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Prologue

The party was in full swing by the time Ross got there. He stood out on the porch of the damned bunkhouse his mom had built for her ranch hands, fist raised to knock. The place belonged to his buddy Brodie now, and Brodie was fixing to get married. Ross wouldn't miss that for the world.

Even if he was half-dreading the whole thing.

"Uncle Ross!" Before he could even knock, Ken's kids came tumbling out, just whooping and hollering and hugging on him. Damn, they'd grown in the time he'd been gone, just wandering around the country.

He scooped up Katie and hugged her tight. "Hey, kiddo. You remember me, huh?"

"I don't know why she should, stranger." That came from Brodie, who walked out of the house and reached out to shake his hand.

He hadn't really been nervous about seeing Brodie again, but the handshake eased him anyway, strong and friendly as it was. He had to shift the kidlet to one side to do it, but they ended up sharing a sort of man-hug.

"Good to see you, buddy," Ross said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." A bright grin split Brodie's usually solemn face.
"Wait until you meet the bride. You'll be jealous you didn't find her first."

"Nah." Ross allowed himself a tiny smile. "I'm good."

His mom came out then, and after that it was Ken and Mandy and Jed and Eli, all pounding him on the back and laughing. Hell, they were all standing around in the cool,

Colorado night air, grinning like fools and cussing him for not coming home sooner.

"We could move inside," his mom said. Nancy Thatcher was a fine looking woman still, and she gave Ross a strong hug, scented with cigarettes and wood chips. "Come on, baby. I missed you and we need to catch up."

"Sure, but..." He dug in a little with his boot heels.

"No buts. Look at you. You look just like your daddy, all cowboy-ed up."

"Yeah. Come on, man. We need to catch up for sure." Jed tugged at his sleeve on the opposite side. "What's your deal?" "Well, there's..."

Ken snorted. "You can get your shit out of the truck later." Sighing, Ross broke free. "That's not..."

"Uncle Ross?" Ken's oldest piped up. "Who's that?"

One kiddie finger pointed at the tall figure standing in the shadows at the far end of the porch. The big guy shifted from foot to foot before stepping out into the light.

Ross grinned, rolling his eyes a little at the man he'd been living with for the better part of a year. "That's Tank," he said. "My lover."

Chapter One Early Spring

Tank tightened a few screws, checked the 'stang over again. Fuck, she was cherry. Rebuilt, stocks to chassis, and fucking perfect.

He ran one heavy hand over the upholstery, caressing it, petting it.

Beautiful. Perfect.

Too fucking bad it wasn't his.

He pulled out his cell, dialed Rick Waters. "Bud! Hey. Your lady's been loved and lubed and is ready for your worthless ass to come fetch."

He grinned at Rick's response, nodding, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Shit, summers were getting earlier and earlier in the spring and God knew that was for the fucking birds.

"I'm gonna hope you were talking about the Mustang and not someone's wife." The voice came from the bay door, and for a minute he couldn't see much beyond a silhouette of a man, about yea high and lean. Then the guy came on in, and he got a general impression of jeans and a t-shirt and close cropped sandy hair.

"Shit, I guarantee you there ain't a woman, heaven or earth worth this car, barring my momma, bless her soul." He grinned, wiped his hands off. "What can I do you for, sir?"

"Well, I'm hoping you can look at my truck. Poor old thing doesn't like this heat a bit." Blue eyes as bright as a cloudless

sky, lines around the mouth, and tanned skin completed the picture.

"Sure thing. What's she doing?" He headed out into the sun, wincing as he pulled the bill of the gimme cap down.

"Well, it's more what she's not doing. Which is running. Overheating every few miles. And I'm not much of a mechanic, I'm afraid." The truck was just old enough to start causing problems, maybe seven, eight years old.

"Smoking some?" At the guy's nod, he sighed. "Sounds like your water pump, maybe. They're twitchy in these Chevys. Hopefully, just a hose, though. Pop your hood?"

"Sure." The hood popped right up for him, and the guy came around to peer in too.

He wrapped his hand in a handkerchief, poked around a little. Sure as shit, that water pump was gone. "Yeah, buddy. Definitely a water pump. How big a hurry you in?" Buddy's was closed for the weekend; Nacogdoches probably had one he could get, if he got on the horn.

He got a snort and a sideways look out of those pretty eyes. "I'm in no hurry. Just sorta rambling around."

"Cool. 'Cause I trust Bud Niedermeyer to give good parts, and I reckon he's closed 'til Monday. Let me call him, see if he's in." He offered over his hand, smiled. "Tank."

"Ross." He got a firm shake and a tired smile in return, the lines smoothing out for a minute.

"Pleased." He flipped his phone open again, dialed Bud and got Suzy. "Hey Suzy, your old man around? Yeah? Have him give me a holler when he gets done showering?"

He chatted a second, then said his goodbyes. "He's supposed to call."

"Okay." Ross looked under the hood and shook his head. "I can change oil and hoses and shit, but this did seem beyond me."

"Well, it's not a terrible fix, yeah? Hundred and fifty or so, tops. Hell, Bud has a used pump and it'll be less." He walked them toward the shade again. "Where you coming from? You ain't local."

"Oh, I was visiting some friends in Georgia. Just sorta wandering from there. My home's in Colorado." Ross followed after slamming the hood shut, wiping sweat from his eyes as they stepped back into the relative cool of the bay.

"Oh, pretty mountains that way. Been camping some in New Mexico, which is close enough, yeah?" He went to the sink, started washing up.

"Yeah. I'm out on the western slope. Right off Grand Mesa." Out of the corner of his eye he could see Ross roll his shoulders, pop his neck. The man had the look of someone who'd been on the road a good while.

"Cool. I've lived here my whole life, 'cept for my time in the army." Rick and Scott pulled up in Scott's Jeep, and he waved. "Let me get these old coots their 'stang and I'll be right with you."

"No problem."

Rick was looking fine, Scott recovering right well from his heart attack. "Hello there, sirs. How's it hanging?"

Rick grinned. "Just fine, you old goat. How's my baby?" "Running like a top."

"Oh, good. You weren't rubbing all over her were you?"
Asshole just had to rub it in. He heard a quiet snort from over where Ross stood, got a grin when he looked over.

Scott chuckled and swatted Rick's ass. "I tell you what, Tank, this boy's got an unnatural hard on for that car."

He snorted. "Shit, Scott. I seen Rick. That's just an unnatural hard on, period."

"Oh, now. I like it all right." Scott was just beaming, not looking a bit gray, and it was good to see.

He laughed, popped the hood and showed the guys what all he'd done, got his check—hooboy. Steak dinner, baybee. Or brisket on the grill...

They left happy, Scott patting Rick's ass before they got in their cars and drove off.. He'd almost forgotten about the other fella until he heard a throat clearing. "Hey, have you got a john?"

"Oh, shit. Sorry, man. I do; that little door through there. Ain't even terrifying."

"No problem. They seemed like a nice couple." Ross headed into the head, came back out a few minutes later. "Oh, much better."

He nodded, looking up at the sun. "Hey, you want a beer? Bud's in the shower and that might take a while, and it's powerful warm."

"Oh, that'd be good. If you don't mind." Now that? Was a smile. Much, much brighter. Made the fella damned good looking.

"Oh, I don't mind a bit. I? Got me a real-to-life vending machine on the back porch for working on Tom Harrison's dualie. Keeps the beers right cold."

"A vending ... no shit? Now that's something else."

They headed down the dirt road toward the house. "No shit. It's cool as all get out. Hey, you okay with dogs?"

"Yeah. I like 'em and they generally like me." Ross followed right along, hands in his pockets.

"Rosebud and Daisy are good'uns; a little rambunctious, but good dogs." His truck and Harley were shining in the late evening sun, looking fine.

"Daisy and Rosebud?" Yeah, he was used to people laughing. "I'll have to tell Jed. That's worse than Garg and Ojo any day."

"Garg is *not* a girl's name, now. My Daisy? Is a lady." He grinned, winked.

"Oh, Garg is a boy. In fact, I think all four of Jed's dogs are ... I think he might be a woman hater."

"Jed belong to you?" He grinned over.

"Nope. He's my brother." And one Ross was fond of if that look was anything to go by. "His man's name is Eli. They're good together."

"Yeah? Good to hear about happy family." Good to hear about family at all.

"Yeah." There was something sad there, something odd, but it passed as soon as he opened the gate and the dogs came barreling forward.

He sort of puffed up and braced, giving the beasts something to crash against. "Hey. Hey girls. Y'all settle now.

Down. Come on." They stopped jumping, Rosebud licking his hand, Daisy barking her darn fool head off.

"Oh, hey ladies." Ross knelt down, carefully offering a hand, just grinning. Obviously the man wasn't lying about liking dogs.

Rosie pushed right in, stubby little Rottie tail going. Daisy took a second longer before her stubborn pit bull brain decided to follow along. Before he knew it both of the girls were getting ear scritches and praise, Ross just looking happy as a pig in shit.

He grinned and pulled two chairs out and turned the ceiling fan on in the porch before grabbing two beers.

"Oh. Nice. You've got a good set up here." Ross settled too, Rosie sitting on the man's feet while Daisy came back to Tank to beg for a sip.

He poured a bit into his palm, let her have some. "Thanks. 'Used to be my Granny's. I like it a lot."

"Yeah? My brother Jed inherited the family place with us. He's the oldest. I had a sweet little house..." Ross trailed off, sucking back some of the beer, going real quiet.

He nodded. He knew about that. "People suck, Ross. That's why God made dogs."

"You got that right." Ross grinned over, lifted his beer in response. "Thanks, man. I needed this."

"No problem. There's sometimes a man needs a brew."

"Sometimes he does, yeah." They sat in silence for awhile, watching the sun move and the dogs snore. Finally Ross stirred. "So is there a fleabag motel around here? Even if you get the part you won't be able to fix it today."

"There is, down the road a piece, but the damned Harvest fair's here. It's full up with vendors." He yawned, stretched. "I got a spare room, you want to put in for some food."

Damn, he could hear his granddaddy in his voice. Some things was just eternal, and one of them was Texas hospitality. Besides, there was something about this feller, something that said he needed a place to be.

He got a long look, then a nod. "I'd be grateful. But I don't want to put you out. I could buy supper."

"Ain't nobody gonna sleep in the room, you don't. I just know the roach motel and I wouldn't send a whore there."

"Well, I'll still buy supper. Man's gotta eat too."

"Sounds fair..." He was about to ask Ross what all he liked to eat when a hoot sounded and the dogs went batshit crazy.

"Damn, Tank! What you doing drinking in the sun with a stranger?" His baby brother Binky bounced over, grabbed a beer, the fucking freak.

"None of your business, little brother. Why ain't you at work?"

"On my way, stopped to get some oil for the silverwing."

"And I'm not a stranger. Your brother and I have been introduced." Oh, that made Binky stop and blink. Good for Ross.

"Well, good for you, stranger." Binky grinned, held out one hand. "I'm Binky Preston."

"Ross Thatcher. Nice to meet you." Ross shook Binky's hand, smiling nice and polite.

"Go to work, Binky. There's got to be a teenager in this town needs a butterfly inked on her ass."

Ross laughed as Binky swiped at him good-naturedly and finished off his beer before bouncing right off again. "He's something else."

"He's a butthead, but he's a good'un, all-in-all. My sister, now? She's a stuck-up bitch. Lives in town."

"I've got two brothers. They're both pretty good guys. Can't live with 'em. But good."

"Live with 'em?" His eyes went wide. "Shit, no. I'd strangle him with his own tongue."

"Yeah. Jed and I, we tie it up. And Ken's just too damned quiet. Of course, he's got his wife and his kids, so it works." Ross finished off the beer and set the empty aside.

"Binky probably has kids, but none he'd bring home to meet the family." He winked. He? Didn't have that problem, thank God for small favors.

"Me and Binky, we probably have a bit in common. At least in my younger days." Stretching, joints popping, Ross grinned.

Ah. Good to know.

He grinned back, nodded. "Well, I seen the girls Binky hangs out with. You'd do better elsewhere."

"Been a long time since I was with a woman anyway. I imagine I won't be looking. So how about that supper?" There was pink in Ross' cheeks that didn't come from the sun, and those eyes wouldn't quite meet his.

"Sure. What does your tongue want?"

That got him a surprised laugh, a flash of bright blue eyes. "Now that? Is a dangerous question. But I think I could go for some steak. There a place around?"

"Charlie's is damn good. Let me get a real shirt on and we'll head out."

"Sounds good. You mind if I wash up?"

"Sure, come on, I'll give you the dime tour." He stood up and opened the back door. It wasn't a grand place, but it was homey and his and decent clean. "This here's the kitchen. There's a dining room through there. Bedrooms down the hall. You'll know which one you're in because the other's full of boxes."

The kitchen was the best part of the house, huge and filled with a little of everything. He'd been working the chile pepper circuit for a few years, gaining himself a name, too.

"Wow. You've got a lot of hot sauce." Ross grinned at him. "You must love chiles."

"Have my own line of sauces." He chuckled and pointed to the line of bottles on the window sill. "Those are mine. Tank's Scorchers."

"Oh, cool. You know, I think I saw some of those in where was it? Beaumont? It all runs together. But if I remember right I sent some to my brother Ken."

"Yeah?" He beamed, just like a dad with his kids. He loved the whole process—cooking to bottling to selling them. "I've got my nephew Ricky running our booth at the fair."

"That's just too cool." Ross wandered down the hall, looking in rooms. It was the bathroom he finally turned into, popping back out to say, "Be right out."

"Cool." Tank wandered back into his room, washed his face and hands and found himself a decent shirt and jeans and his good straw hat, whistling happily.

They met in the hallway, Ross looking better for a little less road dirt and a little hair combing. "Man, I feel almost human."

He nodded, patted his own belly. "I think I lost ten pounds in grease. Must be time to eat."

He led them out to the pickup, checking to make sure he had his wallet and his phone. The truck keys were in the ignition.

"You know it. Hey, I really do appreciate this. I'm probably making no end of trouble for you." They hopped up in the truck, Ross buckling up.

"Oh, Hell. You ain't no trouble. When I was in the service? I was always ending up at someone or another's house. I like meeting folks."

No trouble and easy on the eyes, too. Not a hardship at all.

"So what unit were you with? I was 82nd Airborne." Too bad he didn't think Ross was looking back, but that smile was open and friendly.

"I was a mechanic with 1st Cav. Liked it well enough, too." Damned sand.

"Oh, you were slogging through the nasty stuff, then. Me? I was a jump school instructor. I had it easy."

"Oh, yeah? Wore a beret before they gave in and let everybody, huh?" He pulled out onto the highway, headed into town. "I wasn't nothing special. Just a sergeant, but I had fun 'til I blew my knee out in the sand."

"Yeah. I enjoyed it. I mustered out voluntarily. Had this hot and heavy thing I moved away for. Too bad that didn't

work out, huh?" He got a wry look, Ross moving restlessly, finally ending up looking out the window, elbow propped.

"Oh, that sucks. Ain't that always the way, though? You give it up and they fucking bail."

"Yeah. That does seem to be the way it works. Only one I ever lived with, you know?" They pulled up at Charlie's, and Ross was grinning again by the time they got out. Seemed like the man just didn't stay down for long. "Kev was good, so I shouldn't bitch. We were together six years or so, and it was worth every minute."

"Wow. Six years? That's pretty damned impressive." Oh, yeah. Damned impressive. His record was a two-fer.

"Hey I was in it for life, you know? They got chicken fried steak here? I'm suddenly feeling the need for artery clogging."

"Shit, yes. Beer and cobbler, too. All the good things." He nodded, sympathetic. People? Sucked.

And not in that fun, spanky way.

They had supper, had beer, had dessert. He found out that Ross was still a skydiving instructor by trade, and that the man had a wicked sense of humor and a real way with the wait staff, male and female alike. He got to talk about his businesses, both chile pepper and mechanical, and tell stories on his family.

For all that he wasn't Texan, Ross was a good'un and easy to jaw with. Tank was having himself a right fine time, laughing and joshing, keeping shit light and easy. Man seemed to have a hard row to hoe.

Ross finally sat back, patting just above his belt. "Shit, that was good. They know how to do cobbler, that's for sure."

"Hell, yeah. Blackberries were sweet and fat this year. Binky and me wandered out before the Chile Fest and picked a bucket. Made a jalapeno and blackberry pie."

Man, that? Had sucked big hairy mule balls. Sure had been pretty, though.

"That sounds disgusting. I bet even the dogs didn't eat it."
"Oh, you don't think I'd feed my babies that shit, do you?"
He snorted, shook his head. "Fed it to the contest judges."

There went that laugh again, hearty, open, drawing their waitress, AnneMarie, right over to bend over the table and flash some cleavage. "You boys want anything else?"

He grinned. Damn, the girl'd been a slut in high school and Lord knew not a thing on her'd tightened up.

"Just the check, honey." Lord, look at her wiggle when Ross winked and gave her a bright smile.

Tank chuckled softly, earning himself a glare and a toss of those fake red curls. "Just because you're a jackass, Tank Preston, don't mean everyone is."

"Oh, now, he saved my ass today sure as anything. Seems like a good sort to me. Be nice and you'll get a good tip." That made AnneMarie wiggle and flounce and go get their check, and Ross just laughed.

Tank winked. "She's still sore I'm the only guy on the football team she didn't have in high school."

"Seems a long while to hold a grudge." He got a wink right back. "She has at least one twin in every town I've ever been in."

"At least. She's a good sort, down deep. Talks a mean game, but sure as shit, some man comes in needing a meal? He'll get one."

Nodding, Ross finished off his beer. "Yeah. There's a lot to be said for that."

"You know it. What comes around and all. You want to hit the movie store, pick a couple of somethings up?"

"Sure. I could go for something with car chases. Or explosions. You're not a closet tearjerker fiend are you?" They got all settled up, Ross thanking AnneMarie with another huge smile and a sweet, 'Thanks, darlin'. The man would be well remembered for a good while for that.

"Shit, man. I? Am musicals and showtunes, all the way." He waited to get the look, then laughed good and hard.

"Oh, Lord. Somehow I can just see you waltzing around singing *That's Entertainment*." Ross clapped him on the back as they left, hand warm and heavy on his shoulder.

He laughed good and long, having a damn fine time. "I'm more the *If I Was Rich Man* type."

"Oh, yeah. You'd actually have the voice for that. Nice and deep. Though the accent? Gotta tell you, buddy, wouldn't work."

Shopping for movies turned out to be just as much fun. Ross had pithy comments for some of the horrid action movies they stocked, and some damned funny observations about horror flicks too. Hell, he thought he would wet himself when Ross started on about the killer shark movie and the skinny little doctor chick in it.

They ended up with a handful, along with microwave popcorn and candy enough to make the weekend of it—scary movies, shoot 'em ups, even a western.

He had the beer, so they didn't need to worry about that, and by the time they got back to his place they were like old friends, just easy in their bones together. He hadn't taken to anybody so quick in a good while.

Tank checked the messages—one from Sissy saying he ought to come to church in the morning, surely he knew he was welcome, one from Binky warning him sister was feeling saved again and was fixin' to call her black sheep brothers back to the fold. He just chuckled and shook his head, heading to feed his girls.

Ross set them up right and tight in the living room, just sort of making himself at home. There was popcorn and beer and a movie ready to go by the time he came in, and a Ross on the couch.

He found his glasses and put his hat up before he settled. "Where we starting, sir?"

"I thought we'd go with the action flick. You ready?" He got tossed the remote. Oh, now that was a polite guest. Anyone knew you didn't hog the remote in a man's house.

"Shit, yeah." He hit play and before he knew it they were hooting along with the hero, both of them with their boots off and enough beer in them to make the bad jokes on the show funny.

They made their way through two and a half movies before it got real quiet, and he looked over to find Ross sound

asleep, head back and mouth open. Man looked tired enough to sleep all night right there.

He got up, straightened some and then made sure the guest room was made up nice. Then he let the beasts out and by the time he was done, Ross was blinking, looking dazed. "Come on, then. The bed's comfy. You'll get a crick on the sofa."

"Mmhmm." Stumbling along after him, Ross hit the head again then wandered right into the room he pointed out.
"Thanks again, Tank. I really appreciate it."

"Night, man. Sleep good." He nodded, then wandered himself in to shower and tuck himself in with a book. Poor quy. Hell to be missing the one you wanted, yes sir.

Chapter Two

Ross had a moment of 'where the Hell am I?' when he woke up. He blinked around at the really unhotel-like room and thought about it for at least a full thirty seconds. Oh, yeah. Tank the Texan.

The man was all right. Taking him in that way, and showing him a damned good time to boot. He liked Tank's house, and his sense of humor, and his dogs. It was a nice feeling. Too bad he was probably moving on.

Not that he had anywhere to go, really. He'd been home in Colorado for a bit, stayed with mom and tried to kill Jed. He'd go back there again, most like, but he was still too raw to deal with Jed's constant ribbing and poking.

He stretched, rolled, got up and headed for the bathroom. Damn, it was early. Once an Army man ... 'Course that meant Tank was probably an early riser himself, so maybe he wouldn't mind if Ross made breakfast.

That was how he knew to pay folks back for things. They made nice with him, and he cooked. And it had been too long since he cooked for someone. Not since ... well, he guessed he'd cooked for his buddy Brodie a few times when his brother Jed had kicked him out. But it had been a bit. So he put coffee on and found all the stuff for eggs and pancakes and found some sausage and just went to town.

Tank came in through the back door, big as a wrestler, bare-chested and in jeans and boots, hay on his knees.

"Mornin', sir. It's a fine morning out there, I tell you what.

Them cattle are full of piss and vinegar. Oh, now. That's a fine spread. The bed good on your back?"

Happy and bustling, nodding to him, Tank headed to the sink, washed his hands. There was a long string of dried chile peppers tattooed down the left side of Tank's back—damn near looked real.

"Yeah, it was good." He was staring, and the pancakes were gonna burn. "Hope you don't mind. I like to cook."

"Shit, no. Place is well-stocked, but mostly for the business. Cooking's a great thing. Smells good." Tank grabbed a t-shirt off the top of the dryer, shrugged it on. "Anything I can do?"

"I haven't found your plates yet." Yeah, okay, so he mourned the loss of the view, but hey. Tank probably didn't need a horn dog like him staring. He slid the eggs off the heat.

"Ah, that's because I hide them from the dogs. They think they're people." Tank stretched up, grabbed two plates, two mugs, two glasses. "You want juice or milk or both?"

"Juice would be great. I made coffee too." It was funny, how easy it was, working around the big old kitchen with Tank. Damn. Thinking was bad, and he was starting to feel like a whiny bastard every time he thought about Kev. He? Needed to get the Hell over it. He grinned over at Tank. "You know, if you hate scrambled eggs, now's the time to tell me. I can make fried."

"I'm easy. Scrambled. Fried. Poached. Boiled. You cook 'em; I'll put salsa on 'em and eat 'em." Tank grabbed some

orange juice and butter from the fridge, syrup from the pantry.

"Yeah? Fresh salsa, or some of that hot sauce? There's a difference." Jed would just laugh and laugh about his salsa fixation. So would his buddies back in California.

"Oh, now. On a sunny side up egg? I'm wantin' hot sauce, something to smooth into the yolk, but not leave chunks. You know you can't sop chunks worth a damn. Scrambled, though? That's strong enough for salsa."

Well, he'd never thought of it that way. 'Course he'd never put anything on a soppin' egg but maybe a little cayenne pepper. "Next time I have the over easy kind I'll have to try some hot sauce."

Pancakes, sausage ... "You got any jam?"

"I do. I got plum and blackberry, jalapeno and Momma's homemade strawberry recipe."

Tank pulled this odd lazy susan from the fridge, filled with little mason jars.

"Oh, cool. I like syrup but I always have one pancake rolled up with jam." He had ever since he was a kid. Hell, his mom looked at him funny if he didn't.

"I have a lot of toast with jam breakfasts, so I tend to have a lot."

"Yeah? Mine have been a lot of hotel coffee and fried things." He got the table set up and the coffee poured and sat, just really enjoying home cooking.

"Hotel coffee is a sad, sorry thing." Tank sat, just beamed. "Oh, man. This is welcome as the flowers in May. Thank you."

"No problem at all." Hell, he'd cook a lot more breakfasts to see a look like that. The man had a fine smile.

Tank dug in, eager and hungry, talking about the cattle and the weather and the rabbit the dogs caught that morning.

Ross just ate and listened, happy as a clam to have some company and to not have to just sit and think. Or drive. Damn, he was tired of driving.

"I tell you what. It's a right pretty day out there. What's your position on fishing?"

"I believe strongly in it." Oh, yeah. Fishing and him? They were friends.

"Yeah? Because I got me a little bass boat, a stocked pond, a couple three rods and a cooler for the beer..." Warm eyes smiled at him under a shock of dirty-blond hair.

"Well, if you're inviting me..." He grinned right back. "I can cook bass too."

"I'm inviting. I'll make potatoes and slaw, if we catch supper."

"And if we don't, we can hit the store and make something else." He was just inviting himself along for all sorts of shit. But Tank made it easy to do, didn't seem pressured or worried any.

"Works for me." Tank cleaned his plate and stood. "I'll clean up. Why don't you toss a couple three sandwiches and a bag of chips in a sack, for if we get lazy and fish through lunch? There's lunchmeat in the icebox."

"Will do." They puttered. Tank washed dishes; Ross made sandwiches fit for a king and snuck to the back door to feed the leftover piece of sausage to the dogs.

By the time they got Tennies on and the boat trailer hitched to the ancient Ford in the back pasture, he was feeling good—the sun, the wind, the company. Hell, even the dogs were making him laugh.

If fishing was half this good? He might just not want to leave. Damn, it was fine. Relaxing. "I'm not keeping you from anything am I?"

Tank shook his head. "Shit no. It's Sunday. I don't work Sundays. I fish and fuck off and take me my day of rest."

"Oh, good. That I can help with." Yeah. That sounded like a plan. He couldn't wait to drop a line in the water. He looked around, checking out Tank's land. The place wasn't anything fancy—rye grass growing, a handful of cattle, some goats. It had the look of land that had been lived on and wandered over for generations. The garage near the highway had neighbors, but the land back here? Private and solitary. Peaceful.

Ross just soaked it in, let the sun bake his bones and Tank make him laugh. The man wasn't hard to look at; he had a great voice, and had a sense of humor that really appealed.

The pond was good-sized, the water deep enough to have good-sized fish. They got the boat out there and started casting, Alan Jackson on the little radio, dogs digging for frogs on the bank. "Man, this is the life."

"You said it. A man could get used to it." Ross wiggled his toes, casting out and letting it sit a bit.

"Well, if you're just wandering, you're welcome to stay as long as you'd like. You're fine company and make a good pancake."

Oh. Damn. He almost said yes yes yes, right away, but Tank deserved some thought on his part. Wouldn't be right to put the man out on account of him being lonely. Then again, a lot of people had asked him to stay on and he hadn't. "I think I might like that. Can I let you know tonight?"

"Whenever, man. The offer'll be there." Tank slapped at a mosquito, nudged open the cooler. "I'm thinking it's beerthirty."

"Yeah. It's bound to be time for a beer somewhere." Ross took a beer too, grinning at himself. He was gonna have to start working out again or he'd get a belly.

"I tell you what, I've been fishing out here for a long of years and I ain't nowhere near tired of it." Tank chuckled. "I like to go on the big boats, too, though. Fish down at Corpus."

"Yeah? I've mostly done fly fishing in Colorado and some small boat fishing like this when I was at Bragg." Fly fishing up at Gunnison was high on his list.

"Fly fishing is cool. Don't have much call for it here. Daddy and me went up to Ruidoso a couple three times when I was a kid, and I tried. Takes some skill. I could use more lessons."

"It does. My dad taught all of us boys when we were kids. We got a lot of cold running water up where I'm from."

"Your dad still around? Mine passed on a while back. Left Momma to try and rein Binky in. Then she went too, and it's just us." Tank pulled down the brim of his cap, settled in a little deeper.

"Mine died when I was little. My mom raised us anyway though. Dad was a rodeo rider." He still missed his dad, but it was dulled by time, the memories good, happy.

"No shit? That's pretty cool. My cousin Randy rides bulls, just loves it." Tank grinned, the smile only a little sad. "My daddy drove truck. He was killed damn near twenty years ago out on I-30."

"S'a hard thing." They just sat for a long bit, the boat rocking gently, both of them getting bites but not catching much.

The sandwiches and the beer went down easy, the sun not as brutal as yesterday and the wind and water keeping things nice. Ross was just starting to doze when his line went crazy and he fought that fish all the way in, pulling in a real decent sized bass. "Well. That woke me. Should I keep him or toss him back? He won't be much if we don't catch anything else."

"Hmm. Toss him back and we'll grill some cow. He'll be bigger next time." About the time Tank got the words out of his mouth, the man's line went taut and they got another. "Or pop him in the bucket and cast again."

"Yeah. They keep on biting, I won't even miss the beer."

Oh, yeah. Suddenly they were just pulling them in, having hit that magic window. When the fish quit biting they had a nice mess of six.

Tank was grinning ear-to-ear. "Oh, we're gonna eat good tonight. I might even pull out some peaches from the deep freeze and make fried pies."

"Ooh. You do that and I'll make cornbread. We'll have a feast." He was almost bouncing. Damn, this was fun.

"Oh, man ... There's nothing like good cornbread with real honest-to-God butter." Tank nodded, patting his belly, the sound just thumping with all those muscles. "You got a deal."

"You got it." Yeah. He was really enjoying Tank. He thought maybe he'd stay awhile.

Chapter Three

"Thatcher! Whatever you're burning for supper's boiling over!" Tank grabbed a potholder and yanked the lid off, steam and liquid going everywhere. Damned element cover must've slipped again.

"Shit!" Ross came flying out of the bathroom, jeans hanging low, chest and feet bare. "You're a mechanic and you can't fix the damned stove?"

He got a grin though, Ross reaching past him to turn the stove off, getting a towel to mop up.

"Asshole." He chuckled, stealing a bit of a looksee. "I am a mechanic, not a repairman."

Noodles of some sort. He could smell all sorts of other stuff too, but couldn't see it, so it must be in the oven. Ross finally grabbed the pot from him, peering in and breathing a sigh of relief. "Yeah, yeah. At least you caught these before they were ruined."

"You're welcome." He swacked Ross' ass and chuckled. "How's it hanging, besides you trying to burn my house down?"

He got a look for that, Ross laughing out loud. "It's good. You? Wanna beer?"

"Hell, yeah. I'm happy. Got old lady Morgan's Caddy running and she's happier than a pig in shit. Paid me in real money." He went to the sink, grabbed the Goop and started washing up.

"Oh, cool." The noodles were set aside and Ross went and got him a beer, popping one himself. "I'm thinking maybe it's time I went looking for something to do."

"Yeah? What all you wanting to do?" He gotten Ross' truck fixed a while back, but they were doing good—visiting and cooking, playing cards, fishing. Having a fine time. Hell, it'd been what? A month, damn near?

"I got no idea. I'm good at jumping out of planes and teaching self-defense." The grin he got was wry, but not bitter. Ross didn't seem to have an ounce of bitter in him, really.

"Well, you might oughta talk to Scooter Warner—he teaches them kids at the high school about flying. You might work a deal with him, teaching. Or teach that self-defense at the community center. There's classes there."

"Yeah? That'd work. Drain those noodles in the sink, would you?" The oven it was, because Ross went down and pulled what looked to be a bubbling dish of stroganoff out.

"Surely." He grabbed a colander and drained, grinning ear to ear. "Shit, that smells good."

"Yeah? Good. There's bread and salad, too." They moved around each other easily, Ross taking him the noodles and giving him the hot bread to slice.

"Fucking A." He got the butter from the fridge, grabbed the salt and pepper. "You drinking another beer, tea or milk with your meal?"

"I'll go with tea. My beer's mostly gone, and I need to drink a few less." The noodles and sauce and meat got mixed

and set out, and Ross grabbed the salad from the fridge, joining him at the table.

He poured one iced tea, one glass of milk. "Binky invited us to play poker next Saturday night over at his place."

Not that Binky's place was somewhere he'd usually got to willing. Damn.

"Is that good or bad?" They'd talked on siblings enough that Ross should know, and the shit eating grin told him he was right.

"Good if you know how to play, bad if you have delicate sensibilities." He winked, digging in. "Binky? So needs him a good woman."

"Well, I've never been a shrinking violet. And yeah, I can see that. Someone to keep him in line."

Oh, supper was *good*.

"Shit. Someone to make him pick his drawers up off the floor."

"Oh man. Now there's something the Army beats out of you."

"No shit." He grinned, nodded. "Can you see Binky with a DI? He'd eat dirt twenty-three hours a day."

"Oh, Lord. He'd be in shit so deep he couldn't get his arms free to swim." Plate cleaned, Ross sat back and patted his belly.

"That was fine as frog hair, sir. I appreciate it." He stretched, grinned. "You spoil me."

"Least I can do. That and work around the place a bit." If he wasn't mistaken Ross looked less ... tired than he had when he came. Happier. It was a good look.

He nodded, grinned. "Thanks for mending that gate, bythe-by. It works nice. I got Tim Roger's tractor to work out. Gonna redo the brakes and he'll mow and bale the hay in the back pasture."

"Good." Ross got up, puttered with the dishes a bit before pouring him another glass of milk and rummaging in the oven again, coming out with what looked like a damned fine pie. He'd been promised one soon, something about Ross' stepdad's new recipe. "I wasn't looking forward to that."

He nodded, chuckled. "Makes a man itch for days. That looks good. You want me to fetch some vanilla ice cream from the freezer?"

"Oh, that'd be good. There's places a man shouldn't have hay."

"No shit. There's nothing like the damned stuff on your ball sac and you're at the store or something after, 'bout to go out of your damned mind." And man, didn't he speak from experience?

That got him a snort of laughter, that sweet looking pie almost ruined as Ross shot tea out his nose. "Lord, yes."

He started laughing, tickled down deep, ice cream bouncing a little as it hit the counter.

Ross was just hooting, leaning on the table, laughing his ass off.

"It ... it's hell to be a working man." He rubbed the back of his neck, grinning like a goober. Shit he hadn't laughed so good in a dog's age.

"It is." Laugh lines crinkled up around Ross' eyes, a bright smile stretching sun-browned cheeks. Cutting into the pie,

Ross served them both up a piece and reached for the ice cream. "But there's worse things ... suits and me? We don't mix."

He snorted. "I got a suede jacket for weddings and shit, but a suit? Shit, no."

"Oh, I used to have a good one or two. The kid liked to go out some, to fancy places. I always felt like I was still in my damned dress uniform, all starch and brass." The pie was apple, the crust flaky, and the ice cream melting nice.

"Yeah? I'm a simple guy. Beer at the Ranch House, pool on a slow night. Of course, I have a right fine Mo' Betta shirt for the awards night at the festivals."

"That'd be a fine thing I bet." Still grinning a little, Ross started in on the pie, humming, the sound happy as anything. "You win a lot?"

"Honestly? It depends on where the contest is. Up north? I don't do so good. But the southwest? I do okay. Bunch of second places, a couple three firsts. One grand champion in Tucson." He grinned, proud as all get out. He liked his little sauces.

"Hey, that's not bad at all. Pretty good, in fact. Way to go."

"Thanks. The Fiery Food Fest's in Albuquerque in three weekends. You interested in making the ride with me? We could run the booth." He'd never taken company with them before.

"Oh. That'd be nice. I'd like that a lot. That's not too far from my folks." He got a grin, warm and grateful. "Been a while since I went to Albuquerque."

"Yeah? I'm looking forward to it. Get to see all the new products, the competition." He grinned. "Bloody Marys with Tabasco at every turn."

"Lord. That'd be enough to kill a man."

He winked. "We'll stock up on the Mylanta."

"There you go. You doing the dishes?" They'd quickly fallen into the 'whoever didn't cook washed up' thing.

"You know it. You want to pick a movie out?"

"Sure. I'm thinking something suspenseful." Ross wandered off after helping him clear the table and soon enough he could hear the man whistling.

He grinned, squirting some soap into the sink. Damn. Look at him, all domestic and happy and shit. Like a couple that had been married for years.

He scraped plates and plopped them in the sink with a chuckle.

Hell, they were getting as much nookie as most old married folks, weren't they?

Chapter Four

Ross got back from town just about the time Tank was putting supper on the table. Man, it was weird to do that, but cool as all get out. He was pretty darned happy, because the flight school guy was gonna hire him on and he'd made a deal to teach self-defense at the community center. After they got back from Albuquerque.

"Hey. Something smells good. Looks like I found some work, too." He grinned at Tank, admiring the way the man looked in the shirt he was wearing. Nice.

"Jambalaya and corn bread." Tank gave him a grin, a nod. It was cool, the constant, easy welcome. "Which place snapped you up?"

"Both. I can kinda set my own schedule. It'll be good. That way I can help you out around here, if you still want me to hang on." He wasn't wanting to push his way in and stay, but he had a feeling Tank was enjoying his company as much as he was Tank's.

"You know it." Tank put the tea out on the table. "You're damned fine company, man. And both? Fucking A. Congrats."

"Thanks. Told them I'd start after that festival thing. Want to hit that for sure. What can I do?"

"We're good to go, just dish yourself up a plate." Tank sat, popping the butter dish open. "The bottles and labels for the sauces came in today. I reckon we'll sell all the current inventory plus a little. I keep hoping we hit a distributor. One day? It'll happen."

"It will. It's good stuff." He dished them both up a plate as Tank cut big hunks of cornbread.

"I think so. I was pondering a new line to test. Maybe something fruity? Fredericksburg peach based?"

"Oh, now that's an idea. I should give you Lloyd's number. That's my mom's husband. He's got some great recipes for peaches and heat. Peaches are big over in Palisade, near where they live." Oh, man. That jambalaya was good. Lloyd would want the recipe for that. He had a feeling his step-dad and Tank would get on like a house afire.

"No shit? I would have reckoned it got too cold for peach trees." Tank ate hearty, nothing delicate about the man, not from the huge hands to the laugh big as Texas.

"Palisade is right down in the river valley. It's about an hour drive for them." He wasn't shy about digging in either. Tank always made enough for an army.

Damn, he needed to call his mom. All of a sudden he missed her like a sore tooth.

"Yeah? We'll have to think on it, 'cause the gourmet types? Like the fusion shit."

"Cool." Ross just grinned, humming at the taste of the cornbread. God, he did love Tank's cornbread. "So what do you need me to do, label wise?"

"We'll need to wipe the bottles down and slap those puppies on. They stick hard, so if it's crookedly? We'll keep that bottle back for a sample one."

"I can do that." It would be good, helping Tank out. Good to repay him for all the help Tank had given him.

"Cool. I got the trailer all cleaned up and started setting it up today. It'll slow us some, but I hate hotels. At least in the trailer you know if someone walks in you can bash them." Tank winked, chuckled, sopping up the peppery broth in the bottom of the bowl.

"Yeah. Makes for less in the way of privacy issues and noises from next door." Ross sat back, full as a tick.

Tank nodded. "And you get your own quilts, your own time frame. I even got a TV and a movie player in there."

"You got the deluxe version." He winked. "Who watches the garage while you're gone?"

"Binky will sleep over here, feed the dogs and shit. Sheriff Davis drives by in the evenings, too, just to watch." Tank leaned back, stretched. "I'll have all the work done and the tools are insured, so it'll be safe."

"Cool." That meant he didn't have to offer. Ross just sat for a bit, soaking in the silence before hoisting himself up and gathering dishes.

"I was thinking on making milkshakes for dessert later. There's strawberry ice cream in the deep freeze." Tank headed over to scoop up the leftovers, freezing half and putting half in two bowls for tomorrow's lunch.

"That? Sounds like the best plan I've heard in days. Since the blackberry cobbler at least." He was definitely gonna have to find a place to work out, he kept eating like he was. Running in the morning was all good and well, but he needed to work more off.

"Mmm ... That blackberry cobbler was better than sex, I swear."

"Was it?" Laughing, Ross dumped soap in the sink. "I don't remember sex." He winked over his shoulder.

"See? But you remember the cobbler." Tank chuckled, digging in the deep freezer for the ice cream.

"I do." The water got going and Ross got the blender out, brushing past Tank every time they crossed paths. The kitchen was roomy, but they were neither of them small. It was ... nice.

Tank reached up above the stove for the vanilla as he got the milk, both of them running smack dab into each other as they turned.

"Shit, sorry." His hands were free and Tank's weren't, so as they about went winding he grabbed on and held. Made them bump together again as they overcompensated.

Tank chuckled, the sound husky. "Shit, Thatcher. I didn't know you could dance."

That was ... oh. Ross just stood there, holding Tank's upper arms, thumbs digging into those muscles. "You should try me sometime. I'm pretty good at it."

Those warm eyes met his, Tank swallowing once, hard. "I reckon you are. Mighty fine at that."

The urge hit him, and Ross didn't question it one little bit, just went up on his toes and kissed Tank's mouth, soft, just to see. He got a low rumbling sound for his troubles, Tank's lips moving against his, breath still spicy from supper. It was a slow burn. Didn't surprise him one bit, if you figured how long it took them. But oh, it was good.

The kisses sort of slid, one into another, brief, soft brushes of their lips, just sort of sharing breath, touching. It would

have gone on longer, except for the sound of dishwater overflowing on the floor.

"Shit!" Ross cursed again and hopped back to turn the sink off, getting an old dishtowel to mop up water.

Tank started laughing, milk put on the counter before he grabbed the mop. "Talk about getting distracted ... I never had that reaction to cobbler."

"No. You may have to rethink that statement, huh?" He couldn't help it, he started laughing too, just leaning against the counter and getting breathless with it.

Tank just hooted, grabbed a handful of suds and tossed them, the bubbles plopping in the center of his chest.

"Oh, now that's war." He zinged the towel at Tank, chortling at the wet sound it made against one of Tank's thighs.

"Oh, ho!" Another handful of green apple scented suds smacked him, wet and bubbly and warm. Ross lunged, getting to the sink, getting a handful of his own suds and flinging, hitting Tank's shoulder. The battle was on, both of them dodging and weaving, trying to get the upper hand. Tank snorted, ducked the next volley and grabbed a kitchen towel, winding it up to snap him on the butt.

God, it was good to laugh. To play. Ross slid past Tank's towel defense, grabbing Tank's wrist, turning them so he could get his free hand in the suds and flick more up.

Tank retaliated by tickling, fingers digging into his ribs.

"Fuck! Tank. Stop it." His secret was out. He was ticklish as hell. Ross wiggled and gasped, utterly helpless as he started laughing.

"Oh fuck, look at you." Tank let up some, fingers more caressing now, keeping the laughter going.

Ross just gurgled, finally sort of sagging against Tank's broad chest, wheezing for breath. That man could tickle like a dog with a feather up his ass.

Tank held him up, easy as anything, big old arms solid as stone around him.

"Lord. I think you're trying to kill me." He grinned up, happy as anything.

"Nah. Where's the fun in that? Dead folks? Start oozing."

"Oh, now that's just disgusting." The water wasn't running anymore. Ross took that as a sign and leaned up to give Tank another slow kiss. He just had to. As a thank you, if nothing else.

Tank cupped his head, fingers hot as they held him. He slid his arms around Tank's waist, feeling solid muscle and heat under the t-shirt Tank wore. The heat between them built slowly, the kiss deepening with each passing breath.

It was just too good. Right. Balanced. Ross rubbed his lips over Tank's, tongue pressing the seam they made as the pushed together.

He could feel what he did to Tank against his belly—thick and hard, hot even through those jeans.

Made him damned hot. Made him smile against Tank's mouth and reach down, hand curling around Tank's hip. He wanted to reach down even more, but was oddly hesitant to move them too fast. Tank's eyes were shining, happy, a soft moan sliding into his lips. The kisses continued, never quite catching blaze, just keeping them both burning.

He rubbed his cheek against Tank's, rubbed his hips forward too, holding Tank close. "You feel good."

"We do." Tank's lips brushed the corner of his mouth, hands stroking along his spine.

"Yeah." Yeah. They did. After Kev ... well he'd gone out and catted around, but no one had felt good with him. Tank did. He petted Tank's hip, the curve of Tank's ass through the denim jeans.

He got a grin, Tank making a soft sound. "Oh, now. That feels fine."

"It sure does." Tank was just hard muscle everywhere. Everywhere.

Tank's hand followed the same path as his, cupping his ass, squeezing. Ross could see the heat in those eyes, see the pleasure there.

"Mmm. Yeah." The man had hands that lived up to his name. They were large, blunt, and damned effective.

"This cool?" Tank tugged, rubbed them together some, lips pressing against his.

"This is more than cool." The burn was rising under his skin, making him flushed, hot, making him want more.

"Oh. Good." Tank smiled, pushing against him, starting to rock.

"Just like that." That was just what he needed. He slid his other hand down, cupped Tank's ass with both of them, squeezing, hard muscle flexing for him.

"Uh-huh." Tank panted for him as they found a rhythm, pushing and pulling, bodies working together.

They were just all over it all of a sudden, both of them needing, both of them pushing. He kissed Tank's jaw, his throat, feeling stubble and smelling Old Spice.

"Shit, marthy, that's.... Damn." Tank's hands squeezed harder, damn near lifted him up off the floor. It was weird, to be the smaller one, the one who got lifted instead of doing the lifting. But he sure could live with it.

"It is ... need. Tank." He needed more friction, more Tank, more everything.

"Uh-huh." Tank turned him, just sat him right up on the counter, taking a hard, needy kiss.

Whoa. Ross laughed a little as water soaked into his jeans, and his balance went to Hell. He was so not used to being the one being manhandled. It felt good, believe it or not, and he pulled Tank to him again, wrapping his legs around those hips.

"Sorry. Just. You feel good." Tank kept them together, kept kissing and touching and moving against him.

"Why? Want you." No reason to apologize for that...

"Oh. Cool." Tank gave him a wild little smile, then pulled him in for another of those kisses. Damn.

He couldn't stand it anymore. He reached between them, battling to get past the waistband of Tank's jeans. Tank groaned, hand sliding down to palm his ass again, rubbing. There. Ross popped the button, feeling clumsy as all get out. He shoved his hand into Tank's jeans, his back arching as Tank touched him.

"Uhn." Tank rumbled, pushed right into his touch. "Ross. Damn."

"Yeah. You feel..." God, he didn't have words. Not one. Instead he just touched and tasted and rocked, about to explode.

"Uh-huh." Tank nodded, panting now, heat just pouring off him.

"Come on, Tank. I want to feel you when you..." Ross let his head fall back, let Tank bite at his throat, pulling at Tank's hard flesh. Heat splashed against his fingers, Tank grunting as teeth scraped over his throat.

"Oh! Oh, damn." Without even a touch, Ross came right in his jeans, body jerking and rocking.

"Fuck. That was. Damn." Tank licked his throat, breath just huffing.

"Yeah, it was." It had been a slow burn for so long that the white heat at the end had surprised them. But damn it was good. And he should have expected heat from Tank. All that chile.

"Shower?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking some laundry too." He laughed. They were both a little spunky.

Tank hooted. "Hell yes. And a beer. To celebrate something better than blackberry cobbler."

"Which is saying something." He laughed too, feeling loose and easy in his bones. "Saying a lot."

"You know it." Tank stepped back, grinned. "Bet if we share, there'll be enough hot water to last through washing."

"Yeah. And I am all for that." And for seeing Tank naked. He grinned, feeling evil and pushed Tank back so he could

hop down, grabbing a big handful of dishwater and flinging it at Tank before taking off down the hall.

"Oh. Watch your ass, now. I'm hunting it."

"You a good hunter, man?" He hit the bathroom and got the water going, stripping right off and stepping in. Oh, that felt amazing.

"Fair to middlin'," Tank said, sliding right in behind him, hands completely covering his ass and them some. "Better when I'm hunting something I really want to catch."

"Well, you've got me now." He needed to wash off the sticky mess, but otherwise, he was Tank's all night long. This was just so ... easy.

"Uh-huh." Tank laughed, water running right off him in sheets, hands slip-sliding on Ross' skin. That was a fine thing, all heat and yes and scarred up mechanic's hands. Ross figured he could get used to that.

Hell, they weren't even getting all hot and bothered, really. They'd done plenty of that out in the kitchen and both of them were old enough to know better on the whole second round thing. But God, it was fun to play. They soaped each other up, learned each other naked, which they hadn't even seen yet.

Tank was built like a brick shit house, no doubt about it. Huge, muscled, and hard from real physical work, he had a body a lot of folks would kill for, spending hours in the gym to imitate. Tank was the real deal, and Ross figured having the man all to himself all day was about as good as it got.

The laughter had sorta trailed off, both of them starting to breathe hard again, the look in Tank's eyes gone serious as a heart attack.

"We need to wrap this up and move it somewhere else, buddy?" Ross asked.

Tank nodded, a low rumble rising in that wide chest. "Yeah. You know, that guest room bed is nice, but it's got nothing on the one in my bedroom."

"Yeah? I bet you have a big old bed." Hell, it wasn't like Ross hadn't seen it, living in the same house like they were. Shit, when Binky came over and spent an hour in the guest bathroom, a man had to go somewhere. He'd thought about that bed on and off, mostly in an abstract sort of way, but now he had a much more concrete plan.

"I do." Tank gave him a grin, eyes twinkling, one big hand smacking his butt. "Come on and I'll show you, Colorado."

Ross almost hurt something turning off the water and stepping out on the slick tiles by the bathtub. They danced a bit, both of them cussing and skating before they got towels and dried off, hanging on to each other so they didn't go down.

"You'd best watch it," Tank said. "You take me down with you and I'll squash you like a bug. I'm bigger than you, you know."

Now it was his turn to swat at that solid ass. "Uh-huh. I can hold my own. I been working out again, asshole."

"But you're so small."

Oh. Ross lunged, against his better instincts, arms wrapping around Tank's waist. They slipped, he yelped, Tank

cussed a blue streak and down they went, thudding off walls and porcelain fixtures, thudding hard to the floor where they lay, wheezing.

"Way to kill the mood." Tank's breath fanned the top of his head, the big guy wedged between the sink cabinet and the tub.

"Uh-huh. Not my brightest moment, huh?"

"Nope. I think you damaged my ass permanently." Bless him, Tank didn't really sound mad, though. Just a little bemused and a lot *amused*.

"I hope not," Ross said, hooting. "I have plans for it."

"You and what army, Colorado?" A casual heave of those amazing muscles had them on their feet again. Well, Tank was on his feet. Ross dangled a minute, and that was the strangest fucking thing ever. Not bad. Just weird. He reached out to hang on, hands landing on the slick skin of Tank's shoulders.

Just that damned fast they got serious again.

"We were heading where?" he asked, petting the skin under his hands.

"Bedroom." Tank could move damned fast when he put a mind to it, and he did, dragging Ross with him.

Like Ross was gonna say no.

The bed was a lot bigger than the full he'd been on for weeks now, and Ross let Tank push him down on it, let Tank cover him, arms and legs spreading to hold the man when that big body came down on his.

Holy shit, that felt good.

Nuzzling along his neck, Tank grinned, letting him feel it. "We gonna do more than snuggle, Colorado?"

"I'm thinking we might."

He got a kiss, then, slow and easy and smooth as sunwarmed honey. His hands closed on the back of Tank's neck, holding right there so he could kiss back. It was like they'd both been thinking on it so long that they knew just what to do, and their mouths moved so easy together, tongues slipping out to taste and touch, their bodies moving like a key fitting into a lock.

One of those big hands smoothed down his side, stroking him all the way from pit to thigh, leaving a tingle behind it. Ross grunted and wiggled, almost feeling ticklish, but more happy as a clam. He rolled his shoulders up off the bed to kiss a little more, loving the slide of their skin, all up and down.

Tank grinned against his lips, stubble abrading him some, a sharp, stiff contrast to the softer hair on the broad chest that didn't sting him at all.

Ross grinned, letting his hand come up to rest against Tank's cheek, then run down over wide shoulders to the man's chest, enjoying the hell out of all the different textures. "You're something else, buddy."

"Yep. I'm a big ole redneck." And proud of it, through-and-through. Tank chuckled and bent to nuzzle at his neck, rubbing him with that Brillo-pad chin.

He hooted, reaching around to grab Tank's ass, biting at one ear. "Watch it. You'll sand my skin off."

"Poor, delicate mountain man." Tank eased off a little, blowing a raspberry on the join of shoulder and neck.

"We can't all be roses of Texas ... or sweet little bluebonnets." For such a big guy? Tank could move fast, tickling the shit out of him again. God, it was good to tease.

"Bluebonnets ... You little shit." Tank flipped him, straddling his ass and tickling his ribs from behind, just laughing away.

Shit. He was gonna have a spasm. Ross fought, pushing up, trying to get on his hands and knees, but he really didn't mind. Tank was heavy, hot and felt like home against his back, for sure. Tank's touch eased, rolling them both so that he was cuddled in against Tank's chest, hands flat on his chest and belly.

He stroked Tank's hands, snuggling right back into the cradle of Tank's hips. "You do know how to keep shit interesting."

Tank's chuckled tickled his nape. "Thanks. Shit, you smell good."

"Yeah? Smell like your soap." He let his hand slide back to rest on Tank's hip, stroking lightly. It was funny, how they went hot then just warm and snuggly. He could stay like this all night.

"Well, I wouldn't buy it if it was stinky, would I?"

"Guess not." Chuckling, he bumped back with his hips. "I like it on you, too. And what the Hell took you so long, anyway?"

"Huh?" He felt Tank's prick, warm and heavy, snuggled right up against him, easy as pie.

"I figured you weren't ever gonna come on to me, or touch me." He hadn't been any better, but he'd been seriously afraid to fuck things up.

"Well, we're friends, yeah? I didn't wanna, if you didn't, you know? I..." Tank shrugged a little, fingers moving. "I ain't had lots of guys that wanted to and less than wanted to more than once."

Ross twisted around, needing to look Tank in the eye more than he needed those hands stroking him, and that said a lot. "I want to. Again. Trust me."

"I reckon I do." Tank's lips quirked, eyes twinkling. Then Tank's hands squeezed his ass but good. "But it's good to hear."

Oh, that had him arching up like a cat that'd been scratched in just the right place. "Uh-huh. What?"

"Hmm?" Tank's mouth explored his jaw, heading south while those hands just rubbed and squeezed. His cock settled against Tank's thigh, taking a real interest again. He licked along Tank's neck, his lips open, his tongue just barely slipping out to taste. Tank's hips rolled at the licking, sliding on his skin with a hot, wet kiss. Oh, damn. That was fine.

Ross forgot everything but the scent and feel of Tank, and that suited him to the ground. It had been too long since he hadn't worried about *something*.

Tank made these random noises, low and deep and satisfied, groans that just vibrated all inside that big chest. "Damn, Colorado."

"Uh-huh. Want." Nibbling along one collarbone, Ross stroked with his hands, tracing ribs and hipbones, scratching a little to test the strength of those muscles.

Jesus, Tank was built like a brick shithouse. "I ain't going nowhere, Colorado. Swear to God."

"I know. I know. Just need to touch. Need to feel." Fuck, he was babbling, but he couldn't care. Tank made him feel things he'd forgotten how he could.

"Yeah." Tank grinned at him, eyes a little wild. Then those hands wrapped around his waist, thumbs sliding along his prick. "Touch away."

"Uh-huh. Okay." Thinking went even farther out the window. His whole body shook with that slow glide of callused skin on him, and he arched and grunted, needing more.

Tank's hands moved so goddamn slow he thought it might kill him, but when they both got to his cock, wrapping around and holding on tight, it was so worth the wait. His head threatened to just explode. He moved faster, trying to get more, feeling greedy as hell. He tried to touch back, but his brain was like ... mush.

Tank had him covered, one hand working the tip, one hand jacking him. Jesus. How the fuck did someone not come back for this? Ross sure would. Over and over. The things he wanted to try ... That big body was like a jungle gym. Ross humped even harder, speeding things up.

Tank leaned up, slamming their mouths together in a takeno-prisoner kiss. Ross opened right up, letting Tank in, letting the big man take control. Such a weird thing, but so damned

good all he could do was take it. All he could do was let Tank have him.

A deep groan pushed into his lips, Tank's fingers pushing against the slit of his prick just enough to burn.

Oh, yeah. Ross bucked, his cock throbbing, his balls emptying so fast it almost hurt. He hollered Tank's name like a dying fool, too.

"Oh, you're fine." Tank just beamed at him, hands holding his prick, fingers loose and easy.

"You ... damn." Fuck if he wasn't wheezing. Random little shivers shook him, tiny electric shocks. "That was. Thanks."

"Uh-huh." Those big hands squeezed. "Breathe."

Right. The scent of sweat and come made him almost dizzy when he breathed deep, but that was fine with him. Ross grinned. "What about you? What do you want, buddy?"

"I'm easy, Colorado." That thick, heavy cock bounced on Tank's belly.

"Uh-huh. I bet you are." Even as good and melted as he was, he wanted to taste, wanted to touch, so he pushed and pulled and got where he could get eye to eye with Tank's prick. Then he started licking.

"Oh, damn." Tank looked like he'd been beaned with a line drive.

"Mmmhmm. Taste good, man." Tank tasted more than good. Earthy, almost spicy, which he supposed ought not surprise him. Ross wrapped his lips around the tip of Tank's cock and pulled, sucking good and hard.

It was a new experience, having his whole goddamn body lifted off the bed when Tank arched under him. Smiling to

himself, Ross worked Tank harder, his hands coming to hold those strong hips, feeling muscles work under his fingers. Goddamn, that man was strong. He fucking loved it.

Tank's cock throbbed for him, salty, slick drops sliding over his tongue.

That taste had him moaning, had him pushing down as far as he could go and swallowing around Tank. Yeah, that was what he wanted. He wanted Tank to feel it.

"Oh, lord." Tank bent his knees, legs cradling him as the big body started rocking faster.

Ross closed his eyes and went with it, his cheeks hollowing while he sucked. There was nothing like making someone crazy, like giving and getting this kind of pleasure, and Tank was fucking special. Just real fucking amazing.

"Colorado. I. I'm fixin' to..." The bed creaked something fierce as Tank humped, cock swelling in his lips.

He didn't back off a bit. Tank wasn't the kind to be out there with just anyone, and he wanted everything Tank had to give. So he sucked harder, encouraging Tank on. Tank groaned and twisted and shot, filling his mouth with a bittersalt as Tank gave it up for him.

So damned good. Relaxing, he let himself slump down against Tank's legs, stroking random patches of skin. Yeah. Hell yeah.

"Damn, Ross. That. Damn." Huh, incoherence was a good look for Tank.

"It was. Is." Stroking Tank's belly, he grinned up, meeting those dazed eyes. "Thank you."

"Yeah. Thanks." Tank blinked a little, big hand cupping his jaw, thumb brushing his cheek.

Now it was time for snuggling, or so he hoped. He was a champion at that. Some folks didn't like it, but Tank was just warm and fine and big enough not to smoosh. Tank seemed to be just fine with it, patting his back for a second, encouraging him to stay right there.

Ross settled right in, figuring he had nowhere else to be. He was just fine, right where he was.

Chapter Five

They bounced through Big Bend, the rocks stacked up against the side of the road making him feel all penned in and sorta small, which was different. Still, it was awful pretty, he guessed.

Tank hit search on the radio, hoping for a decent station. Christ knew if he started on the CDs now, he'd be done by El Paso.

The sun was just beginning to set, the whole damned world going a weird Easter-egg pink and he popped Ross' arm, chuckling as Mr. 'I'd-be-happy-to-keep-you-company-so-I'll-snore-for-three-hundred-miles' snorted and snuffled.

"Mhn? What? Oh, shit, did I fall asleep, man?" Ross blinked over, blue eyes all watery.

"Nah, you were rehearsing for a chainsaw drill team and I hated to interrupt."

"You're cruising..." Ross sat up straight, his neck cracking audibly. "Where are we? And is it time to buy you supper to make up for shaking the cab?"

"I'd like to see you hunting my ass, Colorado." Oh, man. Supper. He could handle supper.

"What? It's big enough to find in the dark..." Little rat bastard, teasing him like that.

"Jackass. Shit, white as it is it prob'ly glows." Like Ross' lily white bo-heinie didn't scream 'target' in a dark room.

"Uh-huh. You know, we need to think about fishing naked. Then we could blend. Are we approaching any kind of civilization, or are we gonna have to cook?"

"There's a little town about twenty minutes from here—Alpine—it'll have a campground. Stuff."

"Excellent. I think I went through Alpine on a train once." The ironic note in Ross' voice told him there was a story there. One lean hand landed on his thigh, Ross testing his muscles. "You need a break."

"Do I?" He stretched out, ass wiggling some. "You having fun, Colorado? Glad you came for a wander?"

"I am. I have to admit, it's as much the company as the scenery." Lord, that Ross knew how to sweet talk a man when he really wanted to. He called it wooing or some shit. Like Tank needed encouragement.

"Yeah, buddy. Hell, how many guys will stop at the Snake and Tattoo museum and buy a case of pecan rolls?" He fucking knew how to live.

"Oh, man, I love those things." Yes, indeed. Ross had rhapsodized about them at length, and rewarded him with a hand job at the next rest stop. He liked how Ross loved pecan rolls.

There was a reason he bought a whole case.

Tank chuckled, his cock twitching a little. "Me? I'm a cherry sours guy. Oh, or those kolaches from down at West? Damn."

They had gone and gotten cinnamon rolls and kolaches in West once. Ross had been pretty appreciative of those, too. "Cherry sours make your face all funny."

"Yeah, well, I got pictures of you trying the eight-alarm salsa, Colorado..." That had been a night, shit.

"Yeah? You got pictures of pure blue flame coming out my ass? Jesus, that about killed me." It had near killed Tank, too, the way Ross had let the wind blow.

"Man, you embarrassed the pit bull. That takes honest to God talent."

"It does. I can burp my ABCs too." He got a wink and a grin before Ross pointed out the campground sign.

"Shit, I knew you were a man of class and good taste." He finessed the truck and trailer into the long drive, tongue caught between his teeth.

"One of these days you'll trip like that and bite your tongue off." The hand on his thigh slid up, squeezed. "That would be a damned shame."

"Watch it, Colorado, or I'll make you park next time." Oh, shit marthy, that hand felt damn good.

"And risk scratching your baby? No way." As soon as he pulled into a space, Ross was taking off his seatbelt and leaning over to kiss him. "Oh, that was what I needed."

Tank felt his cheeks heat up, the fucking grin on his face like a newborn fool. "Yeah. Yeah, buddy. You wanna go pay the folks for a night and I'll do the hook-up mojo?"

"You bet." Leaving another lingering kiss on his mouth, Ross slid out of the truck and headed off to the little office, whistling some kind of airborne song or another.

Man sure had himself a cute ass.

Tank hopped out and started hooking up sewer and water and all, nodding to the folks eating supper across the way. Shit, they could just toss some burgers on the grill and eat here, rather than heading into town.

They could maybe get breakfast on the way out instead. Yeah, that would work. Why have to go anywhere when he had his own Colorado sauntering back over and looking as fine as the day was long?

He dusted off his hands, grabbed their deck chairs off the little holder in the back.

"We eating in?" Ross folded down the one little storage dealie, grabbing the baby grill.

"Yeah. I'm thinking burgers. That work?"

"Have I ever turned down red meat in your presence?" Well, there had been that one time that Binky made those onion soup burgers...

"Not when someone with sense and a gentle hand with the Worcestershire sauce was involved." He headed up into the trailer, leaving the door open so they could talk.

"Yup. You make the best damned burgers." He could hear Ross banging around, setting up tv trays and shit. It was plumb nice to have someone to travel with, really.

By the time the burgers were sizzling, they had music on and some jalapenos wrapped in bacon cooking away. He tossed Ross a longneck and the matches and plopped down in a chair. "Light that go-away-skeeter candle, yeah?"

"Sure." Ah, the smell of lemon. It was kinda nice. Ross popped the top on his beer and poked at the little box of graham crackers they'd brought for s'mores. "Where did you hide the Hershey bars?"

"In the fridge. That trailer gets warm in the day." Hell, the marshmallows might just be in a gooey mass.

"We'll leave them in, then. 'Til dessert." He got a grin, bright and naughty as all get out. "Of course, we have other options for dessert. How steady is this thing?"

"Pretty damned, I think." He grinned, cheeks blushing dark, dark red. He'd replaced the shocks during an unfortunate stint doing aerobics to strengthen his knee.

"Well, there you go." Ross turned then, giving him a fine view of that jeans-encased ass. His Colorado had him a fine one, tight and hard and just sweet as anything.

Man, that heinie gave him thoughts.

Entertaining fucking thoughts.

Ross glanced back, gave a little wiggle. "Are you staring at my ass?"

"Yep." No sense in lying, really. Ross knew he was all about watching that little butt.

"Well, that's a fine thing." He got a grin, another bright wattage one. Ross flipped the burgers, plopping the buns down on the other side.

"You know it is." He stretched out and grinned, feeling right in his bones. "Should I go grab some chips and all?"

"Yeah. Some of that dip you made up, too. I love that shit." Yeah, Ross could eat his weight in it.

"Sour cream, cheese, and bacon—what's not to like?" Up. He pushed himself out of the chair, ignoring the twinge in his bad knee, and went to grab chips and dip and two more beers. Oh. Mustard. Pickles, too.

"We got any onion?" Ross called. Lord, that man loved onions. It was purely unnatural.

"Yeah. We got some all sliced up in a baggie somewheres..." He bent over, damn near dropping everything in his hands. "Goddamn it."

"Need some help?" Ross came on in, standing on the little steps. "The burgers are about done. Here, hand me some of that."

"Thanks, Colorado. My fingers ain't as big as I thought, huh?" He turned his head, got himself a quick kiss.

"Mmmm. They're big enough." Oh, thank goodness Ross went on back outside with the food, else they'd have missed supper and burned the burgers all up.

It was one hell of a spread once they sat to it, both of them eating like ravenous beasts.

"I tell you what, traveling makes me starving, you know?" Ross said it around a mouthful of dip, making him chuckle.

"Yeah. It's all the new air and shit. Makes a man hungry."

"That and the sawing logs." Winking, Ross finished off his burger and stretched. "I should get the marshmallows and stuff, huh?"

"Bottomless pit." He nodded, started gathering shit up and packing trash. Man, did he want one more beer?

"You want a beer while I'm in there?" The man was starting to read his mind. 'Course that meant he didn't have to get up.

"Yeah, one more. Then I'll stop."

"Hey, it's not like you have to drive anymore." Ross came and went and came back and he got a beer and some grahams and the marshmallows were fine. They were set.

"You thinking we could try out the bed later?"

Maybe after the whole lazy, sitting here in the dark, cold beer thing.

"I think we could definitely try it out. Though right now I think we'll do slow and long." Yeah, the look he got with that told him exactly what Ross was thinking.

"Oh. Hell, yeah." He sure felt that, didn't he? Balls to bones.

"Damn." Legs stretching out in front of him, Ross patted his belly. "You travel in style. A hell of a lot better than when I was traveling cross country with my tent."

"Well, my knee isn't real fond of the whole sleeping-onthe-ground thing." Tank chuckled. "And I got the trailer for helping Monsignor McCall rebuild his Corvette collection."

"Well, that was a fine barter, buddy." Yeah, and it was the first time anyone had come along in it. He hadn't even let Binky in his trailer.

"You know it. One day, I'm gonna spend half the year exploring the world and selling the sauces." Half the year taking care of the family place and ... "I'll have to get the dogs used to riding first."

"Yeah? That sounds like fun." Ross was a go-baby, that was for sure. Colorado liked to sit at home and bass fish, too. He was pretty well the best kind of buddy Tank could find.

"Yeah. There's lots of places I haven't seen yet." Like Colorado. And the Grand Canyon. And San Francisco. Man, he'd like to just sit and watch those California loonies wander around.

"Colorado first, huh? We could go up through New Mexico. I love Ruidoso." Ross had talked about taking him home a couple times, was talking about Thanksgiving, maybe.

"You know it. Mechanic business ain't worth shit in the winter when it's a decent temperature to be working."

"And we can make you ski." Oh, he could just see him plowing down the slope, taking out tourists left and right.

"Lord. I'll kill myself or someone else. All them little gals in bikinis..." It'd be like redneck bowling.

"Uh-huh. I swear, you'd take 'em out, water or snow." The man didn't look at all like he'd mind that.

"I bet you're good at it, huh? I had somebody tell me once that folks in the mountains took skiing in school for gym class." Personally, he liked ball.

"Yup. We only had Powderhorn close by. It's kinda small. But we took field trips there. And we did cross country for gym." Laughing, Ross stretched, giving him a view that wouldn't quit. "You know, out of the three of us, the best skier is my brother Ken."

"Yeah? Binky is the baseball player, but I didn't used to suck at tackle football."

"Oh, man. You'll have to join the annual touch football game at mom's." The man was bouncing at that. Lord, lord. Nothing like brotherly love, wanting someone as big as him to run them down.

"So long as there's no taking out the knee? I'm there." It'd take two or three solid Thatchers to knock him over. 'Course, there were two or three of 'em...

"We'll put Eli on the other team." Ross had told him about his brother Jed's longtime live in, and by all accounts he was near as big as Tank. Couldn't be quite as big as him if he jumped out of planes, but close.

"That works. Your folks gonna be cool with you bringing a Texan home?"

"Shit. They'll be thrilled."

He wasn't sure about that, because he sure wasn't anything like the last guy in Ross' life, but Ross knew his family, he guessed.

"I can handle that." Hell, from what he knew, the ex was way smarter and way classier than him, but he'd admit, he couldn't see his relaxed Colorado being all formal and shit.

"Me too." That look was warm and fond, making him smile and shift in his chair. "You and my mom are gonna be buds. She loves to go fishing."

"Yeah? There's nothing quite like it. It's good for the soul." Man, that was something he could do every damned day, hop in their little boat and just cast off. "We ought to head down to the coast one time; charter one of them big-assed boats."

"Oh, yeah. And you'll learn fly fishing, yeah?" With a wink, Ross got up and started cleaning up some more. Always busy, his Colorado.

"Sure. It looks like something else, all them lines swirling and shit. How do you keep from hooking your heinie?"

"It's all in the wrist." Lord, he'd heard that before, but in a very different situation. Made him shiver a little.

"You musta learned it good..." His cock was agreeing in his jeans, just bobbing and jerking.

"Uh-huh." When everything was tucked away either inside or under the storage flaps, Ross headed for the little door of the trailer. "You coming?"

"Christ, I hope so." Tank got the chairs stored and followed that tight little butt. Man, it was like one of them hypnotist watches or something. He just couldn't not look.

Soon as the door shut, Ross' jeans and t-shirt hit the floor, and Tank got him a good long look at *everything*. Then Ross was on him, tugging at his clothes.

"Goddamn, Colorado." He stripped off his t-shirt before his hands got all caught up in that touching thing, cupping Ross' cock for a second, then moving to squeeze that tight butt.

"Uhn. Oh, this is the perfect nightcap, buddy." Ross worked at his jeans, trying to get them open, which was tough with the way he was squeezing them together, rubbing all up.

"Uh-huh." Bed. Bed would be good. The fucking cabinets in this thing were too short to be good.

"Come on." Ross wiggled, moving back, bashing his calves into the little pull out table. "Shit!"

"Careful, now." He hauled Ross up, got them to the bed.
"It's less fun to hump like bunnies if you're broken."

"I think I'm ruined for life." Uh-huh. So ruined that Ross had to reach out and grab his cock through his jeans, pressing and pushing.

"Lemme see if I can do some curing..." He popped his fly, cock trying its best to pop out and say hello and howdy.

"I like your medicine, buddy." As soon as his jeans were skinned down, Ross pulled his hips down so they were cock to cock, then kissed him like there was no tomorrow.

Oh, hoo-boy. Tank grinned and pushed right in. That was what he needed, yessir. Just like that.

Warm, hard, Ross just kinda wrapped around him, humping like a mad thing. If this was what he got for letting the man sleep half the day, he'd take it. His balls drew up and he got his hands on Ross' hips, jonesing on the way Ross moved for him, rolled against him.

"Mmm. Damn. Tank." Jerking, Ross settled more firmly under him, legs opening wide to cradle him.

"Uh-huh." He got himself a taste of Ross' lips before he headed down, hunting the flavor in that throat.

"Oh, yeah. Been wanting." Ross' cock told him how much the man wanted; so did the little moans that vibrated under his lips.

"In between chain saw drill practices." That must've tickled them both, because they both started snorting, the pressure easing off just a hair, enough to make it last.

They'd been roaring toward the finish, but now they had time for Ross to stroke over his arms, down his back, fingers digging into the muscles of his ass. Oh, now. That felt fine. Tank found himself moaning, nuzzling into Ross' neck.

"Scratchy," Ross said, tracing the bumps of his spine. The chuckle that came with the complaint brushed his temple, Ross rolling up around him to lick at the sweat rolling down his cheek.

"So's you remember you're not with some sweet gal." He chuckled at himself. Sweet gal. Lord. Like anybody'd think that, with him being a big ol' moose.

"Oh, I think you're more of a big bear." Fingers digging into his muscles, Ross moved under him, hips just rocking.

That was better than a moose, he figured. Hell, once that pretty cock scootched just right so that they were both getting that heavy-duty friction they needed? Shit, bear, moose, hammerhead shark, Yankee—Ross coulda called him anything.

Well, maybe not Yankee.

One lean leg went right around his hips, pulling him in even closer, and there it was. Heaven was right there in sight.

"Soon." Tank groaned, belly tight as a board, balls aching.

Ross nodded, curling up around him, arms and legs clinging, mouth latching on to the side of his neck. That boy could suck like a Hoover. Fuck, he was gonna be marked up. The thought of that surprised him, really, how fucking sexy it was, and he just went to town, humping away. Hell, yes. He needed. Now.

Groaning, Ross pushed up against him, cock wet, pushing into his skin, and then there was a lot more wet. Hot, musk, come, all over his cock and belly. It didn't take him as much as a heartbeat before he was following along, shooting his brains right out his prick

"Mmm." One hand patted his ass, the other stroked along his ribs, Ross doing that lazy-after-I-come snuggling.

"Uh-huh." He grabbed a rag and wiped them up—they'd fallen to sleep and woke up stuck together once, ow—then he rolled to his side, dragging Ross close. "'s okay?"

"S'better than okay, buddy. Riding with you is a helluva lot better than riding alone." Ross took a kiss, nudging his chin up to get to his mouth.

"Uh-huh." That kiss did him right—sweet and lazy and just fine.

Just before he dropped off to sleep, Ross started snoring again. He chuckled. Well, even with the snoring, it was better than traveling alone.

Hell, yeah.

* * * *

The stalls at the Fiery Food Fair were packed, the smells of red and green chile making his mouth water, just like chiles always did. He could remember going down to the Hatch festival with his dad once, and the memory came back strong as Ross sampled the salsas and chilis, said howdy to people and pushed them toward Tank's booth.

Ross wandered a good bit, and by the time he made his way back to spell Tank at the booth he had decided two things. One: chili cookoff folks were a little crazy. Two: Tank couldn't lose. He had the best chili by far, and his spice packets were selling like crazy.

The crowd hadn't thinned a bit, and he'd bet anything poor Tank had to pee like a racehorse, so he moved his boots and got on back to the end of the row, smiling as he slipped inside the little dining fly.

"Hey, buddy. You need a break?"

"Oh, hell yes. My teeth are floating." Tank looked like a demonic chuckwagon cook, with his bright red apron made out of bandanna material, cowboy hat and the nastiest pair of boots on earth.

Ross grinned. That was his Tank. Lord love him. "Then go on. You ran me through the drill. I'm good at following orders."

"Such a good little soldier." Oh, shithead. Tank patted his ass where nobody could see and headed out, whistling The Yellow Rose of Texas as loud as he could.

Of course, when he was faced with a hungry ring of faces wanting samples and a bunch of people waving money, he got to hoping Tank would come back fast. He worked his legs off, sold nearly a hundred dollars worth of shit and changed out the warming pots before Tank came on, so he figured he'd helped out a good bit.

"Thanks, Colorado. You saved my butt." Tank tossed him a beer, got back to work like nothing going. Jesus, look at that grin. Tank was bullshitting and laughing, working the crowd like the big bear of a man was born to it.

The man could talk to trees. No shit. There he was ... Ross grinned and started cleaning, scrubbing pots, packing away anything Tank didn't need. That would save them time when the festival closed.

Man, after this, they were going to wash up and find food that wasn't chili.

Anything but chili.

Maybe pancakes and bacon.

He figured Italian was too close to chili, and Chinese was probably out. So yeah. IHOP. "So where are we staying tonight?" he asked when Tank had a short breather.

"I'm thinking we'll head out of town a little to this good little park, spend a couple of days fishing and wandering and shit."

"Yeah?" Well, he'd been about to suggest a hotel, but that sounded better. Tank loved to fish, and that made Ross love to go with him.

"Well, if that works for you too." Tank gave him a halfgrin, a wink. "I ain't married to the idea."

"No, that works. I like it." Hell, Kev had hated camping with a passion. The thought gave him pause, not because it hurt, but because it really didn't. Huh.

"Cool. They'll announce the winners here shortly and then we'll take our winnings and hustle. My knee says there'll be rain tonight."

"I've got some Tiger Balm, and a decent pair of hands." He grinned over, laughing at the way Tank's eyebrows rose.

"I might just keep your mountain butt, Colorado. Okay, looks like we got us another group of winter folks looking for something new." Tank smiled and waved, booming voice encouraging the gaggle of seniors to come taste and buy and sample.

The day wrapped up with Tank winning the grand trophy, just like Ross had predicted. He was so proud of Tank he could bust. And he was ready to wash off the chili powder.

Tank was walking ten feet off the ground, hooting as they packed up. "Five thousand dollars, buddy. And that's the prize money. We made us some sales today!"

Oh, yeah. He was so getting laid tonight.

Hell, he was whistling himself while he helped load the truck. His might be Sixty Minute Man instead of a Texas classic, but that was okay, right?

It was nearing suppertime when they finished, Tank bending to wash his hands at a spigot. "I don't know about you, man, but I don't want fucking chili right now."

"Hell, no." Oh, thank God. "I was thinking IHOP or something." Yeah. Sweet and salty, with bacon and shit.

"Bacon. Coffee. I'm there." Tank nodded to him, that shiteating grin going ear-to-ear. "Thanks for all your help, Colorado."

"Hey, it's been a ball." Seeing Tank in his element, watching that man laugh and talk and just sell his ass off? Yeah, it had been a ball.

"Good deal. Let's go get us some grub, buddy, and count our pennies."

"You got it." They got the last of the stuff loaded and got moving, falling in with the little caravan of trailers and trucks. Ross handed Tank a bottle of water. The beer would have to wait for when they weren't moving.

Tank hummed along with Chris Ledoux, following the red lights in front of him away from the fair grounds.

The IHOP was a ways down the road, just far enough for Ross to cop a feel. Which he did. A few times. Tank spread a

little, ass wiggling in the seat. "Damn, Colorado, you're enough to make a man want."

"Yeah?" That sounded good to him. Like maybe they ought to have an appetizer before supper. Hey, he'd never sucked Tank in the truck...

"Yeah." Tank's fingers stroked his wrist, just gentle as all get out.

"You could find us a place to park..." Hell, why not get a little rowdy? He hadn't in a while, and Tank wasn't exactly a shrinking violet.

"I could do that. IHOP doesn't close." Those fingers tightened around his wrists a second, just holding on.

"I'll make it worth your while." He squeezed a little, too, his hand still on that tree trunk of a thigh. Lord, Tank was solid. Hot. Good.

"Oh, shit, Ross. I. You make me want. You do." Tank pulled over into the darkest rest stop on Earth, the truck shuddering to a stop.

God, he was all but drooling. Ross whipped his seatbelt off, leaned over and popped Tank's, and started working on those chili flavored jeans. That was enough spice to make him sneeze, but he held it in, not wanting to ruin the mood.

Tank helped, that heavy, hard cock fighting to get out, to get to where he could see and touch. The zipper finally eased down under his hand and yeah, he had his prize. Ross sealed his lips around Tank and sucked, licking up and down the underside when the big vein throbbed for him.

"Oh, good lord. You got the finest mouth, buddy. I swear to God." Tank braced himself on the floorboard, hips jerking up toward him a little.

The steering wheel threatened to decapitate him, but Ross angled himself, and he was bobbing up and down in no time, sucking and kissing and nudging the base of Tank's cock with his lips, those dark gold curls heavy and soft, tickling his lips.

Spicy. Shit, Tank tasted of chiles and cumin and pure male. Damn, that could be an addiction right there. Ross closed his eyes and pulled with his lips. He couldn't get his hands in there much, so he just braced them on Tank's thighs and worked his mouth. He knew he did that damned well.

"Gonna. Colorado. Ross. I'm fixin' to blow."

"Mmmhmm." There. He wanted it all. Come on, buddy, he thought. Just come on. Tank did, just like the man'd heard him. That sweet prick throbbed, bitter and salt pouring into his lips. Sighing happily, Ross licked Tank clean, laying his cheek against Tank's thigh. "Damn. Yeah."

"You. Damn." Tank's fingers felt fucking good, rubbing on his cheek, his jaw.

"You think?" He sat up, leaning to kiss Tank right on the mouth, trying to rub his own cock a little.

"Uh-huh." Tank's hands fumbled against him, trying to push his away.

Ross gave up and sat back a little, turning and spreading his thighs so Tank could get to him. He needed those big hands in the worst way, needed to feel that touch.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's the way." Those huge hands fished his prick out, quick as you please, and started working him. Up.

Down. Just driving him out of his mind. His hips rocked, and Ross braced back on his arms to get more, driving into it. Hot, rough, those hands made him crazy, had since the first time they touched him. Tank's free hand wrapped around his thigh, spreading him a little wider, almost making it ache.

"Uhn." His eyes rolled, his belly pulled in, and before he could take another breath he was shooting all over. Hot, wet, and such a relief he coulda cried.

"There." Tank rumbled some, the touch easing, just managing to not tease, but still draw things out.

Cock twitching, Ross sat back and breathed a little, letting his chest stop heaving. "Damn, I needed that, buddy."

"Yeah, I hear that." Tank grinned, eyes heavy-lidded and lazy. "I vote we take a few days and just chill 'fore we take it home."

"I think that's a plan. We can fish, maybe rock the trailer some more." Grinning, he kissed that slack mouth. "Now, let's put ourselves back together, buddy. We have pancakes waiting."

"Always thinking with your gut." Yeah, and that would mean something, had Tank's belly not rumbled right about then.

"Shit, yes. Though, you ought to be tickled. You trumped syrup." That man made Ross grin like a fool.

"That's me. Better-than-Syrup Man." Tank flexed a little before getting all tucked in and put away.

Pushing his business back in his jeans, Ross nodded, sitting back and buckling up. "You're the best buddy a man could have, Tank. No lie."

Tank's big old hand landed on his knee. "I hear you, Ross. I surely do. Let's go get us some bacon."

The IHOP was about as empty as a place could be, and they got them a booth in the corner where he could poke Tank's leg under the table. Tank ordered coffee and enough bacon and eggs to feed a small third world country. But no chili or salsa or even jalapenos. Small mercies. He got himself the biggest omelet he could find, the one with potatoes and shit inside.

"Man, did you see that lady with her own chili bowl that she just carried around? It was stained from all the chiles." Tank shook his head, pouring a good amount of sugar in his coffee.

"Uh-huh. She as scary beyond all reason, man. You start doing that, and I'll run away." No crazy chili man shit.

"Nah. I'll just dress in a giant chile costume and wander along the highway, shaking my bottles at passing cars."

"Shake your ass and you'd get more business." He winked, letting his toes slide right up Tank's calf. He liked Tank's ass. Solid, muscled, it was a double handful.

Tank hooted, making the waitress look over. "Lord, lord. I'd frighten the world."

"You think? You could hire me. I'm told I'm not bad." He batted his eyelashes, making a kissy face once the waitress looked away.

"You're cruising for a bruising, you stud." Tank snorted and drank deep of his coffee. "I'm thinking we might be getting big enough to get on that food channel."

"Yeah?" That was kind of scary, thinking about sharing Tank with the whole world. But the other part of him wanted Tank to go all the way, make a real success of it.

"Maybe. They were out there today, doing that Fiery Food Festival thing and talk to folks that have a chance to do good. I even got to talk the Scorchers up. It'd get the name out." Tank shrugged, leaned back when the waitress brought the plates. "I ain't never gonna be Pace or nothin', but it'd be neat to see the sauces up on the TV."

"Yeah, it would. A little feature dealie." That would rock hard. Tank worked his ass off on that stuff.

"Yeah. Can you imagine what the guys in town would think? Very fun."

"Can you see Binky trying to horn in on the action?" He could just see that fool brother of Tank's jumping up and down and hooting.

"Oh, good lord. He'd tell them folks we used some weirdassed bayou magic in the sauce, get us in trouble with the government." Yeah, that sounded like Binky.

"He's a hoot." His toes flexed; up, down, and back again. He loved the way Tank flushed when he did that, the way the big guy shifted in his seat.

"He's a shithead, but he's good at heart. I want to meet your brothers, too. They sound like characters." Those thick thighs parted.

Sliding his foot up, he nudged the inside of Tank's thigh. "Yeah, I thought we'd take one holiday, go up there. Thanksgiving, Christmas. Whatever works best for you."

Tank's cheeks went bright red and the man swallowed hard. "You want to go for a few weeks? Christmas break'd be best."

"That sounds fine. Did I mention I think you'll be a hit?" And he thought maybe Eli, his brother's Jed's main squeeze, would love Tank.

"Once or twice, yeah." Tank didn't really look worried about it. The man loved to meet people, didn't have a shy bone in his body, which always made him wonder why he'd been the first man to stick around for any length of time. Not that he was going to look a gift lover in the mouth. Maybe it was just that Tank was too low key. He knew from experience that some folks wanted undying professions of love, and that wasn't Tank's way. Well, at least not so far. Who knew? Maybe the man was a closet hankie wringer.

But he didn't think so.

"You want the fancy syrup or the regular?" Tank was studying the boysenberry syrup with a look like he was smelling onions. Yep. Real sensitive guy.

"I like the plain. Though the blueberry is pretty good." A little too sweet ... his toes landed right next to Tank's zipper.

Tank jumped, syrup landing on the table with a bit of a thump. "You're enough to drive a man plumb loco, Colorado. I swear to God."

"I try. That's half the reason you keep me around." The other half was the fishing and beer drinking and sitting on the porch and bullshitting.

"It's a little bit of it. I'd've let you stay on regardless."

"I know." That meant a helluva lot to him. Tank hadn't started treating him any different when they started sleeping together. They still played and laughed and just were.

Tank nodded, one hand reaching down to squeeze his ankle. "Good. Eat up, I want to find a place to rest before I'm wore out, you know?"

"Yup." Boot hitting the floor, Ross dug in, sucking down pancakes and eggs and bacon, just happy as a pig in shit. They did need to find a place to tie down for the night. They'd had a long day.

After a bit of a rest, they could work themselves into a lazy morning and one hell of an afternoon tomorrow.

Lord knew, he was all about those busy afternoons. Ross grinned and got out his debit card to pay the bill. Tank needed his sleep.

Chapter Six

"Hey, baby. How're you doing?"

"Hey, Mom." Ross took his cell phone out on the porch, not wanting to disturb Tank's communion with the UT football game. "I'm good. How's everything up there?"

"Not bad. Lloyd is making pies for Angie Lohman's sweet sixteen, and I've been turning out a huge Noah's ark for Lila Marsh. She wants it for her grandbaby's first Christmas."

"Bit early for that, isn't it?"

"Not when I have to make two hundred wee animals, it's not."

Ross laughed, his mom's dry tone sounding just like her, just like always when she was about to light into him for being a dumbass.

"Well, good luck with that. You still making that dollhouse for Carrie?" Carrie was one of Ken's brood, and she wanted a dollhouse with all of the fiery passion of a four year old.

"Yup. I got the couch done yesterday." The click of a lighter and a sharp inhalation told him his mom had lit up a cigarette. Made him want one, though he hadn't smoked since right after Kev left. "When are you coming home? Hell, where are you?"

"Texas. And I was thinking about Christmas. Or Thanksgiving. Though Christmas might work better."

"Texas? Well, damn, baby. You taking up the rodeo like your daddy or something?"

"Or something." He knew he should tell his mom about Tank before showing up with the man, but he just couldn't.

Not yet. Tank was his own thing, not something he wanted to keep secret, but something he just wanted to revel in a while. "And no, I've been teaching jump school and self-defense classes."

"Oh, good. You know how I feel about rodeo."

Ross snorted. "The whole western slope of Colorado knows how you feel. How's Ken and Jed and all?"

"Good, good. Eli's doing real well on the training position. Him and Jed took a vacation up to Oregon over the Labor Day. Mandy's so pregnant it hurts. Ken is tickled."

Are you sure Ken hasn't turned Mormon?" he teased, knowing it would puff her up.

"He's just making up for my other two sons, who show no interest in making their mom a granny."

"Yeah, yeah." Grinning, he leaned on the porch rail, watching Tank through the kitchen. "I can't help it. Even before I swung like a rusty gate I wasn't into the kids and the picket fence."

"I know..." She was stubbing out the cigarette, he just knew it by the last big blow of air. "I miss you, baby."

"I miss you, too, Mom. I'll see you in a month or two. I promise."

"Promise."

"I do. Okay? I love you, Mom."

"I love you, baby. Call me once in awhile."

"You bet."

They hung up and Ross wandered back into the house, grabbing him and Tank both a beer and a bowl of chili with

slabs of cornbread. The thought of Colorado used to leave an ache in his belly, missing it like home.

Now it just gave him a tingle of anticipation. He couldn't wait to show Tank where he grew up. And introduce the man to the rest of his family.

* * * *

The wind was blowing something fierce from the south, making the air thick as syrup. Shit, he hated that little bit before a cold front hit. Tank pulled the alternator out of a little Sunfire, sweat gathering at the small of his back.

It took about an hour and a half to clean up the spark plugs and drop in a battery, getting little Jenny Morgan's baby car purring. Lord, that little gal was just all about bad luck. He wiped his forehead with a bandana and gave her daddy a call, getting a credit card number and running it. They should've asked him before they bought that clunker; he'd've told them to run.

Still, fools' money spent as good as a wise man's, he figured.

By the time Jenny's little quarterback boyfriend brought her to get her car, the wind was trying to change, the smell of fall on the air.

Hooboy.

He'd be happy to do away with this humidity for a few days. Lord.

A loud thump at the back of the shop had him looking as Jenny drove off, happy as a clam. Ross wandered over, still in jump gear, his duffel lying where the man had dropped it.

"You know, you can't cut the air with a knife in Colorado."
"No? That prob'ly makes your ass hit the ground harder

there."

"Oh, yeah. But I breathe three times as much oxygen as anyone down here." That grin was damned infectious, Ross looking wind blown and flushed and good enough to eat.

"Is that good, buddy?" He closed the main door of the garage, giving them privacy. "Can you see the weather changing from up there?"

"Yeah. In fact we had to cut lessons short today. Looks like something really coming in." Ah. He'd kinda wondered why Ross was home—he checked his watch—almost two hours early.

"I'm all done for the day myself." Done for the day and nothing to do but a certain Colorado man.

"Whatever will we do?" Checking the door, Ross came right on over and gave him a kiss, hands cupping his cheeks.

"I figure we'll invent something." He groaned, feeling that kiss deep in the pit of his belly.

"Yeah? I could get behind that." Fingers walking over his ass, Ross pulled him closer, rubbing against him. Horny man.

"Mmmhmm." He cradled Ross' head in his hand, pushing into a kiss that liked to burn him up.

Their mouths met and their tongues pushed in to taste and they just went to town. Hot and salty, that kiss made everything else go away, even the sticky air. They made themselves some amazing sounds, each one echoing in the garage. Lord have mercy. Tank's prick started filling, pushing against his zipper and trying to get at Ross.

"Mmm. Yeah, you give me all kinds of ideas." Lips trailing along his brushy jaw, Ross tasted him, licking a little, sucking here and there.

"Hell, yes. I could just eat you up with a spoon." Of course, Ross was the one with that fine, hot mouth. Goddamn. The things Ross could do with that mouth ... well, it was a good thing he wasn't a jealous man. He'd just be grateful to anyone who gave Ross some practice before getting to him.

He pondered on getting to some skin here or waiting 'til they got up to the house where there was a bed, a sofa, a...
Oh.

Truck bed.

That worked.

Tank started moving them over to the little Chevy'd he'd been rebuilding to sell.

Ross looked up about the time they hit the tailgate, checking out where they were and nodding. "Oh, good idea, buddy."

"Yup. I have my moments." He lifted Ross right up, sat that pretty ass down. Oh, nice height.

"Hey, I like this." Those legs wrapped around him, strong as anything, squeezing his hips. Ross' hands landed on his shoulders, rubbing nice and deep.

"Mmhmm. It's a good spot for us." Tank stepped one closer, rubbing into Ross' heat.

"You know it. Now, if we just had less cloth..." Those blue eyes just burned for him, twinkling like mad as Ross rubbed up on him.

"Yeah, yeah. There's always a downside." He snorted a little, nipping Ross' bottom lip as he got himself a double handful of the finest ass in Texas.

"Like sunny side up and over easy?" That got them both snorting, but he didn't mind the laughing. It pushed Ross against him with every breath.

He slid his hand around, hunting a zipper or snap or buttons or *something* to get to Ross' prick.

"Here." Ross guided him to the zipper, which started a helluva lot higher than he'd been digging around. Oh, yeah. Smell that hot, musky man.

"Fucking A." He made sure not to catch anything in the zipper as he slid it down, rubbing down hard on Ross' prick as he passed by.

Arching, moaning for him, Ross wiggled on the truck bed, just fine as could be. That tanned skin appeared in little slivers, making him look for more, especially when it flushed a deep rose.

"You're fine." He eased Ross back, lips moving down, tongue touching each little hint of skin.

"So ... oh. So are you. Right there." He'd hit a patch of belly, one that made Ross' muscles quiver. Oh, yeah. That so worked. He set to licking and nuzzling, maybe sucking a little, just to bring the blood to the surface. It worked like a charm. That skin just went dark, a tiny little bruise rising up just next to one hipbone.

He stared at that a second, thumb rubbing at it. Oh, goddamn. That was right pretty, that wee mark. He bent to make one more just like it, right beside.

"Yeah. Tank. Goddamn." Oh, yeah. His Colorado liked that. A lot. Those legs shifted restlessly, that ass pushed into his hands, and Ross started moaning for him, over and over.

He made two more little marks before going back to the first and nuzzling it. Ross' skin was heated and damp and he could smell that hunger like a drug or something, making him need.

Hands scrabbling at his shoulders, Ross pulled at him, begging him with hard touches and straining muscles.

"What do you want, buddy? How do you want to do this?" He was easy—he just wanted to make Ross come.

"Want you ... Just. Want." Man, he'd reduced Ross to incoherence. Go him. Except that a little direction would be nice.

Ross blinked up at him, looking dazed as hell. That was incredibly fucking cute.

Tank took a hard kiss before grabbing the rolling stool he used for work and plopping down on it. He got his hands back under Ross' butt and tugged that pretty, hard cock to his mouth. There. Sucking and no uncomfortable back pain.

He got a shout for his trouble, Ross bucking so he had to hold the man down to keep either of them from getting hurt. That sweet, thick cock just beat with Ross' pulse, hard as hell.

Yeah, just like that. Hell, he did love the way that felt.

"Tank. Yeah. Come on, Tank." Ross was all but thrashing, just flushed and hot and all man.

Tank just hummed around Ross' prick, lips dragging as he sucked. That's it, give it up. Just let go. It didn't take long. All he had to do was suck up and down a few more times and

Ross was shooting for him, hips humping up and up. Lord, Ross tasted good.

Tank got Ross' cock cleaned and then rested a second, cheek on Ross' thigh.

"Mmm. Damn. You know, you could come here and fuck me." Jesus, the things that man said...

Every goddamn nerve in his body went SPROING. Hell yes, he could. He so could bury himself balls deep and...

He got his hands under Ross' butt and spread that tight ass so that he could slide his tongue down, wet that tiny hole.

"Oh. Oh fuck, yes." That had Ross just vibrating, had the man moaning and twisting for him. That little hole all but sucked his tongue in, opening and closing with Ross' breath.

His hips started jerking, rocking on the little stool, his cock wanting in so bad it ached. He needed to make sure Ross was all into it though, all wet and wanting and ready and shit.

"Come on, man. Come on." Ross was so ready. Hell, he could taste it. Feel it. The man was begging for him.

"Uh-huh." He was shaking as he stood up, fingers fumbling at his fly. "How do you wanna do this?"

"Huh?" Dazed blue eyes met his, Ross holding himself open, waiting for him. "Is there more than one way? You. In me."

Tank chuckled, crawled up in the bed of the truck and took himself in hand, rubbing his prick against Ross' hole. "This okay, Colorado? Just like this?" He pushed in, just a little, just enough that Ross could really feel it.

"Jesus, no, it's not okay." Ross reached for him. "I need more. Please."

"I won't make you beg, honey." He leaned down, took Ross' lips in a kiss that damn near knocked his socks off. His hips matched his tongue, pushing in and pulling out, moving in Ross.

Ross moved right with him, rocking with him, holding onto him, just loving on him something fierce. That cock was rising again, just hot and hard. He'd've reached for it, but he just couldn't with the truck bed all bumpy like it was. He shifted, taking some pressure off the scars on his knee, his cock sliding in deep. When Ross cried out for him, he knew he'd hit gold and kept pushing right there.

"Fuck. Tank. I. God." One hand left his skin and dropped to Ross' cock, pulling at it even as that tight body clamped down on him.

"Ross..." He watched, hips moving without him even thinking. So fucking good. So fine. "Come on."

"More. Tank ... I need more. Come on, love." Oh, that was an amazing thing, too, going from buddy to love, just like that.

"All I got." And didn't he fucking mean it, too. Everything. Tank groaned, his sounds mingling with the creak of the truck springs as he tried his best to fuck Ross through the metal.

"Gotta. Again..." Man, Ross was cranking it, hand moving fast, hips rocking. Then that tight ass squeezed down on him and Ross was coming again, hot and wet and all over him.

Tank nodded, words all gone as he jerked and rocked, fucking that sweet hole until he shot.

Goddamn.

A low sound came from Ross, the man's arms and legs flopping like a rag doll's. "That was a fine hey and howdy."

"Uh-huh." Man, he could stay right here forever.

Well, except for his knee.

That and he figured Ross' ass must be protesting, because those hands found him again, patting. "We could go in, snuggle some."

"Mmhmm. I'm a fan." Hell, after a hot shower? He'd feel like a million bucks.

"Some water, some soap, some food ... then a nap." Ross could be all about the naps, for someone who was always on the go.

"Hell, yes." He reckoned it was all that high-altitude stuff Ross was into. Made a man sleepy.

Struggling up, Ross got them both unbent and on the ground, grinning at him as that jumpsuit got hitched up. "Damn, that was a good workout."

"Mmmhmm. Made me all loosey-goosey." They headed toward the house, the wind just a'blowin'.

"Uh-huh." Ross came right on with him, hand tucked in his back pocket, holding on loosely. "It's the best way in the world to unwind."

"Mmmhmm." Unwind? Shit. He was fucking unraveled.

* * * *

Ross grinned, the little velum envelope in his hand as he wandered out to find Tank in the garage. Lord, the things they had done in the garage the last few weeks. Damn, that

was fun. This time he wasn't ready to make whoopee, though. Well, at least until he asked a few questions.

"Hey, you." There was Tank, working away, a smear of grease on one cheek. "How do you feel about Colorado the week before Thanksgiving instead of right on the day or waiting until Christmas?"

Tank tilted his head, eyebrows creasing a second as the big guy thought. "I don't think there's any reason we can't. What's up?"

"Brodie's getting married. You know, the cowboy friend of mine? He'd like me to come, and it's Wednesday the week before Thanksgiving."

He couldn't be happier for his friend. Brodie had helped him out a lot after Kev. A lot.

"Very cool, man. Sure, we can head up early so's you can go." Tank nodded, leaning back into the engine. "If we leave Friday night, we can potter."

"Yup. We can wander and see things." Tank was so cool about shit. Nothing seemed to faze him. Ross loved that. He went over to peer at what Tank was up to.

Tank was tightening up a timing belt, humming a little under his breath. "You got to wear yourself a suit for the wedding?"

"Shit, no. Brodie's wearing Wranglers. So I get to, too." He usually went for the Levis. He wondered what Tank would think of him in Wranglers.

"Spiffy. He live near your folks?"

"In their bunkhouse, actually. Mom built it for four or five hands and then everyone got married off." He'd been pretty comfy there, himself.

Tank nodded, testing the belt, shoulders rolling. "We prob'ly oughta figure where the closest RV park is, buddy, make some reservations."

"We can do that. I think there's one down by the turn off for Grand Mesa." That would be perfect, only twenty minutes from his mom, and he wouldn't have to subject Tank to staying with the family right off.

"So long as it's got the hookups, I'm easy. I've stayed at some of the scariest fucking parks anywhere. Shit, I've stayed in *Arkansas*."

"Oh, you poor man." When Tank's hands were out of danger range of the car parts, Ross started rubbing the man's wide shoulders. "I had to stay there a couple of times, too."

Jesus, Tank was like a chunk of rock, muscles stiff and hard as fuck. Somebody'd spent the whole day bent over, he'd bet. "You're all tied up, buddy." Digging in, Ross set about getting the kinks out, wanting to make sure he and Tank could canoodle a bit later.

"I. Uh-huh. Been a bendy day." Tank's hands landed on the workbench. "Oh, goddamn."

"Right there?" It was almost like scratching one of the pups, only sexy. Tank turned into his touch like it was the best thing since sliced bread, and Ross worked harder, really pulling and pushing.

"Oh shit, honey..." That big old head fell forward and Tank moaned, that sound deep and hot, settling right in his balls.

"God. You make me want, love. You really do." So sensual. So willing to give over to pleasure.

Tank blushed, that grin just shit-eating as all get out. "You wanna take this to the house?"

"You know it. I'll even feed you." Before or after the nookie, he didn't care. He and Tank could work that kitchen together.

"You got a deal." Tank turned and grinned at him, one arm around his waist. "You got room for a Texan at that wedding, or is it family only?"

"Oh, I wouldn't go, I couldn't bring you." No way. Besides, his family would be thrilled to know he'd hooked up again. Even if he hadn't told them.

"Yeah? I'll have to pull out my Mo' Betta shirt, then. It's fine."

"That'll work. And your good hat." He leaned a little, soaking up Tank's heat, his earthy smell. A little car and oil, but still all man.

"Yeah." They got up to the house and separated a second, feeding and watering the dogs and the cattle, working quick and easy so they could get back to business. He pulled out some chicken and stuff for later, letting it thaw out so they could have something amazing for supper. Then he met Tank in the front room for a kiss.

Tank cupped his head in those big old hands, bending for him, the kiss going slow and deep, just like Tank had all the time in the world and intended to spend it right there. Wrapping his arms around those wide shoulders, Ross held on, letting that kiss spin his whole brain around. His cock

rose, started to ache and leak, just knowing Tank wouldn't let him down.

Tank walked them toward the bathroom, slow and easy, hands sliding down to grab his ass and hold on tight.

"Mmm." Ross kept on kissing and tasting, nipping at that fine lower lip. God, he needed. So bad. He forgot everything else but Tank. It was kind of amazing.

Tank just nodded for him, kept on holding him, that broad body as warm as sunshine against him, newly-cut hair tickling on his fingers. "Come get naked and wet with me, honey. I smell like grease and all."

"Ain't nothing wrong with hard work and a little sweat."
But he'd take a shower. Tank all slick and warm and wet? Hell
yes.

"Not a thing, but there's a lot right with getting soapy with someone fine as you." Well, that was almost a speech. Tank wasn't much for long declarations, but once in awhile he got almost poetic.

"Mmmhmm. I'll take it any way I can get it with you, love." He'd never been one to hold back. Why start now? Ross took another kiss, his lips feeling bruised and hot. He did love how Tank grinned against his mouth, how he got just as much as he gave. There was nothing but pleasure there. They got the water going, got out of their clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor. Then they really got busy, stepping into the shower and rubbing.

Tank had the soap, sliding it over his back, down over his ass, almost like a massage. Oh, right. Massage. That was part of the plan. His hands started working at Tank, rubbing,

pushing at those tight muscles. The steam rose around them, helping them relax, and man that would feel good when they got out, leaving them just a little shivery. Tank groaned a little, turning his head to lick and lap the water right off Ross' neck.

"That's it, buddy. I like that." He so did, unless it was soapy, but he didn't hear Tank spitting, so he must be fine. He did a little nibbling himself, right at the skin Tank left open for him by turning like that. Nope. No soap.

Just clean male. Tank's stubble made his skin just zing, made his balls ache with wanting.

He groped for the taps, turning off the water once they got all of the bubbles swept away, wanting to get horizontal. "Come on, Tank. I owe you a rub down."

"Oh, man. You'll melt me, bone-deep." He got a wink, a chuckle with Tank's cheeks gone pink. "I might just let you have your wicked way with me."

"Oh, you think? I could go there." He just loved the way Tank threw himself into anything they did. The towels felt a little limp from all the steam, but they did the job, and Ross dragged the big guy to bed, pushing him down face first.

That inked line of chiles made him smile. Binky did good work; Ross had to give the kid that. That ristra looked almost real on Tank's skin.

He leaned down and licked that line of ink, tracing each one with his tongue. His hands dug into the muscles of Tank's shoulders and arms, squeezing and kneading, working out tension.

"Ross. Sweet fuck. You." Ross grinned as the low, random babble started.

He mouthed his way back up to the back of Tank's neck, licking at the tiny hairs there. Then he leaned into the massage, setting out to melt Tank to a puddle.

Those thick thighs spread, letting him settle between them, Tank just easing under him, going boneless and easy.

"That's it, love. God, you're hot. Your skin is on fire." Even after the shower, when Tank should have cooled off coming out, the man was like a furnace.

"You make me, yeah? I'm all wantin', honey." Wanting and willing and all his. Goddamn.

"Yeah. I know what you mean." His cock pressed against Tank's ass, hard and hot and so ready he all but exploded right then.

Tank's hips pushed back against him, that offer clear and sweet, one of Tank's legs pulled up, spreading that fine ass for him.

"Jesus." It was enough to make him shake. Goddamn. Ross grunted, reaching for condoms, lube. Something.

"Yeah. I..." Tank turned his head, smiled at him. "I haven't, yeah? Before."

Blinking, Ross stared right into those eyes, his mouth falling open. His lips felt like they'd been sprayed with quick dry lacquer. "No?"

Tank's cheeks went a dull, dark red. "You're the first one wanted more than once, buddy. I ... That ain't something I'd do with a stranger."

"No. No, that's okay, love." He didn't want Tank to think that was bad. Not even close. It was ... Jesus. "I'll go slow, buddy. I promise."

"Well, sure you will." The laugh lines beside Tank's eyes crinkled, that smile widening. "You're ... Well, we got us something here, you and me."

That they did. Nodding, grinning, Ross backed off to turn Tank over. "Want to see you."

"I'm awful big to miss..." Awful big and awful fine, all spread and hard for him. That prick called to him, and he stroked it a few times, savoring the soft skin and hardness underneath. Then Ross set to opening the lube and getting his fingers slick so he could open Tank up. Carefully.

Tank watched him, a half-smile on the man's face, fingers moving nice and easy on his thigh, his hip, just petting him.

Unaccountably nervous, Ross pushed a finger against Tank's hole, feeling the muscles resist him for a moment, feeling them open for him then. And then he was inside, hot and slick and feeling Tank around him.

"Mmm." Tank spread for him, easy in his skin and giving him this, just like Tank brought him in, made him a part of this whole life.

Damn, he loved this man so much already. It was just like coming home. Ross pushed and pulled back before adding another finger, watching for any sign that Tank wasn't into it. He sure didn't get that. Tank let him push for a little bit, then started to move, rocking nice and easy with him, little groans and growls filling the air.

His breath labored in his chest, and sweat dripped into his eyes, and Ross figured he'd go crazy before he got in there. But before he knew it he had a condom on and was replacing his fingers with his cock, just moving slow and sure.

Tank reached out for him, that little hole squeezing him like a fist. "I ... I sure do feel that, honey, full up."

"You're tight, love. So hot." Shaking, panting, he held still except for the hand he used to clutch at Tank's. They stayed that way for endless moments, just breathing, tremors running from him to Tank and back.

"Uh-huh. I gotta. You need to move, honey. I need you to." Tank's hips rolled, had both of them crying out.

Ross nodded, his eyes trying to close, but he couldn't let them. He needed to see this. He started moving, driving into Tank slowly at first, then faster and faster. It took a bit, for Tank to figure where to put those long legs, how to work with him instead of against him. When Tank figured it though, Ross thought his eyes would roll back up into his head. Oh, quick learner.

They managed it, Tank's legs hooked over Ross' forearms, his knees sliding into place to hold Tank up. Goddamn, once they got it right? Nothing had ever felt better.

"Oh. Oh, Colorado." Tank's voice went deeper than ever, the sound actually vibrating inside him where he could feel it.

"Tank. God." He had to dredge his own voice up from his toes, pulling it up and out of himself. Jesus Christ, he wasn't gonna last any time at all.

"Uh-huh." Tank reached down, fingers stroking that curved prick almost gently. He could feel that touch, from his own cock to his toes.

Holding Tank up with one hand, he reached down with his other, his fingers closing over Tank's. "I. Need you to ... come on."

He got a flash of that grin—the man was fucking happy and it was just good as gold, right there, between them before Tank's eyes rolled back, a rough cry ringing out as heat splashed over their fingers.

That was all she wrote for Ross, too, and he came so hard he bit near through his lip, trying to keep his damned eyes open. His balls emptied like nothing going, his cock just throbbing.

Tank was right there when he slumped down, solid as anything. "Damn, Colorado."

"You know it, buddy. That was..." That was fucking incredible. Amazing. Just ... damn. He was kinda stunned.

"Yeah." Tank nodded, cheek against his. "Yeah. Glad it was you."

"So am I, love. So am I." What else could a man say to that? Some things didn't need any more words. They just were.

Chapter Seven

"Goddamn it! Ross! Come here! Quick!"

He was standing under a fucking ton of cases of glass bottles that were trying to topple and cost him his ass. Tank fucking knew better than to try to get shit down off that back shelf, but Ross'd been talking about how his momma and her man needed a big old roaster and his granny's was back there and he reckoned that would be a decent thing to show up with, filled with his sauces and shit, of course.

Of course, these motherfucking bottles fell, he might just blow a goddamn vein.

He threw his head back and bellered. "COLORADO!" Man, his arms were getting tired.

The sound of jump boots on plank came, and Ross barreled around the corner, coming to help right away. "What the Hell are you trying to do, you damned fool?"

Ah. Relief. With Ross taking half the weight it worked much better.

"I had this flash of brilliance, then it faded." They managed to get the boxes down safe and he breathed easier. "Thanks, man. I was in a bad way."

"No shit." He got the eye, Ross always assessing his level of ouch. "What else do you need, buddy?"

"You think your momma'd like that roaster-dealie? It was my gran's." His arms were good, but he was gonna lean and let that bad knee rest for a minute. Not that Ross needed to know that, of course.

Those blue eyes cut to his, wide as all get out. "You sure? I mean, she'd love it, but you don't use it or anything?"

"Nah. I bought that electric dealie at the Brookshires.
'Sides, you and me are more likely to smoke a bird, yeah?"
Fuck, his knee hurt.

"Yeah. Though that sounds kinda nasty." The roaster came down like owl shit, nice and easy, then Ross was on him like white on rice. "Come on. In. I'll get you an ice pack."

"I'm good."

"Tank, when're y'all leaving again? Can I bring Missy Roberts over here to spend the night? She liked the looks of your bed."

Tank looked over at Ross as his shithead baby brother's mouth announced his arrival way before Tank could *see* that skinny ass. "I might have to kill him."

"You might. Come on and sit." Ignoring Binky, Ross got him inside, got him settled, the dogs slipping in with them and crowding around to lick him.

"...and that fat-assed bastard said that my ink looked like fucking prison ink and..." Binky bent down, jabbering into the fridge while Ross was trying to get ice. Huh. He might not have to kill Binky after all. Now that would be fucking funny.

The sound of Ross' hand smacking Binky's ass was loud as hell, and Binky yelped and jumped a foot. Ross just smiled mildly and dug in the freezer.

Tank thought he just might keep the man.

"Damn, he's mean as a snake. So, you really going to the mountains? You just don't want Sissy's sweet potato casserole of death." Binky wandered over, rubbing his ass.

"Dude, your knee's all swelled. You want one of them antiexplanatories?"

"You are dumber than advertised, aren't you son?" Binky winked and grinned. "You know it, man."

Ross hooted, getting him set up with ice, a glass of tea, and some pills. "He's something, all right. Here you go, buddy. No more staggering around under boxes that weigh more than you do."

"Ah, man. Those fucking bottles are scary." Binky shook his head before going back to rummage. Dumb as a box of rocks, but his bubba didn't have an ounce of real evil in him.

"I don't want to come back to this house all tore up."

"Sure, man. When are y'all coming back?"

"We should be back the end of the first week of December," Ross said. Yeah, that would give them near three weeks before they had to mosey home.

"Oh, I can so be ready by then."

Oh, good lord. "Don't make me put you to work..."

"I think you ought to give him a list of shit to do. Make it simple. Small words." Ross treated Binky just like a sibling, ribbing him unmercifully.

"Yeah. Like do. Not. Party. In. My. House." He growled a little, just for show. "I'm fucking serious, Bubba. No skanky whores in my bed."

"I got it!" Binky blinked out from under his bushy dishwater hair. "I got it, okay?"

"You'd better, or you'll get it." Looking from one to the other of them, Ross grinned. "Who wants a big old sandwich and a beer?"

"Oh, man. Pick me." Binky grinned back, eyes just laughing. "Oh, dude. Can I have it to go? I forgot that I told Nemo I'd take his shift. There's this kick-ass blonde that wants a crescent moon inked on her nipple..."

Ross rolled his eyes but nodded, heading for the kitchen. Tank kinda couldn't wait to meet the family if they all equated food with love...

"You are a sick, sick man." Tank stretched a little, his knee grinding. "You got all the keys and stuff? There's stuff in the freezer, if you need it."

"I got it, man. You know that."

He nodded. He knew. Binky was a world-class dipshit, but the man respected him.

"Let me know when you're ready to switch to heat, Tank. I got the hot water bottle." Coming back with a bag full of shit, Ross handed Binky that and a Coke. "No beer if you're working. There's a sandwich and chips and some queso to heat up and a piece of gingerbread."

"Dude." Binky looked over at him, shook his head. "You keeping him?"

"Long as he'll stay, Bubba. Go ink titties, now."

"Going, going..." Binky wandered out, making him sigh and smile. Had to love family.

Ross was just grinning. "He's a nutbag."

"Yup. Thanks for the save, Colorado. I was leaning like a tower of chocolate bars in August."

"Hey, that's half of what I'm here for. You want that sandwich? We got peppered turkey and that fancy ham." The

ice bag shifted under Ross' hands, the man touching him gingerly, testing the swelling.

He swallowed the groan, but the wince slipped by him. "Yeah. I do."

"Cool. I'll get the hot water bottle, now." Look at that man bustle. And Ross bitched about his brother and his momma doing just that all the time.

He was going to tell Ross he didn't have to, but it felt good, to sit a second after all his few days of doing shit. And he got to watch Ross' ass as the man moved around the kitchen. Where was the bad there?

Tank actually sorta dozed off, dreaming about hunting quail as kid with his daddy.

"Hey, buddy. Here you go." The cold eased off his knee, the hot water bottle sliding on, making him moan. And there was a real Dagwood, with chips and queso, and a beer ... Heaven.

"You're fucking good to me." He caught himself beaming a little and bent to his beer, drinking deep.

"I try. You've been a godsend to me." Man, every once in awhile Ross got plumb sappy, but it was cute as hell, so he wasn't gonna complain.

"You ready to see your people, honey?" He knew that it'd been a bit, knew that Ross hadn't left on the best note. Still, them folks called and wrote and all, so it couldn't have been a truly bad leaving.

"Yeah. I think I am. I was a little nervous about going just for the holiday, but with the focus on Brodie's wedding I can

ease in." Those bright blue eyes met his, Ross sitting across to chomp on his own sandwich.

"You know that I'll stay in the trailer, if you want, right?" It would be enough for him to look at the mountains, to road trip with Ross. He understood not being shown off to them that might not look friendly on him.

That look sharpened, Ross's chin going stubborn. "They don't want you around, *I'll* be staying in the trailer." Then he got a grin, wry as anything. "They'll love you. I've told you that."

"Then we're good." He wasn't fancy or nothing, but he wasn't trash. He cleaned up well enough for meeting.

"I can't believe we're roadtripping again," Ross said around a mouthful of turkey. "Lloyd is gonna have pies and cakes and Mom will make casseroles and you'll have to go see her shop."

"I'm a fan of the on-the-road thing." He made a mental note to get the bag of road munchies for the trailer.

"I've done a lot of it, but I got to tell you, I haven't enjoyed it as much with anyone except maybe Dad." That was high praise. Ross' daddy might have died when Ross was wee, but his Colorado clearly idolized the man.

"Well, you know, you and me? We got the right idea for it. No hurrying. No worrying. No bitching."

"There you go." Polishing off the sandwich, Ross drained his beer. "Want another one? Or you want something else?"

"I'm good." He sorta took himself a nice, long look, admiring. Good looking son of a bitch.

"'Kay." Instead of heading to the kitchen, Ross wandered over to sit next to his legs, peeking at his knee. "Hand me the liniment."

"It stinks." Tank handed it over though. Momma'd always said it didn't work if it smelled like pretty girls and flowers.

"It tingles too ... just imagine." Oh, wicked man. And possibly ow. But he could see the merits of lube that warmed up. Just something less stinky.

"If we were gonna go that way, I'd want something that tasted good." Good lord, listen to him talk.

"Mmmhmm. Cinnamon, maybe. Just a touch." Those hands were gentle as could be, rough skin notwithstanding. Ross was the king of massage.

"Or cherry. I do like me that whole tart and sweet and salty together." He could watch those fingers on his skin for hours.

"Oh, that's a good idea." Those eyes glinted at him from under spiky blond lashes. "We'll have to stop at a truck stop."

Oh, good lord. "They got some weird-assed stuff in there." He could handle that, though, licking cherry-flavor off the tip of Ross' prick.

"They do. I promise not to embarrass you. Much." His face must have given his thoughts away, because Ross' touch got all caressing, those eyes going hot for him.

"That'd be something, huh? Like dessert, but better." That made him grin, thinking of that first kiss, that tease about cobbler being better than sex.

"Just like that." The towel went back over his knee, the hot water bottle back in place, and oh that felt better. Ross just leaned against his chair, kinda snuggling in.

He got one hand to moving, just petting Ross' belly. He liked this part, the lazy, warm, teasing and talking and just joshing bit. One arm slid around him, no pressure, no sex in it, just touching. He kinda figured Ross liked it too, as much as they did it. Just being.

"You reckon we'll get a chance to fish while we're up there?" He could try that fly fishing out, no shit.

"Yeah. I bet we can. Hell, even if it's icy the fish bite up on Grand Mesa. Or we can go down into the Junction. It'll still be in the fifties down there, I bet."

"That sounds like a plan. There is precious little that can't be made better with fishing." He'd pack the poles they had and they'd beg, borrow, or buy the rest.

"You know it. And Jed will be tickled. Hell, so will Ken. I bet they'd be happy to make it a boy's day out, let the girls fuss over Brodie's lady." He could feel Ross' chuckle right through his ribs.

"There you go." Women were fucking scary when they were in the marrying mode. They started growing horns and shit.

"Yup." A soft sigh stirred the hair behind his ear. "What all do we need to do? Do we have time to squeeze in a nap?"

"Hell, yeah. We got time, honey." He yawned, stretched a little. "We got time."

"Then let's go snuggle. Get gravity working for us instead of against." Gentle as could be, Ross got the hot water bottle

and towel and pulled him to his feet, arm looping around his waist.

"Careful, Colorado. I could get used to you." Could, his ass. He was in for it, balls to bones.

Ross patted his butt, chuckling, warm and good against his side. "I'm counting on it, buddy. Every day."

Well, thank God for small favors.

* * * *

They'd stopped at the truck stop about noon. Tank was right, there was all sorts of weird shit. From condoms to a staggering variety of French ticklers, they could have had anything they wanted. Thing was, with Tank he didn't feel like he had to be all that creative. So Ross had settled for a bottle of brand name, warming and cinnamon flavored lube.

If nothing else because it was fun to see how red Tank's face got.

That had been in Fort Worth. Tank said they needed to stop back there on the way home to get steaks and visit the stockyards, and Ross was all for that. His dad had been a rodeo cowboy, so it seemed fitting.

Deciding not to go through New Mexico had been tough, but they'd both agreed that they needed to wander less and make better time. That would give them more time to explore in Colorado, which seemed to tickle Tank to death. They were gonna stop in Amarillo, which was just under halfway through the eighteen hour drive, and Ross had been there on the way through once, but that was about it.

It wouldn't be until they passed through the corner of New Mexico that he'd have a clue.

Humming with the radio, he passed Tank a bag of potato skins type chips and grinned. "So what's there to see around Amarillo?"

"You ever been to the Cadillac ranch?"

Tank swigged a Coke, licked his lips and passed a little Toyota.

"Nope. As many times as I've passed through Texas, I've stopped to see precious little." He grinned, watching the miles fly by.

"Oh, man. We'll stop. It's a hoot and that old dude in there? He's a wicked bastard. They say he locked a kid in a chicken coop for stealing one of his signs."

"Yeah? I had a neighbor who pushed me out of his hayloft once." He kinda liked wicked old bastards. They made life interesting.

"Oh, man. There was a scary old hermit dude that shot at kids with a BB gun filled with rock salt. That was the big dare, to ride your bike down in there."

"Yeah? Junior Austin used to do that. That man was scary beyond all reason. I think Jed does work for him now." Man, it was weird, thinking of showing Tank all that stuff. Kev had always been very cool about it, and he'd loved Colorado, but there'd always been that reserve ... maybe Tank wouldn't have it.

"Yeah? He do cropdusting for him? Next time we head up this direction, I want to go in time to see all the fruit trees ready for harvest and stuff."

"He does that, and some heavy lifting, you know?" Licking his fingers, Ross opened another Coke. "You should see Orchard Mesa over next to Palisade when the cherry trees are blooming."

"Yeah? That in the springtime?" Tank headed through Amarillo, pointing them toward the RV park.

"Yeah. Man, it's glorious. I worked the cherries and the peaches for years. You got any idea how hard it is to get peach fuzz off?" Man, he was going to have to find that bag from the truck stop.

"I never lived where they did too much peaches. Tomatoes, though? Onions? Those I've worked." Tank tilted his head. "I bet things can get to smelling ripe, huh?"

"Hell, yes. But I bet onions can be pretty rank." Too cold in Colorado for the onions, but he'd bet they were something else.

"Really, it's not too bad, sort of musty. You put 'em in these big barrels." Tank rolled the truck window up a bit. "Lord, it's chilly up this far north."

"Wait until we hit the mountains." Poor Tank. They were gonna have to get him a better coat. Maybe one of those suede and shearling ones like Jed had.

"Well, that sorta makes sense, you know? Mountains get snow and shit. Somehow, even though you *know* better? Texas don't seem like it ought to be cold." Tank grinned at him, eyes twinkled. "Or so goddamn *stinky*."

"Yeah, well. It's Amarillo. It's not really Texas..." They'd joked about that enough, for sure.

Tank hooted, pulling off the highway, slick as shit. "You want to drop the trailer before we head out or do you just want to see the Cadillacs tomorrow?"

"Let's do the Caddys tomorrow, when we've had time to work the driving out of our muscles, yeah?" He couldn't wait to work on Tank's stiffness.

"Sounds like a plan. We've got that casserole to bake for supper and everything." They'd done it up right—if they wanted to stop for something special, they could, but they had everything they needed, right there.

It was too cool.

"This is the way to travel, man. Beer. Food." They rolled to a stop, and they had this routine down pat, now. Ross went to pay while Tank set up. That was the way of things.

It was a nice little park, damn near empty, and the little old lady at the counter sent him back to the trailer with a little box of homemade cookies and four big assed muffins for breakfast. Score. Tank had them hooked up, the awning the only thing not put out, given the chill and the wind.

"We got baked goods, buddy. Can't beat that." He showed off his treasures, thinking maybe coffee instead of beer, to go with the cookies.

"Oh, cool. I put the casserole in. It'll be an hour or so." Tank loomed over his shoulder, hands on his lower belly. "What all did you charm out of 'em?"

"She gave us muffins and cookies. I thought we could make some coffee. That fancy creamer would be amazing with these chocolate chips." Leaning back, he soaked in Tank's heat, that big body feeling good as a space heater.

"Oh, hell yes. We can live like kings." Tank's fingers moved, nice and easy, warming his belly up.

"Mmm. That feels good, buddy." They kinda swayed, luxuriating in being close, being warm. Yeah.

"Mmhmm." Tank didn't say much, just sort of ... stayed there. Held him like that was just pure heaven. Maybe it was. Grinning, Ross let his head fall back against Tank's shoulders. They needed to stand like this on Grand Mesa and watch the sun set.

Tank kissed his cheek, let him lean until his legs got tired. Then they shifted, Tank going to start coffee, Ross heading to put two little salads together for the casserole.

When they sat down to eat, the pushed into the little booth inside the trailer, legs pressing against each other, shoulders and arms rubbing. Much better than being outside in the wind. "I like the extra cayenne in this," Ross said, forking up more casserole.

"Yeah. It keeps it from being too heavy somehow. Good call, buddy."

They'd spent hours working on the recipe together, and it made him beam to know that he'd contributed. The last bite went down, and he grinned over. "You want some of those cookies?"

"You know it. Let's take it to the sofa bed; I'll pour us a cup." Tank stood, tossing the trash and popping the leftovers in the fridge.

"Mmm. Snuggling." Hell, yes. Coffee, cookies, Tank. What more could a man ask? He got them a little plate, going to sit, leaving Tank room to stretch that bad leg out.

"Mmm. You decided where we're stopping next?"

"I was pondering. We could make it in two, but I was thinking we'd stop in Canon City or Salida, before we go over Monarch pass. That's a heck of a haul for the trailer, and the river there's pretty as hell, worth seeing. If we stop in Canon City we could go to the Royal Gorge, maybe ride the little train."

"Oh, that sounds like a plan. I ain't never gone and seen, buddy, so I'd like to." Tank groaned over one of the cookies. "Oh, damn. These are fine."

"They are, huh?" He looped his free arm around Tank.

"The gorge is something, and there's a bridge over it that's enough to make your knees knock together."

"Now, honey, I got pretty big knees..."

"You do. You got big everything." And that? Was no exaggeration. No, sir. Tank's cheeks heated and he got a chuckle, got one hand wrapped around his hip, tugging him close.

Leaning right in, Ross shared a bite of cookie. "Mmm. Man, I tell you what, you're gonna love Lloyd."

"I'm thinking I'll like all your people. I like you."

"Yeah, but Lloyd makes amazing desserts." Winking, he dunked another cookie in the coffee and offered it up. Tank leaned in, nibbling at the cookie first, then his fingers, teeth just teasing away. Chuckling, he ran his fingers over Tank's lips. "Greedy."

"Well, yeah. Not everybody can have a bite of you."

"Nope. Just you." His hand cupped Tank's cheek, pulling the man around for a kiss. Because, you know, coffee, cookies, his Tank...

Tank hummed for him, sweet as anything, keeping the kiss light and teasing, sharing the bittersweet flavors between them. They made their way through half the cookies and all of the coffee before the kisses got more serious, both of them pushing together.

Tank leaned back, dragged him up along that broad body, just sort of cradling him.

Warm, cozy, just slow and happy. He liked that Tank was just willing to hang out and love on him. Ross nuzzled into that spot between chin and chest and just hummed.

"Mmm. That tickles." Tank cupped his ass, big old fingers rolling.

"Yeah? Better watch it, it could get scrubby." His chin was pretty bristly.

"Yeah, yeah. Your momma might look at me funny, I have a hickey."

"You think? She'll probably be relieved." Laughing, he took a bit of a bite, just licking to ease the sting.

Tank grunted, hips jerking a little. "Relieved?"

"Yep. Visible signs of lovin'. No shame, you know?"

Mmmm. Salty. God, he loved Tank's spicy taste.

"I like the sound of that, honey. No shame."

"You and me both." He crawled around a little, settling in so he could rub. "This good, or should we fold down the bed?"

"I'm happy. You?" Tank got him moving, hands just rolling them together.

"This works." He grinned, rubbing a little more, a little harder. God, it was nice to just rock and roll.

"Oh, that feels..." Tank's hips shifted and then Tank groaned as their found that spot.

"Uh-huh." Like home. God knew, as long as he was with Tank, he was there. "Faster?"

"Hell, yeah." Tank groaned, hands squeezing just a bit harder.

Ross moved faster, spreading a little more, letting Tank bear a bit more weight. Yeah, that was just the thing, got their zippers pressing in all the right places.

"Mmm..." Tank shifted a little, fingers sliding down, brushing his nuts through the denim, the touch driving him fucking crazy.

Arching against the touch, Ross grunted, pushing and pulling, needing for all he was worth. Lord have mercy.

"Ross. Colorado." Tank nudged his mouth up, their lips pushing together, tongue fucking his mouth.

So hot. Cookies and coffee, and pure male. That was his Tank. He reached down, too, his hand brushing Tank's, getting a hold of the man through his clothes.

"Damn. This zipper's gonna bite my cock, the way it's trying to get to you." Tank grinned against his lips,

"Uh-huh. I hear that. Let me just..." They struggled, both of them panting and growling, but they finally got free. Both of them.

Tank made this great sound when they finally slapped together, skin-on-skin. Oh, hell yes. His own eyes tried to

roll, tried to close, and Ross fought it, grasping both their cocks in one hand and squeezing.

"Oh, goddamn." Tank rolled up, knees cradling him.

"Uhn. Love." So fucking hot. Such soft skin over such hardness. Ross forgot about the special lube, forgot the condom, just everything. Only Tank stood out in his mind.

"Yeah." Tank nodded and blinked at him as that heavy cock throbbed in his hand, heat spreading over his fingers.

"Oh. Oh, Christ, Tank. Look at you." Not just look. Feel, smell, and as Ross brought his hand to his mouth to lick it, taste.

"Jesus..." Tank looked gobsmacked, staring at him, purely fascinated.

"Love. I gotta." Ross wiggled, hoping that made his need clear, his kinda awkward position.

"Yeah." Tank lifted his hips up with one hand, the other hand wrapping tight around his prick and starting to stroke.

"Oh. Yeah." He humped like crazy, the smell of sex filling the little space. His balls just felt like stones, his whole body shaking.

"Come on. Let it go, honey, and I'll feed you more cookies and beat your ass in cards." Tank grinned against his lips, fingers tugging away.

His eyes flew up to meet Tank's, and he came hard, laughing as he did. God, he did love this man. And he figured now was as good a time as any to say it. "Love you, buddy. You know?"

"I know." Tank nodded, took a quick kiss. "You ain't alone in that and I ain't gonna do wrong by you. Ever."

"Then let's get cleaned up and play cards. We can make some queso, too. I'm kinda munchy." That whole orgasm thing was either gonna put him to sleep or make him hungry...

"Oh, hell yeah. I got the good chips, the real thin ones." That was his man, all about the food.

Ross took a kiss, slow and sloppy and lazy. "As long as we use your salsa, I'm in."

The lube? Could wait. They had a lot more they could do together besides the sex.

And there was always the early morning wood.

Chapter Eight

Jesus fucking Christ. That was one of the biggest things he'd ever seen.

Ever.

It was like the first time they landed in the desert in Saudi. His brain just couldn't quite grasp it at first. Tank leaned back against the truck, just staring like a newborn fool, hoping that he wasn't drooling or nothing.

"So, you want to actually go into the park?" Ross was grinning like an idiot, nodding at the gates that hid most of the Royal Gorge and the bridge. He could see it all, but to be right over it...

"Yeah. I just. Damn, Colorado. Just *look*." It made a man believe in God.

"Yep. That's God's country. C'mon." Ross took his arm, steering him down and paying their admission. It cost the earth, but Ross shushed him with an, "It's worth it."

Then they were heading toward the highest suspension bridge he'd ever seen, right over the Royal Gorge. He actually got a little bit of the willies, looking at all the space, all that air under the bridge. He wasn't gonna say nothing, but damn. You just walked off the edge of the earth, right onto this bridge, and the black and red cliffs fell all the way down until you couldn't see anything but the tiny river snaking below. It gave him chill bumps. Ross' hand felt good and steady under his elbow, and he was glad for it. 'Course, Colorado wouldn't be wigged. He probably wanted to put on a parachute and jump.

That thought amused him for a good long time, actually kept him sort of distracted as they wandered, step by step by step.

They got to the halfway, and standing still was way easier than moving. He could even look over the edge. It was...

"Fucking amazing, huh?"

"You know it, honey. It's one of the biggest things I've ever seen..."

It was like art or something, like praying.

"Yeah. It's ... well. If you like this, we'll have to go to the Black Canyon. It's not far from Ken." Ross grinned over, blue eyes looking just like the sky overhead.

"Okay." He wasn't sure how Ross could've left all this—the mountains and the wind and the sheer size of it. Then he got to remembering the prairie grass gone blue and red in the spring, the way the sun set over Big Bend. It made him grin, made him just proud in his bones.

"They've got a ride that flings you out over the edge..."
Oh, look at that evil man, poking him.

"Don't make me hurt you, buddy, 'cause I can." He snorted, shook his head. "I reckon I'm too goddamn big anyway."

"Yeah, yeah. You can have a corny dog while I do it, yeah?" The man was an adrenaline junkie, pure and simple. But he didn't figure he'd mind soaking up more view while Ross did crazy things.

"Sure, Colorado. I'm good." Hell, there were a ton of people to visit with, folks that looked like they were from damn near everywhere.

Ross leaned in, almost close enough to kiss, but backed off when some old lady cleared her throat. "Cool. You know I have to try it, at least."

"You go on. I'll find me shady spot and sit." He grinned and went wandering. He talked to this guy from overseas that had a tattoo of a giant pigeon on his arm in the line to get a Coke. Then he sat next to this couple from Yankeeland that lived on a goddamn boat. A boat.

Hell, he even met a lady from Texas who had up and married a Coloradan and stayed there, though they lived someplace over next to Colorado Springs. She told him all about their big tourist attractions, the Garden of the Gods and the great sand dunes and all.

"Lord, y'all have as much to see as we do. Well, we got beach." He winked and grinned as the sweet gal set to laughing, her husband just rolling his eyes.

Ross came bouncing back over, finally, two steaming hot cups of cider in his hands, hair all ruffledy and standing on end. "That was too fun, buddy. Oh, hey." Ross nodded at Tank's new friends.

"Yeah? Good deal! Y'all, this is my buddy, Ross Thatcher. Colorado, this good ole boy stole him a cowgirl from down near Beaumont."

"No kidding? Well, nice to meet you folks. I'm from over next to Grand Junction..." Ross and the other feller talked Colorado for a bit, then they all parted ways.

"You want to hit the gift shop, buddy? Get some amazing shit for Binky?"

"Yeah and I need to get something for the kids. How was the thing? Did you fall off the face of the earth?"

"More like soaring out over the edge and swinging back. It rocked." Yeah, he could see the flush in Ross' cheeks, the width of that grin. Someone had had a good ride.

He chuckled, patted Ross' back and they set to wandering. Lord, lord, Ross was cute as he could be.

They got souvenirs, popcorn, and a new scarf for him. Ross got an ugly boonie hat and an armload of shit for his brother Ken's kids. "Better save some money, though," Ross told him. "There's a silly gift shop at the top of Monarch Pass."

"Monarchs like butterflies or like kings?"

"You know, I have no idea. Been going over it all my life..." Shrugging, Ross bounced a little. "Maybe it says at the little shop. It sits right on the continental divide."

Tank chuckled. Man, he was gonna have to buy more film. "Oh, man. You should've taken the camera when you did your thing and took action shots."

"Oh. I should have, huh? Though I might have hurled, looking through a lens."

Yeah, he could see that. Going back was easier—Ross kept making him laugh his ass off with terrible jokes and, by the time they were on the far side, his ribs were sore. "Lord, lord. You better be the funny brother, or I'm in deep trouble."

"I'm the dork. Jed's the charmer. Ken is the quiet, deep one." He got a wink, Ross just crowding him toward the truck. They'd left the trailer at the RV park, because the road up

was a twisty little devil, and he almost wished they had it right there when Ross rubbed on him a bit.

"I don't know, honey." He looked around, made sure nobody could hear, and whispered low. "I been pretty deep in you..."

"Oh." Those eyes cut over to meet his, and Ross licked his lips. "Wanna see how fast we can get to the RV park?"

"Uh-huh." He tossed the keys over. Ross was way better at that whole make-the-truck-go-up-the-big-incline than he was.

"Woo." Ross raced around and hopped in the truck and gunned it, waiting until he got buckled in to shoot out of the parking lot.

He stretched out, grinning as he realized he could sorta reach out and get to touching Ross' leg. Oh, now. That was kinda fun.

The truck jerked, but only a tiny bit. "Watch it, now," Ross said, laughing out loud. "Gonna have us crashing."

"No. No. No crashing my truck. You pay attention."

"Yes, sir." They rocketed around the last curve before they hit the main highway, and he would swear two wheels left the ground. Good lord. He chuckled, leaning back to watch Ross drive, watch those hands on the steering wheel.

"You okay, buddy?" There was no teasing there. Ross had his back. The man would never do a thing to scare him. And now they were on the main road, Ross was zipping along right at the speed limit.

He'd found out early on how much Ross hated to get a ticket.

"Yessir. I was looking at your hands. They're awful fine."

"Tank..." The heat in the cab went up a notch or two, just like that. Ross glanced over again, and that stare was like a blue flame.

"Yeah." Tank caught himself licking his lips, wanting all sorts of things, right now.

"Almost there." They screeched a little going off the main road, threw a little gravel as they worked off the highway onto the gravel road. The springs rocked when they pulled up next to the trailer.

"Inside, buddy?" His fingers cupped his cock, the goddamn thing so hard it hurt.

"Uh-huh." Ross watched him, lips open, breath coming hard. "Inside. Goddamn."

"Yeah." Or he was gonna bend over and...

Yeah.

Right.

Inside.

"Now."

He popped the door open, heading around to grab Ross. They crashed together when Ross hopped out, rubbing all the way up and down, and Ross' lips nipped at his ear before the man grabbed him and yanked him inside. He got the door locked, then pulled Ross full up against him, shuddering it felt so fucking good.

"Oh, God." Ross kissed him like there was no tomorrow, mouth bruising his, lips crushing down. Those hands grabbed his ass, pulling at him, getting them together all solid.

Tank didn't know what the hell had him all riled, but he'd go with it, humping and rocking, pulling Ross almost up off his feet.

"Uhn." One leg came up around him, the heel of Ross' boot digging into the back of his thigh, and damn, but they needed to get horizontal.

"Bed. Now, man. I need you." He didn't much care what they did, so long as they got to it.

"Yeah." Climbing back down, Ross tugged him to the little bed and started on his shirt buttons, pushing his shirt and jacket off together. A wave of cold air hit him, but Ross's mouth moving across his throat warmed him right up.

His hands were being stupid as fuck, stuttering, fumbling along Ross' back as he shifted and moaned.

"I got you. I got, you, love." Ross just helped him, guiding him, pushing him down on the bed. Then his jeans and boots hit the floor.

"Jesus, want you, huh? So fucking bad." He leaned in, nuzzled the join of Ross' neck and shoulder.

"Uh-huh. Gonna. Soon." Oh, now Ross was getting bare, too, all that fine skin right there for the taking. Shirt, jeans, and he had shoulders and arms, nipples and cock. All his.

He was in total fucking overload, groaning and tugging at his balls as they tried to give it up. "Look at you."

Ross' eyes widened as the man looked at him. "Me? Jesus, Tank. You. Oh. God." Moaning, Ross kinda fell on him, lean and hard and kissing him crazed.

He touched everywhere he could, mouth just moving over every fucking inch of skin, tasting, licking, just fucking drowning in his Ross.

Giving as good as he got, Ross touched him everywhere, tracing his ribs, tickling at the line of his hip and torso. So good.

Fuck, Ross made him want. Goddamn. He shifted under those touches, cock leaking hot drops on his belly.

"Not gonna make it in, Tank." Shifting, Ross got them together, got their cocks lined up and started rubbing, wet and so hard a cat couldn't scratch them.

"We got nothing but time, honey. This feels fine." Ross' asscheek fit so nice in his palm.

"Okay. Yeah." Somehow he figured Ross had lost the words. That was sexy as hell, adding to the slide of skin on skin, the feel of Ross' sweat and heat really sending him.

Tank started licking, each taste driving him higher and higher. Ross was like a fucking drug. Rocking, stroking, Ross took them higher and higher, turning to catch his mouth and take more kisses. They got to pushing, fucking each other's mouths. Loving hard.

One hand rubbed Ross' neck, the other that fine ass and he was fixin' to go off like a bottle rocket.

"Tank!" Ross beat him to it, wet heat coating his cock and belly when Ross shot, that fine body going tight and still. Only Ross' cock moved against his.

His toes curled and he panted, trying to watch Ross come and just flat-out not making it, shooting his good sense right out the tip of his cock.

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Good, love." Ross talked him down, just petting him, stroking him.

"Uh. Uh-huh." He sorta nodded, head bobbing like a newborn's. Damn, that was fine.

Kissing the corner of his mouth, Ross relaxed against him, laughing as his stomach rumbled. "Do I need to feed you now?"

"Hey, there's a lot of me to keep going." Besides he'd walked a long way.

"And you're not used to the altitude. What do you want, buddy?"

"I'm easy. We got stuff for burgers?" He could handle some chili sizes.

"Yup. Like we would travel your Texas ass anywhere without burgers. We got them crinkle cut potatoes, too."
Ross' laughter felt hot on his skin, felt good against his belly.

"Then we'll have chili sizes." He swatted Ross' butt, happy down to his bones.

"Sounds like a plan, love. And tomorrow, we'll be with my folks, yeah?" He got a kiss before Ross moved, rolling off to get cleaned up and go get supper started.

"Mmhmm." That was gonna be something—meeting his lover's folks. Damn.

He could only hope it was gonna be as good as Ross thought it was. At least with Ross he figured the food would be good. So was the loving. What else did a man need? Chapter Nine Present Day

Everyone stared from him to Ross for the longest time. It was like being frozen in one of those Christmas nativity scenes, or a snow globe or something. Ross grinned, holding out a hand for him, and he just went right on over, not the least bit flustered.

"Well, hey, y'all," Tank said. "It's nice to finally meet you."

It was Ross' momma who finally broke the silence. "Well, it's nice to meet you too, honey." She came right over and hugged his neck, or at least his shoulders, as she couldn't reach too high. Then she linked arms with him, tugging him away from Ross. "You need to come in and tell me all about you, since my son hasn't."

"He's been a little busy," he agreed, thinking there were some things you just didn't tell a man's momma. The rest he could spill right easy, though.

"It sounds like it. Little rat bastard."

He could hear Ross protesting, but the man was laughing, and when Tank glanced over, the brothers had crowded around his Colorado and were giving him hell. Didn't look like they was serious, though, so he let Ross' momma drag him inside and push him toward the kitchen.

"Do you want some coffee, honey? Some cake?"

"Oh, I'd appreciate some coffee, but I'd best eat something solid before cake."

Blue eyes just like Ross' stared at him, a little smile tugging the corner of the woman's mouth. "Well, we have left

over pot roast, and some potatoes, if you want me to heat up a plate. I'll get some for Ross, too."

Hoo yeah. Looked like the whole clan did food as love. But he wasn't gonna turn down pot roast, not when it smelled like Heaven and had potatoes and gravy and a big chunk of crusty bread and all. The plate Ross' momma shoved at him was piled to the rafters.

A good looking older gent with a shock of white hair came wandering in, hands in his pockets, and he smiled at Tank, blinking just a little. "Well, hello. You're Tank, right? I'm Lloyd. Ross says you make sauces and spices."

"Yessir. Got my own little business. We went to the Fiery Foods this year, and did right well."

"Oh, you have to tell me about that. It's only about a nine hour drive, but I've never managed to get down there."

They chatted about the merits of chipotle versus fresh jalapeno, cooked versus fresh salsa, and Tank realized he was just having a ball. He'd been right. He liked Ross' people. A lot.

Those brothers spilled into the kitchen, looking like three peas in a pod. He could tell which one was which, too, as Jed had skin like tanned leather and the best laugh lines ever, where Ken looked younger, somehow less weathered, and a lot more eye-roll-y.

"Hey, Tank. My sorry brother doesn't see fit to introduce us, so I will. I'm Jed Thatcher."

The urge to growl surprised him, but he just shook it off and shook hands, knowing from Jed's firm grip and straight on look that he was a good 'un. Ken shook too, smiling a

little, and then they were overrun with kids and more folks and dogs sneaking in and Lord...

It was enough to take a man's breath.

"Don't let them run you down," a soft voice said from right about his elbow, and he turned to see a pretty, very pregnant, thirty-something lady. That had to be Ken's wife.

"Mandy," she said, holding out a slim, work-rough hand.
"You can escape if you want to, by getting me a big plate of cake and helping me go sit in the front room."

"Yes, ma'am," Tank agreed with a chuckle, just watching her trying to move. Bless her heart, her belly button was gonna pop like a turkey thermometer soon. You could just see it. He investigated the cake. "Chocolate or carrot, ma'am?"

"Oh, carrot, I think. That way I can say I'm getting my veggies." She winked at him, big brown eyes just a shining. She was a good-looking woman, and a ranch girl through and through. That made him like her on the spot.

Tank helped Mandy on out into the front room, easing her down in a big old chair that was probably Lloyd's TV watching recliner, and handing her the cake. "Better?"

"Oh." She sighed, arching her back before settling. "Yes. Thank you, honey. So how long have you known Ross?"

Well, Hell. He'd avoided the momma questions, only to be cornered by the sister in law. "Nigh on a year, I guess. Maybe not quite that."

"Really? Oh, Mom's gonna kick his ass."

"Now, there's no need for that. Some things a man just ain't ready to share until he's ready. He's talked y'all up, for sure, so he always planned on bringing me up."

The need to defend just rose right up, his voice a lot more grr than he meant it to be. Mandy stared at him, looking surprised for a minute before cracking a huge grin.

"You'll do, honey. Anyone who likes Ross as much as you do will be just fine."

Tank blinked right back, then just let himself laugh, deep and good. "Thanks. I reckon that's high praise."

"Nah. They're just protective. Come on, buddy, let's get a beer. Leave the woman to her cake." Ross was finally there, clapping him on the back, and his tight shoulders eased a goodly bit.

"Sounds like a plan, Colorado. Ma'am."

"Call me Mandy. And it's been nice to meet you, Tank."

"Same here."

He walked off with Ross' arm around his waist, which made his cheeks heat, but it was a good feeling.

Damned fine, in fact.

* * * *

Well. That had gone well. Despite the surprise, his mom and the rest had taken well to Tank. They'd fed him and asked him all sorts of embarrassing questions, and they'd stayed up half the night drinking beer and talking with Jed and all...

Now it was time to head back to the trailer and take a load off.

Ross stood, clapping Jed on the back. "Well, I think it's time we headed to bed, like mom and Lloyd." He met Tank's eyes, just nodding a bit, smiling some.

Jed looked from him to Tank and back, standing as well.
"Sure, little bro. Sure. It's been a ball to meet you, Tank."
"Pleased, sir. Y'all are just good folks, deep down. You
want I should wash these glasses 'fore we go, Colorado?"
Tank smiled down at Jed and Eli. Christ, the man was big.

Big and good looking and just as Texan as they came.

Jed shook his head before Ross could answer. "Brodie got him a dishwasher for his new bride. Well, mom and Lloyd did, as a wedding present. Don't worry on it. Eli and I will load it up."

"Well then, if you're sure, bed's calling." Tank clapped Eli on the shoulder and shook Jed's hand, just as sweet as you please.

Eli was grinning to beat the band. He and Tank had hit it off like a house afire, just blathering on. It had been good to see. Ross thought maybe Jed agreed.

"Night. Night, bro." Jed grabbed him and hugged him tight, making his ribs creak. "Good to see you, man."

Tank was whistling away as they headed to the truck, moving easy. Damn, it felt good, to have Tank just ... be Tank.

The guy had done well, even when faced by Mom, Lloyd, Ken, Mandy and kids, Brodie and Jill, Jed and Eli, and Stu and his wife. Stu being mom and Lloyd's other ranch hand. It was a houseful that would have made Kev spaz.

Of course, Tank just rolled with it, hooting and joshing and even following Lloyd into the kitchen to discuss the merits of different salsas. Mom had been tickled with the roaster, and Lloyd, well, he'd been in awe of Tank's spices and sauces.

They'd rolled out the chip and dip somewhere around midnight, everyone but poor pregnant Mandy oohing and ahhing.

Ross caught up with Tank right at the door of the trailer, pinching that solid ass. "See? Told you it would go good."

"They're good folks, honey. Real good. I can see where you came from. It's nice." Tank grinned at him, fingers just barely touching his belly.

"Thanks, love." He meant it for everything, too. It was just so good to be comfortable in his skin, which he'd been worried as hell he wouldn't be, going back to Colorado.

Tank kissed his temple, then they got to the routine of getting ready for bed. Easy and simple, they'd figured shit out and ended up in the bed, Tank's back against the wall, waiting for him to settle.

Crawling in, tucking his cold feet under the blankets, Ross curled up, just stroking Tank's side. "Mom looks good."

"She's a handsome woman. Y'all look like her." Tank got the blankets settled. "Man, that little gal of Ken's is swole like a watermelon. She don't look too comfy."

"No. She's looking kinda peaked, actually." He'd seen Mandy pregnant many times, but this time she looked pallid and kinda swollen in the legs.

"Yeah? Them gals are something, huh? I got nothing but awe for 'em. Binky needs himself a woman."

"Yeah. That way you can have nephews and nieces." Tank was amazing with kids. Ken's mob had adored him on sight.

"You know it." Tank grinned at him, head propped on one hand. "Did you ever want to have any? I mean, you said you could hunt heifers as well as bulls."

"Hell, I was a full on heifer guy for years..." He thought about it a bit, really pondering it. "Not really. I mean, I like kids, but I don't *need* them."

"I hear that. Being Uncle Tank is cool though. You know, taking them fishing and shit."

"Yeah. That's something to love." His hand cupped Tank's shoulder blade, pulling a little so they were pressed together.

"Mmm. You're warm." Tank rubbed a little, just enough to warm him up, balls to bones.

"I am now." Poor Tank. He'd sat close to the fire, for sure. Those Texas bones just weren't used to cold.

"Good. You happy we came up, honey? You having a good time?"

"I am. It's been weird, but better than I thought. I left kinda in a hurry." And he'd been out of touch. Man, his mom had torn him a new asshole in the kitchen for not telling her about Tank.

"Well, they all look damned happy to have you here."

"Yeah." He'd never get over how lucky he was to be part of the Thatcher clan. It just amazed him. "They all took to you, too."

"Well, good. I'm a nice guy and I ain't going nowhere, so it's for the best."

"It is." Feeling sleepy and lazy now, Ross took a long, slow kiss, just loving how easy it was.

"Mmm." Tank grinned for him, eyes all heavy-lidded.
"Night, honey."

"Night, love." They just laid there until he heard Tank snoring lightly, warm breath blowing across his cheek. Then Ross let himself drift off, too, just warm and happy, and more at home in Colorado than he'd been in a long, long time.

Chapter Ten

He measured out a tablespoon of chili powder to add to the cocoa, grinning as Lloyd started sputtering. "Trust me. This'll be mild enough the babies can eat it, but it'll be like brownie magic, I swear to God."

They'd been cooking up a storm, laughing and joshing and Tank was enjoying the hell out of himself, especially when Eli decided to join them and start going on about what them weird-ass Northwesterners ate.

Lloyd was just an old cowboy with enough class to be a real gentleman, so he just raised his brows at Tank and shook his head. "If you say so, son."

"Which is his way of saying he thinks you're nuts," Eli added, looking tickled as anything.

"Yep." Tank stirred and grinned. If he knew anything, he knew his chiles. "Don't worry, Eli. I can make some with cream cheese for your palette..."

"Oh, you're cruising, man." But the man wasn't moving from the stool he'd taken up on, beer bottle dangling from his fingers. "I have to say, whatever magic you've got working with Ross? It's really good stuff."

His cheeks heated and he didn't quite know where to look. Hell, Binky'd never ever said nothing about Ross out loud. He still wasn't sure how to react to everybody being all ... out in the open.

"Thanks, man. He's a good guy."

"He is, but he's usually grouchy as a bear with a sore paw. He and Jed haven't had one tie up since you two have been here."

Lloyd kind of rolled his eyes. "They will eventually." "They're brothers." That's what brothers *did*.

"Yeah, but the last time Ross was here, they meant it."

"The last time Ross was here he was hurtin', so you can't go by that." That was from the groom, Brodie, who came wandering in, smiling and nodding all around. Tank could see why Ross counted the man a friend. He was good folks. "Oh, man, are those brownies?"

"Yep." He fought back the growl. He didn't hold much with the idea of Ross being sad, really, especially over some Yankee.

"Smells good in here." Brodie gave him a long, steady look before nodding. He'd seen who knew how many of Brodie down in Texas, steady as a rock. "So, Tank. How do you feel about dogs?"

"For eating? I'm not so much for that. But on general principles? I'm fond. I got me a pit and a rottie back home—real sweet, good girls."

"Yeah? You think they'd mind another?" Brodie kind of pulled a face. "Ross' dog, Pancake ... he's been staying with me just about a year, but my girl has two Aussies who just don't like him. And he's gettin' on to oh, five-ish, I'd say. Maybe six. Too old to have the girls snarling at him."

"Well, sure he can come on home. We got room and cattle and we'll just make him up a little house of his own. Pancake, you said his name was?" Well, hell. 'Course Colorado oughta have his own dog back. Lord.

"Yeah. He's over at Jed's, seeing as how Jill's dogs have been here. Figures he'd be the one they don't get on with, huh?" Brodie lowered his voice a little. "And he never has got over looking for Ross."

"Well, then. Lloyd, them brownies cook for twenty. I'm going to get Ross. That ain't right." He grabbed his ball cap on the way and went hunting.

Ross was down at the shop with his momma, according to ... Annie? Amy? One of Ken's brood. And sure enough there he was, sitting and sanding some kind of wooden toy, looking guilty as hell to be caught with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

"Hey, buddy."

"Hey you. Ma'am." He nodded to Mrs. Thatcher, gave her a smile. "You and me got a drive to take. Someone's waiting on you."

"Call me Nancy, honey. Where are you taking my baby?" She gave him a sunny smile, looking like all was right with the world, for sure.

"I'm fixin' to run out to Jed's, ma'am. Ross here's got a critter waiting on him and that ain't right. 'Sides, Pancake'll need to get used to me afore we drive him home and all."

Ross' eyes lit up. "He's still here? I didn't want to ask Brodie, but I hadn't seen him..." Stubbing out the smoke, Ross hopped up and kissed his mom's cheek. "I'll be back in a bit."

He handed over the keys and nodded at Mrs. Thatcher again. "Y'all need anything while we're out and about, ma'am?"

"I do. Could you stop at the hardware store and get me some more fine grit sandpaper? And you'll need to get Pancake's favorite biscuits, honey. I bet Jed let them run out, busy as he's been."

"We can do that. Come on, buddy." Ross all but bounced out of the shop, jingling the keys.

"Right behind you." Tank grinned, lumbering along behind. See? The man needed a dog of his own. "Tell me about the pup, honey?"

"Huh? Oh. He's a yellow lab. I got him a few years back. He was..." Shrugging, Ross trailed off. "Well, let's just say I got custody. He's a good dog, sweet, eager to please. I've missed him, but I didn't want to drag him all over the country."

"Well, you got a place to put him now and he'll do fine with the girls." Tank got up into the truck, sorta feeling like he oughta apologize for finding out or something, 'cept that didn't make a lick of sense and he wasn't gonna do it.

"He will." He got a sideways kind of grin. "Hell, I was afraid he'd gotten hit on the road or something, and no one wanted to tell me. I figured I'd ask Jed after Brodie left. Sure is good to hear he's all right."

They started off over the Grand Mesa. The roads were still open, as they hadn't had a lot of snow. Ross said it took twice the time going down and around, and they'd gotten chains for the truck just in case.

"So, you miss your other fella still?" He figured Ross might, 'cause they'd been together an awful long time and lord knew, the guy didn't seem to be nothing like him.

Oh, man. Look at them rocks.

The farther they got up on the mountain, the more trees there were, too, bare Aspens that shivered in the wind. It was amazing. He was so wrapped up in that and the snow dappling the side of the road he almost missed the answer.

"Kev is a good guy, but I don't miss him near as much as I thought I still would. I didn't think I'd ever find anything that felt better. I was wrong."

"Yeah? 'Cause I'm sure fond, but I sure don't want you to be unhappy. Life ain't long enough to live like that." He'd just be Ross' friend, if that was what happened. Lovers came and went, at least that's what all the songs said.

"I'm happier than I've been in years." Ross reached over to squeeze his leg, hand strong and warm. "You've been the best medicine I could ask for. And it's not like you have to worry about being rebound guy. We'd been broke up near a year when you and I met."

"Good deal." He was all about this whole things-going-right thing. And it was nice to know he wasn't just a gee I'm desperate thing. "It's sure pretty up here, honey."

"It is, huh? Colder than I remember." They motored along, Ross pointing out when they hit about nine thousand feet. Lord, lord.

"Whereabouts does your brother live, now?" He felt sorta like his eyes were gonna bug out of his head. Goddamn it was big. And snowy. And cold. "Oh, another twenty miles, maybe? Just the other side of the Mesa over in Cedaredge. Usually by now we can't even get to him this way." He'd swear when they started down off the Mesa it was like falling off the edge of the earth. Or, maybe just what it was. The biggest flat top mountain ever.

Tank didn't say much more; he was awful busy sitting and looking with his teeth in his mouth. Lord, he could see why folks got in trouble up here. He could also see why folks stayed.

They pulled up to a little frame house, all neat as a pin, with animals aplenty in the pastures and a little barn just cute as a button. Ross grinned over. "This is where I grew up. Come on."

"Oh, this is sweet as pie, honey." He zipped his jacket up and tugged his cap down. "Look like there's a welcoming party acomin'."

Dogs. Lord, Jed had some dogs. Ross' brother had sent Eli on to Mrs. Thatcher's—Nancy's—early, saying he had work to do, so the dogs must have been out with him. There was a great shaggy beast, a black lab, a cattle dog looking thing, a spotted Basset mix and there ... a wide, yellow bullet, leaping right for Ross.

Oh, now. Look at that.

Tank just got all warmed through, smiling like his face would crack. Look at that puppy love.

Ross laughed, the sound coming from deep in his belly, holding that silly dog right up in the air and letting it lick his face all over. Then Tank got distracted from watching by a herd of curious mutts.

"Hey, y'all. How's it going?" He held out one hand, letting them snort and sniff and lick.

That bunch wasn't shy at all. The spotted mutt started licking at his boots while the monster, who looked like a fuzzy mix of the big herders, stood right up and put both front paws on his chest.

"Oh, look at you." He gave the big guy a scritch, laughing at that big ole toothy smile. "You're a monster, aren't you? Lord, lord."

He did love him some dogs.

"He's a Pyrenees-Newfie mix. Hey, Tank. You finally come for your dog, Ross?" That was Jed, coming out of the barn in his old jeans and faded flannel, smiling at Ross and that big old lab, who were wrestling away.

"Woulda come sooner if I'd known he was here," Ross shot right back, spitting out fur and dirt.

"Howdy, Mr. Jed. I reckoned Ross needed to get the pup used to me before we took him home."

"You bet." Jed pumped his hand, and it was funny how much those two looked alike, for all that Jed was a goodly bit older. "Glad to hear he's going home. Poor pup. He loves Brodie, for sure. But his heart belongs to Ross. Garg. Get down."

The furry beast still licking and wagging at Tank gave a disappointed woof and dropped to the ground.

"Garg? Lord." He gave scritches all around, just laughing his ass off every time he looked over to Ross.

"Gargantor. This is Spot, Ojo and Scorch." Jed was grinning, too, just watching all the dogs romp.

"You missed Jumbo," Ross said to Tank, finally hauling himself up and bringing Pancake over for a hello and howdy. "He was a wolfhound mix, and smart as a whip."

"They're fine, Mr. Jed, I swear to God." He knelt down to the yellow pup, looking the boy over. "And you? Are you glad to see your man, huh? If I'd known about you, we'd've fetched you sooner. He needed him a dog."

Pancake had the best doggie grin, and was just a lover. He was gonna fit in fine, but Tank could see why a couple of working, herding dogs might push him around. He was just a big goober.

"Oh, now, my girls are going to love you. Biscuits and bones and enough cowbirds to run yourself ragged, along with your very own person. Sound good?" Look at that tail go. Man, look at all those dogs' ears perk. Somebody knew the word bones.

"We need to go to the Safeway and get biscuits and shit for mom, Jed. Anything you need?"

Ross was laughing at him, and at Pancake's wiggling butt. He could see it in those Colorado sky eyes.

He winked at Ross, laughing away. "The rate his man's sucking back the brewskies, he'll need some of them."

Jed nodded. "No doubt. You mind if we pile the dogs in the back of the truck and I go with? I need to pick up a bunch of stuff, too, and then I can just head with you to mom's."

"Bring 'em on. They'll settle for the drive, yeah? I'd hate for one to jump."

"They're all go babies. Let me just close everything up."

He got to see Jed and Ross working together, then, and it was a thing of beauty. Hell, they had him chasing down a couple of goats, and that Garg was a big old herder for sure, helping him pen them in. His heart was just pounding when he finished, blood rushing in between his ears. His eyes had lost all their focus and he figured he was just gonna wheeze his last. Goddamn. Just. Goddamn.

"You okay, buddy?" He could hear Ross through the ringing in his ears, and those hands grabbed his upper arms so Ross could look him in the eye. "Jed, get some water, will you? Come on and sit a minute, love. It'll pass quick."

"I'm okay. Just a little winded, I guess." He sat down, just trying to catch his breath. Goddamn.

"Yeah. We're up high. Here, man." Jed handed him a bottle of water, just appearing out of nowhere. Oh, that felt good going down. Cold.

"Thanks." He got to right pretty quick, cheeks heating.
"Damn, y'all. I'm sorry."

Garg nudged his hand, Spot licked his ankle, and Ross and Jed just clapped him on his shoulders. "No problem, love. I'm sorry it never occurred to me. We're at like, seven thousand feet here. You're not used to it."

"Y'all ready to head to the store?" He stood, taking it easy and managing just fine.

"You bet." The dogs heard that and ran right for the truck, getting them all laughing and shaking their heads. Ross slung an arm around him, hard body feeling good against his side.

"You think Lloyd'll like my brownies? He looked doubtful there in the kitchen."

"I think he's gonna love them, buddy," Ross said.

Jed almost drowned Ross out. "Brownies? Hoo yeah."

"Yep. Won a contest in Santa Barbara two years ago. I thought the kids might want something that tasted good." Good lord, listen to him talk.

"Oh, excellent." Yeah, Jed sounded happy with life. It was amazing what some chocolate could do.

"Yeah. We'll grab some ice cream, do it up right."

"That sounds great."

"Yep," Ross agreed. "But make sure you don't put the ice cream in back with Garg."

Tank hooted. "Him and Rosey, huh? That old bitch is a hound for ice cream."

"God, yes." Ross turned that grin on Jed. "That dog can *fly* for ice cream. Like leaping into orbit. And she'll sit on your lap if you're sitting down, just oozing on you."

"Yep. Poor Ross got himself a quick lesson in puppy love right there." He slipped into the back, as well as he could, stretching his legs out.

"You want the front, buddy?" Always thinking, his Colorado. "I don't mind."

"Nah. You're better at driving on this and my bad knee'll appreciate the rest."

"Oh, man. Nothing worse than a knee gone bad. Eli's are both creaky as Hell thanks to all of the landings, you know?" He couldn't help but smile at Jed's concern. It must be a family thing, the way they had all that sympathy and shit.

"Oh, mine's covered by the government, so I don't have to worry about it." Seventy percent, even. Hell, he'd started his

business with the lump sum that they had to pay him once the VA'd made the ruling.

"Yeah, well, Lord knows we all know how good the government is at things."

"Jed was air corps," Ross said, chuckling a little. "That's how he got his wings."

"Yeah? I wasn't nothing special. Just a big old grunt in the sand." He'd done his duty, though.

"Well, shit, Tank. Ross wasn't anything special either. I was smart enough to stay *in* the airplane."

Laughing some more, Ross took a short swing at Jed before starting up the truck. The minute they started moving one of the dogs started howling, just the happiest sound a man could ever want to hear.

Lord, lord. He did love him some dogs.

That one Thatcher boy wasn't half bad, neither.

Chapter Eleven

The wedding had gone off without a hitch. Well, with a hitching, Ross guessed, but still. Brodie had looked just fine in his black jeans and good jacket and boots, and the bride was spiffy as hell in a pretty white dress and Keds. Ross had been so proud he could have busted.

Now, though, they were at the reception, listening to some rocking country music, sipping wine that came from screw-cap bottles and waiting for the cake to be cut. Lloyd had done the food up right, and Tank had helped out in the kitchen, fading into the woodwork.

Ross figured it was time to go find the man and indulge in a little waiting for the toast smoothies.

Tank was up to his elbows in soap bubbles and dirty dishes, good shirt hanging on a cabinet door as he washed, scrubbing the plates.

"Hey, you. I bet Lloyd didn't tell you that you had to do this." He let his fingers trace the lines of Tank's back.

"Mmm. Hey, honey. How's it going out there?" Tank stretched, muscles rolling under his touch.

"Good. Looks like everyone is having a good time." Turning, he put both hands on those tight muscles and rubbed. "Want some help?"

"Mmm. You can keep me company, if you want, but you don't have to. I'm just trying to be helpful, you know?"

"I know." Hell, he could totally understand it. Tank didn't know a soul but him, and he had to feel like an outsider. But

Ross didn't think Tank felt bad or anything. Just a little out of place.

"They looked real happy. I think Mr. Brody made himself a good match, that gal's solid as hell."

"Yeah. She'll cowgirl up well up here." Jill was from Hotchkiss, so she knew all about snow, and she'd grown up on a small ranch. Brody had a fine partner. He deserved it.

"How's Pancake? Is he still running around like a chicken with his head cut off?" Tank nodded at Lloyd, who brought in a big assed tray that looked like Sasquatch had gnawed on it.

"He's asleep in the trailer. I think he wore himself out." Silly mutt. God, it was good to see him. "Hey, Lloyd. Are they gonna cut the cake?"

"Not yet," Lloyd said with a tired smile. "That's great, Tank. Why don't you get a beer and go wait for the toasts. They should start soon."

"You sure, Mr. Lloyd? I don't mind helping you out at all..."

"Oh, I'm going to sit and stare a minute. So go on."

Clapping Tank on the back, Lloyd sank down on a stool. "Go on, you two. Enjoy."

"Let me grab my shirt, then, and dry my hands, and we'll go get a drink." Tank dried his hands on a teatowel, nodding to Lloyd. "You catch your breath, mister. You've worked damn hard."

"It's been a pleasure, you know? But I'm glad it's about over."

"Rest a bit," Ross said, holding out Tank's shirt. "Come on, buddy. Let's find a quiet corner."

Tank shrugged the shirt on, nodded and gave him a grin. "It's one hell of a party, honey."

"We clean up good, huh?" They left poor Lloyd wilting, and Ross caught his mom's eye when they went back out in the big living room, nodding toward where they'd just been. She nodded right back and hustled off, looking trim and fine in her Levi's and fancy sparkly jacket.

"Y'all do." Tank kept a little space between them, so careful around his people, not to upset.

He let his fingers brush Tank's. "Wanna go sit?"

"I do." Tank blushed a little, that grin pleased as punch.

"Cool." They passed Ken's wife, Mandy, who was looking pained and holding her back. "You okay, honey?"

"Huh? Oh! Yeah, I'm fine." God, Mandy still had the prettiest smile. Ken was a lucky guy. "I just need to sit." She winked, and Ross laughed as Tank got Mandy a chair. Ever the gentleman. Then they were alone, heading out on the porch.

"Oh, it's nice out here. Chilly, but real nice." Tank eased down on the bench, leaving him room.

"Yeah." Plopping down close, he put an arm around Tank's waist. "I'll keep you warm. How you holding up?"

"I'm doing good, honey. I really like your people; I think Thanksgiving's going to be grand. You having a good time?"

"I am. It's been great, seeing some of these folks. But I'm starting to get a little wild eyed." He was a little tired of the, 'Where you been?' questions.

"Maybe we could go touristing tomorrow, then? Just drive and look, just the two of us." Yeah, he wasn't the only one getting a little wild eyed.

"I'd love that. There's a lot you haven't seen." Yeah, they could go hit Ouray, maybe. Show Tank how to hot springs in the snow...

"Cool. We'll have ourselves a bit of a wander, then. Vacation a little." Tank leaned toward him, swaying a little with the music.

"Uh-huh." Ross nuzzled up a little, just loving on Tank, letting the man know he was there. Right there.

"Mmm. You're warm, honey. Feels just right." Tank sounded right with the world.

"It does." Humming a little, he just held on. "Thanks for helping get Pancake back, love."

"Hey, he's your pup. A man needs a dog." Hell, some men needed a pack.

"Well, I appreciate it." Tank just rocked his fucking socks.
"So, how do you feel about hot springs? I promise not to take you to the clothing optional one."

"Oh, man. I could so spend a few thousand hours soaking my bones in hot water."

"Than that's what we'll do tomorrow." The sound of a fork ringing on a glass found them all the way out on the porch. "Looks like it's toast time."

"Well, let's go do some ringing, Mr. Thatcher." Tank looked around and stole a quick, hard kiss.

"Mmmm." No way was he gonna let that go so fast. Ross took another kiss, then another before breaking for air, laughing ruefully. "Sorry, love. You get to me, for sure."

"Yeah. Yeah. Come on. Toast. Drink. Trailer." Tank winked at him. "I saved us back a couple plates of the good stuff."

"Oh. You're a good man, Tank." Hooking his arm through Tank's, Ross hauled them up, hearing Tank's knee pop. They needed to sit a bit.

"I'm just yours, Colorado. Come on, we'll miss it."

They got in just in time for Ross to make his toast. He grinned and grabbed a glass of bubbly, raising it to Brodie and Jill. He'd never been much for speeches, even at Ken's wedding, so he just nodded at the happy couple.

"Brodie deserves to be happy, and I think he got a good one. Congratulations, you two."

Tank nodded and grinned, raising his longneck. "Good luck, y'all."

Just about the time they were all taking a big old gulp, a sharp cry came from the back corner of the room, complete woman in distress. And damned if every single man in the room didn't head that way, including him.

Ken got there first, and Mandy gave him a panicked and apologetic look. "I'm sorry, hon. But I'm hurting something fierce. It feels like..."

"It's too early!" Ken helped her sit down, suddenly just as panicked. "Mom?"

"Well, shit." His mom pushed through, elbowing people left and right. "Goddamn it, let me in."

His mom could do anything. Everything would be fine.

Tank looked over, frowned something fierce. "She's swolled like she's foundering. If she was a heifer, I'd pay the vet to make a late-night call. No offense, ma'am."

Mandy barked out a sharp laugh. "None taken. I think I would, too. Mom, can you come with me and Ken? I think we'd best go to Grand Junction. The rest of you need to stay here to cut the cake and toss the bouquet and all."

"What can I do? You want your man, ma'am?" That was his Tank, always trying to be useful.

"Yes, please." Mom smiled at Tank. "Thank you. Ross, go get Lloyd's truck warmed up. Jed, get Mandy's coat. Ken, stop whimpering. Move it!"

Just like a drill sergeant. They all scattered, doing what she ordered, and by the time Ross saw Tank again, the truck had zoomed off and everyone was sort of standing around, staring.

"Okay, y'all. Gals have babies all the time and them doctors are real good at their shit. Grab your glasses folks, and let's get with toasting."

A low murmur ran through the room, but Brodie nodded and grinned. "You got it, Tank. The kids are all in bed, Mandy has had so many she's a pro, and we have more embarrassing shit to talk on."

Jed came back in from outside, pulling off his coat. "Oh! I have something."

Everyone laughed, and Ross went to stand next to Tank, his fingers tapping on his thigh. "Hey."

"Hey." Tank looked down at him, eyes looking just about serious. "You want me to fetch you a beer?"

"No. I mean, not unless I can come with you." Mandy was strong. She'd had plenty of kids. But he knew the look that had been on his mom's face. That was trouble.

"Course you can, buddy. She'll be fine. Worst thing, they'll plop her ass in bed and she'll be unhappy, yeah?"

"Yeah. She'll be real unhappy. Mandy has to be doing..." he trailed off, steering Tank toward the kitchen, knowing there would be beer and quiet. Knowing Brodie would understand.

"Yeah. I hear you." Tank's hand landed on his back, just rubbing nice and easy. "What can I do for you, Colorado?"

"Oh, buddy, there's nothing to do until we hear, huh?" Oh, that beer tasted good going down, felt almost as good as Tank's hand on him.

"Oh. Hey. Are we interrupting?" Jed and Eli came in, looking a little shamefaced, but not wanting to leave.

"Course not. Y'all want a beer?" Tank turned to the fridge before they even answered.

"Yeah. Please." Jed looked ready to bolt. Ross put an arm around him, clapping him on the back.

"She'll be fine."

"Sure she will. No worries. Let's find us a place to have a sit, guys. I'll grab the chips and hot sauce."

Tank pushed beers into Jed's hands, a bag of chips into Eli's, sour cream into his.

Just like mom, getting them to do something. They all sat and mixed up some nachos, staring around the table at each other. The wedding reception went on out in the living room, but their hearts just weren't in it anymore.

Tank looked over at Eli, gave the man a crooked grin.

"Man, if we had cards, we could play poker. Y'all do know how to play way up here, don't you?"

"Hell, yes. We play a lot of that. And pinochle. Let me look..." Wandering off toward the bedrooms, Eli muttered, making them all smile.

"He never turns down poker, huh?" Ross teased.

"He's a good feller. I like him. Even if he is from a weird part of the world." Tank grinned and winked at Jed, just wicked as anything.

Jed hooted. "You have no idea. I had to go up there to get his ass, you know."

"Oh, God, don't let him go on about that. He'll never stop." If Ross hadn't already been in love, he sure would be now. Tank was just a great guy.

"Good on you, Mister Jed! Now me? I just had to pray that the good Lord blew a certain man's water pump at the right little town."

"It worked." Ross grinned, nudging Tank's knee with his leg. Lord, how many times had they stood vigil on some family member, playing cards and drinking beer or coffee and just waiting? It was good to see how Tank fit in.

"God loves Texans, hon ... buddy. That's why he gave us Heaven to live in." Tank dipped a chip, humming over Lloyd's canned salsa. "I'm gonna start running this recipe in my rotation, pay Lloyd a percentage. He liked the idea."

"Oh, that would tickle him to *death*." If Jed and Eli weren't so solid, Ross would growl at the way Jed was turning those big-brother baby blues on his man.

"He seemed pleased." Tank grinned wider, finishing his beer and leaning back. "Lord have mercy, I think I'd best slow down on the beer or eat more. I'm getting warm."

"I could make some sandwiches out of the last of the trays..." Ross hopped up, smacking right into Jed, who he figured had gotten the same idea.

Jed growled a little. "Watch out, little bro."

Ross flipped him off. "Fuck you."

Tank tilted his head. "If y'all are gonna tie it up, do it outside. You'll piss off the bride and groom and draw a crowd."

He and Jed both turned fast, glaring at Tank, but then Ross just cracked up, whapping Jed's arm. "He's got a point." "Yeah, yeah. Get the bread."

"There's a couple of good plates in the back of the fridge. Little sausages and lunch meats and cheese and all."

They had a regular feast, despite all they'd eaten earlier, and before they knew it, Brodie was in there nibbling, too. His dark eyes were serious as a heart attack. "You think Mandy will be okay?"

Ross nodded. "I do. She just got over excited. Aren't you supposed to be dancing?"

Brodie grinned, his face lighting up. "The hens are all clucking. I ducked out."

Tank hooted. "Lord, lord, you'd best get used to it, man. Them things travel in packs."

"So they tell me." Snagging a pickle, Brodie pulled a chair around. "Deal me in."

"Well, ante him up, fellas. God knows when he'll have money again." Tank grinned, the cards snapping and flying in those big fingers.

"No shit," Eli said, handing Brodie a beer.

They'd played long enough that they were all in a lot of pennies to Tank before Jill came in, her wedding dress exchanged for a pair of old jeans and a flannel shirt. She was a pretty thing with blonde curls and big green eyes, and Ross liked her a lot.

"Hey, ma'am. You want to play a hand? We'll deal you right in." Tank nodded to one of the empty chairs.

"You bet. I've done all the throwing, cutting, and toasting I can stand. Brodie, honey, I'll take this hand while you go say goodbye to Carl and Gina. They're the last ones out there."

"Sure." Brodie got up and took a kiss from his girl before leaving her to sit in. Man. They'd been had. Jill was a shark.

Tank was loving it, though, growling and laughing and giving her a hard-time. Then Eli and Jed started in and they were all laughing, just rolling when Brodie came back in.

"Okay. Well, I guess we ought to clean up Nancy and Lloyd's house, huh?" Grinning all around, Brodie scooted everyone over so he could squeeze in next to Jill.

"Sure, but I'm winning, honey. We can wait an hour or so."

"Shit, like I'd make y'all clean. We'll let the pretty lady win a couple more hands and then we'll send y'all on to do what newlyweds do." Tank winked over to Jill. "Unless, of course, washing dishes is more fun, darlin'."

Jill blushed like crazy. "No, I'd say it's more fun to do other stuff. You'll call if you hear after we leave?"

Jed nodded. "We will. Of course we will. Don't worry about a thing."

"Well, don't worry about a thing other than winning this hand." Tank handed her five cards.

"Oh, I got that in the bag." She did, too. Jill cleaned them out in the next half hour, until Brodie threatened to leave on their honeymoon without her.

"You got a fine woman, Brod," Ross said, cleaning up a bowl of pickles and olives. "Go have fun."

Tank and Eli headed for the dishes, Jed grabbed a broom and somebody turned King George on, nice and low.

They were all quiet and just working when the phone rang, Jed and Ross leaping for it at the same time. Jed got it first. "Hello? Hey. Uh-huh. Okay. Well, that's good, right? Uh-huh. 'Kay. See you in the morning. Bye."

"Well?" Poking Jed's arm, Ross waited.

"She's going to have to have bed rest. She was trying to go into labor. They have all sorts of tests to run, but she's resting quiet now, all good. And Mom and Lloyd are gonna stay in the Junction with Ken."

"Poor gal. The kids are gonna be wigged out in the morning, with Momma, Daddy, and Granny gone." Tank shook his head. "I'll get up and make pancakes for 'em. That'll help."

"Oh, that's a good idea." He threw an arm around Tank's waist and went up on tiptoe to give the man a kiss.

Tank blinked at him, those big eyes wide as saucers, then Tank's hands wrapped around his hips and he got him a hard

kiss in return, his lover's cheeks burning hot enough from him to feel.

When they broke for air, Jed and Eli were just grinning at them. "Well," Jed said. "I think we ought to turn in. We're all cleaned up, we've got the dogs, and I'll call Stu and see if he'll go feed for me in the morning. That way we can stay here with the kids."

Ross nodded. That worked for him. "Cool. We'll go let the dogs out to run and pee, and we'll see you in the morning."

Tank nodded, cheeks red hot, but those eyes were blazing. "Y'all have a good night."

"You too."

Ross grabbed Tank's hand and pulled him along, saying his goodnights over his shoulder. The cold air hit them in a wave when they headed outside, but it didn't bank the fire any.

"You okay?" he asked, squeezing Tank's hand.

"Yeah. Yeah, I..." Tank turned to him, grabbed him and kissed him hard enough he saw stars, just kissed him stupid.

Ross groaned, kissing Tank back with everything he had, knowing they really needed to get to the trailer but not really caring. He'd bet Jed and Eli were too busy to be peeking. Tank grabbed his ass, tugged him right up into that broad wall of muscles, and held on tight. Lord, he could feel how much Tank needed him, that heavy prick pushing against him. It was a good thing, too, because Ross needed so bad he thought he might bust. All of the nerves and stress and the wedding and Mandy, all of it just channeled right into heat, making him and Tank just catch fire. God, that man tasted good.

"Honey." Tank stared into his eyes, just serious as a heart attack. "You don't get into the goddamn trailer and I swear to God, I'll embarrass us both right here."

"Right. Trailer. Come on, buddy." He had a serious moment of deja vu when he pulled Tank into the trailer, but it was the good kind, the kind that told him they'd done a lot of lovin'.

Tank didn't wait a second, just muscled him back toward the bed that they hadn't bothered to fold away and pushed him down. Those lips crashed down on his, one hand cupping his butt and keeping them tight together. A low moan escaped him, feeding right into Tank's mouth, and Ross wrapped around the man, just gasping and humping. God. The heat that big body could throw out just amazed him.

Those thick fingers managed to get his fly open—hell, to get both their flies open—so that they were rubbing, skin-to-skin. The trailer was rocking and groaning, just singing as they worked it.

"Tank. Love." They broke for air, and to let him babble a little as his lips slid down Tank's throat. Sweat and Old Spice and beer. That was Tank, and it made his cock jerk against Tank's thick prick.

"Uh-huh. Fucking need you, honey. I got you." Tank rolled a little, getting off that sore knee, and the motion rocked them together, their skin slapping.

"Want me to ride you, love?" That would save that poor knee, and it was one of Ross' favorite ways to get himself some of that amazing cock. He could see Tank's face, could touch everything at will.

The low groan, the way Tank shuddered, those thick fingers sinking into his muscles—they all meant hell, yes. Now.

Smiling, panting, Ross pushed and pulled, getting Tank on his back so he could straddle those thick thighs. "Gonna get me ready?"

Tank nodded, cheeks flushed a deep, dark red as Tank drew him up and scooted down, all at once. Ross' hands landed on the wall as he tried to figure what the hell Tank was up to, then that hot tongue slid over his balls, behind them.

"Oh, Jesus Christ. Tank. Yeah." Shaking, shuddering, he let Tank open him up, that tongue pushing him to heights he wasn't sure he could handle. But he'd just have to, wouldn't he?

Eager as anything, Tank's mouth was about to drive him out of his fucking mind, then Tank pulled him down, got that wide cock head pressed against his hole. Reaching back, he braced on Tank's thighs, pushing down to get more, the burn when Tank slid into him all he could ask for and more. Groaning, Ross let his head fall back, let his hips roll, just fucking loving it.

"So fucking fine." Tank sounded awed, sounded like he was the finest thing ever.

"Uh-huh. Good, love. Good." Leaning forward, he braced on Tank's chest, not wanting to put anymore pressure on that bad leg. Then Ross started moving, up and down, working Tank in and out.

Tank filled him right up, hands landing on his hips with a thud, helping him rock and move, helping him take that whole prick.

The burn made him grunt, made his cock jerk and leak. "God, love. More. Please. Harder." He was begging, but he just didn't care.

"Yeah. Yeah, I will." One of Tank's feet landed on the foot and then all that strength was working for him, driving into him and making every nerve sing as their skin slapped together.

"Uhn." His throat worked, his cock bobbed, and Ross pushed harder and harder, his whole body ready to explode. "Soon, man. Soon."

"Uh-huh." One of Tank's hands wrapped around his prick, started pulling it, working it in time.

"Oh. Oh, God, Tank." Pressing back, he took Tank all the way in again, his back arching as he shot, his skin just pulling up with goose bumps. God, almighty. He could feel it, Tank throbbing and jerking inside him, filling him right on up.

Ross slumped, his hands on Tank's chest, their breath mingling as he took a kiss. Just a little one. Kinda sloppy.

"Mmm. I got you." Tank's hand slid right on down his back, loving on him. "I got you."

"Yeah." That was a fine thing, no matter what. Solid and heavy and hot, Tank was his anchor. The very center.

"You get some rest, honey. We'll get things done tomorrow."

"We will. I bet we even have time to do some of that touring." Mandy would be fine. She'd have to be.

Women had babies all the time, just like everybody said.

Chapter Twelve

Tank wandered through Mrs. Thatcher's kitchen, whistling and hunting where on earth they kept the sage and the corn meal. Most of the Thatchers had been taking turns driving that poor little gal up at the hospital bat shit crazy. He was being useful.

Him and hospitals didn't set well together and hell, the day he couldn't smoke a turkey and make food? They'd have to just put his Texas ass in the ground.

Of course, if he didn't find the ... Oh, there. Corn meal. Thank God. He'd be hard pressed to make dressing without it.

He found a little AM/FM radio, found him some King George and got to work, mixing and chopping and just amusing the living fuck out of himself.

He had the stuff in the oven and some other vegetables simmering for some more casseroles and pumpkin going through the food mill before Ross showed up, a very tired Nancy and Lloyd trailing after him.

Ross' momma's eyes lit up when she saw him. "Oh, Tank, honey, it smells amazing in here."

"Evenin', ma'am. There's a tamale pie all done up for supper. Y'all just need to heat you up some. Them kiddos liked it." He pulled out three beers and handed them over. "How's Ken's gal?"

"She's going to be flat on her back a bit," Nancy said, shrugging, rolling her shoulders. "They want her to stay in Grand Junction."

Ross nodded. "Yeah, but she's stable."

"Poor thing. That's got to be rough." He went back to pottering, sending the pumpkin through a second time.

"Yeah. Especially so close to the holidays. Mandy loves all the trimming and singing and cooking." He got another sweet smile, Nancy coming to stand on tiptoe and kiss his cheek. "Thanks, honey. Why don't you let Lloyd take over and go have some fun? Lloyd thinks cooking is therapy."

"You got yourself a real smart man, ma'am. Real smart."
He wandered over to Lloyd and they started working out what all he'd done and what all was left and what all needed doing tomorrow.

It was another half an hour before he found himself outside, blinking at the bright sunlight, the cold like to curl his nose hairs. Ross was holding his hand.

"Did you get some food, honey?" He squeezed Ross' fingers, trying to decide whether he could stand behind Ross and rub the man's back without looking like a giant perv.

"Huh? I had an egg salad sandwich?" Ross looked wore out, but still jittery.

"Did you want some tamale pie or you want a massage and something from the trailer?"

"Hmmm? Oh. How about something in the trailer. Then you let me take a twenty minute nap and we can head out and maybe go someplace."

"Surely." He hustled Ross toward the trailer and up the little stairs, then he stripped the man's shirt off and got Ross pointed toward the bed. "I'll hunt you a snack."

"You're too good to me, buddy." He heard Ross' jeans and boots hit the floor beside the bed, and the man was all stretched out before he could even blink.

He fixed Ross a quick quesadilla with some bits of that and a little of the white cheese they had left, sitting that and a big glass of apple cider on the bedside table before he straddled Ross' butt and started rubbing. Ross could sleep through it or eat. Either way worked.

"Mmmm. Oh, God. You have five years to stop that." Yeah, he could feel those tight muscles starting to melt. Woo.

Tank chuckled and pushed a little harder, letting Ross' tense spots know that he wasn't having any of that.

"Uhn." Hoo boy. Someone liked that. Someone who was moaning a little, hands opening and closing on the sheets.

Now that was pretty. He grinned a little, getting a little happy with the look of his hands on Ross' skin. A little happy? Hell, he was in heaven itself.

"Goddamn, Tank. You're so hired for the rest of my life." Those muscles shifted under his hands, Ross' skin going all hot and pliant.

"Works for me, honey." Poor man, getting all het up over stuff. That little gal'd be okay, the baby too.

"They're saying she might have to stay in there until her due date, which is near Christmas..." Ross broke off with a moan as he hit a sore spot, working it and working it. The way Ross sighed and softened, Tank figured that had to be the worst of the tightness.

"Well, that's gonna hurt, money-wise, but that's good for that baby, right? I mean, four weeks ain't that early."

"Yeah. I mean, they say they might have to induce earlier or whatever ... mainly it's a worry about Ken's ranch. You're gonna make me all melty, and then how are we gonna tourist?"

"Colorado ain't going nowhere, honey." Lord, lord. Four weeks in the horse-pistol would put a serious bite on an honest man.

"This is true. Mmm. I could eat, I think." Oh, that was a good sign. Maybe Ross would take a wee nap after the sandwich.

"Good on you." He leaned back, got Ross set up and eating. He did a little wandering, coming back to touch, over and over.

Ross finally grabbed his hand and pulled him down, free hand holding his while the other held the quesadilla. "Want a chip?"

"I..." He stopped, grinning as his stomach reminded him he'd been cooking up a storm, but he hadn't eaten. "Yeah."

"Then share with me. You made enough for both of us."
Ross fed him a chip, then a piece of sandwich, just leaning on him.

"Mmm." They kinda basked, nibbling and munching and touching. He could handle this shit.

They sort of propped each other up, Ross going heavy and almost boneless once all the food was gone. "The kids have really loved having you around with all this. The pancakes have been a huge hit."

He shifted, got Ross settled right against him. "They're good kids, all of 'em."

"They are. Ken and Mandy do good." A soft chuckle shook them through. "Can you imagine what kind of spawn Binky would produce?"

"Shit, honey. Can you imagine what kind of hard-ass momma'd have his babies?"

That had Ross cackling like a crow, just hooting. It was nice, though, because that kind of teasing meant Ross liked his brother as much as Tank liked the Thatcher folks. It was a good fit all 'round.

He got his arms wrapped around Ross, one foot on the floor, the other leg cradling Ross. Goddamn, this didn't suck.

Ross just settled in like he was meant to be there, a soft sigh brushing his arm. "This is good, huh? The rest can wait."

"You know it, honey. Just sit a minute. I got you." They could cook and worry and shit later.

* * * *

Ross glanced over at Tank, smiling at the look on the man's face. It had taken an extra day, but they were finally out seeing the sights. They'd gone on down to Grand Junction, hitting the dinosaur stuff in Fruita before heading out to the Colorado National Monument. The air was cool and crisp but not frigid, and the day was so clear you could see all the way to the San Juans.

Sheer red walls fell away into canyons, rock formations and arches making little ripples far below their scenic view point. Ross loved the monument, loved the echoing emptiness of the land, loved the though of how it would have been the perfect robber's roost back in the old days.

Grinning, he poked Tank in the ribs. "What do you think, buddy?"

Tank blinked, mouth opening and closing over and over. "Makes a man believe in God, Ross, I swear. I ain't seen anything so fine outside of Texas."

Ross hooted. "Well, Texas just has *more* to look at than any other state. It's something else, huh? I like the coke ovens the best, but I love the water marks on this draw."

"Why do they call them coke ovens?" Tank leaned and looked where he was pointing.

"I think because they look like the ovens you use to carbonize coal. When I was a kid my dad told me it was because they looked like Coke bottles in an oven, but I stopped believing that when I was about twelve."

"Your daddy sounds like a hoot. I'd've liked to meet him, shake his hand."

"You would have liked him, I bet. He was a cowboy, through and through, full of piss and vinegar. Kind of deep like Ken, though. You know?" He'd looked up to his dad, and looked up to his brother Jed, all his life. He finally felt like maybe he was catching up to them.

"I can see that. You're a lot like your momma, though. She's something." Tank nodded, smiling out over the monument with a bittersweet little smile. "I wish you could've met my momma. She was good folks, real down home."

"I bet. She raised you up right." He put a hand on the small of Tank's back, rubbing a little. "Tell me about her?"

"Oh, she was a good-sized woman, didn't do much for school, but she loved to read." Tank grinned. "She waited

tables all the time I was growing up. She got the cancer when Binky was in high school. Lived 'til a week after he graduated, said she'd got her job done."

"Oh. Well, at least she got to see y'all through the hard years, huh?" That had to suck. Cancer sure was a theif. "My dad was a rodeo accident. Mom never did let us kids compete anymore after that."

"I guess I can see that. That's gotta be hard on a woman. I bet y'all would've took some buckles, though, the way y'all are."

"Oh, I bet Ken would have kicked ass. He's still a roper, when he has time. Ready to hit the visitor's center and get some water and stuff?" They'd brought a bunch of water and snacks, but Tank had been sucking it down, so he knew they needed to get some more. Altitude could make you loopy.

"Sure enough." Tank's fingers squeezed his, just for a halfsecond. "Thanks for showing me this, honey. It's something."

"Don't worry. There's more." There was no one else around, so Ross took a hard hug. "Thanks for coming with me."

"Where else would I be?" Tank winked, gave him a shiteating grin.

"Oh, I know how you feel about Texas." Not that he couldn't see why. Tank had a great place, fishing, room for dogs and a good job.

"It's home, that's for sure, but I don't regret coming to see your people."

"Good." He gave another hard squeeze before heading back to the truck. "Come on, love, you're gonna love this next section of road."

"Hooboy! We gonna get to play on the switchbacks?" Lord, that man was a pure-D redneck.

"We do, indeed." That truck would power around some curves, too. "Wish you had your Harley?"

"Oh, fuck yeah. Wouldn't we have fun, you and me?" Tank damn near bounced, favoring that bum knee just a little.

They'd sit a bit, he figured, take the last few miles to the visitor center slow, and then have a snack and an ibuprofen. "It would. You've never taken me for a ride, buddy."

"I haven't? Lord. That's one of them things I always want to do, but never seem to get around to, you know? We ought to ride together."

"We ought." He reached over, squeezing Tank's thigh.
They'd do all sorts of things together in time. They so would.
He had confidence in Tank that he'd never had before.

They headed toward the truck, Tank whistling a little as they went.

Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer.

Good lord.

"So what do you do for Christmas?" He'd never asked. Tank might have some freaky deaky family traditions that Ross ought to know about.

"I haven't done much in the last few years, I guess. Me and Binky used to go over to Sissy's, but she's got religion and spends her time Bible thumping and making doilies. I got a little tree and me and Binky cook up a ham or something

and then there's a bunch of us good ole boys that hang out and watch football."

"Yeah? Did I mention that we play a mean game of touch football?" He thought he had, but it bore repeating. "We'll even give you a handicap for the knee." The little road twisted and turned, and Tank's head turned like it was on a swivel, catching everything.

"You might've, once or twice. In fact, that man of Jed's tried to tempt me onto their team, but I had to turn them down."

"Oh, now. That wouldn't be fair, you and Eli on the same team. No, sir." They rounded a curve and the world fell away, the view of the whole river valley right there.

"I'm on your team, hon ... Oh, look at that."

He pulled off at the next little overlook and killed the engine so they could just sit and look. They got to see a big old bird, probably a buzzard, but hey it had big wings and was just floating on the wind.

"Look at how fine that is, honey. Can you imagine, being a pioneer in a wagon or on a horse and coming onto this back in the olden days?"

"I probably would have just sat and cried." The desert around Grand Junction would have lulled any pioneer into thinking things were going easier, after the mountains.

Tank hooted, clapping his shoulder. "You got that shit right. Hell, that's assuming your horse didn't just balk and tell you to carry your own fool self."

"God, yes. Can you imagine the oxen? They'd be sitting in the wagons, shaking their heads." They both got tickled at that, thinking of big old cows just going, "No."

"Moo." Tank snorted, eyes just dancing. "Lord have mercy, I'm glad we got V8s and all. No cows needed."

"Nope. Horses or donkeys, either. Well, we've got plenty of ass..."

"Oh ho!" Tank's laugh just rang out, one of those big hands sliding right up his leg.

Grinning, he put his hand over Tank's, patting and stroking. The rough skin made him smile. Working hands, his mom would say. An honest man's hands. They started up again, coasting right into the visitor's center a few minutes later so they could pee and refill the water.

Tank wandered, chatting the lady in the gift shop up, getting a bunch of free information for it.

Hell, they learned all they ever wanted to know about bats, lizards, and some kind of goat that Ross hadn't even known existed. That man had never met a stranger.

By the time they headed out, Tank had a Styrofoam cup of coffee and a magnet with a picture of the monument on it.

The rest of the drive down was the best, watching Tank bounce and hoot as they cornered on two wheels. Yeah. That look made everything worth it, sore shoulders and hot brakes and all.

"Oh, hell. That was fun as all get out!" Tank looked like a kid, just laughing like a big ole loon.

"It was, huh? Want a burger? There's this place in Fruita that has great onion rings." And the greasiest burgers and amazing milkshakes. Tank would love it.

"You know my position on onion rings, man."

"I do. And they might even use hot sauce." That would get Tank chatting with the cook, offering to send samples.

"Yeah. I got a little promo kit in the back seat."

"There you go." He patted Tank's leg. God, it was good to just forget shit for a bit. Tank was so easy.

"You know, I was thinking on doing some Internet sales. You think it'd be worth hiring someone to make me one of them web pages?"

"I think it might be at that. You'd get a good bit of interest, I bet." The product was infinitely portable, and the taste was solid as a rock.

"Yeah? I'll think on it." Tank grinned, pushed his gimme cap up. "Man, that'd be cool, though. Make us a little money."

"You bet. I bet we can find someone who will do a website for your cooking." Ross pulled up outside of Munchies, the smell of pizza and hamburgers hanging in the air.

"Oh, man. I could eat a moose." Tank slid out of the car and looked over at him. "Do they eat moose?"

"Don't think so. They just restocked moose on the Mesa. It's a huge fine to kill them." Hooting, he popped Tank's butt, leading the way into the tiny diner, all formica and red checked cloth.

"I'll be more than happy with cow meat on a bun. Or chicken. No turkey."

"No, no turkey." No dressing. Just burger and onions and stuff. Hell, they ordered a little bit of everything, settling in with chili dogs and burgers and rings and some chili cheese fries.

Of course, Tank had something to say about the chili and Ross'd be damned if the man didn't end up in the kitchen with him after they ate, talking with the cook and the owner, spicing things up and debating chiles.

The cook was a little gray haired lady with a hair net, and she settled on ordering a case of Tank's hot sauce and a case of his five alarm scorcher chili packets. All in all, it was a good sale, and Ross was just tickled to watch Tank in his element.

Tank got a hug for his troubles and the lady gave them both pie and he thought maybe he got a pat on the ass. "See, Colorado? Everybody's wanting a piece of that." Tank's voice was soft, low, just a whisper.

His cheeks heated almost painfully. "Shut up. She was just ... friendly."

"Uh-huh. Friendly." Tank chuckled and grinned so wide he thought the man's face might crack open. "Lord, lord."

"Don't make me beat you." They scarfed the pie, and Ross pondered what to do next. They still had a good bit of daylight.

"So, what's next? Who else you gonna charm with your jumpmastery buttcheeks?" Oh, Tank was cruising.

"Don't forget my self defense upper thighs." Whapping Tank on the leg, he stretched and pondered. "We could go downtown, or we could run back up mom's way and go to Trickle Park, maybe get a line wet...

"Oooh." Tank's eyes lit up like a little boy Christmas morning. "I bought long underwear and good socks at the Wal-Mart. I could fish."

"We'll stop here in Fruita and get a temporary license then. I might have happened to put poles in the truck." Look at that man bounce. It had been far too long since they'd fished.

"Oh, you get Brownie points." Tank beamed at him. "You grab the thermos, too? I bet they'd fill us up with coffee..."

"I did. I figured we'd need it." If the sweet lady cook didn't want to fill them up they'd hit the Go Fer.

"I'll run and get it." Right, run. He almost hurt for Tank as he watched the big guy amble out the door.

The weather was just killing him, and hell, it had been mild for November on the Mesa. He hated to ask what he was gonna have to ask next, because he needed to go to Gunnison for Ken for awhile, and that was a need a block heater to start your car situation. Still, he thought Tank'd come with, because God knew the man seemed willing to hitch their wagons.

"Could we get some of those little pizzas, some of the spice cake, and a thermos of coffee to go, ma'am?" he asked the butt patter while Tank pottered at the truck. "We'll need snacks, and I'd rather buy them from you than the City Market."

"Of course, honey!" She just beamed at him, bustling to get the food.

Tank brought the thermos in, whistling either *O Come All Ye Faithful* or *Friends in Low Places*, he couldn't tell.

"I got us some snacks. She gave us a couple big cups of coffee, so let's just dump 'em in." He let his arm rub against Tank's, smiling like a fool.

"Sounds like a plan. You think we'll get some trout?"

"I bet we will. It's a little cold, but we've pulled them out of the ice in subzero, and it's nice and sunny."

"Fucking A. We got the camera, so we're gold." Tank was almost bouncing. It was cute as hell, a little sexy too.

Ross kept his hand to himself, for the time being. He could grab when they were out and alone. "We're good, for sure," he said, handing the sweet lady behind the counter a twenty and grabbing the goodies. "Come on. Let's go find a spot."

"I'm right behind you, buddy." Tank just damn near muscled him out of the cafe.

Someone wanted to fish. Ross took the interstate up to the Mesa turn off, both of them singing along with the radio. They split between the country and oldies stations, and it suited them both. When they got to the lake, though, he thought Tank might just shit a brick.

"Oh. Oh, man. Look at that. We got bait?"

"We do. I have salmon eggs, Velveeta, and some corn." His mom had loaded him up good when she saw him putting the poles in.

"Mmm. Lunch." Tank grinned at him, suddenly looking as young as Binky. "Come on, honey. Let's fish."

Ross grabbed Tank's arm and pulled him close, going up on tiptoe to kiss the man silly. "Yeah. Let's."

Tank swayed, blinking at him like they'd had too many. Damn, he distracted Tank from fishing. Or maybe it was just

lack of oxygen in a high altitude setting. Grinning at the thought, Ross led the way to the lake, relieved that there was just the barest crust of ice around the edge. "Whatever you do, don't tromp down into the water. You can get hypothermia in the summer."

"Shit, I'd shatter like ice." Tank didn't look worried in the least. "We'll stay high and dry and just seduce them fishes into the cooler."

"There you go." As soon as they got baited up and plunked in a line, they just sort of settled. They could fish for hours without saying a work, just sipping coffee and munching snacks.

Tank's leg leaned against his, the action just as familiar and welcome as it had been at the pond back in Texas.

They fished for a long while before Tank started shivering, but neither of them was willing to give up on the lake trout yet, so Ross went and got an old army blanket out of the truck, moving his stool closer to Tank's and bundling them both up. "Better, love?"

"Hell, honey. This is just right." Tank leaned down, dared to kiss him, sweet and slow. "Thank you."

"Mmmm. Yeah. Shit! You're getting a bite!" Look at that line zing. Trout fought like *crazy*.

Tank hooted, fighting that son of a bitch with all he had. "Man, I need a baseball bat to whack this fucker."

"I didn't bring the damned net, either. You just get him up here and I'll help pull him in." They could work it together, no problem. The fish broke water not three feet from shore, and

that would be damned good eating, if they could get him in still on the hook.

"Shit. Come on, you bitch. Get up here..." Tank worked it like a man who'd fished before he could walk, finessing and tugging.

The monster slid right on up over the ice like it had been shot out of a cannon, and Ross caught it like Johnny Bench, grabbing the wiggling thing in his gloved hands. "Woo! Look at that!"

"Goddamn! That's a fucking monster." Tank and him got it up on the bank, both of them laughing like drunken loons.

"It is. A big old cutthroat. Damn, Tank. That's a hell of a catch for your first try." And didn't the big guy look tickled?

"Man, you and me are gonna eat like kings. I might even share with the family."

"You know it. Here, we can just put him in the cooler."
Ross drug the little cooler over and filled it with some snow,
letting Tank plop the fish inside. "Let's try a few more casts,
see if we can't get another one. That would feed the hoarde."

"You got it." Tank's cheeks were pink, eyes lit up like Christmas. "It's your turn, now. Start waggling that heinie."

"Maybe we should soaked the corn in some beer." Lord. Wiggling his butt would get him Tank, and maybe the lady at Munchies, but he doubted fish would care. Still, they managed to catch two more trout, one each, before the encroaching dark drove them back to the truck.

"Goddamn." Tank's teeth were chattering, fingers red and raw from playing with the fish. "That was fun."

"It was!" Fishing with Tank in his old backyard made him happy, deep down. "And Lloyd is gonna be tickled to show you how to cook trout."

"I'm ready." They got the truck started, the heater turned down 'til it warmed up.

"You happy you got to see some of the world out this way, buddy?" Tank looked happy. Cold, but happy.

"You know it. I'm having a blast." Tank looked around, then leaned for a sharp, hard kiss.

"Mmm." His hand slid right up behind Tank's head, holding the man close, kissing until their lips and noses were warm. "No one I'd rather fish with."

"Good. We got us lots of fishing holes to look at, honey. Lots and lots." Tank rubbed their noses together.

"We do. We'll have to try every one along the way." Ross kissed that mouth again, just telling Tank all sorts of things through the touch. "I can't wait."

Chapter Thirteen

"So, can you do it?" Ken asked, packing the kids' clothes in their little bags, looking frazzled as Hell.

Ross nodded. "I haven't asked Tank yet, but I'm sure it will be fine."

Well, he hoped it would. Tank was a good 'un, and he'd said they didn't do anything special for Christmas down in Texas, so he ought not mind as long as Binky could keep up with orders on the Scorchers.

"Cool. Thanks, bro. I just..." Oh, fuck, Ken looked lost for a minute, just hollow and pale and scared as a little kid.

Ross dropped the sweater he was folding and gave Ken a hard hug. "She's fine. Hell, man, they've said she's really in no danger. She just needs to rest and all."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know. I just. We've never been apart like this, and it's coming on Christmas, and ... fuck, man, I'm scared."

"Well, you don't worry about the ranch at all. Your hand Buddy is there now, and Tank and I will head on over. Tank's good with the critters, and we can always call Brodie or Jed if we need more help."

"I can't believe I'm making the kids live in a hotel at the holidays. Do you think they'll hate me forever, or something?" Ross gave Ken a look. "Now you're just being stupid."

"Okay, okay," Ken said, popping him hard on the hip. "I just worry that I'm scarring them or something."

"It would scar them more to be back in Gunnison, not knowing what was going on with their mom, huh?"

He could see Ken thinking that one over. "Okay, yeah. Well, if you need anything, we'll be at the La Quinta in the Junction, and I'll have my cell. Mom reminded me to charge it and all."

"Stop worrying. Everything will be fine. Tell him, Jed."

Jed wandered on into the room, hands in his pockets, smile lines bracketing his mouth and eyes. "I've never lied to you, right Ken? She'll be fine. You ready? The truck is all loaded except for this stuff."

"I'm ready." Ken and Ross zipped the last of the Disney princess and SpongeBob suitcases closed and headed out. Ken gave them both a hard squeeze, whispering thank yous before slipping into the truck and giving the kids a bright smile. "Come on, you bunch of monkeys. Let's go see Momma."

They watched Ken drive off, standing close like families did in rough times.

"You think he'll be okay?"

Jed gave him the same look he'd given Ken for being a dork. "He'll be fine. So will Mandy. She's in the hospital. First little thing goes wrong, they'll yank that calf out of her and all will be well. We got work to do. You told your man yet?"

Biting his thumbnail, Ross shook his head. "Not yet. But he'll either be cool with it or he won't. He's not going anywhere, even if he has to go home, you know?"

Jed nodded. "I know. I can tell. He's amazing, man. I like him."

That had him grinning like an idiot. "I do, too. And I think he likes me an awful lot. So it works."

"Shit, that fish he caught was a nice change from turkey. For that alone I would like him."

Thanksgiving had been a pretty subdued affair, but thanks to Lloyd and Tank they had never lacked for anything to eat. Turkey, dressing, pies out the wazoo. Ken had said grace and asked for what you might expect him to ask for, and they'd all bawled like babies.

"Okay, bro. I got to go find Tank and tell him we're going to Gunnison."

The time was now, before he lost his nerve. He found Tank with Eli, talking about the finer arts of beer to cook shrimp.

"Oh, now," Tank said, "Shiner goes with anything."

"I like a nice Fat Tire. Never let it be said I haven't embraced Colorado."

"Can I interrupt?" Grinning, Ross whapped Eli on the back.
"Not that this isn't fascinating."

"Ken get off okay?" Tank was always worried about the kids, and he'd been great with them, hated to see them leave their grandma's.

"He did. He asked if we could run over to his place in Gunnison for a few days, help with the ranch."

Tank stuck his hands in his pockets, nodding slow. "I reckon we sure could help out."

"It's cold. We'll need to make sure we get extra liniment."
Those bright eyes told him Tank understood. Period. "No problem. Not like..." Cheeks heating, Tank trailed off.

Ross got it, though, and his hands flexed. Yeah. He liked his hands on Tank's skin, too. "Cool. Well, we'll need to hit the road before one if we're gonna get there before dark..."

"Oh! We're leaving now? Let me get the trailer hooked up. Eli, it's been fine to meet you." Shaking Eli's hand, Tank bustled off, and Ross shook his head.

All that worry, and it had been just that easy.

He should have known better. Tank was always right where Ross needed him to be.

* * * *

Ken's wasn't a mess at all. No sir, his ranch hand, Buddy, had kept the place running like a top, and Ross was damned relieved, Tank could tell. The house was neat as a pin, the cattle were all fed, and the chores were done.

Hell, they even had stew on the stove and sourdough in the toaster oven.

The only problem was it was fucking cold.

Man, it was minus four something cold. And that was just after dark. Ross said it would be colder when they woke up to do chores. Colder, when he didn't figure he had any nose hairs left and his knee felt creaky as a rusted hinge.

"I got to tell you, honey. I cain't believe that people choose to live here." No sir. Not in a million years.

Ross grinned over, tired lines around his eyes and mouth. "Yeah, it's pretty frigid, huh? It's not bad in the house though. Why don't you take a load off and I'll build us a fire to sit next to for supper?"

It went against his grain to let someone else work while he sat, but Tank eased into the big, ugly plaid recliner anyway, stretching his leg out. He'd be worthless tomorrow, he didn't let it rest some, and that would be when Ross needed him. So

he bit back his protest and just groaned as the throbbing eased.

"You want a hot water bottle? I figure you've had enough cold."

"That'd be a help." He smiled, just to let Ross know he was all right, before leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

The drive over had been something. They got just past a town Ross called Montrose and stuff had started freezing over, and they'd slipped and slid and just about gone over ass over teakettle. Crossing the Blue on that long bridge had been just about as beautiful as anything, though, with the water all cold and sparkly and just glorious as the sun started going down.

A warm weight settled on his knee and a warm kiss pressed to his lips, and Tank laughed. "I sure hope you ain't Buddy or Pancake or something."

"No, buddy. It's just me. Let me just wrap the towel tight and I'll go get supper."

Before Ross could move off, though, Tank reached up and put his hand behind Ross' head, brushing his fingers over that close-cropped blond hair. He needed him another kiss. There. Just like that.

"Better?" Ross asked, nuzzling noses with him.

"Some, for sure. Feed me and I might live."

"You got it. I'll pop that pie we got in the oven so it'll be warm when we're done."

Now that had been the best part of the trip over. They'd stopped at this little place called Pleasant Valley, which was just a frozen low spot on the road, and bought a whole apple

pie that looked like heaven. After all of the pumpkin, he was ready for some crisp, tart apples. They grew them up this way, and the lady at the store assured them the apples came right from Montrose.

"Let me help." Trying to get up was tough with the hot water bottle and the towel, and Ross pushed him back down.

"Won't take me any time at all. Sit."

He could hear Ross pottering in the kitchen, the fire starting to take and make the big front room toasty warm. It was classic ranch house inside, with lots of old wood furniture and shabby couches, kid's toys scattered all over. Tank reckoned it was as good as any for spending Christmas in.

Oh, that warmth really made his knee unclench.

"Here you go." Ross came out with steaming bowls of stew and big chunks of bread, setting up TV trays so he could set up next to Tank. "And I brought the hot sauce."

"Good man." Splashing some right in, Tank stirred up the stew and ate hearty, letting it warm him from the inside out. Pancake begged some, and he flipped the mutt a chunk of beef. "We got to do chores tonight?"

"Nope. Buddy said he and the guys got it all done. I'll need to hit the paperwork tomorrow."

"Oh, I hate the paperwork."

"You know it."

It was nice, after riding all day, to just sit back and relax. Eat. Watch Ross, who looked about as jumpy as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

"You all right with this, honey? I bet you someone else would do it."

"Huh? Oh! Nah, I'm just worried about Ken and the kids. Mandy? She's got it good."

"Oh, sure. White walls and green Jell-o." Lord almighty.
"Yeah." That sobered Ross right up. "Well, hopefully she'll
just have that baby soon, and we can get back to normal."

"Oh, I'd like that." Not that he wasn't willing to help, but God willing, they'd get back to touristing and then Texas in no time. He was starting to get a little antsy.

"You want some pie?"

"Surely."

They'd have dessert. A shower. And then maybe see if Ken's guest bed was more comfortable than the trailer.

The rest would work itself out. Later.

Chapter Fourteen

Tank chewed the inside of his lip as he headed for the house, his knee screaming like a newborn baby needing Momma.

Oh, now.

That was fucking funny, given that they were here punching cattle because another newborn was fixin' to pop.

Shit, if that baby would've just come on...

"Ross? Buddy? You in here?"

They needed to talk.

"Huh? Yeah. In the office, buddy." Man, Ross hated paperwork, but he'd thrown in and started paying Ken's bills, just like he was a born accountant. He might oughta get him one of them, too.

He lumbered on into the office, plopped down in the empty chair. "How's it going?"

Jesus, this was a way to start things. Hey, honey. How's it going? I know you're working your ass off and it's fixin' to be Christmas and all, but I gotta go. I got this call.

Ross stretched, joints popping. "Not bad. Mandy is so organized it hurts. This is a breeze. How's you?"

"I got a phone call from a guy in Houston."

"Yeah?" Turning in the big oak chair, Ross gave him the full focus of those blue eyes. "What's up?"

"He wants five thousand bottles by the first of January to distribute. He saw us on the food channel."

Five thousand.

Bottles.

In three weeks.

"Holy shit." Ross stared, then a huge grin broke out over his face, and he hopped up, whooping like a crane. The man bounced right over and attacked him, kissing him hard. "Way to go, buddy!"

Oh.

All his worry about leaving Ross, about heading home, all of it faded for a second as he grinned, arms wrapped around Ross' waist.

He got another kiss, and the biggest grin he'd ever seen. "I knew you'd hit it big, love. I just knew it."

"Five thousand, man. Five *thousand* bottles." That was over twenty-five thousand dollars retail.

"You're gonna have to kidnap Binky and tie him to the kitchen island." Ross sobered. "You know I'll come down and help you as soon as Mandy pops that baby out."

"I know." He frowned over. "And you know that I hate leaving this to you, buddy. I surely do, but I can't turn him down. I just can't."

"Hell no! Why would you? Do you want me to get you a flight, or do you think you can drive it?" One hand came up to cup his cheek. "This is fantastic, love. You gotta go for it."

"I'll drive it, honey. We'll fly you home when your folks are done with you, yeah?"

Lord, he needed to get to work. Five thousand bottles.

"You got it." He got another grin, a sweet press of lips on his. "You're gonna rock this, love."

"You think? Can you imagine it? My bottles on the shelves in the grocery store next to Stubbs and them?" He grabbed

Ross' ass, squeezing good and tight. "Oh, man. It's gonna be fine."

"It's gonna be amazing." Those strong, lean thighs straddled his carefully, avoiding knocking his knees. "I'm so proud I could bust, love."

"Thanks, honey." He ran his hands up Ross' thighs, thumbs heading toward the fly of Ross' jeans.

"Mmmm." Looked like Ross was all about congratulating him, hands going to the hem of his sweatshirt and yanking. Course with his arms down so he could work Ross' jeans, it didn't go nowhere.

Tank chuckled, nuzzling Ross' jaw. "Mmm. You smell good, honey. Real good."

"You smell like horses." But Ross was laughing, too, not complaining a bit. "You have way too many clothes on, though."

"Honey, it's colder than a witch's tit in a brass brassiere. You're lucky I'm not in eighteen layers." He stripped his shirt off, leaning back into the chair. "Better?"

"Uh-huh. You okay in here? Or would you rather go to bed?" They'd done it out by the fire in the front room once, and while that was the warmest he'd been since he came to Colorado, it had put a hitch in both their getalongs.

"You best wash them sheets but good before your brother gets home..."

"Hell, I'll just buy him new. And we're in the guest room, at least. Think of how you're going to have to bleach your sheets..."

Okay, gross.

"Oh, that was nasty. That's it. I want new sheets for Christmas, man." They got to laughing, both of them just hooting like a pair of drunken barn owls.

"Come on, love. Let's go to bed for a bit. Then we can make a plan." Ross would help him figure the best way to get home, help him make a production plan, anything he wanted. He knew it. The man was solid.

"Yeah." He looked at Ross, just gave the guy all he had.
"I'm damn glad you found me, honey. Real glad."

"So am I. I swear it, Tank. So am I. Love you, yeah? The rest is all in the details." Ross just leaned on him, chin against his shoulder, cheek to cheek.

"I know, honey." He held on a second, just feeling his lover, his buddy. "I got you."

"Yeah. It's good. We'll figure it." Ross finally got up, held a hand down for him. "Come on. The bed can wait. Let's get some food and sit and make a plan. We got to get you making bottles."

"No shit. Bottles and labels and I got to figure how much product I need. I got about a thousand bottles put back..." He grabbed Ross' hand, let Colorado help him up.

"Well, you said Binky had been working on labeling for you since you been gone, so at least that ought to help when you're ready to start filling." That was a little bit of a relief, if Binky had put them labels on straight.

"Yeah. I got some money put back for the supplies, too. I might sell the old pickup, though, just to make sure. God knows I can't do any engine work 'tween now and then." He

should be good, though, and this guy was going to pay him on delivery.

"Oh, I got some put back if you need supplies." They bellied up to the kitchen table and Ross got them a little pad and a pen. Look at that Colorado. Just rarin' to go.

"You keep your money. Hell, I might need help with the 'lectricity and all." They put their heads together, started crunching numbers and shit, Ross scribbling all over that paper. By the time their bellies were rumbling like a badly tuned engine, they had him a solid plan on how many bottles he was gonna have to do a day and about what it was gonna cost. Damned fine figuring.

"Let's cook something and then I vote I take your fine ass to bed and make you walk like a cowboy." He patted the ass in question as he stood.

"Oh. I'm all for that." Cheeks bright, Ross wandered to the fridge and looked in, bending over and giving him another view of that fine butt.

He was sort of drawn, his hands wrapping around Ross' butt and just squeezed.

Firm. Nicely packed. He approved.

Ross jumped a little, but then relaxed and wiggled, humming for him. "Hey, you. Like what you see?"

"You know it. It's like magic—seduces grannies and fish alike." He grinned, rubbing with his thumbs a little.

"Goddamn it, Tank, don't make me laugh all crouched like this. I'll topple over." Ross was laughing, though. And rubbing right back into his touch.

"Find us some food, honey, don't worry about your butt. I got you." Lord, he thought he might just eat Ross up, top to bottom.

"Uh. Cheese? We got that leftover roast beef." That voice sounded good when it got a little rough around the edges. He liked it. Even with the air from the fridge making him cold again.

"Works for me." He leaned down, lips brushing the small of Ross' back, where the shirt had pulled up and bared that fine skin.

"Mmmm. Good. I like it to work ... Oh. That feels good." They got beef, cheese, some mustard, and Ross handed shit to him before standing and pulling him close for a kiss.

It was hard as hell, not to just stick his thumbs through the packages of cheese while Ross worked at stealing his breath clean away. Goddamn.

"Better." A wink, a grin, and another wiggle, and Ross was grabbing the sandwich stuff, working on getting them fed and slopping mustard all over.

He stood there a minute, just sorta blinking and staring. Man, that man could just send him straight to tilt.

"Come on, love. Get chips, drinks ... We need to feed, keep our strength up." Those eyes met his over Ross' shoulder, serious as anything. "I need to get my Tank quota for a couple days."

"Yessir. I gotta make sure you remember to come home to me."

"No. No, I'd remember that anyway. You're home, buddy." "Yessir." Hell, that's all he needed to know.

Chapter Fifteen

Ross was missing Tank something fierce. And the man had been gone less than twenty-four hours. He used a small pick to break the ice away from the edges of the water tank, making sure there was a place for the cows to drink, thinking how proud he was of Tank's little business. And how much he wished he could have gone with the man.

Ken's cell phone went off in his pocket, and he pulled it out and flipped it open. His own phone got no service in Gunnison, so he was using Ken's spare.

"'Lo?"

"Hey, baby."

"Hey, Mom." Fuck, he hoped it wasn't bad news. Ow. Ice sharp. "What's up?"

"Well, they think Mandy will pop any minute. They're ready to induce in three days if she doesn't. You doing okay, baby?"

"Missing Tank, but otherwise, yeah." He grunted, flinging a sheet of ice out a ways. "It's fucking cold, Mom."

"Watch your mouth."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mandy wants to know if you paid the feed bill."

"Mandy needs to stop worrying about the bills and have that baby." Lord, that woman was just something else. Ken had gotten the best ranch wife a man could ask for. 'Cept maybe their mom.

"She does." He could hear the click of a lighter, and he almost laughed. Some things never changed. It was comforting in the weirdest way. "Tank almost home?"

"Yeah. I guess he fell ran into some bad weather, but he'll get there by tonight."

"I like your man, baby. He's solid."

He'd heard that a few times in the last month, but it never failed to make his chest swell with pride. "I do, too, Mom. He's just my best friend, you know?"

"I do. I can tell. I'll tell Mandy to get with the baby making so you can go home, okay? Love you, baby."

"I love you, too. Holler when you know about Mandy and I'll come on over to the Junction."

"Will do. Bye, honey."

"Bye."

Ross stood there for a moment, just staring, phone in hand. Then he got back to work, knowing there was a lot of shit to get done. Wishing he was home wasn't going to make it so. And the sooner he got the chores finished, the sooner he could cuddle up in front of the fire and call Tank.

Just to make sure the man hadn't killed Binky when he got home. Yeah. That was his story, and he was sticking to it.

* * * *

Well, shit.

He hadn't stopped on the way home from Colorado for more than to let Pancake out to do his business and, damn, twenty three hours didn't used to be so goddamn long. Hell, he didn't used to be so goddamn old, he guessed. Tank grinned and shook his head at himself, slapping his cheeks to wake himself up a little. Lord, he was seeing shit from the side of the road and no amount of caffeine was helping. 'Course, the rain wasn't helping either. Goddamn.

"Hell, just let me get my ass home before it turns to sleet." There wasn't no way he could handle this big bitch in the ice. No way in hell. Shit. He should stopped in Denton for the night. Still, he was here, now. Only had to get through town and to the house and then he could crash, sleep the sleep of the well-deserving. Hell, he might take himself one of them little blue pills to help, if the tired didn't help enough, all on its own.

Tank squinted, hands pulling them off the highway and pointing the truck toward the house before his poor brain could read the exit sign. Hell, he knew this better than he knew damn near anything. He toodled through town, only considering stopping at the Circle S for a cup of coffee for about ten seconds, which was about as long as he waited for the red light to change before running it. If Will Gentry wanted to ticket his tired ass, the sheriff knew where the fuck to find him.

Besides, folks'd be talking and shit if he showed up looking like he was dragged out and tired, and God knew he was. Tired and hurting and ready to get out of the truck and feeling a little like a girl pouting over a boy.

They were both grown men, goddamn it, and he had work to do. Good work. Five thousand of his Scorchers were gonna go all over Texas and New Mexico and that distributor dude was talking about hitting Louisiana and Arizona. Maybe California. He needed to get his ass busy. Five thousand. Jesus fucking Christ.

He reckoned this was the scariest and coolest thing ever happened to him. It sorta sucked that it was happened when his Colorado couldn't come and see it all. Lord have mercy, they'd have fun, even if Ross did get growly about the smell of chile and salt after a day or two.

Still, it only took a nice fruit pie or some of Miss Hannah's apple cush to set that man to right, didn't it? Hell, yeah. Some cherry pie filling spread on Ross' lips just to be licked off and...

Tank sighed and swatted his cheek again, waking himself up from a little nap at the FM 5107 stop sign and pulled into the driveway, parking beside Binky's P.O.S. and some girly car complete with pink fuzzy dice and a stuffed animal collection fading in the goddamned rear window. Fucking figured. That little fucker was a horndog. He sighed and grabbed a hold of Pancake's collar. "Come on, honey. Let's sleep in the trailer. I ain't in the mood to wash sheets."

The pup growled a little, but came with, his girl babies raising one hell of a ruckus when they saw he was home with a friend. One dog started digging to get to him, the other took a running leap at the fence. The rain turned to sleet about the time Pancake peed on his boot and that big moose of a shepherd from down the road started howling.

Tank just shook his head, laughed and laughed 'til his belly hurt, the lights in the house coming on, Binky's face appearing at the kitchen window.

Yep. He was home, thank God.

And he thought maybe he could wash the sheets after all.

Goddamn, if he burned his hand on this big assed pot one more motherfucking time...

"Tommy?"

Tank looked over at Binky, who'd been hanging out for damn near a week, tilted his head. Lord, he hadn't heard Bubba call him by his given name in ten years. Maybe longer. Chile fumes must've gone to the man's head. "Whut?"

"You gonna put up a tree and stuff?" Well, what a question. He still had fourteen hundred bottles to fill and with the weather being cold and wet and his knee swolled and hurting, he hadn't even thought of...

The coffee cup moved around the table in stupid little circles, making this irritating as fuck sound. All of the sudden Tank could see Binky as a little kid, staring at him with the biggest scared eyes, waiting on him to make a move, waiting on him to be the man. Waiting on him to be the big brother. Shit. Sometimes Tank hated his daddy with a passion that he didn't reckon he'd ever share with no one.

"I hadn't thought on it none, man. I been busy."

"Yeah. Yeah, and I ain't looking to ... I mean, I know you got all this to do and ... Well, it ain't like Sissy'll invite me over or nothin' and since Ross ain't here..." Binky ran his fingers through his hair, the mass just going wild, cheeks a dull, dark red. "I'd help with getting it out of the storage unit. I'll even do most of the work and stuff, man."

It wasn't fair, for a man to look that lost when he was with his own kin. Not fair at all. "Well, then. I reckon you'll be wantin' turkey instead of ham for our Christmas supper?"

"You ain't cooking goose?"

Asshole. "Goose tastes just like liver, Bubba."

"No shit?"

"Swear to God. But they got turkeys at the Winn Dixie and all the fixins."

"Hell, yeah." Binky slammed back the rest of the coffee, grinning over at him like a fool. "I'll go ahead and get on it. God knows you've made a mess out there with your bottles and labels and shit."

"That works." He waited 'til Binky got almost out the door, then called out. "Bubba?"

"Yeah?"

"No matter whether Ross is here or not, you and me, we're family, you hear? Ain't no one changing that." Not that Ross would. Hell, Ross was the baby brother himself. The man got it.

"Yeah. Yeah, Tommy. I hear you. I do." Binky gave him a shit-eating grin and nodded. "The boxes in the storage building?"

"Just like always. Go on. I gotta get one more batch off the stove before tonight. You can buy me pizza for supper."

"I can do that. Thanks, Tank."

"You got it."

Binky went on and Tank nodded to himself and went on back to the kitchen, looking to see if he had the time to call Colorado for just a second before he had to get back on work.

* * * *

"You gonna call him and tell him, honey?" His mom drew on a cigarette, letting smoke trickle out her nose. "Let him know you're coming?"

"No." Ross had agonized over it, and Tank might kick his ass, but just in case his red eye flight got cancelled, he wasn't gonna get Tank's hopes up that he'd be there for Christmas and not make it.

It was about five o'clock on Christmas Eve, and Ross had a new nephew. The most beautiful fucking baby in the world. Mandy was fine. Ken was a mess. The ranch hands at Ken's had kicked his ass out, because God knew Ken would be chomping at the bit to go home tomorrow if Mandy could, and Ross was ready to go home.

Home to Texas and Tank. Who would have thought it? "Baby, you should call."

"I know. But I just..." Rubbing the back of his neck, he shrugged. "I just don't want to disappoint him if I can't make it. The snow in Denver..."

"Coward." She said it fondly, though, grinning. "Well, we'll be down for New Year's."

His eyebrows went up. "You will?"

"Yup." Jed wandered over, draping an arm around their mom. "Ken gets us for Christmas, but Mom and Lloyd and Eli and I will be down for New Year's Eve. You'd best be ready for us."

"I. You ... really?" That just floored him. Oh, Lord, his brother and Binky, meeting ... "Okay."

His family had never fucking budged from Colorado for the holidays. Not since they were kids and they'd gone to see

some of Dad's family down in New Mexico. "I know we'd be glad to have you."

"You'd better be. I hear it's a sight warmer down there than it is here." Grinning, his mom stubbed out the cigarette, coming close to give him a hug, squeezing hard. "You go on, you need to get through security before it closes."

Grand Junction was the only airport he'd ever been through that only opened security for about an hour before each flight. He'd need to hustle through or not make it until after his flight left.

"Okay. I'll see you soon. I love you." Ross kissed his mom's cheek, gave Jed a big, bone-creaking hug, and smiled. "Thanks for everything."

"Shit, honey, you were the one on a busman's holiday. Now git. We'll see you in a week or so."

He got, shouldering his duffel and heading to the security line. Damn, but cowboy boots were tough to get off and get in that bin. Not as hard as jump boots, but...

Damn. He was going home. And it wasn't *to* Colorado. The weather had best cooperate with him. Missing Tank sucked. Missing him on Christmas Eve would be a fucking shame.

Ross just needed to get there. As soon as he could.

Chapter Sixteen

The snow had almost stopped him cold in Denver. Pun intended. His flight left at eleven, and he heard they closed the airport at eleven forty-five.

Still reluctant to call Tank, he'd rented a car in Nacogdoches and headed out, knowing the way better than he thought he would. It took him maybe an hour, and he got to Tank's at maybe quarter to six. Christmas morning.

Goddamn, he was tired.

Ross heard the dogs start the ruckus, figured there was no way Tank could sleep through that if he was still in bed, so he headed right up to the house, leaving his duffel in the car.

The house was lit up like the Fourth of July, a tree in the window, a weird-assed chile pepper wreath on the front door. All three dogs tackled him as soon as he opened the gate, the kitchen door opening about a half second later. "Well, I'll be goddamned. Merry Christmas to me!"

Oh, now. That was what he wanted to hear.

Scratching ears and butts, Ross grinned up at Tank. It was so good to see the man that it *ached*. "Hey, buddy. How's it hanging?"

"Better now that you're home in one piece. How's Momma and Baby?"

"Just fine. They both came through with flying colors. It's a boy." Wading through the dogs, Ross made his way up to Tank, needing to touch. To feel.

"Go Ken." Tank headed down the stairs, arms open and reaching for him. "How's you? Glad to be home?"

"You got no idea." Oh. Solid. Fine. That hug was the best medicine for the longest day he'd had in years. "God, you feel good."

"And you feel like you've had a hell of a day. Coffee or bed, honey? The turkey's already in the oven." Oh, God. Smell that.

"Coffee. I want to spend some time, and you're already up." Tank was dressed, so he'd bet the man had been up working. "How's the order going?"

He took Tank's hand, just feeling that huge, callused paw against his palm while they walked into the house.

"I got another order for sixty bottles in yesterday, so I'm about four hundred down. God, look at the boxes. Labels. Stacks. Packing material. They were going to have to clean out the old barn and make it storage.

Heck, they could put in a little kitchen out there, too, with some stainless counters ... Ross chuckled. Look at him, planning and plotting. "How much bacon have you got?"

"Four pounds. It was on sale and I wanted to make a cheese ball later. There's plenty to breakfast on."

"Oh, you're my hero." Bacon, some eggs, some coffee. He'd be set. "I slept some on the plane, so I could so power down some food."

"Well, have a sit down and I'll rustle some up." Tank got his butt planted before starting to potter, a cup of coffee plopped down in front of him as soon as the bacon started sizzling.

Moaning into it, Ross inhaled the steam before taking a sip. "I missed you. My mom and Jed are coming down for New Year's."

"Yeah? That'll be nice to see them. Lloyd and Eli coming too?" Tank flipped the bacon and threw some biscuits in to cook.

"Yep. They said they were thrilled to have someplace I called home, wanted to come and get warm. Warmer, anyway." Damn, smell that. And bless his heart, Tank gave him toast and butter while he waited for biscuits and eggs and all.

"We'll clean it up pretty for 'em. Hell, Binky'd even offer to get Jed and his man matching ink." Tank chuckled, hands landing on his shoulders, rubbing good and hard.

"Uhn. Oh, do that some more. Don't burn the bacon." He figured he was jet lagged and not making sense, but it felt so good. His hands went back to rub at Tank's legs.

"I won't. I'm watching." Oh, that poor tore up knee was all swollen, hot in the jeans.

"You been on your feet too much, love. We need to get you a tall stool, huh?" Yeah, they'd make a new kitchen for the Scorchers, one that had a lot of Tank's stuff right at arm's reach, so there weren't so many trips back and forth.

"Yeah, I oughta take it to the VA, but I been busy." Tank went to turn the bacon, then those hands returned, thumbs working his neck, pushing in just hard enough.

His head rolled, his eyes closing automatically. "Well, you feed me, and I'll return the favor. Get the liniment out and rub you down..."

"Honey, I'll feed you and then I'm taking your to our bed. I been *missing* you."

"Oh, Hell. That's the best offer I've had in weeks."
Suddenly he was just in a hurry. Like really. "Need you."

"Yeah. Yeah, Ross. Lemme make you some eggs."

Lord, those were going to be the fastest cooked eggs in history.

"I'll help." As soon as Tank moved he was up, stirring the bacon and setting out the paper plates, so they didn't have to wash. "So how long did it take to oust Binky?"

"He's at this lady's place tonight. He's taken a shine. Spent three whole nights there with her."

"No shit? I saw you put up the tree. It's nice. Sparkly." Drawn right on over to Tank's side, Ross leaned, kissed the man's neck and shoulder.

"Yeah, Binky did most of that..." Tank groaned, one hand landing on his ass. "Goddamn, honey."

"Mmmhmm. If I didn't feel my belly gnawing at my backbone." Score! The biscuits dinged, so Ross plopped them on plates and pulled the bacon, giving it a quick drain.

Eggs. Bacon. Bread. They got piled up on his plate, Tank making himself a bacon biscuit and pouring more coffee.

They worked through the food, both of them practically vibrating with anticipation. Yeah, he needed Tank all naked and solid and heavy on him. Ross figured he brush his teeth first, though.

Man, there was his older toothbrush, just waiting on him next to Tank's. Goddamn.

Fuck, it felt right. Good. Ross brushed his teeth, cleaned up a little ... Yeah. He was ready. "You in here, love?"

"In the bed, honey." Oh, hell yes. In the bed. Naked. Hard. Looking at him like he was a buffet.

Ross made a flying leap, narrowly avoiding that leg. He'd work on that later. That first kiss was like pouring gasoline on a fire, so hard it bruised.

They slapped right together, Tank's tongue fucking his lips, hands hard enough to bruise on his ass.

Humping, gasping, Ross worked his body against Tank's, finally feeling like he was really home, like he'd really gotten there.

"Feels fucking good." Tank got one finger playing with his hole, just teasing enough to make him ache.

Back arching, he rolled his ass back against Tank's touch. "Want you. Come on, love. Want you in me. Can we ... can you make it that far?"

"Yeah. Yeah, honey. You gonna ride me? My knee's sore as a boil."

"I will. We got anything slick?" Fuck, right now he'd settle for spit. He just needed.

"Yeah. I been needing it for ... you know." Tank grinned, handed him a nearly used tube of KY.

"Oh. Yeah." That made sense. He'd been using a little bottle of travel lotion. Ross wasted no time getting his fingers wet and sliding them right inside his own body, stretching to reach. That was nice, but it wasn't Tank.

"Oh. Oh, goddamn. You..." Tank watched, licked his lips and just stared, heavy cock throbbing and dripping on that flat belly.

"Uh-huh." Talking was overrated, right? He handed Tank the tube back. "Get all ready for me, 'cause I'm about to jump on and ride."

"Fuck, yeah." Tank got that pretty prick wet and slick, big hands working it, slicking it up this for him.

That was all he needed. Ross was wet, open, ready for that thick flesh, and he just pulled his fingers free and rose up, pushing to get Tank right where he needed. Right there, pressing against his hole. "Ready, love?"

"Hell, yeah. I need, honey. Need you bad."

"Come on, then." Sinking down as Tank pushed up, Ross took every inch, seating Tank deep inside him. His eyes rolled right back in his head, his cock jerking like crazy. Fuck, he'd missed this, missed this man.

"Ross." Tank groaned, fingers wrapping around his prick, hips bucking right up into him.

"Fuck! Tank." He was gonna last about as long as a teenage boy with a porno mag. "Oh, God. Move. More."

"Uh-huh." Tank got one leg planted on the bed, hips slamming up into him, over and over, just driving that prick deep into him.

Hands braced on Tank's chest, Ross pushed down for all he was worth, rocking into the cradle of Tank's hips and thighs. Then back up into that hot hand.

"Look at you..." Tank's eyes damn near burned into him, that hand squeezing his cock, thumb nudging the slit on every upswing.

"Tank!" That was all he needed to push him over, his whole damned body tingling, so hot he thought he might just melt. He came hard instead, shooting up over Tank's chest and belly, reaching to rub it into that flushed skin.

"Ross. Oh, sweet Christ." Tank's hips rolled, heat flooding him all of a sudden, Tank just throbbing inside him.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's it." The words came out choked, harsh, his voice just blown. Goddamn. Home. He was home.

"I got you. I got you, honey." Tank's arms wrapped around him, fingers petting his back.

Ross let himself relax, let himself slump right down and get some squeezes and hugs. "Merry Christmas, love."

"Oh, merry Christmas, honey. Sleep, huh? You're home now." Tank sounded happy as a pig in shit.

"Yeah. Stay with me a bit? I'll get up and help you soon." His voice sounded slurry to his own ears, and he figured Tank wasn't going anywhere with him pinning the man down, but he needed to hear it.

"I ain't going nowhere, Ross. I got what I need, right here."

Those were the sweetest words he could hear. Ross let himself slip into sleep, knowing that he'd found the place he belonged. Right there. With Tank.

* * * *

One Year Later

"Goddamn it, Ross, would you get that kid before he gets away?"

Ken was holding two wiggling children, the baby scooting right past him, right into Ross' waiting hands. "I got him, man. Besides, Pancake was fixing to corral him if I didn't."

Poor old Pancake had settled right in with Tank's two, and man, they were almost as good at herding kids as Jed's bunch. Ken, Mandy, and all of the kids were down for Christmas, along with Mom and Lloyd, saying it was their turn to get away. They'd promoted their man Buddy to foreman, and he was running shit while they were away.

Seeing the family was great, even if he did miss Jed and Eli, who had gone to Oregon. What was best was seeing Tank and Binky light up when the kids showed up, though, plotting Christmas morning and sitting with the younger ones to make cookies, putting the older ones to work labeling bottles.

Tank's business had taken *off.* Ross was so proud he could bust.

"Here, I'll take him." That was from Binky, of all people, and Ross handed over the baby. Binky had settled a lot since he'd met his lady friend, Beth, last year. She kept him in line.

With Ken and Binky on the kidlet situation, Ross wandered to the kitchen, looking for Tank. Mom and Lloyd were out to the grocery store, so the big man ought to be all his, and bingo, there he was. Ross went right over, sliding his arms around Tank's waist.

"Hey, you. You doing okay?"

"Happy as a pig in shit," Tank said, turning to give him a squeeze. "You?"

"Hell yeah. I'm tickled as anything that the folks came down again."

"Me too. I like your people."

"Well, I'm glad." It still amazed him, how Tank fit in his life like a missing piece of puzzle. "Thanks for letting them come stay."

"Shit. Like I would say no. And Lloyd is a great source of inspiration."

Lord yes. The two of them had sat with their heads together for hours, mixing spices and discussing the merits of different fruits for a new line of sauces.

"Oh, speaking of, did you still want me to go get that load of boxes and shit today?"

Tank nodded, cheek rubbing his hair. "If you would. Binky's gonna be busy, and I got to get some stuff ready for dinner tomorrow."

"Will do." Ross took a kiss, patting Tank's ass before heading off to look for his truck keys. He grinned when he looked at that old truck, sitting out in Tank's yard. It had been a leap of faith staying the night at Tank's when that old girl had broken down.

Out of all the jumps he'd taken, he'd never been happier about taking one than he was about Tank. He'd landed just where he needed to be.

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