



No Bull

A Torquere Press Single Shot by BA Tortuga

Man, it sucked hairy donkey balls to wake up in the hospital.

It wasn't the first time Joss had done it. Lord knew, you rode bulls enough, you were gonna get stomped and forget where you were. He remembered them asking him if he knew where he was, and he remembered saying, "On the floor..."

Now he was in one of those beds with the rails, and there was beepy shit, and his head was hurting fierce. Not as fierce as his arm and ribs and his shoulder. There was something really wrong with his riding arm. Something that had it all immobile and hanging in suspension and shit...

"Joss, man? You really awake this time or is it more stoned stupid?" A bright red head appeared in front of his face, just like magic. Damn. Mackie looked like hammered shit -- dark circles under his dark circles -- but that grin was familiar as all get out.

If he'd had a free arm, cause the one not all wrapped up was full of tubes, he woulda swung and seen what he could hit. As it was, he settled for a hard snort.

"Yeah, m'here. You look like warmed over poo."

"Yeah, well, you give us a scare, man. I had to come as soon as the round was over. Hell, I called your momma and all. She got all fluttery."

Oh, lord. Mackie calling Momma? Never good. Never.

"So I ain't dead. What all is wrong? And tell me you ain't got momma flying over?" They were somewhere. Australia? New Zealand? Hawaii? Someplace where it took hours to fly.

"You got pins in your shoulder, your elbow. You broke a metric fuckton of bones and cracked a couple ribs. Your head's okay, though..."

"Well, why couldn't I have hurt somethin' I don't use?" He gave Mackey a grin, because his best buddy was looking downright panicky.

"Oh, that'd've been too fucking easy." He got one of those wicked smiles. "You won the go-round."

"No shit?" Well, that might pay for one night in the hospital, huh? He grinned, rolling his head to look at the door. "They ever gonna bring me food?"

"Shit, you sure you want what they bring? I'll go fetch some burgers and a milkshake, if you want."

"No!" He cleared his throat. "I mean, yeah, but maybe you could call one of the other guys to bring it? You could stick around." He wasn't gonna sleep again for a bit, and he needed the company. His whole body was starting to hurt.

"Surely can." Mackey plopped down in a chair beside him, one hand right there next to his bed, the other flipping open a cell phone. "Hey, Cody? Yeah. Yeah, dude. He's awake and starving. Get the man a cheeseburger and fries and a strawberry shake. Nah. I got cash on me, I'll give you some."

Joss sighed, relaxing back against the thin, scratchy pillows. He could always count on Mackey. Even when he couldn't rub two nickels together or keep his sorry ass out of the well, Mackey was there.

Course, the vicey-versy was true, too, wasn't it? He'd seen Mackey through the death of Mackey's daddy, through a cracked pelvis and a slump so bad didn't anybody think the cowboy'd come out the other side.

He inched his fingers over, ignoring the pull of tubes, and touched Mackey's hand. Just made him feel better, knowing he wasn't alone no more.

Sure as shit, Mackey's fingers curled around his, just a second, just long enough to feel it, to know Mackey was right there and paying attention.

Joss shifted, peering down at his toes. He wiggled them, just in case. Well, at least that was all right.

"Careful now, or I'll reach down and tickle 'em and laughing'd hurt them ribs like all get out."

"Well, I had to make sure they worked, now didn't I? So who won the event?" He figured it had to be over by now, short round and all.

"Hell, I hadn't even asked yet." He got another quick goofy-assed grin, Mackey's cheeks turning all red.

"Oh." That said something 'bout how hurt he was, Joss guessed. "Any word on how long I'll be out?"

For the first time, that smile disappeared, those blue eyes boring into him. "Yeah. You sure you wanna hear? It ain't good."

Damn. A deep breath strained his ribs, but Joss nodded. He needed to know. "Yeah. I want to hear."

"Six months, for sure, maybe longer. You ain't got much left of your riding arm and lots of metal in it now."

"Shit." His hand automatically tried to flex, and screaming agony had him gritting his teeth. Sweat popped out on his forehead.

"Easy. Easy now." A straw got pushed against his lips, Mackey right close. "You ain't gotta think about it now. Just take a drink, huh? Think about that food that's coming for you?"

A sip eased his throat some. "Yeah," Joss said, licking his lips. "Strawberry, right?"

"You know it. Strawberry and a cheeseburger'll fix you up."

"I'm messed up, huh?" He wheezed a little laugh, trying to stop feeling like he was gonna have a screaming fit.

"That critter stomped you but good, but don't you worry, none. I ain't gonna leave you hanging in the wind, now." No. No, he didn't imagine Mackey would.

Except Mackey had to ride, or he'd not make the season at all. "I guess I can ride in your trailer when we get back to the forty eight, huh?"

"Don't make me hit you, asshole. It'll hurt like hell and I hear these Island jails have big old scary dudes in 'em. Hell, it's damned near like it ain't home here, huh? I mean, the gate pullers were wearing floweredy shirts..."

"That was a sight, huh? Ol' Pud Franklin in them showy flowers?" His eyes had damned near bugged out, he'd seen that.

"You know it. And some durned fool had draped Hustler with a bright red flower lei-doolie."

"No way! Bet he stomped that to bits, huh?" That bull was mean as shit and twice as slippery to ride.

"You know it. Looked like the ground was bleeding." Mackey settled on the bed next to his hip, hand running through that shock of copper-penny hair.

"I bet. You look tired, man." His fingers could just brush Mackey's Wranglers.

"I been watching your stuff. Didn't want you to come to and not have a friend."

"Thanks, man." He meant that, all the way down to his unbroken toes. He always meant it. "So where the Hell is my cheeseburger?"

"Who the hell knows? Quit yer bitchin', cowboy." Mackey winked, goosed his leg.

"Shit, watch it. I'm bruised all over. So did you make your ride?" He hadn't even asked, and didn't that make him feel like an ass.

"Nah. I didn't even go two." He got a shrug. "My head was somewhere else."

"Uh huh." Before he could rib Mackey about that, Cody Ames showed up, bearing the biggest bag of fast food he'd ever seen and a big old shiner on his eye.

"There we go..." Mackey hooted and shook his head, goofball son of a bitch.

"Well, hey, man. Did you make your ride? Heard you pulled Under the Gun." Lord, that food smelled good. And kinda gross, too.

"I did. How you feeling?" Mackey took the shake from Cody as the man jabbered on, plopped a straw in and held it to his mouth.

He had to suck before he could answer, the cold, creamy shake soothing his scratchy throat. "Feel like hammered shit."

"Look sorta banged up." Cody shook his head. "How long you gonna be out, man?"

"Don't nag him, kid. He's still working on the solid food phase." Damn, Mackey could get plumb... growly.

Cody raised his brows. "Not nagging, you old mother hen. Just askin'."

Joss shook his head. "Don't know. Doc says six months."

"Goddamn! That's deep into the season." Cody looked as shocked as all get out and Mackey rolled those big ole eyes, forcing the straw back into his mouth.

Didn't he know it? After the holidays, shit started right back up. And the first part of the season was his best for making points. By the end he was feeling old and tired and started fucking up. The eighteen year olds were harder to beat every year.

Cody just kept jabbering away, and it was almost comforting, just listening and drifting. Mackey fed him a french fry here, a nibble of pickle - nothing much, really, but enough to settle the gnawing hole inside him. Thankfully, the greasy meat stayed on the bun, but he got some of the grilled bread, crusty around the edges just like he liked it.

He finally swallowed and smiled at Cody. "Buddy, I'm real tired."

Cody nodded, winced a little, then looked over at Mackey. "You need anything, man?"

"Nope. I'm gold. You heading home soon?"

"Yeah, I got a flight out in the morning. Gonna go see my momma."

Cody did love his momma's fried chicken. "Well, safe trip, man. Thanks for bringing me food. You've always had my back." Just a few steps behind Mackey.

"Yeah." Mackey and Cody talked a minute, long enough that he drifted off. Then Mackey was back, skinny ass leaning on the bed.

"Hey," he managed to mumble, good hand trying to lift up off the bed. "Thanks."

"Yeah. Get some sleep. I'll head off the nurses."

"Okay." A man couldn't ask more than that. They'd try to kick Mackey out and Mackey would raise a fuss and that would be that...

He could sleep easy with that kind of friend around.

After God knew how long of watching nurses and Joss and monitors and shit, Mackey finally just gave up the ghost. He dragged the chair close enough that he could rest his arms on Joss' bed, his chin on his arms, and he slept.

Hard.

He dreamed about riding and about eating fried chicken and a little about how goddamn fine Joss looked on the shore fucking around on the surf board thing.

He woke up to something clunking into his chin, the sound of muttering and cursing low and pained floating down at him. It was just as well; the dream Joss had started swimming in poi.

Poi. Jesus fucking Christ.

"Hey. Hey, Joss. 's'okay." He hoped it was okay; his fucking lower back felt pretty fused and he didn't know if he was ever going to be able to straighten up.

"Mmph? Ngh." Yeah, that was coherent. Poor Joss sounded drugged to the gills.

"Fuck. I gotta." Shit. Okay. How bad could it possibly hur...

Sweet Christ!

He jerked up, biting back his groan as he moved. Okay. Bad. Fuck him raw.

"Mackey?" Okay, Joss sounded more alert, and when he looked up as far as he could, those blue eyes were looking at him, not too clear, but definitely concerned. "S'your back?"

"Yeah. Slept crookedy. You want a drink?" See him, see him be functional and shit.

Fuck, he needed a shower.

Coffee.

Possibly chicken fried steak by the pound.

"Some water. Then you promise me you'll go get some food and all. Some clean clothes." Joss' pug nose wrinkled up. "You stink, man."

"Fuck you." He rolled his eyes, went to see if there was any water in that flimsy little plastic pitcher. "I ain't got on my lucky shirt, do I? I'll switch out."

Cody'd checked him out of the hotel and brought over their gear 'til he could figure out what was next, anyway.

"They prob'ly got some kind of family dealie...they did in Tulsa, you remember? Like a thing where you can go shower and shave."

Yeah, the hospital in Tulsa had been right nice, with condos for families of intensive care patients. Or friends of famous cowboys.

"Yeah." He nodded, poured out a measure of water and grabbed a straw. "How you feeling?"

"Logy headed as Hell. You want some of the good drugs? I can sneak you some." Eyes twinkling, Joss grinned at him through the bruises, shifting on that damned hospital bed.

"Lucky bastard." Joss was at that nasty part, where the swelling was coming down, the bruises turning colors.

"Uh huh. You get to walk out if you want to." That grimace spoke volumes. Damn, but he remembered how that felt, all tied up and nowhere to go.

"You'll be able to go home middle of the week, they said." They'd be out of here by Thanksgiving, if they were lucky.

"Yeah?" Look at that smile. "That would be cool. What are you gonna do for the holiday? Go see your folks?"

Right. Like he was gonna leave Joss to that scary woman Joss called Momma. "I reckoned I'd stick with you a bit, make sure you could manage..."

"Yeah?" Joss' fingers scrabbled at the scratchy blanket a bit, working toward him. "I'd like that. You know I don't want to go back home with her." Hell, he hadn't even had to say it out loud.

"I know. We'll figure something. You'd have a time cutting turkey with that arm." He took Joss' fingers, squeezed them.

"We will. Man, I have to piss." They stared at each other, then just cracked up, both of them laughing until the nurse came in, looking all pissy.

Lord, that was a growly woman. "He's gotta do his business and I need a shower, honey. Is there a place?"

"You can go ahead and wash up in there," she said, pointing at the little head in the room. There was one of those little walk in showers that drained right into the floor. "Since the other nurses on duty say you're a bulldog, I won't ask you to go. I can help him while you do that."

"I'm more of a pit bull than a bulldog, really, but thanks, darlin'. I thank you and that cowboy's fine sensibilities thank you."

Joss was still blushing like a fool, though. He hated that kind of shit, for all that they'd both been laid up enough to get used to someone letting them pee in a can.

He nodded and winked and grabbed his duffle bag. It didn't take long for a dose of hot water, some Irish Spring, and a close shave made him feel like a brand new man. Lord, yes. Now he needed coffee and a sausage biscuit, damn it.

He really needed to get to a state where poi wasn't a staple.

By the time he got back out, the nurse was gone and Joss was staring at the ceiling, teeth set, jaw hard as rock.

"You okay, man?" He reached out before he even thought, hand on Joss' ankle.

"Hurtin' some. She sure manhandled me." The man would never say much more than that, but Mackey could see the pain in the stiff lines of Joss' body.

"Well, shit. Let's get the pillows better set for you. Damn folks, jostling and shit." He jabbered on and on, getting Joss better settled, shoving pillows here and there.

Fucking nurses, treating folks like they weren't human.

"Mackey. Man, come on and just sit with me." Easing back on the pillows, Joss gestured for him to sit on the side of the bed instead of the chair.

He settled, thinking about that cup of coffee for half a second before he let it go. "They gonna feed you, you think?"

"I imagine. You want to go get doughnuts? Or something greasy? I won't stop you." That damned trapped hand just came up to touch him again, making him want to rip all the tubes out.

"I'm good. I'll go hunting something after a while." Hell, Joss'd crash again here soon and he'd hunt up some grub. His fingers traced the outline of the tape on Joss' hand. He fucking hated IVs, always had.

He got a grin, Joss' look knowing as anything. "Back feel better after that shower?"

"You know it. There's nothing like a decent shower with hot water." He waited a heartbeat and grinned. "Too bad that wasn't nothing like a good shower..."

"No shit." Hooting, Joss poked him. "I got a sponge bath, man. I think that nurse has a closet hard on for cowboys."

"Christ, buddy, you'd get so lost in her cleavage you'd have to search for a month to find your way out."

Joss laughed until he wheezed, and Mackey was sure that nurse would come growl again, but she stayed away right enough. Joss' stubby blond lashes started to droop not long after, and he figured he could go get that coffee.

He reckoned all the other guys were going to be gone by now, so, after coffee and food, Mackey

intended to find himself a doctor that would tell him what day to buy plane tickets. As soon as he could, they'd head to Uncle Billy's old place, spend the winter.

He'd had just about enough of hospitals and Paradise and all.

If Joss hadn't? Well, the man was real hurt. Joss couldn't fight him until after he'd gotten them both back home.

Joss figured he was just gonna die.

Hell, by the time they got to Mackey's uncle's place, he would have been happy to. His whole body throbbed, and his arm felt like it was so hot and tight that the skin would split.

Well, that might have been because they had just stitched shut the split he'd already had in his skin, after the swelling went down some.

He hated that Mackey had to carry both their duffels, too. That poor back didn't need the strain.

"Anything I can do to help?" he asked, watching Mackey hump shit up the old wood stairs.

"Sit and be pretty, cowboy. I gotta go turn the water on and all." The place was old and dusty and wore down, but it wasn't a goddamn single-wide and it wasn't snuggled up next to another house, so it'd do.

Hell, he even liked the flat land and big sky view.

He found an old, beat up recliner he could settle in and put a pillow under his arm. "Feel like shit, making you do for me."

"Shut up." Mackey rolled his eyes, headed back out the kitchen door. "There's a coke machine out here on the porch..."

"Yeah, but does it work?" That was the all important question.

"I dunno. Lemme turn the water on and I'll find out." He heard some creaking, some clanking and then the screen door banged open, Mackey with two Cokes in hand. "We got water and Coke. All I gotta do is head to the Winn Dixie later for food."

"Well, there you go." Yeah, he could just sit right there and nap. Hell of a lot more comfy than the damned hospital bed. Or the plane. Even first class couldn't ease a fifteen hour flight.

The coke was popped open and put on a TV tray by his elbow, then Mackey started wandering as he dozed. Windows were opened and the radio turned on, water ran for a sinkful of glasses. Normal sounds. Good sounds.

He woke with a start, noting the path the sun had traveled while he slept. His head buzzed a little with the drug hangover, and Joss yawned, yelping when he tried to stretch. Shit.

"Easy." Mackey was right there, hand on his wrist, his shoulder. "Try it now. I'll keep the important parts still."

"Oh..." Damn, that felt good, being able to twist and turn and work the kinks out. "You're too good to me, man."

"Yep. A regular angel among men." That shit-eating grin shone down at him, Mackey wicked as hell. "Man, you should see the crap I found in the kitchen. There was a possum in the freezer all wrapped up in butcher paper."

Well, that wasn't unusual, was it? "Long as it's not an armadillo. Those things are nasty."

"They carry leprosy. You need help getting to the john, or are you cool?"

"I could stand to go. I can do it fine, but I'm not sure I can get out of this chair." He rode bulls for a living, but damned if he could get his ass off the recliner...

"That's easy enough." Mackey stood in front of him, one hand around his waist, the other under his good arm. "Okay, now. Up and at 'em."

He shot up faster than he expected, stumbling right up against Mackey's solid body. God, that felt good, and he let himself lean a little. Not out of weakness or nothin'. Just because he'd always wanted to.

"I got you." Mackey let him rest a second, least until he noticed a bulge in those ancient Wranglers, then Mackey eased back, getting him turned toward the bathroom. "I'll go rustle something for supper."

"Okay." Well. He just stood there and stared at Mackey's back for a moment, then headed in to handle the lengthy business of peeing with a cast and all. Hell, by the time he got out there were Ranch style beans on the stove and Mackey was rummaging through the freezer.

"There's hamburger meat and Elgin sausage. You got a preference?"

"Oh, we could have sausage." He liked that. Lord, he was swimmy headed. Maybe he could lean on the counter. He was sick of sitting and lying on a bed and whining.

"Sure. You want a chair?" The package of sausage was chunked in the nuker and the world's oldest can of green beans plopped on the counter.

Hey gave the beans a jaundiced once over. "Nope. Don't want those poor assed green beans, either. Isn't there something less bomb shelter?"

"Picky picky picky." Mackey went over to the pantry and bent over, digging through the cans. "There's peas from 1968..."

Oh, man, that was gag worthy. "How old is the sausage, you think?"

"I dunno. A while. It's been good and frozen, though." Lord, Mackey'd eat anything.

"Mac. Man. Come on, while I'm still standing we can go to the grocery and get something." No way was he eating mystery meat. A man had to have standards.

"You ain't up to buying a bill of groceries, are you?" That look of concern was damn near cute.

"Well, if I get botchilism from old food I'll be worse. Hell, what is there in town? We could get a hamburger." He just...he wanted good food more than he wanted sleep. "Or a steak..."

"There's a little steak house, yeah. It's not fancy, but it used to be real good."

"Well, I could surely eat a steak." He laughed hard. "Though you might have to cut it up for me like a momma."

"We'll just have 'em whirl it through a blender like that time I broke my jaw, huh? You could suck it through a straw." The beans got turned off, sausage and ancient ptomaine-poisoned cans chunked in the trash.

"You're fixing to make me hurl. Like the time you came off that little spinny bull in Amarillo and spewed blueberry..."

"Oh, shut up." Mackey turned a little green. The man still couldn't look blueberry pancakes in the eye.

"Uh huh. Well, you get like for like." Easing away from the counter, Joss started heading for the door, figuring he needed the extra time to get to the truck.

"Man, if you weren't hurt, I'd kick your ass." Mackey grabbed the keys for the Chevy, grabbed their wallets.

"You and what army, buddy?" That was a running gag for them, depending on which one of them was laid up. Maybe they needed a new line of work.

"Oh, man. I'd just get you while you were sleeping. Shave you bald and draw happy faces on your head." Mackey helped him down the steps and then up into the truck.

"Shithead." Damned if Mackey wouldn't do it, too. He'd all but had to staple his hat to his head at one event because Mackey had dyed his hair blue when he'd passed out drunk.

"Yup." Mackey jumped into the truck, grinning like a fool. "Like I said, you're lucky you're on the injured list."

"Uh huh. So you think they'll have Texas toast, or those yeast rolls?" He liked Texas toast. Especially if there was gravy. "We ought to go to the grocery and just pick up the stuff for jambalaya."

"You'd have to talk me through cooking it, but sure. I'll get some burgers and hot dogs and shit, too."

Mackey hit the cattle guard and slowed way down, trying not to jostle him.

"Mmm. Hot dogs. Oh, do you think there will be cobbler? At the steak house?" Man, he could really eat some cobbler.

"Probably, yeah. Either cobbler or some pie. This ain't a fancy cheesecake place." Mackey pulled out and headed into the little town. "Man, so long as they don't send us that gray slimy shit, I'll be happy."

"No shit." That poi stuff wasn't cowboy food, that was for sure. "I tell you, you coulda glued books together with that."

"I think they probably do, for the tourists." They started laughing, both of them hooting like a pair of loons.

He could always count on Mac for that. It eased him, all the way down deep where he was bruised and battered and worried as hell. Joss figured he wasn't getting any younger. What would Mackey say if he said he might retire, though?

They pulled into a little joint with a blinking sign that said "Freida's". Well, it sorta said "r i a's", but he got it.

He eased out of the truck, breathing in the smell of meat and smoke and grease. That was the ticket. He'd had all the Spam and Jello he could stand.

"Come on, gimpy. If you're nice, I'll let you smell my beer."

"Oh, asshole." His free hand didn't have no damned tubes in it anymore, did it? He whapped Mackey on the shoulder. Hard.

"Ow. Oh, ow. I'm bein' abused!" He might have to kill the skinny son-of-a-bitch.

"I'll abuse you for sure, you don't shut up." The red headed waitress gave them a grin and a shake of the head when they walked in, waving them toward a table. He gave her the big eyes. "I ought to hurt him more, huh?"

"Oh, honey, given that hair and the shit-eating grin, that's one of them MacIntyre boys. You can't keep them sons of bitches down."

"You got that right, honey." He grinned right back, scooting around a highbacked chair and trying not to hit anything. "He's just like a jack in the box."

"Boing boing." Mackey chuckled, shook his head. "Man, I can't catch a break."

The waitress cracked her gum. "Looks like your buddy caught enough for both of y'all."

"No shit. He's tore up, sure enough."

Joss grimaced, giving Mackey a look. "I'll live. 'Specially if you bring me steak. And cobbler. You got cobbler?"

"Yes, sir. Blackberry and cherry." Oh, thank God. "Today's special is the beef tips. Sides are mashed taters, okra, pintos and corn."

Heaven on a plate. Lord have mercy, he was home. "Yes please, ma'am. Then he don't even have to cut it up for me."

"I want the hamburger steak, honey, and two iced teas." Mackey brought an extra chair over for him to prop his arm up on.

"Thanks, man." They sat for a bit, waiting for their tea, but once they got it, he looked at Mackey, meeting those bright eyes. "You got a plan beyond getting me healed up?"

"I dunno." Mackey's eyes sort of slanted away, which was weird as all fuck. "I got some ideas."

"Like what?" He tore open a little pack of club crackers with his teeth, munching away. "I mean, another four weeks and I'll be mobile again."

"I'm just... Well, I got a chance to buy the ranch and the house, maybe get a start on some stock..."

"Yeah?" Oh. Oh, man. That was. Sounded like Mackey was fixin' to settle. "I was thinking..."

"Yeah?" Mackey shifted a little, staring at him. It was a little weird, Mackey being all unsure.

"Uh huh. I was thinking I was going to retire." There, he'd said it out loud. But damn, he was too old to be getting tossed around like a rag doll and stomped and shit.

"No shit? Because..." Mackey frowned, fingers drumming on the table. "I thought we'd lost you. I mean, we been through some shit, but this time..."

"Yeah." He'd been out solid when they drug him out of the arena, but he'd woke up back in the

medical area, screaming and hollering. That kind of pain... Well. "I just keep thinking my heart ain't been in it since about June."

Mackey nodded once. "I'm thinking I'd like to set down some roots for a bit. Fix the house up. Rebuild that barn. I could raise bulls."

"You could. You've always had a good nose for which ones will buck..." The little plastic wrapper from the crackers crinkled under the force of his grip, his good hand opening and closing. "If you need an investor, I reckon I could help."

"You think you'd want to? I mean, I'd let you stay up to the house anyway."

"I got all that money." It might not seem like a lot to a banker, but for a cowboy, he was pretty set. "I might as well throw my rope in with yours, unless you got something else in mind."

"Nope. I was mostly just hoping you'd not be all pissy that I retired."

"Hell no." The waitress saved him from being all mushy by bringing their food, and those beef tips had mushrooms and onions and gravy and damned if there wasn't Texas toast.

Life was getting better by the minute.

Mackey came in from the barn, stomping his feet and shaking the rain off his hat. God damn, that blue norther was coming in like a son of a bitch. He was hoping Joss wasn't feeling the sudden cold too bad. The man had just got stitches out a week ago and lord knew that was gonna throb.

He headed over to the wood box, dumped the load in. They'd need it tonight, sure as shit.

"Hey. You need any help?"

Yeah, like he was gonna let the fool carry anything yet. Still, Joss looked better, all the bruises on his face gone, the cast that had held his arm immobile missing now. And that grin was twice the wattage.

"Nah, I got it." He stole a look, nodding to himself. Looking good. Hell, yeah.

He did a double take when Joss looked right back, giving him a once over that he couldn't mistake. "You're good, huh?"

"Uh." Mackey blinked, his body going SPROING. "Uh-huh."

"Cool. I got some gumbo on for supper." The man was so damned proud that he could chop vegetables now. Contribute.

"Oh, hell, yeah. That's way better than mac and cheese with hot dogs." He could cook that and omelettes and stuff in the can.

"You know how I like to make gumbo." Joss could only do Cajun stuff, but man, that he could do. In a big way.

"I know and the weather's just right for it." He thumped himself a little so he could get the fireplace set up. "You making cornbread?"

"Uh huh. I got that blackberry cobbler out of the freezer." They'd taken a little help from Mrs. Smith's on that one. Neither of them could bake for shit. They needed a little old church lady to befriend them.

'Course, they'd been managing okay with the boxed stuff and the frozen stuff. Really. Especially once Joss did that whole supervising of the pantry cleaning thing.

The beans from the sixties were gone. The whole flour with weevils thing? Gone. Now they had Jiffy mix and shit.

"How's the arm?" He got the wood all set up, stuffing paper in the cracks.

"Not bad. Not bad at all." Flexing a little, Joss snorted. "Still weak as a baby, but not bad."

"You'll get there. You just gotta do that therapy shit that guy showed you." He hadn't liked that guy at all, all citified and shit.

"Shit, I just gotta get to helping you around here, maybe doing some roping on that plastic cow." Neither one of them had ever stuck with physical therapy worth a damn.

"Hell, you might just learn to lasso the son of a bitch..." He waited for Joss to whap him, good and hard.

"Oh, fuck you, man." That good hand wasn't weak at all. Joss used it to whack his ass hard on the way by to stir the gumbo.

Mackey bit back his reply and went to set a match to the fire. "You gonna stay here over Christmas?" They'd not done a lot of talking about not going back on circuit, about not living the life.

"Uh huh." Those blue eyes flashed back at him, Joss' face taking on that sad, boyish look that had won him thousands of fans. "Unless you're going to see your momma."

"We'll have to go for supper, at least." It was only a two hour drive.

"Well, we can sure do that." Nodding, Joss lifted the lid on the gumbo pot, the spicy, heavenly smell making him drool.

"Oh, man. That's better than Christmas." The windows started to rattle a little bit as the wind picked up.

"Nah. Christmas is gonna be amazing this year. I can feel it. Here, taste."

He leaned and blew on the spoon before taking a good, big bite. "Oh..." Hot, spicy, rich - just like he liked it.

When he got done humming and yumming Joss was right there, staring at him, eyes wide as saucers. Maybe as wide as dinner plates. He stared back, feeling the heat rise up in him - in his cheeks and cock both.

"Good gumbo, huh?" Man, Joss licked his lips and Mackey watched and Lord have mercy he was suddenly needing.

"Uh-huh." He caught himself leaning forward and stepped back, hand down to hide the bulge in his jeans. "I. Uh. Fire. I should. Start it. Right."

"Whut?" Man, those eyes had gone all cloudy and confused. "Oh. Sure. 'Fore it gets any colder."

"Yeah." He turned a half-turn, trying to not look like a randy goat as he stared. God, Joss was a fine, fine specimen of cowboy. Christ, he'd better not've said that right out loud.

"Well..." He would swear he felt Joss' hand brush across his ass. "I'd best get the cornbread out of the oven."

"Uh-huh..." His eyelids drooped and he could swear the smell of wanting was on the air.

"Because it would be bad if it burned." Maybe he could see it a little, too. That had to be a bulge in Joss' jeans to answer his.

"Yeah." His fingers curled up into fists. He wanted to touch, so bad.

"Okay." Joss turned away, a little too fast, cussing a bit as something hissed on the stove.

He stepped closer again, reaching out without thinking. "You okay?"

"Uh-huh." Turning around, Joss smacked right into him, chest to his, both of them grunting. Joss' hands came up to hold his shoulders, squeezing at him.

Oh, sweet Jesus. His hands landed on Joss' waist, held on tight just like they had a mind all their own.

"Hey." Those pale lashes swept down, then up, Joss looking at him like he'd hung the damned moon or something.

"Hey." Shit.

Just shit.

He wanted to...

Yeah.

Mackey leaned in and did it, took a quick, hard kiss and then stepped back, heart pounding like all get out.

Joss stared at him a minute, blinking, then stepped right up and kissed him back. Hard. Oh. Oh, sweet Jesus. He got his hands around Joss' waist, dragging that hard, fine body up next to his. God, he'd been dreaming about this for years. He got a hard press of lips and the touch of Joss' tongue. Then he heard a low moan and Joss wrapped around him like an octopus.

They stumbled back, his back hitting the wall. Oh. Support. Good. His hand slid down and he got himself a double handful of ass.

"Shit," Joss gasped, rubbing up on him, all but climbing him. Jesus fuck, that felt good. Joss was warm and hard and just kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

He spread his legs, thighs tight as they started rubbing like they were two sticks and a fire needed starting. Joss bit his lip a little, hands digging into the muscles of his shoulders, holding him close. Lord, that man could kiss. His prick was aching, but fuck it was sweet, the pressure, the way Joss rubbed against him.

He couldn't quite believe it. Hell, maybe Joss couldn't either, because the man pulled back and looked at him, eyes a little wild, but so hot they burned. "You okay?"

"Uh-huh. I didn't. I didn't know you was..." He touched Joss' lip, needing to know how hot it was.

"I been waiting, Mac. Been just waiting." That tongue slipped back out to wet his fingers, making him jump.

"I been looking a long time." Almost from the get go.

"Yeah?" That grin just made his heart race. "Me, too. Just seemed stupid while we was on tour."

"Yeah." He swallowed hard, fingers moving until he could cup Joss' face, touch. "You reckon I gotta keep on waiting?"

"No, sir. I am officially retired." Shifting from one foot to the other, Joss leaned into his touch, cheek pressing against his palm. "I'm announcing after Christmas."

"You are still one of the best, but I can't say I'm sad about that." He'd already called his sponsors, his daddy. He was going into the contractor side.

"Me neither." Looking up again, Joss nodded, good and firm, just like he always did when he'd made up his mind. "And I been thinking about all the stuff I never have gotten to do..."

Oh, now. He had himself a list. "Yeah? Like what?" Mackey needed to hear this.

"Like you." That was all he got before Joss was kissing him again, acting like he couldn't not, like he had to have a taste.

His knees buckled and they slid down the wall, Mackey pulling Joss right into the curve of his body. Oh, he'd imagined a million times and hadn't been even close.

They had to wrangle around Joss' bad arm when they pulled their shirts off, but that was enough to keep them going a good while, fingers tracing skin. Joss had calluses that mirrored his, rubbing against his arms, his nipples.

Best of all was when Joss leaned in and they were skin-to-skin, waist to shoulder. Mackey couldn't have stopped his moan for love or money, couldn't have stopped the way his eyes met Joss' in a pure, happy shock. That was almost like looking in the damned mirror, too. Joss had that same amazed fucking look. Like he was a kid on Christmas day and there was a brand new saddle under the tree.

"We're gonna burn the cornbread." His fingers explored Joss' belly, tracing each and every muscle.

"Yeah, but the gumbo will be fine. We can make more bread." Joss touched him back, hands shaping his shoulders and arms, sliding down his ribs.

"Uh...uh-huh..." Lord have mercy, those hands would make a dead man cry.

"Kiss me again, man." Joss hooted, holding him even closer. "That sounded like one of them TV movies. Mean it, though."

"Okay." Like he was going to argue with something he'd wanted for so damn long

They got to kissing again, and he figured his head was just gonna explode. Joss all but climbed on top of him, lips pressed so tight against his that neither one of them could breathe.

He was fixin' to embarrass himself by shooting like a redneck by a duck blind. Which, on the one hand, funny. On the other, not so much.

"Your back ain't gonna like this. Let's turn off supper and go someplace soft."

Yeah. Yeah, that would let him back down a bit.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Mackey still wasn't a hundred percent sure he wasn't dreaming, but if he was, well he'd take it.

"Well, let's go." They sorta turned together, turning off the stove and wandering to the bedroom, neither of them really looking at the other. Not like they was ashamed or nothing, just like they weren't sure what to say now they'd decided to do this thing.

Mackey hoped the sheets didn't smell bad or nothing. He'd washed them just a couple days ago. Hadn't smoothed them or nothing, though.

Joss turned again, reaching, and those battered hands grabbed right at his belt buckle, pulling it loose before he could even blink. Then the man went to work on his button and zipper. Didn't look like Joss cared, right this second. He started working on getting Joss naked, too, needing to see all that skin.

Funny, how he knew every scar, every rough spot, but how different they were when he could look his fill. When he could touch. They stared, both of them just tracing each other like lines on a map. He'd helped Joss in the chute, helped the man off the arena floor, but he never prayed to get this. It was fucking fascinating, watching his hands on Joss' belly, Joss' chest.

"Sweet." That voice had gone all rough, Joss looking up at him with blue eyes just on fire. "Can I?" Joss' hand hovered over his johnson.

"Lord, yes." He watched as those familiar fingers curled around his shaft. It almost took a second for him to remember to feel the touch.

"Oh, God, Mackey. Hot. So fine." Sliding up and down, that hand made him go up on tiptoes, the feeling so good and new and right that he thought he might just come right then.

"Joss. Buddy. You'll make me." His thighs were tight as rocks, hips starting to rock.

"Uh-huh." Tongue caught between his teeth, Joss just kept touching him, stroking. That thumb rubbed over the head of his cock, pushing at his slit.

"Uhn..." His head fell back, cracking good and hard against the wall. Good thing he was damn busy shooting his brains out of his cock or it'd hurt.

"Jesus fuck." Joss' head whipped up, a shocked look on his face, his hand closing tight. Then Joss moaned and the smell of spunk doubled, Joss coming hard.

"You..." Oh, sweet Christ. Mackey grabbed Joss, tugging him close and tasting that open mouth.

Joss leaned into the kiss, rubbing slow against him, just pushing the come into their skin. A man might just die happy. Except he wanted more.

It was easy to two-step Joss over to the bed, keeping their mouths together while his hands pushed into Joss' jeans.

"Messy." Laughing, Joss helped, pushing at denim, getting them both naked before they eased down on the bed. Joss kinda had to lie on his back, because Lord knew either propping up on the bad arm or bending it to touch too much would be bad.

He leaned over, kissed the scar on Joss' shoulder, just a little. He might've missed all this.

Joss' good hand came up, fingers stroking over his hair. That smile looked so good, so fine. And knowing. Like Joss had his number, knew exactly what he was thinking. Yeah, well. Mackey took a kiss, one leg pressing in between Joss' thighs.

That sweet cock pressed up against him, hardening up again, Joss moaning for him, clutching at him. Lord, that man just made him need. Especially when those hot hands slid right down to cup his ass.

"What... what all do you like?" Weird, huh? That he knew all sorts of shit about Joss, but not this. Not even a little.

"Anything with you, man. Been dreaming... Hell, I ain't done that much." Cheeks going bright red, Joss kinda shrugged under him. "It wasn't worth worrying about someone seeing then."

"I hear that." He had been out of the barn a couple times, but he wasn't like a brood mare in a stack of stallions. He leaned in, nuzzled Joss' neck. "We'll figure it."

"We so will." Joss pressed up against him again, humping with short, sharp jerks. Jesus, that felt good. Instinctive, like Joss just couldn't get enough of him.

He got one hand under Joss' ass, giving Joss some support. Oh, hell yes. Please. Good.

"Mackey." The sound of his name just had him moving faster. Maybe they'd be able to slow down sometime. Maybe next year.

"Yeah. I got you." He leaned down, got himself a taste of Joss' throat.

"Mmm." He'd never thought about what Joss' noises would sound like. Now he knew that they were way deeper than Joss' speaking voice, harder, rougher.

"Uh-huh." His mouth watered and suddenly he wanted to know more, to know what Joss tasted like

for him. He scooted down, licking on Joss' belly just a little while he gathered the gumption to put his mouth where it wanted to go. Once he did though, goddamn.

Salty, strong, all male and addictive as that first pack of Marlboros. Jesus Christ.

He heard Joss shout like the man was a million miles away, hardly a whisper over the roaring in his ears. Soft, smooth skin as hot as a brand covered that sweet cock, and Joss' prick moved for him, jerking under his touch. He licked at the tip, pressing his tongue flat over the slit and letting Joss' flavor just sorta fill him up.

"Lord. Mackey. Please..." Rough and hoarse, Joss' voice washed over him, making him work harder to get those sounds. Joss was thrashing, panting, begging him.

Yeah. Yeah, he needed it, needed Joss, lock, stock and barrel. He got most of Joss cock in his mouth, sucking hard as he could. Chest heaving, hands scrabbling at the bed, Joss cussed, filthy words from a pretty mouth. Lord, that man had a vocabulary that would make his momma blush.

He rolled Joss' balls, pushing a little, making Joss feel it, feel more. Joss gave him everything. All of the sounds, all of the moves, all of the hot little drops that told him Joss was close to coming again, just like that. For him. Jesus, he'd imagined so fucking long. Mackey closed his eyes, took Joss in as deep as he could.

The man gave it right up, balls actually drawing up against his hand, cock jerking in his mouth. Damn. Oh, damn. Bitter and salt and heat filled his mouth and he swallow as best he could, his eyes rolling back up into his head.

Josh went slack under him, breathing hard, hands moving on him clumsily. He got a chuckle, breathy and short. "Goddamn, Mackey."

He grinned like a fool, cheek on Joss' belly. "Uh-huh."

"Man, you're gonna have to come here. I can't... I'm all limp." Poor Joss did seem to have that dishrag thing going on.

"Yeah." He sorta half-crawled, half-scooted up Joss, prick dragging all the way. "Hey."

"Hey." Joss reached for him with the good hand, trying to get between them to touch him, maybe. Mainly he managed to slap Mackey's chest instead.

"Damn, buddy. Don't beat me up. I was good to you." He snorted, leaning in close.

"You were. I wanna..." The motion of Joss' hand said the rest. He just wasn't sure the man was up to anything strenuous.

"You don't have to, honey. I can handle it." Lord knew he could. Hell, he'd just have to remember Joss' cock on his tongue and bam.

Joss stared at him, mouth dropping open a little. "I... damn, I could watch that."

His cheeks turned all hot, but his cock jerked, tapping Joss' thigh good and hard in what had to be a nod. "Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. I mean. Damn." Yeah, okay, that flush on Joss' skin wasn't all leftover from the man's orgasm. No sir.

He stayed close, fingers wrapping around his prick and beginning to move. Shit. Joss was watching him. His Joss. Goddamn. And touching him. Joss reached up and touched his chest, fingers trailing along his skin, slow and easy. Those eyes, though, they never left his hand and what it was doing.

"Jesus..." His fucking skin didn't fit, he was burning alive, right there in the bed.

"Come on, Mac. You look so goddamned hot. I can't hardly stand it. Come for me, man. Want to see." Shit, those words were hot as a brand.

"Joss..." His belly went tight as a board, heat pouring over his fingers as he shot so hard the room swung.

"That's it. That's the way." Fingers dragging through the come on his belly, Joss talked him down, sweet as pie and twice as good.

Mackey ended with his cheek next to Josh's arm, breath finally slowing down. Good night that was. Yeah.

Too fucking fine.

Joss woke up sometime late at night. He knew it was late because of the dark and, well, Hell, the glowing red clock on the side table said 10:30. Shit. His stomach was gonna gnaw through his backbone.

When he tried to move he realized that Mackey was there, weight holding him down. Mackey. Jesus. How long had he been wanting that man? Too long. But it had been better than he'd ever dreamed.

His stomach growled, loud and long, damned near shaking the bed.

"Lord, Joss. You sound like a grizzly bear." He wasn't sure Mackey was even awake.

"Uh-huh. I'm 'bout to starve." He let his fingers walk up Mackey's poor scarred back.

"Can't have that." Mackey hummed, rubbing against him a little before those eyes flashed open. "Lord, it wasn't a dream, was it?"

"No, sir." He grinned a little, looking at that wild-assed red hair, all rumped up. "Wasn't at all."

"Oh. Good." He got this smile that liked to set him on fire, balls to bones. "You want me to heat up that gumbo?"

"Yeah. And I can make more cornbread." The other had to be a loss, for sure. That was okay, though. "You good?"

"I..." Mackey's lips twitched, then Mackey gave him a short, hard kiss. "Yeah. I'm good."

"Mmm. You are." Laughing, he pushed, feeling the twinge in bad arm. "Come on and get up, honey. I need to pee."

Mackey levered himself up, then grabbed his hand and helped him up. He got a good long look at Mackey's backside as the man searched for some sweatpants. Lord. That was enough to give a man palpitations. He returned the favor, giving Mac a Hell of a show while he looked for something soft and warm himself.

"I'm never gonna get to the kitchen if you don't go on, buddy."

"Huh? Oh." His cheeks heated a bit, but he went on, hitching up a pair of sweats and tugging on an LSU hoodie. He toodled into the bathroom, hyper aware of Mackey passing right behind him on the way to the kitchen.

Mackey started whistling something that was a mixture between Silent Night and Up On the Rooftop. Either that or it was Leroy the Redneck Reindeer...

Lord, it *was* almost Christmas. When he headed back to the kitchen he was treated to another heart pounding view of Mackey's rump, those old sweats not hiding nothin'. Joss couldn't help but grab a handful on the way to clean up the cast iron skillet.

"Grabby hands!" Mackey's eyes lit up, that quick grin blazing at him. Christ, how many times had he seen that and it never looked so... knowing.

"Making up for lost time." He gave Mackey a wink, jonesing on being able to play and not worry and man, could he be any more of a goober?

"Yeah. I been wishing for a while..." Mackey stirred the pot, watching him put the cornbread together.

"Uh-huh." Man, that look made things tingle. Good thing they'd had a nap. Joss popped the cornbread in the oven and wandered closer to Mackey. A lot closer.

"Hey." Mackey leaned a little, nostrils flaring, fingers just barely touching his side.

"Hey." Oh, Lord. He had to kiss that mouth for sure. Just because he could, damn it.

Mackey moaned for him, lips opening right up and letting him in.

Lord, that was fine. Just fine. Joss reveled in it. Hell, it made him feel downright poetic. He wondered what he could rhyme with ass. 'Cause that's what he was squeezing. Mackey grinned against his lips, that touch getting firmer, pushing right in against his skin.

They bumped noses pretty hard trying to change the angle, and his eyes teared up. Made him laugh like a fool. "Now, stop trying to kill me, Mac."

"Shit, if I was trying to do that, I'd've had zillions of chances over the years."

"Yeah, yeah. It's me that's always saves your life, huh?" They'd both taken a few close shaves for each other.

Mackey popped his ass, the skin just stinging. "Yeah, yeah. You've covered me up a few times."

"Well, now I get to do it again." Bouncing on his toes, he kissed Mackey again, happy as a pig in shit.

Yeah, except this was better. This was private and hot as hell and had Mackey's hands pressing flat against his back and hauling him in close. They pushed in even closer, like they hadn't been at it like bunnies just a few hours ago. The kisses went deeper and deeper, bruising up their lips like they'd been hitting the back of a bull again.

Mackey rested their foreheads together, panting against his lips. "Damn. You're gonna make me forget about supper again..."

"Yeah, and I don't want to make three cornbreads." Joss backed off a little. They had time. But man, it was nice to be able to fool around at will.

"Well, you could make three, but I wanna eat two of 'em."

"Well, maybe for you." He winked, going to grab some plates before he got any more grabby. "So what do you want for Christmas?"

"You." Mackey turned a deep, damn near painful red, turning to stir the gumbo again.

"Hey, that's a given." Did they need to talk about that? Joss tilted his head. "We already decided to hang our hats together, yeah?"

Mackey nodded, not hesitating even a little. "Hell, Joss, I'd've stayed on working with you even if we'd never..." Mackey waved his hand a little. "You know."

"I do know." Mackey was the best buddy a man could have. Period. "We'll have to make a plan."

"Yeah? We can do that. You follow them way better than I do." Well, yes. He had money invested; Mackey had \$200,000 in a coffee can in the barn.

That man just didn't believe in brokers and shit. Joss had to. His momma would steal it all if he didn't hide it away all legal. "Well, it's not like I don't trust you, honey. But the folks at the stock contractor's thingee had rules."

"I know." Mackey didn't look the slightest bit worried. "I'm just way better at the part where I go nail shingles on the roof and unload feed from the truck."

He laughed. "Well, I'm better at fixing up old saddles and shooing the deer out of the garden. But we'll manage."

"Sure we will. We know them bulls."

"Yup. No shit." That had him chuckling, almost snorting with it. Lord, you would think he hadn't stopped taking the drugs a week or more back.

"Dork." Mackey went wandering, grabbing a couple of beers and the butter from the fridge. Man, that sounded like the beginning of some filthy goddamn joke...

There's this guy, with a beer, some butter, and a turkey cannon... Yeah. He'd have to remember that. The cornbread dinged, and supper was finally on. Just a few hours late.

It was damned good, for all it was late, and it did his heart good to see Mackey chow down. The man had gotten plumb skinny in all that time they'd spent in Hawaii. "Good stuff?"

"Hell, yeah. I'm so glad to be home." That grin sorta landed on Mackey's face again, shared with him like Mackey had some big secret.

'Course Mac had the pure devil shining out of his eyes half the damned time. "Me too. You know something I don't?"

"No, I don't reckon." That grin got wider. "Just thinking 'bout Christmas, you know? Gonna be different this year."

"Yeah. Hell, yeah." Usually it was a drop in maybe on your folks and then run, as the season started in January again. A man had to be on the run near before the new year came.

"We oughta get us a tree and shit." Mackey nodded, bouncing a bit. "Just a little one for the front room."

Oh. Man, when was the last time... "We'll have to go to the Wal-Mart and get decorations, too. I don't have even a string of garland."

"We could do that. Get some lights and all. You like the plain white or the coloredy ones?" Christ, they'd been buds for years, and they didn't know this stuff.

"I like the colors." Joss sipped his beer, pondering how a twinkly Christmas light could make him happy. "You want some coffee? We got that pie at the grocery."

"Surely." Mackey got up, started pottering around, whistling as the coffee got started, the pie plopped on the table.

He cut them some big old slices and went to the fridge to get the whipped cream in a can. He couldn't figure people who sprayed it on each other. Hell, even with Mackey that didn't sound appealing. Of course, Mackey grabbed the can, sprayed some on one finger and licked it clean and that wasn't nasty. No, that was kinda hot. But he figured that was watching that finger slide in and out of Mackey's lips.

"You want some?" Mackey offered him the can, finger on the nozzle.

"Sure." What the Hell? He held out a finger, let Mac spurt some out for him. Whoa. Sweet.

Okay, so *maybe* he could see it. A little. Mackey squirted whipped cream on both their pies, the meandered for the coffee.

Man, it was strange what he suddenly found hot after years of thinking things would be sexy. Damn, Sam. He grinned, starting in on the pie, and the grocery sure did make it better then he did.

Mackey dug in, leg bouncing, fingers tapping away. Lord, that man couldn't sit still to save his life. That boded well for his bucking bull program. Mackey needed to be busy, so he'd be a success. Joss couldn't wait to help. And do other things.

"That was a good supper."

"Yup. You do good." Mackey popped up like a jack-in-the-box, dishes in the washer, food in the fridge, coffee in the cups before he could saw 'whoa nelly'.

"Wanna watch some TV?" He didn't know about Mac, but snuggling together on the couch and maybe making out sounded fine.

"Surely. We oughta look to see if we can't get one of them dishes. There's not much on the antenna,

but there's movies." Mackey smiled at him, eyes dragging over his body. "It's weird, huh? I don't know whether to just kiss you stupid or act like everything's normal."

"I know! I thought we could maybe get busy on the couch." He flexed his arm. "I'm feeling all right."

"I haven't made out on the sofa since I was a teenager trying to date Mary Jo Franklin."

"Yeah? I haven't ever, I don't think." His momma wouldn't have let it happen, girl or boy. "I spent a lot of time in pick-ups."

"We can try that later, when it's warmer." Mackey led him into the front room, popped a movie into the DVD player.

"Okay..." That made his ears go hot, his cheeks heating right up, too. Lord almighty. They could do whatever they wanted. He'd thought that before, but it bore repeating.

"I liked it, you know. What we did before." Mackey stood before the TV, staring, hands on those lean hips.

"Uh-huh. I like it. Lots." Hell, he could do it every day and every night. Woo hoo.

"Yeah." Mackey seemed to shake himself a little, then those bare feet padded right over to him. "It'll be easier to do it in the sweats, too."

"Uh-huh. We could maybe try other things, too. Not the whipped cream, though. Too messy."

"Whipped cream?" Mackey tilted his head, looking for all the world like a puppy hearing a whistle.

"Uh..." Lord Almighty. His mouth was running on without his brain. "Nothin'."

"Okay, 'cause I could see it. I mean, see licking it off of. I mean, I like my sweet and salty together."

"You could? I mean. Well, I always thought that would be kinda gross, but with you..." He was. Itchy. About the whole thing. Too hot. Too tight.

"Well, I wouldn't wanna take a bath in it, but I could like a dollop off the tip of your..." Mackey blinked over, went a deep, dark red.

"Sweet and salty..." He felt like he was strangling. Lord almighty.

"Uh. Uh-huh." Mackey nodded and just stepped forward, pressing their lips together, taking a kiss that liked to burn him to the ground.

Lord love a duck, that man could kiss. Like he'd never wanted anything more in his life than to kiss Joss all day long. Joss agreed. There was nothing hotter than this.

Mackey eased them both down onto the sofa, the son of a bitch so careful of his arm and shoulder. It was sorta sweet, but mostly aggravating. Hell, he wasn't fucking broken. He'd ridden bulls with worse injuries. Hadn't he won the last go round of the finals three years ago with a broken collarbone? Joss got a little growly, pushing Mackey back against the cushions and kissing him harder. Mackey went still for a second, then moaned and opened up, one hand dragging his fingers down to where Mackey's cock was hard as nails, throbbing in those sweats. Goddamn, the man was hot as a two dollar pistol. Maybe it was years of pent up need, just like it was with him. Maybe it was all that looking they'd done without touching. Whatever it was, they were like a house afire.

Mackey grabbed a hold of his ass, squeezing good and hard, rubbing them together.

Hellfire. Joss moaned, rubbing hard, his sweats just itching where they were in the way. He broke free with a gasp. "Cloth."

"Huh?" Mackey looked like he'd just been dazed.

"It's in the way. I need to get it off. Come on and help me, you fool."

"Jackass. Say what you mean, then." Mackey slid his sweats down over his ass.

"I did." He just couldn't get his brain to work enough to say more than a word or two at a time. He tugged at Mackey's sweats, too, trying to get them bare together.

Mackey's laugh tickled his jaw, his neck, making him squirm a little.

"You gonna laugh or are you gonna... oh. There." They slapped together, skin on skin, and it was so hot and good that he all but fell over.

"Bitchy old cowboy." Mackey nipped his bottom lip, tugging on it a little.

"I just know what I want." He nipped right back, letting Mackey feel how good that was, amazed at them. Once they started, man, there wasn't no stopping.

"Glad of that, honey. I swear to god I am." Mackey rolled against him, damn near begging.

"Uh-huh." His hands got all grabby, sliding up and down Mackey's body, his fingers slipping down where thigh met torso, following the line around.

"Mmm. Want. So many things." His thumb caught on a ropy scar on Mackey's hip, a present from a big white Brahma.

"Like what?" His brain was just chugging along like a rabbit on speed, but he could pretend to be listening, yeah?

Mackey bit his jaw a little, hips starting to slap his belly. "Like you in me. Like your mouth. Like *you*."

"Same to you, buddy." Grinning like a fool, he pushed down a little, his cock sliding beneath Mackey's balls. His eyes went wide at how good that felt, soft and fuzzy and hot.

"Oh..." Mackey jerked, head tossing. "More. Fuck, Joss. That's. Damn."

"Uh-huh. Fine. Just fine." They rocked, pushing him harder against that amazing body. Pushing Mackey back against him. It was like riding a really good horse.

"Uh-huh." Mackey's eyes rolled back in his head, the man's fingers digging into the sofa cushions. There would be time to do more. He knew there would. So Joss decided he didn't mind just kinda rubbing off again. Which was good, 'cause he was about to blow.

And when Mackey's teeth fastened on his ear lobe, it didn't matter because he just lost it. His hips rocked hard, his spine went ramrod straight, and Joss let the come pour right out of him onto Mackey's skin. Happily. Damned happily.

Mackey groaned, forehead on his shoulder, hips humping away. When he could think again he reached for Mac's cock, jacking it between their bellies, urging the man on. That skin was thin and fine and hot enough to brand him.

"Buddy." The word was bitten out, Mackey arching beneath him, heat spraying.

"God, look at you." That... fuck, he could see that every day. Every goddamn day. Mackey's eyes rolled, the swollen lips parted. Damn.

Joss took a kiss, because what the hell else as a man to do. Fuck, he loved this guy. He really did.

"Mmm. Hey." He got one of those slow, lazy grins. "'s good."

"Uh-huh. Good enough to do over and over." He'd thought he would miss the rush of bull riding. He probably would. But with Mackey around, he'd always have something to keep him going.

"I like how you think, cowboy." Man, Mackey's eyelashes were *red*.

"Good. Because I'm thinking we have a lot to explore." He grinned, sharing the ease, the happiness deep in his belly.

"Exploring sounds fun, buddy. It surely does."

They would have fun, all right. No matter what. They always did. Even before they started riding each other instead of bulls. It would be a fine retirement. Yessir.

"Joss. Look."

Mackey squeezed the stuffed cow's belly, "Deck the Halls" ringing out in the most amazing moos.

That was.

Damn.

"Lord have mercy. That sounds like a cow with the runs, maybe."

Or a big black guy mooing away as a joke. But it was cute as hell and it made Joss laugh like a loon, so he threw it in the cart.

"What all do we need, man? I got slippers and that grill dealie for Momma and a new reel for Daddy. Lights?" And what the hell did you get the guy who'd been your friend for fucking ever who was now way more?

"We need lights. We need... Holy Shit, would you look at that longhorn yard thingee?"

"Man, that rocks. We need one that looks like Bodacious." Or Li'l Yellowjacket.

"Or even Blueberry Wine." Joss snorted and shook his head. "We should suggest that to Ty, huh? That would be cool for the catalog."

"It would. You know there's folk'd buy it. Hell, you remember that scary woman with the scrapbook and the tattoos of bulls on her hiney?"

That might have scarred him for life.

"Lord, yes." Joss should. They'd been sitting at the signing table together when that lady had dropped her pants and Joss had near had an aneurism.

"She wanted to do things to you that would frighten fish." Which, ew, but... Oh. Chocolate covered cherries. He grabbed four boxes.

Joss raised a brow, but didn't say nothing. They'd shared more than one box of those on the road.

"What're you sending your mom?" He didn't hold much with the woman, but Joss was a good 'un and sent stuff anyway.

"I think I'm just getting her a gift card. She likes to shop, you know? She just bitches if I send flowers or somethin'." Yeah, he'd heard the woman ramble on about dying shit in her house.

"Yeah, I know." He picked up a little glass thing with sparkly shit in it. Lord. "So, what all do you want?" Oh, go him. Subtle.

"Huh? Oh, you know how I am." Yeah. He knew. Stubborn, resisting him spending money, all that shit. "We could just have a nice Christmas Eve, maybe. Get some Jack, make some coffee..."

"Be good or I'll get you a puppy." Or a pony. Oh, God, that would be funny. Some cranky, stubborn, worthless shetland. Or a donkey.

"You're an evil man." Though, really, the way those light eyes had lit up at the mention of a puppy...

"Am not." Renee Walker's pit had just had puppies. They could get them two.

"Sure you are. Tempting me to have a real Christmas." Joss gave him a sideways look. "You know they asked me to go into announcing..."

"Yeah." He nodded, grabbed some tortilla chips. It sorta stung, knowing he wasn't ever gonna make the money Joss could. Knowing that Joss had a better deal out there than the man'd find with him. Still, it was cool and lord knew, he'd make sure that cowboy had a place to hang his hat. "You wouldn't have to go 'til after the New Year, though, right? We could have Christmas."

"Shit, Mackey. Can you really see me sitting up there next to them bigwigs and jawing? I'd say three words and all of them would be foul." Shaking his head, Joss grabbed the shit for queso, some Velveeta and some Ro-Tel. "I told them no."

"Yeah? I think you'd do okay." He couldn't stop grinning, though. Joss'd said no.

"You're funny, asshole." Popping him on the hip, Joss stopped in front of the Oreos. "White chocolate dipped or dulce de leche?"

"Get both. It's Christmas." He wanted some Nutter Butters.

"Yeah." Joss grinned, wide and a little wondering, that old broken took sharp and snaggly. It was cute as hell, but Joss usually hid it.

"You want turkey or roast or what for supper?" He knew he was staring. He knew. He couldn't help it.

The smile slipped a little, Joss looking at the floor. "For Christmas? I think a turkey. Since we missed Thanksgiving."

He reached over with one toe, nudged Joss' boot. "Hey, I was liking that."

"Huh? Oh." He got another, smaller grin, but it was just as bright. "I just keep forgetting there ain't no cameras. Remember when that reporter woman said I ought to get it fixed?"

That had been near six years ago when they'd both been broke dick and Joss had been just out of the minor circuits.

"She was a nasty bitch." His lip curled, chin lifting some. "sides, she ain't the one kissing you."

"Nope." Look at that man blush. But the look in those eyes made him shiver. "Nope, she ain't. We need to get on home soon."

"Uh-huh." He nodded, swallowing hard. They needed some slick stuff. Just in case.

Whoa.

He hadn't said that out loud, had he?

From the way Joss was choking, he was pretty sure he had. Damn. Well, at least it looked like Joss agreed, because they were veering toward the health care stuff.

Well, okay then. Christ.

Mackey managed to almost stop blushing when they got to the sex part of the stuff and he started up again.

Joss' cheeks almost glowed, as he had kinda rosy ones anyway. But those hands pulled lube and stuff off the shelf and put them in the basket. He didn't get so much as a sideways glance. Until Joss brushed up against him when they turned around, humming a little.

Damn. That felt. Damn. "You done, honey?" Can we go home and get busy?

"We can." It took forever in the checkout line, and they had to be extra careful, because the blue haired old lady checking them out knew Joss and him both, could even quote their stats.

Of course, they'd been more than careful for a long goddamn time. Mackey reckoned he could keep his hands to himself in the damned Wal-Mart.

Joss waited until they got to the truck to burst into laughter. "Mac, I tell you, I thought she was gonna come over the counter at you."

"For what?" That lady was ten thousand years old, for chrissake.

"To grab you. She was looking at you like a cat with cream." Joss paused, giving him a look finally. "Like I do."

"Uh-uh." His cock sorta jerked and bobbed. "Ain't nobody looks at me like you do."

"Yeah?" They got in the truck, and damned if Joss didn't put a hand on his thigh, bold as brass. Those fingers squeezed a minute, just holding, then Joss sat back and let him drive.

"You... you wanted this a while, huh?" He sorta liked that he hadn't been the only one needing a little bit.

"Hell, yes. Been looking a long time. I'm good at it." Shifting, Joss pulled at his seat belt. "Now I get to and it's kinda weird. But damned fine."

"Yeah. I thought some things about you, when I had some alone time." He watched the road. "Real thing's better."

"You know it." Joss' hand crept over again. "Though it's never been this good. I mean, not that I done all that much."

"No, there wasn't a lot of time to play like that." But he had time now, didn't he?

"Nope." The truck rocked on its springs when he pulled up to the house, and Joss was off like a shot, opening up the door and carrying bags. One little bag went right to the bedroom.

They did all the stuff they needed to first. Feeding and watering and unpacking and putting away and shit, but finally, *finally*, they were done and in the house and the door locked.

That was when Joss gave him a sideways kind of look and started drifting toward the bathroom. "Wanna take a shower?"

"Uh-huh." Oh, man. He so did. Wet, slick, hot cowboy...

"Well, come on, then." The sound of Joss' undershirt and shirt hitting the floor came, loud as anything in the quiet house.

"Right behind you, cowboy." His own shirt was as stubborn as a mule, fighting him about coming off.

Hell, Joss had skinned out of his jeans and gotten the water on before he got his fingers to working right, and that pale torso and tanned neck narrowed right down to a stark white butt. That ass stuck out while Joss fiddled with faucets, and it occurred to him that he could touch it all he wanted. So, he let the shirt go and reached out, fingers sliding over the smooth, sweet skin. Oh, man. That was something a man could want.

"Shit, Mackey!" Jumping, Joss whirled around, reaching for him, starting in on his button and zipper like he'd lit a fire under that butt instead of just touching.

"Sorry. Needed. You're fine." His cock was trying to drill its way out to Joss.

He got what he wanted, his cock slipping right out to slap into Joss' palm. Those fingers closed around him and pulled, and he went from supercharged to supernova in no time.

"I. Shower." His hips were moving like he was fresh out of the bucking chute.

"I know you do. I admire that in a man." Oh, the bastard. Laughing at him. But Joss' cock was up against his, rubbing alongside, hot and hard.

He'd've said something witty if he could talk but, well, no. So he just nodded, walking them back toward the water.

Joss got soaked right off, water dripping off his hair and nose and eyelashes. Pulling him right into the shower, too, Joss moved close, kissing him, their skin slick and hot together. Oh, man. Slick cowboy. He was a fan. His lips slid across Joss' jaw, hands cupping those lean hips.

"Mmm. Love the way you feel, man." Joss' hands slid up and down his arms, around to his back, just loving on him.

"Uh-huh." Mackey nodded, grinned some. "Keep on keeping on, then." Yeah, go him with the coherence and shit.

"Gonna," Joss said, sounding like he did when he was determined to make a ride. When he was gonna stick like a burr to some bull.

"Uh-huh. After, want to feel you in me, deep."

"Oh, God." That had Joss jerking against him, those hands clutching at him.

He grinned, wickedness getting him a little. "Gonna let you in deep, honey. Want it bad."

"Mac!" Pushing him against the back wall of the shower, Joss kissed him until he thought his brains would melt and leak out his ears.

He jerked and started humping, entire body into it, needing it like he needed eight seconds in the short go. Little noises came from Joss, just falling on his skin like the water. Damn. Good.

"Come on, come on. We'll get the edge off and then we'll..." Yeah. They could. Nice and slow.

"Uh-huh. Need to. Now." Joss came for him, eyes wide, mouth opening on a soundless moan.

He followed pretty close behind, watching them pretty eyes like they were the last things on earth he'd ever see.

Joss rinsed them off, kissing his mouth one more time before helping him to dry off. "Come on, honey. Let's go to bed a bit."

"Yeah." He nodded and followed right along behind. "I'm right with you."

"Good." Man, Joss' arm was almost like new. Oh, he had weeks of healing to do, but it was strong enough to yank Mackey right down on the mattress.

His belly slapped against Joss' side and, God help him, his prick started considering taking an interest. His fingers got all tangled up in Joss', both of them reaching and wanting to touch. Joss held on a minute, squeezing, before drawing his hand down to one narrow hipbone. Then Joss started petting him, working up his arm and over his shoulder. Damn the man had the best goddamn hands. Mackey did himself some touching, fingers easy on Joss' belly, the soft-soft sacs. Arching, rolling, Joss put on a clinic on how to ride a fine touch, starting to pant for him, skin going bright and hot. All the while Joss just stared at him, looking amazed.

"You. Damn." His fingers moved up, slowly working the thin skin covering that filling cock. He wanted that inside the man, wanted to feel Joss' heat like nothing going.

"I what?" That little broken tooth showed up again, that smile just for him. Him alone. Joss stroked him, too, hand slipping between his legs.

"You're fine. You make me want things." He leaned in, tongue exploring, sliding over that tooth.

"Mmm. Weirdo." Laughing, Joss petted his neck and shoulders, gently working out knots he always seemed to have. "Tell me again what you wanted?"

"You. In me." He groaned, let his head fall forward. That felt just right. "less you don't wanna."

"God, honey. I want to. So bad. The bag. It's right there." Yeah, he could feel Joss shake at the idea, hear the hitch in the man's breathing.

"Yeah." He stretched, hearing the bones in his back pop and crack like Rice Krispies before he got a hold of the bag.

"Lord, Mac. We shoulda stayed in the shower longer." Warm fingers stroked along his back, up and down, finally digging in and giving him a good rub.

"Oh..." He stretched out, damn near shaking it was so good.

"Yeah. You need that, huh? Christ, you're a knot and a half." Joss gave and gave, making him melty as hell.

"Loosening me up for you, buddy?" He spread right out, all hints of nerves just gone.

"You know it. I don't want you hurtin' one little bit." Joss grabbed the bag of stuff from him, giving up the massage with what looked like real regret. The man was a sucker for making him feel good.

"You're good to me." Had been from the get-go, for the whole damn rodeo.

"You deserve it. Now, let's see if we can figure this." Look at that man, tongue caught between his teeth as Joss tried to open the tiny tube of lube.

"You'll figure it." Joss wanted this, damn near as bad as he did.

"Freakin' little...ha!" The cap popped off and Joss crowed, squirting some of the slick out on his fingers. "You ready to get busy?"

Mackey hooted, tickled to the bone. "I'm ready, man. Lube me up!"

They both started laughing hard, grinning at each other like fools.

"You ass." Tilting his head, Joss laughed harder. "No. *Your* ass. Get it?"

Oh. Oh, fuck. He was gonna pull something, laughing so hard. Shit, he'd never thought it would be so fucking *fun*.

When Joss's slick fingers slid down his prick, then down over his balls and past... well, there was no laughing matter. Especially when one callused fingertip pushed right in. His eyes met Joss', his breath all caught up in his throat. Oh, sweet christ. That was *Joss* touching him.

Joss went still a moment, eyes burning blue fire down at him. Then that finger moved, in and in and in, scraping every nerve. His hands opened and closed, his body starting to rock, that riding motion familiar as breathing.

"Fucking A, Mackey. Look at you." His Joss was saying that a lot these days. He could figure what he looked like, all laid out, flushed, moving like he couldn't not. Hell, he could see it reflected in Joss' eyes.

"Need you. More, huh?" He reached up with a shaking hand, cupped Joss' jaw.

"More. Definitely." Another finger worked in next to the first, Joss breathing hard for him, those fingers shaking the tiniest bit.

"Uh-huh. Love." The word slipped out of him, pushed right out by Joss' fingers.

"Oh, yeah. Definitely that." Rubbing him from the inside out, Joss loosened him right up, free hand reaching for a little foil packet. They were gonna. Holy God.

Mackey pulled his knees up, spreading wide and letting Joss look his fill. Fuck, he needed him some of that.

For a minute he thought Joss might stroke out. Jesus, those eyes... they ate him up. Then Joss was pulling his fingers out and getting the rubber on and slicked up and boom... That thick cock was right up against his hole.

He pushed down and Joss pushed up and. Oh. Oh, sweet Jesus. Everything in him sort of stretched, letting Joss in. They got to where Joss' hips pressed against his ass, and Joss' chest covered him, and that was... Oh. Then Joss started moving, in and out. It took a second to find their rhythm, but they got it, both of them pushing and pulling and rolling away. He'd not known how much he'd needed Joss in him 'til he felt it. Now he knew he'd never get enough of it. Joss felt thick and hot and so hard a cat couldn't scratch that fine cock. And the sight of Joss bent over him, muscles working... well. It just sent him flying.

"Oh, damn." He leaned up to get his mouth on Joss' skin. Moving that way pushed Joss' cock deeper and he cried out, lightning shooting right up his spine.

"Oh, God, Mackey. Fuck." Joss moved faster and faster, face set in tense lines, hips moving like a piston.

"Uh-huh. Please, Joss. I gotta." He reached down and started pumping, his body going tight as all get out.

Reaching down, Joss helped out, hand wrapping around his to squeeze tight. "Wanna feel it when you go off. Wanna feel you around me."

"Joss." Everything in him just went *ping* and he was shooting, hard enough that the top of his head liked to pop off.

"Oh." That sweet mouth dropped open, Joss letting out a cry for him. Then Joss was coming, too, bucking into him like Bodacious on a good night. Hell yes. He'd so needed. So much.

Mackey's head was bobbing like one of them dolls, all loose on his neck. Joss just flopped down on him, chest heaving, body wracked with little shivers. Damn, the man was hot, his skin just burning up, sweat rubbing off on Mackey's chest.

He held on, fingers petting away. "I got you. So fucking good."

Mackey had him and wasn't even about to let go.

They went to Mackey's momma's on Christmas Eve. It was real nice, with good folks and good

food, and Joss had maybe a minute or two of missing the guys they usually had holidays with, but a few quick calls fixed that right up.

By Christmas morning they were back in their own bed, with their own blankets and sheets and each other, wrapped up tighter than any present from Santa.

Joss woke up first, feeling Mackey against him and thanking God for his gifts. Each and every one. Mackey was at the top of the list. That damned red hair stood up all over, and Mackey slept with a smile right on his face, like he was happy and where he belonged.

Joss couldn't help but take a kiss, right on that smiling mouth.

"Mmm. Morning, buddy." Mackey's eyes didn't open, but Mackey's smile widened, tongue sliding out to touch his bottom lip.

"Morning. How's it going, lover?" Look at him, going with the pet names.

"It's going good. I'm liking this Christmas morning thing." Mackey's fingers slid around his waist, tugged him a little closer. "How's the arm doing?"

"Not bad." It still gave him twinges, would for a good while. Hell, it was still all wrapped up and the docs kept poking, but it was mending. "How's the back?"

"Getting older every fucking day, man." That answer made him laugh. How many times had he heard those words, even if they hadn't been in that sleepy, husky tone of voice.

"No shit." Joss grinned, kissing Mackey again, just a slow meeting of lips and tongue and bodies.

Mackey hummed, that mustache -- which was getting bushy with the cold, damn it -- tickling his lip, his jaw. He chuckled. That man and his facial hair. 'course he was less than clean shaven these days, not having to scrape his baby face every day for the fans. Joss bent and scrubbed his scruff over Mackey's neck.

"Uhn..." Oh, now. Somebody liked that, didn't they?

Laughing right out loud, he bent a little more, pressing his cheek to Mackey's chest just before he took one tight little nipple between his lips. He'd always thought that nipple stuff was a crock until now.

"Oh, holy shit." Mackey grunted, hand sliding to cup his head. That little piece of skin tightened right up for him, hot as anything against his tongue.

"Mmm." Man, he loved that. Loved the way Mackey gave and gave, always ready to feel with him. Joss licked, pushing this way and that, looking for more sighs and moans.

Mackey groaned and shifted, pulling away from him and making him frown. Soon though, Mackey's lips were on his hip, that full cock by his cheek. "This okay?"

"Hell, yes." Why hadn't he thought of that? Someone was wanting, and it wasn't just Mac. But Joss knew what Mackey was asking for here, and he rubbed that sweet cock with his beard stubble.

That got him the roughest goddamn sounds, Mackey's mouth opening around his nuts, pulling them in. His eyes rolled, and Joss was damned glad he didn't have his mouth on Mackey yet, or the man would be missing something important. When he could breathe again, he licked a line up Mackey's cock, letting his chin settle at the base. Hard.

He felt Mackey's moan, vibrating all through his nuts and goddamn, that was going to kill him, swear to God. His hips rolled, pushing against Mackey's mouth, just needing more. And it occurred to him that he could give more, too, so he did. Joss wrapped his lips around Mackey's cock and pulled, sucking deep. It didn't take but a second before Mackey was working his prick, head bobbing, those hands dragging him into that hot fucking mouth.

They curled around each other, arms wrapping around hips, and sucked, both of them working hard. Joss opened his jaw more, tried to take Mackey all the way down. Mackey's fingers, slick and hot, slipped between his cheeks, one pressing right inside him just as sweet as you please. His eyes flew open wide, and he all but choked, thrusting hard into Mackey's mouth. He backed off to the tip of Mackey's cock so he could breathe a minute, then plunged right back down, sucking to the rhythm of that finger moving inside him.

Fuck, he could feel Mackey moaning, could feel the way that one finger became two, Mackey's cock leaking as those fingers worked him deep inside. He was afraid he was gonna hurt someone, either Mac or him the way he was thrashing around, grunting and pushing. His skin felt too tight, and he figured his head was gonna explode.

Mackey's fingers pegged him, rubbed him deep inside, sending electricity shooting up his spine. His whole body arched and he came like crazy, his balls emptying as he shot right into Mackey's mouth. Merry Christmas to him.

Jesus.

Mackey hummed low, cleaned him off, lips the softest goddamn things, that mustache just tickling him.

Mackey was still hard in his mouth, still moving with little jerks of his hips, and Joss forced his lips to move, his tongue to stroke. He wanted Mackey to feel it, too.

"Oh... Joss. Honey..." Those lips moved on his thigh, hips moving a little faster, a little rougher.

"Mmm." he encouraged Mackey right on, his hands grabbing those lean hips and helping, pulling until his lips sealed tight around the base of that hot cock.

That was what Mackey needed, because he got a cry and a roll of those lean hips and Mackey was coming, shooting all hot and bittersalty in his throat.

Joss licked it away happily, just loving the hot and earthy flavor, the need Mackey gave him. Then he pulled off and rested his cheek against Mackey's leg, sighing. "Hell of a good way to wake up."

"Uh-huh. Merry Christmas, buddy."

"You know it." He stretched, his arm protesting a little, reminding him it was there. His stomach rumbled, too, chiming in to tell him he was starved. "Pancakes?"

"Mmhmm. After we go down to the barn. I got something to show you."

"Yeah?" Well, that was cool. He'd hidden that big assed pile of tools he'd gotten for Mac in the barn, too.

"Yep." Mackey slapped his ass, grinned. "Get some clothes on, honey. Come and see."

Rubbing his stinging cheek, Joss got up and pulled some sweats on. "Man, that feels a hell of a lot different without jeans and chaps."

"Sorry, buddy." Mackey didn't look all that sorry, really, hopping up and pouring himself into an ancient pair of jeans.

"Uh-huh. Sure."

Fuck it was cold when they got outside, another one of them cool fronts coming on down on them. Joss clapped his hat on his head and wished he'd put on boots instead of sneakers. Mackey got one arm around his waist, tugging him toward that big old barn where there was a ruckus going on, barking and howling and...

Barking?

Joss turned his head and stared. "You didn't. Did you?"

Man, butter wouldn't melt in that mouth. "Hmm? Santa came."

The doors opened and two pups barreled out, two goofball coonhound puppies with more ears than sense whining and barking away.

"Oh." Jesus. He'd always wanted dogs... Joss knelt down and got licked and romped on and kissed while he scratched ears and got acquainted.

Mackey leaned on the barn door and watched, the best look on his face, like the sweet son of a bitch was the happiest man on earth.

The pups ran over to Mackey after a bit, and Joss followed, brushing off his knees. He gave Mac a kiss, making the pups bark like mad. "Thank you."

"Merry Christmas, huh? Our place, it needed dogs."

"It did. Come on, mutts. You got some stuff to see, too." A man with a bull breeding program needed shit. Joss had gone a little wild.

"Me?" Mackey grinned, actually looked surprised. "In here?"

"Uh-huh. Amazing, how you never look at that corner that was falling in there for a bit." He'd told Mackey it was gonna be his workshop, which it was, when he got the ATV and shit outa there.

"I've been busy, buddy..." Mackey chuckled as the pups tumbled over each other, growling and playing.

"No kidding." He watched those pups play with the goofiest smile on his face before going over to move the tarp. "So have I."

"I..." Mackey stood there, teeth in his mouth, eyes just wide as saucers.

"Well, I figured you needed a start..." Look at that. Joss idly scratched puppies as he watched Mackey explore.

Mackey dug around, gasping and oohing and aahing and making him feel thirty feet tall. Those eyes kept coming back to him, grinning at him like he *was* Santa Claus.

Finally Joss had to grab the man and hug him tight enough that his ribs creaked. "Merry Christmas, man."

"It's been a good one, huh? A real good one."

"The best I've had." They took a kiss, making the dogs whine, making them both break into laughter.

It may be the best yet, but Joss had a feeling Christmas would only get better as long as he had Mackey around.

Hallelujah.

end

No Bull

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