

Single Shots



Christmas Fire
by Julia Talbot

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"Hey, you know that kid from Washington state? The new kid?"

Jed glanced up at Eli from where he sat reading the Sunday funnies, the late fall sun just warm enough that he could get away with an open flannel and his oldest pair of jeans. Eli was looking fine himself in a pair of sweats and a long sleeved t-shirt. Lord, that man was built like a brick shit house.

"Uh-huh. The Toby kid, right? The one you took to dinner last week."

"That's the one." Eli grinned at him, brows rising and falling. "He's gay."

"Yeah? How'd you figure that one?" Jed put down the paper, waiting. Even though Eli Marshall had taken on the rookie training for the smoke jumping headquarters in Western Colorado, he wasn't one to get personally involved with his trainees. Eli had about as much patience for personal confidence as a mule did for a pack saddle.

Eli's grin widened. "He made a pass at me."

Jed stood up, moving close, frowning at the stupidest man on earth, save for Jed's brother Ross. "Uh-huh. And what did you do?"

Backing up a step, Eli held up his hands. "Now, Thatcher, you know I turned him down flat."

"You'd best have, Mister, or I'll skin you alive."

"You a little jealous, Thatcher?"

"No, I'm a lot possessive."

Eli laughed right out loud and grabbed him to give him a sound kiss on the mouth. "Good. I like it that way."

"So why tell me, then?" Jed asked, getting distracted by the feel of Eli's hands on his upper arms and Eli's mouth in his.

"Because the kid needs a man. At least for a bit. I figured you'd have an old friend you could set him up with."

Jed rolled his eyes. Lord Almighty, but Eli was never going to let him forget the few times he'd called up old friends before he and Eli were solid as a couple...

"Most of my old friends are too afraid of you to come around."

"Good," Eli repeated. "I don't want them to. But if you could dig someone up for Toby, then I'd be nice."

Jed pressed his lips to Eli's throat, his hands grabbing that fine ass. "You really like this kid, huh?"

"Yeah." Eli shrugged, shoulders rolling. "He reminds me of me. Very much an island or some shit."

"Okay. Then I'll look."

"Thanks, Thatcher."

"Uh-huh. I think you owe me something, Mister," Jed said, looping his arms around Eli's neck.

"A beer? Fajitas?"

Jed nudged Eli's thighs apart and slid his leg between them. "I was thinking more along the lines of a massage and a good, hard fuck."

Eli's cheeks went pink, but he nodded, looking tickled as all fuck. "You got it, Thatcher. And I won't even think about fire once."

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Jed laughed, leaning back to look into those dark eyes that seemed so happy these days. "You're gonna spoil me."

Nodding, Eli hoisted him up and headed for the door, hauling his ass inside. "That," Eli said, "is my favorite job in the world."

* * * *

Buddy James was sick to death of going out on Friday night and watching the little birds and bees swarm around each other. Living in a college town could be hell when you were a high school drop-out and a cowboy besides. And when you were all that and queer as a three dollar bill to boot?

You were shit outta luck.

He threw the six pack of Coors behind the seat of his truck and headed back to the Thatcher place. Ken Thatcher was a good man, and he'd taken Buddy on when no one else would. Hell, Buddy knew the man didn't have two nickels to rub together, either, but he'd given Buddy a full time job, and room and board besides.

And that little wife of his was a damned good cook, too.

He toodled on back to the ranch, pulling up and staring at the unfamiliar pick-up parked in his usual place. Well, shit. Maybe he shoulda stayed in town and had supper, if the boss had company.

He'd check, maybe offer to share his beer, as it was still cold in the chill of the October evening. Gunnison was one of the coldest places on the fucking earth, but Buddy loved it with a fierce passion. The Blue Mesa and the reservoir, just all of it.

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Buddy knocked on the back door, and one of the kids let him in. Lord, those folks had a lot of them. This one was, uh ... shit. The one with the gap-toothed smile.

"You don't have to knock, Mister Buddy. You know that."

"Well, I do anyway. You know why?"

"Uh-huh!" That was one of the girls. "It's so you don't walk in on Momma and Daddy kissing."

His cheeks heated almost painfully as Ken Thatcher came into the living room, shoos the kids off and clapping him on the back. "Little snots," Ken said companionably. "Come and meet my brother."

"Oh, I don't want to interrupt," he said.

"Shit, Jed and Eli brought chili. You don't want to miss Jed's chili."

"And cornbread." A big guy with black hair and pretty eyes came out, smiling and picking up one of the rugrats. "Is this your hand?"

"Yep. Buddy, this is Eli Marshall, my brother's significant other, as they say. Eli, Buddy James."

"Hey." Eli stuck his free hand out to shake even as he tossed the kid up in the air with the other.

"Hi." Man, that man did something seriously physical for a living, because he had a grip that would squash a guy flat.

"Pleased."

"Hey, Eli, is it true that you got knocked out in the middle of a fire ... Oh, hey. Sorry."

Well, hello. That was one cute man. Tall and a little skinny, but old enough to know better, with brown hair and gray eyes, he was something to look at. He came out of the

kitchen with a beer and a smile, looking from one of them to another, waiting for an introduction.

"Hey, I was just doing my job. Toby Lawrence, this is Buddy James. He's Ken's new hand."

"Nice to meetcha," Toby said, shaking his hand with a shadow of the same strength Eli showed. He had the same calluses, though, and the same pocked scars on the back his hand. Toby caught him staring and grinned. "Firefighter hands."

"Ah. Makes sense." He held up his own too-old hands. "Cowboy hands."

"Uh-huh. I've seen a lot of those lately." But Toby was sure checking his out, which was kind of cool. And kind of unnerving in front of the boss, even if Ken's brother was gay and all ... "So what do you do for fun around here?"

"Huh? Well, uh." What did he do for fun? "Fishing. Trail riding. Maybe some river rafting in the summer." It was too late for rafting now, being mid-fall, but the other two he still did a good bit on the days off.

"I've never been on a horse. Will that get me kicked out of Colorado?"

"Nah, but you might have to move to Boulder." That was Ken, clapping the kid on the back and making them all hoot.

"Well, you can come on over any weekend you want to and I'll take you out," Buddy added, glancing at Toby from under his lashes.

"That would rock, man."

"Well, then come on."

"How about next weekend?"

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He grinned a little, feeling the tiny spark of a new flame lighting up in his chest. "Sure. We'll just have to exchange numbers in case something comes up. Fire. Spontaneous cow escape."

"Sure." They chit-chatted while Mandy got the chili laid out, and damned if Toby didn't offer to do dishes.

Buddy hopped to his feet. "I'll help out."

Ken and Mandy and the brother and the big guy, all of them watched them go with these little smiles on their faces.

"You ever get the feeling we're being set up?" he asked, hauling a load of plates over to the sink.

"Yeah. I mean, is that okay? It's kind of a haul to get over here, but I'd love to hang out, you know?" He got a grin, those gray eyes twinkling for him.

"I would, too. I mean, I assume you're..."

"Queer? As a bull in a dress." Toby lowered his voice. "I hit on the bossman, and now his boyfriend wants to hook me up. I didn't know he was taken."

For a minute he couldn't figure how Toby could have hit on Ken, but then light dawned. "Oh, the big guy. He's awful pretty."

"Uh-huh. And solid as a rock with your boss' brother."

"Yeah. I mean, I hadn't met them until today, but the kids talk a lot about how Uncle Jed is the lucky one."

"Uh-huh. So are you from around here?" Water went everywhichways when Toby started scrubbing, and Buddy took over.

"You dry. Mandy will have a fit if you ruin her kitchen."

"Ruin." Toby hooted. "That's a great word."

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"Yeah, well just wait until she ruinates your ass."

Long eyelashes batted for him. "Oh, I'd rather have someone else do that."

Man, it felt good to flirt, and Buddy smiled as he set to washing. "Anyway, yeah, I'm from up around Telluride. So you're from Oregon?"

"Yup." Toby rubbed a dish so hard it squeaked. "It rains a lot. I'm looking forward to seeing snow."

"Well, you won't get near as much down over in Delta, though if you're staying up in Cedaredge, you'll see it." That was where Jed lived, he thought.

"Oh, I have a little place down in Grand Junction. Near the jump center."

"Oh, Hell, you'll have to come here, then. Grand Junction is too low for the heavy stuff."

"Then I'll visit. Do you really want me to come up for a trail ride next weekend?"

"I really do."

Toby's fingers touched his, sliding along them when he handed over a bowl.

Suddenly life looked a little less lonely, and Buddy decided he hoped Toby would come by often.

* * * *

As it happened, it was almost three weeks before Toby could get to Gunnison again. A late season brush fire out near Loma had caught them all unawares, and something like two thousand acres had burned before they got it out.

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Working alongside Eli and his crew was an amazing thing. They were like a well-oiled machine, and Toby felt incredibly lucky to be doing his rookie training right there, on the blazing field of battle.

Still, when it was over and the boss told him he had a three day free? He hopped in his truck and headed for the Blue.

The drive from Grand Junction to Gunnison awed him. Color Sunday was well over, but the trees were still turning, and the radio said snow flurries were possible up on the summit.

Mainly, though, he was looking forward to seeing the redheaded cowboy again.

Bright red hair, brighter blue eyes, and a face that looked far better in motion than it did still had haunted his thoughts for days and days. Sure, he was lonely, but the anticipation went beyond that. He'd really had fun joking around with Buddy, and man, he wanted to learn to ride. He always had.

Toby stopped in Pleasant Valley to pick up a pie, as instructed. Jed had said that she liked the apple the best, but he had to try a piece of the pecan, too, with coffee, at the counter. Dude, that little old lady got seriously lonely.

Half an hour later he was on his way again, and he made good time across the reservoir and got to Gunnison just before lunch time. The bumpy old road out to Ken's ranch had him bouncing and singing, smiling like an idiot.

Three kids spilled out of the house when he pulled up.

"Mister Buddy is in the barn."

"Did you bring us pie?"

"Are you going to come live with us, too?"

"Thank you, yes, and no." Such cute kids. He couldn't remember their names for the life of him, but man, they were something else. "Can I trust you to take the pie to your mom?"

"Sure." That was the one of the older ones, looking just like his dad and uncle, all blue eyes and easy grin. "Come on, guys. Let's get this inside."

He got a wink, and the boy herded all of the other kids back into the house. Gracious, what a passel.

The barn wasn't easy to find, at least to a city slicker like him. There were maybe five outbuildings, and none of them looked like the traditional red barn. The one with the little corral in front of it yielded Buddy, though, so he was happy.

"Hey, man," he said, grinning. "Good to see you."

"Yeah, you too." Buddy shook his hand, smiling wide. "You ready to go riding?"

Poing. Hell, yes. Oh. Buddy meant horses.

"Yeah, though I have to admit, I could use a crash course."

"Well," those blue eyes ranged over him, sizing him up nice and slow. "You're an athletic guy, so you shouldn't have any trouble staying in the saddle. The only thing you'll have to worry about is finesse. You gotta help the horse think it's his idea to do what you want."

"Oh. Well, could we maybe practice a few minutes before we hit the trail?" He didn't want to make a fool out of himself. Especially not when that appraisal had gone all appreciative.

"You bet. We'll get Patch saddled up and trot you around the ring."

"Cool." He followed Buddy deeper into the barn and looked at the row of soft noses that suddenly pushed over stall doors. "Oh, wow, look at you guys."

"This one is Patch." Buddy led him over to the third stall down, holding out a hand for the horse inside. A painted looking head pushed out, the nose working into Buddy's hand, the animal snuffling loud. "He's looking for a treat. Here."

Buddy pulled out a piece of cut carrot. "Put it flat on your hand and hold it right up there. Unlike Spice down there, he won't bite a bit."

"You sure?" But he did what he was told, holding out the carrot, feeling the animal's lips and whiskers brush his hand as the carrot disappeared. "Oh, man, that tickles!"

"See? Nothing to worry on. Ready for your crash course in saddling?" That grin would be worth a crash course in falling off.

"Sure."

Buddy pulled the horse out of the stall and showed him how to smooth of the blanket and lay on the saddle. The man made him do all of the work, telling him that if you were gonna ride, you had to know how to do the work, which just seemed like such a cowboy thing to say that it had Toby smiling to himself.

He'd always had a sneaky fondness for cowboys, even if he'd never really met one before Buddy.

"Now, lead him out to the pen."

Buddy went and opened the gate for him, and he tugged the reins, pulling Patch along to the ring, laughing when the

horse stopped right inside and stood, chewing the bit and eyeing him lazily.

"Did you give me the horse with sloth, dude?"

Buddy laughed out loud, the sound deep and infectious.

"No, but he is a gentle boy. Now, come around like this..."

With a little grunting and pushing, he found himself in the saddle, and it was a little like flying. Good thing he liked that, huh? "Wow. Cool."

"Yeah? Well, try to get a feel for him. You have to work with him. Now, heels down, hands light, and let your hips move with the motion."

"Like this?" The horse walked and Toby rolled with it, trying to keep himself upright.

"Uh-huh. Only you need to relax a little. Now, try to guide him. Gently, it doesn't take much. Good!"

He rode in the pen for maybe fifteen minutes, then he and Patch took a break to let Buddy saddle up. He leaned against the gelding, for Buddy had explained the whole fixing a male horse, just like you would a male dog.

"You know, I haven't seen any dogs. Either time I've been here. I mean, Ken's brother has like, five. And his mom has more than that."

"Huh? Oh, we have 'em, but they've been working. Ken has them up helping the guys move the cattle from summer to winter pasture."

"Oh." He stroked Patch's neck. "So why aren't you?"

"Because someone has to feed and muck and ride fence." He got a wry grin as Buddy tightened straps on his own big,

rawboned horse. "Which is what we'll be doing today on our trail ride, I'm afraid."

"Hey that's okay. I like the thought of playing cowboy." He watched Buddy swing up into the saddle, those lean hips turning just so, and his mouth went dry.

"Excellent."

Man, Buddy looked way better on a horse than Toby felt.

"So what about you?" Buddy asked. "Isn't it your off season now? Are you going back to Oregon?"

"Nope. I'm gonna stay on. I like Grand Junction well enough, and I really don't want to go back and forth. Now that we have a good rookie training program here I can do my proficiency in the spring without having to go back up."

Those blue eyes sparkled out from under the brim of Buddy's hat. "Yeah? Well, good on you."

"Uh. Is that a good thing for you, too?" He knew it was pushing to ask, but he kinda wanted the lay of the land.

Buddy grinned before nudging his horse into a walk, glancing back over his shoulder with the hottest look Toby had seen in a long time.

"Yeah. That's a good thing, man. Now come on and ride."

* * * *

They had a ball. Toby only slid off Patch once, and that was really not his fault. Stupid gelding just rubbed the man off on a tree. Toby took it like a champ, though, and that made Buddy like the guy even more. Not that he needed help in that direction.

He liked pretty much everything about Toby, from his solid body to his pretty gray eyes, and the way Toby took everything in stride, smiling and laughing.

They went on into town for lunch, armed with a list of stuff Mandy wanted from the City Market. They went to the Quarter Circle and had chicken fried steak and homemade cake and Toby raved about the ranch dressing.

"Is this homemade?" he asked the waitress, a college girl Buddy knew from going to high school with her brother.

"Sure is. We make all the dressings ourselves." She fluttered her eyelashes at Toby, and the kid turned beet red.

"Angie, leave the boy alone."

"Oh, you're never any fun, Buddy James."

"I think she's wrong about that," Toby told him when Angie left. "I'm having a great time."

"Well, you think this is fun, wait until I come down to the Junction to go bar-hopping with you."

"You want to? That would be great!"

"I do. Want to see you again, I mean."

"Cool." He got a shy smile, and man, it made him want to kiss the guy right then and there. Lord. That would be beyond stupid.

"You ready to hit the grocery? Sorry you got roped into doing chores, but if you stand still long enough, Mandy will have you running errands."

"Hey, as long as I get to do it with you..."

"You do. Anytime..."

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They both paused and stared at each other, and Buddy felt his cheeks heat. His cock twitched good and hard, just to let him know it was there and interested.

"I'll remember that," Toby said, eyes hot on him.

"Good. We should go..."

"Uh-huh."

They got back to the truck and headed for the City Market, and you could cut the silence with a knife. They kept looking at each other and Toby kept wiping his hands on his jeans and they were just gonna explode.

Lord have mercy, Buddy was sore by the time they got inside the store. He thumped himself good and hard before digging out Mandy's list and letting Toby grab a basket. There was something about the way they worked together that made him happy deep down. Like it was just good and easy and right.

They flirted over the frozen food and fondled the veggies and eventually got dog food and canned pintos and all manner of other shit. Hell, they even got the kids pecan and chocolate chip cookies, because they loved those things with a passion that could be kinda scary.

Half shame-faced, Buddy added a box of condoms and some lube to the cart while they were hunting Mandy's pear and something shampoo. Toby blushed beet red, but he didn't say nothing, so Buddy figured he might just get lucky. If not today, then soon. That would suit him just fine.

"You, uh ... you think we'll have time after?" Toby finally said, and Buddy felt his own cheeks heat right up.

"Well, it might have to wait until I come down to see you. You got your own place, you said."

"Oh. Yeah, I can see where with you sharing and all."

"That and it's my boss' place, you know?"

"Uh-huh." Toby licked his lips. "I want to, though."

"Yeah. Yeah, me too."

"Oh, good."

They hardly talked at all on the trip back to the ranch, just stared at each other out of the corners of their eyes. Buddy felt his chest rising and falling faster with each breath, and by the time Toby's hand landed on his thigh his cock was hard enough to jackhammer concrete.

Goddamn.

They shuffled like naughty kids up to the back door and unloaded the groceries. They almost got away, but Mandy caught them, grinning at them through the screen door. "You boys want some pie or something?"

Buddy tried not to stammer, because he figured she had to be able to see the bulge in his jeans. "No, ma'am. You know, I think I forgot to do something in the barn. You gonna help, Toby?"

"Huh? Oh! Sure. Hope we got everything, Mrs. Thatcher."

"Oh, I'm sure you did." She smiled, her pretty eyes just a'twinkling at them. "You go on and do whatever you forgot."

"Uh. Thanks."

Lord, that man gave away everything he was thinking on his face. Buddy tugged at Toby's arm, head down so Mandy couldn't see the half-grin on his face. They got out of earshot before he said, "We couldn't've been more obvious, man."

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"No shit. Sorry, I couldn't figure out what to say."

"No big." He patted the arm he still held. I mean, shit, it's not like they weren't setting us up, you know?"

"Well, yeah. But I don't mind if you don't."

As soon as they were out of sight in the barn, Buddy spun Toby around and pulled him in for a kiss that kinda made his hair stand up on end. Toby kissed him right back, mouth opening up to let his tongue in, and the battle was on, both of them going for it. Buddy's lips burned from the friction, it was so good.

When they broke for air, he grinned. "That feel like I mind?"

Toby blinked at him, lips swollen and eyes hot. "Hell no."

"Well, there you go."

* * * *

Toby checked his look one last time. Cowlick. Check. Nerves making his eyes almost charcoal-colored. Check. Big grin. Yup. It was November already, and how had that happened? But he and Buddy were finally going on a date.

Buddy had a harder time getting time off than Toby did, and considering that their little round of kissing and petting in the barn had been interrupted by Toby's pager going off, that was saying something.

The creases he'd ironed into his brand new Wranglers felt weird, but they were going to a country and western place after supper, so Toby was trying not to embarrass Buddy too much. Not that Buddy seemed to care that he was a big dork from Oregon.

The knock on the door had him jumping, which was just silly, but he still had to clear his throat to say hi when he saw his own personal red-headed cowboy standing out there.

"Hey," Toby said, looking Buddy over with hungry eyes. "You're looking good."

That was no empty compliment. Buddy looked amazing in tight jeans with a big buckle, a starched shirt, and boots and a hat that had seen better days but were clean as a whistle.

Damn, he liked the cowboy look.

"You too," Buddy said, eyes wandering over him thoroughly. "So, you ready to hit the Rockslide?"

The Rockslide was a local institution in Grand Junction, right downtown, and with enough microbrews to make even a Northwesterner happy. They also had some amazing food. Toby really liked their calzones and their fajitas.

"I am." He locked the door behind him, letting his hip bump Buddy's a little.

"Cool. I want their toothpick thingees. You know the jalapeno and onion sticks?"

"Oh, that sounds good. What is it about hot peppers that make your mouth water?"

"I don't know, but they sure do."

One of Buddy's hands slipped into his back pocket for a minute, steering him toward the truck. The touch sent little shivers up and down his spine, making the little hairs on his arms stand on end. Woo.

Too bad they hadn't had time for a kiss. Or the thought for it. Or something.

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The Rockslide was full of people, so they had to sit in the bar, but the booths there were big and comfy, and it was almost like a private little place of their own. They got to bump boots under the table; his were lace-up steel toes and Buddy's were pointy cowboy boots.

They got the jalapeno toothpicks and a couple of entrees to share and they both had a stout, which was like eating beer with a spoon.

"So you like it here in Colorado?" Buddy asked when the waiter finally stopped hovering.

"I do! Everyone has been so friendly, and the sun shines, and it's all good." Toby cut off a piece of crusty bread and popped it in his mouth. "Has it snowed up in Gunnison yet?"

"Yup." Buddy rolled his eyes a little. "We got near a foot the other night."

"Wow. I'm amazed you made it down."

"Oh, I got chains. And Hell, once you get over the Blue it ain't so bad."

"I've never driven in the snow." He grinned. "Rain, yeah. And I've done freezing rain."

"That's worse. Besides, you walk through fire." Buddy nudged his ankle, winking, and Toby went hard in a rush that left him blinking. That smile was pure mischief, the devil shining out of Buddy's blue eyes. It was a good look. Real good.

He shifted, trying to get the seam of his new jeans in a more comfortable place.

"So, uh. Where are we going after this again?"

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Buddy's eyes darkened to a deep ocean blue. "Well, we were going to go to Whiskey Creek and line dance. But if you want to do something else..."

Oh, God. Yes, please. "Did you bring the stuff you got when we went grocery shopping the other day?"

"Uh-huh. It's in the glove box."

"Then we could just go back to my place. We could line dance to the radio."

Nodding, Buddy waved for the waiter. "Good idea. Better to teach you first, right? When it's not so crowded."

"Right..." His whole body thrummed with need. This guy got to him in a serious way.

"Well, let's go then." Two twenties appeared out of Buddy's pocket, the waiter grinning like crazy when he realized they weren't asking for change. Buddy grabbed his wrist and towed him out of the pub, ignoring the few stares they got.

No one had ever wanted him quite so fast and hard, and it made him feel just like jumping out of a plane from over a thousand feet above the earth. Like he could soar.

They got in the truck, which was parked in a back forty city lot, and Buddy turned to him, hand sliding up his thigh as the man leaned in and took a kiss just like the one they'd shared in the barn that day. Left him panting.

"Shit, I needed that. Let's get back to your place."

The truck roared and they got back to his little apartment over off Horizon Drive in no time, just zoom. Toby had given up on talking after the kiss, but his hands fared better in the whole coordination thing, sliding across to pet Buddy's leg and shoulder, making the cowboy curse and swerve a little.

"Watch it, man. Gonna make me run off the road."

"No crashing. We need to get back to my place and..."

"Definitely and." They rocked to halt.

Heck, he hadn't even noticed they were that close to home. But he wasn't gonna bitch. Not even a little. He was just gonna grab Buddy and take him inside and see about getting naked.

Of course, once the door closed behind them Toby got a little shy. Buddy pulled him right up for a kiss, and Toby put his hands on Buddy's shoulders, stepping from side to side.

"You want a drink?"

"No. I want you. Is something wrong, man?"

Poor Buddy looked so confused, bright blue eyes gone dark with need and a little worry.

"No, I just ... I need to slow down. I don't..." Spreading his hands, he shrugged. "Sorry, man."

Nodding, Buddy eased back, pulling off his jacket. "No problem. We got too hot too fast. Best way to ruin a barbeque."

That surprised a laugh out of him. "Are we marinating?"

"Sure. We'll be smoking, too." One hand came up to touch his cheek, Buddy's thumb running over the ridge of his cheekbone. "It's okay, man. Let's sit down, maybe have a beer. You got beer?"

"I do." Now he was embarrassed, his cheeks hot as a jump fire. "I'm not a tease, you know. I think I just got a little scared."

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Hands slipping into the pockets of his Wranglers, Buddy rocked on the heels of his cowboy boots and chuckled. "I was a little intense."

"So was I." No way was he letting Buddy take the blame for his own stupidity. "I got a little carried away. I want to. But I need to sit a bit, talk with you a while."

"Hey, I said it was cool."

"Sorry." Sheepish now, Toby headed for the kitchen and grabbed a couple of beers. "All I have is Rolling Rock."

"That's okay." Buddy flopped down on his little sofa, patting the space next to him. "Come and sit, man."

He sat, the inches separating them seeming like a yawning chasm now. Well, until Buddy put hand on his thigh, just sort of friendly and warm and not pressing.

"So, what's your family like?" Buddy asked, grinning over.

"Huh? Oh, they're okay. I mean, I have one. I mean, not like a wife and kids..."

"Well, that's good to know." The slow drawl and sideways look made fun, but Buddy patted his leg and eased the sting of it, making it something Toby could laugh at, too.

"Yeah, I guess it is. What about you?"

Buddy's face closed up a little. "I don't see my folks much."

"Oh. Sorry."

Shrugging, Buddy took a long swallow of beer. "Hazard of coming out. I ain't gonna squawk about it, though, when it's my own choice, yeah?"

"Right. I admire that." He really did. It made him kinda sorry for Buddy that his family hadn't taken it well, but proud that he'd stand his ground like that.

A loud snort answered him, Buddy scrunching down in the couch cushions. "Yeah, whatever. Do your folks know?"

"Uh-huh. It causes them wonder, let me tell you. They think I'm too manly."

"Oh, they should see the Boss' brother, huh?"

"No shit. Eli is a stud."

"Yeah."

They sat for a little longer before Buddy rolled his shoulders, easing around to face him more. "Want to watch TV?"

Toby shook his head, amazed at how stupid he was. He reached out, cupped one of Buddy's cheeks in his hand, thumb rubbing over freckles. "Nope. I want to make out."

"Sure?" Those eyes cut to him, little slices of blue beneath pale lashes.

"Yup." Finally over his jitters, Toby pulled Buddy in and kissed him, nice and slow, making it go deep . Hot as Hell. Yeah, he was ready.

* * * *

Finally.

Buddy had figured he was going home sore and frustrated. Not that he wouldn't have left that way, because he liked Toby enough to back off and give the man some space, but damn. This was better.

Much, much better.

He took the kiss even deeper, pushing his tongue into Toby's mouth to taste beer and the smoke Toby had sneaked out back at the bar. Testing the ridges of Toby's teeth, Buddy coaxed Toby's tongue back into his mouth, letting the guy get a feel for his flavor, too.

Not sure where to go, his hands balled up into fists at his sides. Lord knew he didn't want to spook Toby again by touching places he wasn't supposed to. He jumped nearly a foot when Toby grabbed his hands and uncurled them, thumbs rubbing over his palms and making his fingers twitch.

"S'okay, man," Toby said, pulling at his wrists, bringing Buddy's hands up to rest on his shoulders. "S'okay."

"Cool." He murmured it against Toby's mouth, his fingers stroking Toby's collarbones through his shirt.

Moaning, Toby moved even closer, one leg hooking over his, hands sliding around behind Buddy's back. Warm, hard, those hands slid right up and down, massaging stiff muscles, getting him all melty. Damn. Who knew firefighter hands could be so hot?

His own hands wandered, cupping Toby's cheeks to tilt the kiss this way and that before slipping back down to tease shoulders and arms, tickling a little at Toby's armpits through the cloth that still covered them.

A chuckle vibrated against his lips and Toby pulled back, eyes a sweet, dark charcoal color as they stared into his.

"Let's think about getting a little more naked, huh?"

"Sure. How about we do it in the bedroom, though? Less chance of getting a sore back, contorting on the couch and

all." He kinda held his breath, hoping he hadn't screwed up again.

The wide grin he got in response told him it was all good. "Come on, man. You got the uh ... the rubbers and all?"

Buddy nodded, leaping to his feet. "I do."

They wandered down the tiny hall to Toby's bedroom, kissing and hugging on each other, clothes falling to the floor with light little plops. They bounced off one wall and staggered through the door to the bedroom, Buddy's hand down the front of Toby's jeans, Toby with his eyes crossed and his tongue hanging out.

Hot. Toby's cock was long, not too thin, and hot as a brand. Buddy moaned, wrapping his fingers around it as much as tight Wranglers would let him, and grumbled about new zippers.

"Zipper? Oh! Yeah. Let me..." The fabric gave way around his hand with an ominous tearing sound when Toby yanked at it, giving him room to pull the soft boxer-briefs down and get a real hold on that sweet prick. Hoo yeah. He had a lot of plans for that, but right then Buddy just wanted to watch and pull and see how much Toby could take.

Not much, from the way Toby squirmed and grunted, cock rubbing madly into his hand. In fact, the kid kinda lost the ability to do anything else, tongue pushing out to get caught between even white teeth and eyes rolling a little. Oh, man, Toby was gonna blow any second.

"Need to, man." Toby echoed his thoughts just that fast, cock pushing into his hand, then pulsing for him. Long and hard, each shot feeling almost painful under his touch, Toby's

cock danced for him, the smell of spunk and man filling the room.

Flopping like a rag doll, Toby rolled one eye at him. "Now you see why I wanted to slow down."

Buddy hooted, his own cock just pounding with need. "Honey, you're bound to have at least one more in you."

Looking less embarrassed, Toby nodded. "Yeah, I bet I do."

"Well, there you go. 'Cause I got one ready to pop."

Toby chuckled, hands starting to move again, uncoordinated but working at it anyway. Felt so good that Buddy groaned, his hips starting to rock. Oh, right there. Yeah. Jesus. When his jeans gave way under Toby's hand he thought he might just die a happy man.

"God, you're hot," Toby said, stroking him up and down, fingers closing tight around him.

"I am. For you, man." He'd gotten off a good bit in the last few years, both with his own hand and with the hands of strangers, but this felt different. Way better. Hellacious good. His belly went tight as a drum, his balls drawing up like stones.

Goddamn.

Toby pulled at him and he rocked. It was like a really good ride, when he got the rhythm of his horse and just went with it, running like the damned wind. His chest heaved, his hips rose and fell, and his muscles clenched up tighter than a

"Gonna, man..." he said, trying to hold it back.

"What was it you said? I bet you got one more in you, at least."

"Uh-huh..." He moaned, the sound trailing off to practically nothing as he shot, his hips jerking hard before going still so he could just let his cock do all the work.

When he was done, he slumped down against Toby and panted. "Damn, honey."

"Uh-huh. Well, that wasn't exactly how I envisioned our first time, Sorry I freaked out."

Buddy grinned. "Hey, if you were thinking about it, I'm pleased."

"Then maybe we need to move on to round two."

"If that won't freak you out again..."

"Nope. I'm done being freaked out."

"Then let's do it."

* * * *

Round two wasn't scary. Really. Even with the condoms and lube making a return appearance. In fact, now that he had come, he was really mellow and ready to just oil up and let Buddy have him.

More than ready.

Damn. The man had good hands and a pretty mouth, and Toby liked everything about him, and he couldn't think of a single reason for why he'd been acting that way. Except maybe that he didn't want to screw it up.

He was the freaking king of screw-ups.

They rolled together, both of them grinning like fools and touching whatever they could. He ended up on the bottom, his legs spread so Buddy could kneel between them, fingers

skating over his belly. His cock was on the rise again, and so was Buddy's which was just too cool for words.

"You ready to get ready?" Buddy asked, then shook his head and laughed. "Ready for the lube, I mean."

"Uh-huh. I'm good." He wanted to feel Buddy in him. He really did. His earlier attack of nerves had completely disappeared.

"Then here I come." Buddy popped the lube open and got his fingers slick, and Toby watched, fascinated by the gleam of moisture and the wet sounds Buddy's fingers made rubbing together.

Then those hands were on him, one stroking his cock, the other sliding beneath his balls to find his hole.

Toby spread even more, reaching down to pull his knees back. Buddy moaned, eyes wide, tongue coming out to lick his lips, and Toby started to labor for breath just watching. When one blunt finger pushed into him, he began to pant.

"Oh. Oh, God. Hot." He was babbling, but it was true. Buddy's finger pushed at him, opened him, but it was hot, not hurt.

"You know it. You're on fire, honey."

Another finger slid right in alongside the first, stretching him so much that he had to twist against the burn. God, that was just ... Crazy good. Scary in a non-freak out way. It all but shorted him out, his body bowing up and out, his arms aching from holding his legs to his chest so tight.

Before he could so much as blink, Buddy pulled out, moving up between his legs, settling there. The broad head of Buddy's cock nudged his hole in place of the fingers. Oh. Oh,

God. Just that tiny touch had him moaning and whimpering and begging.

Why on earth had he been afraid of this again?

He just couldn't remember.

Buddy pushed in harder, all the way, hips up against Toby's ass. Toby closed his eyes and rode the feeling, letting it take him over. God. Thick. Hot. Hard. Buddy was everything a man could want and more, and Toby remembered he had hands, too, finally. He touched Buddy, exploring lean muscles, fingers skating down Buddy's back and ass. Everything flexed for him, Buddy moaning good and deep. Made him crazy.

They rocked together, both of them making happy noises, going faster and faster because they couldn't slow down. It was too good. Too hot.

So much for the second time going slower.

Buddy called his name, body bucking against his, cock pounding deep inside him with Buddy's heartbeat. God Almighty. That was ... it was so intimate, so hot.

A few quick pulls on his own cock was all it took to have Toby coming like a ton of bricks, clamping down on Buddy. Buddy came right along with him, hoarse cries torn out of that tanned throat, Buddy's hands clutching him so tight they were gonna leave bruises.

"Damn," Buddy said, collapsing down on him, that last push into him enough to make him yell.

When he could get his voice under control again, Toby wrapped Buddy in a hug, kissing his throat. "Yeah. Damn."

Christmas Fire
by Julia Talbot

Those blue eyes twinkled at him when Buddy pulled back to smile at him. "So what are you doing for Christmas?"

"Uh..." Heck, he hadn't even thought about it. His folks weren't big on the holidays, preferring to go to the Bahamas or something. So he'd been planning on seeing if any of the guys were staying in town.

Ears going red, Buddy ducked his head and shrugged. "I mean, you don't have to do nothin' with me. I was just hoping."

"Hell, yes! I'd love to do Christmas with you."

"Really? I mean, I'll have to work up 'til Christmas Eve, but I could come on down then, be here before nine, I bet."

That smile lit up brighter than a Christmas tree. A tree! He'd have to get a tree. And presents and shit. Make his place all homey and shit. That would be cool.

"Then come on. We'll make roast beast and do the nasty. Lots." Shit, could he be any more of a dork?

"Sounds like best Christmas in recent memory." Buddy snuggled a little closer against him, kissing his chin. "It really does."

"Yeah. Me too." He meant it.

Christmas with his very own Colorado cowboy. He couldn't wait.

* * * *

Buddy grunted pulling the alfalfa off the back of the truck and loading up the feeder. One down, how many zillion to go? Goddamned blizzard. They'd had fifteen inches dumped on them last night. Then the day had dawned, sunny and clear,

which meant the temperature had plummeted to almost twenty below.

It was the kind of weather that made a man's nose hair crinkle up and fall out. It was evil.

'Course that was what he got for living in the second coldest spot in the country.

The boss and family had missed the storm, heading over to see Ken's mom in Mesa for the holiday. That left him and Jeffy Martin and Joe Blackney in charge, and the snow had made for a serious emergency feeding. The alfalfa would provide the cattle much needed protein, stuff they couldn't get from scrub hay.

Which meant he probably wasn't going to the Junction for Christmas, as Jeffy and Joe both had wives and kids and would want tomorrow off as much as possible.

His cell wasn't getting any reception out in the back forty, so Buddy made a mental note to call Toby and let him know he'd be a no show when he got back to the bunkhouse.

So much for his Merry Christmas. Buddy sighed. Toby would understand. The man valued hard work and all. But it still sucked. They'd had them some big plans.

He tossed out some more hay at the next feeder, the truck laboring through the snow. He really needed to talk to Ken about a snowmobile or two, with some little trailers. Lord almighty, he wasn't in the Christmas spirit, even with old Jeffy blaring Silent Night out the cab through at him.

The cattle knew what they were up to, and started crowding the feeders, making their job even harder. Those

fool bovines moored and pushed and made him work to get them fed.

Took him and Jeffy and Joe what seemed like an eternity to do the rest of the chores, but he finally made it back to the bunkhouse, shucking boots and coat in the mudroom and going to change into dry, warm clothes before heading for the phone.

"Hello?"

Even the man's voice was enough to give him a little thrill.

"Hey, Tobe. We've had a Hell of a storm. Looks like I won't make it tonight. I'll have to stay here and keep everything from freezing."

Buddy said it all in a rush, hoping it wouldn't sound so bad that way.

"Oh." Toby paused, and Buddy could hear thumping and shit in the background. "Bummer. You're the only one there?"

"Well, I will be after about eight tomorrow morning. Joe and Jeffy will come out and help me out, but then their kids will be wanting Christmas."

"Damn." More thumps had him burning up with curiosity. "Well, we could do New Years, yeah?"

"You bet. I'd like that." Ken and family would be back by then, and he could go on down early New Year's eve.

"Okay, then. We'll do that." The last big whomp from the other end of the phone had him about to have a fit to know what Toby was doing. "What in sam Hell are you up to?"

"Huh? Oh. Uh. Toys. They guys all bought toys for the firehouse giveaway tomorrow, and I have to haul them over."

"They left them at your place?" That sounded a little weird, considering the jump center had a big old common house.

"Well, it's right down the road from me. I'm centrally located."

"Oh. Okay. Well..."

"Yeah."

Silence crackled along the line a bit, and Jeffy and Joe came on in, so Buddy rolled his shoulders and sighed. "Well, I'll call you tomorrow night, okay?"

"You'd better." Toby laughed. "Merry Christmas Eve, man."

"You too. Later."

He really felt like he'd cheated Toby, out of Christmas and out of all the other things he wanted to say, but he'd be alone tomorrow night and he could engage in a little embarrassing but hot talk, maybe.

The guys helped him check all of the pipes up at the main house and get all the vehicles plugged into the block heaters before they left.

"You gonna be okay, Buddy?" Joe asked, his sun-baked face all screwed up with concern.

"I'll be fine. Thanks for everything, guys. Go have eggnog before the roads get any worse."

"We'll be out in the morning to help out early-early," Jeffy said, clapping him on the back. "Keep your ass unfroze, yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks. Now get."

They got, laughing and jostling each other like men who had something to go home to. Lord, he was getting maudlin already and it wasn't even late on Christmas Eve. Determined

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to find some spirit, Buddy plugged in the lights on the tumbleweed Ken had picked up on his trip to New Mexico (what kind of fool brought home tumbleweeds as souvenirs ?) and put the new George Christmas CD in the boom box.

He wasn't sure if that made it better or worse. After a TV dinner and some Louis L'Amour, he gave up and turned everything off, heading for bed.

And all he knew was that he wasn't supposed to go to bed alone tonight.

Peace on earth and good will to men be damned.

* * * *

Waking up alone on Christmas morning sucked about as much going to sleep that way did. Buddy stretched, cracking his back and neck, feeling freezing cold air on his arms when they spilled out of the covers. Lord, it was like a witch's tit in a brass bra.

Buddy got up and pissed, pulling on three layers before he went to make coffee. Just about the time the pot got done making the boys showed up, and it was a quick sausage biscuit out of the freezer and out to work.

Chores did take a man's mind off things, at least.

Joe and Jeffy were in fine moods, whistling and singing, and by seven thirty Buddy was ready to scream, so he sent them off to their kids. They were just going to make him sadder than sad if they stayed.

Buddy took the truck out and checked some of the worst fences and heaviest feed loads. It took him until just after noon before he decided to head on back to the bunkhouse for

lunch. There wasn't much to do until he had to feed the critters in the barn at suppertime.

The bunkhouse smelled different. Like ... well, like something was burning to begin with. Not electrical or nothin', but like woodsmoke. Now, he knew he'd not left anything burning, so Buddy went right to the front room to make sure Joe or Jeffy hadn't done something stupid.

His eyes went wide and his mouth fell open when he saw the damned room. Tinsel had exploded everywhere, there was a six foot tree in one corner, and a cheerful log fire burned in the fireplace, just going to town. There were presents and trays of cookies and he could smell something amazing coming from the kitchen.

"What the Hell?" Maybe he should believe in Santa Claus.

"Hi!" Toby popped out of the kitchen wearing a black apron with flames printed on it. "I hope you don't mind me dropping in."

"Shit no! This is ... wow."

"I started packing it all up while we were still on the phone. If you couldn't come to Christmas, I figured it could come to you."

"This is amazing, man. Wow. Just wow." He just couldn't believe it. There was Christmas everywhere he looked, and his own personal elf had brought it to him. Buddy unstuck his feet from the floor and started toward Toby, but he remembered to take off his wet boots first. He shed his coat halfway across the floor. Then he had Toby in his arms, kissing the man senseless.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," Toby said, blinking and looking dazed. "I have pot roast. I don't know how to cook it any other way. And I'm baking the potatoes. I hope that's okay."

"That's better than okay."

"Oh! And I got pecan pie. I remember you said you liked it. They had them at Sam's."

"All this and pie, too? You're a damned good Samaritan." He took another kiss, then another, crowding Toby toward the couch. "Anything gonna burn if we do the nasty, like you promised?"

Toby fell back on the couch, grinning up at him and spreading out like a Christmas feast. "Nope. It all has at least an hour."

"Oh, what we can do with an hour." With the fire burning right nearby, the room was toasty warm, so Buddy stripped right down before he sat next to Toby. "Let's get you naked, too."

"I like naked." Their hands got all tangled in Toby's sweater, but they figured it, both of them working at cloth and zippers and buttons. Before long they were both naked as jaybirds, rolling together on the couch to get their cocks lined up for a good hump.

"I didn't see your car," Buddy said between licks and bites, his mouth hungry for Toby in ways he couldn't even express.

"I hid it behind the barn. It took me forever to get here. I started out at like, seven." Toby was cupping his ass and squeezing, just hot as anything.

"You didn't run off the road or nothin' though, right?"

"No. I got chains."

Good man. Buddy was impressed. And fucking horny. Still, he had a thought.

So that was you packing yesterday? Not fixing to take toys to the firehouse?"

"Well, I did that, too. I didn't want to lie." Toby was moving against him, hands on his skin, hips rolling.

His cock rubbed right up against Toby's, wet at the tip, so ready to blow that he could hardly stand it. Goddamn. All he could do was rub and kiss and moan.

Toby gave as good as he got, just ... damn. Those hands pulled at him, squeezed him, and one finger traced down between his asscheeks, tapping at his hole.

Damned if that didn't have him shooting right off, his come coating Toby's belly and cock, his surprised cry ringing out in the room like an off key carol.

"Buddy! Oh, god. Need."

He managed to get a hand between them, managed to stroke and pull and get his thumb along the underside, even though he felt like one of them air-filled Christmas dealies that was deflated on the lawn.

Toby bucked under his touch, shivering and moaning, and it took one, maybe two strokes before the man joined him in the pleasure, shouting and shooting and just looking like the best gift a man could have.

Hot damn.

They laid together on the couch, panting, the cooling sweat making them goosebumpy, and Buddy grabbed a quilt off the back of the couch and wrapped them up. It was fine, just to lie with his head on Toby's shoulder and watch the fire.

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Looked like a man just couldn't keep Christmas from coming. And he wasn't feeling nearly so Grinchy now anyway. So it was all good.

* * * *

Toby hummed along with O Holy Night while he pulled the roast off the stove and put it on a platter with the carrots and turnips. He woulda never thought of turnips if he hadn't called his aunt Patty and asked her what he should do instead of potatoes. He liked baked potatoes instead of boiled.

The brown and serves were done, the potatoes were fork-tender, and the roast was falling apart. They had salad and pie and even a little green bean casserole that Buddy had made in a flash with extra bacon bits.

It was really good Christmas fare.

Buddy was setting the table with Chinnet and shit, and they worked together to get the food out. When they sat down, Buddy paused, grabbing his hand.

"You mind if I say grace?"

"Nope." He was a little surprised, as Buddy had never prayed over food before, but the holidays were the time for people to do just that, so what the Hell?

"Cool." Buddy closed his eyes. Toby kept his open, watching, "Lord, thank you for this blessing that we're about to receive, and thank you for making me believe in Christmas again. Amen."

Oh, wow. "Amen." He grinned like an idiot, squeezing Buddy's hand. "That sounds almost serious and shit."

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He got a look from under Buddy's lowered lashes. "I think it is. Or at least I think it's working toward it. Is that okay?"

"That's more than okay." He had to lean over and kiss that mouth. "Merry Christmas, Buddy.

"Yeah. It is."

And they hadn't even opened presents yet. He figured that was a good sign.

The fire crackled, and they dug in, and Toby was really glad he'd let the boss set him up. It kind of made the humiliation go away completely.

Toby could so get with that. He really, really could.

* * * *

New Year's Eve

Eli glanced over at Jed, who was putting another log on the fire, They had all sorts of finger food, some queso, some cheap-assed champagne ... They were set. Jeans and flannel and bare feet was a fine look for his Thatcher.

"So, you know the new kid? The one from Oregon?" he asked, scratching idly at Scorch's ears. The silly lab mix mutt had grown into a monster.

"He's not exactly new anymore, mister." Jed stood up, stretching so hard that joints popped.

"He is until he actually works a jump season. Until he gets through wildfires with me, he's the rookie."

Look at that man. The shirt and t-shirt underneath pulled up when Jed went all the way up on tiptoes, arms over his head. Eli all but drooled.

Jed just shook his head and gave him a look of fond disgust. "You're a crusty old bastard, Eli."

"You know it, Thatcher."

"So what about the new kid?" Jed asked, coming over to snuggle up against his side.

"He's hooked up. With that hand of Ken's. They spent Christmas together, and he's talking about commuting from Gunnison like I do from here."

Gunnison was another two hours to Grand Junction from where Eli was in Cedaredge, though, so that was a Hell of a haul. Still, if you found someone worth it, you had to go for it. He knew that from experience.

Jed just laughed. "Lord, now you'll have a swelled head from being all matchmakery."

"That's not what's giving me a swelled head, Thatcher." His hands went wandering, finding that little patch of belly and letting his fingers pull at the fine hairs there.

"Watch it. We'll miss the ball drop." Jed didn't seem to mind, though, just sorta oozing into his lap. It still amazed him, the fire between them.

"Wouldn't be the first time." He grinned, kissing Jed's smiling mouth. "You think Toby and his man are anywhere near as happy as we are?"

Jed thought about that a moment, idly stroking his hand where it rested on Jed's belly. "Nah. They're still in the blush of first love. We've got history."

Yeah. The blush of first love for him and Jed had been kind of a hard road. Good, for all that, but hard. "Well, whatever their deal is, I hope they have a good year."

"Oh, hell yes. So do I. That means the kid will leave you alone."

Rolling his eyes, Eli grabbed a stray hair and pulled. "He stopped flirting with me when he knew I was taken. Get over it."

"I am. Really. And ow." Jed pinched his hand. "You think the fire needs one more log?"

"Nah. I think it will last most of the night, just like that. And I've got another fire that needs tending."

"Yeah?" Jed worked one hand down into his jeans, fingers just touching him where he needed it the most. "I can do that."

"What do you think we ought to get Toby and his cowboy for Christmas if they're still together next year?" Eli asked idly, stretching his legs out and sucking in his belly so Jed could get to more of his skin.

He got no answer, and glanced up to meet Jed's dancing blue eyes. Eli burst into laughter, nodding.

Together they chorused, "Yeah. We should get them a dog."

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