

## The Drifter's Song, by Z.A. Maxfield

Laurent ground tied his horse down by the stream and climbed the hill again, just a little before sundown, heedless of the way the wind whipped at his clothes. It could hardly be called a proper hill, as it was only one of the endless low rolling mounds that seemed to mark this place like boils. Those who liked the monotonous grassy rises and falls of this land could have it; he favored the starker terrain of the southwest -- the terrifying desolate landscape of the badlands -- and heat that flayed a body alive, or the easy decadence, the humid richness and excitement of New Orleans.

Laurent crawled along on his belly and tucked his hat under his arm just as he'd done the previous two nights to watch the odd soddy-dweller.

How could people live in houses made from earth, like moles? The dwelling itself was damp and crawling with vermin, roots grew through the ceiling, and things that live by burrowing, rodents and snakes, might make an appearance when you least expected them. It was like living in a grave before you actually faced the need for it, and Laurent couldn't see it. For a fact, he'd rather be dead if he were going to be buried beneath the earth..

Nearby, on a slight rise, sat a half-finished cabin. The half finished structure looked like little more than a chewed up animal carcass. It was already succumbing to the elements and appeared to be abandoned, as though its builder had a change of heart. Looking at the man who sat in the tiny family graveyard it was obvious that was exactly what had happened.

Was he entirely alone? It seemed that way. Laurent had seen him sit there two nights in a row -- on a mound of earth he'd apparently built

for the purpose -- his hands wrapped around his knees, much as a man might sit before a fire with his children.

More than one such prairie dweller had gone quietly mad out here in the vast nothingness of these godforsaken plains. To be sure, the land was rich and yielded much. But it took more than arable land to sustain the desire to live. It took guts and heart. It took courage, the strength of community, and the touch of human flesh.

Most men who lost a wife -- which might have befallen this poor bastard -- headed somewhere to find a new one fairly soon after, even as Laurent's own father had done. He'd taken a native woman who was convenient, getting companionship and more sons from her into the bargain. Laurent had to admire that kind of practicality, his own mixed heritage and the trouble it caused notwithstanding.

That this reed thin, barely-alive man sat stunned into silent misery night after night on his peoples' graves seemed almost like a criminal waste. Did the man want to die out here, alone? Did he want to give up? If that was the case, why not simply lie down and die, why continue to hack at a small garden, why worry about feeding a few chickens, or milking the scrawny cow.

Why get up at all?

Laurent turned to survey the rest of the area. A man had to keep watch here in this vast ocean of grass. The autumn winds could turn deadly fast, and the earth was dry as powder. A farmer could find himself battling an out of control grass fire -- all it took was a little lightning, a stray spark, and it could go up and race across the horizon like Satan himself rode along on the winds. It was one of the reasons he'd chosen to stop on this man's land, where he could bed down near a narrow stream and make a tiny fire in the night to cook what he caught and keep

animals away, but where he could also be certain of damp earth and dousing the flames quickly if things went wrong.

The way the farmer spent the twilight hours sitting alone among the dead purely fascinated Laurent. He didn't think too much of the man's chances. It tickled along the fine hairs of Laurent's arguably unhealthy curiosity. People interested him. If he'd become a doctor like two of his white brothers had, he might have liked to study people the way a scholar studied trees and birds.

It would make sense to find out, for example, what beat one man down so flat he couldn't get back up, and what made another get back up raging mad, entirely undaunted. Unvanquished.

While not lacking humility, Laurent was the getting up kind of fighter and he knew it; he had long experience with being beaten so far down he could hardly find up, much less achieve it. Laurent's own family had done all that beating. It made him a man, by heaven, as did his education among white men who thought him less and white women who couldn't resist him and played terrible, costly games to get him into their beds -- without much success.

It did him little good, as the color of his skin dictated the life he was allotted, except out here -- out...nowhere.

On the plains, the prairies, or in the badlands, in the newness of undiscovered, barely inhabited lands, he could make his way in solitude, exploring both nature and humans to his heart's content as long as he honored the one and stayed away from the other.

For the moment, he focused on the deeply unhappy face of the man he watched. That was as near a picture of human grief as any Laurent might have seen on his travels. Laurent pulled a worn pair of pinc-nez spectacles from his pocket -- the theft of which might have gotten him hanged if it were known he'd stolen in through a window and

taken them from his father's private study while the man lay dying with his white sons and daughters all around him.

The spectacles allowed him to see near objects more clearly, as he suffered from the same long sight as his father. Thusly, he could write an observation of the man he watched into a small, leather-bound journal while he peered over the rims to observe him.

Pale skin. Faint growth of fine brown hair masquerading as a beard. Possibly weeping. By god, the object of his current fascination was young. Cornflower blue eyes made more striking by the swollen rims of red skin surrounding them, light brown hair matted with sweat and crusted with dirt.

As Laurent watched transfixed, the young man drew a hunting knife from its leather sheath.

Laurent's heart lurched with fear.

This was new behavior. It was dangerous, the way he held the blade... He seemed contemplative, intrigued. He both caressed it and seemed to draw strength from it, which was alarming. Were it as sharp as the one Laurent carried, one tiny slip could bring a bad wound. Infection. Death.

For the first time Laurent wondered if the man's evenings were leading up to a tragedy -- if they were a gathering of courage and a way to spend final time with his earthly loved ones before he plunged the knife into his neck and sent himself irrevocably into hell, without them.

Watching him now, Laurent grew tense. The naked anguish Laurent saw in the soddy dweller's body -- the bleak finality -- made his mouth dry and his throat work like he'd ingested poison.

Would he be able to watch a man take his own life? Would he be able to remain anonymous and otherwise untouched by such a tragedy, especially since he knew, as everyone knew, that the act itself was one of

the few that could remove a soul permanently from the presence of God? That the act of suicide could, in fact, send a soul to perdition for all eternity?

Laurent swallowed the bitterness that rose in his throat. His course was clear, and he had the mettle to keep to it. He'd grown hard through the forced suppression of every instinct he had. Every tenderness he'd possessed, every finer feeling, had been ruthlessly and consistently stripped from him along with his flesh, his hair, his clothes, and his pride.

If that farmer wasn't strong enough to survive out here, the sooner he found out, the better. And likewise, dying by his own hand would be easier than some of pitfalls the land held for him. It would be quick, if the boy had guts. If not, Laurent wouldn't allow him to suffer. He could surely do for a human what he would do for an animal.

Laurent closed his eyes briefly. He didn't need to stop some despondent settler from taking himself off, even if the act condemned both of them to hell. The man already lived there and Laurent would surely join him there by and by.

A gust of wind caught the grass surrounding him, ruffling it like fur. The dry vegetation parted and Laurent was partially exposed, opposite the setting sun, its glare catching him full in the face. Laurent's settler looked up, directly at him, and for a second, Laurent froze. Then he pulled his spectacles off his nose and crept backwards down the hill, silently, on his belly. He felt safe enough but he couldn't be certain that the subject of his study hadn't seen him. At least, he couldn't be sure he hadn't seen the reflection of the sun's light off the glass of his pinc-nez.

Wars had been lost for less substantial reasons. He could elude the man if he gave chase, but after a few heart-stopping minutes of

concealment and listening for sounds, it became clear he wasn't followed. After a few more tense minutes, he breathed normally again.

Once he was concealed as well as he could be in his spot by the stream, he watched his horse nose the ground while he pulled a handful of nut meats from his pocket to eat. He had a little whiskey in his saddlebags along with a goodly amount of dried beef. If he could catch a fish he would chance a small fire once night fell, because he knew his settler went inside the soddy once the sky grew dark.

In the morning, he would have to move on. He didn't have time to wait for the farmer's drama to unfold. It was none of his business, anyway. He sure as hell had nothing in his saddlebags that could keep a man from losing hope.

His horse nudged his shoulder, butting his big nose into Laurent's neck and tickling it.

"Pssht." He used his head to push him back. The stallion, Forfeit, had a mind of his own and didn't hesitate to make his opinion known. Laurent admired the beast, but still, he didn't want horse spit in his hair.

Laurent pulled up a tuft of grass and held it for him, waiting patiently while he nibbled at it. Forfeit bobbed and nickered softly while pawing impatiently at the ground. Even his horse knew they should be leaving.

"Yes I know. We have to press on or we'll be stuck in this godforsaken place all winter."

The horse merely lost interest and went back to nosing the ground.

The skin of Laurent's shoulders tingled – a sure sign he'd been found out – seconds before he heard the lightest of footfalls behind him. He turned, even as he caught up his rifle and prepared to defend himself.

“No need to shoot me. I mean you no harm.” The young man’s voice, faint and rough, calmed him even though he’d unsheathed his knife.

Laurent turned, saying nothing. He held his weapon at his side. No sense in revealing that he was probably far more deadly relaxed and holding his gun away than the man before him with his knife and his tired posture -- his defeated countenance -- could ever be.

“I’m just passing through.”

“It’s fine.” The young man’s eyes remained blank. It didn’t appear he cared.

“I had planned to start a small fire after dark, for a little warmth and to keep the animals away.”

“It’s too dry.” The farmer glanced around. “Have you ever been in a grass fire?”

Laurent nodded. “I know how fast they move. I’ll control it.”

“Do that. Prairie fire’s like all talk of hell come to life.” The man said tiredly, then held out his hand. “My name’s Calvin Taylor.”

“Laurent LaGrosardière.”

“That’s quite a name, sir.”

“Call me Laurent.”

“Then call me Cal.” He cleared his throat. A small smile lifted the side of his mouth. “It seems I hardly know how to talk anymore.”

“Cal.”

“Maybe now you can tell me why you were watching me.”

Laurent offered his most winning smile and tried to come up with an answer as he busied himself gathering some stones to ring the fire. In the end all he could come up with was, “I was scouting out the surrounding area and I came upon your farm.”

“But not today, I think. I been out here a couple nights, to sit and watch the sky. I do that every now and again, if the weather’s nice.” Cal seemed to lose focus and peered back the way he’d come.

“In the graveyard?”

Cal frowned. “With my family. I thought I must be going crazy at last. I felt you watching me. That’s why...”

Laurent glanced up as he placed the last smooth stone.

Cal closed his eyes over an expression of immense pain. “I felt your presence. I thought maybe it was ghosts.”

“I’m sorry.” Was that why Cal had come out each night? Because he felt someone there?

Laurent felt real remorse if Cal had believed he’d been in the company of his lost ones. It seemed Laurent might have caused the very behavior he’d sought to study. “I meant no harm.”

“I thought...” Cal finally sheathed his knife but said nothing more.

Laurent frowned. "I regret causing you any pain."

In the waning light Cal was all contrasts. His skin was pale, but there were dark smudges beneath his extraordinary blue eyes. His cheekbones slanted over purple hollows that looked like bruises. Dry lips, several days’ growth of wispy beard.

A hat hid Cal's hair, but Laurent knew it to be shoulder length and untidy.

Cal spoke, “Do you believe in ghosts?”

A smile tugged at Laurent’s lips. “I do. Are you disappointed to find a man instead of a shade?”

Cal’s face twisted into an expression of horror. “Hell no. My heart fairly freezes at the thought.”

What an odd thing for a man who spends his evenings sitting on graves to say.

Cal looked down at his boots for a minute or two, while Laurent played at arranging kindling. "I can offer you a roof over your head for the night."

"I..." Laurent gave the soddy his consideration. He wanted to hear the man's story. At least he would have liked to listen to a human voice for a change and Cal's didn't sound like he used his much, if ever. Maybe he'd want to talk.

Laurent believed in offering honesty. "I don't know if I can sleep inside an earth house, like you do."

Cal nodded. He peered at Laurent from under the limp brim of his hat. "It takes some getting used to."

Laurent hesitated. "I don't think I could breathe."

"You have the look of someone more comfortable under the sky."

Laurent nodded. That was surely true. People had said the same thing far less diplomatically. "Perhaps you can join me here for a time. The company would be welcome."

Cal could hardly make his voice work, that's what came of living in silence --of talking to the coffee pot and the milk cow because there was no one else. Once, he'd talked to the horses, but they were gone, and as for humans...Laurent was the first he'd seen in a long time.

"All right." Cal sat tentatively on one side of the fire ring as Laurent added some wood chips and dried dung to the pile before carefully striking his flint, blowing on the little pile to get it started. It crackled to life, a tiny fire, but oddly cheery.

Laurent pulled a bottle from his saddlebags and offered it to Cal, who uncorked it and took small swig. He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth and handed it back.

"Going to be cold out." Cal watched the other man take a swig.

“I’m accustomed to it.” Laurent wore a wool coat and had a blanket to wrap around his shoulders. He seemed easy in silence, as though he were used to it, and Cal was grateful he didn’t have to dig around inside himself for conversation. If he did, it would sound rusty and strange or worse, he’d take off talking like a jackrabbit -- like his son Jacob had when he’d learned to talk.

Cal held his counsel because in the presence of another human what he’d lost was all too real. Something inside him shied away from starting over with anyone, much less this stranger who’d been, he was certain, watching him for three days. When he’d begun feeling spied on, he’d wondered what it meant. The people he’d loved were gone but for a moment he’d had the very real and tangible worry that they watched him -- were waiting for him somewhere.

Cal had nearly done the unthinkable.

“Are you a Christian man?” Cal asked. He could tell his odd visitor had mixed blood. He had thick brown hair, which he wore longer even than Cal’s own untrimmed locks, and wide-set, hooded eyes, as brown as a bear’s. He had high cheekbones, bronzed skin and a nose like the blade of an ax. His face was impassive, but...keen and fine. Intelligent and observant.

Laurent appeared to choose his words carefully. “I wouldn’t say so.”

“Me neither. I never had much use for religion.”

“Me neither.”

Cal might have liked to follow that up, but Laurent's liquor, to which he was entirely unaccustomed, bloomed in his blood veins and he felt oddly boneless and befuddled. Laurent offered him the bottle again but he waved it away.

“Religion serves a purpose for some.”

“But for you?” Cal asked.

Laurent shook his head. "I can't worship the spirit inside a box made by men."

Cal settled back a little, relaxing. "I've heard talk of so-called 'boxes made by men' that took five lifetimes to build, and are so beautiful that you fall to your knees when you see them. In France and England they have churches that are so tall they brush the sky."

"I've seen some fine churches. In the East some of the buildings are grand like that. I've even been inside them," Laurent admitted. "The priests babbled until my ears bled but I heard nothing with my heart."

"You really went inside those big churches?"

Laurent nodded. "My father made me go. Later at school there was a chapel. My father's gone now and I've left that behind."

"My wife was a church-going woman. Sh-Sharon." The name seemed to stick on the roof of his mouth. He'd avoided saying it out loud for a long time.

"Sharon. Rose of Sharon. That's in the book." Laurent passed the whiskey bottle to Cal and this time he took a long drink. He held it between his hands and tried not to think of how far he'd taken Sharon away from everything she'd ever known, from her family and her friends and her church.

"There's no church out here. There's nothing. It's a long day's journey to the closest farm."

"It's a difficult life out here."

"It's impossible. This land just devours everything on it."

Damn. The drink loosened his tongue. Laurent said nothing to that. He took the bottle back from Cal and put it away. Cal worried he'd said too much and wasn't that just fine? The first man to come along in ages and Cal would drive him away with his maudlin talk. He contemplated the

fire for a while and then focused on his companion. Those dark eyes studied him, unblinking.

Cal swallowed hard. "Why were you watching me?"

"People interest me."

"People?"

"People, nature. The land. Everything interests me."

"I see." But Cal didn't, not really. The man gave nothing away and the alcohol made Cal's head swim. "You like people?"

"Not precisely. No." Cal stirred the fire. "I wouldn't say I like them. In point of fact I'm heading to the west where people are scarce."

"If you want a place where people are scarce you could stop right here."

"I'm going farther west. Maybe the territories, Arizona or New Mexico or further south, even. Mexico."

"What will you do there?"

"Live." Laurent shrugged. "Build something. Explore."

"That sounds mighty nice."

"What about you?"

Cal's heart clenched. "I'm keeping on here. Scratching away."

"You stopped work on your house?"

"Yeah." Cal felt for his knife, somehow comforted by touching the tooled leather sheath, knowing his knife was tucked safely within. "After Sharon passed it didn't make much sense to keep working on it. I like the soddy fine."

Laurent nodded, but Cal noticed his expression hadn't changed from that eerie, watchful gaze.

"It's cooler in the summer."

"You won't be here in summer anyway," Laurent said gently. "Will you?"

"Sure I will." Cal tried for a laugh but it sounded forced. "Where would I go?"

"Where indeed." Laurent removed a pouch from his coat pocket and produced a paper in which to roll a cigarette. "I couldn't help noticing that you have no horse."

"I did have. They were stolen."

Laurent fumbled the tobacco. It fluttered into his lap and he brushed at it unhappily. "How?"

"In the night. I came out shooting but they were already riding away." That's when Cal knew he was already dead -- the last little bit of fight left him when a group of renegades stole his only means of escape. He didn't blame the men who took his horses. He didn't deserve what he couldn't hold onto.

Laurent interrupted his thoughts. "You can't live out here without a horse."

Cal shrugged. "I know that." For a man intelligent enough to have been in some Eastern school with a chapel, this fellow nimbly rolling a second cigarette was fairly slow. Cal glanced up and met Laurent's eyes over the fire and waited until the man grasped what he'd left unsaid. Sure enough, the brown eyes narrowed.

"You plan to die out here."

"It's a hard land."

"You want that?"

Cal shrugged. "I can't say I want it. I can't say I'm surprised by it either. When I think about it at all, it seems inevitable."

"You aren't prepared to fight?"

The man's questions - and especially the challenge in his eyes - shamed Cal. He was surprised to find he still had a tiny cache of pride.

"You wouldn't understand."

“Then why don’t you explain it to me so that I do?”

“There is nothing out here. No. Thing. It’s so far away from home -- so deep inside the belly of nowhere a man just disappears. I thought I could live here, and I can’t.”

Laurent's voice was soft, sad when he finally spoke. “I see.”

Cal barely heard the night sounds: the buzz of insects, the rustling of nocturnal animals, and the ubiquitous song of the wind in the grass. He was struck again by the silence that surrounded Laurent, as if he swallowed sound, as if he caused the hush to fall over them while they talked.

“Thank you kindly for allowing me to bide here,” Laurent said formally.

“You’re entirely welcome.” Cal was equally polite even though he didn’t remember being asked or giving permission.

Laurent nodded from where he sat on his bedroll and lit his cigarette. After a while the smell of tobacco surrounded them. The aroma was both a treasured memento and a source of acute pain. To Cal, it brought memories of home.

Cal had been too young to fight in the war, but not too young to hang on every word spoken by the men who’d come by his family’s tiny farm on their way home after the war ended. He hadn’t been too young to understand grief, since two of his brothers never made it back.

So many men had been healing from terrible wounds or shock, in need of a meal or a friendly ear. Some had been hungry for more and Cal – ah Christ—he’d been a wild boy then and hungry too -- for the taste of tobacco-tainted lips and the feel a hard, rangy body against his.

He’d lain awake at night listening for the sound of men’s voices, and when they’d gotten quiet, he’d crept out under the stars to experience the nerve-shattering agony of indecision -- of wondering how

he'd be received when he approached a likely prospect and let his guard down. He had burned for the chance to be somebody's boy, practically begging like-minded men to take him up on it and shove him face first into a hay bale and used him for their pleasure. He'd been quick to learn how to turn those first shocked fumbblings into -- if not satisfaction -- at least relief.

One or two men had touched him carefully - like a bride. Those men applied a knowledgeable hand and sent Cal spinning away to the most insane, the most gut-wrenching ecstasy imaginable.

That was glorious, exquisite release. As if all the angels sang his name at once.

"I should leave," Cal rose to his feet.

It didn't bear thinking that the smell of tobacco on a man's breath -- a whiff of smoke and sweat and sweet earth on his clothes -- did private, shameful things to Cal's body. It didn't bear thinking that he could run so far for so long to escape what he was, only to consider turning back to this man Laurent and expressing his desire to experience it again.

That would likely get him killed anyway. This was the true reason he lived in the absolute solitude of his own private hell.

That short lived time of freedom had been followed by tragedy, he'd been found out -- disgraced -- and married off in haste, sent west to expiate his sins. Since he'd dragged his poor family along, travelled further and further into the wilderness, not out of wanderlust or desire for adventure, but to escape his unwholesome desires -- to escape himself.

This land -- his sins -- had killed his wife and their children, and soon it would kill him too.

When the stranger moved on in the morning, he'd be left alone with his thoughts and his ghosts and those shameful memories. After that, it wouldn't be long before he lived in hell for real.

"Cal," Laurent's voice sounded soft -- like he was talking to a spooked horse. "You don't really have to leave yet do you?"

Cal gave the barest shake of his head.

Laurent moved slowly. He stretched out his long legs and lean body, his back against his saddle, and held his flask up again. "Nights out here get awful tiresome without company."

Cal tried not to watch that big body unfurl. He tried to forget the way a man's muscles felt beneath his hands.

To hide his growing attraction, he pulled his long coat tighter around his body. He got the feeling his 'guest' didn't miss much.

"I'm cold."

"Perhaps if you came over here? The breeze is blowing the warmth of the fire my way and we could share it."

Cal nodded, making his way around to Laurent's side of the fire, where it was indeed warmer but the smoke irritated his eyes.

Laurent laughed at his attempt to wave it away. "When I was young my mother used to say smoke seeks out the pretty children."

Had Laurent just called him pretty? "Your folks still alive?"

"No."

"Mine neither." Maybe they still lived, Cal only knew he wasn't welcome home anymore.

Laurent made room and Cal sat, cross-legged, with his back to Laurent's saddle. One of his thighs brushed along the solid warmth of Laurent's hip and a jolt of pure animal attraction flared through him.

Cal caught surprise in Laurent's gaze -- a moment's hesitation, during which something passed between them.

Can Laurent -- this stranger -- tell what I'm thinking?

Does he know?

Cal glanced back toward the tiny fire in surprise. It had been a long time since he'd allowed himself to wonder about such a thing.

"Tell me a story, Cal," Laurent whispered.

"I don't know many stories."

"Tell me your story, then."

Cal pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them, tucking his head in tight like a ball. Such a silent, anguished sound fell from his lips it spooked Laurent's horse.

Tentatively, Laurent placed his hand on Cal's back between his shoulder blades. Cal melted into his touch. "You've been alone for a long time."

"I guess so."

"I'm here."

"Christ," Cal cursed.

"Not exactly." Laurent simply pulled Cal into his arms, enfolding Cal's tightly drawn body into his own.

"Don't."

"Shh..."

"Stop." Cal fought him. His soft grunts of effort disappeared into the night, as did the effort itself. He was no match for Laurent -- it didn't take long before he lay limp and exhausted, shaking in Laurent's arms like a beaten dog.

"It's all right," Laurent soothed. "I've got you."

Cal heard that odd, anguished sound again. It had to have come from him, but for the life of him, he couldn't feel it. He couldn't feel his arms or legs, couldn't manage the simple act of speaking or moving

away. He let Laurent hold him, unable – maybe unwilling -- to do anything about it.

“That’s better. You don’t have to fight me.”

Cal’s eyes burned. “I can’t fight you.”

Large, firm hands kneaded the muscles of Cal’s back. “I know.”

“How do you know?” Cal whispered urgently. This was his worst fear -- that his unnatural behavior had stained him somehow and people could tell. That wherever he went ordinary men could see it.

“There’s nothing wrong with admitting you’re lonely.” Laurent cupped the side of Cal’s face and Cal felt pinned, helpless against the warm skin of Laurent’s palm. He breathed in the scent of man and sweat, of horse and earth and tobacco and nearly wept with relief. “There’s nothing wrong with craving human touch.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.” Laurent molded his other hand against the base of Cal’s spine.

“I shouldn’t want this.”

Those knowing brown eyes studied him. “But you do.”

He did. He wanted the warmth of human companionship. To hear a voice that wasn't his own. He wanted the simple sound of footsteps and to lie awake at night and hear someone breathing.

He wanted the press of a human body against his.

“God help me, I do.” Cal capitulated, giving in to the searing pleasure of Laurent’s touch. Laurent’s skin was dark and smooth at the base of his throat. His pulse throbbed and when Cal pressed his lips to that tender skin he shivered all over.

Lifting his gaze, Cal saw naked hunger in Laurent’s eyes and did the only thing he knew how to do -- he followed Laurent’s lead and let his hands roam over the hills and valleys of Laurent’s body while Laurent

deftly found Cal's tender spots with his lips and hands -- deep, secret places where touch sent Cal spiraling out of control: the tender skin behind his ear, the taut buds of his nipples, and the hollows of his hips.

Laurent tore at the fastening of Cal's trousers, digging inside, opening the buttons of Cal's union suit until his cock leapt, hot and heavy, into Laurent's hand. Cal tried to do the same, fighting with a belt and ties, and eventually finding what he looked for, Laurent's thick, dewy member, already hard for him. Laurent made a needy sound and Cal shifted lower to capture him with his mouth.

That first taste of Laurent's sex -- the explosion of bitter and salt on his tongue -- nearly undid Cal. He wrapped his arms around Laurent's hips and dove on him, again and again, swallowing Laurent's thick member until his nose pressed into the bare wisps of hair on Laurent's groin.

Large hands settled on Cal's head, stroking his hair, framing his face as he licked and sucked the stranger's cock. If he was sleeping - if he was dying, and dreams had conjured this man, this magnificent strange being - Cal didn't want to wake up.

Cal's found strength in Laurent's powerful body and tenderness in his touch, and he didn't need more.

When Laurent's crisis came on him, his whole body went rigid. Cal swallowed his essence eagerly and when at last Laurent was still, Cal closed his eyes and rubbed his lips over Laurent's softening manhood, memorizing every detail.

When Laurent tried to pull Cal's body up, away from where he'd pillowed his head on Laurent's softening cock, he resisted.

"Let me taste my seed on your lips," Laurent urged.

Surprised, Cal lifted his head. Firm lips met his. He opened with a gasp of surprise and Laurent was there to seize control, pushing his

tongue into Cal's mouth, kissing him deeply. Cal molded himself to Laurent's body, and they rolled together until Laurent had him pressed down into the soft earth. He slipped a hand once more into Cal's underclothes.

Cal uttered a cry when Laurent finally slipped deft fingers around his cock. Laurent had a man's hands, calloused and work roughened, with long fingers that wrapped around Cal's rod and gave him a hard squeeze. Cal's hips shot up, pushing into that exquisite vise while Laurent kissed him into breathlessness, the taste of seed on both their tongues. There was nothing now of the gentle lover, Laurent's hand flew over Cal's cock while Cal punched up into his clenching fist, his only goal to reach release. Silent minutes later, he shuddered and came apart in Laurent's arms.

Cal had no words to give, and Laurent asked for none. He simply curled up against Laurent for warmth and fell into a deep untroubled sleep in his arms.

At some point in the night, Cal woke up and found Laurent's gaze on him -- penetrating him and stripping him of all artifice.

"Are you real?"

"I am," came Laurent's reply.

"What now?"

"What do you want?"

"I can't have what I want."

"Who's here to stop you?"

Cal blinked. "Laurent—"

"There's no one within a hundred miles. It might as well be a thousand. Who can stop you from taking what you want?"

"God knows. He—"

"Maybe you should ask yourself why of all the endless places in the world I found this one."

"That's—"

"That's talk for another time, I'm tired."

Cal closed his mouth obediently. He noticed Laurent's smile before he tightened his arms around him and closed his eyes.

Laurent heard Cal leave their makeshift bed before dawn. He gave the man time to slink away -- he had nowhere to go. For a few minutes, Laurent contemplated the fate that led him to be in this particular location at this exact time. He wondered about his skills, and the obvious failure of stealth that caused Cal to catch him out when he'd been able to skulk around whole army encampments, helping himself to whatever he chose -- switching men's boots for a prank -- without being found out.

He got up and made sure his fire was completely extinguished before he saddled up his horse. A last look around told him everything he needed to know.

This was good land. Rich and fertile. It had pitfalls -- it was lonely -- but overall the land was good. Still, it was no place for him and no place for Cal.

Laurent led his horse back to the rise where he'd watched the blue-eyed soddy dweller and was unsurprised to find him where he'd first laid eyes on him, sitting with his dead.

This time Laurent didn't hesitate. He led his horse right up to the tiny row of graves and waited. Forfeit's hooves thudded over the dry earth, disturbing the early morning quiet.

"Get what you can carry," he told Cal.

Cal's gaze lifted. He sat on his small mound of earth. "What?"

"Get your things."

Fear shadowed Cal's eyes. "I can't leave."

"You can't stay." Laurent dismounted and marched right past Cal to the lean-to where Cal kept his rangy cow. Laurent was loath to drag it along, but perhaps they could trade it for some sort of horse.

When he returned, towing Cal's cow along on a length of rope, Cal hadn't moved.

Laurent stood over him, determined. "I said get your things."

Cal glared at him. "And I said no."

Gods, what a stubborn man.

Laurent knelt before Cal and gently pushed the hair from his eyes. "Introduce me to your family."

Cal's eyes glittered as he pointed to each small mound of earth. "Lily" -- he cleared his throat-- "Lily didn't thrive. She was the first. Jacob made it to three. He and his mother died from a fever last spring. There was nothing I could do."

"Would they want you to die here?"

Cal didn't answer. He swiped a sleeve across his eyes and looked away.

"You need to move on. There are other places where you can punish yourself."

At that, Cal shoved Laurent away. "Go to hell."

"Look around you," Laurent shouted. "This is hell."

"Things could have been so different for them. If it weren't for me running from what I am--" Cal's eyes burned with regret. "The least I can do is honor their memory."

"Honor it by doing better. Honor it by saving yourself and serving others."

"There's no saving me, you saw last night, I'm--"

"You're what? Why worry where we spill our seed in this godforsaken wilderness? Is there anybody out here to even care?"

Cal said nothing.

"I can't leave you here." Laurent admitted. "I thought I could stand by and let you make your choice. I thought I could live with it, but I can't."  
"

"Laurent--"

"Maybe you weren't the only one who was lonely. It's been a long time since I got close enough to know someone. I touched your skin. I held you in my arms. I felt your heart beat against mine and now I can't leave you here to die. Don't make me walk away alone, Cal."

That was all Laurent had to give, and even sharing those few words -- opening a window into his most private emotions -- felt like a savage cut into his skin. He wasn't given to letting people know he cared about anything.

Why hand over a weapon someone could use against you?

"Wait here," Cal said finally, leaving Laurent standing there while he went into his burrow.

Dieu merci!

Cal returned in only a few minutes with two small bundles and a shotgun. "I rolled some clothes into a blanket. The food I have is in the sack there."

Laurent tied Cal's things to Forfeit's saddle and watched while Cal gave a last look around.

"Everything I tried here failed."

"Time to try something completely new." Laurent swung up into the saddle and held out his hand for Cal. Cal placed his foot into the stirrup and swung himself up behind Laurent.

"Is it that simple?"

"How should I know? I'm trying something new here too."

"I see."

Laurent let Forfeit get used to their combined weight before nudging him into motion. Forfeit danced around a little, forcing Cal to put his arms around Laurent's waist. Laurent liked having the solid warmth of Cal's body at his back. He caressed Cal's hands to let him know he liked them there.

"Hold me tight," he teased. "If you let go, I'll make you ride your cow."

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Z. A. Maxfield is a fifth-generation native of Los Angeles, although she now lives in the O.C. She started writing in 2007 on a dare from her children and never looked back. Pathologically disorganized and perennially optimistic, she writes as much as she can, reads as much as she dares, and enjoys her time with family and friends. If anyone asks her how a wife and mother of four manages to find time for a writing career, she'll answer, "It's amazing what you can do if you completely give up housework." Find her [here](#).