

A person wearing a black cowboy hat, a blue denim jacket, and a red bandana covering their face. They are holding a knife in their right hand. The background is white.

JAMES BUCHANAN

TWICE THE
Ride

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

Phaze

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a novella of homoerotic romance by

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Chapter One

Warm, damp, and smelling of his own spicy aftershave, Jess Graff wandered out of the shower and into his bedroom. He rolled his neck, generating pops from tight muscles and bones long used to being mistreated. Bronc riding wasn't easy on the body. Construction wasn't easy on it, either, but it was the kind of job where he could take off for a few days to hit a rodeo circuit event.

Being a pretty skilled carpenter kept Jess in grub and suds. Any yahoo could knock together a two-by-four frame ... not many could reconstruct an antique molding. If the contractor on one project got pissed 'cause he was going to be gone for a bit, another would pick him as soon as he got back. And there was a nice, warm skinned Mexican cowboy waiting for him when he hit home. Or, waiting for him the times Manuel Santos Fuentes didn't tag along with Jess, or Jess didn't tag along with him. Shit, half the time Manuel's roping skills footed the hotel for them both. That boy could rope down the moon and tie it to Jess' heart anytime he pleased.

Life was pretty good these days.

However, this morning it was less than perfect. An empty and made bed, the southwestern style throw blanket pulled up under the pillows, confronted him. Damn, that meant Manuel was already up. Jess tried to remember if he had work or if it was just habit, and finally settled on his *charro* being an early riser. Someday he'd break that boy into Saturday

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morning lazies, where you'd stay wrapped up in bed not doing much of anything. Well, if he wasn't under the sheets...

Jess leaned out the door of the tiny bedroom in search of the finest thing ever to wear a cowboy hat. Nice benefit about a one bedroom shack in the desert, there wasn't a whole lot a place for Manuel to hide from him.

Dark, brown eyes and a bright, white smile said good morning. Goddamn, Manuel was just nine kinds of wonderful first thing in the A of M. Stretched out along the couch, he was dressed in nothing but last night's jeans. That rangy frame got Jess going every time. Just enough muscle ran under smooth caramel skin to flex with interesting patterns of light each time he moved. Manuel's agile fingers teased the weave on his *charro* bridle, trying to fix a broken weft in the herringbone pattern. Mexican bridles were beautiful in their simplicity: no throatlatch, no noseband, just cheek pieces and an ear-slot so that the horse's features would shine through.

Jess shook his head and laughed to himself. Manuel couldn't be coaxed into leaving a spare pair of pants in the drawer, but his extra tack littered the house. Jess figured that meant Manuel thought of Jess' place as home. Clothes could be got anywhere, but a good saddle was hard to come by. One leg kicked up over the back of the worn couch pulled denim tight across Manuel's crotch. The bridle he worked on hung over his knee so he could use both hands.

Jess licked his lips, remembering Manuel's musky taste from this morning. That thick prick all hot and hard in his mouth, he watched his *vaquero* writhe as he licked and sucked. Wanting more, he stepped up to the dingy sofa and

ran his fingers through thick, black hair. With a sly grin, Manuel reached out and tugged on the towel wrapped about Jess' hips. Spicy hints of their morning fun rose from Manuel's skin, running just under the smell of soap from Jess' shower.

Jess was just about to say something, make a comment about what needed to happen to those tight jeans and his own towel, when a woman's voice broke out of the speaker phone. "*?Manuelito!*" Manuel's mother's rich Spanish sounded over the connection. "*Debería llamarme más.*"

Biting his tongue to keep the comment back, Jess shot Manuel a glare as he hightailed it to the kitchen ... intent on rounding up some coffee. One of the few things that drove him up a wall: Manuel's insistence on using the speakerphone. The first time it happened, Jess had sidled in the door after work and snuggled up against Manuel in the front room. In his best come hither rumble he'd purred out, "Time to get nekkid, boy," and been answered by Manuel's boss with, "I guess he ain't coming back out to help that mare foal tonight then." Good thing that woman didn't give a rat's ass about Manuel's sexuality or he could have ended up in the unemployment line.

Either oblivious to, or ignoring, Jess' irritation, Manuel smiled again. Absently, he answered his mother. "*Aye, mama, llamo todo el tiempo.*" That smile could wipe away just about any exasperation.

Jess returned the grin before starting the hunt through the cabinets for filters and coffee. The second annoying thing about Manuel was his insistence that everything had to come off the counter and go into the cupboards. Jess figured that

one came from years of Manuel living in the efficiency unit at the ranch where he worked. There was barely enough room to turn around in Manuel's place. If you didn't put stuff up, you'd end up sitting on it.

Manuel's mother's voice tugged at Jess' ear as cold linoleum soaked through the soles of his feet. "*¿Cómo es Mango?*" Always ask a cowboy about his horse, Jess had enough Spanish to figure that out. Otherwise the conversation was a soothing sing song of warm words.

"*Bien, Mango está bien.*" Manuel mumbled. Jess looked over his shoulder to catch Manuel's dark-eyed gaze burning up his bare back. Manuel shifted and Jess could see that everything between his legs had gone hard. Maybe he was finally figuring out the point of a day off. Just for fun, Jess stretched combing his fingers through still damp, sandy blond curls. It earned him a soft hiss.

A heavy pause, then she asked, "*¿Y tu novio?*"

Manuel coughed; an embarrassed sound. Jess stifled another laugh and went back to getting caffeine into his system. To be caught with a raging woody for your boyfriend while you were on the phone with your mom, it served him right.

"*Jessé es bein.*"

Jess looked again up when Manuel said his name. He loved the way Manuel added that little lilt to the end of it. He'd loved it from the first moment it slipped past those sensual lips. A smile brightened his hazel eyes as he tried to figure out what *novio* might mean, 'cause it certainly was related to him. Jess silently mouthed the word as question. Manuel

frowned and shook his head. If he thought he was getting off without answering that, he was sorely mistaken. Then Jess held up the coffee pot, pointing at it, then at Manuel. This time Manuel nodded in response.

"*¿Está viniendo?*" The voice of Mama Fuentes caught them both off-guard.

Manuel looked over at the phone as he answered sheepishly. "*Sí, mamá.*" Jess shot him a glare as he filled the pot at the sink. Something was up. The tones in their voices said it. He and Manuel were going to have a little conversation of their own when Manuel got off the line.

"*¿Ambos?*" A load of meaning was packed into that one word. Jess wished he spoke better Spanish, something beyond, *where's the hammer?* And, well, the other phrases Manuel was teaching him didn't serve outside the bedroom.

Manuel squirmed. "*No sé.*" Now Jess was beyond curious. What didn't he know? This was one of those real uncomfortable conversations, by the look on his *vaquero's* face. No way he was getting out of telling Jess what was going on.

"*¿No sé?*" Mama Fuentes' voice cracked like a whip. "*¿M'ijo, es esta semana!*" What do you mean you don't know, and this week, Jess had enough Spanish to catch that.

"*Yo sé. Yo sé. Pero mamá, Tío estará.*" That pricked up Jess' ears even more. *Tío.* Manuel's uncle, he hated that asshole. If it was ever just he and that man in a dark alley ... well, one of them wouldn't be coming out in one piece.

"*Aye, sí, mi hermano viene. Espero tu, mi hijo, venir. No quiere tu que yo encuentre su novio?*" The woman's voice cajoled and chided all at once. "*?Son tu avergonzado por él?*"

Damn, Jess really wished he spoke more Spanish. Only about one word in three made sense. "*No, pero Tío lo odia.*" Manuel's denial confirmed for Jess that some mother/son dynamics were going on there and that they pretty much revolved around Manuel's uncle. Curiosity would just kill him if he didn't find out soon what they were talking about.

"*No me preocupo. Quiero que tu venga. Quiero que tu le traiga.*" She wanted something from him. Jess stored enough bits and pieces away to give Manuel the third degree when he got off the line.

"*Sí, mama. Dirigiré a Jessé sobre ir. No puedo prometer que vendré, pero intentaré.*"

Silence filled the house for a moment, then Mama Fuentes barked out, "*Si tu no viene, no le hablaré otra vez.*"

"*?Aye, mama! Intentaré!*" Jess had no clue what Manuel was responding to, but he'd bet both barrels of mama's emotional shotgun had been emptied square at her son. "*Tengo que ir.*" The *vaquero* groused, his tone defeated. "*Le amo.*" Now he was apologetic. "*Adiós.*"

"*Adiós m'ijo.*" Somehow, Jess guessed she'd won whatever battle they were having. "*Le veré en una semana.*" Empty air sounded, then a click as she hung up. Out of the corner of his eye, Jess watched Manuel glare at the phone. The bridle jingled as he leaned over and punched the disconnect button.

Jess turned and propped his butt against the counter. "So what was that all about?" Coffee gurgled into the pot behind him.

"Nothing." Manuel snapped and went back to messing with the tack.

"My ass nothing." Jess pushed away from the counter and stepped to the door jamb. Leaning against the wood, he crossed his arms over his chest and glowered. "You gonna tell me, or am I gonna beat it outta ya, boy?"

Manuel snorted. "You wouldn't do that."

Oh, a challenge, Jess always liked a challenge, especially before he'd had his first cup of joe. "Try me," he growled as he moved into the living room. A few steps brought him to the edge of the couch. Jess wound his fingers into Manuel's thick mane of dark black hair. The *charro* always kept it buzzed on the sides, but longish on top ... the perfect length to hang onto when things got going. Pulling Manuel's head back, Jess was treated to a sly, sexy smirk and lust filled eyes at half mast. Damn, Manuel played him like a fiddle.

Hooking his long, brown fingers along the edge of the towel, Manuel yanked. Terry cloth slid off Jess' hips to pool at his feet. Manuel leaned in and ran his tongue over Jess' already half-hard prick. "*Si, papi,*" he teased, "I'll try you."

"Shee-it!" Was all Jess could manage to hiss in response.

Nuzzling up under Jess' sac, the rough morning stubble rubbed hard on soft skin. One strong hand slid behind Jess' ass and pulled him in close. The other toyed with the trail of fur running from the cowboy's navel and fanning out over his pecs. With a low, satisfied murmur, Manuel sucked one of

Jess' balls between his lips and rolled it in his mouth. Jess shuddered.

Slowly, Manuel pulled back letting the heavy weight of Jess' balls pull them from his kiss. Then he ran his tongue up the hard ridge along the underside of Jess' cock. He tickled the base of the crown, tracing every inch of flare. Fuck, looking down, Jess saw Manuel's eyes closed in concentration. That man sucked dick like it was candy. Better than candy by a mile.

Jess sunk to his knees on the edge of the cushions. Manuel, fingers still gripping Jess' ass, scooted back to give him a little room. Even while he moved the tender torture of his lips and tongue never let up. Letting go of Manuel's scalp, Jess braced himself with one hand on the spine of the sofa. His other wandered down to tease hard brown nipples. Manuel shivered and Jess could hear the pop and grind of his *charro's* pants being undone.

Manuel hissed, hot air caressing the wet head of Jess' prick. Then Manuel wrapped his lips over the crown, toying with his tongue, slowly pulling him inside. It was Jess' turn to shudder again. "Hot damn, Manuel!" he managed to choke out before the *vaquero* sucked him down hard.

Jess slid his hand across the tight plain of Manuel's belly. Fingers searching in the warm curls, Jess found the hard length of Manuel's cock still trapped under his jeans. Distracted as he was, it took Jess a bit of finessing to tug him out of the denim prison. When that beautiful prick finally was free, Jess tightened his fist around silk covered steel and

stroked. Still sucking hard, the *vaquero* rocked his hips into Jess' grip.

Manuel moved on him like nothing else existed. Shit, the world really didn't exist for Jess right then. His entire consciousness centered between his legs. Manuel would pull back, lick Jess' head, then suck him back down. His cheeks hollowed with the effort. The pace and pressure were intense. All the while Manuel kept up a steady stream of hungry moans. When Manuel got going it was like he didn't even need to breathe.

Jess stroked Manuel's prick like mad, bumping Manuel's wrist every time he moved. Looking down that sexy form, he could see Manuel's hand buried in his jeans. The way his fingers were moving and the flashes of skin ... Goddamn, it was hot watching the *vaquero* play with his balls in his pants.

Manuel pulled off, his face tight. "*Chinga, chinga!*" he panted. The prick in Jess' hand got ten times hotter, swelling in his fist. Then Manuel jerked and twisted. Hot jets of white cum spattered his stomach. The warm, musky scent of it crawled up Jess' spine.

A bemused smile flickered over his sensual mouth. Manuel took three deep breaths, then swallowed Jess. Now he was on a mission, moving on Jess' cock like he would die if he stopped. It was all Jess could do to hold on and ride. With Manuel that intent, it didn't take long before Jess' thighs trembled. Every muscle tensed. With a hissed, "Fuck!" Jess came, emptying his balls and his mind into Manuel's mouth.

When things came back into focus, Manuel was staring up at him like a wolf caught raiding sheep. "Wait, don't swallow."

Jess damn near fell on Manuel. He licked the little bit of spunk running from the corner of the *charro's* mouth before pillaging his own taste. It was so good. Better than coffee first thing in the morning.

Jess snuggled down the rest of the way onto the couch. After a few grunts, pinches, and a lot of twisting and shifting, they ended up wrapped together. Propped in the corner of the upholstery, Jess' legs stretched on either side of Manuel's lean form. The *vaquero's* head lolled on Jess' shoulder, his back warm where it pressed against the cowboy's chest. "God, Manuel," Jess muttered, his fingers teasing the edge of Manuel's ear, "you're so good."

Manuel laughed and brushed his hand away. "*Acocote nuevo, tlachiquero viejo.*"

Replacing his touch with a kiss, Jess asked. "What the hell does that mean?" Half his conversations with Manuel had that phrase in them.

"If you want a job done right, get the man who has that job."

It was Jess' turn to laugh. "And you so have that job around here."

"Of course, *papi*." Manuel ran his knuckles along the cowboy's thigh. "I like my job."

They drifted for awhile, not doing much but touching. Finally, Jess figured he ought to get around to what was eating at him. "So..."

Manuel's eyes were closed and his sharp features relaxed. "*Que?*" He mumbled the question.

"Manuel," Thinking, Jess tried to phrase what he wanted to ask. After a few options were considered and discarded he opted for direct. "What does *novio* mean?" Sometimes you just had to go for direct.

"Ah, you heard *mí mama* call you that?"

"Boy, the people a mile up the road heard your mother call me that." He flicked Manuel's temple with his thumb and index finger. "That's what happens when you use the speakerphone."

The *vaquero* chewed on his lip awhile before answering sheepishly, "Boyfriend."

With what Jess knew of Manuel's family that surprised him. "Really, your mom knows I'm your boyfriend? Not just a friend, but your honest-to-God boyfriend."

"Of course she does, what should I tell her?" Manuel shrugged. "I'm calling you from some strange man's house every weekend? She has three numbers for me: my cell, the ranch, and yours. She usually finds me at yours."

"Well, I kinda thought, given your uncle, you might not be real open with her." Of course, Manuel's Aunt Graciella knew, but there was a real special relationship between them. From what Jess understood, Graciella taught Manuel most of what he knew about horses. Well, that and Manuel was a natural. Jess had seen him do things with the pea-brained equine species that he didn't really think were possible. Give Manuel the most obstinate, ornery critter who would rather eat nails than be ridden and the *vaquero* would turn him into a child's saddle horse.

Another, not quite comfortable silence hovered. Finally, Manuel broke it. "If *mí mama* cannot love me for who I am, how can she love me at all?"

Jess felt the heaviness in Manuel's statement. "Sometimes you are smarter then I can ever hope to be." He tried to ease the hurt a little with a compliment. Manuel only had a dad in the strictest genetic sense. The role of daddy had been played by *Tío*, his uncle. *Tío* pretty much hated what Manuel, and for that matter Jess, was. That snake tried to hurt them both for it. Jess detoured the conversation into his other area of rampant curiosity from the morning. "So what is she mad at you about?"

This time Manuel lifted himself up and twisted to stare down at Jess. "Why do you think she's mad?"

"Cause she has that tone..." Jess pushed his thumb against Manuel's sensual, full bottom lip, teasing him with the touch. Manuel kissed the tip as Jess finished his answer, "The *you're blowing me off* tone."

"She is not mad at me." The shake of his head denied Jess' observation as well. Manuel's eyes, however, confirmed Jess was right.

Jess pushed. "Then what are you supposed to know that happens this week?"

"You speak too much Spanish, Jessé." Manuel's rebuke was sharp with disgust at being caught shading the truth.

"Or not enough."

Running his hands through his hair, Manuel sat up and scooted to the far end of the couch. His jeans gaped, flashing white at the crotch. Tucked under the cotton, the outline of

the *vaquero's* prick was almost visible. The sight teased Jess. "It's nothing." Manuel's words brought the cowboy back from staring and remembering earlier. "My mother, she is just getting married this weekend."

That shot Jess upright, and not in the good, let's have sex way. "What?" He'd been knocked right out of the saddle by that one. "That's not nothing!" Holy crap, how could Manuel hide that from him? The Clark County Rodeo was that weekend. Manuel's mom lived up in Nevada, around Logandale where the rodeo would be. Jess figured Manuel would probably want to go say hi ... but a wedding? And not telling Jess? The cowboy was damn near boiling.

"Is no big thing." The tone of his words conveyed that the *charro* really didn't think it was anything much at all. "She wants me to come to give her away."

Jess remembered to shut his mouth before the flies flew in. Whether Manuel wanted to or not, he was going. "Don't you need a tux or something? It will probably be easier to rent one here in Nogales rather than up in Logandale. We're gonna be kinda busy while we're there, you know."

"No, if I go, I will wear my *charro* clothes. She wants me to do that." Manuel waved his hands in the air as though he were swatting away the thoughts. Still minimizing, he continued. "But it is nothing, very small, only family and some friends. So I do not know if I will go. I told her maybe I would come, because we will be there for the rodeo."

Crap, there went the rest of a lazy Saturday. They now had shit to do. With a grunt, Jess hauled himself out of the sofa and headed towards the bedroom in search of some

pants. As he rummaged in the dresser he shot a rebuke rolled into a question at Manuel. "In Nevada next weekend?"

"Saturday afternoon." Manuel followed him. Propping himself against the door jamb, the *vaquero* glowered at Jess. "I said, maybe, if we we're not busy, we might go."

Jess stood, a pair of shorts in one hand and socks in the other. "I am gonna beat you." Tossing the socks onto the dresser he shoved his legs into the briefs. Then he snagged his jeans off the floor and repeated the dance.

Sounding exasperated, Manuel huffed out, "Why?"

"Holy shit," Jess dropped onto the edge of the bed. As he fought with his socks and then his boots, he growled, "It's your mom's wedding, Manuel." Leaning from the bed to the dresser, Jess grabbed a T-shirt. The fabric muffled his next words. "I don't know how we're gonna manage it, but you gotta be there." His head popped free on the last word.

"Her third ... not counting my father." Manuel twisted his face into a lopsided smirk. "They never married."

Hell, his momma seemed to get around a lot. "She's had two other husbands, not counting your dad?"

Manuel drifted over to the bed and dropped down next to Jess. Staring at his hands hanging limp between his legs, he explained, "Well, one, this one was also the first one. But he drank a lot then." Sheepishly, he slid his warm gaze up to meet Jess' eyes and offered up another thin smile. "But now he is better, and has a store of his own and doesn't drink so much any more."

Okay, that was out of the way. Time to tackle the other bits Jess had heard. He didn't want to confront Manuel,

possibly start a fight, but closed wounds just festered and got worse. Best to get it over with now, Jess took a deep breath. "So what's the other problem?"

"What other problem?" The question was wary and Manuel went a little tense as he asked it.

"Don't you want me to meet them?" Jess ran at the issue full bore. Subtle had never been his style. "Is that why your mom was talking about me, and your uncle in the same breath."

Manuel's head dropped. His fingers twisted around each other and he shuffled his bare feet on the worn rug. Finally, he sighed. "Not everybody in my family is as nice as Graciella."

No shit, Sherlock, give that boy a prize for understatement of the year. "Would never have guessed that, considering the second time I met your uncle he threatened me and the third he slammed my head up against my own truck." Jess slid his arm behind Manuel, resting his weight on the bed and leaning against the *vaquero* in a not-quite embrace. "The dent's still in the damn door."

Not looking up, Manuel snorted and nodded. "Most are not as bad as *Tío*. Some almost, but not as bad."

"Your cousin Guillermo seemed nice." Jess moved his hand to Manuel's hip. The *charro's* back was warm against the skin of his arm. He pulled Manuel closer.

That move earned him a contented, soft moan. "Memo is nice." Manuel rolled his head to stare up at Jess with those deep brown eyes of his. "I always teased him that my aunt

slept with the school teacher, because Memo was too smart to be my uncle's son."

"You got away with that?" Jess laughed touching his forehead to Manuel's.

"No, Memo beat me up for it." He could barely see those eyes and how they crinkled at the edges. Manuel must be smiling. A warm touch drifted over Jess' thigh. "He was my big brother, he always did things like that."

Soft and slow, Manuel moved the few inches between them. His warm lips brushed Jess' and made the cowboy suck in his breath. The kiss was so gentle. It wasn't a ploy to get him off track. It wasn't a demand to stop asking questions that Manuel didn't want to answer. It just was. Perfect in timing and opportunity.

Jess gave in and opened his mouth. Manuel's tongue slipped inside teasing his own. Jess slid his hand up Manuel's back as Manuel wrapped his arms around Jess' waist. Without thinking, Jess pulled them down onto the bed, never breaking the kiss. Manuel rolled so their hips connected and the touch burned up Jess' spine. Oh, fuck, why did he bother to get dressed?

Grinding along Jess' thigh, Manuel pushed his own leg up against Jess' crotch. Jess rocked into the pressure. Manuel's kisses burned over his chin and down his throat, driving him nuts with frustration. Then those long, agile fingers started popping the buttons on his fly and Jess groaned. He did it again when Manuel pulled him free.

Another shift brought things a little more equal. Manuel had both of them in his hand, stroking, rubbing the sensitive

flesh together. Jess found the *charro's* lips again. Hungry, he pillaged the hot confines of Manuel's mouth. Their tongues fought as Manuel's hand danced over two cocks. The cowboy thrust into that tight fist, savoring the liquid heat from Manuel's juices and his own. Those tiny little droplets added such fire to the friction. Again and again he thrust. The morning blurred away into sweet heat.

Still lost in Manuel's taste, Jess exploded. Trembling as he came back down Jess kissed Manuel's cheek, his chin, his throat, and anywhere else he could reach. Manuel jerked hard against him chanting, "*Papi! Papi!*" The heavy scent of cum flooded Jess' senses.

"Oh, crap, Manuel," Jess chuckled, nuzzling under the *charro's* chin. "I'm going to have to get dressed all over again."

"I like you when you're not dressed." Manuel's hand skimmed over Jess' skin, just under the band of his now soaked jeans. "At least you have something to change into."

"Well, there's a drawer and a set of hangers for you, any time you want." Manuel grunted, not bothering with more of a response. Why did he always resist that suggestion? It was like Manuel was afraid of something—real afraid. The last time Jess'd pushed the subject, Manuel had walked out on him for a week. Well, the *vaquero* claimed he didn't, claimed he was just busy, but Jess knew better. Instead he decided to hit another button. "So," Jess pushed the hair out of Manuel's eyes, "what should I wear to meet your mom and your new/old stepdad?"

"Jessé..." Manuel glared, then shook his head. Then he rolled his eyes and flopped back on the bed. "*Para dejar el pellejo, lo mismo es hoy que mañana.*"

Jess leaned over Manuel's body. Poking the *charro* in the ribs, he teased, "Okay, I don't have enough Spanish to figure out that one."

"Death will find you." Manuel squirmed and swatted at Jess' hand. "The question is does he find you today or tomorrow?"

Jess wouldn't let up. Tickling his way across Manuel's chest, he added. "I don't get it." Manuel edged away, snickering and jumping at the touches. Every inch he moved was one Jess took. Finally they reached the edge of the bed. Instead of continuing the tickles, Jess kissed Manuel. Then he did it again 'cause it tasted so good. "So what does it mean?"

Manuel shrugged. "It's going to happen sooner or later, so why put it off."

"Ah, yeah," God, introducing Jess to his family was as bad as dying. It couldn't be that bad. "No sense in putting things off."

Chapter Two

"You so don't get the point of a day off, huh?" Jess grouched, his breath sparking in the chill dark air. Stamping his feet and jamming his hands into his pockets, he added another complaint as he walked around the front of the truck. "Shit, it's cold." It wasn't Oklahoma in the middle of winter cold, but it was too chilly for his nuts this morning. Why had he let Manuel talk him into getting out of his nice, really warm bed for this?

A silent ranch slept in the predawn of a Sunday. For the first weekend in ages, the entire two days had been theirs to spend how they pleased ... and where were they? At the ranch.

"I do," Manuel protested. The driver's door on Manuel's old El Camino slammed. "We're going to go someplace fun today, you will see. I think you will like *la carrera*." Emerald green stock paint had long since faded into a hazy ocean blue. This early in the morning it washed out to the same two-tone gray as the rest of the world.

Boarded horses whickered and stamped in their open pens. Manuel walked away toward the long line of covered stalls. Grumbling, Jess followed. "Drag my ass out of bed at four a.m. on a Sunday, it better be fun." Beyond them, the dark shadow of the barn where the breed horses were kept almost blocked the first twinkling of light from the ranch house. A ways farther down, the three trailers that served as bunkhouses still slept in darkness.

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The warm, green scent of alfalfa and ripe smell of sweet oats washed over Jess as he approached the stables. In the distance the spokes of the hot-walker creaked in the light wind. It vibrated the padlock on the tack room doors and made Jess hunker down into his jacket as he walked along the row. Manuel searched his keys, twisted the right one in the lock, and yanked it down. Hooking the padlock through the loop, he slipped inside. Jess had enough time to wish he was still back in bed before Manuel reappeared with a thick sheaf of hay.

"Lock it for me, *papi*," the *charro* smiled and brushed past, "I'll be right back."

Jess' gaze followed him as he hightailed it a few stalls down and called softly to Mango. As Jess snapped the lock back into place, he smiled on seeing the buckskin toss his head over the gate and whicker. Manuel dropped the hay into the manger. Then he kissed and stroked the silky black and brown face saying, "Good morning." Mango's ear rotated in Jess' direction. Breaking from Manuel's caresses, the horse threw his head, his mane cresting like a black waterfall as he whinnied.

"Good morning to you, too, sir." Jess kept his voice soft. The horse snorted in response. "Hey, you've known him longer than I have. You got a problem with Manuel waking us both this early, you know where to take it." Another snort, then Mango's head disappeared into the stall.

"It's not that damn early," Manuel muttered as he walked by.

Jess fell into step next to him. "No, it's half-past damn early."

At the very end of the building Manuel stopped. The *vaquero* fumbled for his keys again, his bright smile visible in the pre-dawn darkness. "Come inside, I should get new clothes before we go."

"Yeah," Jess snorted, coming to a halt next to Manuel, "you've been wearing those same jeans for two days. They could probably stand up on their own by now."

"No, just yesterday." Manuel bumped Jess' hip with his own. "I changed before I came over on Friday."

"You know, you could make it easy on yourself and leave some things at my place." At Jess' words, Manuel stopped, key in the lock. His shoulders tensed. The pops from his neck were audible three counties down. Jess counted to ten then added, "I'm just saying ... not nagging."

Manuel glared as he unlocked the door to his bunk and stepped inside. Cramped wasn't the half of it, one of the many reasons why they never bunked at Manuel's place unless there was no other option. Tucked behind the tack room the place was basically a closet with a bath and coat rack. Along one wall ran an efficiency kitchenette—oven, sink and ice-box all as one unit. You had to step into the closet to get to the john. At least that meant more wall space. Otherwise, there wouldn't have been anyplace for the twin bed and small dresser.

Jess stamped his boots before following Manuel through the door. It was as cold inside as it was outside. Scooting round the *charro* already digging through the drawers,

ancient springs protested when Jess flopped on top of the covers. He watched as Manuel shucked his clothes on the way to the closet. Jess would have reached over and turned on the small wall heater, but they weren't going to be there that long.

He closed his eyes and lazed. Subtle and soft, Manuel's scent drifted from the pillow. The slightly honeyed smell of the shampoo Manuel always used reminded Jess he needed to pick up more. That meant a trip to the only damn store in town he'd found that carried the chunky orange bottle. He should probably grab some of those little sesame candies the boy had gotten him hooked on, too.

Okay, it was four goddamn thirty and he was making grocery lists. It was either time to go back to sleep or head out. Sleep sounded like the better option. Jess just started to wonder what was keeping Manuel when the drizzle out of the bath sounded.

Disgusted, Jess sat up, flipped on the heater, and yelled without quite yelling. "You could have taken a shower at my place."

From behind the drone of water came Manuel's voice. "*No hay que ahogarse en un vaso de agua.*"

Jess hauled himself off the thin mattress and headed into the closet. Neat rows of shirts and jeans hung from a pole along one wall. Two sets of broken-in cowboy boots, a pair of tennis shoes, and Manuel's fancy *charro* boots were lined up underneath. Manuel's pride and joy, second only to Mango, took up most of the space. Tucked along the back wall, a black leather saddle studded in ten pounds of coin silver slept

on its tree. The damn thing cost more than a quarter of Jess' yearly take from construction.

Turning left, the cowboy leaned against the jamb and coughed. A dark shadow lurked behind green and blue stripes running across a dime store shower curtain. "What the hell are you going on about?"

Manuel stepped to the rear of the tub and pulled the plastic back. Water beaded on his warm brown skin. "You make it a big thing when it is not. I didn't think before we left."

Jess sucked in his breath and shifted. Suddenly his coat was too damn warm and his pants too damn tight.

Manuel's lip curled in a sensual smile. "You want to join me, *papi*?"

Jess swallowed. "I already had a shower." A quick and dirty jump under the spray and hose-off while Manuel made coffee, but a shower all the same.

Manuel leaned back against the pink tile and smirked. One hand wandered down to rub his thick, uncut cock. Nimble fingers played with Manuel's heavy balls and stroked warm flesh. "*Pasa nada*." He shrugged and pretended as though he could really care less what Jess wanted to do. "You do what you want."

Damn, no way the cowboy could even make eight seconds with that show. "Ah, hell." Jess hissed as he stripped. "At least it's warm in there." Stumbling over his own feet, he tried to get his boots and jeans off at the same time. Finally he recovered and shucked his clothes in record time.

With a smirk, Manuel licked his lips. "Very warm."

Everything was already hard and throbbing as Jess stepped into the tub. Manuel reached out and wrapped his hand around Jess' cock. "*Jessé, estoy ansioso de ti.*" He whispered as he moved in close.

Jess swallowed, trembling with anticipation under Manuel's confident touch. The cowboy wasn't even out of the gate and he was already half way to finished. That firm grip moved up and down his shaft, balling lightning in his toes and behind his knees. "Goddamn!" Jess hissed just before Manuel's lips met his own.

Jess slid his hands over Manuel's chest across his back and down to cup his tight cheeks. Hard in all the right places, round in all the right places, Jess cupped and squeezed. That man had the finest ass in all creation. It might be just his opinion, but did anyone else's matter?

With an indrawn breath, Manuel leaned into Jess' body. Everything was rearing up and ready to go for both of them. Manuel's hard prick bumped up against his belly. It left a slick kiss each time. Rocking his hips to feel that silky hard flesh moving along his own, Jess moaned out. "Hot damn, Manuel."

Manuel's lips tortured his neck and chin. Their bodies slid against each other. Manuel worked down the cowboy's throat to the hollow of Jess' collar. Each kiss went an inch further south. Jess let go of Manuel's ass and braced himself on the wall. The *vaquero's* tongue circled each nipple sending shivers crawling through Jess' chest. Then that tongue teased its way over Jess' abs and lower still. When Manuel slid his lips over Jess' aching head, the cowboy moaned and bucked into blissful heat.

Manuel's tongue swirled around his shaft, locking it between sensual lips. Jess slid his fingers through damp, black hair to cup the back of Manuel's skull. The tile was cold against his back. Warm water flowed over his chest, beading on Manuel's face. Cheeks hollowed with effort, Manuel sucked Jess down to the root. The suction frosted Jess' thighs and the back of his knees. Already close to going over, Jess shuddered.

Jess tugged on his hair, pulling Manuel off. He wanted to savor it, go whole hog. "Turn around." He managed to pant out.

Manuel rocked back on his heels, shower spray plastering his hair to his skull. They might not be getting clean, but they were sure as shooting having fun. The *charro* shook his head, spraying droplets of water over Jess. Then he stood. After a burning kiss that robbed Jess of his ability to breathe, Manuel turned. Bent forward, hands splayed on the wall, Manuel braced his knee on the side of the tub.

Fingers playing in the streams of water running down Manuel's strong brown back, Jess knelt. Then he took a moment to just savor the sight. Guys who rode broncs had damn fine butts. Nothing worked a man's glutes, thighs, and calves quite like hanging on a horse for dear life. The position, one leg up like that, opened Manuel up so nice. Heavy balls swung from a thatch of damp black curls. A red, swollen head peeked from the other side of Manuel's thigh. Neither sight compared to that flash of wrinkled brown flesh, beckoning Jess. Possibly his favorite thing in the world: sucking that tight ass.

Growling as he knelt and leaned in, Jess ran his tongue in the tight cleft. Manuel moaned, spread his cheeks with one hand and pushed back. Hot damn, yeah. A guy who loved getting as much as he loved giving. He circled Manuel's hole with his tongue—tickling, teasing, tasting. His cock throbbed hard between his legs. Jess gave himself a few twists through his fist while he attended to the matter at hand.

Manuel arched his back as Jess went in for the kill. In one hard thrust, Jess pierced Manuel's ass with his tongue. He shoved his whole face between the *vaquero's* cheeks and came back up snorting water. Manuel looked over his shoulder and laughed at the sight of Jess sputtering. The cowboy hauled off and whacked Manuel's butt. Okay, so maybe the shower wasn't the best place for that kind of sport.

"Come on, we got to back up so I don't drown."

"I don't know." Manuel teased. "Maybe you should get farther in so you don't breathe water?"

Jess smacked Manuel's thigh. Manuel stood and started to step back. Jess tried to stand at nearly the same instant. With Jess still behind, he couldn't maneuver right. They slipped. Jess grabbed for the soap dish. Manuel caught the only thing within reach. His hands balled into the shower curtain.

With a pop and a clatter, down it came on top of them. Manuel fell forward. Catching himself on the toilet he managed not to fall head first out of the tub. Legs tangled with the other man's, Jess slid on his ass. Spray drilled his face as he tried to breathe and laugh at the same time. He reached across Manuel's back so he could shut off the water.

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

Clambering out of the tub, Manuel's frame shook with his own laughter. He palmed his face and sat on the can. Jess dropped his head on his knees and gave himself up to the mirth.

When Jess heard the snap of the medicine cabinet, he looked up. Leaving the mirrored door ajar, Manuel dropped to his knees next to the tub. Two interesting bits of equipment were held in his hand. The small clear bottle with its black label thumped on the lip of the tub. Held between Manuel's index and pointer fingers a small purple packet caught Jess' attention.

"*Papi*," leaning over, Manuel hissed, "I want to ride."

Jess didn't need much more invitation then that. "Yee-haw!" He clambered out of the tub, climbing over the *charro's* frame to kiss him. Without looking behind him, Jess snagged the lube. He passed it to Manuel then tore into the condom.

A wicked smile still gracing his angular features, Manuel scooted back and lay down. Dark and throbbing, his own cock jumped in time to his pulse. Brown fingers glistened as he played where Jess wanted to be. Jess took a moment to savor the sight of Manuel spread and waiting for him. Then he slid between Manuel's thighs. The *vaquero* pulled him down for a kiss, his fingers wrapping around Jess' prick and stroking.

Never breaking contact with Manuel's mouth, Jess angled himself. As his tongue forced its way past Manuel's lips, his cock breached the first ring of muscle. Manuel arched his back and hissed. With slow, gentle thrusts Jess sheathed himself. Manuel's body was so goddamn hot. It always was.

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On the floor of that tiny little bath, Jess surrendered to the blissful heat. Manuel wrapped his legs tight around Jess' thighs, urging him on. His pulse thundered through his frame. Straining, he gave everything he had, every ounce of soul, to Manuel. His *vaquero* might not want to hear it said, but Jess would shout how he felt with his touch. Muscles rippled with barely checked movement. Every move, every moan, made him pull for the finish.

He reached between their bodies. Wrapping his hand over Manuel's dick, he stroked in time to his thrusts. Manuel moaned, "*Chingame!*" and shuddered as he was pounded. God, Manuel rode Jess as much as he was ridden. He thrust back. He writhed. He sucked on Jess' tongue.

Still sensitive from getting sucked down, Jess's gut froze. White heat tore up his balls and flooded his dick. "Ah, hell!" He reared back, his whole frame shivering with the intensity.

Manuel gazed up at him. Desire and amusement spread across his face. Jess smiled back and kept stroking. Feeling that solid prick glide through his hand, there wasn't much better. He loved how that uncut cock responded to his touch. Jess twisted his palm over the thick, ruddy head. When he slid his hand down Manuel's shaft, his foreskin pulled back opening him up.

Manuel bucked into his hand. The *charro's* eyes drifted half shut and his mouth tightened. His cock swelled ever so slightly. Then he jerked in Jess' grip. Thick ropes of creamy cum jetted over Jess' hand and Manuel's belly. Jess kept pumping, drawing more from deep within Manuel's balls. Then

he bent down and swirled his tongue in the juice. Manuel's flavor rocked him. Jess licked every last bit of it off salty skin.

Manuel reached up and ran his fingers through Jess' curls. "Oh, *papi*, you're so good to me."

Jess kissed the tip of the dick softening in his hand. "Ditto."

They would have stayed on the floor forever, but when they stopped moving the cold crept into their skin. Before shivers could eat them alive, they scrambled into their clothes. Then Manuel herded Jess out the door. "We wasted time, we'll be late."

Swatting his ear, Jess shot back, "I consider that anything but wasted time."

"You're so bad, Jessé." Manuel's smile told Jess he like the cowboy just dandy that way. "I'll get Mango." Pushing Jess towards the truck, Manuel tossed the cowboy his keys. "You hitch up the trailer, okay."

"Okay," Jess caught the jangling mess in one hand. Heading towards the El Camino, he shot over his shoulder, "Let's get this show on the road."

It took a bit of finesse to back the vehicle around to the two horse trailer Manuel always used. It was one of the ranch's older ones and a little run down. They used it for short hops but mostly it sat neglected. The use of it was one of Manuel's fringe benefits.

Jess was messing with the hitch to the tag-along trailer when a soft voice caught him off guard.

"Morning, Jess."

Without looking Jess knew the features of its owner. There'd be gray hair and green eyes attached to a sly smile. He stood and turned to find Maggie Parks, Manuel's boss, walking toward him from the direction of the tack room.

"How you doin'?" Sun and time long ago cut furrows in her face. Still beauty shown through ... the kind that came from so far inside nothing would ever kill it.

With a nod, Jess greeted her, "Ah, morning ma'am. Managing about near perfect." Then he gave his attention back to the work at hand. The ball hitch was about as centered as it was ever going to be. Kneeling again, Jess let down the supports for the trailer, easing it over the joint. The El Camino creaked ominously as the extra weight settled onto the frame. Manuel said he'd towed it before, but Jess wasn't all that convinced.

"You boys are up early." He pushed his flat-top Stetson back and looked up at Maggie as she spoke. Sun-creased skin and a whip lean frame told you about everything you needed to know about Maggie Parks. She worked. She worked hard and expected everyone around her to do the same. Jess thought it was a decent enough attitude.

It took some effort to close the latch down and Jess grunted out, "Manuel says we got someplace to go." When it clicked into the socket, Jess fished the padlock from his pocket and snapped it through the hitch. Now it would take more than just the whim of fate or man to shake the trailer off.

"Oh, yeah," A chain rattled in his ear. Maggie passed a short length over the hitch to Jess. "It's that day."

"What day?" Jess' knees popped more as he dropped down and felt under the bed for the frame. He hooked the chain to a decent spot.

"If he ain't filled you in, it's not my business to." Maggie smiled as she knelt down and mimicked his moves on the opposite side of the truck. "Jess..."

"Yes ma'am." Jess tossed the other end of his chain under the hitch and Manuel's boss did the same with hers. They both moved to the tag-along.

"Manuel is the best horse trainer I've seen in a long time, maybe ever." She paused before securing the tow chain to the appropriate spot on the trailer. "I want you to know there's a lot of things I put up with because it's him, and I want him happy."

After doing the same, Jess stood. "I sense a 'but' in there."

Standing, she slapped the dust on her palms off against her ass. "I don't put up with my hands bringing their girls back to fool around. Just 'cause you're two stallions in the paddock doesn't change that fact. Do I make myself clear?"

Heat flowed from the blood crawling up his neck when he realized that, having come from the tack room, Maggie Parks had heard them. Damn, how thin were the walls in Manuel's bathroom? How much of it had she heard? There was no way he would ask those questions direct. And, well, he already had some answer: "pretty damn," and "enough." He ducked his head and messed with a chain that was as secure as it needed to be. "Crystal, ma'am."

"You don't have to call me ma'am, Jess," she chided. "I ain't out to bust your balls ... this is a business. If I have that

rule for one set of employees, it's got to apply across the board."

Still too embarrassed to meet her gaze, Jess just nodded. "I understand."

"Good." Reaching over, she slapped his shoulder. "I'd talk to Manuel about it, but he's very sensitive when it comes to you. In fact, I had some *suspicions* but I didn't *know* until you started coming 'round. He always kept that real separate from all this, which I appreciate. It don't matter much to me, he works hard, does magic with the horses. But there's others around who aren't as open minded." She smiled at him, reminding Jess of his Nana. "With him mixing his lives, not separating things out, well, I think he likes you more than he's willing to admit."

Jess snorted and smiled back. "Well, it just takes him a while to get his head around things sometimes."

As she walked away, heading towards the barn and shaking her head, she shot back, "I've known mules who were less stubborn." Maggie waved to Manuel, who appeared at the stable door leading a brushed and combed Mango.

Manuel sauntered up to the cowboy, questions filling his eyes. Jess shrugged. "Ms. Parks says good morning." Avoiding the rest of it, Jess moved to the rear of the trailer and popped the gate. "Let's get a move on. We don't want to be late for whatever this big ol' surprise you got for me is." As they loaded Mango in the trailer and headed out, Jess sidestepped the *charro's* inquiries.

They headed down the highway a far piece before turning off into a maze of old abandoned roads. For the life of him,

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

Jess couldn't imagine what surprise could be hidden out in the desert, especially one that needed Mango. Still trying to figure it out, Jess caught sight of something strange in the side mirror. He twisted on the old bench seat and hung his head out the window, holding his hat on with one hand. Bouncing along behind them an old Dodge, metal pipes welded up in the bed to form a cage, held three horses. The animals stared out over the cab like nothing much special was happening.

Cresting a rise in the track, Jess was greeted to the sight of a small army of trucks and people and horses. All the activity centered around a section of reasonably straight and flat road. People sat on the hoods of their vehicles and gossiped. Men led or rode horses in between the trucks. Children ran everywhere. At one end of the dirt road, a red pipe frame of a portable racing gate hulked. Two red painted poles were driven into the shoulder about half a mile down.

Jess turned to Manuel as he angled the El Camino into a vacant spot. "Horse races?"

"Sí," Manuel smiled and put the truck into park, "I told you *la carrera*." He chuckled when Jess glared at him. "Come on, Jessé, help me saddle Mango."

Thin sun baked the scent of creosote out of the mesquite and teased rivers of sweat behind the men's ears as they unloaded and saddled Mango. Then they wandered. Children would stare at the beautiful buckskin. Sometimes, Manuel would swing one up into the saddle and let them ride for a minute or two as they walked toward the track.

An old woman with wrinkled skin the color of walnuts and silver hair pulled into a bun sold homemade tamales from the

trunk of a thirty-year-old Caddy. Manuel drifted over, drawn by his nose or his stomach. "*?Qué tiene?*" He queried.

"*Tengo a ricos pollo o pureco.*" She flashed a gap toothed smile. "*Y los dulces tambien.*"

"You like raisins, Jessé?" Manuel handed over Mango's reins.

Taking the lead, Jess shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"*Dos dulces.*" Manuel smiled as he fished in his pocket for a few bills. "If you don't like it, I buy you the chicken." When she held out two tamales, Manuel took one for himself and traded the other with the cowboy for Mango's reins.

Jess unwrapped the corn husk. Hot green chilies, rich pork, and sweet raisins all bundled in thick steamed *masa*. It smelled like root beer mixed with chili. The cowboy's stomach rumbled. He took a deep bite. It tasted almost better then it smelled. Mumbling around a mouthful of food, Jess asked, "Why do you bring Mango to something like this?"

Manuel chewed his own tamale and swallowed. "Advertisement."

"What?"

"During breaks, people ride around, put the horses through paces." He waved his hand, indicating the general chaos. "You see who has what, and where the horses come from. There are ranchers and breeders here. It's why my boss lets me use her small trailer. I come here. I show off. They ask me things and I tell them who I work for and that I train horses for her. Then they come buy her horses. It's good."

"You can show off for me anytime," Jess teased as they walked. Manuel seemed to be headed for a group of men and horses locked in tight conversation.

"Oh, *papi*, should I put you through your paces?"

"Right here," Jess winked, "right now?"

"*Chingame!*"

At that they had to stop teasing or risk being overheard. One leather faced *gringo* checked the confirmation of a wiry little spotted horse. If she hit more than fifteen hands high Jess would eat his hat. Maybe a bit of Arab and a hell of a lot of Mustang made up her bastardized heritage. Patches of black and brown flecked her white coat. Muzzle, ears, and stockings were mixed black-brown; what they called greased 'cause it looked like a hand had smeared her with dark fry-grease. Her head was delicate with big, wide eyes, like an Arab's, on an otherwise compact frame. The man swung up into the saddle and, with the owner's permission, stretched her out a bit. She clipped along at somewhere between a walk and a run.

Spanish flowed around him while Jess finished the tamale. He dropped the husk to the sand and wiped greasy fingers on his jeans. As horse and rider finished their short circuit, Manuel translated the gist of the conversation. "They say he will race her today to sell her."

With a nod to the other man as he dismounted, Jess stepped in and took the mare's face in his hand. He pulled back her lip and checked her teeth. They were all adult and not terribly worn, putting her somewhere between five and eight. No mites in her nose. With the way her ears tracked

Jess' movements she definitely heard and saw him. When she butted his hand, the cowboy scratched her head. Then he ran his hands over her body and legs. She had splints on one, nothing major or bothersome since they were old and well healed.

The other men were all drooling over Mango. Looking down at Jess the potential buyer asked, "What do you think?"

"Well," Jess stood and shrugged, "listen to her lungs after she runs out a bit." The filly pushed against him again, and Jess slung his arm under her neck and scratched her jaw. "If she's not wheezing ... I'd buy her if I had the cash."

Hearing the word *buy*, her owner looked over from the other conversation. "She pretty lady, *sí*? Made for you, ah?"

Jess laughed. "Me and women, we just don't get along much."

Manuel looked over and rolled his eyes. "Jessé, you're so bad."

"Ain't that the pot calling the kettle..." Jess let the thought trail off. This was not the place to be teasing like that.

Staring hard, Manuel ran his tongue over his teeth. "She likes you, you like her." *He was doing it, his horse thing.* Leading Mango in a great circle about the pair, Manuel studied them from all angles. When he reached her head, he peered around and nodded at Jess. "You should have this horse."

"I can barely afford my rent right now, Manuel." Jess gave the mare's ears another scratch. "No way I can afford to buy a horse."

"But she is for you."

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

Hand dropping lightly on the *charro's* shoulder, Jess shook his head, "Well sometimes, boy, you just love from afar."

One of the other *vaqueros* said something to Manuel. After a moment of consideration Manuel answered him and Jess quickly lost interest. It was hard to pay attention when you couldn't understand ninety percent of what was being said. Manuel tapped his arm and handed over Mango's lead. Then he hunkered down with the other men and traded tight whispers. Notations, figures and odds were calculated with sticks drawn through dust. After narrow eyed glaring and pursed lips, money was passed over to an old man who kept the figures in his head. Illegal straightaway racing; if the betting commission was out they'd all get hauled away.

Manuel nodded and stood, wiping the dust on his ass. The mare's owner took his feet as well. They both stepped in, grasped forearms and smiled. When Manuel moved back to his side, Jess handed back Mango's reins. "So what was that all about?"

"We are going to race." He flipped the reins over Mango's head and moved to the left side of his mount. With his boot in the stirrup and a grunt, Manuel lifted himself up and into the saddle. Then he leaned down and smiled at Jess. "This afternoon she will be yours."

"What?" Jess couldn't have heard that right.

"The mare," Manuel leaned down and pushed his hat back on his head, "she will be yours."

Stepping up to the *charro's* knee, Jess hissed. "Manuel, you don't have that kind of money."

"I know." His smile broadened to take up his whole face. "I bet."

"You bet what?"

"On a race, he and I will race. If I win, we get the mare."

Lead dropped into Jess' belly. In a hoarse whisper he asked, "What if you lose?"

"I won't lose." Manuel snorted, almost like he was offended that Jess could think such a thing.

Jess repeated the question, dreading what the answer might be. "What if you lose?"

With a click of his tongue on his teeth, Manuel started to turn the horse toward the track. "He gets Mango." The other man had already mounted the mare and ridden toward the gate.

Jess grabbed Mango's bridle. "No." He almost shouted, but backed his tone down at the last minute. Still, the other men's attention swung toward them.

Manuel glared. "What do you mean, no?"

"You idiot! I'm not going to let you risk Mango ... your baby, on some freaking painted lady!"

Manuel jerked on the reins breaking Jess' grip. Circling Jess, he added, "It's too late." Then he guided Mango toward the track.

Jess jogged along beside him. "It's never too late. Go tell him it was a mistake, that I don't want the horse that bad. I won't let you risk Mango."

Manuel wouldn't look at him. He just stared straight ahead. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

Manuel pulled back on the leads and Mango halted. "If I back out, I lose."

"Lose?"

"Sí, he takes Mango without the race." Manuel sighed. "Do not worry, Jessé, I will not lose." He dug his heels into Mango's side and the buckskin broke into a canter. "You want to talk about it, we talk after we leave." He called the last over his shoulder.

"No, we can goddamn talk about it now!" Jess yelled at his back.

"Not now, you wait!" It was the harshest tone Manuel had ever used with Jess.

Shit, there was no way to stop this. Jess thought he would puke. Word had spread like fire through a dry field. People abandoned their cars and their gossip for the race. Dodging through spectators, Jess ran towards the far end of the track. If things went bad, Manuel would need him. And, come hell or high water, he'd back that asshole out of the bet, even if it meant promising every paycheck 'till hell froze over.

Two men pulled a rope between the poles where it rested on pegs. Near midway, Jess hooked his heel on the bumper of someone's truck. A hand reached down and helped him clamber up. Everyone was smiling, laughing. Everyone except Jess ... all he could feel was dread. All attention swung to focus on the red painted gate. The horses skittered and bounced sensing the agitation around them. Manuel and the other man eased the horses in, leaving the middle chute open between them. An old man ran at the back, setting the ropes behind their haunches then grabbed the lever. A wave of a

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cowboy hat from the finish line let him know the marker was set. Jess counted three heartbeats before the old man pulled. Ancient gears groaned. The gates shot open with a bang.

The mare bolted out clean. Cheers went up. Mango reared and leapt forward; taking the strides he'd missed in seconds. Spectators urged him on with yells. Both horses laid out long, giving it their all. From dead on, Jess couldn't see who held the lead. They seemed neck and neck. A cloud of dust flowed behind their undulating forms. There wasn't a blanket between them as they thundered past. Jess' breath froze in his lungs. He couldn't watch, but he couldn't stop watching.

The mare pulled ahead, taking stride after stride. Muscles rippled like water flowing to the roar of the crowd. Each inch gained ratcheted up the tension and noise. Jess swallowed. Manuel was going to hate him. Every time he looked at the cowboy all he would think was *I lost my baby because of you*.

When she'd taken almost a full head, Manuel leaned deep into Mango's neck. The buckskin responded with a surge of speed. The crowd roared. Mango took the rope with less than a nose.

Jess scrambled off the truck and ran down the middle of the track. Both riders slowed their mounts with large turns. Mango tossed his head and whinnied as he trotted back. People surged around them and Manuel was forced to rein him in. The *charro* seemed to search the throng, and spotting Jess saluted with his hat. Then Manuel leapt from Mango's back and was swallowed by a crowd of well wishers. Men hugged him and slapped him on the back. Some old woman kissed his cheek.

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Jess pushed through the crowd, growling, "You sorry son of a bitch." The cowboy grabbed Manuel by the shoulder. Jess spun the *vaquero* to face him and sputtered, "You ever do something that goddamn stupid again ... I'll kill you."

Manuel frowned. He rolled his shoulders. Then he cocked his arm back and decked Jess.

Chapter Three

Wednesday morning faded into a blur of tack store and feed lot. The morning gobbled up under the hum of the tires running from store to store getting ready to head out. Jess'd started out before sun up to get what he needed done. Cell jammed to his ear while trying to drive, the cowboy scrambled to find someone to check in on his new horse. The mare could fend pretty well in the old pipe corral and sun shelter at his place, but feeding was the problem. All his old friends were up in Tucson. While Jess could call in a favor or two, it wouldn't be a daily thing. Imposing on someone for a two hour round trip for four days running ... well, he couldn't do it.

Jess swore as he got the answering machine, again, for the contractor on his current jobsite. "Mike, Mike, Mike. It's Jess, call me back, *hombre*," he pleaded after the beep. Mike had a teenager, with a car. Jess' last hope hinged on wrangling the kid into breaking the morning ice in the trough and throwing out a sheaf of hay in exchange for some cash. Hard to manage even that when Jess couldn't scare up more than the answering machine. He kicked himself for not starting the search Monday or Tuesday, but at that point he still had held out hope Manuel would return his phone calls.

Jess swung off the main highway onto the rust colored dirt road leading to his place. Six hay bales bounced in the bed of his old jeep pickup. A brand new, but dirt cheap, halter with rope lead sat atop white plastic bags full of last minute things

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by J Buchanan

he needed from the only open drug store, like those hot-cold patches, antacids, and aspirin. He always needed lots of aspirin—bought the stuff by the truckload. Like always, there'd be something he forgot, but Jess was pretty sure he got most of it.

Hooked on the headrest ... the prize of the day jangled. A second hand, dark-oil leather bridle with rawhide braiding, snaffle-bit and spliced together, but still usable, harness leather roping reins. Jess wrangled that and a used blue/red Apache print saddle blanket for twenty bucks.

Undulating green-gray winter dry hills broken by swatches of red still wore a fine dusting of snow. Scraggly cottonwoods and the occasional Manzanita tree with its characteristic crimson bark lined the track. As he drove in and out of thin winter sunshine, Jess fumed. How could Manuel saddle him with a goddamn horse and then just drop off the face of the earth? Especially when there was a rodeo the next weekend? That boy just didn't think two steps ahead. If'n he had the time, Jess would have found Manuel and killed him. There wasn't a judge in the world who wouldn't buy the he-needed-killing defense at this point.

Homicidal thoughts were cut short as Jess rounded the last bend and caught sight of Manuel. That lean frame, bundled in a heavy, sheepskin lined coat, drove the worst of the bloodthirsty thoughts out of his head. The *vaquero's* chin rested on arms crossed over the top rail of the corral while his left boot heel banged the bottom. Work gloves, jeans streaked with red dust, and flat-topped Stetson pulled down

low over his eyes, Manuel watched Mango and the appaloosa dancing around each other.

Mango's top lip curled up briefly, before he shook his head and snorted. Ears forward, they touched noses. The two horses shared a breath exhaling in a sparkling mist. Then Mango pranced away and gave the mare some room.

Parked next to the corral, Manuel's El Camino and the two-horse tag-along were coated in rust colored mud. Jess figured Manuel'd been there awhile. Wasn't hard to twist his brain around that. Mango was in the corral. The trailer was unhitched. The front light he'd left on was off. Manuel always flipped the dang thing off when he went inside, even if Jess had just turned the light on a moment before.

Manuel looked up as Jess got out of his pickup, but didn't call out or greet him. Instead he turned back toward the pair. Jess swore under his breath again. That boy ran him in circles so much the cowboy had to look at his own tracks to tell if he was coming or going. Jess shoved his hands in his pockets, popped his neck and shifted his shoulders before ambling over. Again Manuel turned to stare at him. Finally, the *charro* pursed his lips and gestured with his chin into the corral. "I think they like each other."

"Good thing or Mango could have gotten a good swift kick."

"No," Manuel chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, "she wouldn't, not to him. She is used to being with other horses. And he is lonely sometimes, too."

Slow and easy, Mango sidled up to the mare. With a whicker he nibbled at her shoulder. She whinnied and

stamped but didn't move off. It was a good sign. "Looks like Mango's straight, though." Jess teased a little to ease the almost physical tension between them.

"My horse is castrated." Manuel snorted and rolled his eyes. "He's just confused."

They stood for awhile, watching the pair get to know each other. Finally, Jess broke the silence. "You never did tell me what her name was."

"*Nombre?*" Manuel asked the question of Jess, but stared at the horses.

"The horse." This speaking, without talking to each other, was getting on the cowboy's nerves quick. It reminded Jess of his disastrous attempts at dating girls in high school. He tried again. "Did the guy tell you what he called her?"

Manuel finally looked at him. "*Su nombre es Peca.*"

"What does *Peca* mean?" Jess tilted his head and leaned in a bit, easing himself into Manuel's personal space.

Manuel reached out to run his fingers lightly over Jess' cheek and the bridge of his nose. "Like spots, like on your face here." His touch was tentative, as though he were scared of frightening Jess off. When Manuel bumped the bruise on his cheek, the cowboy flinched and Manuel frowned. Well, damn-it, he should be sorry that he'd busted Jess up. Lighter this time, Manuel caressed the same spot. Not like it wasn't easy to find ... with the nice yellow color it had turned.

"Freckles?" Trying not to twitch under the touch, Jess voiced his consternation. "My horse's name is, Freckles?"

"Sí." Manuel drew back and shrugged. "That is what the man said. I stopped on the way over and got the papers for her."

"Why?"

By the look on his face, Manuel just put him up for idiot of the year. As if it should be obvious, the *vaquero* explained, "Because we can't transport or board her without ownership papers, health certificates, those things."

"Where is she going?"

Instead of answering, Manuel asked. "We have a rodeo this weekend, yes?"

"Well, I wasn't sure you'd be coming with me on this one." Jess studied his boots. "Called a couple times to get things ironed out for the trip and I didn't hear nothing but the wind back."

"Of course I'm going with you. Why do we need to talk over it, we do the same all the time. You told me last week when we would leave, so I came." Manuel leaned back against the fence and hooked his arms over the rail. "And because Mango goes, she can go. It will keep him company when we board him, make him happy. You will have a horse to ride at the beginning, when the rodeo starts."

"I don't have tack. Picked up a halter, bridle and blanket, but I couldn't afford to drop a few hundred on a saddle right now." Jess twisted his hands around the rail. "Probably be able to turn up something decent second-hand when we get back, but just didn't have the time."

"I thought so." Nodding, Manuel waved toward the horse trailer. "I borrowed an old saddle from *Señora* Parks. *La*

señora dice, you come fix the loose boards on her porch and you can call it even trade. I picked out a nice one, but maybe you don't want the saddle any more than you want *Peca*, ah?"

That was the tip of it. Manuel's tone said nine-hundred things his words didn't. "Is that what got your panties in a bunch so bad you didn't want to talk to me?"

"I think *chicas* wear panties, not me." Manuel pushed away from the fence and began a rolling walk towards the house. "It was nothing." He called over his shoulder, "We should get ready to go."

"No," Jess jogged up. Grabbing the *charro's* arm, Jess spun Manuel around to face him. "I ain't gonna spend almost ten hours driving and a weekend in a hotel with you getting the cold shoulder." Manuel tried to yank his arm back. Jess wouldn't let go. After a futile struggle, Manuel just stood there and glared at him. "Come on, Manuel, tell me what's eating you or so help me God, I'll slap you so hard your grandkids will have headaches. I owe you one and frankly, I got one nerve left and you're on it."

Jaw set hard, Manuel glanced back toward the pen. He watched the two horses. He sighed. Then, Manuel answered. "Jessé, where I come from, you accept a gift. You say thank you. You get excited and happy ... even if you don't want it." Now he focused on Jess. "If you do not take it, it means that you do not want me. And you made me look bad in front of all those people. You're my friend, and more, but they don't know that." Again he looked away. "And *mi novio* told everyone that he did not like me."

"Was that any reason to haul off and hit me?"

"You made me mad." Manuel avoided his gaze. "You insulted me and I got angry. I should not have ... *Siento*, I'm sorry, Jessé." Mumbling into his chest, Manuel offered an explanation. "You made me low in front of them, like I was a child. You can't do that. If I did not do something, they would all think I was not a man. And maybe I did the wrong thing. I don't know how to tell you so you will understand."

Ah, shit, he kept stepping on these landmines with Manuel ... somebody needed to give him a map or something. Despite the recent spate of verbal flooding, the cowboy wasn't much for words. There was only one way he really knew how to fix things. Jess grabbed Manuel's face in both hands and kissed him. He knocked the *charro's* hat onto the dirt. Goddamn, Manuel's mouth always tasted so good. Hot and spicy and all for Jess.

Coming up for air, he managed to breathe out. "Idgit, you can give me anything you want. Just don't ever risk Mango again." Manuel opened his mouth to protest once more. Jess stopped him with another kiss. "Shh, promise me that. I would have felt so low if you'd lost him. 'Cause that horse means everything to you." Running his thumbs over sharp brown cheeks, Jess added, "I love her, she's wonderful, prettiest little filly I've ever seen ... and you know I don't usually go for women."

That made them both chuckle. Then he slid his hands behind Manuel's neck and pulled him in close. "You have a dang fool head and more gut than you can hang on a fence. I would never have had the balls to pull something like that off." Between more kisses, Jess whispered, "And never, ever,

ever doubt that I like you, I love you, ever want to be without you. I don't understand you half the Sundays in the year, but I love you."

"*Sí, papi*, I know," Manuel sighed, "but you make me crazy sometimes when you do things."

Hugging him tight, they rocked together. "I make you crazy? Boy, sometimes I get the feeling we're dancing two different set of steps to the same music." The reflection of his smile flashed in Manuel's eyes. Jess could drown there and never worry about breaking the surface again. Pressing his forehead against, his *charro's* cheek, Jess heaved a heavy breath. "Come on, I got to pack." With another sigh he broke the embrace and reached down for Manuel's hat.

As he stood, Manuel tried to snatch the Stetson out of Jess' hand. "You haven't already?"

"Manuel, you know I have three sets of clothes," Jess laughed, playing keep-away for the moment. Finally he let Manuel grab the hat ... but not before he stole another kiss, "put on, pull off, and do without." Wrapping his arm around Manuel's shoulder he steered them towards the house. "Gear's all set, though. Just got to throw some clean jeans and a few shirts in a bag and I'm ready to head out."

As they walked, Manuel's hand slid into Jess' back pocket. "So, *papi*, do we have time?"

Hand on the door knob, Jess paused. "Time for what?"

"Time for me," Manuel squeezed Jess' ass through his jeans, "to show you how sorry I am?"

Well, Jess was never one to turn down an offer, but he didn't want Manuel thinking that he owed Jess anything.

There'd been missteps by both of them. "Look, Manuel, it was a misunderstanding." Jess had to pull away from their comfortable embrace to step through the door. On his five-step journey across the living room to the bedroom he added, "I'm thinking we're gonna have a slew of those." He turned and smiled ... dollars to doughnuts they'd have more.

Returning the smile with a bright one of his own, Manuel dropped his cowboy hat on the shade of one of the two table lamps. It made as good a hat rest as anything. Jess had used it for that purpose on more than one occasion. The *charro* shucked his coat. That landed on the couch. "No, I mean for hitting you." He sidled up to the cowboy and ran one strong hand over Jess' crotch.

"Oh, that." Suddenly, Jess was very interested in Manuel's apology. "We could dawdle some." He drawled out. "Take us a bit hauling the trailer. As long as we head out around nine, we'll be okay."

Manuel dropped to his knees and kissed Jess' stiff prick through his jeans. Jess groaned, anticipating the apology. He slid his fingers through Manuel's heavy black hair. Cupping the back of his head, Jess pulled Manuel against him and ground his crotch against the kisses, hard.

Jess' hands trembled with anticipation and he began to sweat. Damn, he should have taken off his jacket. As he tried to wriggle out of the heavy material, Manuel pulled back. Strong fingers worked at his belt and fly. When Manuel's hand snaked under the denim and pulled his shorts away from his cock, Jess hissed. It felt so good. It always felt so good with his *vaquero*.

Finally the jacket was off. Jess leaned back against the jamb, pulled up his shirt and spread his knees. Manuel looked up into Jess' eyes, opened his mouth and leaned in. As his lips closed around Jess' aching prick, the cowboy rocked his hips. Jess relaxed into the heady suction. Gently teasing, Manuel worked the cowboy's cock in and out of his hot mouth. It was so good like this. Jess slipped his hands around the back of Manuel's head, trying to control the ride. As Manuel sucked Jess' cock, Jess felt his body tighten. His breathing was fast and heavy. He used his hand on the back of Manuel's head to urge him on. He was going to cum soon, Jess could feel the heat building inside.

Hot, full lips tortured his shaft. Manuel's tongue danced along the throbbing veins. Pressing the crown against the roof of his mouth, the *charro* mumbled, "Jessé, *mio*." The sound vibrated down Jess' prick and through his balls. Jess grunted and lost control. He thrust his hips like mad, driving his cock deep into Manuel's mouth. Manuel choked and tried to pull back. Just as he did, Jess's senses exploded. Heat boiled up his cock and filled Manuel's mouth with cum. Pulling the cream from Jess' dick, Manuel sucked and swallowed.

Panting, Jess drifted back down. When he could focus again, he found himself stroking Manuel's temple. Manuel knelt in front of the cowboy, butt propped on his heels. "My turn now." Looking down at that serene dark face, Jess smiled.

Manuel wrapped his hand over Jess'. "For what, *papi*?" He purred out the question.

"For me," Jess pulled Manuel up next to him. Before settling into a deep kiss, he added, "To apologize to you." Damn, Manuel still tasted of Jess. It always rocked him. There were times when Jess realized he was just a cum slut. This was one of them. Tongues dancing, he pillaged his own flavor in Manuel's mouth.

Finally, Manuel pulled back. "You don't have to apologize to me."

Jess ran his hand up Manuel's back. "But I want to." Tugging on Manuel's belt he eased them over to the bed. As he moved, Jess shucked his shirt and kicked off his boots. "Get nekkid, boy. We got time to play."

Manuel laughed and pulled his t-shirt over his head. "We do, ah?" Jess savored the way the *vaquero's* muscles moved under his skin. He was just nine kinds of fine. Slowly, Manuel pushed his jeans and briefs down. When that thick cock came into view, Jess hissed. Dark and throbbing, a little bead of juice glistened at the tip.

Jess lay on his side and reached out for that beautiful prick. It was so warm and heavy in his hand. Like a lead, he used his grip to tug Manuel onto the bed with him. Manuel knelt on the edge of the mattress, allowing Jess to gently stroke his cock. Then Jess patted the bed next to him. He felt the bed shift as Manuel moved. For a moment he fumbled in the bedside drawer, looking for what they needed. Then his attention was all for Manuel.

Manuel moved up close, dragging his prick along the cowboy's thigh. Slick heat wicked along his skin. Jess ran his free hand over Manuel's torso and pinched his nipples. Manuel

wincing. Jess smiled. Jess toyed with him for a while, and then let his hand drift down to the *charro's* stiff cock. Pushing back the foreskin with his fingers, Jess rubbed his thumb all around the ruddy head. Manuel moaned.

"Like that?" Jess whispered his voice husky.

"Oh, *sí, papi*." Manuel mumbled.

"Good," He cupped Manuel's heavy balls in his hand. The contrast between that rock hard cock and soft supple sac was intense. "You up for a ride?"

"You going to get it up again?" Manuel teased.

"That's not what I meant." He squeezed and Manuel yelped. "I know what you need."

"Oh, really?" Manuel scooted down as Jess spread his legs. "You are telling me what I need?"

Jess' cock tried to rally. Didn't much matter to Jess at the moment. He wanted attention to a totally different area.

"Okay, how 'bout, I want you."

Settling between Jess' thighs, Manuel braced his hands on either side of the cowboy and leaned in. "I like it when you want me." He bent down for a kiss. Jess' hand wandered across Manuel's solid chest. After he rolled the condom onto Manuel's cock, Jess reached down, grabbed behind his knees and pulled his legs back. Manuel smiled, hissing in appreciation at the sight.

As he held his sheathed cock in one hand, the *vaquero* scooted forward and stared down at Jess again. His intense chocolate eyes never wavered. Jess felt the head of Manuel's dick press against his hole. He closed his eyes and groaned as Manuel spread him. Jess felt that thick head slowly crown

inside. A little pain, a lot of pressure and then heaven ... goddamn that felt so good. Slow and easy, Manuel pushed forward. When the ring of muscle snapped around the ridge of his head, they both moaned.

Manuel slid his arms under Jess' legs, pressing them back farther. "Oh, Jessé," he hissed, "it is so good."

Gently, Manuel thrust and Jess arched his back. The cowboy wrapped his hands around Manuel's biceps. "Damn straight." Jess was shocked he managed something coherent in response. He would swear he never felt anyone like Manuel in his life. Gentle but strong, he filled Jess, spread him wide, it was just incredible. And it wasn't like Jess hadn't been fucked more than a few times in his life. There was just something so special about getting pumped by Manuel. The *charro* pushed a little deeper, then slowly pulled the length of his cock out. Jess groaned loud as the thick head of Manuel's prick stroked his insides.

Sweat beaded on his heaving chest. Jess shivered when Manuel licked it off.

"Ah, fuck!" Was about all Jess could manage under that touch.

Manuel rocked against him, fucking faster and harder and deeper. Jess rode it and begged for more. Manuel's breath broke in hard little grunts. Burying his face in Jess' neck, kissing and licking the cowboy's skin, Manuel thrust like mad. Jess moaned with every stab of Manuel's cock deep inside him. His own prick slid in the slick sweat between them, tingling and tightening his stomach.

When Manuel began to grind, Jess slid his arms up and across Manuel's back. Rough and slow Manuel explored every inch of Jess' channel. Jess dug his fingers into the *vaquero's* shoulders. Manuel shuddered, hips pounding Jess like mad. A few quick bursts with his hips and Manuel lost it, growling as he filled Jess with heat.

Breathing hard and trying to catch his breath, Manuel collapsed onto Jess' chest. Jess wrapped him up in a tight embrace. "Manuel, Manuel, what the hell would I ever do without you?"

"I don't know, *papi*," Manuel's voice was sleepy, "but I don't want to find out." Dozing, they drifted in the happy peace of make up sex.

Finally Jess hauled himself out of the bed and into the bathroom for a bit. When he came back out with his kit, Manuel was sitting on the edge, dressed and talking on his cell phone. "*Sí, sí.*" He nodded as he spoke. Then he fell silent for a bit, listening. Jess shrugged an unspoken question and Manuel rolled his eyes. "*Possibl  siete o siete y media? No es necesario, mama.*" Another pause, "*Okay, bein, no le hace. Te amo.*" He snapped the phone shut.

Jess tossed the kit next to Manuel before he fished his clothes off the floor. As he dressed he asked, "What did your mom want?" Then he dug his bag out of the closet.

Manuel flopped back onto the mattress. "She wants us to come to dinner."

A few loud cowboy shirts followed the luggage. "Okay." He walked around to the end and collected t-shirts, shorts, jeans and socks. Like he'd said earlier, everything else was already

packed and ready to go. Jamming the clothes into the bag he waited for the rest of whatever they'd talked about.

With a grunt, Manuel rolled off the bed. He grabbed the bag, stuffing the kit in as he zipped it, and headed for the living room. Jess was right on his heels. On the way out the door he snagged his bucking rig and the case already filled with chaps, boots, and assorted cowboy junk.

Manuel pulled the door shut behind them. As he fished out his keys to lock it, he finished, "And," a heavy sigh was added for effect, "stay with her. She says I should not be at a hotel when I have family there. It's disrespectful."

Jess tossed his stuff into the back of his truck. Manuel's gear would already be stowed in the trailer. The only thing left before they headed out was to hitch up the tag-along and load the horses. "So, what did you tell her?"

"What could I tell her?" Manuel shrugged, dumping what he carried on top of the chaos already filling the truck bed. "I said we would."

Jess considered the *charro* long and hard. "She has a spare bedroom."

Shaking his head, Manuel sounded the death knell for a weekend in bed. "No. She has a couch that becomes a bed."

It was bad enough staying in a rented bed on the road, but at least it was private. "You're shitting me right?" A strange house, a strange bunk and no privacy was not how he pictured the next few days.

Manuel started for the trailer, mumbling, "*No le estás dando vuelta al malacate porque se te enredan las pitas,*" over his shoulder.

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

"Awful long answer for a yes or no question."

Louder, he interpreted the saying, "Only men who want to suffer go against their mother's wishes."

Yanking open the door to his truck, Jess grouched, "So we're passing the misery round on a plate then?"

"It won't be that bad." Manuel's own face said it probably would.

Chapter Four

Jess woke one minute this side of damn early. That's what he got for trying to sleep in a strange house. It was hard enough in hotels. Although, after years on the rodeo circuit, Jess sorta had the rhythm of them in his system. He snorted with the memory of last night. A woman with Manuel's smile had met them at the door amid a flood of kisses, hugs, and Spanish laced with English. Petite, with a spare layer of softness over her bones, it did nothing to hide the ramrod core she'd passed on to her son. Soon everyone in the building seemed to know about Manuel's arrival. The apartment was stuffed with dozens of people, some of whom may have been related, but most were not.

Begging off an early rise and a long Thursday ahead of them, they'd tried to sneak their leave at least twice. There was no way, once they'd showed up for dinner, that Lupe Fuentes was going to let them sleep anywhere but her house. Hell, the woman had grub in the oven waiting for them ... about two hours past done. At least Jess now had a damn good idea where Manuel got his pig-headedness from. Look up stubborn in the dictionary and there'd be a picture of Manuel's mother to illustrate it. Jess stifled a yawn and debated whether to try and go back to sleep.

Manuel still snored beside him. You knew you were broke to a guy when something like that became a comfort and not an annoyance. Flat on his back and arm thrown over his eyes, he slept like he was in the angels' own arms. Jess snorted. Of

course he could sleep like that ... he was under his mama's roof.

Well, no way was Jess getting back to sleep. And he sure as shooting wasn't ready to get out of bed. That meant time for entertainment. Somewhere under the pile of blankets lurked a rangy brown form. Jess edged over, searching under the covers. There it was. A warm belly, t-shirt ridden up, slid under his palm. Manuel mumbled and shifted. Jess followed the soft line of fur descending from his navel. He didn't have to go far. Already hard, Manuel's cock strained under his shorts.

What is that boy dreaming of?

Ancient springs creaked ominously as Jess nuzzled under Manuel's chin. The sofa bed was all kinds of uncomfortable. Support bars ran just under his hip and ankles and the mattress was too thin. It was a miracle he'd been able to get any sleep at all. Plus, the pull-out wasn't quite big enough for two grown men. Of course, that had advantages, too—less space for Manuel to run from him. Jess snaked his hand beneath the band of Manuel's shorts. There it was, hot and hard and waiting.

Manuel rolled slightly, his shoulder sliding against Jess' chest. As he moved his arm and blinked up at Jess, Manuel yawned. "Morning, sunshine," Jess mumbled before pressing his lips against the *vaquero's* mouth. Easy and slow, Jess pulled the chamois ramrod through his fist. Still half asleep, Manuel groaned and lifted his hips.

What a wonderful way to wake somebody up. Jess forced his tongue between Manuel's teeth. Warm skin came alive in

his hand as Manuel's body shook of his dreams. Only one thing could be better before the sun was even up. Jess broke the kiss to work his way across Manuel's sharp chin and down his neck. As he kissed and nipped and sucked, Jess pulled off Manuel's shorts.

That woke him up. "Jessé, somebody will hear," Manuel hissed, pushing at his face.

Jess just grinned, his tongue snaking out for a lick at the inside of Manuel's elbow. "Then you better make sure you're damn quiet, huh?" He whispered and ducked under the blanket. Manuel squirmed as Jess kissed his hip. Jess moved by smell and feel. That musky scent drew him to a nest of soft curls. All warm and deep, he drew in the aroma of his *charro*, it was like nothing else in the world.

Jess pulled Manuel's foreskin up—like a cup—and ran his tongue in the opening. Just enough taste to get his motor firing from a cold start. Manuel bucked under the touch. From somewhere on the other side of the blanket came strangled moans. By the sound of it, Manuel must have had his face buried in the pillow. That just fueled the cowboy, made it more fun.

Kissing and tasting, he took his time. Jess licked his way around the head of Manuel's prick. He could keep up this torture forever and still be rearing to go. Hours of teasing sounded like damn fine fun. Stifling a smile, he traced the veins coursing up Manuel's stiff prick. While he licked, Jess rolled the *charro's* balls in his hand. Manuel's fingers clawed into his hair. It was hard to tell if he was pushing Jess down or pulling him off.

Still, it wouldn't do to get caught ... especially not by Manuel's mama. Jess had no doubt that woman could be as ornery as a Mustang with a burr under the saddle.

Jess took two deep breaths, then sucked Manuel down hard. He didn't stop until that thick cock bumped the back of his throat. As he went down, Jess squeezed the furry sac in his palm. With his tongue, Jess pressed Manuel's throbbing length against the roof of his mouth as he pulled back. Then he licked the slit, drawing out the flavor of what was to come. Another muffled moan rewarded him. After that Jess was on a mission. He sucked with everything he had. Manuel bucked into his mouth.

Hell yeah! As Manuel shuddered beneath him, Jess kept up the pressure. From sweet and slow to whirlwind fast, the only thing the cowboy didn't do was let up. Finally, Manuel's breath hitched. His thick prick swelled between Jess' lips. Hard as nails, Manuel's fingers grabbed a hold of Jess' ears. He rammed his prick between the cowboy's jaws. Fucking Jess' mouth, Manuel let go. A thick wave of salty, warm cum filled his senses. He sucked until there was nothing left for Manuel to give. Then Jess drew back, pulling Manuel's flavor across his tongue.

"Aye, Jessé." Manuel muttered above him.

"That," Jess stretched, his back popping like ice in a thaw, "was the breakfast of champions." He scooted himself up, blankets falling away, and pillowed his head on Manuel's sharp shoulder.

Rolling his head to the side, Manuel glared. A soft glow from a night-light air-freshener combo in the bath shed just

enough light into the room that Jess could tell it was a glare. "You're so bad, *papi*." Both worked at keeping their voices low.

"Really," Jess teased, "from the way you blew, I would have thought I was pretty good."

Tugging his shorts up, Manuel hissed, "*Cabróne*."

Jess sat up and stretched again. "Damn," The pops weren't as loud the second time around. "Now I go and give you head first thing in the morning, and you call me an asshole."

Manuel rolled out of the bed. "Jessé, how many times do I tell you?" As he stood, he tossed the blankets back at Jess. "*Cabróne* is jerk. *Pinche cabróne* is asshole." Glaring down at the cowboy, Manuel added, "But today, *posiblé, tu es mi puto!*"

"What did you just call me?" Jess swung his feet off the bed. The way his bones protested, it was not going to be the most pleasant day.

Manuel smirked over his shoulder. "I called you my bitch."

"Why you..." Jess lunged from his seat to grab at Manuel. The *vaquero* stifled his laughter and scooted away. Not fast enough, Jess managed to snag his middle and pull him back on top of him. The old bed groaned like an organ on Sunday morning. "I'm gonna make you pay for that." He hissed into Manuel's ear.

Manuel resisted, kneeing Jess' thigh. "Jessé." He clawed at the edge of the bed and tried to pull away from the arms around his waist. Trying to keep it all quiet made for an interesting, and futile, struggle.

Jess wrestled them down, using his weight to pin Manuel. It felt, to Jess, more like a half hearted excuse to rub up against him. Hell, with sucking Manuel off, his own normal morning rise and all that twisting and struggling, a fire started in his belly. Especially when that tight, sexy ass brushed up against Jess' prick, things started to really wake up.

"Manuel!" The sharp tone hit them both like a two by four between the eyes.

Manuel stilled. He swallowed and Jess could feel the knot sliding down into his own stomach. "*?Hola mamá,*" Manuel stuttered out, "*durmió bien?*"

It took a moment for Jess to remember what they were wearing. Or rather, what they weren't. T-shirts, drawers, and not much else: Jess hadn't packed for staying in someone's home. Letting go, the cowboy inched away from Manuel. No way he wanted Manuel's mom to see him in just his skivvies. He especially didn't want her seeing what the morning calisthenics had done to his lower anatomy.

Mumbling, "Morning ma'am," Jess dragged the blanket over his lap. Maybe he should have grown some balls last night, put his foot down about the hotel issue. But, hell, he wanted Manuel's mama to like him. Lord knew that a relationship where your mama didn't like who you were with had a snowball's chance in Hell of getting off the ground. Come at it with two guys, different cultures, and a little bit of the age thing going on and, well, winning Lupe Fuentes over was a hard row to hoe at best.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared. "*Bien, pero entonces algo me despertó ...* " Even though Jess didn't catch half of what she said, that look conveyed everything. They'd roused her out of bed with their carrying on.

"*Siento.*" Manuel apologized as he crawled off the bed. "We did not mean to wake you." Because Jess was there Manuel was making the effort to include him. Although Jess would almost rather he hadn't. The *vaquero* grabbed a pair of jeans out of his bag. Then he smiled back at Jess. "I'll take my shower, okay?"

"Sure," Jess couldn't help but smile back, "go ahead."

As Manuel passed, his mother reached out to stroke his arm. With long, peach-colored nails, she brushed his hair out of his eyes. Lupe smiled at her son, the barest hints of silver caps flashing at the edge of her teeth. Manuel bent down to kiss her cheek and for a moment the hard lines in her face softened. Jess got a full dose of the beauty that must have caught the eye of Manuel's father. Then Manuel disappeared into the bath and years' worth of cares settled back on her shoulders like a well worn blanket.

As the door shut, she bent down and switched on a table lamp. Jess blinked in the sudden onslaught of light. Lupe Fuentes waited until the shower sounded. Turning back to Jess, she gave him a hard once over. Lips thinning, she thought for a moment. "What does your family think?"

"About what, ma'am?" Jess swallowed to hide his nerves.

"*Mi nombre es Guadalupe*, you call me Lupe. I told you that last night." She ran an outrageously manicured hand across her eyes and sighed. Another sigh as Lupe adjusted

the worn robe covering a cheap set of PJs. She stepped into the kitchenette and flipped on that light as well. "You know what I ask you," came from around the corner amid bangs and clanks. Hopefully, coffee would at least be a by-product of all that pent up aggression.

Jess slid off the bed and into his own jeans. Damn, he did know what she meant and he wished he didn't. Padding barefoot into the kitchen, he gave her the truth. "My mama's been so doped up most of her life she wouldn't know me from Adam. I ain't seen her but once in the last ten years. So I don't give a rat's ass about what she thinks. My daddy drank himself to death before I got outta high school so it never came up between us."

Filling the carafe at the sink, Lupe nodded. Somehow Jess knew she understood about shit like that and didn't judge him for who his parents had been. "So who raised you?" She might have judged him for other things, but not that.

"My Nana, my daddy's mom." Jess shrugged and leaned against the counter. He answered the question still in her eyes. "I think it makes her sad. I think she thinks I'll be lonely all my life. She don't understand how I could settle down with anybody but the girl next door. But, I don't drink much, I don't do drugs and I do pretty good for myself. As long as I'm happy and I'm okay, she just accepts that's who I am."

Filter, coffee, and water all made its way into the brewer as he spoke. Once she'd hit the on button, Lupe turned back to him. Critically, she studied Jess. "And you would settle down with my son?" Far as he knew, Manuel wasn't that far

along. But moms, they were always looking two rises down the road.

The cowboy smiled. "I'd die happy if he'd come around to that." And that was the God's honest truth. They didn't talk much beyond that round of questions. Lupe handed him some coffee as he sat at her rickety dining table. Both of them had a smile for Manuel when he appeared, shirt off, jeans on and toweling off his hair. Jess shrugged off his quizzical look and set his mug down. "Leave me any hot water?"

"*Sí, papi*, all yours." Manuel grabbed Jess' abandoned coffee and took a swig. "Go, we need to get going and feed the horses. I'll clean up the room."

"No, go, go! I clean up." Lupe bustled around them, swatting the back of Manuel's head. She shooed Jess towards the bath. "Go, shower. The horses you need to go give them food." Jess wasn't certain Lupe liked him yet, but he was pretty sure she didn't dislike him. He'd take that for the time being. Heading for the tiny bath, Jess grabbed his kit and clean duds. He also managed to dodge the sudden onslaught of maternal worry. "You want breakfast, *m'ijo*? I make you breakfast for when you get back. You don't eat good." Lupe called a question at Jess' back, "He don't eat good, ha?"

Pretending he didn't hear, Jess hit the shower. He was not getting dragged down into that bucket of worms. The shower did him good. Wet heat worked some of the knots out of his back. His own fist worked the rest of the tension, at least temporarily, out of his system. Normally he'd have gotten a little assistance on that front. But the whole sleeping situation kinked that wire up good. Shaving he'd put off until just

before the rodeo—wouldn't want to jinx things by jumping the gun.

Halfway presentable, Jess struggled, still damp, into his jeans and mustard rodeo shirt. A lot of people didn't go for yellow, said it was bad luck, but the color had always been good to him. He didn't hold much for that superstition. Well, a lot of the others, like not carrying money in his pocket when he rode, those he played as better safe than sorry.

After a few deep breaths and palming his stubble covered face, Jess braced himself for the other side of the door. Calm it was not. Lupe bustled about like only she could get the world off on the right foot. One moment she was trying to force food down their throats. The next, Lupe upbraided them for not seeing to the animals. It took some delicate dancing to actually get out the door and on the road.

As they pulled into the first dribbles of morning traffic, Jess slid his hand through his hair. "Shit, I forgot my hat." He never walked out the door without his hat.

"You want mine?" Jess looked over to see Manuel grinning at him, hand on the brim of his hat. "I think we were trying to escape to fast, *sí*?" The *vaquero* yawned and rolled his neck. "You want to go back and get it."

"Naw, there's only so much of your mom I can take this early in the morning." He snorted. "She'd probably try and feed us again and then get mad 'cause we're thinking of our bellies first."

"She is like that, huh?"

"Yeah, s'okay though." Jess flashed a knowing smile at Manuel. "Moms can be that way sometimes."

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

The rest of the morning drive passed fairly quiet. Life was like that with Manuel. Nobody had to say a dang thing; they could just be with each other. The sky went from navy, to cobalt on the twenty minute drive. The sun was just peeking over the horizon as Jess pulled off the freeway.

They made it passed the gate guards and through a small city of trailers. People were already up and about for the morning. Mango and Freckles, the name was growing on Jess, stood on opposite sides of a pipe fence, nose to dock. That's how herd horses slept on the range ... I'll watch your back if you'll watch mine. Both were just comfortable with each other, like they'd been that way all their lives.

It took them longer to drive to take care of the horses, than it took to perform the actual chore. Jess didn't want to hang around too long since he didn't have his hat. Not that it was required this early, but he just didn't want to mess with some dang fool rodeo official first thing in the morning. They hustled and bustled through. Then got stalled when they made the truck and found the Jeep had a flat. Jess banged his knuckle messing with the jack and Manuel dropped the spare on his boot. Finally, the tire was changed and they were headed back across town ... only to hit a wreck on the freeway.

If'n it wasn't one thing it was another. The whole universe just seemed one step to the left of true.

Only the need to grab their gear, grab his hat and shave stopped Jess from just saying to hell with it and turning around to wait out the time to the six o'clock show. When he managed the wrong turn off and Manuel got them lost trying

to find the right one, Jess almost popped a gasket. He was ready to hit a chain store and buy a new kit. On the last turn, there was the street they needed. They had to park four blocks away, but they were on the right street.

Weary and looking for a quick nap, they slogged up the stairs. Opening the door, an apartment full of women confronted them. Thick as dew on Dixie, every female for a mile round was crammed into Lupe's place. The apartment sounded like a hen farm, but smelled like heaven.

At the chorus of greetings, Lupe leaned around the kitchen corner and called out, "*M'ijo*, I had Carmella put your things in my room." She stepped over and around a group of young women wrapping cookies in ivory tissue paper. Powdered sugar flaked off the round balls and onto their fingers while they laughed and talked in Spanish.

Snagging a broken cookie, Manuel's mother smiled as she stepped up to kiss his cheek. The sweet she handed to Jess. *Well, it's better than a sharp stick in the eye.*

Dressed in jeans, a gauzy shirt and flowered apron, Lupe's hair was pulled back with the odd damp tendril plastered to her forehead. Leaving Jess to follow, with one arm around her son's middle and the other hand on his shoulder, Lupe pulled Manuel through the maze of women. "You eat now. *?Qué quiere comer? Sopas?*"

Manuel looked back at Jess with a *why fight it look*, "You want *sopas* Jessé?"

Jess was about to answer, but found himself at a loss for words as they stepped into the tiny kitchen. The room had become a miniature factory. Trays of deep fried dough

triangles were stacked like cards on the counter. Two old women, weathered faces smiling, stuffed squares with bits of fruit, folded them, pinched them and dropped them into an oil-filled Dutch-oven boiling on the stove. Other women sat around the table fishing soaked corn husks from pans. With deft strokes they spread a thick layer of *masa* on one side with the back of a spoon. A flick of the same spoon loaded it with stewed chicken or pork. Not even looking at their work, their sure hands folded the husks into tamale shapes, tied a strip of husk around the middle and tossed them in pots. Everyone was talking and over-talking each other.

Jess was not prepared for that level of chaos before eight AM. He mumbled, "What?" in response to Manuel's question.

Manuel shook his head and chuckled. "*Sí, mama, sopas están bien.*"

Lupe brought them little circles of fried tortilla loaded with the meat from the tamales and topped with a little cream. Leaning against the counter in the least congested portion of the kitchen, they wolfed down their food. Manuel traded jokes with the women and occasionally translated for Jess. Mostly the conversation centered around the wedding with a few questions about the rodeo and how they thought they might do.

Carrying a box of wrapped cookies, one of the girls from the front room squeezed into the kitchen. At a question from the table she turned. The box bumped Jess' elbow and the bite meant for his mouth went down the front of his shirt. Everybody was up and fussing over him in a heartbeat. Backing away under the onslaught of feminine attention, Jess

ran full tilt into one of the other cookie carrying gals. The box hit the floor. The volume in the house soared to record levels.

Mumbling, "I gotta change," Jess fled to Lupe's room. As he stumbled through the door, Jess stopped dead. His gut froze. Folded at the end of Lupe's bed were their blankets from last night. Resting atop that ... his Stetson. Jess hissed. Without thinking he stepped up, slapped the hat off the bed, and stepped on it.

"*Papi*," Manuel leaned through the opening, "why are you stepping on your hat?"

"My hat was on the bed."

"*?Que?*" Manuel eased into the room, shutting the door behind him.

Dropping on the edge of the bed, Jess stared at the now crushed Stetson. "It's bad luck, it's real bad luck."

"You mean it was lying on the bed?"

"Yeah."

"Aye," Manuel grimaced. "That's not good."

"No, it ain't." Jess sighed and began to ease out of his shirt. "It don't bode well for the rest of the day."

Manuel sidled up behind him. A set of warm strong arms wrapped around his now bare middle. Lips pressed up against Jess' neck, Manuel whispered, "So, *papi*, you okay?"

"Yeah," Jess leaned into the touch. It was senseless and stupid. Still, the whole incident upset him. "It's just a dumb superstition. T'ain't nothin'. But between that and all the stuff that's gone wrong this morning ... makes me more skittish than a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

"Lay down, I make you better."

"Shee-it, boy," Jess half turned to give Manuel a wide eyed stare, "we're in your mom's room."

Manuel snorted. "*Aye papi, no!* I give you a back rub. Make you relax." A small shudder slipped through his frame. "No, not here." He kissed Jess on the ear. A little thing, but it said a lot. Then he pulled and prodded them to the bed. "*Sentarse.*" Manuel emphasized the command by pushing Jess down on the mattress.

Grumbling, more out of habit than resistance, Jess complied. The cowboy scooted up along the flowered spread to lay flat on his stomach. Then he felt the mattress shift as Manuel clambered up next to him. One strong hand wrapped over Jess' neck. Jess winced as Manuel began to knead his tense muscles. Steadily, the *vaquero* worked down and out across the cowboy's bare back. His callused hands moved in slow, large circles, thumbs pressing the tension out of Jess' shoulders. Each stroke worked the muscles. Jess offered up the occasional groan as Manuel labored over a particularly sore spot. The pressure was firm but not painful.

Manuel's touch slid deep inside Jess' bones. It was something beyond just the caress of hands on skin. Every bit of caring, all the want and need and love came through the tips of Manuel's fingers. Erotic, but not, and just on the edge of excruciating the caress slid him into relaxation. By the time Manuel had moved to his mid back, Jess drifted off.

Unfortunately, Jess slept long and hard. He and Manuel woke wrapped around each other with Lupe pounding on the bedroom door demanding that they get up. A dime store clock told them it was past two. The rodeo started at six and they

still had to make registration and draws. Scrambling and cursing, they pounded down the stairs. Jess was still buttoning his shirt as they ran to his truck. A parking ticket fluttered under the wiper and Jess ripped it off and threw it in the glove box. At least this time he didn't forget his goddamn hat.

Bad luck continued to dog them. Fair parking, even with the windshield pass, was at a premium. They couldn't be farther away if Jess had parked the Jeep in Las Vegas. Then Jess' registration was so fouled he almost didn't get to compete. Only because he had copies of everything, including cancelled checks, in his truck did he manage to get a draw. The cinch on Freckle's saddle broke during Grand Entry, but luckily after it was pretty much all over. After Manuel's turn at calf roping, where he did fairly well, they turned Mango back into his box. The gelding managed to step on Jess twice in the process.

Jess almost hit a disqualification by missing his first call out fussing with everything. There wasn't even time for Jess to do his little ritual and get himself centered down. He'd drawn a liver-chestnut called Spiderbite. Then the bronc acted up in the chutes, jumping and fussing while they were rigging him. Finally the rig cinched down, Jess climbed onto the chute. Braying, Spiderbite reared up banging his legs on the metal. Jess jumped back and away. The chute boss fought Spiderbite down. That little bit seemed to take it out of him and the cowboy tried again. He had to scramble to be above Spiderbite when the previous horse left the arena.

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

But as soon as Jess got down on Spiderbite, the fight returned. Jess had a heck of a time getting set. Spiderbite gave a couple of bucks in the chute and Jess banged his knee on the gate. Damn, the animal was ornery. He had to try at least twice to get a buck out on Spiderbite before he could ask for a re-ride. Or Jess could scratch himself, but he'd rather be tarred and feathered than do that.

Spiderbite bucked out hard, but Jess was so rattled he wasn't certain that his spurs had marked out above the withers. He tried to lean back and gain exposure, up his score, but by the second buck he knew something wasn't right with the ride. It was like trying to hold down a rocket propelled pogo stick. Too much slack, not enough grip ... Jess couldn't maintain his hold. Two seconds of clarity. Jess knew he was bucked off. He tried to steel himself to the kiss of dirt.

And it didn't come.

Not on Spiderbite, not hugging earth, Jess was hung up in his rig. Somehow he'd twisted his hand round, locked himself up. As Spiderbite bucked and lunged across the arena, Jess fought with the rig to free himself. Each time the horse moved, it felt like someone wrenched his arm out of his socket and was beating him with it. God, he couldn't even begin to count the kicks. Jess was barely conscious of the pick up rider pulling the flank strap. It didn't calm the bronc one bit. He twisted, using Jess like a pivot weight. Finally, sheer centrifugal force freed Jess' hand. Landing on his back in the dust, Jess skidded to a stop.

His shoulder hurt like a son of a bitch. The arm was heavy, wooden. As he staggered to his knees and then to his feet,

Jess made a conscious effort to keep his arm from flexing out. If he didn't, EMT observers would know something was wrong ... something that could take him out. There was no way he wanted them to see the outward twist signaling a dislocated shoulder. Luckily, the bulk of his safety vest kept the oddly squared off profile of his shoulder from being obvious. Fighting back the pain raising the bile in his throat, Jess shoved his thumb through his belt and kept walking out of the arena.

Manuel waited for him in the contestant area. Jess rushed past before Manuel could speak. It probably pissed the *vaquero* off, but Jess didn't much care right then. "Jessé!" Manuel's boots thumped on the hard ground behind him. Jess ignored him. "Jessé, what's wrong?" Ahead lay the glorious area of the stalls. Okay, well, they weren't glorious but they were away from the EMTs.

Manuel grabbed his shoulder ... that shoulder. The bloom of pain shot down his arm and through his gut, almost dropping him to his knees. Stifling the yelp that threatened to overwhelm him, Jess managed not to stumble too hard and keep going.

"Jessé, what happened?"

Through gritted teeth Jess managed a coherent answer. "I popped my shoulder out." They'd reached Mango's stall. Jess slid through the gate with Manuel right behind. Moving toward the back of the small paddock he hissed, "You got to put it back in place. I don't want it to take me out ... and they'll take me out for it."

"But Jessé," even in the dim light of the stall area Jess could see the concern in Manuel's eyes, "That's the arm you ride with."

"I know." He grabbed a bucket of picks and brushes off the big, lidded tub they used for storing tack. Dropping the pail on the ground with a thump, Jess sat down hard on the makeshift bench. "Just fucking get to it before the doc gets here!" With the uninjured hand, Jess pulled his bum arm from where he'd hooked it. Once more pain screamed through his frame. This time it was accompanied by a wave of nausea.

Manuel knelt down in front of the cowboy. "Jessé, your shoulder is not in the right place. You need the doctor."

"It's a fucking dislocated shoulder." Jess glared up at Manuel. Fighting about wasn't productive on any front. "I've had them before. Help me pop the bone back into place before everything seizes up and it'll be okay. If the doctor looks at it he'll take me out."

"Are you okay for this?"

Give the boy a prize for the dumbest question of the year.

"No, it hurts like fucking hell." He snapped.

"Are you going to be okay for tomorrow?"

"If you do what I goddamn tell you to ... I will be."

"Okay, okay."

"You done this before?" Of course, if he hadn't it wasn't a great time to be reconsidering his options. "It ain't that hard if you haven't."

"I helped," Manuel swallowed hard enough for Jess to hear, "but there was a doctor there."

"Good." Jess shoved his bareback glove between his teeth, he laid back and scooted over until his good side was under the pipe of the temporary corral. "I'll keep myself as steady as I can." What he really needed was a two-hundred pound bull-rider to hold him down, but he didn't have the time to go find one. Wrapping that arm around the bar to keep himself stable, Jess hissed as he bent the bad arm at the elbow. Manuel came up next to him. Resting his knee on the tub alongside Jess' hip, he got a firm grip on Jess' bicep just above the elbow. "You just do what you need to and don't mind me a bit." He mumbled around the leather.

When Jess nodded ready, Manuel leaned back and pulled. Face tight with pain, Jess pulled himself against the force Manuel exerted. Thank God for the glove in his mouth or his Nana would have heard him cussing a blue streak to put the devil to shame. As he pulled, Manuel twisted Jess' arm, wiggling it back and forth until they both felt the give as the ball slid home. Instantly the pain dropped from unbearably insane to a dull, throbbing ache.

Jess sat up and Manuel took a seat next to him on the bucket. "You sure you're okay, Jessé?"

"Get me some Ace bandages and I'll be right as rain." He patted the *charro's* knee. "Look, let's head back so I can make like I ain't a sore loser." Hissing and rolling his shoulder, he added, "Well I'm sore and I'm a loser, but I wouldn't want to get dinged for bad sportsmanship."

Chapter Five

Stiff and sore, Jess lay in a bath so hot it turned his skin red. Alternating heat and cold made the pain in his shoulder bearable. Still, last night had been miserable. The only way Jess could sleep was propped up in the crook of the couch. Every time Manuel moved in bed, Jess woke. The wonders of an unstable shoulder.

One of these days he'd have to knuckle down and go through surgery again. Right now, Jess was just trying to maintain enough to get through tonight's event. If he wrapped it up tight, he just might manage.

He shifted in the bath. No position was comfortable. Manuel had told him to take it easy and gone off to check the horses himself. Lupe disappeared early, too, probably preparing for her wedding tomorrow. When both were gone, Jess had dropped back into a restless sleep. Thankfully, everyone was still gone when he woke later that morning. After yesterday's chaos he needed a little alone time.

Well, enough of the hot water. Jess clambered out of the tub. It hurt just to move his arm enough to wrap a towel around his waist. Jess blew out the pain and kept going. Under the gurgle of the drain, he heard someone come through the front door. Jess steeled himself for an invasion. A knock on the bathroom door and a whispered, "Jessé," flooded him with relief. Manuel. He could stomach Manuel so long as he didn't have to deal with a heard of fillies.

Jess popped the lock while digging a cold patch out of the box he brought. When Manuel poked his head around the door, Jess even managed a smile. "Hey, how are the horses?"

"They're okay." Manuel eased into the small room. "How are you?"

Hissing as he slapped the patch on his shoulder, Jess managed an answer between clenched teeth. "Been better, been worse, I'll live." He flipped the lid down on the toilet and sat. Getting a feel for the range of motion, Jess rotated the bum shoulder a few times. If he pushed too far back nausea would seep into his belly.

Manuel dropped, butt resting on his heels, in front of Jess. "*Papi*, you don't look good." Caressing Jess' cheek with his thumb, Manuel's voice was full of concern. "You shouldn't ride tonight. Is not good for you."

"Don't give me lectures, you ain't my momma."

"No," Manuel's eyes went narrow, "I'm your boyfriend and I worry about you."

Jess pushed the *vaquero* away as he stood. "Ain't no cause to." He headed out to the living room. The unmade fold out bed took up most of the space and Jess flopped down on his stomach. At least the chemical reaction in the patch was kicking in. That eased things some. He felt Manuel's hand slide up his leg. Springs creaked as Manuel settled in beside Jess. "Don't worry about me, Manuel. I've been taking care of myself for a long time."

Manuel's touch drifted from his leg to his back. "Telling me not to worry is like telling the sun not to come up. No matter how many times you say it, it still happens." Jess snorted. It

felt so good just to be alone with Manuel. Family was nice ... but you could have too much of a good thing. One of the things Jess enjoyed most about doing the circuit and Manuel was the time they could just be together. Sitting half nekkid in bed, eating cheap take out and watching TV, none of that was happening this weekend. They had to be careful about what they said. Screwing around whenever they felt like it was out of the question. Not that Jess would hide it from Lupe. Still, he wasn't about to fuck her son into the mattress while she slept in the next room.

Manuel's sigh broke through Jess' thoughts. "It's just not good luck for you, ah?"

"It ain't that. This weekend's hard."

"Thank you."

Jess propped himself on his good arm. "For what?"

"Putting up with my mother ... making the effort."

Manuel's mouth twisted into a half hearted smile. "I know this is not what you wanted."

"I'd be lying if I said I was thrilled. Know what, though?"

Manuel shook his head and Jess continued, "I am happy that you like me enough that you want me to meet your mom and that you're comfortable enough to be together in front of your family."

"*Papi*," Manuel scooted in close. "*Te adoro*." Even closer, Manuel whispered, "*Te quiero*." Then he kissed Jess.

They'd been together long enough for Jess to learn those phrases: *I love you* and *I want you*. Soft and slow, Manuel explored Jess' mouth. The *want you* part was pretty mutual. Damp, the towel tickled Jess' cock as it swelled. As easy as he

could manage, Jess tugged the cloth from his hips. Manuel's hand snaked down to stroke him. When those strong fingers wrapped around his prick, Jess groaned. He slid his hand over a denim clad thigh to cup Manuel's ass. His arm hurt, but he could use it.

Manuel pulled back. Another, more content, smile played over his sharp features. Still moving his hand along Jess' aching length Manuel began to unbuckle his wide belt. "Mama said she would not come back until afternoon. They are at the restaurant, making it ready for tomorrow." He squeezed and Jess shuddered. "I need to go at lunch for rehearsal, but we have time now."

There was something kinda naughty about being bare-assed and laying next to a guy in all his clothes. Jess let his hand drift across that firm body, savoring the feel of muscle under cloth. It was erotic in an entirely different way. The cowboy snorted. "Shee-it, we get the place all to ourselves and I got a bum shoulder."

Manuel's grin went wicked. "Let me do the work."

That sounded fine. "All the work." Jess rolled onto his back, pillowing his head on his good arm. Hard and ready for Manuel; his prick stood up from his body.

Manuel got up onto his knees. A blood red cowboy shirt, piped in black, and tight jeans hugged Manuel's frame.

"Oh, *sí papi*, all of it." Manuel pushed the denim down and pulled himself out. Shucking his shirt, Manuel tossed it to the side then he worked on kicking off his boots. "You know I like to ride."

Oh, hell yeah. "Ride?" Jess sucked in his breath at the sight of Manuel's body. Every time, since the very first time, it did it to him. A warm brown frame, laced together with rangy muscle and that thick uncut cock, Jess couldn't get enough of his *charro*. Ever.

Manuel took Jess' cock in his hand. Slowly stroking, Manuel leaned in and kissed the cowboy's thigh. He licked up the line of Jess' hip and across his belly. That hot tongue danced along Jess' skin, firing every nerve underneath. Moving up, wriggling out of his jeans, Manuel nuzzled in the fur spread out across Jess' pecks. Fire ate the cowboy inside and out. Nobody knew how to work him quite like Manuel. He twitched and snorted when Manuel flicked his tongue across one hard nipple.

Light touches and a strong grip, Jess could hardly handle it. "Manuel." He hissed, sliding his hand across the back of the *charro's* skull. Manuel rolled his head to stare into Jess' eyes as his tongue teased the sensitive bit of flesh. Jess shuddered. "What am I going to do with you?"

"*Papi*," Manuel chided as he sat up, "if I have to tell you..." Nimble fingers got Jess prepared and then Manuel straddled his hips. "So," Manuel leaned forward to gaze down into Jess' eyes. "You have a stopwatch?"

Hands roaming over Manuel's arms, Jess shuddered, waiting for Manuel to move. "What the hell for?"

"See if I make eight seconds."

That raised a smile. "Boy, you just gotta ride 'till I'm broke." He ran his good hand up Manuel's chest. "*Vaquero*

style rodeo." Wrapping his hand around the back of Manuel's neck, Jess pulled his *charro* into a deep kiss.

As their tongues fought, Manuel's hand reached back to guide Jess. That sweet hole just opened up for him. Manuel and Jess groaned into each other's mouths as the *vaquero* rocked himself down on Jess' prick. Always so tight, hot, and intense, nothing in the world felt like Manuel's body. The cowboy thrust up into bliss. The warm blanket of Manuel's body sucked his prick deep inside. When their hips met, Manuel broke the kiss. He nuzzled Jess' temple, tongue licking off the little beads of sweat.

"*Papi*, I missed this."

Barely able to move, Jess moaned out, "That makes two of us, boy." Manuel sat up and smiled. The movement pushed him down on Jess' cock, driving it deep. Jess hissed with how intense it all was.

With a laugh, Manuel reared up until the tip of Jess' dick was barely inside him. Then he slammed back down. Jess relished the tight heat as he drove back in. Manuel deliberately squeezed his ass down on Jess' cock to make it tighter.

Jess got as good a grip as possible on Manuel's hips. Each thrust up met Manuel's body driving down. Manuel panted, "*Chinga* me."

"I am," Jess snorted, barely able to breathe himself, "fucking you." The infernal sofa bed squeaked like the devil's organ each time they moved. The ride was wild and hot. Manuel worked them like nobody's business. Fast, hard, Jess lost himself in Manuel's body. Before he was really ready, his

balls tightened. "Oh hell, Manuel!" Jess bucked like a madman. Manuel rode him like a pro. Every move countered, every second drawing Jess closer to the buzzer. One last thrust, with Manuel's ass tight around him, and Jess broke. His body balled up tight. Shivers flowed down his chest and up his legs to pour out his cock. Manuel kept bearing down, milking every last shudder from the cowboy's frame.

Panting, Jess dropped back on the mattress. "Damn, that was a ride."

"*Sí, Papi.*" Manuel wriggled off Jess' softening prick. A new round of chills crept through Jess' hips. With a grin, Manuel added. "My turn." A hungry stare ate Jess alive as Manuel inched up the cowboy's body. Finally, Manuel's prick throbbed right in front of Jess' face. Manuel's knees were tucked under Jess' arms and the *vaquero* braced himself steady on the back of the couch. "Suck it," he ordered.

Hands roaming over the back of Manuel's thighs and his tight ass, Jess pulled him in close. Manuel could order him around like that any time. When Manuel got bossy and demanding ... well, Jess liked it more than he wanted to admit. He licked the head, pulling off the salty taste gathered there. With his lips, Jess pushed Manuel's foreskin back. Manuel always felt so good in his mouth. He could suck that boy's dick 'till hell froze over and still not have enough.

Manuel rocked his hips, pushing his cock deeper. Jess opened up and took it, let Manuel fuck his mouth. After all, the *charro* had promised to do all the work. Kneading that fine ass, Jess encouraged him to pound. That thick prick slid between his lips. He sucked hard, keeping pressure on.

The cowboy moved his bum arm down and around. Coming up under Manuel's balls, he squeezed. Manuel groaned above him. Jess worked the fingers of his other hand farther round. When he found the spot, he pushed in deep with two fingers. Manuel bucked into his mouth. "*Oh, papi! Chinga!*" Jess' dick had already opened him up. Going down on Manuel while he finger fucked his ass ... Jess though he might get it up again with that. He slid his fingers in that soft heat in time to Manuel's movements. Rolling the weight in his hand, tugging on Manuel's sac, Jess egged him on to go harder, deeper and faster.

He sensed Manuel was losing it. The *charro's* hips thrust like mad, driving his cock into Jess' willing mouth. Then, there it was. Manuel froze. He shuddered. His cock got so damn hot. With a shout of, "Jessé!" Manuel shot deep, bathing Jess' throat with cum. It tasted so good: bitter and sweet and salty all at the same time. Jess swallowed, milking Manuel's cock for every ounce. Even when Manuel was spent he kept up the suction. Finally, Manuel pushed him back and almost fell into the corner where the couch met mattress.

"I thought," Manuel panted out, "I was supposed to do the work, *papi?*"

"Me," Jess stretched and then hissed as his shoulder flared up, "I wasn't doing nothing but laying here."

Manuel swatted his head. "*Vamanos*. We should go."

Ah hell, life. Jess really would rather stay in bed with Manuel the rest of the day. "Do I need to go?"

"*Sí, no*. I want you to meet people, my stepfather, others. Also that's where the food is." Sex and food, only one other

thing kept Manuel's interest ... horses. "Mama's kitchen is empty for the wedding and because she is moving in with her new husband."

Sitting up, Jess winced. His shoulder just wouldn't ease up. "Okay, I'll clean up. What color shirt should I wear to impress the gang?" Jess wasn't in the mood for impressing anyone, but for Manuel he'd make the effort.

"Not yellow, it didn't do good for you yesterday."

"That's God's honest truth." The cowboy slid off the bed and dug into his bag. Drawers and jeans didn't take much thought. Neither did his boots. Looking back at Manuel buttoning up his own red shirt, Jess added, "Never put much stock in that superstition. Maybe I'll have to change my ways." He pulled out a deep green shirt with a Wrangler logo. Might as well get ready for the evening now. Most likely they'd go straight from the restaurant to the rodeo.

His face went tight as Jess slid his arm into the sleeve. "Course, it could be that I was only wearing my second luckiest shirt ... couldn't quite overcome that hat thing."

Manuel had to drive. Jess couldn't handle the gear-shift with his shoulder out like it was. They pulled into the parking lot about ten past eleven. Not many cars were around, wasn't strange since it was still early, although there were two cop cars in the lot. If cops were eating here, it meant the food was pretty good.

Manuel herded Jess towards the entrance to a building coated in blue stucco with large letters, painted in ripples of red, yellow and white, proclaiming *Mariscos Tampico*. "First, I take you to the kitchen." Giant Technicolor fish of

indeterminate heritage leapt about an arch opening onto a patio. A huge stone fountain burbled just inside a red tiled courtyard.

"Why the kitchen?"

"*La hermana de* my step-father, Analisia, *el esposo de ella*, her husband, this is his restaurant." He ushered Jess through a patio filled with basket weave *equipale* chairs. The rounded backs covered in studded butterscotch saddle leather matched lacquered table tops. A few knots of business folk chatted over lunch. "I want you to meet Natal." Yanking open a large pine door, Manuel hammered Jess' good shoulder. "Natal can do things."

The interior was dim. Rustic pine tables and high back chairs were scattered around. A large, equally rustic bar took up most of one wall. Backing that was a mural of a tropical beach. Off at a corner table sat the cadre of uniforms. The two cowboys barely merited a once over from the officers as they passed.

"Like what?" Jess followed Manuel off to the left where curtains hid a hall. Every so often a server in black bottoms and a white shirt would make their way through the opening with trays of food. The restaurant was doing a decent business for not quite lunch hour on a Friday. Most of the customers must have walked. They weren't that far from the downtown office scene.

"Like fix your bad luck."

Still, there was nothing going on in the place to indicate a wedding reception. "I thought you said your mom was here setting up."

"Sí," Manuel waived toward a set of doors at the rear of the room, "there's a back room and patio for parties."

That solved one riddle, but another had worked its way into his brain. "Okay," Jess slid through the curtain a step behind Manuel. "Why, if you're having the party at a restaurant, were your mom and those women making all that food?"

Manuel broke out laughing. He stepped to the side to allow a busboy to pass then shook his head. "She says the food they make here is too *gringo*."

Jess almost choked. "It's too white?"

"Sí. Natal and Analisia, they will do *asada* and some *mole*, *ceviche*, rice, beans those things. The other, *los tamales y empanadas*, *mi mama dice*, they must be homemade." The hall opened up onto a typical industrial kitchen. Staff bustled about with prep work and cooking. Off in one corner was an office area and Manuel headed towards that.

A gnarled gnome sat on a stool in the office spooning beans into his mouth with a torn bit of tortilla. His walnut skin hung like folded curtains to his neck. Blue stained bags puffed under his eyes. At Manuel's entrance he looked up and smiled. When he smiled, Jess sensed the world whispered secrets to him ... like they whispered to his Nana. "*Buenos tardes*, Manuel." the man's voice was deep and rumbly; a bigger voice than the body suggested. "*Es su amigo sobre el que me dijo*."

Another man sat just behind and to the left of wizened gentleman. His black hair was sprinkled with gray. First his gaze acknowledged Manuel. Then he stared at Jess, hard and

apprizing. Given that they weren't in *that kind* of place, Jess doubted the man was looking for a date. There had to be some reason for it. Jess returned the attention. The man was a little heavy set, but Jess could tell there was muscle hidden under that mass. With as quiet as he was, his stare made Jess a little skittish.

Both stood and met Manuel with stiff armed embraces. "*Sí, Natal.*" It didn't seem uncomfortable or awkward, just formal. Turning, Manuel held his arm out for Jess. "*Natal Benavidez, es me amigo* Jess Graff."

"*Mucho gusto señor.*" When Natal took his hand Jess winced, "Manuel says you have problems with your luck." Releasing Jess, he beckoned them farther into his little office.

A little more sheepish, Manuel introduced the other occupant. "Jessé, this is Ramon Sanchez ... my step-father."

Ramon's eyes narrowed as he took Jess' outstretched hand. With his face pulled that tight Jess got a good look at a scar running from the corner of his mouth up towards his cheek. It was an angry pale trail on an already pockmarked olive background. Ramon's grip was soft, like he was holding back, not really wanting to touch Jess. That *awful feeling* crawled in and hunkered down in Jess' belly. It made his chest ache.

As quick as he could, without seeming overly rude, Ramon dropped the shake. "I'm going," it was delivered with the solemnity of a funeral dirge. "*Tu mama*, she wait for me. You come eat when you finish."

"*Sí,*" Manuel patted his back as Ramon passed them. Jess was favored with another guarded look. Then Ramon was

gone and Jess would swear the room warmed up by at least ten degrees.

Warm Spanish flowed between Natal and Manuel, but somehow Jess didn't feel left out of their conversation. Butt propped against the edge of an ancient metal desk, the old man listened as Manuel spoke. Occasionally he would nod or ask a question. When Manuel finished, Natal turned to Jess, "Wait here, I will be right back. I think I can help you my friend."

He was gone for a moment. When he returned, Natal carried a blue bowl with a brown egg and a cup of some liquid. He motioned Jess to the center of the room. "Please, you come here. Do you know the Hail Mary Jess?"

Southern Baptist didn't do Hail Marys much. Jess shook his head and added, "No."

"Do you know the Lord's Prayer?" Natal took the egg in his hand and moved to stand next to the cowboy.

That his Nana had drilled into his skull every Sunday at dinner. "Yeah." Prayer before dinner, kids' Bible books when he was young and the Bible itself when he got older on Sunday evening. No TV but maybe the radio in the background as Nana read ... strange that it never seemed like a hardship to him.

"Good, as I move the egg over your body, recite the Lord's Prayer. Keep your mind focused on God."

Manuel smiled and nodded at Natal to begin. "I will pray with you, Jessé." The old man and Manuel began to chant in Spanish and Jess in English. The words were different but the

cadence similar. "Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

As Jess prayed, Natal moved over his body. Starting at the cowboy's head, he made the sign of the cross over and over. He moved down his face, neck, shoulders and chest. When he reached Jess' feet, Natal started back up Jess' legs. By the time Jess was done with the second prayer, Natal was finished. He coughed and picked up the bowl. He set the egg in the middle and poured the small cup of oil over it. The liquid was bright orange-yellow and smelled like sage. Then Natal picked up the egg and slammed it into the bowl, shattering it. Bloody yolk frothed against the porcelain.

Jess gagged. The smell was awful, like sulfur. Luckily it passed quickly, sucked out through the vents in the kitchen. Natal sucked on his lower lip. He said something in Spanish to Manuel who seemed less than satisfied. The *charro* answered in Spanish as well. This time Jess felt left out. "What's up?"

"He says," Manuel ran his tongue over his lip, "that this took the worst but not everything. We need to have you bathe with agrimony, lavender and sage for three days. If you do not, the bad luck will stay. It will get worse."

Jess tapped his bum shoulder with his good hand. "How could this get worse?"

"Think about what you do, *papi*." Manuel stared at his boots for a moment. When he looked back up his face was grim. "It could be much worse." Natal said something else in Spanish and Manuel nodded in agreement. "He does not think you should take risks right now. It is a very bad time for you."

"Okay, thanks," Jess' smile was tight, "It's all a bit creepy, but I can handle myself."

"Jessé, you should listen to him." Manuel seemed like he was going to add more when raised voices seeped in over the kitchen noise. All three men looked at each other as though one of them might know what was up.

Natal shook it off first, heading out the door. Manuel and Jess followed seconds behind. Heading left of the office and down a different hall than the one they'd reached the kitchen by, they hightailed it into the back room. White table cloths were folded on a counter that held small pots of geraniums, waiting to be distributed to tables. Jess recognized the boxes of cookies from the apartment stacked on another table. This looked more like a place being set up for a reception.

Strident voices in Spanish grew louder as they ran across the room. Busting through a set of large French doors, Jess found himself in another walled patio. A knot of women clustered around Lupe. Among them Jess recognized Graciella, Manuel's aunt. Graciella always looked like she belonged on the cover of *Arizona Housewife*. Tight, white cargo pants, strappy cork sandals, and the ever present sweater set in bright blue ... Graciella's middle class, Juarez life had been easier than her sister's on the US side of the border.

Manuel shouldered his way towards his mother, "Why is *Mama* crying?" Ramon held Lupe like she might break, his face stoic, almost impassive. Jess revised his opinion of the man slightly. Maybe he just didn't do people well.

"José!" Lupe and her sister spit the name like it tasted vile.

Manuel brushed a stray hair from his mother's face. "What did *Tio* do?"

Ramon's voice was heavy. "He said things to her."

"About?"

"About, you *mi'jo*." Lupe sobbed. "About you."

"I don't understand."

A chair scraping across the tile made them turn. José stood and glared, his thick featured face pinched tight. That stupid, pencil-thin mustache looked like a caterpillar had crawled up died on his upper lip. "I told her you are a dog. That you are *la Joto*." José's voice seeped poisonous around them. *Tio's* neck was almost as thick as Jess' bicep and his arms were huge. Jess was a wiry rough-stock rider ... Manuel's uncle was built like the bulls he rode in the Mexican rodeos. "I told her you are *el chocho del gringo* and it is a disgrace to have you give her away. But I am reasonable, because you are her son you can sit with everyone else, but you should not be in it."

"*Yo sí soy maricón, Y qué?*" Manuel spat back. That boy was brave enough to charge hell with a glass of ice water. "This is *mí mama*, her wedding. It was not your right to decide this to tell her that." Manuel's uncle believed it was his God given right to determine the fate of the family. Because Manuel, with Jess, had stood up to him, he hated them. Well, he also hated them because he was a prejudiced bastard all around. Guys who liked guys weren't big in his book.

Jess crossed his arms over his chest. Well, José had roughed him up once, now Jess figured it was time for another go round. "You're just a piss-ant dictator aren't you?"

"*?Andar con mal tapon!*" Manuel added a choice expletive as he stepped away from his mother. "If it was any tighter, you'd be shitting diamonds!" Manuel stepped towards his uncle. Jess figured this would get ugly fast. All three of them were itching for the fight. "*?Quitarle al mondongo un peso de encima a todo!*"

"How dare you speak to me like that, Manuelito," José mocked Manuel with the diminutive form of his name. "I raised you. You should not speak to me like that. Of course, maybe you can't take the breeding out of a boy ... *Hijo de maguey, mecate*. Santos was a good for nothing bastard from when he was a *chavalito*. I don't know why I expect you to be any different."

"Why don't you just quit fucking with other people's lives?" Jess snapped. Manuel was ten times a better man than his uncle. "What the fuck do you get out of it, making people miserable like that?"

José barely favored Jess with a sneer. "You, stay out of this. Is not your family!"

"I think Manuel is my family. I'm committed to staying with him, no matter what you, or anyone else, thinks!"

"Bah, you, you are nothing but a *gringo* who likes to suck Mexican dick." The next hateful question was for Manuel. "*?Su tiene gusto de revisar los interiors de ello?*"

"*?Sí, tengo gusto de él!* I love him. Jessé is for me, ah."

"Maybe I didn't teach you good enough the first time."

"Are you saying you teach me now?"

Cocking his arm back, *Tío* growled, "I say you are my son, so maybe I teach you to respect me and what I tell you."

It didn't surprise Jess at all that a punch was thrown. What surprised the hell out of the cowboy was who threw it. It was always the quiet ones that knocked you for a loop. Ramon squared his shoulders, popped his knuckles and landed a good, solid blow to *Tio's* gut. As the man gasped for breath, Ramon said, "No, actually tomorrow he is my son."

José roared. Like the bulls he resembled, the man charged. His shoulder landed under Ramon's sternum carrying them both back and into a table loaded with votive candle holders. Everything went down in a crash of glass, wood and men. Scattering, women screamed. Jess figured there was no sense in letting Ramon have all the fun. He jumped in and grabbed *Tio's* arm, pulling him off the other man. Manuel blocked a punch meant for Jess' face and added a knee to José's hip. José shoved. Manuel fell back into Jess. Both he and the cowboy went down, taking out another table as they fell.

Jess groaned and rolled out from under Manuel. Holy hell, he'd landed on his shoulder. It wasn't out ... but it damn near felt like it was. The *charro* jumped up and readied himself to take on another round. Things were about to get real fun.

That's when the cops showed up.

Five minutes later Jess was sitting on the curb, hands draped between his knees. A thick drawl made him look up. "So, what's your version of this whole mess?" The officer, his name tag said Martinez, flipped his pad and popped a wedding cookie into his mouth. Manuel, perched on a planter nearby, held a cube of ice wrapped in a red paper napkin to his lip. Blood oozed from where he'd split it on the table.

Looking up sideways, pushing his hat back on his head, Jess shrugged. "It's just a family fight, nothing big."

"Well, no one's drawn guns yet." The Texas twang was so bad it almost made Jess laugh. He stifled the impulse right quick. "Dog-piles and busted up furniture I consider big."

"José is being a *pendejo*," Manuel tossed the ice aside, "trying to make everyone miserable."

Crunching down another cookie, the officer looked them over. Jess knew *that look*. "Apparently he has some issues with ya'll?"

"*Un poco*." Manuel's answer ran over Jess' mumbled, "A few."

"What did he say?"

"Honestly, didn't understand half of it." Jess shrugged again. He seemed to be doing that a lot in this conversation. "But when he came at Manuel..."

"So he threw the first punch?"

Jess almost shrugged again, but stopped himself. Rubbing his shoulder instead, Jess corrected. "No, but he made the first move."

"So why are ya'll having this fight in a restaurant patio?"

Manuel answered that one. "We were getting ready for the wedding rehearsal." The *vaquero* ran his hand over his face before adding, "He didn't think I should be part of it."

"Ah," They got the all knowing police officer nod, "weddings, funerals and *Quinceañeras* they bring out the best in families. So, ya'll didn't even make it to the reception. This is going to be a fun one." He flipped the pad closed and tucked it into his pocket. "Well, ya'll are lucky that this place

belongs to family. I'm not going to do anything right now. Nobody seems to want to press charges, but if I got to come out here later ... everybody's going downtown. Clear?"

"*Claro.*" Nodding his understanding, Manuel stood. The officer helped Jess to his feet and the swaggered off. He joined up with his buddies coming out of the patio. They'd broken the witnesses up and each taken a group. Jess and Manuel, Ramon and *Tio* all got their own personal police interview. Graciella and Natal followed the officers out. When Manuel's aunt caught sight of them she hustled over.

"*M'ijo.*" Fussing over Manuel's lip for a moment, Graciella seemed at a loss for what to say. Finally she crossed her arms and rocked back on one leg. Staring at her nephew, she told him the obvious. "*Tu mama*, she is very upset by all this. Her son and her brother it is not good." She smiled. "I know you are a big man. Go find José, go apologize to him."

Jess damn near choked up a lung at that. *That gal's hat's on too tight.*

"No." Manuel's rebuke saved Jess from putting his foot in his mouth with a nasty response. "There is nothing for me to apologize to him for."

Graciella's mouth opened to argue. Jess jumped in. "Look, it's not going to turn around and be all nice a pretty. Don't you get it? We can't cure him of being a bigot."

"*Tia,*" Using a softer voice than the cowboy's, Manuel tried to explain, "he has to choose himself. We can't do it for him. *Cada quien hace de su vida un papalote.* We love each other. We want to be with each other. If *Tio* doesn't want that to

happen ... guess what, too bad, it already has and he can't change it."

"Why can't you be a bigger man then he is?" she wheedled. "You should apologize and make your mama happy."

"No!" Manuel's tone turned sharp. "I am a man. I am living my life the way I want to live it, not how someone else says I must. I would think you and mama would understand that more than anyone."

"I think you are afraid of him."

Looking off towards the street, Manuel chewed his lip for a bit. He shuffled his feet in the dirt and stuck his hands in his pockets. Finally, he spoke, *"Más vale que digan aquí corrió una gallina y no aquí murió un gallo."* Graciella's face went white and her eyes almost bugged out. She sputtered, seeming at a loss for anything to say. After a moment she gave up and stalked back into the restaurant.

"Spit it." Jess really needed to learn Spanish.

Manuel smiled at him. "Loosely?"

"Okay."

"Better to be a living chicken then a brave dead man." He stepped up to Jess and bumped his hip as they both broke out laughing. When the mirth died down a bit, Manuel added. "Come on let's get going. We should head to the rodeo before anyone else tells me to be the big man and apologize."

Jess dug out his keys and tossed them to Manuel. "Okay, you drive."

Draws and preparations made the rest of the day speed by. Jess helped Manuel get ready for his event ... calf roping.

Mango liked the sport almost as much as Manuel. Both were made to work together. Every move Jess made shot fire down his arm. He almost dropped Manuel's roping saddle when he went to pick it up because of the pain. Just moving his dinner to his mouth was excruciating.

When everything was set and the crowd in, Jess left Manuel at the chutes. Bulldogging usually came early in the evening. Usually he would have watched Manuel. The man was magic with a rope, but tonight he had too much to do. It was gonna be hard and it'd take a lot of preparation just to get the balls up for it. Jess swallowed, took a deep breath and headed out to get ready.

Not twenty minutes later, Jess leaned against the corral, his face buried in Freckles' neck. He didn't know why, but the smell of horses, the combination of dust and hay and animal, was comforting. It always centered him, finding the soul of a horse. It's what he usually did before a ride. Look deep inside and then look out and you'd find everything you needed to know. He scratched the mare's ear and she whickered at him. When her head went up at the same time her ears rolled forward, Jess knew that Manuel was behind him. Mango's whinny confirmed it. Jess turned.

Manuel led Mango toward them. Damn, Jess wished he could have seen them in action. The way Manuel handled a rope was almost spiritual. Ah well, tomorrow evening would do. As he approached the *charro* asked, "What about your ride, *papi*?"

Jess shrugged. "What about it?" Freckles threw her head over the fence and Jess obliged her with another scratch.

"Why aren't you getting ready to ride?"

Jess thought how best to answer that. Finally, Jess snickered. "Bock, bock, bock."

"What?" Manuel looked at Jess like he'd grown another head.

Jess pushed away from the fence and moved in close. "This chicken kinda figured he'd live for another ride instead of going out there and maybe hurting himself worse. So I saw the doc over at the Secretary's trailer. He told me I was a stupid, dumb shit for not going to the ER last night, wants me to get x-rays. They drew me out on medical."

Manuel opened the gate on Mango's paddock. Fussing with the tack and grooming, he didn't say anything for quite a time. Jess just watched, figuring Manuel would get to it when he was ready. Finally, Mango was brushed, both horses were fed and the tack was slung across the vaquero's shoulder. He stepped up to Jess and handed over his bridle. "It is good you did it."

"No, it sucks." Jess kicked a pebble sending it skittering between the stalls. "Since I rode we don't get my entry fee back."

"But it is good that you do not hurt yourself more. Should we go home now?"

"Yep, boy, I think there's a wedding tomorrow that you got to be all nice and pretty for."

Chapter Six

Jess sat on a diminutive table in the preschool room of the *Espíritu de Cristo Luterano* church waiting for Manuel. The place wasn't much of anything at all. A small chapel, a kitchen/rec-room set up to one side, and three small rooms at the back for Sunday schools or meetings ... damn, the church felt like home.

"Is this going to be like a traditional Mexican wedding?" He called towards the bathroom where Manuel messed with his hair.

"Yes and no. There are things that only the Catholic Church does. But then there are Mexican things. Those they will do, too."

"Why did I think you were Catholic?"

"*No se*," Manuel's voice echoed out of the small bathroom, "*son Luteranos* ... Lutheran. Why do you think we were Catholic?"

"I don't know, isn't everybody in Mexico..." Manuel shot him a dark glare. Rubbing the back of his neck, Jess retreated from his observation, "I guess not. What about your good luck charm? You know, the one with the Virgin Mary on it. Didn't your mama give that to you?"

"The Virgin, she is Mexico. It can't hurt to carry the Virgin." Straightening his shirt, Manuel walked into the classroom. "So *sí*, she bought it for me."

Jess sucked in his breath at the sight of Manuel. That boy just threw him every time. An ivory shirt with a stand up

collar, slashed pockets and arrow shaped button flaps contrasted with his warm skin. The yolk stitching was almost like an old style cowboy shirt, except that it dropped down the shirt's front in a two inch wide strip to form a wide placket. Carved ivory lozenges buttoned the front, pockets and sleeves. "Damn," Jess hissed in appreciation, "you ain't hard on the eyes." Manuel wore his traditional *vaquero* pants, the ones he wore the first time Jess saw him ride. Slim caramel leather trousers sported silver conchos from hip to heel. They hugged everything in tight.

Manuel smiled and moved in close. "*Papi*, you're pretty *tio bueno* yourself."

"I assume," Jess chuckled, "that's a good thing."

"A very good thing." Manuel teased as he tugged on the front of Jess' cowboy shirt.

Jess' own shirt was styled like something out of a Roy-Rodgers western. Kelly green fabric set off his eyes. Broncs bucked across white yolk panels outlined in brown piping styled like rope. If he were trendy, Jess might have called it vintage or retro. Mostly what he called it was a gift from Manuel and that made it more special than just about anything. "This ain't gonna be a real formal affair, right?" Deep black jeans and a gold and silver buckle the size of his palm finished it off. Jeans and no jacket just felt kinda wrong for a wedding.

"It's her third wedding, you are good." Manuel grabbed Jess' lapel and pulled him off the table and into a quick kiss.

"Mmm, Jessé, I need to find someplace to kiss you more."

"Really?"

"Sí." Using the grip on Jess' shirt, Manuel led him back into the small bathroom. It wasn't more than a little room with a toilet and sink. Cheap, industrial with white tile half way up the wall, the remainder painted a bright blue ... maybe someone thought it was cheery. Or maybe that was the only paint color they had. Manuel leaned against the sink and pushed the door shut. Then, with a grin, he twisted the lock.

Manuel tugged Jess in close. His kisses tore up Jess' senses. The warm lean form pressed against his chest, a tight, hard, and sweet body rocked against the cowboy's stiff prick. Manuel's mouth was hot as Jess forced his tongue between Manuel's lips. The *charro* rubbed his own cock, covered in leather, across Jess' imprisoned package. Jess ached with how hard he was. Manuel's fooling around didn't help a dang bit. Four layers of drawers and pants in between what he had and what he wanted. Dry humping like that drove Jess crazy. If it didn't let up, he'd blow.

"Goddamn," Jess hissed into the kiss, trying not to groan too loud, "we're in a church full of people."

"Sí, *papi*." Manuel slid his hand over Jess hip, cupped the cowboy's denim covered ass and pulled them together. "So you better be quiet, huh?"

That time, Jess could barely stifle it, "Ah, shit."

Jess reached between their bodies and popped the buttons on his jeans. He fished his hand into his shorts. With his wrist he pushed the fabric down and pulled his dick out of his briefs. When Manuel went to rub again, Jess' cock pushed hard against the leather covered crotch. Jess jerked back.

Playing was fun, but cum stains on the *charro's* pants wouldn't do.

"*Papi*," Manuel hissed as he fumbled with his fly and then shucked his pants down to his thighs. "I want you." Hooking his thumbs into his briefs he pushed those down as well.

Jess shuddered for a moment at the thought of busting Manuel bareback. He shook it off, "We ain't got nothing here."

"I know." The vaquero turned and grabbed the small counter. "But we can make do." As Manuel bent over, Jess got a great shot of Manuel's ass. If he hadn't already been bursting, that would have done it. Shirt pushed up around his middle, pants dropped around his knees, damn that boy was fine.

Where there's a will there's a way. Jess spit in his palm then twisted his fist around his dick. Manuel looked over his shoulder; dark eyes filled with want and licked his lips. A couple more times and he was as slicked up as he could manage. The cowboy slid his stiff prick between Manuel's thighs. Hard muscle trapped him. That's what he got for playing this way with a guy who broke horses. Soon Jess was sliding hot between Manuel's legs.

Barely audible mariachi music drifted into them. Shit, the church would be filling up. Jess figured they had about three minutes before people would start asking for Manuel. As there wasn't a whole lot of building to search, somebody would find them if they set their mind to it.

Each time he moved, Manuel's sac shifted over his cock. It was warm and soft and just felt so damn good. Manuel started a slow grind with his hips. Jess pressed his face

between Manuel's shoulders to muffle his moan. Despite trying to play church mouse, they made noise. The risk of getting caught at it threw gas on the fire. Jess bucked into the hollow between Manuel's legs and shivered.

Slick satin heat slid against Jess's skin. He locked his hands on those warm brown hips and rode Manuel. As Jess fucked his *charro's* thighs, Manuel stroked himself. The sound of the Manuel's fist flying over his prick carried just over the muted background of strings. Manuel's body was hot as the hinges of hell. Jess kissed Manuel's ear and whispered, "You're wicked ... just nine kids of evil."

"So are you, Jessé." Manuel panted out.

Jess worked one hand down around to play with Manuel's balls. That heavy, furred sac felt so good in his palm. Chills crept up his stomach and down the back of his knees. Every inch of exposed skin at Manuel's collar got tasted. Jess used the grip on Manuel's sac to rub the *charro's* weight against his head each time he thrust. Feeling his prick bump those balls, damn, Jess lost himself in how damn wonderful it felt.

The burn started in his gut. Jess groaned. He shuddered. Just before his mind exploded, Jess jerked away. Cum spattered his boots and the floor. Somehow he managed not to get any on Manuel's leather pants.

Breathing hard as he pushed away from the sink, Manuel turned. His face was tight and his eyes half mast. Jess dropped to his knees and wrapped his lips over Manuel's thick uncut cock. Hard, fast he sucked that sweet pick, urging Manuel along with his fist. Manuel's fingers tugged on Jess'

hair. "Oh, *papi!*" was all the warning Jess got before Manuel filled his mouth with cum.

Jess staggered to his feet and kissed his *charro* long and hard. Sharing the taste that way was so intimate. It made it hard to get themselves all straightened out, but Jess didn't want to give up the kiss. Finally he had to breathe. Jess pulled back and worked the last button on his jeans. As he buckled his belt, he smiled at Manuel. "I guess we ought to go and be sociable, huh?"

Manuel snorted. Tucking his shirt tail back into his pants, he groused, "I would rather stay and be sociable with just you." A few twists, tugs and shoves, and Manuel's clothes were righted. It was almost a shame to see him all dressed up ... almost. "We should go to my mother." He unlocked the door and peeked out. "Nobody knows, ah." Walking out into the classroom, he added, "If you don't tell, I won't tell."

"My lips are sealed." Jess grabbed his hat off the table on the way through. Manuel smiled back at him before ducking down a short hall. The door to the kitchen stood open and they headed there. Several women who Jess recognized from the other day bustled about, assisting Lupe with the last minute details. Her blue pastel sheath dress was covered by a long cream coat. Manuel was right. It wasn't a really formal wedding.

"*Hola mama.*" Manuel hugged his mother and gave her a kiss. "*Parece hermoso hoy.*" Then he leaned in to peck Graciella's cheek, "*?Cómo está, Tía?*"

Graciella, hair done up and dressed in summery chiffon, fussed over her sister. Instead of answering she shot a quick

glare at Manuel, "José did not come." Lifting Lupe's chin, Graciella ran a thin coating of liner over Lupe's lips. "He left back to Mexico last night. He did not have nice words to say." Her tone conveyed that it was Manuel's doing.

Manuel crossed his arms and leaned against a table. "That is not my fault."

She snorted derisively. "It makes the day sad." Jess bit his tongue. It wasn't the time to get in the middle of this. Of course it wasn't the time for Manuel's aunt to be bringing it up, but that wasn't his business.

"I wish I could make the day happy." Manuel was trying to be reasonable. Jess could see the effort in the tight line of Manuel's jaw. "But I cannot, I will not change who I am for him."

"But you could have tried, *m'ijo*, to make things good between you." Graciella dropped the lip pencil in a bag and fished out a tube of lipstick. With her cheeks locked in Tia's grip, Manuel's mother couldn't do much more than roll her eyes. As she painted her sister's lips Graciella added. "For the sake of your mother."

Okay, that was low and all bets were off. Jess jumped in. "I don't think you get it." Startled, Graciella jerked back. Luckily, so did Lupe or there would have been a red line to her ear. Both women turned to him. "It's not ever gonna be neat and tidy. This ain't some TV show where everyone says I'm sorry and things are fixed in half an hour. Life is messy and nasty and sometimes things just stay broke."

When Graciella opened her mouth to rebut it, Lupe laid a hand on her arm. "Ellia, *hermana*, this is José's choice."

Manuel's mother was serene as she smiled first at her sister, then Jess and finally Manuel. "I am more happy with my son here to walk with me than to have my brother sit somewhere in this church. José hates in his heart and that is sad for him." She took her sister's hands and squeezed them in her own. "Manuel is a good boy, a good person. Nobody can take that away from him, not even my brother." Then Lupe stood. She fussed with her coat, smoothing wrinkles that weren't there and missing those that were. Looking at Manuel, she sighed. "I do not understand why you are this way. I worry for you, *m'ijo*." Another soft sigh slipped from her tight lips before she cocked her head to stare sideways at Jess. "Maybe I worry not so much now, because this man is also a good man. And I think he very much cares for you Manuel."

That said, she hugged her sister tight. Almost whispering, she added, "I do not understand, but I do not hate because I do not understand. José hates what he does not understand. He is afraid of what he does not understand. And this fear, he will miss many things in his life because he is afraid." Lupe stepped back and clapped her hands. "And today, I am not afraid to get married, but I am afraid that my guests will think I am and I have run off." Slipping her arm around her sister's waist, Lupe led them to the front of the church.

With a smile and a thump of his fist on Manuel's shoulder Jess left them in the narrow vestibule. He made his way into the plain open room and found a seat at the back. Not that it was crowded, Jess just felt a little uncomfortable among sixty or so strangers. White walls, red carpet floor and the raised

platform at the front were separated from the pews by an open railing. People chatted and laughed.

Ramon, wearing a gray suit and flanked by Natal and two other men, stood up near the *padre*. Behind the priest a chunky wood table served as an altar. U.S. and Nevada flags stood like sentinels on either side. A simple cross hung on the back wall. To the right was a podium and to the very left a piano. Next to the piano, three men wearing white shirts, red bow ties, and black pants strummed a love song on their guitars.

Jess caught sight of Graciella in the doorway at about the same time as the priest. The man nodded to the mariachis. The music changed to something vaguely resembling a wedding march and the people quieted down.

After that it was pretty much a wedding. Manuel walked his mother down the isle and said the scripted answer. A little strange to Jess was the white braided cord tied into a figure eight and bound by a sprig of roses at the center that the priest slipped over the couple's shoulders. Before exchanging rings, Ramon also offered Lupe *arras*: thirteen dime sized coins of stamped silver held in a mother of pearl box. Then all the words were said and the kiss was done and it was a rain of flower petals.

Jess hung out for a bit while the wedding party did a few pictures. Then he and Manuel drove to the restaurant. The back entrance was wide open and Natal stood to the side welcoming guests. People milled about the courtyard. The party apparently could not start without the newlyweds. A cascade of applause from the entrance signaled their arrival.

Manuel, looking more handsome then Jess could ever remember seeing him, met his mother and step-father at the entrance. Around them, the guests formed a heart shaped ring. After an expectant pause, Manuel coughed and shuffled his feet. A slightly embarrassed smile graced his sharp face. "*Buenos tardes, compadres*, I wish to thank you all for coming to celebrate with us. We are so happy that so many of our friends and relatives are able to come here to enjoy this splendid occasion." Another, briefer pause before Manuel continued, speaking this time to his mother and step-father. "You are proof: *El carbón que ha sido brasa, fácilmente vuelve a arder*. They say I must give advice to *mi mama y padrastro*, and I wish to speak to the man who decided this, because I have some words for him." A small ripple of laughter ran through the crowd. When it died down, Manuel resumed his speech, "Now, because I have not been married there are only some things I know of being together, that I can say to you. Remember to share everything with each other ... including the housework. When you are wrong, admit it, and when you are right ... *?Cállate!* And remember, with four hands all work is small."

Lupe, almost in tears, embraced her son. Then, surprisingly, so did the normally reserved Ramon. People cheered and clapped as Manuel's mother whispered something to Manuel that made him almost tear up. He covered his mouth with his hand until his composure returned. Stepping away, Manuel realized people were staring. He shook his head and yelled, "Is this a funeral or a

fiesta?" He didn't quite manage to mask how choked up he still was.

Dancing, eating and drinking ushered in early afternoon. Jess watched Manuel move out on the patio with Graciella. Somewhere between a two-step and American swing: lots of spins and undulating hips, they moved across the floor. The food was incredible and Jess probably ate more than he should have. Both he and Manuel stayed away from the booze.

About one o'clock, Manuel caught up to him. "Okay *papi*, we should go, ah?"

"If you're going to compete, yeah." Jess stuffed one last cookie into his mouth. "Your mom okay with you bailing?"

Manuel threaded through the crowd heading for the gate. "Sí, she knows I have the rodeo." It took a bit to actually get out of the restaurant because people kept congratulating Manuel on his mother's marriage and telling him how nice the party was. Finally they made it to the truck. "If we want to we can come back after."

"It'll probably be kinda late." Jess clambered into the passenger side.

As Manuel slid behind the wheel, he laughed. "You've never been to a Mexican wedding, huh?" Jess shook his head no. "We come back for breakfast tomorrow, they will still be here."

Jess laughed almost all the way to the fairgrounds.

Once there, Manuel changed into jeans. Actually the *charro* pants looked far spiffier, but regs were regs. He kept the shirt, though. It was a little odd, although still cowboy styled

enough to pass. As Manuel saddled up Mango, Jess did the same with Freckles. A short walk got them to a warm up ring. While she wasn't competing, the mare needed to stretch out a bit after a day standing in that small stall. For a while they put the horses through some slow paces, warming up Mango's muscles. Freckles shook the kinks out as well with her high stepping gait. Jess had to wonder if she had a little Paso Fino or Tennessee Walker in her with the way she almost danced.

Manuel warmed up as well. Muscles needed stretching so that Manuel would be at his peak. With a practiced flip the rope spun into the air. Manuel kept it circling high above his head. Because Jess watched, Manuel showed off a bit. He always did. And Jess ate it up.

Smiling as he fed more rat-tailed rope into the air, Manuel coaxed Mango with his knees. The buckskin tossed his head, his mane rippling like a black silk flag, and began a slow sidestep across the practice ring. Manuel brought the loop down until it swept the ground around Mango's hooves. His gaze never left Jess. Up and around and back again the ribbons of rope flowed. Jess was barely conscious of the people stopping to watch, climbing on to the knock-down fencing to get a better look.

Manuel was perfection. He knew where Mango would step. Mango knew where the rope would go. They danced to a music shared in their souls. Phantom brass and strings drover their inner rhythm. If Jess focused on just them, he could almost hear it too.

The rope was a blur as it moved about them. Manuel set Mango to a canter around the ring. Jess nudged Freckles in toward the middle of the ring to give him some room. The rope spun above the *vaquero's* head. Smirking, Manuel closed the arc and force Jess farther into the center. Tighter and tighter he moved in. Finally, Mango's head brushed Jess' knee as they moved in a tight circle. Manuel lowered the loop so that it spun about all four.

Jess looked back and caught Manuel's eye. The brilliant smile flashed all for him. In a different place, without all the people watching, Jess would have leaned back and kissed him. He didn't need to. He knew it. Manuel knew it. That was all that mattered. With a final flourish, Manuel snapped the rope. It sailed out and lassoed the gate. The impromptu audience clapped and hollered. Stopping Mango, Manuel touched his hand to the brim of his hat, acknowledging the applause.

Jess reigned Freckles in as well. "You'll do alright tonight." His voice was quiet and full of all of his feelings.

Manuel snorted and rolled his eyes. "Of course I will." Not more than whispering, he added, "I will always do well when you are with me."

Then it was time. He loosed the mare in her stall, hooking the saddle and bridle on the gate. If anyone needed that busted up tack enough to steal it, they could have it. Then he walked with Manuel, offering the comfortable silence of one rodeo cowboy to another. Jess felt strange not gearing up himself. Few were the times he'd been at a rodeo and not there to compete. Still, it was better this way. He'd be a

damn fool to go forward and wreck his shoulder for good. Of course, for once he could just watch Manuel compete without his thoughts being wrapped up over his ride.

Leaving Manuel at the staging area with a pat on his shoulder for luck, Jess made his way toward stands and found a decent vantage along the edge. Not really a spectator but not a competitor, Jess joined the ranks of family and coaches. Cool evening winds blew over the open arena. The end of winter in Nevada meant chilly nights. Jess hunkered down into his jacket and leaned against the fence. With a bang a brindled calf shot out of the chute. The first horse was too eager, breaking the rope barrier before his target and earning his rider a time penalty.

The second cowboy out misjudged his shot and the lasso snapped short without even touching his calf. Bulldogging was a harder sport then it looked. Jess had been to rodeo finals where no one had actually managed to drop and tie the calf properly. Finally, it was Manuel's go round.

The rope slipped through the air. Perfect timing and rhythm, Manuel pulled the *vaquero* trick not going for where the animal was but where it was going to be. The edge of anticipation, it was one of the reasons Manuel was so damn good a roping. The lasso landed true and jerked the calf up short. Again, just the right timing between man and horse, Mango stopped at the most opportune moment and Manuel leapt from the saddle and sprinted toward the calf.

Three hundred pounds of unruly bovine fought the line. Mango kept moving as necessary to keep tension on the rope. Manuel flanked the calf, picking the beast up and dropping it

on its side. It took a moment to grab three of the legs together and wind them with his "piggin" string. When the calf was properly hog-tied Manuel threw up his hands. Under his breath, Jess counted off the seconds. The hooey had to hold for six for Manuel to qualify.

On five, the calf kicked free and an audible sigh went through the crowd. Shit, that was a no score.

Jess met Manuel as he led Mango to the paddock. "Damn, boy, you almost had him." He slapped Manuel on the back, commiserating.

"I felt it." Manuel pushed his hat back on his head. "I knew the hitch wasn't good when I let go. Too late then." Jess jumped ahead and opened the stall. As he walked Mango through, Manuel added. "We see how everyone else does tonight. I did good enough before, I may still qualify."

"If you don't, you don't." Jess grabbed a curry comb and slipped between the pipes into Freckles' stall. They groomed the horses down together. Small bits of conversation passed between them, rehashing Manuel's go round and what he might have done better. Jess couldn't add much other than Manuel did the best he could. Horses fed and brushed, tack stored it was time to check scores.

Manuel just shrugged when he found he hadn't made finals. "We will do it next time, hah?"

"Well," Jess grouched as he headed back to Lupe's place, "it wasn't the best weekend ever."

Lights from other cars lit up Manuel's face. "*No hay mal que por bien no venga.*"

"You said that one before."

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

"There is always good out of the bad."

Jess snorted. "That eternal optimist in you is gonna be the death of me."

The cab was silent for a while. Then Manuel burst out laughing. "At least you would die happy."

Chapter Seven

Damn, damn, and damn again. Monday evening crept into the rearview mirror as Jess drove the rutted road home. Every mile earned a curse or three. He hated doctors. There was no sense in hating the doctor—the man just laid it out straight—and knowing that didn't help one bit. All day used up shuffling between medical professionals, sitting in examining rooms, and waiting for test results. The longer he was there the more certain Jess became that the news wasn't gonna be good.

That feeling had lived in his gut since Sunday morning. The entire drive back to Arizona, Jess had been quiet. Like Nana would say, Jess was feeding the dread with silence. None of Manuel's ploys managed to drag him out of the funk. He knew Manuel felt bad about leaving him Sunday night, but Jess couldn't really get up the guts to ask him to stay. Spreading misery around wasn't his style. Especially not when he knew Manuel had to work the next day.

When Jess finally saw the doctor, it hadn't been good. Surgery and no more rodeos for a good long time. That bit just about killed Jess, he lived for the broncs and the dust and the adrenaline. If the cowboy didn't get the ligaments and muscles tightened up, the next time he picked anything up or twisted wrong, it might be out for good. Hell, work was going to be a bitch, too. Hard to swing a hammer with a bum shoulder. Somehow, Jess would have to figure out how to

make rent. Why was it, whenever you needed the money all you had was moths in your pocket?

Coming round the bend, he saw a sight that made it all just a little better. Manuel leaned against the bed of his broken down El Camino. While he didn't want to burden his *charro* with his own fears, Jess really didn't want to go it alone. He'd called Manuel before he left the doctor's office, just to hear his voice. They'd talked about nothing special. Jess hadn't let on what the doc had said, yet there was Manuel. Faded blue paint on the El Camino, faded blue denim stretched on that boy's hips, faded blue sky behind them. It looked like a slice of heaven.

Jess drew up alongside in cloud of red dust. As he clambered out of the Jeep he called out, "Whatcha out here for?" He tried for cheerful and missed it by a mile. "You got keys." Jess moseyed up and hooked his thumbs into Manuel's jeans pockets.

Manuel's gaze slid toward the broken down paddock. Jess followed the look. Freckles threw her nose over the fence and whickered her customary greeting. Seconds later a dun face with black tipped muzzle and ears appeared. Mango nodded, mane flying, and brayed out a welcome as well.

Jess cocked an eyebrow and took a sidelong appraisal of that dark, handsome face. Manuel pursed his lips then sucked on his tongue. His eyes drifted off to not quite stare at the bed of the truck. Again Jess tracked the glance. A five-thousand-dollar saddle of stamped black leather strewn with nickel-silver conchos rested on top of two broken down suitcases. The matching bridle hung from a pommel the size

of Jess' hand. One other bag, also hand tooled leather, lay on its side. Jess would bet dollars to donuts that a *vaquero's* suit of caramel leather was tucked inside. Manuel continued to stare at the contents of the pickup bed until Jess put a thumb under his chin and made the *charro* look him in the eye.

"You okay there?"

Instead of answering, Manuel said, "After we talked, I ah, thought you might need some help. Your shoulder it worries me as much as it worries you."

Jess shifted back, running his hand up under his hat. "I didn't say anything about that."

"You did not have to." Manuel almost frowned. "Your voice said it. So it's bad?"

"Kinda, sorta." Shrugging, Jess studied his boots before looking up sideways from under his Stetson. "I gotta have surgery again. Had that done once when I was twenty. That was a few years back, and I've put some real hard mileage on it since then. Won't be doing much rough-stock for awhile." He swallowed hard. "If it don't heal up right, maybe not ever again."

"Don't worry, *papi*, you'll ride again." That smile held bucketfuls of bravado. "I know you. But, I also know you will not be able to work, do things for a while." Manuel shifted, the worry showing in his eyes. "It's okay with you that I just came?"

Jess was silent for a while. He watched the horses nibbling on each other in the corral. Finally he smiled at Manuel. "Your kit's all here and now you ask if it's okay with me?"

"I'm sorry, Jessé," It was Manuel's turn to kick the dust, "I should have asked first. I..."

Manuel was as skittish as a green colt sometimes. Jess knew it was a waiting game. Push too hard and Manuel would be off, but just hang out and wait and sooner or later he'd come round on his own. "Shh," Jess stilled the babble with two fingers pressed against sensual lips. Everything he needed Manuel had offered him. The *charro* never asked for much in return. "Manuel, I've been planning for it since, oh, about the day after I met you. I just didn't want to rush you. Didn't want to seem like I was pushing." He moved his fingers to tease Manuel's jaw just under his left ear and leaned in.

"So it's okay, *papí*?" The words trembled against Jess' lips.

Like he even needs to ask? As they settled into a warm deep, kiss, Jess breathed, "More than okay." Slowly, Manuel's mouth opened to him. Jess cupped his hands around the back of Manuel's skull. The weight of Manuel's arms settled around his middle. All he wanted was to be with Manuel. Just kissing and tasting, he could stay like this forever. Off in the distance, the birds called out to the fading sun. The wind picked up teasing his face with Manuel's hair. Cowboy, hay, and horses; those scents swallowed Jess body and soul. There was nothing in the world but them.

Jess breathed. Nuzzling cheek to cheek, Jess sighed. "Let's get your things inside." He stepped back and flicked the brim of Manuel's hat with his thumb and finger. "You can put the saddle over the back of the couch for now. We'll get a tree for it later."

Manuel hauled the heavy studded piece out of the low slung, pickup bed. "I have one at my place." He paused. "At my old place. I bring the rest tomorrow after work." When Jess moved to grab one of the suit cases, Manuel stepped between him and the truck. "I will get these things."

Jess glared. "I ain't an invalid. Not yet and even then I got one good arm."

"Okay, Jessé." He conceded then moved off towards the house; his walk punctuated by the jangle of silver. "You eat yet?" There went Manuel with food again. Jess swallowed back a laugh and yanked out one of the cases using his off hand. "I make dinner, okay?"

"Somebody's cooking other than my own." Jess called at Manuel's back. "I could get used to that." *Damn, what the hell did Manuel have in that suitcase?* Jess figured he'd grabbed the one with the boots as he dragged it through the door. Manuel was already scooting the couch out from the wall and Jess bumped the *charro's* butt with his knee as he passed. After he tossed the case on the bed, Jess leaned out the bedroom door. "Actually, I got a couple ribeyes in the ice box. I was saving it for something special." He smiled when Manuel looked up. "Reckon this is pretty special."

Despite Manuel's offer, Jess ended up fixing grub. Manuel was off seeing to his things; getting himself and his horse settled. That skittish, nervous energy had to go somewhere and that was as good a use as any. Jess tossed a couple of steaks under the broiler and fried up some potatoes. It wasn't a good ol' Texas bar-b-que, but it'd have to do. Heck, he even managed to scare up a couple of bottles of *Negro Modello*,

Manuel's favorite beer. It's what they'd both been drinking the first time they'd met.

They ate sitting knee to knee in the cramped kitchen. Jess didn't think he'd ever stop grinning. Just looking over, watching Manuel shovel food in his face and jawing about nothing in particular ... for the first time, in a long time, his house felt like somewhere other than just a place to hang his hat. It'd take a little more doing. There were rough edges to file off, but it was like a river flowing; it just wasn't going to not happen.

Jess grabbed the plates from the table and headed to the sink. Elbows propped on the table and apparently amused, Manuel watched him. He sucked down the last swig of his beer and teased, "So *papi*, you do windows, too?"

"First you call me your bitch," Jess turned, flicking water across the room. Manuel ducked and laughed. "Now, you expect me to do all the chores."

Standing, stretching, Manuel ambled into the living room. "I didn't exactly call you my bitch."

"You called me *puta*." Jess, a grin splitting his face, stalked Manuel into the other room. "You said that meant bitch."

Manuel retreated into the only other room. "I said it meant something like bitch."

No, he rightly remembered Manuel said it meant bitch. Close on Manuel's heels, Jess grabbed the *charro* about his middle and yanked him back. "Okay, if it don't mean bitch..."

"It means," Dark eyes teased Jess over Manuel's shoulder, "pussy."

"You are so dead, boy." Jess slid one arm up to wrap across Manuel's chest. The other slid down to cup the *charro's* prick in his jeans. Manuel rocked back against the cowboy, baring his throat. Jess moved in to suck behind his ear.

After a few moments, with Manuel swelling in his grip, the *vaquero* broke the embrace. He yanked his shirt off, turned and dropped down on the edge of the bed. Toeing out of his boots, Manuel unbuckled his belt and undid his jeans. "So, Jessé," Manuel flopped back and writhed on the bed, shucking denim and drawers. Already half hard, Manuel's thick, uncut cock came into view. Damn, he was fine. "You going to do housework all night, or are you coming to bed."

Shucking his own shirt as he moved, Jess dropped down to his knees. First he kissed Manuel's thighs making the *charro* twitch. Jess ran his tongue up the charro's leg until he found those heavy balls. With a groan, he took Manuel's sac in his mouth. So hard and soft all at once. Jess slid his hand up Manuel's leg to stroke his cock. Feeling it come to attention in his grip always drove the cowboy nuts. He pushed Manuel's thighs wide with his free hand.

Then Jess worked down that silky strip of skin under his balls to tickle Manuel's hole with his tongue. Manuel moaned rocking his hips back and moving one leg up onto Jess' shoulder. That was all the invitation Jess needed. Gently he licked and teased, looking for what he wanted. Hot and tight, Manuel's body first resisted his probing. Then, with another moan, he just opened up. Jess' tongue slid into heat.

Manuel writhed. "*Chinga, Jessé! Le gusto.*" It was incredible. Manuel tasted like a guy who worked and it was so

good. As he sucked and licked, Jess stroked Manuel's prick. His own cock throbbed in its denim prison. Jess wanted to be greedy. He could allow himself to be greedy. They had all the time in the world. Whatever they didn't finish now could go on tomorrow and for a month of Sundays.

Jess knew what he wanted. He made his way back up to lick the trickle of juice pooling on the hood of Manuel's dick. It tasted good, salty. Still tasting, he worked one finger down and in to replace his tongue. Manuel's ass almost sucked him in as Jess pumped and licked and finger fucked the warm brown stud writhing on his bed.

As Jess wrapped his lips over the tip, he teased that spot, and sucked Manuel's cock into his mouth. Manuel jerked his hips and gasped as his sweet spot was stroked. Jess held the *vaquero's* shaft steady while he sucked up and down. Manuel bucked into his lips. Jess loved this.

Manuel loved it, too, Jess could tell by the mutterings in Spanish flowing from his lips and the way he kept hissing, "Jessé," over and over. Jess knew Manuel was close by the way his body jerked. Manuel's dick throbbed against his tongue. The first spasm rocked Manuel.

Jess yanked back, pulling off. As Manuel's cock slid from his lips, Jess jacked him off. Hard and moaning Manuel shot all over the cowboy's face. Cum dribbled down Jess' neck and all over his mouth and tongue. Jess's tongue snaked out to catch a drop as it slid across his lips.

Jess stood popping the buttons on his jeans. He pulled himself out and gave his cock a few twists through his fist. "You ready, boy?" Jess was beyond ready.

"For you, always I'm ready." It took a moment to get everything set, then Jess leaned in over Manuel. Weight on his good arm, Jess caught Manuel's leg up behind the knee with his other. He sidled around until he was between Manuel's thighs, and Manuel's leg was over his shoulder. Knees pressed against the edge of the bed, Jess slid his cock against Manuel's ass. He rubbed it around and over his hole and using the weight of his body, pressed in. Manuel, body relaxed from fingers and tongue and coming like gang busters, still resisted. The pressure on his head became harder. Then Manuel breathed deep and Jess slipped inside. Both moaned. Jess stilled, savoring the tight heat.

"Shit, that feels good!" Jess moaned. He rocked back, withdrawing until he was almost not touching Manuel's ass. Then Jess thrust back in. Each buck of his hips drove him a little deeper. Damn, it wasn't like he and Manuel hadn't done this time and again, but it always felt as good as the first time. Jess wanted to savor it. Draw it out.

"*Jessé, te adoro, te amo.*" Manuel reached up to tease Jess' lips with his fingers. Jess stopped moving just to revel in Manuel. The *charro* slid his hand behind Jess' neck and pulled him down. The kiss that met Jess was as hot as Manuel's body. He devoured his *vaquero* inside and out.

He took his time fucking Manuel's ass and mouth, pushing a little deeper each time they rocked together. Soon bellies and balls were slapping together in an urgent rhythm. Jess buried his cock inside Manuel, as deep as it could go. God, he felt so tight. Manuel met each thrust. It didn't take long before Jess felt the burning start deep in his gut. Chills

flooded up his spine. His cock swelled and his balls felt like they would burst.

"*Papi*," Manuel whispered, "for me now." The words rippled down his frame and let him loose. Jess pressed in as deep as he could and lost it.

Shuddering, Jess dropped and slid onto his knees. Manuel's leg still draped across his shoulder, Jess nuzzled against Manuel's prick, kissing it. The light touch of Manuel's fingers combing through his hair sent after burn shudders through the cowboy's body. "Just think," he mumbled, his mouth sucking on the shaft of Manuel's cock, "We can do this every night from here on out."

Manuel laughed and pushed at his forehead with the flat of his palm. "No, Jessé, not every night."

Jess rolled his head, staring up that flat belly. "Why not?"

"Because," Manuel hauled himself up on his elbows and smiled down at Jess, "Sometimes you get to be on your back."

Crawling up Manuel's lean form, Jess snuck another kiss. "Anytime you want, it sounds mighty fine to me." Then he wrapped Manuel in his arms and them both in the blankets and told the rest of the world to go away for a while. It must have worked because Jess dropped off telling Manuel that he loved him.

It seemed like his head hadn't hit the pillow a moment earlier before Jess was blinking himself awake. He had no idea what time it was. All his mind could wrap around was somewhere between too late or too early to be up and damn chilly at that. Manuel wasn't in bed and, for that matter,

nowhere in the house as Jess could tell. With as small as Jess' place, *their place* was, you could hear someone in any other room. Jess rolled out of bed, grumbling. Not bothering with a light, he slid a pair of jeans over his hips and grabbed his jacket. Out on the back stoop he found Manuel.

Blanket wrapped about his shoulders Manuel sat staring at the stars. Jess settled in next to him and let the quiet seep into their bones for a bit. Manuel leaned against his body. There was a need there that just oozed out of him; something desperate and wanting. The cowboy slipped his arm over Manuel's shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

Lips against Manuel's temple, Jess whispered. "You okay, partner?" It seemed odd to break the stillness like that.

"Sí," Manuel sighed, "I just have many thoughts in my head. I couldn't sleep."

"You thinking 'bout us?" Even as cold as it was, Manuel's body was warm. Jess pulled him closer to revel in that heat.

"*Un poco.*" It was a very small answer in a very vast night. Off in the hills a coyote sang. The horses shifted in the paddock as the wind teased hisses out of the leaves.

"Manuel," Jess asked the question that had dogged him in his sleep, "What made you change your mind?"

"*Contigo la milpa es rancho y el atole, champurrado.*" Jess rolled his eyes. Even in the darkness Manuel must have caught the expression. He translated. "The world with you is so big that all my problems seem small. Not many people have ever made me feel that way."

"I kinda feel that way all the time with you." Jess snuggled in closer still. "That's what made you change your mind?"

"No, *papi*," He could feel Manuel's shift in, making himself comfortable against Jess' chest, "*mi mama*, she changed it for me."

Running his fingers along Manuel's temple, the cowboy asked, "What did she say?"

"Not what she said so much, what she did." Manuel's touch drifted down Jess's leg.

He snorted, "You mean get married?"

"*Sí y no*. Not so much that." Manuel pulled away slightly turning in to look at Jess. Moonlight and starlight caught in his dark eyes making them seem bottomless. "Mostly that she married Ramon ... again." A laugh stopped halfway out of his mouth. "She loved him enough to give him a second chance. I think if she can give him a second one, I should give you a first one. I always thought that I could not be with someone. It scares me. But maybe I shouldn't be afraid to try. If I don't try, I'll never know."

"I'm all for the trying." Jess hoped Manuel could see his smile.

Manuel leaned in. Hesitant at first and becoming surer with each passing second he kissed Jess. It never went past light, gentle contact. Still the kiss robbed Jess of any hope of ever resisting Manuel. After a moment Manuel mumbled. "*Dicen que robar es malo, cosa que yo nunca haría, pero un beso de su boca con gusto lo robaría.*"

Jess kept his voice low as well, "What the hell does that mean?"

"Stealing is wrong, I shouldn't do it ... and still I steal kisses from you."

Twice the Ride
by J Buchanan

"Boy," He pulled Manuel in as tight as he could manage,
"don't you know, you can't steal what somebody gives you."

About the Author

James Buchanan is a multi-published author of homoerotic romance. James grew up in a small Southwestern town, hours away from any other small Southwestern towns. A stint at the State University, where he ostensibly majored in English, garnered him a degree useful for being someone's secretary. The absolute lack of employment opportunities led James to Southern California. After a stint in County Mental Health (administration, not client) he ran screaming into the field of Law. James has been practicing for nine years and someday he might even get it right.

Visit James at www.james-buchanan.com for more information on his books.

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