

Potnia Theron

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summary

An unlikely encounter nudges Del Mar toward Twist and on to different choices. A bad case of deus ex machina. Bear with me, I am a born sheepdog.

note

Potnia Theron is the appellative given in archaic Greek mythology to the Lady of the Beasts, an Earth goddess manifesting herself in the form of a she-bear or in the human form of Artemis Ephesia.

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Chapter 1: What the Bear Said

May, 1983

The big grizzly sow stood up tall in the middle of the path, and the mare shied hard to the right. There was no way Ennis could have sat it, and he found himself rolling on the ground while his ears rang with the clang of shod feet galloping down on the stony slope toward the camp, two miles back in the valley. His face still pressed in the pine needles, he heard a low growling and felt his heart start racing.

"If I'm going to die now, it's just as well t'have a look" he thought, and very slowly he rolled over facing the bear. He was surprised at her beauty, the thick fur, the double row of teats on her breast; she must have cubs afoot. Before he could stand, the bear had already bumped down on all fours, jumping in a heavy, four-beat gallop, and suddenly she was over him, rolling him again to his back, pinning down his spread arms by her heavy, long-nailed pads. He could smell her wild tang of honey and marjoram and her hot breath laced with fresh salmon, much too close for comfort, and all thought left him in the wonder of this unexpected death. "Nothin' pisses me off like you blokes lettin' a good miracle go to waste".

It was the bear talking, a gravelly voice, slow and powerful, half-way between a growl and a purr.

"Like you felt entitled to a whole bunch o'them in your lifetime. Or to none at all. This free will thing, sometimes you make me wonder if it was such a great idea after all. No beast give me more trouble with it than you humans, not even cats, and that's saying a lot. Cats' miracles usually come either of the eatable or fuckable variety, and you bet they eat or fuck first and ask questions later, if ever. But you two..."

A large wet nose hovered and quivered an inch above his, and when he raised his eyes there were hers fixed into his, two deep black shiny buttons of nothingness. He felt himself gulping dryly.

"Who... what are you?" he breathed out.

"Here you are again with names! I sent Adam go name things around just to take him off my hair for a while, and look at you now, still acting like you perform a sacred duty out of sticking labels on the world as if you own the damned place and need to brand it for property. Names are nothing. I have a million names and to spare, none of them meanin' nothin'. You just call me Boss".

She licked her lips, the rosy tip of her tongue flicking out of the thin dark lips and passing briefly on her nose, leaving it glistening.

"And, by the way, sure thing I have cubs afoot. I always have cubs afoot. You are one of them, and your Jack over there is another, and when I put together a gift miracle for you, real nice like that, and deliver it to you on a plate, and you don't even bother to take notice, that's when I get grumpy, that's for sure. Now get you up, boy".

The bear stepped back from his arms, letting him rise to a crouch and slowly to a stand. He shuffled his feet a little, not knowing where to look. Somehow it felt appropriate to take off his

hat, like in church. Here was a talking grizzly who sounded like she was reading his mind, and what this made him feel was not so much scared as rather solemn. Either that, or scared out of his wits, more probably.

"You two seem to believe that people first decide whether they're straight or gay, and only then set off finding the love of their life. No wonder so many of you fuck it up for good. You are a case in point yourself, my innards be blessed! What's so tough that you can't get it? Neither gender nor sex are so important to loving. Look at the wild geese, they don't put up such a fuss about same-sex couples. Still, a third of the world keeps thinking that I burned Sodom down because of that, when I said loud and clear it was because of the breach of hospitality instead. So now open your ears and listen, you hard-headed young son of a bitch. You have had a miracle going on here, these last twenty years, but now it's slipping away, and the only way to hold on to it is by grasping at it together. 'This ain't no small thing happening here'. The other one at least got the idea, more or less... almost too late, I may add. However, he can't pull it off alone, and time is running out on both of you. You humans, walking around like you were immortal, but you ain't. Not even I can know what fuss you'd be able to kick up. You already had one chance to make it right, first time up here, when I made that chestnut of yours dump you and the mules run off, but no, you didn't get it, did you? A tiny black bear was not enough, you needed a grizzly to put the fear of God into you at long last. Let you know you won't live forever".

Ennis tries hard to speak. This is turning his whole world upside down, in such a sudden, authoritative way that it doesn't really seem important if this is really happening or if it is a crazy imagination while he is being eaten alive and plucked limb from limb on the mountain path and his spilled brain spews off its last sparks.

"But what about my girls, and Alma, and Jack's family? Ain't we due to..."

"To hell with you duty, Ennis Del Mar!"

The bear is growling now, her eyes sparkling with anger.

"Number One duty is being truthful to whatever bit o'sense you manage to lay your hands on during your lifetime, which is usually pretty little anyway. What do you think, that you can go on forever living your lies without bursting? How strong do you think I made you, you mankind? I have my hands full already with all the mess coming out of your little human lives, without you overrating yourself to such extents. 'Truth will make you free', I made sure they wrote that down, but there you are all set into binding yourselves up in lies like Thanksgiving turkeys. Not that I ever get thanked for the right things either. And the strongest thread of lies is believing you are doing your duty by disregarding MY MIRACLES!"

The voice raises from growl to roar, making a flurry of wings hurriedly rise from the larches nearby.

"Remember: I am said to be jealous. Whenever you take off running after your silly ideas of propriety, forgetting time and death and flesh and blood, your attention all over the place instead of focusing on that only important thing, the thing you call love, then yes, I get jealous. Do stick into your mule head that love never needs to choose. You don't get to choosing what you feel! You don't have to choose between loving your girls and loving that bloke of yours. What you do get to choosing is what you do. Either you let it slip by, and keep poisoning yourself and all those who love you with the lies you try to stick to, or you take the plunge and try to make it work once and for all, you dumb asshole!"

'We could have had a sweet life, you an'me': Jack's words, filled with final regret, pass through Ennis' mind. Has he heard them already, or is he listening to them being said in the future? The pain in them is so real it chokes him. And yet...

"I'm still scared" he whispers.

"Right for you to be. Never said it'd be easy".

The voice is softer now, more purr than growl.

"Want me to list what you're scared of?"

A beat. He'd rather not, but he feels he's goin'be told anyway, so he briefly nods.

"To begin with, you're scared of not being a good enough father if you go build a life with the person you love. Let me tell you, you're sure to be a damned better father by being truthful about love in the face of your girls. How the hell are they to learn that living and loving need pluck and pride, if you don't show them yourself?"

"Never seen it in this way before. Guess I never thought about it" he says, thoughtful. "I got this idea that they bein' so nice and pretty and, ...you know, kind o' regular, decent, not like

me here, that they'd be going' naturally to hitch up with twogood men and have a better life than mine. Never thought they may have to stand up for it".

"Maybe, or maybe not, but don't you believe they'd miss out a lot in their life by not knowing they'd be able to, if needs be? They don't see you fighting for what's worth fighting for, for instance this love which should be protected and is left flagging in the wind up here instead, time after time. They see you day after day, holding on to something with all your fucking hard-headed determination, but they don't know what it is, 'cause you don't tell them and don't let them see it. What d'you think is this going to teach them about how good life can be if they do right by it?"

"But Alma..."

"Leave Alma alone. She has more sense in her than you two put together. She loves you, you know".

"Yeah, I guess". There are times when guilt feels so heavy his shoulders hurt, and this sure is one of them.

"She can't fix it if you don't, so she stands it out, just like you. Two good people in pain because one of them is an ass. She don't get no trips up here either, you know this".

Uncomfortably, he looks up. "What should I do?"

"Make it worth her while, you son of a bitch. She's not going to like it anymore than she does now, but she'll know one of you at least is having what he wants. That's loving for you, if you never got it until now. She may even turn out being proud of her daughters' father".

Someone being proud of him is such a new idea that he blushes.

"It's clear you're not being worried the same about that Lureen".

His blush deepens.

"Just for this one time you're right, she already has the baby boy she wanted, out of a stud of her own choosing. She can get by very well on her own from there. Never imagined there may be more to life than that... No wonder she barrel-raced, silliest way to ruin a horse over here".

The bear stops, the sudden silence filled with her slow breathing and Ennis' faster, shorter panting, while his mind is flooded with extraneous thoughts. 'The outside taken care of, now it's time for the inside stuff'. 'This is going to hurt'. The voice speaks again.

"Then again, you are scared that things may not go so smooth after all if you lived your life day by day with that man of yours. Quite right, cowboy: there's only one thing that's harder to do than keeping up a love at a distance, and that's keeping up a love at close range. But you know, this one love-at-a-distance is almost ruined already, and you know very well you ain't gettin' a second chance from that Jack Twist, just like I'm not giving you a third one. He ain't no bit less tough than you, but when he gives, he gives for good, no fixin' it, and he's darn near the breaking point right now".

The bleak early mornings, when he gets up in the empty trailer and gulps down the cold coffee left over from the day before. The evenings alone, falling asleep in his work clothes, head pressed on the formica tabletop, waking up cold and cramped after a few hours and crawling into his unmade bed, trying to warm himself up, usually in vain unless he thinks of Jack. Such a far sight from their glorious days together on Brokeback, when being cold and sleeping on hard ground feel like heaven. Would the glory fade to the dreary grey light of common days, or would those days be heaven because they're shared between them?

"Life is short and you get only one, man. Think about it".

He does. Goin' out somewhere else, a clean slate. Uprooting himself just for once, and getting to choose where and how to put down roots for good. Too good to be true, and he feels a chill along his spine as the voice goes on.

"Then you are scared of scandal. Well, boy, you ain't no idea how much scandal is up there already about you, both in Riverton and in Childress. Fuck the scandal, what's the matter of it? Let them buzz and talk and whisper, poor chickenshits, afraid of looking at themselves in the mirror and taking it out on you".

"They may not stop at talkin'". He talks in a matter-of-fact way, hiding his deepest, most ancient fear.

"So you are scared of those tire irons. And what I can say is, you either have the balls to risk it, or you don't, but if you don't, you are heading headlong toward two broken hearts, while if you risk it, and it does turn out to happen, the only broken heart will be the survivor's, whichever he is goin'to be".

The grizzly slowly rises to her feet again.

"Come here, son" she says.

Eyes on the ground, he steps forward, until he almost touches her warm huge body. Her arms come round him, hugging him around his shoulders, so heavy he can barely stand, and he feels her wet tongue passing on his brow, like a newborn cub being licked into shape.

"Blessed be my stupid children whenever they turn around to listen" she hisses on his face, then turns around, and a moment later, she has gone.

The mare, still bewildered, is peeping through the birches, sixty yards down along the path.

Meeting his eyes, she walks gingerly forward, but steps on one rein and bumps her own mouth to a cramped halt, head lowered by the taut leather. Ennis comes to, sticks his hat back on his head, walks down to her, softly whistling a reassurance. He knows what to do next.

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Chapter 2: Taking the Plunge

May, 1983

A small noise, still far away.

Jack listens, stops his carrot-peeling.

A few pebbles rolling down the path, the carefully stepping jog of a horse picking its way on uneven, stony ground along the wooded slope. The rhythm of the gait worries him a little.

Why a jog?

Why the hurry?

The path is shut off by the larches and pitch-pines surrounding the campsite. He stands up and motions to go and walk over toward the sounds, his breath catching uneasily at the thought that something may be the matter with Ennis, but then he hears the jog slowing to a walk, and he relaxes again at the sound of those determined, evenly spaced beats.

They are getting near.

A glimpse of red roan among the tree-trunks, the light-brown coat he knows so well inside and out.

That salty smell he loves to inhale, old corduroy, horse sweat, hay and leather, cigarette smoke washed away by the breeze, ...and Ennis.

There he comes, out of the shadows.

A small nicker from Ennis' mare to the bay gelding he brought up here all the way from Riverton for Jack to ride.

A muffled answer from the bay.

Even at some distance, he can see the mare's ears and nostrils are tense.

Something is definitely the matter, although neither mare nor rider seem injured, and now Ennis suddenly pushes the mare into an easy lope on the short grass, straight as an arrow in his direction, gently stops her square a foot from him, jumps down, turns to face Jack, left rein draped on his right arm.

He tips up the brim of his hat.

Now Jack can see his eyes, and in them something he has never seen.

Something halfway between shock and sudden happiness.

"What's up?"

A lifetime of bad surprises has not been enough to make Jack lose his habit of waiting for good ones, although it has made him more careful. He stands there, hands on his hips, waiting for whatever is going to come his way, hoping it won't be another punch. Or at least hoping he can stand one more.

Those brown eyes in which he has a tendency to drown are looking straight into his, like they haven't in this past couple of days, their twice-yearly, always too short days together drawing again to a close.

He thought he knew those eyes well, and that face where light and shadow play like sun and clouds, unwillingly revealing, but this is something new.

"What's up, bud?" he repeats, a little breathless.

"Something's happened".

A small smile begins to stretch Ennis' lips, widens into a grin, lighting up his eyes.

Jack's own grin mirrors his. Whatever it is, this definitely does not look like a punch coming.

"Well, spit it out, cowboy. What bit you up there in the woods?"

Ennis puts a hand on his arm, leads him to his favorite stump, pushes him seated.

"Wait there".

He turns around to the mare still following him, quickly unties the cinch, guiding it down with the tip of his boot to avoid it bumping into her forelegs, slips the saddle carefully to the ground, picks the bridle off, scratches her withers, pushes her away. She walks off to the tethered gelding, looks and sniffs around carefully, then puts her head down to graze next to him.

Jack waits, his elbows on his knees, his hands folded under his chin.

He knows better than disregarding Ennis' instructions, in the rare occasions he sees fit to issue any.

Besides, he loves looking at him around horses.

He has often wondered how Ennis managed to shrug off the attitude of confrontation toward animals that fathers of their generation used to hammer as a matter of course into most boys. Jack for one knows he is not rid of it even now, but Ennis is something else. To his horses he is father, brother, mother, all rolled into one, like there was no difference at all between them and human beings, and they do respond in kind.

But now Ennis is turning back to face him, staring at him for a moment from above, standing there with slightly hunched shoulders.

Without breaking eye contact, he leans to his right to pick up the plastic crate they used to carry their provisions, sets it upside down in front of Jack, sits down.

Staring, smiling, silent.

"What's this, a game at who'll laugh first?"

One second longer, and Jack knows he will begin feeling worried again.

But Ennis takes a deep breath, like a diver before plunging.

"Listen carefully, because this is rather revolutionary" he says, and his voice sounds twenty years the younger.

"I guess there's a few things that bear changing 'round here between us. What about you 'n me putting up a small cow-and-calf operation somewhere... Maybe also a couple 'o mares, and workin' at it together...?"

It was a punch coming, after all.

Jack can't breathe. His eyes grow dark with disbelief. He looks down, snorts, looks up again.

"This is not fun, man. Don't you dare teasin' me!"

"I'm not".

Another snort.

"I am not!"

Jack feels Ennis' hand on his knee, firm, squeezing.

"Look at me" Ennis says, his voice low and suddenly serious.

He does.

"I mean it. It's no joke. I'll do it if you will".

The light is still there in Ennis' eyes, that smile is only waiting for Jack to quit frowning, and all at once Jack feels like maybe... maybe...

"Why now?" he hears himself saying, and he'd rather have bit his own tongue. Right to the point is not how you talk to Ennis Del Mar about personal issues, unless you want to see him bristle up or shut off in silence.

But this time a lot of things seem to be different.

"I ha'been given some telling off".

Jack could swear Ennis is almost chuckling, but there is also something else in his voice, something like the awe he heard in his words the time they were surprised by a spring shower up high, and any soaking they got had been worth it, because when the sun had come through again they had watched a double rainbow bridging the valley below them, shining and fading. 'They're in a good mood up there today' Ennis had said, and never again Jack had heard that tone of voice, never until now.

"Who? Who is there?"

Worry is creeping again into Jack's mind and heart. They should be invisible... They come up here to be invisible. What if anyone -anyone else- sees them, watches them, knows them...?

"I... I don't know how to tell you. Guess I'll have to think it over for a while. A long while maybe".

Now Ennis sounds like a ten-year-old boy, but his voice is filled with wonder, not with fear. His eyes are wide as he stares into Jack's.

"But the long and short of it is, are we goin' to do it? Pack up our sorry selves and try it? You still in?"

It is Jack's turn to breathe deeply.

"You bet" he says.

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Chapter 3: Working at it

May, 1983

Jack Twist

A brand-new, but mud-stained pickup is rolling along on the highway, headed south. Music comes from the open left window, Dylan's "Shelter from the storm". A denim-clad elbow rests on the edge, the fingers of the attached hand tapping to the tune on the wheel.

Jack Twist is driving back to Childress, TX, to begin working at his new life.

The next verse begins, and he feels his heart somersault in his throat, like that time he got a full 9" 34/100 riding a big bastard of a Brahma bull and just for that once he felt one with the mass, the movement, the life of him, a Minotaur with two heads and eight limbs. Or like those times as a boy when he dared himself to jump off the hay loft on the straw heap below.

Something is holding his heart and squeezing it, and he can't do anything about it. This thing may kill him, but it doesn't. Instead, it makes his smile stretch wider with every squeeze.

In his mind again and again pass the words of the last conversation with Ennis. Once more the evening before Jack had pleaded with him, to no avail. Time after time, it was more difficult to make himself say those words. What in the early days had been given as a spontaneous offer, to hell with what the world would think, was now beginning to taste sour. Now, as soon as he opened his mouth, his voice sounded to him as that of a kid asking his parents for a pony once too many. A boy pleading like he believes his life depends on it. Difference is, Jack knew his life depended on it.

"If that is what could be, then why shouldn't it be?" he had said.

Ennis had looked down into the fire, saying nothing. Nothing was better than "no", but that's the best that Jack could say about the matter. He had felt the string tying them to each other get taut and stretched, felt it a little bit more frayed than last time, and knew it would soon break.

And then what?...

So at first he couldn't believe Ennis when he cantered down the path, all in a hurry to tell him he had changed his mind. After what had passed, all those years, he couldn't take in the fact that suddenly, without any more effort from his part, the release he was beginning to despair of had simply fallen into his hands like a ripe fruit.

Since his boyhood in Lightning Flat, spent searching for a way out –any way out– Jack has come into the habit of trusting destiny quite a lot, on the assumption that whatever unknown event is coming his way, it gets a good chance of being a far sight better than the dreary life he knows only too well.

Destiny is an entity he has had to deal with every time he slipped on top of a bull in the stocks. He breathed it in, together with the last gasp of air, as he folded his fingers on the rope and forced himself to relax his tense back muscles. No way he would stay on even the first three seconds unless he let go of those knots and went with it.

In the eyes of Jack Twist, destiny is a rodeo bull.

But this time over, it looked at first like too much of destiny for his liking.

Yet, Ennis' eyes more than his words have turned his diffidence upside down. There was something new in those eyes, and at the same time there was something missing. It had taken him a moment to realize what. There wasn't fear, not anymore. And if Ennis felt there was nothing to be afraid of, then nothing could have made Jack afraid. If Ennis felt that they could do it now (not before, perhaps not later, but just now), then now they would, and that was definitely that.

No doubt that it was, and tasted, like the beginning of heaven.

However, nothing in life comes for free... Not even heaven itself. Neither a chap can agree on advance payment. Jack knew there would be a price to pay, twenty years of frustration were just the preconditions for the deal life was now offering him, and the sooner the bills would start coming the better. It would be worth it, whatever the price would be. He has never been one to discuss prices when value is involved.

Later that evening, both sat silent, next to each other in front of the fire. Happy like they didn't feel since a long time, but also thoughtful. Both knew there would be a lot to do: decisions to take, things to say, ties to break or change over for new ones.

Ennis had slept like a log, never once changing position. Jack knew, because he had barely slept at all. Unable to still himself, unwilling to disturb Ennis' peaceful sleep with his own restless shifting, he had crawled out of the tent and stretched himself on the ground under Ennis' corduroy coat, resting his head on one of the saddles, and had watched for a long time the stars trailing above him on their track toward dawn.

As he is driving now, the sun slowly shifting shadows across the wide landscape, his eyes are still filled with darkness and the gleam of those stars...

Too much for safety.

He is brought back suddenly to himself by the hoot of a truck asking for way.

A look into the rearview mirror, a quick check-out, he eases the pickup to the side of the road as the truck rolls on, whooshing past on his left.

'Better catch up on some sleep, or the next truck coming on will wipe this silly grin off my face pretty fast'.

He draws down the back of the driver seat as far as it can go, stretches his long legs, pulls the brim of his hat on his eyes and crosses his arms on his chest, trying to recall the feeling of Ennis hugging him before they parted.

He congratulates himself on having been able until now to avoid Lureen tacking him up with a cell-phone. He would probably be unreachable up in the mountains, but surely the devilish thing would begin ringing as soon as he hit the plains.

'She'd fit me with a radio-collar if she could', he grumbles to himself, but today he feels no bitterness toward her and her small cramped life.

His wife seems incapable of shaking off her family's habit of owning things... and people too. Even as a girl, she owned her horses, her blouses, her cars, or rather his father did. Old Newsome has a gift for owning people, even his wife and daughter. All along these years he has done his best to also own his son-in-law, not to say his grandchild. Being a loving family, they call it. Exchanging pricey things instead of valued time.

Oh, they keep all celebrations: Christmas, Thanksgiving, 4th of July, birthdays all around...

They put on their best clothes, gather around a table, and go through the motions of a well-rehearsed play, smoothly most of the time, while he seethes silently, waiting for the grinding noise when inevitably he says, or does, something not quite right. He has taken up the habit of never looking at anybody's eyes in those occasions. He knows that the habit has unwillingly leaked out of those occasions, into his daily life, into his own house, as far as he can call it his. That way he once had of looking straight into Lureen's eyes, when she had been a bright flash of red into his hopelessly discolored life, was so long in the past he can barely remember what she made him feel.

Now he avoids all eyes, afraid to find them as empty as the voices sound to him.

All that's left is this play-acting.

And the fact is, none of them, not even his Bobby, ever seems to mind or even be aware of it. None except Jack himself.

While he slowly falls asleep, the realization seeps in that in leaving his father's house and ending up in L.D. Newsome's he has only left one cattle pen for another. The former pen was shabbier than the next, but the final destination for which he was earmarked was the slaughter-house from both.

'But I'm out now' he mutters to himself. 'Ennis has opened the gate', and a moment later he is asleep.

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Ennis Del Mar

An old, weather-beaten but carefully mended pickup, two-horse trailer behind, is rolling along on the highway, headed north. Singing comes from the open left window, McMurtry's "Where's Johnny".

Ennis Del Mar is driving back to Riverton, WY, to begin working at his new life.

He gets to the end of the song and falls silent. He doesn't feel like trusting, as much as he'd like, this new happiness filling his lungs and making him want to shout out to the world, against the world, "I've done it!".

Moreover, there is much to keep his thoughts occupied.

After his encounter with the Bear –he can't avoid thinking of Her with a big-case first letter– the following events have been so unexpected that he still can't really make head or tail of their actual implications.

He has told Jack he'd agree to something which until the evening before he knew beyond doubt to be impossible.

He never imagined it would taste so... hell, so good.

He expected to feel even more guilty than he has felt all these years anyway, but it is not so: he feels better than he ever did since that one time, so long ago, before his parents died, when he was home alone and a storm had suddenly come on. He was nine at the time, but before the sky opened he had managed, with the only help of his old paint pony, to gather the whole small cattle herd from the far pasture into the sheltered pen next to the house. The praise he had received then had been pleasant, making him feel more grown-up than his years, but the real happiness had been the accomplishment itself.

Since then, he had taken responsibility for the herd, more extensively and more deeply than his family was ready to acknowledge. Caring for things, and especially for living beings, human or otherwise, has soon grown into a habit with Ennis. In his no-nonsense way, without any frills or embellishment, whatever comes into his hands is kept safe and sound, clean and in good order.

He is unusually good at any job which calls for slow attention, be it helping a cow deliver her calf, sweet-talking a napping horse into loading in a truck, or cleaning and oiling a neglected saddle. All his employers see this in him and take advantage of his qualities, but only a few, if any, bother to pinpoint what actually makes him so good at it. Most of their wives however can see very clearly that those same qualities are not used to Ennis Del Mar's own advantage. He himself seems completely unaware of them, like they were a matter of course.

Now Ennis is silent. He is rested, alert, his mind clear. His sleep has been deep and refreshing and without dreams. He is used to the last few days with Jack to feel like the vividness of things is slowly fading around the two of them, until at parting there is only a grey fog of nothingness. But now he looks at the road in front, looks at the fields around, and all is filled with intense lively colors.

His mind goes back to the words they said that morning, before parting as usual.

No, not as usual.

Ennis himself has started conversation over breakfast.

Jack looked like he has not slept at all. Ennis has woken up to find him already busy with the coffee-pot. When he has raised his eyes to greet him, Ennis has seen the face of a boy waiting to be allowed to open his present on Christmas morning, unable to believe his wish may come true and equally unable to stop hoping.

Ennis tried hard to find the right words. There was something important he must say now, before any decision was made, because all the rest depended on this, but he didn't know how Jack would take it.

"Hey" he said, crouching near the fire. Not a great beginning.

"Hey to you". On the other side of the fire, Jack was pouring coffee in the mugs. He may have had a difficult night, but his voice shook a little, and Ennis knew it was happiness.

"There's somethin' I have t'say to you".

There was a sudden hitch in Jack's movement and some hot coffee spilled on his hand.

"Fuck!" he cursed, half out of pain for the scalding and half for fear that Ennis may have changed his mind again.

Ennis soaked his bandanna with water from the wash-up bucket, handed it to him to wipe his hand, and said quickly, before Jack could raise his eyes so blue and expectant:

"Not at your people's ranch".

Jack seemed to forget all about his hand. He stared at him in silence, and Ennis had to continue.

"I don't want to live with you in Lightning Flat. I want a place of ours. If we can't afford one, I want us to be hired together again, on some ranch or farm this time, find somewhere to live, no matter where, but on our own. I don't want other people in the house".

He had paused for a moment, looking away, then added under his breath, only half-jokingly: "Hope I'm not goin' to growl too much 'gainst you".

Jack stood up in front of him, tilting his hat back and putting his hands in his hip pockets like he unconsciously does whenever he feels under scrutiny. Mildly challenging, telling the message 'This is how I stand and you're allowed not to like it, provided you don't mess with me'.

"So you're putting conditions, are you? Well, I have one for you too, cowboy. I agree we're not going to live with my parents, I agree to everything, but beginning with this moment I'm going to have no more of that darn Wyoming dally-roping of yours. This is goin' to be a hard-'n-fast thing between us, Texas-style, or it is goin' to be nothin' at all. Got it, pal?"

Ennis has got it.

They have hugged each other for a long time before going on their separate ways, their faces deep into each other's shoulders, breathing hard each other's scent, swaying slightly to a shared rhythm of their own.

The feel of Jack's chest against his, of their arms around each other, fills Ennis' heart of such joy that he bursts into song again, and to hell if it comes out a little off tune.

A tractor turns out of a field onto the road in front of him.

Ennis eases the gas gently so as not to brake and unsettle the horses in the trailer.

The tractor is drawing a flatbed of freshly-baled grass hay, the dry sweet smell wafting to him through the window. Well made hay, good for horses. His mother used to say that following a truck of hay was lucky, provided you were not the fool on top of the heap.

Ennis smiles happily, shifts to a lower gear, follows the tractor.

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Chapter 4: When dreams come true

August, 1986

It's early evening. Few cars on the highway, their lights already on.

A pickup towing a horse-trailer, "TDM Ranch" hand-painted in bold red letters on the side.

The pickup slows down and turns off on a side road, then again, carefully, on a narrow dirt track across the fields. It's a shortcut well-known to locals, smooth enough for driving a horse-trailer along, sparing a longer detour at the turnpike.

The pickup reduces its speed coming up to a small concrete bridge on an irrigation canal, the driver taking care not to bump his living load on the expansion joints. A clump of trees and bushes grows along the banks, the only shelter for a few miles.

The vehicle proceeds at a walking man's pace, the front wheels just rolling up on the concrete slab, when a double explosion breaks the quiet of the evening. The pickup sways for a moment, then bumps to a stop as the driver brakes as best he can, kills the engine, pulls the block. Stomping of feet from inside the trailer, a bout of repeated kicks against the side. The trailer rocks and shivers.

"Shit!" the driver mutters to himself.

There must be something on the road, maybe some old barbed wire or broken bottles... Even then, two flat tires at the same time come under the Big Mess label by any of Jack Twist's standards. Especially six miles from home, in the middle of nowhere, with a difficult horse loaded into the trailer.

Jack steps out, slamming the door, and kneels down to look at the near fore tire. There is something embedded in rubber at the edge of the shredded tire. It seems like, what? a four-point nail? There's another here on the ground... Who's the idiot throwing four-point nails along the road...

More stomping from the inside of the trailer. It covers the rustle of clothes and the noise of footsteps behind him.

A heavy hand is laid on his shoulder, turning him round abruptly, making him lose his balance and fall sitting on the ground. Three men are standing in front of him, a fourth is coming out of the bushes down the ditch. Strangers' faces.

Dreams come true after all.

Nightmares too.

But the nightmares were wrong. No tire irons here. One of the men carries a baseball bat, another a large screwdriver, the third a wrench, the fourth a pair of nippers.

Silence. The big one with the screwdriver begins tapping the point onto his gloved hand.

How can time suddenly be stretched so long?

Is it so that he can savor what's left of his life, smell the frogs in the ditch, the dry odor of dust, the sweet scent of corn in flower in the field across the track?

Or is it so that he can find out what to do to save his life... and not his own alone?

There's Ennis in the trailer.

He should not be here at all, much less travel inside the trailer against all rules of law and common sense, but he had somehow stuck into his head that such a hot two-year-old colt as they were going to fetch and take home would need his company to steady him during the trip, and nothing Jack had said had been enough to dissuade him.

So it is not one, but two waves of fear washing over Jack, chilling his spine and leaving a metallic taste into his mouth.

It is curious how no sound seems to reach his ears. He can't hear the words these men are saying, although he can see their lips moving. The man with the bat smiles wickedly.

Now the man with the nippers takes a step forward.

All of a sudden time is flowing again. It's now, or never. Jack jumps to his feet, charges head-on into the belly of the man with the bat, who backs up out of breath, then cuts a left-and-right punch on the chin of the screwdriver holder, and turns to the nipper man, trying to kick him in the balls, but the man with the wrench grabs him by the shoulders. Jack feels the wrench grazing the side of his head. He ducks just in time, kicks hard into the wrench man's leg, whirls around, feeling another body behind him. He fights blindly, out of instinct, going for the flesh, avoiding hard metal and wood, hitting and tearing, feeling himself slowly go under but not quitting.

It feels like a long time, but only a moment has passed. The noise of a door slamming, a few thumps loud enough to break the silent cocoon enveloping him, and suddenly he feels a difference, the pressure eases, the fight seems to shift its aim.

He looks up, and sees the biggest man rolling on the ground. The man with the screwdriver is spitting out blood and cursing. That's Ennis pushing his way through and now he's at his side. He holds a wooden twitch in his right hand, wrist threaded inside the loop of string. He hands Jack the large hoof rasp from the toolbox in the trailer. Panting a little, without taking their eyes from the band of the aggressors, momentarily disrupted, they exchange a quick glance. "Y'all right?" Ennis asks.

Jack nods.

"I'll take Bat and Nippers, you get t'others".

"kay".

"Now", and they both plunge again into the fight.

Two against four. The nightmares were wrong again. It's not a man alone being beaten and left to die, it's two fighting together, and it turns out that being brave enough to act love out is not nearly as dangerous as trying to play safe. A few moments later, three of the men are retreating hurriedly, one bruised by the twitch, two bleeding, scratched by the rasp's wicked teeth.

The fourth remains behind.

He's the one with the baseball bat, now lost and rolled under the pickup by a blow of Ennis' twitch. Jack pins the man on the ground while Ennis, spitting blood from a cut on his lip, stoops to pick up the nippers abandoned by the edge of the road.

Ennis steps up and firmly pushes Jack to the side. He crouches next to the man on the ground. He is quietly furious, something Jack has never seen in him before. He looks at the nippers, throws them to the side, takes his knife from his hip pocket instead and carefully unfolds the blade. Sweet-iron, razor-sharp, dully gleaming.

He reaches out to the man's belt, pressing his fingers on the buckle.
"You know, man. Jus' got this idea I could geld you. Part of my job, you know? Can do it pretty nice. Most of the times".
His usually rough voice sounds deep and smooth and dangerous, something between a purr and a growl, making Jack shiver.
Angered surprise changes to fear in the man's eyes at his words, then to panic, as a dark wet patch leaks and grows between his pants' legs.
"But on second thoughts, maybe I won't, and want to know why?..."
Ennis' words are slow and determined, hammered like blows on a row of nails, making sure each one is going through.
"Because although you're more full of shit than some cowpens I see around, you are flesh and blood jus' like me and my bud here, and it means we are each'n all next to dying, man. If you think it over you'll see there's not much that looks important anymore, surely not how my partner and I pass our spare time".
He raises to his feet, knife still in his hand, thumb on the blade. No mistaking his intentions nor his ability to act on them.
"Now fuck off. And dont' forget to tell those other pieces of shit, and anybody else who's interested, that the skin of these two queers here don't come for free".
The man stands up, backs away, turns and runs off. They hear an engine turned on, further along the canal, behind the bushes on the other side. They listen silently as the last man stumbles across the bridge, jumps on board, slams the door, and the engine rolls away, a cloud of dust tracking after it while it turns up on the track and finally bumps off in the distance.
They did it. This time.
They turn to look at each other. Both are bleeding and battered, but no worse than after other fights they both have been in before. Was it luck, love, lightness on their feet, or a Bear's blessing that kept them safe from the worst of it?
Their eyes meet.
A moment later, Jack Twist is witness to the incredible: Ennis Del Mar is standing tall in the middle of the road, legs apart, hands on his hips, howling like a fucking coyote at the young moon just rising in the summer haze above the horizon.
There's only one thing to do.
Jack walks up next to him, and begins howling too.

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Chapter 5: "He'll fix it"

October, 2012

When the first sharp pang had hit Ennis' stomach and left arm, stopping him halfway in his reach for the next heifer's horn, his only thought had been for Jack.
'He'll fix me... he'll fix me...' he kept repeating to himself while he turned around, no outward sign for the others to see that anything was the matter, and ambled away to the fence, then out of the gate, and on to the barn.
The men had gone on with their work. The old man had probably jus' gone takin' a piss. They didn't notice how he stumbled a little when the second stab came, didn't hear the words leak out from a thought to a stuttering mutter.
"He'll fix me".
Jack seemed to have a knack for fixing things.
Give him some wire, a bit of baling twine, a pair of nippers and any leftover rubbish from the cellar or attic, and he'd make out an answer for every need.
He'd built a fantastic contraption for their kitchen, a sort of grille to hang pots and tools from, suspended above the sink; you could lower and raise it by a cord-and-pulley system, and stop it at any height by passing the cord in a cam-cleat screwed to the wall.
When Ennis daughters were young, on the spur of the moment he'd put together wonderful toys for them, and also for Bobby whenever he was allowed to visit.

Be it a motorcycle, a pair of scissors, or a saddle, he could tear apart and then rebuild whatever you put into his hands or caught his fancy, usually improving both function and beauty in the process.

Ennis was endlessly fascinated by this ability, and by the way Jack's ears would turn red in surprised pleasure and embarrassment whenever he voiced his appreciation.

That very ability had allowed Jack to tear apart and rebuild Ennis himself.

It had taken a lot to do – solid walls of defense built up in almost forty years, entrenched ideas about it being there a definite slot one belonged into. Straight or queer, married or unmarried (subdistinction: never married or divorced), man or woman, hired man or boss, worthy (and allowed) to be happy or not...

Jack had never stuck Ennis in any slot. His Ennis could not be defined by any label: Ennis was Ennis, and that was that. Not that they'd ever talked about it; Ennis was not even sure if there was any conscious decision behind the fact, but it was clear from his every move that in Jack Twist's mind social models were not something that had to do in any way with Ennis Del Mar. It had taken more than a few years for him to trust Jack's judgement enough to quit worrying about slots and definitions.

When he had quit eventually, he'd found he felt better than he'd ever did since that brief moment he could never forget, when he'd felt a Bear lick her blessing on his brow, and he knew he owed it to Jack.

He still found hard to talk, but his thankfulness flowed out in other ways.

Ennis would fix hot coffee and buttered toast for Jack first thing in the morning. He'd take care of the laundry, something Jack hated enough he regularly forgot about it until he ran out of clean socks. He remembered Jack's birthday every year, disguising his present as a needed household or barn fixture but each time trying to hit on some tool Jack would enjoy using. He felt it was far from enough, but he loved taking care of Jack. He could feel his own ears get hot, and his hands grow cold, when he saw Jack's eyes turn even bluer with joy.

There had been more. Whenever trouble headed their way –and it had, often, especially at the beginning: money trouble, legal trouble, people trouble– Jack was sure to come out with a plan.

'For every problem there is a solution' he'd say, and a solution he delivered. He was the one who knew what to do, just as Ennis had always been the one who knew how to do it.

Now Jack would know what to do.

Ennis stumbled again and pressed both his hands to his stomach, trying to hold down his pain and his surprise. He was used enough to physical pain, and surely he was not one to fuss over it, but somehow this was different, unexpected. It seemed that his eyes were not working very well either... It was like looking through an upside-down binocular, only a small round window visible at the end of a dark tube.

At last he had reached the office door, had managed to push it open, relieved to find Jack there busy with his ledgers, suddenly pale when he saw Ennis' face.

"Jack, there's something wrong with me" he had said, and he had felt the grim determination that had brought him here drain from him together with his strength.

Jack would fix him.

He had folded kneeling on the floor, feeling himself melt like ice to water into Jack's arms, and the last thing he'd heard had been Jack's voice, murmuring in his ear "It's all right... It's all right".

It would be all right, Jack would make it all right as he always seemed to do.

It did not occur to Ennis Del Mar that he was dying.

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Chapter 6: Now, forever

November, 2012

It's early evening, a Saturday at TDM Ranch.

Jack Twist is checking out the horses and cattle.

The men have just gone, crowding in the foreman's pickup for their usual Saturday evening round of beers at the Rope'n Saddle.

Since Ennis Del Mar died five weeks ago, Jack doesn't feel like joining them as they both did before.

It had been a stroke, nothing either of them would have expected given that, despite a few early-morning aches and Ennis' smoker's cough, both were still putting in as much hard work as usual. Jack was in the office that afternoon, updating ledgers, when Ennis had stumbled in, very pale and pressing his stomach with both his hands.

"Jack, there's something wrong with me" he had said, surprised more than pained, and had folded kneeling on the floor. He had lost consciousness in Jack's arms, not hearing the shouts, the hurried phone call for an ambulance, the bustle.

He was dead by the time they got him into ER.

Jack takes his time on the evening round, making sure everything is just right. It was one of Ennis' chosen jobs to 'kiss the horses and cattle goodnight', like Jack used to say, teasing him. Sometimes he joined Ennis, not to help as much as to snatch a little more time together in their busy life. Early on, he had had to make his peace with the fact that Ennis would rather do the evening round alone, most of the times.

Since the fateful day, almost thirty years ago, when they had taken the plunge and begun to build their life together, they had never once looked back.

But there had been hard times, especially at the beginning.

Leaving their families had been tough for different reasons. All in all, the social ties binding Jack had been easier to break, in comparison with the painful, slow untying and retying of Ennis' link to a woman who had loved him and two daughters who missed him terribly.

Relocating had involved much soul-searching, planning, choosing, and a good deal of risks taken.

They had settled in the middle of nowhere, five miles from the nearest general store, seven from the main road. They had given advance payment for a small ranch, using the money Jack's father-in-law had been happy to loan him if only he'd fuck off. The house and barn were in bad shape, not to speak of the fences, but the place had good pasture and plenty of clean water sources.

They had kept to themselves, didn't see anyone beyond the bare necessities, and worked their butts off for the first ten or twelve years, until all money was repaid and the TDM Ranch, as they had called it from their initials, had been licked into shape like they wanted it.

By then, when they looked around they could see just that sweet life Jack had mentioned, and it was all their handiwork.

There had been other things, too.

Back in the early days, Jack only managed to get permission to see his son briefly once every couple of years, but Ennis' daughters came twice or thrice a year for a week or so, and rang often to say hello.

In time, Bobby had grown apart from his father, sucked back into the family business and family ways, and Ennis' youngest never seemed to get over a layer of embarrassment in her contacts with her father, but Alma Jr. still came as often as she could, sometimes complete with her own family, most times alone. She seemed to always fall easily into step with her father's moods, never cornering him into dealing with her husband and children, but ready to catch Ennis' windows of sociability so that her kids could get exposed to their granddad's ways and off-the-track practical wisdom. The kids themselves enjoyed his company like a rare treat, trying to earn more of it by staying on their best behavior during their visits.

It turned out that Ennis was not joking at all when he had warned Jack about his growling at him. Ennis' need to be alone at times, on his evening rounds and in other occasions, sometimes for days, had been difficult for Jack to swallow. Somehow he felt he should have been able to bring Ennis out of his moody stretches, or at least stand at his side through them, and not being allowed to even try made him feel inadequate.

When that happened, when he felt stranded alone and on foot on the edge of some stormy prairie Ennis rode across alone, he tried to recall the buoyant feeling of togetherness after the fight they had fought, that night when they had been ambushed and attacked by four guys ("The Righteous Band", they had taken to call it afterwards), and had sent them into a hasty retreat. They had shared their triumph howling together at the moon, right there in the middle of the road, before picking up their life like nothing had happened.

But something had.

The old nightmare had come true, they had fought it and won together, and from then on their bond had strengthened even more. What still remained, at the time, of their private doubts about roles in their relationship, had been wiped away for ever. Theirs was not a bad surrogate of a guy/gal love. Neither was going to play woman to the other, whatever that meant. They were equals, and tough, and together.

They had become more relaxed around each other, even when there were others around, and it seemed their newfound strength and balance somehow transpired out for other people to see also, as nobody had been troubling them ever since.

His check completed, Jack packs a few things in the pickup, not that he's going to need anything really, but it gives him a feeling of normalcy.

Carefully, fussily, he cleans up, oils and loads Ennis' rifle, the one he had shot the deer with, back in '63, first time on Brokeback, and adds it to the rest of the stuff.

He scribbles a note, "Gone campin', back in a few days" and leaves it on the kitchen counter for the foreman to find the next morning.

It is getting dark when he starts the engine of the pickup and leaves.

No music tonight to keep him company, all those miles to the mountains.

Only his memories.

Ennis falling asleep and snoring on the right seat of this very truck, next to him. Ennis who clucked to himself like to a horse before heaving a load. Ennis shifting gear on his truck in time with the music from the radio or Jack's harmonica. Ennis keeping in his wallet a chestnut trimmed from Cigar Butt's left hind; the wallet reeked with the dry, rancid smell, but Ennis said it was his own special lucky charm, and anyway at least he'd be able to smell his way to his money if ever he was robbed. Ennis catching with his bare hands, in one swift perfect movement, a swallow stranded onto the feed room floor, unable to take flight in the cramped space, bringing it outside and holding it gently for Jack to look at the hard claws and wicked pointed beak before letting it go. Ennis unselfconsciously sucking his teeth after dinner, a bottle of chilled beer in his hand, glancing sideways at Jack, his eyes long with desire. Ennis clinging to him after they'd made love, in their bed at home or once again under a tent during the short trips they still managed to snatch from work sometimes in late autumn. The plans they'd meant to make for their thirtieth year together, but they hadn't had time to make.

Then, nothing at all.

He takes the truck as far up the path as it will go, then shuts down the engine, pulls the block, locks the door. From the trunk he takes the rifle, a bottle and a paper bag with something inside, sets out on foot.

Climbs to the place he knows well enough he doesn't need a light to find.

Sits comfortably, the bag between his legs, next to the rifle butt and the whisky bottle he doesn't touch.

He can smell snow in the air, but doesn't feel the cold.

Waits for the first light of morning.

The grunt of a bear is heard in the distance.

Never been able to make head or tail to that story of Ennis about the Bear, with the big B, however often he got to hear it told, always a little different but always with that shadow of awed happiness in Ennis' voice. He regrets now that he didn't ask Ennis for its meaning to him.

He knows he didn't tell it to anybody else, and now it is too late to ask.

The sky pales behind the dark silhouette of the mountain in front.

A robin calls out to his left, once.

He takes off his coat, then his shirt, shivering a little.

Takes out something from the paper bag.

Two shirts, one inside the other.

He slips into the sleeves, his bad right shoulder aching when he wrings his arm back. He buttons both shirts carefully and puts on his coat again.

Then he turns the rifle into position.

His hands are steady.

He's never been a marksman worth a damn, but even he can't miss at this distance.

He loads and fires, once.

They found him three months later, when the snow melted.

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Chapter 7: Back to the egg

April, 2013

It's a little past dawn on Brokeback Mountain.

A big grizzly sow comes out of the larches shielding the path to the upper pastures. She sniffs carefully the breeze coming up to her from the clearing, her nostrils dilating, nose nodding slightly to catch every thin layer of scent.

She can discern the slightly rotten smell of grass, yellow and soggy among patches of melting winter snow.

She can tell the choky black odor of cold ashes from among a small fireplace of stones.

At one time, someone camped here; crickets have nestled all winter into the now empty holes where the tent pickets had been hammered.

She can taste the memory of food... beans, and canned beef, potatoes, and sometime roasted deer.

She savors the smell of love being made, still hot after such a long time.

And the smell of cold adrenaline, anger, fear.

And also another scent, the scent she came here to seek.

She rolls down toward the campsite, ambling in fluid long steps, her rich fur softly undulating at every movement on her shoulders thinned out by winter.

After a moment, two small cubs come out of the shrubs and follow her, galloping and leaping across the clearing, one chestnut-colored, the other almost black.

The grizzly stops where the grass has ben recently disturbed by the feet of many humans.

She sniffs around, her nose on the ground, until she gets to the lower layer of scent.

She picks out the place where a man sat all night long, last November.

And where he lay quietly through the winter, under the cold clean snow.

There is a drop of dried blood there, congealed on a half-buried stone.

The bear licks it up, then turns around, crosses the clearing back to the path, walks away into the upper woods, the cubs playfully on tow.

It will not take long before the grass of a new spring will grow to erase all memory of the campsite, up there on Brokeback Mountain.

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