

The Camping Sight

Part II

Written by: Trendane of Windshift

I awoke the next morning not having remembered falling asleep. I reflected briefly on the wonderful dream I'd had the night before. Caleb and I, making love. Though it was a very tense and short-lived event, I couldn't have wished for more.

I punched my pillow to try and soften it. It had a bone hard lump right in the middle. The bump didn't go away so I punched harder.

"OOF!" the pillow said.

I drew my fist back to try it again and...wait....waitwaitwaitwait. Had my pillow just said oof?

I looked up into Caleb's beautiful brown eyes. He was there, laying beside me, and smiling even though I'd just hit him in the ribs.

"Do you punch all your lovers on the morning after?" he asked, muzzle drawn in a smile. "Or is this just something you do for me?"

"I thought you were my pillow," I mumbled. I looked him directly in the face, "Caleb...we...really did it? It wasn't a dream?"

He chuckled deeply and wrapped his arms around me, "If it was a dream, I'm ready to experience deja vu." He kissed me passionately, his paws sliding up my long neck and cradling my head like a cub. All too soon he broke the kiss and said, "How about you bud?"

My tail rattle buzzed soft and low in willing response before I could answer. I closed my eyes and made a near whimpering sound as I felt the warmth of his paws soak through my scales.

"That's really cute, y'know that?" Caleb chuckled, looking at the dark brown rattles at the tip of my tail. "Does it always do that?"

"Only when I'm turned on or really happy," I said, smiling up at him with dreamy-eyed adoration.

"Well, which is it now?"

I smiled a bit wider. "Yes," I said, laying my head on his chest and sighing deeply. I closed my eyes and just wanted to lay with him forever. I didn't care what happened, so long as I never had to move from where I was.

"Hello?" a voice called from outside the tent.

Caleb looked down at me, alarm showing in his eyes. He scrambled to get out of the sleeping bag and into his jeans. He had a bit of a problem getting them on as they were still wet from the storm the previous

night.

"Hello? Is there anyone in camp?" the voice called again.

"Yeah. One sec...I'll be right out," Caleb called back.

He gave himself the once over and made sure he looked appropriate for company. He walked out through the tent flap and zipped it quickly shut behind him. Soon I heard he and whoever talking outside, their voices muffled and hard to make out.

My heart dropped a bit as I realized that he didn't want anyone to know that we were sleeping together. He was ashamed of our love making and as far as everyone else was concerned, he and I were just friends and nothing more. Knowing that made me feel a bit smaller, but some part of me understood, given that he was straight and, as far as anyone else knew, a recovering homophobe.

I climbed out of the sleeping bag and unzipped the tent slowly, peering out at our visitor. He was a fox, dressed in a safari type outfit that looked really silly on him. I've known people who can wear them and look really good. This guy was not one of them.

I slipped on a loose pair of shorts and climbed from the tent quietly. As I approached them, Caleb was giving the fox directions to the ranger station.

"And then, when you reach the river...go downstream and follow it to the ranger station. You can't miss it." He looked up at me and nodded quickly, "Oh, Mik'l, this is Jesse McAnders. Jesse, this is my friend and camping buddy, Mik'l Greendrake."

I took his hand and shook it gently. His hands were soft and his grip was surprisingly light. I'd not dealt with many foxes before so I wasn't sure if this was the norm or if he was just a pantywaist. Regardless, his reaction to my last name set me back a bit.

"Not exactly original," he chuckled, "Did you choose that name just because you're a green dragon?"

I could feel icicles creeping through my arms as my anger began to swell. Fortunately, I was able to maintain some modicum of control.

"No," I said, letting only the slightest edge show in my voice, "It's been my family name for seven generations now. I didn't choose it...I was born to it."

The fox's face lost some of it's bemusement as he realized he'd not made a good first impression. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean do be offensive.." His muzzle worked for a moment longer, trying to form words, but none came. Eventually, he just let his head hang and shake slowly. You could almost hear him cursing himself.

"Don't worry about it," I said, trying to comfort him, "You didn't know."

"I still should have considered the possibility of insulting you. I spoke before I thought and I'm sorry for that." His head dropped again as he looked toward the ground.

"It's okay. Forget it." This was getting old very fast. Time to change the subject. "Were you in the storm last night?"

He didn't raise his eyes an inch, "Ummm...no. I found a cave to sleep in. I really wasn't packed for rainy weather."

"Didn't you watch the weather forecast? They were predicting that storm last night at almost 90%." I couldn't believe that he would have gone camping and not watched the weather report.

"I've been lost for two whole days. I was supposed to be at work yesterday morning. That's why I was so happy when I saw your camp." He seemed almost on the verge of tears. Obviously, he was not very used to camping and getting lost had impacted rather profoundly on him.

"How long has it been since you've eaten?" I asked. I could feel Caleb tense up. It was getting clear that he wanted this guy gone, but I couldn't figure out why. It was either so that we could have sex again, or because Caleb was worried he might find out about us. I was willing to lay money on option two.

"Almost a day," the fox said, looking into my eyes with an expression of almost pleading hunger. I didn't really care what Caleb wanted. This guy needed to eat.

"Well, drop your pack and sit down, Jesse. I was just about to make breakfast anyway. And we've got more than enough food here. Besides, we don't get much company when we camp and I think it's a pleasant change." I tried to keep the bite out of my voice, or, at least, not direct it at Caleb. But he flashed me a look that was both sour and hurt as he set about preparing the fire, practically ignoring both the fox and me.

Jesse dropped his gear and sat on one of the log benches chatting away in a friendly, though increasingly annoying manner. He told us about his job, back in the city, and why he had decided to take this camping trip in the first place.

"My boss told me that I needed to get away for a while. He said that I was headed for a nervous breakdown if I didn't get back to my roots. He's one of those survivalist types who's always going out for adventurous treks across some far off, frozen wasteland. I'm not built for stuff like that. I'm a businessfox, not some gung-ho, bungee jumping, psycho-wolf, adventurer type."

I passed him his plate and nodded, thankful for the small respite as he ate with abandon. "Well, this life isn't for everyone. Mostly, it seems to be more of the 'hunter and prey' types from the old stories, who like the outdoors the most. I assume that your boss is a wolf, and so, he probably has some natural instinct to get out into the woods and nature."

Jesse nodded and shoveled another spoonful of grits into his muzzle. He spared a glance at Caleb, his eyes scanning that beautiful bear's body. It was easy to tell he was uncomfortable with Caleb's continued silence. I had to admit, it was bugging me too.

Caleb just stared off into the woods, his sharp eyes easily picking up things to conveniently keep his attention diverted from us. He ate quietly and quickly, as though he had chores he wanted to get started on.

"Caleb," I said, forcing him to pay attention to me, "Do you think one of us should take Jesse to the ranger station? It is a rather long hike and since we both know the way, we can make sure he doesn't get lost again." I turned to Jesse, "No offense."

Jesse shook his head, swallowing a muzzleful of oatmeal, "None taken! I'd get lost so fast it'd make your

head spin. Even if you handed me a rope tied to the ranger station, I'd miss it somehow."

I had to chuckle at that. I looked at Caleb as he looked from me to the fox slowly. I didn't know why it was bothering him so much, but I planned to have words with him when I saw him again.

"You take him," he grumbled, "I've got too many things to get done around here." The look I gave him clearly told him what an ass he was being. He looked at Jesse and, with a slightly softer tone said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be offensive that time."

Jesse simply nodded, finishing off his bowl of oatmeal and handing it back to me with a smile. I took the bowl and washed it, listening to the intense silence between Caleb and Jesse. I had to do something about it, it's in my nature.

"When did you want to head out Jesse?" I asked.

"Whenever you're ready, really. I appreciate your wonderful hospitality, but I really do want to go home and sleep in a real bed."

Caleb looked totally admonished by Jesse's statement. He stood up and stretched, trying to make as graceful an exit as possible.

"I'm...gonna go look for more wood and see if there's a good place to fish around here." Caleb said, looking off into the woods. "If I'm not here when you get back...that's where I am."

I nodded to Caleb and grabbed my pack, slinging it over one arm. I turned to Jesse and saw that he was staring rather intently at Caleb. As I watched, his gaze coursed over the bear's body slowly, taking in every detail. Sparing a glance at Caleb, I saw that he was still looking off into the distance, paying the fox no attention. As near as I could tell, Jesse's eyes lingered longest somewhere around the bear's midsection. His still moist jeans left a clear outline of his pride even though he was flaccid. A slow smile of realization and irony crept across my face as I addressed Jesse.

"Ready?" I asked him.

His stare leaped from Caleb's crotch to meet my eyes. He dropped his gaze immediately and slung his pack over his shoulders, standing and turning. Try as he might, he couldn't turn fast enough to keep me from noticing that he was incredibly hard. My smile widened even further as I looked at Caleb and gave him the smallest wave.

"I'll see you in a few hours, Caleb." I motioned Jesse to go eastward, toward the river that would eventually wind lazily past the ranger station. Caleb gave me an almost painfully sterile salute and nodded, without actually looking at me.

Jesse and I headed off toward the sun, rising high in the eastern sky. He walked fast, eager to leave his embarrassment behind. I picked up my pace to move up next to him and we walked in silence for a time. He was obviously aware that I had seen him giving Caleb a very thorough looking over. I decided that I'd get directly to the heart of the matter, rather than patronizing him with idle chitchat until I'd worked up to the subject.

"He is very good looking, isn't he?" I asked without looking at him.

"What? Who..who is?"

"Caleb," I chuckled, "I don't mean to put you on the spot here but I saw you looking at him." I paused for second, trying to figure out how to say this, "And...I saw your....reaction."

He stopped dead in his tracks, looking like some small child who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He stammered for several seconds as though trying to come up with a denial that would sound genuine.

"Jesse," I said, placing my hand lightly on his shoulder, "It's alright if you find him attractive. I do, too."

"So...you're gay?" he asked. He still wasn't admitting it, but this was a step in the right direction.

"Yeah. And I've been lusting after Caleb for five years now."

He let out a long sigh of relief and smiled, "Okay. I thought you two were...y'know, both straight or something."

I couldn't help but chuckle, "He is. I'm not. He's actually rather homophobic. He's only just recently begun to get used to the idea of having a gay friend." I turned and continued walking. He matched my pace, walking right beside me, though considerably more relaxed than before.

"Oh," he looked up at me, smiling coyly, "Then why, if you brought two tents, were you both sleeping in the same one? Just how accustomed to the idea is he? Or did I misinterpret your meaning of 'friend'?"

"His tent flooded last night during the storm," I replied, keeping my voice level. Until I had a chance to talk to Caleb about how he felt, I wasn't going to be discussing it with anyone.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you two might have been...you know..doing something when I showed up. I would hate to have interrupted you."

"Umm, no. We weren't. So you don't need to worry your pretty little head over that."

Jesse looked up at me, seeming pleasantly shocked, "You think I'm pretty?"

I choked back a laugh, "That's not what I meant. I just like that phrase."

He nodded slowly, eyes drifting toward the ground, "Oh...."

"Hey," I said, placing my hand on his shoulder lightly, "I didn't say you weren't attractive. I just said that's not what I meant with that particular statement."

His expression brightened, "You really mean that?"

"Sure," I nodded, "I'm not normally one to be attracted to foxes. But there's an exception to every rule."

"What's wrong with foxes?" he asked looking hurt.

This was getting me nowhere very quickly. "Nothing, Jesse. I have friends who are foxes. I just don't normally find them attractive in a sexual manner. That's all. They're still very good friends of mine."

He sighed and nodded slowly, "I see. But you find me attractive?"

"Yes."

"Sexually?"

"Yes," I said, without thinking.

He stopped and smiled coyly at me, his arms crossed over his chest. "Oh really?" he asked. "Well...what am I to do on such a long walk with such a gorgeous dragon? Surely we have to stop and 'rest' at some point."

I found myself somewhat angered by his implication that I wanted to have sex with him so soon after meeting him. This wasn't a cruise bar and I still hadn't settled my feelings about Caleb. I'm sure my expression showed my irritation because his ears laid back and he began spouting off apologies like mad.

Rather than get into another bout of fending off the overly apologetic fox, I simply shook my head, dismissed the subject with a wave of my hand and walked onward. He tagged along behind me, head down and ears back, completely mollified by his own actions.

We walked in silence to the river, where we stopped to refill our canteens and let him rest. I warmed myself in the sun for a few moments before deciding it was time to move on. I wanted to get back to camp before sundown and didn't relish the idea of trekking back at night. Not that I couldn't find my way, mind you. More to the point, being a land dragon, I don't deal with cold too well. We used to hibernate, in prehistoric times, and cold still makes me incredibly sleepy.

When we got to the ranger station, it was well past noon and few of the rangers were there. Most were out, doing their patrols or giving short 'classes' to those campers who didn't have a clue what camping was about. As I looked around the office, I found it to be the same as always. Some desks were strewn with papers and charts where others were immaculate. I took in the rangers one by one, regarding each one with fondness that made me smile.

Nicholas Reikes, one of the youngest rangers, was a raccoon. He was leaning against the desk of one of the oldest rangers, a very old grizzly that everyone called 'Gristle'. At the desk next to them sat a white-tailed deer. His name was Edward G. McDermont, but everyone called him Edge. He had to be one of the most pompous people I knew. But, despite his arrogance, he was still a good friend.

"Mik'l!" Nick said, turning and noticing me for the first time, "What the hell are you doing out here? Is it that time of year again already?"

"Of course," I said, chuckling softly and taking his embrace happily, "Why else would I come here? You think I actually want to come and visit you people for no reason?"

Nick smiled back and shrugged sarcastically, "Well, as I recall, you only come up here to invite us to dinner and to tell us that you and Caleb are out there."

Edge's ears went straight up at the mention of Caleb's name and his attention was closely focused on me.

I knew he had an unstoppable libido and he really had a thing for Caleb. I don't think he actually had any real feelings for the bear. More to the point, he knew he couldn't have him because he was straight. It's what I called the 'Forbidden Fruit' complex. Knowing that you can't have something makes you want it even more.

"Well," I said, laying a hand on Nick's shoulder, "I came here for both of those reasons. We are out there and you are invited to dinner tonight."

He nodded and smiled, looking past me and giving Jesse the once over. He leaned closer and whispered to me, "New friend of yours?"

I had almost completely forgotten about the fox. I turned, grasped his arm gently and pulled him in front of me, facing him toward the rangers.

"Jesse McAnders, this is Nick, Edge, and Gristle," I said, indicating each ranger in turn, "Guys, this is Jesse. He got a bit side tracked and needs to get back to the city."

"I'm heading in to pick up more medical supplies from ACGAS Hospital," Gristle said gruffly, "You can catch a ride with me."

Jesse smiled and seemed about to cry again at the thought of being so close to going back to the familiar places of his normal life. "Thank you, sir. I can't tell you how much this means to me."

I chuckled and patted Jesse's shoulder, smiling down at him, "See? No problem at all."

He looked up at me and nodded slowly, "If you have time before you head back...I kind of need to talk to you." Something in his eyes told me that he needed to say some things. More importantly, he needed me to hear them.

"Sure thing," I said, "Let's step outside for a minute."

He stepped quickly through the door and walked to a watering trough a short distance from the ranger's shack. I walked to him and dropped my pack, looking down at him curiously as he stared at the ground. Whatever he had to say, it didn't seem it was going to be easy for him.

"I'm really sorry if I made you mad before with what I said," he mumbled, "I didn't mean to seem like I...." He struggled for the right words.

"Jesse," I said, sighing and shaking my head.

"Let me finish!" he blurted out with more assertiveness than I'd seen from any fox who behaved as he normally did. I yielded and let him continue.

"I didn't want to seem like I was just out for a piece of ass is what I'm saying. I know I haven't chosen my words very carefully today and I'm sorry for all the times I angered you. I really would like to be friends with you." He chuckled softly, rubbing at one of his ears, "After all, you basically saved my life."

I couldn't help but smile at that. "Jesse, I'd be happy to be your friend. When I come back off this trip, maybe we can get together and do something. You know, go catch a movie or whatever."

He smiled and looked me in the eye, nodding happily, "That'd be great Mik'l! Maybe Caleb could join us sometime too?"

"Possibly," I nodded, "I hope you like high speed, testosterone-laden, blow-up-everything-you-can types of movies then. They're Caleb's favorites."

We laughed a bit and he nodded, saying that his boss was the same way. We walked inside again and I scribbled down my address and such so he could call me when I got back.

"How long will you guys be out here?" he asked.

"Three or four more days." I said, "It depends on the weather."

Gristle came lumbering out from behind his desk, placing his hat on top of his head and positioning it perfectly. He looked down at the fox, completely dwarfed by his own mass, "You ready, Jeffrey?"

Slinging his pack over one shoulder and nodding up at the huge bear, he said, "Yep. And my name's Jesse, sir."

Gristle just shrugged and trundled toward the door, "Whatever."

Jesse turned and hugged me tightly, whispering yet another thank you into my ear and asking me to pass it along to Caleb. I hugged him back and nodded down to him, smiling as he walked through the door and I heard the land rover start up and drive away.

Nick chuckled softly behind me where he was perched on a counter, his tail swishing behind him, "So?" he asked, giving me a coy little smirk.

I turned and looked at him in confusion, "So what?"

"What's Jesse like?" he asked incredulously.

"He's nice," I shrugged, "He can be a bit short on tact when he's nervous but he's a good kid."

Nick gave me a friendly punch in the shoulder, "You know what I mean. What's he like in bed?"

Speaking of short on tact...

I was determined to keep my composure. I kept my expression simple and neutral. "I don't know. I only met him this morning."

Edge snorted, leaning back in his chair and propping his hooves on his desk, "Are you saying that you walked from your campsite to this office, with a fox, and you didn't stop and fuck the hell out of him at least three times?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying, Edge," I retorted, sneering at him, "Some people don't think you have to have sex with every living thing you come in contact with."

He chuckled and shook his head, "Then those people don't know what they're missing. That kind of logic

is just...insane."

My hand fell to the hilt of my knife as my eyes drifted up to his antlers. I was disappointed to find they weren't in velvet. I could have taught him a lesson very easily if they were. Instead, I simply shook my head and turned away from him. Nick was still staring at me with a grin on his face that could only mean he was still waiting for an answer.

"What?" I shouted, starting lose my temper.

Nick just kept smiling and shrugged. I knew he was just trying to goad me on. This was the same, good-natured ribbing that we always give each other. But in light of recent events, I wasn't anywhere near to being in the mood for it.

"What the fuck is this?" I cried. "Did someone declare this to be National Insinuation Day and I just don't know it?" I turned for the door and started on my way out. "If you guys want to come to dinner tonight, you'd better bring some damned manners along with you. If not...fine." I slammed the door behind me and stormed over to my pack. Throwing over my shoulder I stalked away from the ranger station, mad as hell.

I heard the door close behind me and light, fast footsteps as someone came running up behind me. Seconds later, Nick appeared next to me, adjusting his hat. He looked up at me, genuine concern showed in his eyes, as he half jogged beside me, trying to keep pace with my longer, angry strides.

"Mike, stop," he said, his voice pleading, "Please. I'm sorry about that. I understand that you're mad but that wasn't any worse than the normal things we say to each other."

I stopped and whirled to face him, "You can't possibly have any clue as to what I've been through today. It started out better than I could have dreamed and now..." I growled deep in my throat and turned, picking up my original pace again.

He leaped onto a stump directly ahead of me and crossed his arms, "You're right. I don't have a clue. And I won't understand what's bothering you until you tell me. I can't try and help if I don't know the problem."

I shrugged him off and walked past him, "I don't need any help. I can take care of this myself."

He turned as I passed, facing me, "Bullshit. You don't want help...but you most definitely need it. I've never seen you like this, Mike. Never once in the thirteen years I've known you. Now you either tell me what's going on...or...you can count me out on dinner."

Somehow, that almost made me laugh. I stopped and turned back to him. His bemasked face was locked in an expression of angry concern. All of my rage seemed to bleed from me as the stress of the day's events hung before me. He was right, as always, I did need help. This wasn't something I could deal with on my own. But I couldn't tell him about what Caleb and I had done. That would be a violation of the most sacred trust I had ever known. Isn't that what this was all about though? My feelings for Caleb and the thing we had shared was interfering with every other aspect of this trip. It was tearing me apart mentally and emotionally. I wasn't sure I could talk to Caleb about this, or if he'd even want to listen. But if I couldn't talk to him, then where could I possibly turn?

Nick sat down on the wide stump and patted it's ringed surface next to him, "C'mere and tell me what I can do to help."

I walked over to him, every step like dragging my legs against the current of a stream. I sat down and felt myself collapse inward under the stress. Tears began to well up as my confusion became too much to deal with any more.

Nick put his arm around my shoulder as I slumped. He gave me a gentle pat and looked into my eyes. "Is it something involving Caleb?" he asked, "Did you two have a fight or something?"

I shook my head, beginning to sob uncontrollably. He examined me closely, looking for some sign that might tell him what was bothering me so badly. His expression changed suddenly, becoming one of shock and disbelief as he pulled his hand from my shoulder.

"Oh no," he said, "You had sex with him didn't you?"

My breath caught in my throat as I froze, too scared to move. That was all the confirmation he needed. He leaned away from me and bent forward, resting his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands for a moment. After what felt like an eternity he took a long, deep breath and sat up, looking at me.

"Mik'l," he said, "Do you realize what this means?"

"Yes," I replied, numb from the emotionally outpouring, "It means I've polluted something I valued. I feel like I've just trampled the a perfect field of snow, marring it with my passing. I won't be surprised if he never speaks to me again after this trip."

Nick stood up on the stump and gripped my shoulders firmly, shaking me until I looked him in the eye, "No. I wasn't asking that as an accusation. I want to know what happened. Not the details of the act...I want to know what happened before and afterwards."

"Well," I said, sniffing a bit, "we came out yesterday and set up camp. He went out for wood and came back saying he'd found a hot spring. We went to take a short swim and he..."

Nick took my hand and guided my along the path back toward camp as I went on. I hesitated for a long moment before continuing, my feet plodding along of their own accord and my mind racing with the events of the past twenty-four hours.

"And he what?" Nick asked.

"He kissed me." I said flatly.

Nick stopped dead in his tracks and stared at me, slack jawed. He had known Caleb only a little less time than I and this must have been quite a thing for him to hear. Slowly, his muzzle closed and we started walking again as he just shook his head, dumbfounded.

"Then," I went on, "he avoided my every glance and query until we got back to camp and it started raining. He went to his tent and I went to mine. I was distraught, confused and even scared. I didn't know what was going on. Then, he climbed into my tent, soaking wet, claiming that his tent had flooded."

"What?" he asked, "That makes no sense at all. Caleb is one of the best campers I have ever seen. I dare say he's better than me. He takes great steps to ensure that nothing like that happens."

"I know that," I said, nodding my agreement, "But this time he set up his tent in this little depression. I was going to question him, but he was pretty pissed off at the time."

"About what?"

"We got lost," I said, "We set up camp there and he said that we could figure out where we were in the morning."

Nick shook his head slowly, our pace having slowed to a stroll. "That can't be. You said you guys were camped near the hot springs?" When I nodded he almost exploded, "This is crazy! Caleb knows that area almost perfectly. He's been there at least three or four times that I know of."

"Then why would he say he was lost?" I asked.

"For the same reason that he intentionally set up his tent in a place where it would flood. He wanted it to flood so that he could come to your tent. Just as he purposely picked that very site because the hot springs would give him a chance to really get under your skin, so to speak. It's all too damned convenient."

"I can't believe he'd go to such lengths to have sex with me. Why not just ask?"

"He's straight, Mik'l. He probably thinks that asking would make him gay. But if the situation just happened to lead up to it..." he paused, shaking his head, "I've seen it done before. Tell me something. What did he say after you two were done? How did he react? Was he even vaguely remorseful about it?"

I shook my head slowly, trying to fathom what Nick was saying. Could Caleb have planned all this from the beginning? My confusion just continued to grow as more and more ideas swam through my already emotionally clouded brain.

"Tell me exactly what he said after you two were finished having sex."

"Well," I started, trying to clear away the fog and find the fact, "He said that he was sorry for teasing me, but he was really curious. He said that it was the only way he could think of to show me that my homosexuality didn't bother him. I asked him if he was afraid that it would have changed him and he said no."

Nick nodded slowly, his eyes focused on the trail before us, "Anything else?"

"Yeah, he said that we could take our time when the sun came up," I half smiled to myself, "It went rather quickly last night."

"So you did it again this morning?" he asked, smirking a little.

"No," I sighed, "Just as we were about to start, Jesse showed up and Caleb sort of freaked out. I guess he's afraid of anyone knowing what we did."

Nick pushed a branch clear as he stepped over a fallen log. "Hmmm. Well, that sounds like a damned good guess to me. And don't worry, I won't let on that I know about it."

"Thanks," I sighed, "I really need to talk to him about this."

"He may not want to talk about it after such a close shave with Jesse."

"I know that. But I have to try. I love him."

"Oh, I'm sure that'll go over like a lead balloon. I doubt he wants to hear that from you." Nick said flatly.

"He already has," I retorted, "And he said that he loves me to. He said so last night."

"Last night? After you had sex?" Nick became exasperated as he stamped about, yelling at me as though he were scolding a child for making some stupid mistake, "I can't believe you! You of all people should know better than to believe that shit. Those words were said in the throes of passion, or damned close. You can't take them as truth."

Some part of me refused to except that. Some part of me believed what Caleb had said, as impractical as it might be. There was something more than simple sex going on last night. It was love making in a tangible form. There was no mistaking it.

"And what if he does mean it, Nick?" I asked challengingly, "What then?"

"Then, my friend, your problem is far bigger than you and I can deal with on our own." He sighed softly, looking up ahead as we approached the point where we turn away from the swift flowing river, "Or...you don't have a problem at all. You have a mate."

END PART II