bitch burnt me with a cigarette while I was shackled to a table." Thunderclouds entered his light blue eyes, and he turned to the man behind the desk.

"Barney?"

"Detective Varness said the ash dropped accidentally then your boy attacked her."

"Let's see the video." Jim said flatly.

"Look, Jim ..."

Jim cut him off.

"Don't! First you arrest a minor at gunpoint and incarcerate him in an adult facility without notifying Children's Services or his guardians. Then you let that psycho-bitch Varness interrogate him without reading him his rights or letting him contact a lawyer OR his guardians. Now you are trying to cover up your incompetence? Let me see the DAMN VIDEO!" Jim ended in a roar.

The man looked at him for a few heartbeats, then shook his head and made a phone call. He turned the computer monitor around so we could see it, punched a few keys, and hit enter. The monitor came to life, he hit another key, and the interrogation room blossomed on the screen.

We could see me brought into the room, trussed up like a mass murderer.

"Pause!" Jim commanded. "Why was he in leg irons and a waist chain?"

"Jim, I explained what happened to the fax. It was garbled so badly all we could read clearly was his description, screaming eagle, and custody. It looked like he was 24, a member of The Flaming Eagles, and he had escaped custody. You know what kind of gang TFE is, and we are looking for one similar to the kid for questioning in a rape and murder. My men were told to take no chances. When he was stripped," Jim's eyes flashed, "and we found the tattoo and the money roll, what were we supposed to think? He gave a false ID. He tried to avoid the trooper. What would you do?"

"I'd buy a damn fax that works and confirm any report where I couldn't read one word in ten! Start the damn video!" The video continued. Jim watched them lock me down, his face grim. Then nothing happened for a really long time.

"Pause! How long did you leave him in there?"

The man sighed. "Forty minutes." If looks could kill the lasers from Jim's eyes would have sliced and diced that guy.

"Start and fast forward past the dead time. And when you give me my copy of this video, all forty minutes had better be in there." The video buzzed forward then slowed a few frames before the bitch walked into the room. We listened to our conversation, but when she walked behind me and ripped my jumpsuit, I thought Jim would put a fist through the monitor.

"There!" I said, pointing at the monitor as the bitch lowered the hand holding the cigarette down behind my back. My jump and reaction were immediate. Jim stayed silent as the guards restrained me and hustled me out of the room.

"Back it up!" The video reversed to just before her burning me. Jim turned the monitor back toward the man behind the desk. "Run it."

The man looked at his hands, then shook his head. "Jim, you know Varness' history, why she is death on drug dealers. She's my best narc. If you make this public ..."

"She tortured a kid, Barney! MY kid! This stops here! Suspend her as of today, or I will take this to the press and the Governor. You can't cover for her anymore. She's out of control!" Jim stood. "I want a hardcopy of that video complete with the forty minutes you made Ruel sit shackled to a table."

He turned to me. "Shirt off!" he commanded. I gingerly removed my t-shirt, and he looked carefully at my back. "Even without the video, Barney, you can see this isn't dropped ash. We've both seen this on abused kids." He pulled a camera out of his pocket and took several shots of the burn.

"Put your shirt back on, Boy." He looked at the man sitting quiet behind the desk. "Today, Barney. I'll pick up my video on the way out." He turned to go then turned back. "I also expect a formal apology to Ruel, on the official letterhead, from the department and Detective Varness. And a copy of her disciplinary report and suspension from active duty pending psychological evaluation."

"You can't demand all that!" the man exploded. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I am the guardian of the minor one of your detectives tortured after your office screwed up and arrested and incarcerated him." He waved the camera at the man. "With evidence. You have until Tuesday. And e-mail it or send it by courier. You fax is shit!"

"Come on, Boy. Let's go home. I have a promise to keep, and so do you."

At the front desk a video cassette was waiting for us. "Tell Barney, if this isn't what I told him I wanted, what happened today will be mild annoyance compared to the hell I will visit on him!" Jim took the cassette, and we pushed through the front doors out into a late November twilight.

Mr. Reeves stood by the Wolverin County Sheriff Unit, smiling. "How are you doing? Sounds like you had quite a couple of nights." I nodded.

"Don't blame Jeff. He was just being a friend. If you have to blame anyone, blame me." Mr. Reeves stopped me with a raised hand.

"I don't blame Jeff for being a good friend. However, we are due a discussion on the definition of dangerous." He smiled to show it wouldn't be too bad a discussion.

"Sounds like a discussion I need to have with someone." Jim said.

"Jim, we need to talk." I looked at Mr. Reeves, and he walked off toward the State Police building.

"Ruel, Jeff told us why you left. You are not responsible for what ..."

"YES! I am! You wouldn't be fighting and ... voting and ... splitting and ... " I drew a deep breath. *shit!*

"If I had never come, your family wouldn't have anything to fight over. Mrs. Weatherby wouldn't be upset about Hope, the clone twins wouldn't feel like they are being replaced by a bastard. Hope wouldn't be swearing like a roustabout." I looked at Jim, feeling despair at what I had to do.

"You don't need to vote. I vote myself out. Have Mrs. Weatherby sign the papers. Send me into the system. I won't run again. Get rid of me before I destroy your family. I don't belong in a decent family. The clones were right, I'll never fit in." I stopped. I'd said what needed to be said.

31 — It Might be No Ordinary Family, But I Guess I'm Stuck with It

=====
"Are you finished?" Jim asked.

"Yeah. Let's get back so ..." Ruel started but Jim interrupted him.

"Shut up! I listened to you. Now you get to listen to me. You were doing fine up until that stupid shit about voting yourself out of the family. You don't get to vote yourself out. Family is stuck with each other. It's not a collection of acquaintances. It's not a group that gets together because they like each other. It's people related by blood or the law. Ellie is your mother. Whether she likes it or you like it doesn't matter. Even if she signs the stupid papers, she is still your mother by blood. It doesn't matter if you never call her mother or mom or ma. Blood is blood. And I'm related to her by law, so you are related to me by law. As long as she and I are married, which will be 'til death do us part, you and I are related, so deal with it. The girls are going to learn to deal with it, too, because the same applies to them. They don't get to choose."

"Did you say all this to them?" Ruel asked when Jim paused to breathe.

"No. I'm practicing on you. Pete and I talked on the three hour trip here. He pointed a few things out to me that I, in my infinite stupidity, failed to realize on my own."

"Like what?"

"We've been so busy tiptoeing around each other, afraid to say or do the wrong thing, we forgot what family is. Family isn't some perfect mix of perfect people who never have problems or disagreements. Families are confusing and mixed up and messy because people are confusing and mixed up and messy. When a problem comes up a family doesn't throw the person causing the problem out of the family, they solve the problem or work around it.

"Do you think we are going to throw Hope out because she swears or doesn't talk?"

He shook his head. "Of course not!"

"Do you think we're going to throw Faith out because she is a bossy little baggage?" He shook his head again and smiled a little.

"How about Ellie? Should I throw her out because she lied to me for ten years, keeping you a secret?" He hesitated then shook his head.

"I might be royally pissed at her right now. Hell, I don't even like her right now, but I'm not going to throw away a perfectly good wife and mother, someone I love most of the time, because she screwed up."

"So why should we throw out a boy who came to us against his will but out of necessity, a perfectly good brother and maybe, God willing, someday a perfectly good son, just because his coming stirred things up a bit?"

The boy's face tightened up, and his eyes shifted away from Jim's.

"Just because this boy doesn't fit the image my wife had in her head of what a son should be like, doesn't mean we toss him back. It means my pig-headed wife has to adjust that image to fit what God gave her. Just like she adjusted the image when she became the instant mother to three little girls, and when she

found out she was going to have twins, and to fit around a bossy little martinet, and to fit a baby who is talking on her own timetable.

"Just like I had to adjust my image of family that included Darlene and our three girls. I didn't throw the girls back because we no longer fit into the family image I held in my head. I changed the image to fit the situation. It's what family does. It adapts."

"Like Joe adapted when he suddenly became responsible for me?" Ruel asked quietly.

Jim nodded. "He could have dumped you on the first church steps he came to and just kept going. But he didn't. I'm pretty sure the image in his head that said family didn't have him being a single father at seventeen. But he took that changed image of family and, in his own unique way, he made it work. You told Jeff you figured out your childhood was weird, but it made you who you are, and you like who you are. Joe did that, Ruel, when he chose you over the image of family in his head." He thumped the boy lightly on his forehead.

It was full dark now, and the ever-present high plains wind was whipping around them, but Jim didn't really feel it. His brain and heart were too full.

"Just like I have to adjust my image of family to fit a sheriff, a bossy controlling woman, and seven sometimes pain-in-the-ass girls?" Ruel asked. "Do I have to adjust it to exclude Joe? Because I don't think I can do that."

Jim shook his head. "My image of family still includes Darlene and my folks. They had a part in who I am, who my girls are. They are gone, but they are still family."

The boy nodded once and shivered just a little. Jim was suddenly aware of the cold and wind and Pete standing patiently a few yards away.

"Maybe we should get back. So you can tell everyone else before you forget all that shit you just said to me," Ruel said with a small smile.

Jim smiled a little, too, and started toward the truck.

=====

Being the low man on the totem pole I got the backseat. And having slept badly or very little since Tuesday night, I fell asleep and slept all the way home.

It was late when we got home, but everyone except the three little ones was up. I barely made it through the front door when I was engulfed in hugs. Beth got to me first, throwing her arms around my waist and squeezing as tight as her eight-year-old brownie arms could squeeze. Then Merri and Grace, followed by Sarah and Amanda. Jeff even squeezed into the crowd of noisy girls and grabbed my hand.

Mrs. Weatherby did not join the hug-fest. She stood back, watching, a strange look on her face. Everyone trying to squish me in half or strangle me suddenly seemed to feel the tension and faded away to the sides, leaving a clear path between her and me.

Before she could say anything, I jumped in. No matter what Jim had said about family, I had to offer.

"Mrs. Weatherby, if you want me to go, I will. Sign the papers giving up your parental rights. I won't fight it, and I won't run again. I'm not going to be responsible for whatever problems this family has. Not

anymore." I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wad of cash.

"I earned this yesterday. It was my running money. I'm not running anymore." I moved forward and placed the roll in her hands.

"This will bring my clothes debt down to about \$400. I will pay that back, but it might take some time, depending on where they send me."

I turned toward Jeff and handed him back his small wad of bills. "Thanks for the loan."

Mrs. Weatherby's face was a pale mask, giving nothing away. She held the money loosely, like she was afraid it would bite her.

"Jim said a lot of good stuff about family, after he got me out of jail. How we don't have any choice about who we're related to. And he's right. But we do have a choice about who we live with. I figure you all have a right to choose who you let into your home. You let me in for a while, and it sure as hell gave me a whole new perspective of family." I shrugged my backpack off my shoulders.

"My coming here wasn't welcome, but I didn't expect it to be. I figured I'd keep my head down, put in my time, and split when I turned eighteen. I didn't understand that only works when you got no one but you. It doesn't work in a home, not a real home, because everybody is so mixed up in each others' lives. Jim said families are messy and imperfect because people are, so I guess the problems weren't all my fault.

"If it's OK with you, I'd like to take as many of my new clothes with me as possible. I figure they won't fit anyone else, so I might as well use them." I was running out of energy, **RUNNING ON FUMES** as Joe used to say. I walked past Mrs. Weatherby and all the Reeves to my bedroom. I dropped the backpack by the door and moved to the stairs.

"I'm going to keep my promise to Hope. While I'm up there I'd appreciate it if you all decided if I'm staying or not. Knowing one way or the other will make sleeping easier tonight." I climbed the stairs, walked down the hall, and opened the door to the mini-mes' bedroom. The thought that it might be the last time made my stomach hurt. Or maybe that was my heart.

Hope and Faith were sound asleep, little arms and legs sprawled out like they had no bones. Mostly cartilage, Jim had said. I knelt by Hope's bed and gently kissed her soft baby cheek. *damnit, joe, i didn't want to care about these people, to become part of these lives. but i did and now it just hurts so fuckin' much.* I kissed her again and stood to go.

"Roo?" I knelt again.

"Hey, Mini-me. Told you I'd come."

"Po's?"

"Yep. Promised. Hey, who knew two weeks ago I'd be speaking Mini-me." I brushed a curl off her cheek.

"Uv Roo." She patted my cheeks and went back to sleep. *well, shit.*

When I got downstairs, there wasn't a single Reeves to be seen, but there were seven Weatherbys scattered around the living room. Jim pointed to one of the easy chairs.

"Sit. Family conference."

"Then I shouldn't be here. Not my family." He pointed again, and I sat.

"That's what the conference is about," Grace said.

"Whether you want to be part of our family," Beth said.

"Although ... after the way we treated you ... we'd understand ... if you said no," the clone twins said, completing each others' thoughts. *creepy*.

"But we want you to stay," Merri said.

"If you'll have us," Jim said.

"Did you guys rehearse this?" I asked, trying for levity and failing.

"I don't think this is something you can vote on, like electing a new sheriff." I looked at Mrs. Weatherby who sat looking at me with that same strange look on her face. She hadn't spoken to me since I came back.

"I think it has to be unanimous or there is a lot of resentment. I meant what I said. I'm not going to be responsible for any problems this family has."

"So your answer is no. You don't want to stay." Mrs. Weatherby spoke for the first time.

"I didn't say that!" I objected.

"Yes, you did. Because being part of a family means sometimes causing the problems and always being affected by the problems." She was still pale, but she seemed relaxed. I didn't think I'd ever seen her relaxed.

"I panicked when I saw you, Ruel, and my response was to control the situation. To squash you into the family, make you fit. And when you refused to fit, when the family started changing around you, I panicked again and wanted you gone. I blamed all the changes on you, just like I blamed you for all the changes in my life when I was pregnant with you. I was wrong both times. When I was fifteen, I think I had an excuse. I was young and stupid. This time I have no excuse. I was just stupid.

"I forgot families are always changing. Every single day something changes, some problem comes up. Someone in the family causes a problem, and everyone in the family is affected by the problem in some way. That's part of being in a family." She smiled a little.

"So if you don't want to be responsible for any problems in this family, and you don't want to be part of any problems in this family, you can't be in the family. It goes with the territory."

I looked around the room. Everyone was nodding. Apparently this is common knowledge in families, but what the hell did I know about families.

"What changed while I was gone?" I wasn't buying the sudden attitude shift.

"I reminded Ellie and the girls what it was like when Jim and Ellie first married." Mrs. Reeves was standing at the bottom of the stairs. "They make it sound all hearts and flowers now, but it was a huge upheaval. The girls were resentful because Ellie was taking their mother's place. Ellie was resentful they didn't listen to her. It took about two years for everything to smooth out."

Mrs. Weatherby smiled. "We all have selective memory except Evie. She has total recall, and reminded us in excruciating detail of some of the more memorable problems we had during those first two years." Sarah and Amanda were smiling, too, although they were a little pink, maybe embarrassed to be reminded they hadn't been little angels.

"I told them it had taken them two years, and here they were ready to throw in the towel after two weeks." Mrs. Reeves started climbing the stairs, "Sorry for eavesdropping, but it's my family, too," and disappeared into the upstairs hall.

"She called us lily-livered cowards and a disgrace to the name of Weatherby," Amanda said.

"She said our Grandpa Joe," my head shot up at that, "would be ashamed of every one of us," Sarah said.

"And Grandma Mary would turn us over her knee for acting so unChristian," Grace said.

"Wait a minute." I looked at Jim. "Your grandfather's name was Joe? And your grandmother — your grandparents were Mary and Joseph?"

"Mary Evangeline and James Joseph. Not quite as weird as you're making it sound. But, yeah, he went by Joe."

"So will you stay?" Beth asked so softly I almost couldn't hear her. "Please."

Every eye, blue and brown, was on me. "What about all that anger and venom and shit the clones were dishing? Is that all over? And do we all have to be lovey dovey good friends, let's all just get along?"

"Oh, hell, no!" Jim said. "Evie and I fought like cats and dogs until I left for college. But when I came home the first time I discovered my annoying little sister had suddenly gotten civilized and tolerable."

"I heard that!" floated down the stairs.

"Stop eavesdropping if you don't want to hear the truth about how annoying you were!" Jim hollered back up the stairs. He grinned at the look on my face.

"Brothers and sisters fight and annoy each other. They call each other names, although we will have rules about how nasty those names can get, just as we'll have rules about what words can be used when fighting with each other."

can i do it? can i live here and stay me? will this life smother me? DO THE JOB IN FRONT OF YOU, TAKING IT ONE DAY AT A TIME. Joe and Jim told me. I smiled.

"Will you stay?" Jim asked.

"Can we take it one day at a time?" I asked.

"Only way to live," Jim said, smiling back.

"And I stay me!" I looked at Mrs. Weatherby. "No more pushing and pulling to fit me into some damn mold!"

"I'll try my damndest, but you might have to cut me some fucking slack once in a while." She smiled at the gasps from the girls. I gave her a thumbs up.

"I'll stay."

32 — Sweet Home Wyoming

By the time the Reeves left Sunday afternoon, Jeff and I were pretty good friends, Annie and Grace apologized for the vamp act, and the burn on my back was healing. Mrs. Weatherby had been furious about the abuse and was ready to drive to Billings and rip Detective Varness a new one. It was kind of nice having her defend me instead of trying to twist me into her version of a teen-age boy.

After Sunday dinner, I approached Jim as he sat reading the paper.

"Something on your mind, Boy?" he asked, laying the paper in his lap.

"Coach Runsford wants me to try out for wrestling. At first I told him I would just to shut up the sales pitch. Now, I don't know." I sat on the couch across from his chair.

"You don't want to try out or it sounds kinda fun, but you aren't sure you want to go that mainstream? Like it would be giving away part of you."

"Damn. You're pretty good at this father shit!"

"Practice. Although this is the first time anyone has asked me about wrestling. Usually the questions are more — girlie." He smiled like maybe he liked giving out some guy advice for a change.

"At first I thought it was kinda dumb. Then I realized I'm not doing as much physical stuff as I'm used to. I don't want to get fat or lazy. I mean I can workout on my own, but I'd have to get the equipment or find a gym or something. They already have the equipment at school, and maybe it would be better, easier, working out with a group. But all that school spirit shit at homecoming about made me hurl. I don't think I can do all that rah rah crap!"

Jim thought for a bit then asked, "Is it more important to you to work out and stay in shape or avoid the rah rah crap?" I hadn't thought about it that way.

"Like a cost benefit ratio?" I asked. His eyebrows went up a bit, but he nodded. *is the cost — the annoyance — worth the benefit — working out?*

I smiled. "Thanks, Jim. I hadn't looked at it like that. I guess I have to think about it."

I got my coat from my room and headed to the front door, pulling on my watch cap and gloves as I went. The snowing had stopped, but now it was clear and the temperature was dropping fast.

"Where you going?" Grace asked from the rug in front of the fireplace where she had been doing her homework.

"The barn."

"Can I come? I've been inside all day and I'm getting droopy. Some fresh air might wake me up enough to get through history." I nodded and waited while she grabbed her coat and gloves.

Outside it was getting cold enough to freeze the hairs in your nose. We didn't talk on the walk to the barn,

which was fine by me. After a houseful of fifteen people all weekend, I was about talked out.

Inside the barn I dug through piles of scrap limber Charlie kept from repair and build projects. He had several stacks, and I was on the third stack before I found what I wanted. I took it to the workshop and measured and marked the different pieces and put them to one side. Then I dug through the bins and drawers of hardware, and the shelves of stains and paints, finding some other stuff I needed and making notes on a slip of paper about what was missing. The whole time Grace sat in Charlie's battered old easy chair watching. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore.

"What are you doing?" I started when she spoke. I'd been concentrating so hard on what I was doing, and she'd been so quiet, I'd forgotten she was there.

"A project for my bedroom." I kept digging and writing.

"What project?" I glanced at her, trying to decide if she was interested or would make fun of it.

"A desk. For doing homework."

"Why not just do it in the living room, or at the dining room table?" *truth or lies?*

"You and the clone twins are always chattering in the living room. I can't concentrate. And the brownies ask me questions all the time if I sit in the dining room."

"It's called socializing, Ruel. It's what families do."

"It's called distracting, Blondie. I prefer the quiet." I was looking through the last drawer, which was good. My hands were going numb.

"Is that a Ruel thing or a guy thing?" The question surprised me, and I stopped rummaging.

"Since I've never been around other guys my own age before, I guess it's a Ruel thing. Although Joe and his friends didn't like a lot of chattering and useless talk. So maybe it's a guy thing." I shrugged and went back to digging.

"What good is it going to be having a 'brother' if he can't give us the inside scoop on how guys think?" I stared at her, then laughed.

"If you're expecting me to tell you how teen-age boys think, you're in for a big disappointment. You want to know how pimps and roustabouts and bartenders and bouncers think, I'm your man." She blanched a bit at my rundown. I felt a little bad, but the Weatherby girls were going to have to accept who I was, same as their mom.

I finished my rummaging and list making and looked around the barn one last time to make sure I hadn't left a mess for Charlie. I was going to need his help with this project.

"You know, after a lifetime with sisters, it's kinda weird all of a sudden having a 'brother'. It's going to take some getting used to." I laughed again.

"Try a lifetime just you and your dad then suddenly having two 'parents' and seven sisters. I'll see your weird and raise you a mind blowing." She laughed at that, and I watched her blue eyes crinkle at the corners. *wow!*

We shut the barn door and slipped and slid our way back to the house. The temp had dropped enough to turn the packed snow into a skating rink. Grace almost fell once, and I grabbed her hand to keep her upright. We hadn't walked two steps, and she slipped again, grabbing my hand again and almost taking me down with her.

"What the hell kind of boots do you have on?" She held out one small foot, clad in a brown leather-soled knee-high leather boot. I'm sure it was very 'in', but it was shit for traction, and we had thirty or forty feet to go to the porch.

"You'll be lucky if you don't break your neck before we get to the house. Why the hell don't you have some decent boots?" She jerked her hand from mine, leaving her bright blue glove behind.

Snatching the glove, she put it back on and glared at me. "These boots are fine. They are waterproofed and really warm!"

"And slicker than snot on the bottom. Ice like this you need Vibram soles, not leather."

"But these are beautiful boots. They're just like the boots Julie Forster wears."

"Who?" She gave me an eye roll.

"Julie Forster? She's only a five-time Academy Award nominated actress!"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Never heard of her."

"These boots are very stylish and cost me six months' allowance!"

"I'm sure you'll look very stylish with a broken arm or busted ass!"

We took a few more steps, and she slipped again, grabbed my hand, and landed both of us hard on our asses. I stood up and pulled her to her feet.

"That's it! I'm carrying you if only to save my own ass." I reached for her, and she backed up shaking her head, slipped, and almost fell. I grabbed her around the waist, swinging her clear off her feet to keep her from falling, then slung her over my shoulder and started toward the house.

She began shrieking, but I kept walking. "This was your choice, Blondie. I would have carried you like a gentleman, but you fought me, so you get the sack of potatoes carry. And stop wiggling, or we'll both go down."

Her shrieking brought Jim and the clone twins to the porch. By the time I thumped her stylishly-clad feet onto the porch, she was furious, and they were laughing their asses off. She turned on me swinging, but I caught her hands and held them fast. Then she tried kicking me, but my legs and arms are too long, and she just got air. She shrieked again and angry tears spilled down her cheeks. *shit!*

I felt bad and let go of her hands. Big mistake! As soon as she was free, she swung with all her might and hit my left cheek with a resounding open-handed slap. It cracked like ice during break-up in Alaska, and snapped my head hard to the right, taking my unprepared body around and down off the porch flat on my face on the frozen snow.

well, at least this time the landing comes pre-iced!

Jim was beside me in an instant, putting one hand under an elbow to help me up. I shook him off and rolled over.

"I think I'll just stay here. The sky is beautiful from this view. Are those clouds above the mountains?" I looked at Jim who was trying hard to not laugh. "Do you think your wife would serve me supper out here?"

"Idiot!" He grabbed me under the shoulders and lifted, then his feet went out from under him and he lit on his butt beside me. The clone twins and Grace stood on the porch, hands over their mouths, light blue eyes wide.

Jim and I got to our knees, and I looked at him and said, "At least it isn't shit!" By the time we stopped laughing and got back to our hands and knees, Mrs. Weatherby had come out onto the porch.

"Are you two alright? The girls came in and said you were hysterical." Jim and I stopped trying to stand long enough to overcome the giggles, then carefully got to our feet, making sure we weren't close enough to each other to bring the other down if we fell again.

"We're fine, Ellie, but I need to talk to Miss Grace about appropriate reactions to adverse circumstances."

"What?" she asked, looking totally confused.

"Jim, don't. It was as much my fault as hers."

"Yes, it was, and you and I will have a discussion about manhandling the girls, even when they deserve it. However, you didn't hit, she did. Hitting trumps carrying."

Stepping carefully, we made our way to the porch without embarrassing ourselves again. Jim hung his coat on the rack by the door and went in search of Grace who was, unsurprisingly, not sitting by the fire studying history.

I hung my coat in the closet in my bedroom, then took my wet pants and boxer briefs off to check my butt. I'd lit on it hard enough it was probably bruised. While I was turning around like a dog getting ready for a nap, trying to see my butt, the bedroom door opened, Grace rushed in, and closed the door behind her. She stood with her ear to the door, obviously listening for pursuit.

"Ruel, you have to tell Daddy it's OK. It isn't like I slugged you. I only slapped you becau..." she turned to tell me why she slapped me and realized I was standing there without pants and underwear. Once again, we stood and stared at each other, but this time her eyes dropped quickly to my groin, which immediately reacted to the presence of a pretty girl.

33 — Is a Stepbrother His Stepsister's Keeper

That kicked my brain out of neutral, and I turned my back to her and scrambled for a dry pair of briefs.

"Don't you EVER knock?" I hissed as I pulled my boxer briefs on and reached for some jeans. I had one leg on when there was a knock at the door. We both froze, me with my pants half on, and Grace with her hand over her mouth.

"Ruel, have you seen Grace?" Jim called. She recovered first and darted to my closet, pulled it open, and stepped inside, pulling it closed behind her. *shit!*

"Ruel?"

"Just a minute," I called, hopping around trying to get my pants on. I finally got them pulled up and answered the door while I was zipping them up. I stood just inside the room, holding the door, trying to look casual and praying Jim wouldn't notice the bulge.

"Why did you think I'd know where Grace was? I'm probably the last person she would want to see right now," I said, touching my left cheek, which was still warm from her slap. "Jim, really, can't we just let it go? I'm not hurt, and I'll bet she feels bad enough about it without the lecture." He shook his head.

"No! I taught the girls to defend themselves. Using that skill in anger is a big no-no!" He started toward the stairs, then turned back. "Ellie is ready to put Hope to bed."

I nodded. "I'll go right up, but I want to put some socks on first." When I shut the door, Grace opened the closet door a fraction and peeked out. I pulled a pair of socks on and started to open the bedroom door.

"Where are you going?" Grace asked in a panic.

"I'm going to tuck Mini-me in. You need to get out of here! Your dad catches you hiding in here and I'm toast!" I went out, shutting the door. The clone twins were in the living room doing homework. *damn! i hope grace looks before she comes out.*

After tucking Mini-me in and getting three face pats and a "Uv my Roo" I went downstairs, hoping and praying the twins were out of the living room and Grace was out of my bedroom. The twins were gone, but Jim was looking through the DVDs.

"Find Grace yet?"

He shook his head. "No. Where ever she's hiding, it's a good spot. Of course that only means she will be in even more trouble when she surfaces. Ah, there it is." He held up a DVD titled 'Brave Heart. "Every so often I can convince Ellie to watch an action movie with me. She thinks Mel Gibson is hot."

"I do not!" Mrs. Weatherby laughed, coming down the stairs. "I know Mel Gibson is hot. Do you want to join us, Ruel?"

"Uhm, no thanks. I've got homework to do." Mrs. Weatherby went into the kitchen to make popcorn, and I slipped back into my bedroom.

Grace poked her head out of the closet. She whispered, "I tried to get out earlier, but the twins were in the living room. Is it safe now?" I shook my head.

"Now your parents are settling in for popcorn and a movie, something called 'Brave Heart'," I whispered back.

"Oh, no! That movie's like three hours long. I've got homework to do. It'll be midnight before they finish!" She put as much anguish in her voice as she could while whispering. The old house was solid, but my bedroom was right by the living room.

I got my backpack, now repacked with my school work, and sat on the bed. When I pulled my history book out, she knelt on the bed beside me, grabbed me by the shoulders, and tried to shake me. Since I'm ten inches taller than Grace and probably have eighty pound on her, she shook herself more than me.

"What do you think you're doing?" she whispered furiously.

"My homework," I whispered back, brushing her hands from my shoulders like I was brushing off flies.

"You can't do your homework. We've got to figure a way out of here."

"I don't have to get out of here, it's MY room! And if you had enough manners to KNOCK instead of just barging into a guy's room, we wouldn't be in this mess."

She leaned over and put her nose practically against mine, trying to shout at me while whispering. "Well, if you hadn't picked me up like a sack of flour ..."

"Potatoes. You can't carry a hundred pound sack of flour like that. The paper splits." If looks could kill, I would have been dead at that moment.

"If you hadn't picked me up like a sack of POTATOES, I wouldn't be in trouble in the first place!"

"I picked you up because you kept falling. I was TRYING to keep you from hurting yourself. If you wore decent boots instead of fashionable useless boots just because Janet Fisher wears them ..."

"Julie Forster!"

"What?"

"Her name is Julie Forster." I rolled my eyes.

"Whatever! If you had decent boots I wouldn't have had to carry you!" Her eyes were really blue when she was mad, light clear blue, like a winter sky. And her face was flushing pink and her lips were — *oh, shit!* I stood up, dragging my backpack with me.

"We need to get you out of here!" I paced to the narrow window and turned to look at her, holding my backpack in front of me at waist level. "I have homework to do, and you're flapping your gums like you and the clone twins do in the living room. You need to go." I shut up, because I was starting to babble.

She got off the bed and stalked over toward me. "That's what I've been saying. Honestly. Sometimes boys are just so ... arrggghhh!"

I knew how to get her out, but I really didn't want her to know about the ladder. *shit!* I thumped the backpack down on the bookshelf ledge and stared out the window, thinking. I finally admitted to myself there wasn't another option. *damn!* I sighed and turned to look at her, standing there with her hands on her hips and her lips so pink and her eyes so blue. *oh, shit, i have to get her out of here NOW!*

"I'm going to show you something, but you can't ever tell ANYBODY! EVER!" Her eyes widened, and she began backing away from me. She dropped her gaze to my zipper and licked her lips. *holy shit!*

"NO, not that! Shit, get your mind out of the gutter, Blondie! Besides, you keep walking in on me naked. You've seen pretty much everything I've got." I walked past her and opened the closet.

"If you tell ANYONE! ANYONE I'll never talk to you again. And I'll tell a guy at school who likes you that you're ... you're ... that you like Devon Hatfield!"

"You wouldn't!" she hissed at me. "Wait. A guy at school likes me? Who?" I rolled my eyes!

"Trust me, I would. Swear you will never tell anyone. Not your mom. Not any of your sisters. Not your friends. Not any of your cousins. Swear ... swear on your mother!" I didn't think it was possible, but her eyes got wider and her lips parted. I know it was in shock at what I asked, but dear God all I wanted to do was kiss her and THAT was NOT acceptable behavior. *sister, idiot, she's your sister*

"Swear!"

"What about my dad?"

"He already knows. Swear!!"

"What about Charlie?"

"He already knows. Swear, damnit, or I'm gonna walk out there and tell your folks you walked in on me naked. Twice!" She went pale, making the light tan freckles stand out on her soft pink — "SWEAR!"

"Alright! I swear I will never ever tell anybody what you are about to show me. On my mother! Happy?"

"Yes. Oh, and you are to never use this without my permission!"

"Your permission. This isn't your house. It's our ..."

"Your dad's house. And what I'm going to show you is his, so have a little respect and don't use it without permission!"

I knelt down and shoved all the stuff off the closet floor. Using the old screwdriver for leverage, I lifted the trapdoor.

"What in ..."

"Sssshhhhhhh! Pipe down!"

I started down the ladder then held my hand up for hers. "Come on."

"Where does it go?" she asked as she placed her small slim hand in mine.

"I'll show you." I helped her get started down the ladder then went on ahead of her. I was standing in the almost completely dark basement when she reached the bottom.

"Ruel, I can't see a thing." I took her by the waist, steadying her.

"Just another step." She stepped down and drew closer to me.

"Where are we? It's cold and creepy down here." I put an arm around her because she was frightened and cold, and not because I wanted my arms around her to pull her close to me. Not at all. *sister, sister, sister*

Resisting the urge to bury my face in her soft golden curls — *get a grip, ruel!* — I took her hand and moved forward, toward where I remembered the wall of boxes. I shuffled my feet slowly, hoping I wouldn't knock anything over and alert Jim and Mrs. Weatherby I wasn't industriously studying alone in my room.

I finally reached the knee-high wall of boxes and worked my way around it. Once past it, the sodium vapor light over the barn reflected off the snow and through the basement windows brightly enough we could see the washer and dryer across the room.

"See. We're in the basement." I tugged her toward the stairs to the kitchen. "You go wait in the kitchen. I'll go back up and go out and talk to them to distract 'em, and you can sneak upstairs. After that, you're on your own when your dad comes looking for you." I let go of her hand, ready to go back up the ladder and play my part in deceiving her parents and probably saving myself from certain death.

"Wait! There are some really noisy parts in this movie. I can just sneak up during one of those. Come up to the kitchen with me so I don't have to wait alone. Please!" Her blue eyes were pleading, her lips were soft and moist, and I'm an idiot fourteen-year-old boy. I went.

The kitchen doorway to the living room is right at the bottom of the stairs, so we crouched there waiting for an explosion or gun fire or whatever was noisy in this movie. She put her mouth right next to my ear and whispered, "There's a really noisy part coming up in just a minute. I'll go then." I just nodded because after feeling the tickle of her words on my ear, I was incapable of coherent speech. *come on explosion!*

The noises from the TV got louder and louder. Finally Grace nodded, grabbed me and kissed me full on the mouth, then slipped through the door and up the stairs as quiet as whispered words. I stayed crouched for a minute because now I was incapable of coordinated movement. *i am going straight to hell for this.*

I snuck back into the basement and back up my ladder. I shoved the closet floor junk back, then settled on my bed, supposedly to do homework, but I was totally 'distracted' for about thirty minutes because the room smelled like Gracey. *yep, straight to hell!*

34 — Wrestling with Alligators is Easier Than Wrestling with Hulk Matthews

The week after Thanksgiving I experienced two new firsts.

Monday night after supper I got my first ever scolding. Jim sat Gracey and me down in the living room and talked forever — OK, it was about five minutes, but it felt like forever — about what would happen the next time Gracey hit someone in anger and the next time I manhandled one of the girls. I just nodded along, grateful it wasn't about other inappropriate behavior, like lusting after your sister.

Thursday I tried out for a team sport. I'd never played any sports, I'd never been part of any kind of team. The whole concept was foreign to me, but since my life for the last three weeks was new and foreign, I figured what the hell. Might as well go for it.

Everyone was weighed then assigned a weight class and a tryout partner. I weighed in at 194, which put me in the heavy weight class with Hulk Matthews, from my Math Basics class, who weighs 267 pounds. Hulk was my tryout partner was. *i'm going to die!*

Two experienced wrestlers would demonstrate a move, then the rest of us tried it against our partner. Many were the same moves Deke taught me, so I was confident I knew them, but trying them against Hulk was — embarrassing. His calves were as big around as my thighs. I have large hands, but I could barely grab his wrists. I spent most of the tryouts picking myself up off the floor. I'd get Hulk in the hold that had been demonstrated, then he would stand up and dump me on my head or my back. A couple of times I just slid off, like a scoop of ice cream falling off the cone.

I spent three hours sliding, falling, and being dumped off Hulk Matthews. At the end of the tryouts, I had made the Junior Varsity team. I was the only heavy weight on the JVs, as everyone called it, so my training would be mostly with Hulk and some of the lighter Varsity wrestlers. *lucky me.*

The month of December was weird. No other word for it. After the traumas of November, December was calm, routine, normal. Like I said, weird, because until I came here I had thought my life was normal. Guess not.

I had wrestling practice everyday after school so afterwards I spent an hour or so at the Justice Center doing homework then rode home with Jim. At home we ate dinner; I helped put Mini-me to bed; I did my assigned chores of chopping and hauling wood for the fireplace, shoveling new fallen snow off the walkways, and running the tractor-mounted snowplow to clear the driveway and turnaround. Then I finished my homework and fell into bed about midnight, only to get up and start over at six the next morning. Normal.

After the kiss in the kitchen, Gracey and I avoided each other like the plague. Jim and Mrs. Weatherby probably thought we were still mad at each other about the manhandling/slapping thing. I'd been having sex since I was twelve, but I'd never been attracted to a female on a personal level, just hormonal. Whatever this — thing — was that I was thinking or feeling about Gracey had me scared to be alone with her. And since everyone kept calling the girls my sisters, it seemed wrong, which made me feel guilty, which made me grumpy. If I was going to feel guilty, it would be nice to have done something enjoyable to feel guilty about.

I learned a new vocabulary being part of a sports team, and I learned when sports are involved it's OK for

guys to hug and slap each other on the butt. The whole thing was weird and uncomfortable for me, but I kept my mouth shut because this was normal in this new life Joe's death had thrown me into.

My first wrestling match was a home game, and the whole Weatherby clan came to watch, including Mini-me. By the time for my match, everyone in the gym was probably wondering what the hell a 'roo' was. I did not enlighten them. My opponent was three inches taller than me and had me by thirty pounds, and I spent the pre-match time praying for a hurricane or possibly death by rhinoceros stampede, figuring either would be less painful than what this kid was going to do to me.

=====

Jim sat in the stands holding a bouncing Hope and watching the boy warming up, staying loose for his match. His opponent was taller and heavier than Ruel, and Ellie was making worrying noises in her throat.

"Roo! Roo! Roo!" Hope kept yelling. The boy looked up once and smiled briefly at his Mini-me, but Jim could see his mind was on the fast-approaching match. Jim wondered if he should have told the kid to not try out. If he got hurt, Jim's life would be pretty miserable when all eight of the women in it blamed him. Oh, well, too late now.

Jim would never tell his wife or darling daughters, but he was relishing having a son, although he would never call Ruel that. He wondered if every man secretly hoped for someone to do guy things with, or if it was just all the years of estrogen.

Then the match started and Jim Weatherby watched his boy.

=====

I won. The kid was big but unskilled, and I pinned him one minute seven seconds into the first period. I endured the requisite hugs and butt slapping from my teammates, and the equally embarrassing but more welcome screams from the Weatherbys, including piercing shrieks from Mini-me that hopefully translated to some form of my name and not swear words.

Over the first few weeks of December, I won my next three matches by pins within the first two-minute period.

I also experienced my first away game where there were very few Wolverine fans, and a lot of very unfriendly Mustang fans. Wrestling might not be the most popular sport at W.C.C.H.S., but it was huge at H.H.S. and the stands were packed.

Seven times the matches had to be paused while a rabid fan was ejected and the soda/hotdog/shredded program/brown leather wing-tip/whatever was cleaned up from the mat or floor. Hulk and I both got pelted with French fries — mine had been dipped in ketchup so they actually stuck — because we overwhelmed our opponents. Guess it was better than blood. Frankie Pilner, one of our featherweights, got hit with a beer bottle and had to have three stitches in his right eyebrow — after he pinned the jerk he was wrestling. Take THAT Mustangs!

As Christmas approached there was already talk the Wolverines might make the play-offs in February. It was still a weird experience, but it was also kinda fun being part of a team, working toward a common goal with other guys my age. The whole school spirit rah, rah, rah crap I could still do without, especially since it came with added attention from some of the skankier girls, but it was part of my new normal, so I endured.

The last match before Christmas break was at home, and the Weatherby clan once again attended and embarrassed me cheering my quick victory. I was now 5-0 — that means five wins zero losses for anyone who, like me, was not raised in normal-land. Since it was Friday night, Jim took us out for pizza afterwards.

When we pulled into the gravel drive around ten o'clock, there was a silver Cadillac Escalade with Florida plates parked right in the middle of the turnaround. Jim parked behind it, and before anyone could open any of the van's doors, the doors on the Escalade popped open, and two people stepped out into the beam from the van's headlights.

Jim swore under his breath, and Mrs. Weatherby gasped. The clone twins breathed out variations of 'oh, shit' and Gracey looked at me, eyes wide.

"Ellie?" It was a question.

"No! Oh, Jim, no. I wouldn't do that to him!"

"Ruel," Jim said, "I swear to God we did not know they were coming. I swear! I would have told them to stay home."

And then I knew why the woman looked familiar. She looked a lot like Mrs. Weatherby, only older and sour, like she had recently sucked on a pickle. She looked like her daughter would look in twenty years or so, hopefully without the pickle. I was seeing for the first time the woman who had convinced a fifteen-year-old Eleanore June Ruel to abandon her five-hour-old son. Walter and June Ruel had come for the holidays.

Merry Christmas to me!

35 — The Nightmare Before Christmas Wyoming Style

Jim and Mrs. Weatherby got out of the van, telling the rest of us to stay put. We watched as they approached Mrs. Weatherby's mother and father, who were shading their eyes from the glare of the headlights Jim had unthoughtfully not turned off. Sarah rolled down her window so we could eavesdrop.

"Mother, Father, what are you doing here?" Mrs. Weatherby asked. Her voice had a little shake to it, and I heard Amanda groan.

"What?" I whispered.

"Mom always turns into a terrified little kid when Grandmother is around. Why do you think she was so happy to move to Wyoming? Because it's a long, long way from her mother's thumb." Amanda whispered back.

"She has no backbone at all when they are here. It's like she's still a teenager. It's creepy!" Sarah muttered.

"She morphs from Mom the Drill Sergeant into Mom the door mat. It's embarrassing and disgusting!" Gracey contributed.

"That isn't a very gracious welcome, Eleanore June. We've been sitting here for two hours waiting for you to get home. You surely didn't keep the babies out this late!" Mrs. Ruel's voice was as sour as her expression.

"Now, Sugar," Mr. Ruel placated, "I'm sure James and Eleanore June have a good reason for being out so late." He smiled widely at Jim, who did not smile back.

=====

The anger inside Jim would have alarmed any criminal he had ever faced. These two had never been his favorite people, and now that he knew what they had done to the boy, what they had talked Ellie into, they were right near the top of his shit list.

"Walter, June, if you'd been kind enough to tell us you were coming, we would have sent you our itinerary. " Jim's voice carried an edge.

"Now, James, we wanted to surprise you," Mrs. Ruel said. She was going for pleasant, but just sounded snotty and inconvenienced, as usual. Jim didn't give an inch.

"Then you can't expect us to be waiting here for you. We had plans for the evening."

"Plans that kept the babies out so late? That doesn't sound very responsible," Mrs. Ruel stated flatly, as always so sure her opinion was all that mattered. Jim thought, of all the things she had to pass on to her daughter, that pig-headed conviction was the one he could most do without.

"Well, since they're OUR children, that's for us to decide. Isn't it!" Jim said. "Speaking of our children, Walter. Could you move that thing so I can pull the van up to the walkway. It makes it easier to carry the little ones up to the house. Then I can help you with your bag."

=====

Mrs. Weatherby stood silent, like she wasn't sure what to do. I hadn't seen her like this since that day at

the Justice Center when I'd defied her, and she didn't know how to respond. She looked lost, and for the first time I felt sorry for her.

"Showtime!" Sarah whispered. "Daddy always butts heads with them, trying to be a buffer between them and Mom."

"Never works. Mom still folds like a cheap suit!" Amanda added as Sarah rolled up the window.

All three of the girls were looking at me. They knew what the Ruels had done, and they knew my temper. I don't know if the looks were warnings to keep myself in check or hopeful that I'd blow. I looked back, my expression blank.

Mrs. Ruel and Mrs. Weatherby went into the house while Mr. Ruel moved the Cadillac, so Jim could move the van. Once the van was parked at the end of the walkway, he turned to me.

"How do you want to play this, Boy?" I looked at the sleeping brownies and mini-mes, then I looked at the watching twins and Blondie.

"I don't want to cause trouble, but I'm not going to bend over backwards to be nice. How about I just be me, and let the chips fall where they may?" Jim nodded, and the girls grinned. Guess that was a hopeful look they'd given me. Maybe they didn't like their 'grandparents' anymore than I did.

"But I don't want to make it harder for Mrs. Weatherby. The girls said she has a hard time standing her ground when they're here."

"No, we said she turns into some sort of pod person, when they're here." Sarah contradicted me. Jim grimaced but nodded his head.

"June Ruel is an overbearing, sour, dictatorial bitch!" Jim said.

"Gee, Jim, don't hold back. Tell me what you really think!" He laughed a short bitter bark.

"Walter Ruel is a smarmy, manipulative, asshole!"

"That's better. Get it all out of your system." I grinned at him. "Any other adjectives you want to toss or should we unload the munchkins, and go face the ogres?" I undid my seatbelt, "Because frankly, I'm freezing my butt off." They all looked at me like I just had no idea how bad it was going to get.

"Listen, I've dealt with pimps, drunken roustabouts, drugged-out whores, and the clones. I think I can handle whatever two old nasty Texans can toss my way. If I am my own charming self, maybe I can run them off in a couple of days so they don't wreck Christmas for everyone." They all shook their heads, and Jim clapped me on the shoulder.

"Do your worst," he said, and opened his door.

Jim and I took the brownies, and Sarah and Amanda took the mini-mes, while Gracey brought up the rear valiantly lugging my sports bag. It wasn't heavy, but it must have smelled like the inside of a gym locker.

Inside, the Ruels — *dear Lord, it is creepy sharing a name with someone I despise* — were in the kitchen, probably nagging Mrs. Weatherby for something warm to drink after being close to death waiting in the grueling Wyoming cold in a \$70,000 car that probably had more bells and whistles than the space shuttle.

We put the sleepyheads to bed. I went in and kissed Mini-me good night, and the girls tried to sneak off to their rooms without greeting their grandparents. Jim solemnly shook his head and pointed down the stairs.

"You are not leaving your mom to face those two alone. March!" They groaned and whined, but they marched. Jim looked at me questioningly.

"I'm no deserter. Beside, I want to see their faces. I've always wondered what sniveling lying cowards looked like up close." I followed the girls, warmed by the conspiratorial grin on Jim's face. *oh, yeah, this oughta be good!*

The Texans and Mrs. Weatherby were sitting in the living room drinking tea. Mrs. Weatherby looked beleaguered, and I made a decision I would do everything I could to not add to her burden. She might have been a coward when she abandoned me, but she had also been a kid relying on her parents' wisdom, and they had lied to and manipulated her.

She heard us and glanced up fearfully. She saw the girls and relaxed a touch, but when she saw me she paled. I gave her a warm smile and a thumbs up, and she smiled back.

Her mother saw she had lost her daughter's attention and followed her gaze. Seeing her step granddaughters, she smiled broadly, then she saw me right behind them. Her penciled eyebrows rose, and she stood, pointing a manicured blood-red fingernail at me.

"YOU!" She shrieked. "What are YOU doing in this house?" I smiled and kept descending behind the girls, who turned and gave me a look that said, 'see, we told you'. I winked at them.

Mrs. Weatherby's father saw where his wife was pointing and also rose, his face darkening with either temper or an impending stroke. I was voting for a stroke.

Mrs. Weatherby rose, out of reflex I think, but said nothing. When we all reached the bottom of the stairs, the girls just stopped. Jim had to step around them, giving them all a look that clearly said, 'get your butts over there and say hi'. He walked up to Mrs. Weatherby and put his arm around her shoulders, and the girls followed, giving their grandparents each a very lukewarm hug.

"Hello, Grandmother. Hello, Grandfather." they each said. The Ruels returned the hugs, but kept staring at me.

I stayed at the bottom of the stairs, staring right back. And while staring at the people who had thought a tiny baby was disposable, I realized something. They despised me as much as I despised them, and we shared a name. *oh, yeah! i can work with that!*

"Eleanore June, I asked what this man is doing in this house!" Mrs. Ruel demanded.

Jim whispered something in Mrs. Weatherby's ear and squeezed her shoulder. Hopefully he was telling her something like, 'Put your big girl panties on and stand up to these jerks'. She straightened her

shoulders, opened her mouth, and — nothing. She froze.

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Jim whispered in Ellie's ear, "Baby, if you are ever going to be your own woman, if you are ever going to stand up to these two, this would be a great time to do it."

Ellie's shoulders straightened. She looked at her parents, opened her mouth to speak. And Jim saw her freeze, saw her think one heartbeat too long. Then she deflated and withdrew again, the strong take-charge woman he loved sinking back into the bullied overpowered teen-age girl who couldn't stand up to the assholes who raised her. Shit!

Jim saw movement, and looked up from watching Ellie's face to see the boy walking toward the Ruels, toward the people who convinced his mother to abandon him when he was barely born. He saw the cold in the kid's glacier-blue eyes and the shark-like smile on his face, and thought, Oh, hell, yeah!

=====

Clearly a stronger will was needed here. I moved forward. Jim's face was a green light, but Mrs. Weatherby's clearly said 'NO'. I ignored her. Otherwise we would be here all night, and I was tired.

I stuck out my hand and grabbed Walter's with a strong grip, a grip with years of hard manual labor and a lot of anger behind it. He winced.

"You must be Walter and June. I've heard so much about you. I'm Ruel Black." I switched my hand shake to June. I only put enough pressure in it to let her know I was not to be trifled with. They hesitated when I said my name. I know it wasn't the one they were expecting.

"Ruel?" Walter said uncertainly. I nodded and smiled my shark smile.

"But ..." June began.

"Oh, you must have thought I was someone else." They both nodded, a little relief beginning to show on their indignant faces. I snapped my fingers.

"I'll bet you thought I was my dad, Joe. Everyone says I look just like him when he was young." The indignant looks were back, and the sour pickle had become lemonade without the sugar. I was still gently squeezing June's hand, and she snatched it back.

"What are you doing here? You're not welcome here!" She turned in anger to Mrs. Weatherby. "Eleanore June, ..." but I cut her off.

"Well, June, I didn't know you owned this home. Here I thought — *jump in with both feet, ruel* — my mom and stepdad owned this home." I turned toward Jim and Ellie. "Ellie, Jim, was I wrong about that?"

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Jim heard 'mom' and 'stepdad' and the rest of what the boy said wasn't important.

He grinned like he had the day his first daughter was born.

=====

Jim grinned broadly, "No, Boy, you weren't wrong."

Ellie's eyes suddenly sparked, awaking from whatever stupor these two evil creatures had created in her. She smiled at me, and I smiled back.

"Was I wrong, Ellie? Does June have the final say about who's welcome in OUR home?"

She looked at me and shook her head. "No, Ruel, she doesn't." I moved to her and put my arm around her shoulder and squeezed gently.

"That's a relief. I thought for a minute I LIVED in the wrong house." I let the word 'lived' sink in, then turned to Jim, ignoring the two shocked Texans standing frozen in outraged silence.

"Jim, were we going to get their BAGGAGE? It's getting late and they're probably anxious to get settled in the GUEST room before we all go to OUR bedrooms for the night."

I emphasized every way I could that they were guests and we lived here. I don't know if it sank in, but for now I had them confused, and I wanted to keep them that way until Ellie had some time to hopefully recover her equilibrium and strength of character. If I could never do anything else for her, maybe I could teach bio-mom to stand up to her overbearing parents.

"Sure, Boy, let's go get their BAGGAGE. Girls, why don't you take your grandparents up to the GUEST room before going to your OWN bedrooms for the night. Honey," he turned to Ellie, "why don't you get Ruel a snack while we get the BAGGAGE. Even though our FAMILY pizza was only a couple of hours ago, I'm sure OUR BOY is hungry." Jim is one smart man. Must be why he's such a good cop. Ellie nodded once, still smiling at me, and went into the kitchen, not even telling her parents goodnight.

The girls were grinning broadly as they herded their gob-smacked grandparents up the stairs. Every one of them winked at me as Jim and I put on our coats to fetch the 'baggage'.

"That," Jim said as soon as we were outside, "was the best time I've ever had with those two old reprobates in the eleven years I've known them. You, my boy, were brilliant!" He clapped me hard on the shoulder and did a little jig on the porch. I laughed at his enthusiasm.

"You know, I've always thought Ellie was heartless, leaving me in that hospital, but those two could turn St. Peter into Mephistopheles." I shuddered in mock horror. "My new question is how did she grow up even half normal with those two for parents. People say Joe was a shit father, but he was Michael the Archangel compared to them!"

A new terrifying thought hit me.

"Holy shit! If Ellie hadn't walked out of that hospital I might have been raised by THEM?"

36 — I Didn't Ask for a Grandpa or Grandma for Christmas

I sat suddenly and put my head between my knees as dizziness swept over me. Jim knelt beside me.

"You OK, Boy?" he asked, laying a large hand on my shoulder.

"Holy shit, Jim. What kind of nightmare childhood would I have had with them?" The dizziness segued into nausea, and I thought for a moment I was going to throw up. The reality of what I had escaped because Ellie was a pregnant bewildered teen-ager too brow beaten to stand up to her lying manipulative parents nearly overwhelmed me.

Jim massaged my shoulders, trying to calm me down.

"There but for the grace of God go I?" He stood. "Come on, let's get the evil baggage into the guest room. Then we can go wash our hands and have that snack."

The Texans had two suitcases — each. "Holy hell, how long are they gonna stay?"

Jim shook his head. "Too long." He offered to take it up, but I claimed the privilege. Give the iniquitous in-laws a chance to spew their venom without contaminating the rest of the family. *or give me a chance to strike the first blow. hell, yeah!*

Jim carried two of the suitcases to the top of the stairs then left me to my fate with another clap on the shoulders.

I knocked on the guest room door and waited. Walter answered. He opened the door wider then stepped back, not offering to help. *whatever*. I carried two of the cases in, set them on the floor, went back and got the others, setting them beside the first two. When I entered the room with the second load, Walter shut the door. *ahh, good call, ruel*.

I turned to face them and, not giving them time to speak, said, "Walter, I just want to thank you and June for abandoning me at the hospital and sneaking off the way you did. It used to make me angry, but since meeting the both of you, I realized that no matter how shitty a father Joe Black was, you two make him look like Mother Teresa. If you had exercised any Christian charity and raised me yourselves, I'd probably have turned into a fuckin' mass murderer instead of an uneducated warehouse bouncer. I don't know how I'll ever repay you for your damn fine act of sneaky maliciousness." Then I beamed at them like they were God's own gift to grandparents.

They stood with their mouths hanging open so long I was hoping their teeth were real, otherwise they were sure to fall out. I gently reached over and with the middle finger of each hand closed their mouths. Then I patted them on their shoulders and left them to the very flowery very pink guest room.

Outside the door I nearly tripped over the clones. They backed up quickly, stifling their giggles with their hands.

"What are you three doing?" I whispered furiously. "I almost fell on my ass!"

They grabbed my hands and pulled me down the hall to the Princess Throne Room and pulled me inside,

shutting the door behind us. I'd never been inside. It was even fancier than I'd imagined, fancy enough to rival the one in the master suite.

"Wow! This is a pretty nice set-up. It's bigger than my bedroom. Maybe I should move in here and let you three use the powder room." Instead of giving me fits over my sniping about their fancy bathroom, they surrounded me and hugged me and danced around the room like they were the bread and I was the filling in a subway sandwich.

"What the hell are you three doing?" I asked, trying in vain to get out of their collective embrace. They danced a few more turns then began kissing me on my cheeks and laughing. Somewhere in the middle of all this celebrating, Gracey snuck a lingering kiss on my lips, and I was once again in a condition NOT acceptable between brother and sister.

"Enough!" I snapped. "What the hell is wrong with you three?"

They finally released me, gleefully exclaiming, "We've been eavesdropping!"

"Yeah, I might not be the brightest bulb in the pack, but I figured that out when I almost face-planted in the carpet. Why?"

"To hear what was happening, of course," Sarah said, as if that ought to be obvious even to me.

"We saw you go into the guest room and decided if they got nasty we'd break in and rescue you," Amanda said.

"You were magnificent!" Gracey said, dancing me around one more time. "No one has ever put them in their places with such ... such fucking style!" *oh, great. first mini-me and now grace. jim and ellie will kill me.*

"And the way you set them straight downstairs ..." began Amanda,

"... and backed Mom up was amazing!" Sarah finished the thought. *creepy!*

"That was so cool of you," Gracey said, placing her slim hand on my arm. "You put aside your own feelings to help her." She kissed me on the cheek. "That took a real gentleman, no matter what you said to Annie."

I pulled my arm free before I was tempted to put it around her and pull her in for a real kiss. "Joe always said THE LEAST YOU CAN BE IS HONEST WITH YOURSELF, KID. I realized something. If Ellie hadn't left me at the hospital I might have been raised by those two. Now that I've met them, I know it's the biggest fuckin' favor she could have done for me. And you," I said, turning to Gracey, "need to stop swearing. It just sounds ... weird coming out of your mouth!"

She stuck out her tongue at me. "Oh, that's real mature!" I said snidely. She did it again.

Someone knocked on the door, then Jim said, "I don't know why all of you are in the bathroom TOGETHER, but I'd appreciate it if you would send out the non-female so I don't have to come in there and thump him." *shit!*

I left the bathroom about thirty seconds before Jim was ready to enter and drag me out. He eyeballed me a little, but I just smiled back at him.

"You gotta talk to those girls of yours. They kidnapped me and dragged me into their lair. I barely escaped with my life. If you hadn't come along ..." I shuddered for dramatic effect "... it could have gotten ugly."

He placed a gentle hand on my shoulder and said, "If I find you in the bathroom with my daughters again, it will get ugly." Then he squeezed. With all the working out I'd been doing, it didn't hurt, but I pretended it did. I didn't want him to go get his gun. The gulp when he mentioned 'daughter' and 'bathroom' in the same sentence wasn't pretend!

37 — Some Parents Would Have to Improve to be Bad Parents

I got up early Saturday morning to fill the wood box in the living room. Then I laid a fire in the fireplace and lit it, and sat on the floor and leaned against the couch, watching the wood catch, watching the colors shift and change. I liked this early morning time to myself. Even with all the 'normalizing' I'd been going through this last month, I got overwhelmed by the crowds of people at school and the wrestling matches and needed some alone time.

Over the gentle popping of the wood, I heard scruffing sounds. I waited, knowing what was coming. Suddenly, Mini-me's head bobbed around one end of the huge high-backed couch that sat in front of the fireplace, and she burred 'Roo', laughing before I even started playing hide-and-seek with her. She hadn't managed 'boo' yet, so she used her name for me, and it wasn't really hide-and-seek, more like 'where's Min-me?' She'd bob in and out of sight, until she was giggling so hard she couldn't stand up, then I'd pounce and tickle her until she shrieked. When she'd had enough, she'd go to her book basket, pull out whatever book was her current favorite, and bring it to me to read to her. I'm not sure when the ritual started, but it was firmly established now.

This morning it was *Goodnight Moon*. I read, and she babbled along using real words this morning like 'no' and 'my'. One morning Ellie had found me rolling on the floor holding my sides after trying to read *Cat in the Hat* while Hope added a swear word about every third line. Ellie had not been amused.

We had finished the book for the third time, when I smelled coffee, and Mini-me just smelled. She was sort of kind of getting the hang of the potty chair, but not talking put a crimp in being able to tell anyone she had to go. My suggestion we teach her shit and piss, since she already knew the first word and was a cinch for picking up the second, was shot down in glorious technicolor flames by a very irate mother.

I picked up Miss Smelly Pants and went in search of her mother. I did NOT do diapers.

Ellie was in the kitchen, scrambling eggs when I presented her with my 'gift'.

"You look tired. You want me to go find Jim?" I asked. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her already pale skin was almost translucent.

She smiled and took her baby, cuddling her against her chest. "No, I need some unconditional love right now." She handed me the spatula, and started toward the living room.

"Ellie." She stopped and smiled at me. "It'll be alright. You just have to tell them to go to hell a few times. Once you get the hang of it, it'll get easier." She turned back and gave me a one-armed hug. I returned it, and her smile got wider.

"If having them here means you call me Ellie and let me hug you, it might even be worth it." She looked better as she carried Hope out through the door and up the stairs to clean her up and get her dressed.

I stirred the eggs until they were mostly done then turned them into a glass pan and put them in the oven to keep warm. The big griddle was already heated so I covered the surface with bacon slices, put the splatter shield over it, and poured myself a cup of coffee. As I sipped I stirred the hash browns in the giant skillet on the counter, and got bread out of the freezer to make toast. Breakfast for ten people took a lot of co-ordination, but I'd watch Ellie do it for several weeks now, so I figured I couldn't mess it up too much.

Worst case scenario, the toast would be burnt or cold.

A snort from the doorway told me at least one of the Ruels was up. *i wonder if they'd consider changing the spelling of their name?* I looked up and saw the penciled eyebrows and sour expression. I tried to smile, but I couldn't muster the strength this morning. Ellie's tired face kept popping into my head.

"Good morning, June. Would you like some coffee?" The expression soured even more, which I wouldn't have thought possible if I hadn't seen it.

"I only drink herbal tea," she sniffed. I knew I'd used deodorant this morning, so I figured it was a cold or an affectation. I guessed the latter. I nodded, filled the tea kettle, and put it on a back burner.

Ellie had about fifty-seven different teas, so I pulled twenty or so down and put them on the kitchen table, got a clean mug out of the cupboard and put it next to the teas, got a spoon and a ceramic-flower spoon rest and put those by the mug, put the sugar and creamer next to the spoon and mug, and found a little dish of lemon slices in the refrigerator and placed that next to the creamer and sugar.

She stared at the mug. "Don't you have a proper tea cup? Eleanore June knows I only drink out of a proper tea cup, not one of these ... mugs!"

"Sorry," I said. "I don't know where she keeps the royal china, but she'll be back soon."

I turned the bacon strips, stirred the hash browns, took a sip of coffee.

She stared at the table full of tea and such. "Is that cream? I only use real cream, not any of this hand-and-half or milk." She said milk the way I'd say arsenic.

"Sorry, I don't know. Ellie will be back soon." I placed the cooked bacon on paper towels on a plate, covered the griddle with more strips, and replaced the splatter screen. Took a sip of coffee. The tea kettle whistled so I took it off the burner and put it on a hot trivet on the table.

"If she doesn't come soon, you'll have to start over with the water. It must be fresh water and freshly boiled. It cannot sit. Where is Eleanore June? She should be here attending to this, not leaving a ..." she sniffed again, "... a ..." She seemed at a loss for the word or she was too refined to say it, so I said it for her.

"I believe the word you are looking for, June, is bastard. Ellie should be here attending to your needs, instead of leaving a bastard in charge. She's taking care of Hope." I took a sip of coffee, turned the bacon over, and turned the hash browns down to warm. I started placing bread slices in the eight-slice toaster.

"You are a very crude young man. Of course, that's to be expected considering who your father is." She sniffed again.

"Was." I handed her a box of tissues off the top of the refrigerator.

"Excuse me?" She took the box then looked at it like she couldn't figure out why she had it.

"Considering who my father was. Joe is dead." I took a sip of coffee, removed the cooked bacon to the

paper towel-covered plate, and covered the griddle with bacon slices again.

"Dead?" she asked blankly. "What do you mean he's dead? He's a young man, barely older than Eleanor June. How can he be dead?"

"Anybody can die, June." I took another sip of coffee. It was getting cold, and I topped it off to warm it up. The toast popped so I buttered the slices and put more bread in the toaster.

"Did he drink himself to death?" she asked with another sniff. I pushed the box of tissue toward her. She looked at it, puzzled.

"No. He was crushed by a load of pipes." I turned the bacon, took another sip of coffee.

"Roo." Mini-me barreled into the kitchen, but I caught her before she and my zipper connected.

"Me ooo," she said, wrinkling her tiny nose. Then she patted my cheeks a few times, her favored way of showing me affection.

I held her on one hip while I removed the second round of toast out of the toaster. I set her on the counter, buttered one slice and gave her half, then buttered the rest of the slices. Placing her on my hip again, I put more bread in the toaster, turned the bacon strips, and took another sip of coffee.

She pointed at my cup. "Me?" I shook my head.

"No, Mini-me. Do you want some juice?" She nodded so I set her in her high chair, gave her one strip of bacon and the other half piece of toast. While she was munching, I poured her a half glass of apple juice. I took the last of the bacon off the griddle, added it to the paper-towel-covered plate, and stuck the whole thing in the oven to stay warm with the eggs.

Ellie came in just as the last slices of toast popped up.

"Oh, Ruel, I never meant to be gone so long. She was so messy I had to bathe her." I wrinkled my nose like Hope had. She looked around the kitchen.

"You cooked all of it?" I nodded. Then I poured out the not fresh water in the tea kettle, refilled it, and put it back on the burner.

"I don't know where the royal china is, but June wants a 'real' teacup. I also didn't know if this," I pointed at the creamer, "was real cream or that vile pretender, milk." Then I buttered the toast.

"I THINK I got it all. I cooked all the bacon, toasted the whole loaf of bread, the eggs and bacon are keeping warm in the oven, I turned the hash browns down." I looked around the kitchen. "I think that's everything. Probably some of it will be cold, but that's what microwaves are for. So ... "

I got hot pads and removed the eggs and bacon from the oven. Placing them on the counter, I removed the cover from the hash browns, set the toast plate next to the eggs and bacon, and handed Ellie a plate.

"Eat."

"Oh, I should make sure ..."

"Eat!" I pushed her toward the food. "There's nobody here but the three of us, and June and I are perfectly capable of filling our own plates and cups." I removed the whistling tea kettle and set it on the trivet.

"Hot fresh water, June. You better find that 'real' cup and make yourself some tea. If you let the water get cold, you get to heat the next batch." I made sure Ellie filled her plate and sat down beside Hope. Then I filled my own plate and sat down at the table with them, pushing ten or twelve tea boxes aside.

Ellie kept glancing at her mother, standing beside the table obviously waiting for Ellie to fix her tea and a plate. Once Ellie even started to stand, but I placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, pushed down lightly, and shook my head. She took a deep breath and sat.

"Eleanore June, I need a teacup. You know I can't drink from one of those crude mugs."

"Where are the 'real' cups, Ellie?" She pointed to the cupboard over the toaster.

I pointed to the cupboard over the toaster. "They're in there, June," and went back to eating. I got up once to get Mini-me more juice and some eggs, then settled in to finish my meal and make sure Ellie didn't turn back into her mother's personal drudge.

Other people started trickling into the kitchen, filling plates, and finding places to sit. Sarah and Amanda reheated their eggs and hash browns in the microwave. All the time people were filling their plates, June stood by the table, waiting. Twice I kept Ellie from waiting on her. I filled Faith a plate and sat her on her booster seat in the chair I'd used.

Somewhere during the mild chaos of twelve people moving in and out of the kitchen, filling plates, and finding places to sit, Walter entered and stood beside June. She whispered something to him, and he looked up and saw Ellie cleaning up Mini-me.

=====

Jim walked into the kitchen just in time to hear Walter talking at Ellie.

"Eleanore June, your mother hasn't eaten or had her tea." Ellie was in the middle of washing Hope's greasy little hands, but she stopped and placed the washcloth on the table, preparing to jump through her parents' hoops like she always did. Ruel shook his head at her, and she smiled at him, picked up the washcloth and resumed cleaning their youngest.

The boy walked up to a very unhappy Walter. He and June were eyeing the boy like he might explode. Jim also noticed the twins and Grace were watching very closely.

"Walter," the boy said, "do you and June have servants at home?"

"Of course!" Walter said proudly.

"Well, here, we don't. We serve each other. We are also ten very hungry people. So I suggest if you want any of this food before it's all gone you get your thumbs out of your asses and dish some up. Because nobody is going to do it for you. Ellie works plenty hard taking care of her seven kids. She doesn't need to add two able-bodied lazy-ass senior citizens to her to-do list."

Walter and June looked as though the boy had struck them, although he never raised his voice, and even his tone was calm. Jim almost pumped his fist and yelled, 'Hell, yeah!'

The boy whispered something to Ellie, and gave her shoulders a squeeze. She picked Hope up and walked out into the living room, leaving her parents standing like two disgruntled islands in the midst of the happy Weatherby chaos.

Jim grabbed a plate and started filling it with cooling food. He put it in the microwave to heat while he filled a mug with coffee, then he sat down by Merri and Beth and ate his breakfast.

He smiled. It was a good day.



"Ellie," I whispered in her ear. "Why don't you go do something just for you. Something you don't usually get to do?" I squeezed her shoulder lightly. "We'll take care of the kitchen."

Ellie picked up Hope and walked out into the living room. Through the open doorway, I saw her put Hope in her pink Michelin-man snowsuit. Then she put on her own coat, hats, gloves, and scarf and took her daughter out to play in the snow.

I walked up behind the clones and leaned over to whisper in their ears. They jumped when I started talking. *oh, yeah. some days are just that great!*

"I cooked it all, so you three can clean it up." They started to protest, but I pointed to their grandparents finally, reluctantly, filling their own plates. "I also accomplished the impossible. I got your mom to stop letting your spoiled grandparents treat her like a slave. First step to a backbone. You owe me. Clean-up!" They all three stuck out their tongues at me, but didn't argue.

The food was pretty much cold by now, but apparently Walter and June had no clue now to work the microwave. I debated giving them a lesson, but when I looked at Jim he shook his head ever so slightly and put a forkful of hash browns in his mouth to cover his smile. So I left.

38 — Who Needs Enemies When You Have Family

Charlie had cut the wood for my desk, bought stain to match the bookshelves in my bedroom, and gotten the hardware I needed. After escaping the chaotic kitchen and Ellie's overbearing parents, I decided this would be a good day to stain the wood. I'd already sanded it as smooth as Hope's cheeks, so it was ready for the next step.

In the barn I cranked up the big heater Charlie had in the workshop, put on an old pair of Jim's coveralls, and got all my supplies out. I had been working for a couple of hours, when I got a creepy feeling up and down my spine. When I whirled around Walter Ruel was standing a few feet away, watching me. I hadn't even heard him.

"Can I do something for you, Walter?"

"Why is your name Ruel?" He almost snarled the question.

I turned my back on him and began wiping off the gel stain, hoping Charlie and I had figured the time right to get it as dark as the old bookcases in my bedroom.

"It's on my birth certificate." I wiped the stain off in long even strokes, not wanting to ruin a couple of hours work just because this creepy old man was trying to psych me out.

"Why?" he demanded like a spoiled child.

"That's what Joe named me." I kept working.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm staining wood."

"No, idiot, here at Eleanore June's home." Again he snarled.

"First of all, Walt, you don't get to call me names. I'm not calling you names like manipulative lying asshole, so you don't get to call me names. Second, it's Jim and Ellie's home, not just Ellie's. I'm here because Joe died, and Ellie is my only living relative — well, except you and the charming June, and I'd rather slit my wrists than live with you two." I continued to wipe the stain away, revealing just the color Charlie and I had hoped for.

"Why do you care?" I had to let the stained wood dry before I coated it with furniture wax, so I propped the pieces on the small sticks Charlie had cut, to keep them from touching anything while they dried.

"Eleanore June is our daughter. It is our duty to look after her interests," he said pompously.

"Bullshit!" I spat at him. "You don't give a flying fuck about Ellie's interests. You two treat her more like a servant than a daughter."

"The Good Book tells us children should ..."

"NO!" I shouted. "You do NOT get to quote scripture at me as an excuse for anything you do. DON'T YOU DARE stand there and hide behind the Word of God. DON'T YOU DARE!!!" I was shaking I was so furious.

The old reprobate stood shaking, too. His fists were balled up, and his face was red. I could tell he wanted to hit me, so I stood nose-to-nose with him.

"Go ahead, old man! See if you can!" God help me, I wanted the old bastard to swing at me so I could knock his damn head off.

All my life people like him had been using the Bible to keep me or Joe or any of the whores or roustabouts out of their lily white churches because we weren't the right kind of people. Ellie had assumed I didn't go to church because I didn't believe in God. I believe in God, I just don't believe in churches full of hypocrites like this old bastard.

As with all bullies, he backed down. "You are evil, boy, your grandfather was evil, your father was evil, and the sins of the fathers ..."

"I warned you about quoting scripture, old man." My words and the look on my face shut him up.

"You will come to a bad end, bastard!" He spit the words out, then he spat at me. It hit my cheek and slid down, leaving a slime trail. I never looked away from his hate-filled eyes.

"Maybe, old man, but I'll have come by it honestly. When you wake up in hell, it's probably gonna surprise the shit out of you, but Satan and the bad guys won't be surprised. They probably already have a fuckin' brass plaque engraved with your name. Now get away from me before I forget you're old and give you the fuckin' beat down you deserve." I turned away then turned back.

"And old man, if you ever treat my mom like your servant again, in front of me, the whole Weatherby family won't be enough to pull me off you. Now get the fuck out!" He staggered as if I'd shoved him, then turned and shambled out of the barn. When he opened the door to leave, I was surprised to find it was almost dark.

I wiped his slime off my cheek with a shop rag, then cleaned up the space, wanting to leave it the way I found it — Joe taught me that. Thinking of Joe was an ache in my gut.

Until I'd met their parents, I never understood what the teen-aged Joe and Ellie had to face. I had thought Joe's parents were evil incarnate the one time I met them. I'd been seven, and they'd been scary even to a skinny too-tall kid raised by whores and roustabouts, but they never tried to make anyone think they were anything but what they were — mean white trash. Ellie's parents were worse. They presented one face to the world, hiding behind respectability and money, while inside they were rotting and twisted, like gangrene festering below the surface but poisoning the body.

I shook off the willies Walter Ruel had given me and shut out the workshop light. The vapor light over the barn door made the snow glow eerie blue white, and I stood outside the closed barn just breathing. The air was crisp enough to tingle in my nose.

The house spilled warm yellow light out of every window, and through one I could see Ellie and the

brownies decorating a tree. I'd heard of Christmas trees and seen them in stores, but Joe and I'd never had one. No place to put one in a 15x15 room. Besides, we never had presents to put under it.

Because the fireplace burned all day on Saturdays, I knew the porch wood box would be low, so I skated back and forth between the wood pile and the house a few times, until the porch supply was high again. My fingers were freezing, and I was looking forward to warming them around a mug of hot strong coffee.

The front door opened, and June looked out.

"Oh," she said flatly. "I thought you were Walter."

"No, I am thankfully not Walter," I said as I knocked some slush off my boots.

She sniffed — again — and looked past me into the turnaround. Their Cadillac was still there, and she stepped out onto the porch to get a better look around. The ground was flat and clear all around the house and outbuildings. No Walter. Ellie came out onto the porch, pulling a sweater off her shoulders.

"Mother, what are you doing out here without a coat?" She draped the sweater around her mother.

"I'm looking for your father. He said he was going for a walk, but that was some time ago."

"Ruel, have you seen him?" Ellie asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. About an hour ago he came in the barn, called me a few names, quoted some scripture at me, and I told him to get out." Mrs. Ruel turned on me in a fury.

"What did you do to him you vile child?" She was curling her fingers into claws, like she was going to launch herself at me and claw my eyes out.

"Mother, Ruel wouldn't do anything to father. Stop over-dramatizing." She sounded calm, but I could see tension around her eyes. *crap! she doesn't need this drama anymore than I do.*

"You want me to see if I can find him?" I volunteered reluctantly.

Ellie smiled at me. "Would you? I'd appreciate it. Jim and the girls should be back soon, but I hate to wait. Did you see which way Father went when he left the barn?"

I shook my head. "I was busy cleaning up. I'll see if I can find a trail." What I really wanted was something warm to wrap my cold hands around and put inside me, but I turned away from the warm lights of the house and trudged back toward the barn.

I followed every trail I found leading off from the barn, but most of them were my own going to and from the huge pile of dead trees Jim and Charlie had hauled down from the hills to be used for fire wood, or they were Charlie's as he went about his work to and from the various outbuildings. After two hours I was so cold and stiff I couldn't close my hands. I went back to the house to warm up and see if Walter had returned.

He hadn't, and June was practically hysterical. Guess I couldn't blame her. He was old and not in very

good shape. He could be lying somewhere hurt from a fall or having a heart attack. If only, I thought uncharitably.

I took off my coat and gloves, laying them by the fireplace so they could warm up while I got some food and something to drink. I was leaning against a kitchen counter wolfing down a sandwich and a cup of coffee, when Jim came in.

"Any sign at all?" I shook my head, my mouth full of ham and cheese.

"Where all did you check?"

I swallowed and said, "The barn, all the outbuildings, the big wood pile. I followed a track as far as the south pasture fence, but it was Charlie's from when he repaired it Thursday." I took another bite and talked as I chewed. "I figured I'd head down the drive and see if he walked down the road."

Jim said, "I didn't see him when I came in, but he's been gone long enough he could be anywhere. I've radioed in for some help, told them to start at the Trask end and work this way, searching the side roads. You head west along the road, and I'll work my way back toward Trask. There are quite a few side roads he could take between here and town, but only a couple between here and the river." I nodded, finished my sandwich, and went to get my coat.

"Ruel," Ellie said, "I've laid out some of Jim's thermal underwear on your bed. Put that on under your clothes while I get you an emergency pack." She hustled out to the mudroom, and I went to put on the loaner long johns.

Back outside, bundled up and feeling like Mini-me in her Michelin-man snowsuit, I slung the emergency pack onto my back and headed down the drive. At the end I turned right, toward the river and the end of the road. The road was plowed and packed so no footprints were visible, but I kept heading west. About three miles west of the Weatherby drive, there was a driveway off to the right, towards the mountains, that lead to a summer home for some rich person who lived in Denver or Billings or some other city. The driveway was a foot deep in undisturbed pristine whiteness so I moved on. The only other road off this one, about two miles further on, led south out into the flats. It showed a couple of partially filled tire tracks but no footprints. I took a swig from my water bottle and kept walking west, toward the river.

I'd already come five or six miles, and after almost three hours of searching, the slipping and sliding one-step-forward-one-step-sideways walking and the dropping temperature were tiring me out fast. I'm in pretty good shape, between the physical work I did before coming here and working out for wrestling, but even I was feeling the effects of this winter night. I didn't believe Walter would have come this way, and if he did I didn't think he would have gotten this far. I would have already found him. *another mile to the river. might as well go the distance. make sure.*

I was almost to the river when I saw him. He was sitting under a tree, his feet pointed toward the road. *oh, God, for ellie's sake don't let the old charlatan be dead!*

39 — The Golden Rule Doesn't Just Apply to Nice Guys

"Walter?" I said, loudly enough he could hear, if he was conscious, but not loud enough to startle him. If he was having a heart attack I didn't want to make it worse. I approached slowly.

"Walter?" He moved his head. *thank you, God!*

"Walter, kind of a crappy night to be lounging under a tree. You OK?" I moved up beside him and squatted. That's when I saw his leg. It was bent at a funny angle just above his shoe. *well, shit!*

"Broken?" I asked, gesturing at his ankle.

"Obviously!" he snarked back.

"Uhm, Walter, you might want to hold the snark until we get back to the house." He grunted. *i'll take what i can get.* In the little light provided by the stars reflecting off the snow, I could see his lips were turning blue. He didn't have much time, which meant my first plan of going back to the house to get help wasn't going to work. So, Plan B.

I pulled the emergency pack off my shoulders and opened it. Right on top was a survival blanket. I pulled it out of its plastic bag, shook it open, and wrapped it around the old man, tucking it as far under him as I could. I found some ibuprofen and shook a couple out, then handed them and my water bottle to him. He hesitated.

"Walter, I don't have any contagious diseases. My last check-up was completely clear. Get your head out of your ass and take the fuckin' pills!" He winced at my swearing, but took the pills and the water.

I pulled the rest of the contents out and spread them on one edge of the foil-lined survival blanket. Wind-proof matches in a plastic case. A candle. A flashlight in a plastic bag with batteries. A couple of chemical glowsticks. A bag of trail mix, which I handed to Walter. And a survival knife, a K-bar.

First priority was to get him warmed up. He'd never survive the trip back as cold as he already was.

I wanted to save the flashlight for the trip back, so I snapped and shook one of the glowsticks until it glowed bright green, then handed this to Walter. "Hold this so I can see what the hell I'm doing."

Using the edge of my boot I scraped through the snow down to bare dirt, creating a circle about six feet across. Then I took the knife and began breaking and hacking limbs and twigs until I had a fair pile beside him. I placed the candle in the center of the bare circle, piling a bit of dirt around it to keep it upright, then carefully placed the smallest twigs around the candle, so they surrounded it like a cage, with the candle down in the middle. I carefully lit the wick, and as the twigs began to burn I added more, then bigger twigs, until I had a fair little fire. Then I began gently placing larger and larger twigs, then small branches, and finally some of the bigger branches.

I went farther and farther from the fire circle, breaking and hacking, bringing back the fuel and placing it on the fire. Soon it was roaring, pouring wonderful heat out. I thawed my frozen hands — hard to break and hack in gloves — then checked Walter's ankle. Definitely broken. I could see the bulge of the bone under the skin, and I'm pretty sure it wasn't supposed to turn that direction.

As far as we were from the house, I knew his only chance was for me to carry him back. I sighed. He wasn't a tall guy, maybe five six, but he was chubby. I could bench press quite a bit, but carrying a hundred sixty pounds dead weight six miles? *shit!* Well, it had to be done, but I had to stabilize that ankle, or he'd never be able to take the pain.

I dug through the last pile of sticks until I found four relatively straight ones. I cut the sticks down to fit Walter's ankle. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything to tape them with. *think, ruel, think.* I shucked out of my coat and pulled my t-shirt and thermal top off, then quickly put my coat back on. *shit! it's cold out there!* I tore some strips off my t-shirt — *damn. it's almost new!* — placed the sticks around his ankle, and tied them on with the strips. I twisted the rest of my t-shirt into a tight roll and made a figure eight around his shoe and ankle. I tied it as tightly as possible, then shook it a little to see if it was secure.

"How does that feel?" I asked. He wiggled the foot a bit and grimaced, but nodded.

"Better." He looked like he was sucking on something nasty, but he finally gritted out, "Thank you." I nodded.

"Take your coat off," I said. "We need to get this on you." I held out the thermal shirt. He was warming up, but as soon as we were away from the fire, the cold would come in again. I wasn't about to go to all the hassle of lugging him back only to have him die of hypothermia.

"But, you won't ..."

"Come on, Walt. The sooner you get this fuckin' shirt on, the sooner we can get home."

As he was taking his coat off, he said, "You swear an awful lot, young man!" I tugged the thermal shirt down over his own shirt and sweater, then motioned him to put his coat back on.

"Yeah, I do." I repacked what was left of the emergency supplies and put the pack on Walter.

"Why do I have to carry the pack?" he grouched. I fashioned a sort of poncho out of the survival blanket, cutting a hole for his head and slashing it for his arms. I cut one strip off an edge and used it to tie the makeshift cloak around him. He looked like one of those conspiracy nuts in a reflective suit.

"Because I am going to be carrying you." I stood and kicked snow over the fire until it hissed out. I put the batteries in the flashlight and handed it to Walter. Then I leaned down and pulled him up onto his good foot and leaned him against the tree. I backed up to him and squatted a bit and got him in a piggyback carry.

"I don't know how long I can do this," he groaned when I grabbed his knees.

"We'll do it until we can't then we'll try something else."

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Jim and his deputies had scoured every road, path, and wide spot between the Weatherbys' place and town. No Walter. He sent everyone back to the office to wait, then went back to the house. The boy hadn't returned. Almost five hours. Either he'd found Walter and the old man was injured, or the boy had injured himself. Jim drove his unit west toward the river, praying every mile for some sign.

Half way to the river, his topped a rise and pinned the boy and the old man in his truck's headlights. The kid was carrying the old reprobate, who was wrapped up in a survival blanket and looked like a potato ready to toss in the coals.

Jim stopped the truck, hopped out, and hustled around to open the back passenger door.

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On the long unending walk back we changed positions every time we stopped, which was about every mile. I had him in the fireman's carry now, and he was starting to complain and squirm, when headlights rose up over a gentle rise in the road and flashed right into my eyes.

I squinted them shut. "Shit! Ouch!" I stopped because I couldn't see. Also because he was heavy and whining and wiggling.

The lights stopped about ten feet away. The driver's door opened, and the dome light flashed on, revealing a very worried-looking Jim Weatherby. He met me at the passenger side where he opened the back door so I could lower Walter onto the seat. *dear, God, that feels good!* Jim went back to the driver's side, opened the back door and pulled Walter farther onto the seat so we could close the doors.

Walter laid back on the seat and groaned. I knew he had to be hurting, but he would never be mistaken for a stoic. He'd complained the entire walk, to the point I'd seriously considered just dumping his body in a snow bank and letting them find him in the spring.

I got in the front with Jim. "His right ankle's broken. Twisted kinda weird." Jim nodded, turned the truck around, and headed east.

"Probably should take him straight to the hospital," he said, snatching up the radio.

"Unit One to Base. We've found Mr. Ruel and are headed to the hospital. Possible broken ankle and exposure. Let 'em know we're coming in. And could you call Ellie and let her know we found the boy and her dad. Over."

"Roger, Unit One. Base out." Jim tossed the radio into the console, and looked over at where I leaned my head back against the head rest. "Tell me." So I did. It took most of the trip into Trask to tell everything, because he kept interrupting, asking questions and for clarification.

Walter fell asleep about two minutes after we got in the truck and slept all the way, snoring loudly. Maybe I'd be as sour as June if I had to listen to that shit every night.

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"Why?" Jim said. The boy looked at him in surprise.

"Why what?"

"The man is a complete asshole! He wouldn't walk across the room to piss on you if you were on fire. I'd bet a steak dinner he will have more complaints about his rescue than he will about the fact that he sat under that tree and almost froze to death. He will never thank you. So I repeat — why, Ruel? Why would you risk your life for that old bastard?"

"I'm not him, and he already did thank me. Grudgingly. At least for the splint. Of course, he complained

the entire walk back, so that kind of cancels out the thank you."

"Why did you do it?"

"It was the right thing to do, Jim. Joe told me YOU DO THE JOB IN FRONT OF YOU, KID. That was the job. I did it." Ruel looked at Jim's face illuminated by the instrument lights. "You'd do the same, Jim. Any man would."

Jim jerked his head at the buzz saw in the back seat. "He wouldn't!"

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"I said any man, any real man. Joe might have been a shit father, but he taught me PEOPLE WHO CAN HAVE TO DO FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN'T. He never said anything about the people who can't being nice." I looked out the window as the truck covered in minutes what had taken me a several hours to cover while I was searching for Walter.

"Besides, as nasty and mean as he is, Ellie would still feel bad if anything happened to him. The bottom line is I sure as hell didn't do it for him. He just was lucky and caught the fallout."

=====

Jim glanced at the boy, leaning his head against the seat. His eyes were closed, and the dash lights highlighted the dark circles under his eyes. He looked exhausted.

Jim thought about the ungrateful snoring man in the backseat, and compared him to the tired boy beside him. It was clear to Jim who the bastard really was.

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We didn't say anything more until we reached the hospital. Jim parked in the Emergency Room parking lot, and jogged inside to get some help. When the hospital personnel were moving Walter to the stretcher he was full of tales of his ordeal under the tree, then tossed in several references to how painful the rescue was. Jim grinned at me over the top of his unit. I just grinned and shook my head.

I was in the waiting room, when Ellie and June came in. I had removed my coat, but the hospital hadn't given me back the thermal top, so I was sitting bare to the waist in one of the uncomfortable gray plastic chairs, sipping bad coffee and eating a worse sandwich when they entered.

"Where are your shirts?" Ellie asked, eyeing my bare chest.

"Used the t-shirt as a splint and gave the other to the old man so he wouldn't freeze on the walk back. They haven't given it back."

"Where is Jim?"

I nodded my head toward the doorway to the back. "He used his badge to get back there and see what was happening." I held the Styrofoam cup up. "You want some really shitty coffee?" I waved the sandwich at them. "Or one of the worst fu...reakin' sandwiches I've ever tasted?"

Ellie shook her head with a small grin. June hadn't said anything. I think the sight of my tattoos held her speechless. Her mouth was slightly open, but I resisted the urge to reach over and shut it.

"Are you warm enough?" Ellie asked, looking for signs of imminent hypothermia, or at least goosebumps.

I shrugged. "I'm OK. Only get chilly when the doors are open."

Jim came back through the double doors just then and made a beeline to Ellie and June. He gave Ellie a quick hug then turned to June.

"He's going to be fine. Ruel got to him in time. His ankle is broken, and they are going to have to take him into surgery to set it. You need to come sign some papers so they can get going on that." He motioned toward the back, then escorted June through the double doors.

He popped his head back out. "Honey, do you want to come back and see him before they put him out?" Ellie nodded and stood, then she stooped over and gave me a fierce hug.

"Thank you," she whispered, "thank you!" She released me and followed Jim through the doors.

40 — How Walter and June Couldn't Steal Christmas

"Ruel?" I looked up from the piece of wood I was waxing. Jim stood in the barn door, peering toward the workshop where I sat.

"Yeah?"

"I'm taking June and Ellie into town to see Walter. You want to ride along? You said something last night about Christmas shopping."

We'd finally all waked up late Sunday morning after not getting in until well after three. Walter had come through surgery fine, and we had left him recovering. The doctors had said they would keep him until Monday for observation, and I said *yay!*

"Give me a few minutes to clean up." I put the lid on the wax and gathered all my supplies into the wooden box I'd been using for storage.

Fifteen minutes later, we were on our way. June was sitting in the second seat of the van complaining about the delay. I sat in the back and ignored her, trying to think what I could buy with my meager funds. I wanted to get Jim and Ellie presents, and maybe something all the girls could share. That's about all the money I had.

Jim dropped Ellie and June at the hospital, and I moved into the front seat.

"Where to?" Jim asked.

"What's open? And what can I get that the girls could share? I'm not exactly flush."

Jim reached into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out an envelope. "Ellie and I've been talking. We figured since you've pretty much settled in, and you work as hard at your chores as the girls do, you deserve the same allowance." He handed me the envelope, and I could feel the money inside. I shook my head and tried to hand it back.

"No, you don't owe me anything. You've given me shelter and clothes and food. That's enough." He held his hands up, refusing to touch the envelope.

"You don't want it drop it in the Salvation Army kettle at the Pay 'n Pack. I'm not taking it back. You work hard, Boy, at home and school. You've had to twist yourself six ways from Sunday to adjust to this life, but you never complain. Take it." He touched my shoulder. "As part of the family. Take it."

I opened the envelope. The cash inside would give me enough to buy everyone a small present. Since I'd never gone Christmas shopping before, I needed some advice.

"Thanks!" I tucked the envelope inside a zipped pocket. "Now, how the hell do you shop for Christmas presents? I've never done it before."

Jim helped me spend that money, getting something small for each girl — gift cards at the local coffee shop for the clones, hair ribbons and clips for the brownies, a book each for the mini-mes. Now I needed

something for Ellie.

"Ellie doesn't want anything. I think you calling her Ellie was more present than she expected." That wasn't good enough. I was looking around the limited shopping area in Trask, trying to come up with something that wouldn't be too mushy and weird, when I saw just what I wanted.

"Would Ellie mind if I gave her an early Christmas present?" Christmas was Wednesday, but if I did what I wanted to, I couldn't wait until then to give it.

"Ruel, she ..."

"Would she mind getting it early?" He shook his head.

I had already decided what I was giving Jim. "I'm done."

Walter came home Monday on crutches. It had started snowing Sunday night, and I spent Monday morning, while Jim and Ellie were getting him, shoveling out the walk and clearing the driveway and turnaround. I'd just finished when the van pulled in.

All the girls came out onto the porch, a reluctant but doing-our-duty welcome home party. Jim and I helped Walter into the house, making sure he didn't slip. Sarah and Amanda helped him into a comfortable chair, and Merri and Beth slipped an ottoman under his cast. Gracey took his crutches. We kids had had a conference Sunday night, sans parents, and decided we would take care of the old grouch so Ellie didn't morph back into Cinderella. We didn't let her do a thing for him. We did for Walter and forced June to tend to herself.

Tuesday, Christmas Eve, I discovered why June and Walter had so much luggage. Two of the suitcases were filled with presents. They were manipulative hypocrites, but since they had bought loyalty and friendship all their lives, they were generous in the Christmas giving. At June's imperious instructions, I brought the two suitcases down Tuesday morning and arrayed the presents under the already full tree. I was deemed the appropriate person to distribute the presents around the tree because there were none for me, so I wouldn't shake or squeeze them. Hah! I'd never seen so many presents in my life. I shook and squeezed everything I touched.

My own gifts were modest but well-wrapped, thanks to Ellie helping me, and they were inserted into the branches of the overburdened tree, sagging under the weight of hundreds of lights and decorations.

Late Tuesday afternoon Charlie took me into town to get my present for Ellie. I'd called ahead to make sure they were open. I got back just before dinner, and presented Charlie with a new pair of fur-lined leather gloves.

"Thank you, and Merry Christmas, Charlie." I'd already received his present. A newly-installed desk in my bedroom.

"Thanks, Boy. Merry Christmas to you, too." He clapped me on my shoulder, then headed home to his own family.

The house windows were glowing warm again, and I stood on the walk for a minute and looked. Seven

weeks ago, I'd approached this house convinced I didn't want anything to do with this home or family. *a lot changes in a few weeks. 'EVERYTHING CHANGES, KID, YOU GOTTA GO WITH THE FLOW OR GET SWEPT AWAY' i heard joe say in my head. got that in one, joe.* I went inside.

"Ruel, where have you been?" Ellie demanded, whirling through the living room, lighting candles. "It's almost time for supper. I told you this was an important tradition." I didn't say anything or move, and she turned toward me.

"Take your coat off and get in the dining room. It's all ready. Scoot." I took off my coat and stuffed the gloves into the pocket, then hung it on the coat rack by the front door.

"Ellie?" She continued to rush around straightening things, scooping up out-of-place items and depositing them in the basket she kept at the bottom of the stairs.

"Ellie!" I snapped at her. My voice was louder than I intended and several faces appeared in the dining room doorway.

"What?" She looked at me, and before she could turn away to do some other chore —

"Merry Christmas!" and I pulled off my watch cap. She stared. Her mouth dropped open. Then shut. Then open. She tried to say something and failed. I stood silent and completely still, bracing for what I knew was coming.

Ellie burst into tears and came forward and hugged me hard. I hugged her back. Hard.

"Merry Christmas," I whispered. She looked up and touched my hair, or what was left of it. It was cut to a uniform two inches all over my head. The snarled tangled mass hanging down my back was gone, and shiny soft curls were all that remained.

All the rest of the Weatherbys burst out of the dining room and surrounded us, hugging both of us and laughing. Everyone wanted to touch my hair. Hope got both hands in it. Gracey kept looking from my hair to my face and back, then reached one tentative hand up and touched it.

"Ruel, you didn't have to do this," Ellie said in wonder, fingering a curl over my ear with her thumb and forefinger.

"I know. I wouldn't have done if I had to." I felt a hand touch the back of my neck, where the flames swirled close to my hairline before dipping down to curl under my jaw and around my neck.

"I didn't realize the flames came so high on your neck," Jim said. "Your hair hid it. This ought to make Mr. Hatfield happy," he chuckled. Ellie thumped him on the shoulder, but gently.

"Roo ha'," Mini-me said, holding my hair with both chubby fists. Then she pulled on it, so I lowered my head, and she rubbed her little snub nose in it.

"Please tell me she didn't just wipe her nose in my hair," I said. Everyone laughed. "No, seriously, did she?" Everyone laughed again. *thanks a lot!* I reached a hand up to my hair, feeling for anything — well — slimy. It came away clean. *thank you, God!*

Walter and June were silent during the meal, but they'd been pretty quiet since Walter came home from the hospital. The rest of us ignored them and just enjoyed the meal. Every so often, Ellie would reach over and finger a curl, or just rest her hand on my head. *i guess she likes her present.*

Hope and Faith went to bed shortly after supper.

"It's so Santa will come sooner." Faith asserted.

"Why?" I asked, having never believed in Santa.

"So he will leave our presents," Faith said in her 'duh, now stupid can you be?' voice.

"I don't think there's any more room in the living room for presents. Don't you think you have enough?" Now I got the look that goes with the 'duh' voice.

"Sa' pes't," Mini-me said. I gave her a kiss.

"There are plenty of presents for everyone, Hope." She gave me a few cheek pats, one side wet, one side dry, and shut her eyes.

The next morning, I heard my bedroom door open when it was still dark outside. I cracked one eye and was stared down by four pairs of chocolate eyes. And one thumb.

"What are you four doing up so early?"

"We can't reach our stockings," Merri said logically.

"Then wait," I said and shut my eyes. A small finger pried one open.

"We're allowed our stockings before everyone else is up, as long as we all come down together. But we can't reach them." Beth said.

"And Hope wants a fire to open them by." I opened both eyes and stared at Faith.

"How do you know she wants a fire?" I asked logically.

"Cause I mind melt," Faith said confidently.

"You mind melt?" I asked.

Faith nodded. "Uh huh, just like Spoke on Star Teck."

"What are you talking about, Faith?"

"She says she mind melds like Spock on Star Trek," said Gracey's soft voice, from my doorway. "If you do the fire, I'll get the stockings."

And that is how I came to be sitting on the couch with Gracey early Christmas morning, watching my first

ever Christmas Stocking opening. Gracey had also made coffee and heated the apple cider, so she and I were sipping our favorite hot beverages and watching the brownies and mini-mes. They found fruit, candy (which Gracey reminded them they couldn't eat until Ellie said so), bangle bracelets for the brownies and glowsticks bracelets for the mini-mes, tiny flashlights, and a certificate promising each one's favorite dessert.

I was concentrating on the mini-mes and brownies and their stockings, when Gracey turned my face toward her and gave me a long lingering kiss. When she pulled back her eyes were inches from mine and our noses were practically touching.

"Merry Christmas, Ruel," she whispered and kissed me again, gently touching my lips with her tongue. I pulled back and scrambled away from her toward one end of the couch.

"Gracey, what are you doing?" I whispered furiously. "Jim will kill me if he finds me kissing you!" *and God will send me straight to hell.*

=====

Jim left his bedroom, tucking his shirt into his jeans and thinking about breakfast. On Christmas morning he always cooked his mother's sausage breakfast casserole and Pecan Pullapart. And he let Ellie sleep in a bit. Never lasted long with seven girls in the house, but a bit was better than none.

When he reached the end of the short hall, he could smell the fireplace and heard the little ones with their stockings. He smiled. He loved Christmas.

Then he heard Grace say, "Merry Christmas, Ruel." followed by a pause. Not a silence, exactly, but a pause.

Then he heard the boy say, "Gracey, what are you doing? Jim will kill me if he finds me kissing you!" He's right, Jim thought, I'm going to kill him. How dare he come into my house, like a wolf in sheep's clothing ...

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"Why?" she whispered back, not looking the least bit ashamed. *what kind of stuff do they teach at that church?*

"Why? WHY? Because you are his daughter. You're my sister. That's kind of wrong!"

"First of all, you weren't kissing me, I was kissing you. Second, I'm not your sister."

"Your Dad is married to my bio-mom. Pretty sure that makes us brother and sister." My jeans were getting a little tight, and I was trying to sit so she wouldn't notice.

"Wrong! It makes us stepbrother and stepsister. No relation." She smiled and moved toward me.

I blinked. *stepbrother? no relation?* She moved right in front of me, got on her knees, and leaned in and kissed me again, sliding the tip of her warm moist tongue over my lips. *holy shit, tight jeans. shit!*

I slid around her and stood. "It won't matter. This isn't going to happen!" I turned toward my room.

"Why?" Gracey asked surprised.

I whirled on her, "Because your dad trusts me to NOT let it happen. Because I'm never going to do anything to lose that trust. Your dad has been a decent guy to me when he had no reason to be." I entered my bedroom and, just before shutting the door, said over my shoulder. "It doesn't matter how much I want it, this is never going to happen."

I didn't come out again until Sarah knocked and said breakfast was ready.

=====

Jim shut his eyes and leaned against the wall. He felt instant and deep shame that he had judged the boy so immediately and unfairly. He had criticized Ellie for her prejudices toward the boy, but was he any better?

Jim heard the boy say, "It doesn't matter how much I want it, this is never going to happen," and heard his bedroom door shut. Another lesson in trust, Jim thought as he continued on to the kitchen.

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41 — Peace on Earth Goodwill Toward Men, Even the Ruels

Breakfast was great, but watching people open presents was the most unbelievable experience. The Weatherbys had a system that spread the present unwrapping far into the day, but kept it organized. I guess you have to be with twelve people.

Paper bags were placed around the room in pairs — garbage and reuse. Everyone sat in a favorite spot. I chose on the floor leaning against my bedroom door, and Mini-me sat beside me. The oldest girl, Sarah, who was seven minutes older than Amanda, picked a present for each person, handed them out, someone chose a present for her, then everyone opened his or her present. Everyone admired what everyone else got, then the next oldest girl took her turn.

My first present was a brilliant blue sweater that Ellie (the giver) said matched my eyes. It was only a sweater, but I was touched way out of proportion to the gift. Joe's birthday present to me had usually been a box of ammo or a tattoo.

Merri was the first to open a present from me. She loved the ribbons and clips. Whew!

After Gracey had her turn, everyone looked expectantly at me.

"What?"

"You're next oldest, Ruel," Jim said. "You are seven months younger than Grace."

Feeling very self-conscious, I dug through the gaily wrapped boxes and bags, choosing just the right gift for each person. I debated briefly before handing Walter his present, but gave it anyway.

There was a present waiting for me at my seat. It was from Sarah. A plaque for the powder room door that turned from 'Available' with a picture of a smiling bull to 'Occupied' and a picture of a bull standing on his back legs, which were crossed, wearing a decidedly pained expression.

I laughed and turned it to showed it to everyone, but they were all staring at Walter, who held a small plastic wrapped silver rectangle.

"What is this" Walter demanded, shaking the small item.

"It's from me, Walter. It's a survival blanket like the one I used on you. It's small enough to keep in your pocket, so you will have it if you ever have trouble again."

He looked at it, sniffed once, then dropped it in the trash bag? I felt my face flush a bit, but ignored the flush and the ungrateful man.

Instead I held up my plaque and said, "Is this going to work or do I need to install a lock?" Sarah blushed a bit, as she and Amanda had both almost walked in on me in the shower.

The rounds of presents continued, and the other girls seemed pleased by my small gifts. Of course, they could be just being polite, but I'd take what I could get. When my turn came again, I deliberately chose my present to June.

Everyone unwrapped their gifts, except me. I was watching June. I had no expectations from her other than surprise that I'd given her anything. When she took the last layer of paper off, and opened the white box, she looked inside then raised a smiling face — toward Ellie.

"Eleanore June, this is just exquisite!" She carefully lifted a fine china cup and saucer from the white tissue paper. The thin porcelain was ivory with embossed whorls and swirls. The thin handle echoed the swirls and was small enough I doubt I could have fit my pinkie inside it.

Ellie looked confused. "Mother, I didn't give you that."

"Nonsense, Eleanore June, who else could have given this to me?"

"I could," I said quietly.

"Don't be ridiculous! Where could you have gotten the money to buy such a beautiful set?" If she were dripping any more disdain, she would need a bib.

"There's a second-hand store in Trask. He had that in his display case. He said it's a Lennox pattern that is discontinued, whatever the hell that is." I watched her face closely. As she became convinced the cup and saucer had come from me instead of Ellie, her face soured, and her mouth twisted.

"You?"

"Me!"

She dropped the ivory cup and saucer into the garbage bag beside her. She was sitting by the fireplace, and her garbage bag was sitting on the stone hearth. The distinct sound of breaking china could be heard as the nearly paper thin cup and saucer hit the unforgiving stone.

Everyone in the room gasped, and Ellie sprang to her feet. I jumped up and intercepted her before Jim could even react.

"That's it!! I want you both out of my house NOW!" She tried to get around me, to get at her mother and father who were sitting with their mouths open at this rebellion by their usually subservient daughter.

I stood between her and them, while she spewed venom around me.

"He saved your life, you horrible, wretched, despicable old man. And you, you ungrateful, bigoted, withered old witch. You're both the most hateful, hypocritical, black-hearted..." Her arms were reaching around me in futile gestures of grabbing and scratching.

"Ellie," I said quietly. "Let it go. Ellie! They can't hurt me. They don't have any power over me. They're just have shriveled hateful black hearts and gangrene of the soul."

She continued to rail at them calling them vile names and trying to get around me to get to them.

"Ellie. They aren't worth it."

She was shaking with rage, her language deteriorating to Joe's level.

"Ellie, stop! Let it go!"

She was beyond listening. Years of abuse and lying, hatred and degradation had snapped her customary self-control, and she was scrabbling now, trying desperately to get around me. An animal seeking only to hurt these people who had hurt her all her life and were now going after me, the son they had denied her through lies and manipulation.

Jim's face was white, and the girls were all crying silently, Sarah and Amanda holding the mini-mes, and Merri and Beth holding each other. Gracey was standing by Jim, her face as white as his, tears running down her soft freckled cheeks.

I wrapped Ellie in my arms, holding her tight against my chest. Leaning down so my lips were right by her ear, I whispered, "Mom. Stop. They're not worth it. They can't hurt me. No one can hurt me unless I let them. Mom, let it go."

She stopped, suddenly, like switching off a radio. She went silent and limp, clinging to me like I was a life preserver in the middle of the ocean.

"They can't hurt any of us unless we let them. Don't give them any power. Ignore them." My voice was so quiet I could hardly hear myself, but Ellie stood limp and frozen in my arms.

"Let it go, Mom."

She raised her dead-white face, her brown eyes like windows into the dark place she kept all her hurt and anger, always controlling it, never letting it out.

She smiled a shaky smile. "You called me mom," she whispered.

"Seemed like the only way to get you back," I said softly, pushing a brown curly strand behind one ear.

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Jim watched in horror as Ellie came apart right in front of him. He had moved to grab her, hold her, when her witch of a mother had shattered the boy's present, but the boy had moved so fast, like he was expecting this. He wrapped his strong young arms around her and pulled her to him. Bending his head, he spoke so softly even Jim, standing just a foot away, couldn't hear.

All Ellie's words and frantically movements stopped, like he'd pulled the plug or switched her off. She sagged, clinging to him, while he whispered into her ear. Ellie raised her stricken face to him, smiling, and whispered something. The boy moved a soft brown curl behind one ear, and answered her,

Suddenly she was sobbing, shaking, calling his name. Jim stepped up to the pair, scooped his wife into his arms, and carried her away from the pain and hate.

=====

Suddenly her eyes widened and filled with a flood. "Jim?" she sobbed, and he came. He picked her up right out of my embrace and carried her to their bedroom.

The tension broke, and the sound of the girls' crying got through the bubble I'd had around Ellie and me.

"Roo!!!" shrieked Mini-me, reaching her chubby arms out toward me. I took her from Sarah, and walked out of the living room, the others following, leaving the two wicked old sinners alone.

We took Mini-me and Faith to their room, and all of us sat on the floor and played little kid games and read little kid books, and kept the little ones occupied, not knowing what else to do. At one point we heard sounds on the stairs, like their grandparents were coming up, but none of us were interested in finding out.

The mini-mes and the brownies fell asleep about eleven, so we tucked them all into the mini-mes beds. Sarah and Amanda and Gracey said they wanted to sit with them. I needed to move, so I left the seven sisters watching over the littler ones and comforting each other and went downstairs. There were still a lot of presents to go, mostly those from Walter and June. Everything they'd given the girls so far had been expensive. *wonder what they'll do with them now?*

I cleaned up what I could. I took the garbage bags out into the mud room, so I could take them to the burn barrel tomorrow. I put away the dishes from the drainer. Not knowing anything about the food, I didn't know how to check the turkey or what else needed to go in, so I just made sure the kitchen was clean, the way Ellie likes.

I put on a fresh kettle of water, made a fresh pot of coffee, and turned up the slow cooker full of spiced cider. I set out mugs, spoons, sugar and creamer, some boxes of tea, and the little bowl of lemon wedges. I found the plates of homemade Christmas cookies and placed them on the table.

I was running out of things to do to keep busy, so I started inventing things. I brought several armloads of wood to the pile on the porch. I used the hatchet and split enough kindling to overflow the kindling box. Then I brought wood inside and built the fire in the fireplace back up.

A sound brought my head around. Gracey was standing there, her white face tear-streaked.

"Are the little ones OK?" I asked, worried that's why she was down here. She nodded.

"Are you OK?" She shook her head, then moved forward into my arms. She was shaking and crying, and I just wrapped my arms around her as I had Ellie, and held on.

Gracey finally quieted, leaning into me, sighing and hiccupping occasionally. I held her tight, waiting for some sign she was finished. She fell asleep wrapped in my arms, upright but sound asleep. The couch was covered with the gifts and such that Merri and Beth and Faith had already opened, so I picked Gracey up and took her into my room. I laid her on the bed and covered her with the spare blanket Ellie had given me, then I went out, not quite shutting the door.

I got a cup of coffee and stood in front of the Christmas tree, all the room lights out, just looking at the gaudiness of it. I mean, come on, a ten-foot-tall dead fir tree covered in shiny glittering baubles and ugly homemade ornaments, strung with paper loops, and a jillion twinkling colored lights stuck in the middle of someone's house, shedding needles? For sheer weirdness, it can't be beat. I loved every gaudy, weird, ugly, beautiful square inch of it. To me it represented every minute I'd been in this home — ugliness, beauty, weirdness, attractiveness, love, selfishness, acceptance, rejection. Maybe it was some sort of existential metaphor for a family, but for me it was what a real home should be.

I heard steps behind me, but didn't turn. It didn't matter who it was. There was no one in this house I was afraid to turn my back on, even the two nasty old people upstairs. I just kept looking at the tree.

"Contemplating the universe?" Jim asked, stepping up beside me with his own cup of coffee.

"Just the tree. It's the first one I've ever had. Well, it's not exactly mine, but ... you know." I gestured toward it with my cup.

"I went up to check on the girls. They said Grace had come down here," he said, looking around the obviously Grace-free living room.

"She's sleeping," I said, waving my free hand toward my bedroom door. Jim looked at the almost-closed door, very pointedly, then looked at me, also very pointedly.

"Jeez, Jim, get your mind out of the gutter. She came down here sobbing, she fell asleep, I put her on my bed and covered her up." I rolled my eyes at him.

=====
Jim felt guilty, like he'd spied on the two earlier, so he straightened his shoulders and looked the boy directly in the eye.

"I heard you and Grace earlier, on the couch, when the little ones were opening stockings.

The boy froze, coffee cup halfway to his lips. He lowered it carefully and waited, just holding it and staring at the brightly lit tree. Jim thought he would make a great painting — the tall rough-looking man drinking coffee and staring at a tree. Maybe 'A Roughneck Christmas'.

"I heard what you told Grace." The boy nodded and turned just enough so he could see Jim. His blue eyes were shuttered, hiding what he was thinking, much as they had been when he first came to them seven weeks and a lifetime ago.

"Did you mean what you told Grace?"

"Yes."

"Did you know I was listening?" Jim hated asking, but he was a cop. He gathered all the facts before acting.

The glacial-blue eyes grew cold. Jim could practically feel the wind right off the surface of the millennia-old ice.

"No!"

"Good!"

The boy's black eyebrows rose a bit. "Why? 'Cause I'm not good enough for your daughter?" Ruel's voice was tight and low-pitched.

"Get the chip off your shoulder!" Jim snapped. "I'm glad because it means my trust isn't misplaced." He was angry, because the boy was so close to what Jim had thought earlier.

"No one is ever good enough for any man's daughter. You'll learn that when you become a father," he took a sip of coffee, "in ten years or so! Grace is fourteen. The girls aren't allowed to date until they're sixteen. That doesn't change just because you live here!"

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I stared at him, unsure I'd heard right. He just smiled back.

"Grace is right, Boy. You aren't related." Over his shoulder I saw my bedroom door stood open.

"So, what does that mean?" I asked, pretty sure Gracey was standing in my dark bedroom listening.

"I'll tolerate holding hands. Anything more, and there will be consequences. Remember, I have a gun!" I saw her in time to put my cup on the mantle before she launched herself into my arms.

"I TOLD you!" she said as I caught her. Before I could stop her she kissed me hard, making me hard! *shit. what part of just holding hands did she miss?*

"Grace," Jim said quietly, "I didn't say Ruel would suffer the consequences." She blushed bright pink, as if just realizing her dad was standing there, and wiggled out of my arms.

"Sorry, Daddy." She hugged him. "I'll be good," but she kept looking at me like I was lunch. *maybe i need to get a lock for my room.*

"Ground rules! No more joint visits in bathrooms. Any room that contains both of you must have the lights on and the doors open. No sneaking kisses, etc. at school. No being horizontal together — anywhere!"

"Daddy!" Gracey exclaimed, turning even pinker.

"Any violations and one of you will be sleeping in the barn." He directed this last statement at Gracey, which embarrassed and pleased me both. He didn't assume I would be the one breaking the rules.

Gracey hugged him again. "Thank you, Daddy," she whispered. He hugged her back — hard — and kissed her forehead.

"You're welcome. Now do me a favor, go tell your mom I'll be back in a minute. I want to talk to Ruel in private."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Daddy!"

He turned her around and gave her a little shove. "Go! Please." She went.

I braced myself, hoping to God this wasn't a facts-of-life lecture. That ship had left the dock a long time ago.

"I heard what you told Jeff, about your twelfth birthday present." I looked away, back at the tree. *oh, shit.* I swallowed hard, for the first time embarrassed about the way I was raised.

"Given your dad's past, I'm going to assume you always used a condom." I nodded. "Are you clean?"

I nodded again. "Joe made us get checked every couple of months. My last was my birthday in September."

"Were you active after that?" I nodded.

"As soon as we can arrange it, you get tested again." I nodded again.

"And from right now, no more. Until you are eighteen. Agreed?" *four years? holy shit! since my twelfth birthday, the longest i'd gone was since i moved here.*

Jim saw my hesitation. "Agreed?" Joe said DON'T MAKE A PROMISE UNLESS YOU KNOW YOU CAN KEEP IT, KID. *can i keep that promise?* I finally turned and looked at Jim.

"I don't know if I can promise that, Jim? I wish I could say 'Sure, I promise', but I can't because I don't know if I can keep it." I glanced at my present to Jim, lying on a branch a few feet away.

"I promise to talk to you before I do anything. That's the best I can do." He looked unhappy, disappointed, in my answer.

"Do you want me to lie, Jim? To make a promise knowing I maybe can't keep it?" On impulse, I reached into the tree and grabbed my present for Jim. "Open it." I said and handed it to him. I turned and went into the kitchen, not wanting to see him read it. Just in case.

=====

The boy's deep blue eyes were sad as he handed Jim the scroll of paper and walked off into the kitchen.

Jim unrolled the scroll and read.

Jim and Ruel

Agreement so we don't kill each other

- 1. Ruel will refrain from using the word fuck or any version of it around the Weatherbys, especially the women. *I haven't done very well on this, but I promise to try a lot harder.*
- 2. ~~Jim will not call Ruel son or call himself Ruel's stepfather, stepdad, or make any other reference to being related to him.~~
- 3. In so far as it is possible Ruel will have final say in how he looks, clothes, hair, etc.
- 4. Ruel will not call any woman bitch, especially the Weatherby women. *Does thinking it count? :-)*
- 5. Ruel Black is proud to be part of this family. Thank you.

Jim stared hard at the simple declaration. His vision blurred, and he swiped at the tears slipping down his face. He looked up and saw the boy standing in the kitchen doorway, looking uncertain. The look was so unlike Ruel's usual confidence, Jim wasn't quite sure what to do, so he went with instinct. He walked up to the boy and drew him into a bear hug.

"Merry Christmas, Son," Jim said simply.

=====

"Merry Christmas, Jim."

Epilogue

We never got back to the tree that day, and we never had Christmas dinner. We ate turkey sandwiches and had turkey soup and turkey casserole and turkey pot pie until we were all ready to hide the damn leftovers so Ellie couldn't think of one more fu...reaking way to serve turkey.

The day after Christmas, Jim drove Walter and June back to the airport in their rental gas-hog, and Sarah and Amanda and I followed in the family van. Ellie and the rest of the girls never said goodbye or saw them leave. In fact, Ellie didn't come out of her bedroom until they had gone. I never saw them again except at their funerals, which suited me just fine.

The older girls, clones and brownies alike, boxed up every gift Walter and June had given them, except the cash and the two new laptops, and gave them to the Salvation Army. Somewhere some kids got some late but very expensive Christmas presents.

My first Christmas was over.

New Years' Eve, Sarah and Amanda had dates to the school End-of-the-Year dance, which Jim and Ellie chaperoned while Gracey and I babysat the brownies and the mini-mes. Yes, we behaved ourselves, except for one very quick peck at midnight. Shit! Get your mind out of the gutter!

Gracey and I became officially boyfriend and girlfriend, although she had to teach me what that meant. Mostly it was walking with her between classes, holding her hand, and not looking at "skanky girls who are trying to steal my boyfriend".

In February, the Varsity and Junior Varsity wrestling teams both made the State Wrestling Tournament in Casper. I won my JV Heavy Weight Division, by beating an undefeated German exchange student, who took exception to losing by grabbing the trophy out of my hand, breaking three of my fingers in the process, and trying to run off with it. A Mustang fan brought him down with a well-placed beer bottle.

Gracey turned fifteen and got her Learner's Permit. It took me two months to work up the nerve to ride with her.

In March, over spring break, the Reeves came back to visit. While the females visited and went shopping in Billings and did other girl stuff, Pete, Jeff, Jim, and I went camping. It was muddy and cold, we could hardly get a fire going, and we spent several nights fighting wind and rain. The highlight was when a herd of elk decided our nice clearing would make a good bedding site, and we woke up surrounded. It was the best week ever!

In April I gave Ellie a birthday present. I went to Easter services at their church. I got a few weird stares because of the tattoos, but the preacher was nice and most of the people made me feel welcome. I might go again sometime. The brownies turned nine

In May Hope turned three. She was talking more, not just swear words, but real words. My favorite is 'brudder'. She's still fixated on me, but it's more just little sister worship, which is kinda cool.

In June, the brownies went to summer camp, the clone twins turned seventeen, and Faith turned six. Jim and Ellie had their eleventh wedding anniversary, which they celebrated with a week in Jackson Hole.

And Gracey taught me to ride a horse. I think I prefer motorcycles.

In July, I spent most days keeping the ranch equipment running. Charlie liked it because it meant he could do the job he was supposed to do, keep the ranch running. We made a good team, and he dubbed me official Weatherby Ranch mechanic. I accepted the position by rewiring the 1949 Jimmy pickup, and rebuilding the engine. Turns out Charlie is a better ranch foreman than mechanic.

August was hot, but no one complained. We all remembered how cold winter got. I helped with my first ever haying. The whole family went to Cheyenne for back-to-school shopping, which was a good thing. Rob, the clerk at the Trask Mercantile where I'd gotten my clothes when I first came to town, said they didn't carry stuff my size. I'd grown another two inches and was twenty-seven pounds heavier. For Jim's birthday, I got the Jimmy started.

In September, I started my sophomore year in high school. I was in AP English, AP History, and made the football team. I had also passed Spanish I and was taking Spanish II (turns out doing your homework around a Spanish-speaking dispatcher has its benefits).

I turned fifteen, and Jim took me in for my learner's permit. I aced the test. Jim helped me study for it and was looking forward to teaching me to drive. I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd been driving since I was nine. I've learned sometimes a small lie makes for a lot of happiness.

Jim also took me to Sheridan and let me get a tattoo. On my right bicep under the flag Joe had given me, I had 'JOE' tattooed above the words 'DO WHAT YOU GOTTA DO, KID' with a line of barbed wire around my bicep above and below the words. Ellie was unhappy with both of us, but Jim and I stuck together on it.

In October, Jim helped me buy a small bronze plaque for Joe's grave. He and I drove back to North Dakota to install it. It said,

**JOE BLACK
BEST BOUNCER AND WORST FATHER
IN NORTH DAKOTA
WHAT HE HAD, HE GAVE.
I MISS YOU, JOE.**

In November, I celebrated living with the Weatherbys one year, like a second birthday. Except I got everyone else presents. The girls got bracelets. Jim got a mug that said, 'World's Best ~~Step~~Dad'.

Ellie's was hardest, but I finally figured out what I should give her. It was a photo Jim had taken of the eight of us kids washing the van. We were getting more water on each other than the van, and he'd caught us just as all the girls ganged up on me and doused me with the soapy water buckets and hoses. I printed it out on photo paper, and made a frame for it. Into the edge of the frame I carved —

We don't get to choose family, but we get to choose who we love.

Jim and Ellie taught me that.