

Jackass Flats

*Julia
Talbot*



Jackass Flats
by Julia Talbot

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Chapter One

Tate clapped his hat on his head and staggered out of Lulu's, cursing the damned wind and snow. Why any fool would build a bar at near eight thousand feet up a ten thousand foot pass was beyond him. Why any man would drive all the way up there for a beer was an even more stupid question.

The worst part about Lulu's was that the parking lot sat across the road. The road that was the only way across Organ Mountain pass between Las Cruces and White Sands. In a snowstorm like this a man could get hit crossing that damned road. Or worse. Hell, old man Neelan had stumbled off into an arroyo two years ago and froze himself to death.

That wasn't no way to go.

All Tate had to do was to get himself to his old bitch of a Dodge and get back down to his little house on the edge of Jackass Flats. Oh, they called it Tortilla Flats now, all them fancy folks who were building houses. Jesus, they had Saltillo tile and stained concrete floors, steel appliances and frilly curtains.

That wasn't his thing. Tate never had gotten that kind of life, and he was pretty unlikely to. He might just be the only cowboy left in his corner of southern New Mexico.

"Whoa, old timer." A big old pair of hands landed on his shoulders, a strong, solid body near knocking him down when it collided with his.

"I ain't old," Tate snarled, the beer making him just loose enough to welcome a fight. "Not that damned old, anyway."

"Sorry, man. You got that old cowboy look, is all."

Tate blinked snow off his eyelashes. "And you're regulation. Fort Bliss or White Sands?"

"Hmm? Oh. White Sands. You need some help finding your ride?"

What he could see of the kid was just big all over. Big old down jacket, big shoulders, eyes glinting some light color under the single street lamp outside the bar.

"I'm fine," Tate said, stepping back, and promptly stumbling over something. Goddamn it.

"Uh-huh. Come on, buddy. I'm a lot more solid against the wind. You're kinda lean."

Well, that was the nicest way anyone had ever told him he was a skinny ass. "I wouldn't mind a hand crossing the road." Hell, he wasn't above admitting that the wind felt fierce.

"Sure. Come on." Taking his arm, the Army kid hauled his butt across the wind and snow battered asphalt, helping him stay a lot more steady than he would have otherwise. They just missed a big SUV whizzing by, throwing up a wave of slush.

"Well, this is it," he said, waving at his truck. "Thanks, son."

The man peered down at him, craning to get a look under his hat. "You're right, man. You're not that old. Look, you gonna be okay to drive home?"

The beer and cold were making him stupid. That was Tate's only excuse. He fumbled for his keys, his creaky old

fingers hurting something fierce. He dropped the goddamned keys, too, looking like an idiot.

"Shit. I don't know, kid. I might ought to just sleep it off in my truck."

"You'll freeze to death." He could almost see the wheels turning in the kid's head before a little cell phone came out. "Hey, Ram. Can you pick me up ... where do you live, man?"

"Jackass Flats. I'm out past the last housing development, right up near the spring."

"Shit, man, that's B.F. Nowhere. No, Ram, I wasn't talking to you. So, you know that ranch road before you start up to Organ? Pick me up there, will you? No, I'm driving someone home. Thanks."

"You don't have to drive me home," Tate said, wondering where he'd lost control of his day. Probably when he'd decided to go have a beer.

"I'd feel better."

They had a little stand off, but Tate finally handed over his keys, struggling around to the passenger side. They got in the cab, and the silence was jarring. Weird.

"You got a name?" Tate asked, finally breaking it right in two.

"Dave. So back down the mountain, huh?"

"Yep."

The big truck roared to life, pulling smoothly, even in the snow. The kid was all muscle, but the truck had a surprising finesse in his hands. Or maybe it was the other way around. The dash lights glowed, making eerie shadows on the guy's

face, and Tate suddenly wondered if he'd just been abducted by an alien. In his truck.

He chuckled, the sound old and rusty.

"What?" Dave asked, glancing over, making him look even less like he had a neck.

"This ain't Roswell, you know. Even if it is New Mexico."

"Uh-huh. I can read a map. Hell, I can read a topo and tell you where you are within two inches. I think I get that."

"Now, now, no need to snarl, son. I was just wondering if you was an alien."

He got a long stare, the truck drifting a little. "No, sir. I'm just a regular Army stud, taking you home. You drink a lot all the time, or just in snowstorms?"

"Shee-it." Warming up made him sleepier, if that was possible, and a hell of a lot stupider. "I just like to forget my troubles for a bit. Ain't no crime in that."

"Nope, but if you do this a lot, you might think about being nicer to the folks who pour you into bed."

They hit the curve on the way down the mountain, the one that you rounded and saw the whole of the Dona Ana valley spread out before you like a sea of light, making Cruces look way bigger than it was. The truck skidded a little, and Tate perked up. "She ain't got anti-lock brakes, man. Pump them a little."

"Got it. Thanks." The kid righted them just fine, and kept on a'going, keeping them between the lines with surprising skill.

"Where you from, you can drive in the snow like this?" Tate asked, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. Wouldn't do for him to slur his words that way, not one bit.

"Colorado. Not too far up the road, huh?"

"Whereabouts?" Tate had gone fishing up on Grand Mesa a few times, had gone to the stock show in Denver once.

"Out around Greely, actually."

"Yeah? I hear it's stinky there. Feed lots."

"You get used to it. Is this your turn?"

Damn, that had been fast. Tate usually had to creep home from Lulu's, and it seemed to take hours, even though it was a damned short drive, really.

"No, the next one. That one dead ends."

"Got it."

They turned off nice and easy, the truck only sliding the tiniest bit, and Tate made a mental note to yell at the old bitch when there wasn't anyone around to hear. She never purred so sweetly for him.

"How far am I gonna have to walk to get back, man?"

"Oh, shit. Stop. We can wait here for your buddy and I can drive on to the house. I'm the only one back this way, so if I hit anything, it won't be a person." There. He was a gentleman, wasn't he?

"Okay. I guess you'll do." Someone didn't want to hike in the snow, looked like. Dave pulled off a bit from the turn off and put the Dodge into park. The dome light popped on, making Tate yelp and squeeze his eyes shut, the sudden brightness more than he could take.

"Jesus, kid."

"Nope. Dave. Look at me, Tate. It's Tate, right?"

"Uh-huh." Opening his eyes seemed harder than it should, but not because of the sleepy. More the spinny. He did it, though, staring into bright green eyes, the color true as a fucking crayon.

"Shit. You're totally gone. Well, we can wait here for Ram and he can follow me back to your place, then take me back to the bar."

Tate blinked. The kid's growl seemed to come from nowhere, with no damned provocation. "Oh, fuck that," he said, opening the truck door and sliding out into the snow. "I'll just walk back. You leave my girl here and I'll hike up and get her in the morning."

"Are you crazy?" The driver's door popped open and Dave appeared in front of him, snow covering the down jacket fast, making the kid look like the Michelin man. "Look, I'm sorry I snarled, okay? Come on, sit in the truck. The way Ram drives it'll be five minutes, tops, then I'll be out of your hair."

Well ... It was awful cold. Tate nodded, slogging back to the truck and climbing in. They both settled in, the heater warming them through again, and Tate turned to get another look.

High and tight in an indeterminate brown color. Those pretty green eyes. Strong jaw and heavy shoulders with very little neck to be seen with the coat. Built like a brick shithouse...

"Is Ram your boyfriend?" he asked, not even thinking it might be a bad question.

"What? No! No. Jesus. He's just a buddy."

"Oh." Tate nodded sagely. "Buddy."

Dave's eyes narrowed, the shock becoming a glare. "You don't believe me? He's married, has three kids. He's just been a good mentor to me since I've been here."

"Sorry, sorry." Holding up his hands, Tate grinned, trying not to burp in the guy's face. "I was just making a stupid joke, okay?"

"Yeah, well watch the jokes. Oh, thank God."

Headlights appeared behind them, another, far newer pick-up pulling up alongside.

"Trouble, man?" a Dave clone called from the other vehicle.

"Too cold to walk. Follow me down?"

"Sure!"

Then they were off, and before Tate could even blink, really, he was home, a military escort on either side of him, the guys walking him to his kitchen door.

"Here you go, Tate," Dave said, helping him get the door open.

"Thanks." He shrugged a little. "I mean, really. Sorry if I was an ass." He smiled, glad as hell to be home. "I'm a little drunk." He pulled out his wallet and tried to give them ten bucks for gas, which they refused, and he argued until Ram threatened to pop him one.

Dave laughed finally, clapping him on the shoulder. "No problem, huh? Just don't make me drive you home ever again."

"Sure. You bet." He watched them walk away, looking like a poster for being all they could be, and figured the chances of seeing Dave ever again were pretty remote.

Damned good thing, too. Army types were far too law-abiding for an old cowboy like him.

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Chapter Two

Dave Lopes had a three day, and he'd never been more grateful for it. Patrolling the goddamned desert in the worst winter weather he'd seen since he went to Basic in Alabama and left Colorado behind sucked. It sucked hard, and sucked big, hairy donkey balls, at that.

So much for his MO making him skilled labor.

He wanted Mexican food, wanted enchiladas and honey-soaked sopapillas and maybe a margarita on the rocks. His ancestors would never forgive him for drinking a fruity, frozen thing.

Well, okay, they were his step-mom's ancestors, but still. A man had to honor the family traditions, and Rosie's people believed that tequila should be as little diluted as possible.

There was a place he'd heard of out in Mesilla, just the other side of Las Cruces called El Patio. Everyone said they had decent, nothing-fancy food, but the margaritas got five stars. That worked pretty damned well for him, especially since he was unlikely to meet anyone else military in the little tourist town.

Parking was at a premium in Mesilla, but Dave immediately loved the old fashioned plaza with the funky adobe buildings and the big church at the far end. San Albino was all lit up with farolitos or luminarias, the little lights burning in the paper bags making it look cheerful, even in the watery, gray evening light.

The stores were open late this time of year, with the Christmas shoppers out like crazed locusts. His mom would whap him for that one; she loved Christmas shopping and wrapping presents and sending a million little things all over the country to relatives she hadn't seen since she was five.

El Patio was nice enough, maybe a little too fancy in the dining room for Dave, but the food was solid—enchiladas and tacos—and the drinks deserved their reputation. Hell, when he was done with supper, he moved to the bar, which was much more his style. Ancient black and white vinyl floor tiles and a big wooden bar sat alongside a dartboard and an old fashioned jukebox. The bartender's name was Lucy, and she told him in no uncertain terms that she didn't hold with bullshit, even as she made him the best margarita he'd ever had.

"Bliss or White Sands?" she asked, pouring his second glass over ice.

"White Sands. That obvious?"

Nodding, bright brown eyes sparkling, Lucy laughed and lit his cigarette. "Yes. I bet everyone asks you."

"They do." The last person who had asked had been Tate, the good-looking and very drunk cowboy he'd met up in Organ. He thought about Tate every now and again, wondering if the guy was all right.

Anyone who drank that hard had shit he was trying to get away from.

"Well, hey there, Army. How's it hanging?"

Dave turned, stared a little, wondering if he *was* an alien, having conjured Tate up like that. The man looked ... Well, damn. He looked good.

"Tate. Hey, man. I'm good. Good. Have a sit with me?"

"Sure." Doffing his hat, Tate sat next to him, smelling like Old Spice and spray starch. Tate wore a white button-down, old jeans, and a flannel-lined denim jacket. He looked fine. Like really fine.

"You're looking better than the last time I saw you."

"Well, I just came out for supper, not to get my drunk on. Hey, Lucy, get me a Coors, will you?"

"Sure, Tate. How's Darla?"

"She's good. How's your baby car?" Tate's tanned face creased in a slow smile, blue eyes bright against his brown skin.

"Good. I just got her new chrome. You'll have to come out and see."

"Good deal."

Dave watched them like a tennis match, finally elbowing Tate in the ribs. "You're being rude. Who's Darla? What car?"

"You're pure D nosy, son." But Tate winked, waving a hand at Lucy. "Darla is my sister. She and Lucy went to school together. Her car is the blue Mustang out in the side lot. Pretty baby, and she's been working on it for two years."

"One Coors, Tate."

"Thanks, honey." Tate passed over a five and waved off the change, grabbing the longneck and sucking down a few gulps.

Lord. When he'd first met Tate, he'd assumed the guy was a lot older than he really was; there was no way the man was older than thirty, thirty-five. He just had that lean, sunburned look that was universal to cowboys, the one that made them kind of ageless once they hit their middle decades.

Dave had grown up with guys like that, guys who could have been thirty or fifty.

"...eat yet?"

"Huh?" Dave blinked, a little taken aback by being caught staring.

"Did you eat yet, I said."

"Yeah."

"Oh." Tate deflated a little. "Well, hell. I was hoping you'd come and have a bite with me."

Something in his belly went a little tight. Just a little. "Well, I didn't remember to get my sopapillas. I wouldn't be averse to getting some with you."

"Well, that'd be right decent of you." The smile lines around Tate's eyes crinkled right up. "It's a shame to eat alone if you don't have to."

"Yeah. I hear that. Can I take my drink back in?"

"You bet."

They moved back to the dining room, and Tate ordered a combination plate, letting Dave nibble on chips and salsa until it was time to order dessert.

"I got to admit, son, I didn't think I'd run into you again. I'm kinda embarrassed about how schnockered I was when we met. I'm not sure I thanked you proper."

"Sure you did. You even tried to pay us." Man, Ram had been damned near in a fit by the time Tate had stopped arguing with him.

"Well, you wasted enough of your friend's gas." He got a shrewd look. "He sure likes you."

Hot blood rushed to Dave's cheeks. "I told you before, it's not like that."

"I bet it would be, he wasn't married."

"Look..."

"Hey." Tate held up his hands. "Ain't no skin off my nose. Maybe it's just wishful thinking on my part, huh?"

Okay, the heat in his belly bloomed into a full-on fire. It had been a long time. Too long, in his don't ask, don't tell world, if a simple smile from Tate was giving him a raging hard-on under the table.

"Maybe. Maybe not as much as you think. Just not me and Ram."

"Huh." Those blue eyes gave him a good once over. "Well, now, that's something to hear. You want those sopapillas now?"

"I do." They each had another drink, and the sopapillas came, warm and sugary, served with enough honey to make them a sticky mess. Dave was entertaining some pretty energetic fantasies about that stickiness when Tate asked him to play some darts.

"Sure." Blinking, Dave wondered if he'd have to get Ram to come get him this time; those margaritas were some strong shit.

"Come on, then. I'd offer something else, but I'm too damned old to be giving blow jobs in bathrooms, and Lucy frowns on it, anyway.'

Oh, God. His cock jumped in his jeans, "How do you feel about giving them in a truck or something?"

Tate grinned, cheeks going pink. "Not on a first date, honey. Come play darts with me." That slow, drawly voice lowered. "Give yourself a thump. Worked for me just now."

Dave did just that, curling his middle finger and thumb together to flick himself hard, his cock subsiding a bit. The fact that Tate *knew*, that Tate was hard, too, made it even worse. Better. Harder.

Whatever.

They went back into the bar to toss a few darts, and damn but Tate was way more coordinated when he wasn't drunk. They went for best two out of three, and Tate ended up with another beer on Dave.

"Nice. You didn't tell me you were a ringer, man," Dave said, clapping Tate on the back. He let his hand linger, feeling Tate's heat though the thin shirt.

"You should see me play pool."

"Shit, I bet you'd kick my ass." It was funny, how he'd gone from this man's rescuer to his admirer in no time, really. Dave sure had, though, because all he could think was that kicking wasn't what he wanted Tate to do with his ass.

He just needed to get laid more often at the base. There were plenty of willing guys, even if Ram wasn't one of them, like Tate seemed to think.

"So, you just out for the night? Or you got some time?"

"Huh?" Damn. He'd been caught staring again. "Oh, I'm on a three day."

"No shit? Well, if you need a place to stay tonight, you're welcome to come on to my place so you don't have to go back in."

Dave's heart set up a slow, steady pounding, his body revving right up. "I thought you didn't do that on the first date."

Tate gave him a long, steady look. "I'm not now. You stay in town, though, and we can have that second date tomorrow. No telling what I might do, then."

Well, damn.

Dave started grinning. He supposed he could live with that.

* * * *

Tate was damned glad that he'd cleaned up some. The dog hair wasn't so thick that you could knit a new dog, and he'd scrubbed the hard water stains off the toilet. Hell, he hadn't even known why he was so industrious. Now he figured the universe must have been telling him something.

Dave looked around when Tate let him in, smiling a little. "Man, I thought I had seen it all in bachelor pad décor. This looks like something you'd see at a dude ranch."

Tate tried not to bristle, but it kinda put his back up. "Cowboys like antlers."

"Hey, I never said it was bad. I just said it was very western." Dave held his hands out to the side in a gesture of peace.

"Sorry." He didn't mean to grumble, but he couldn't help it a bit. "Anyway. Let me show you to the guest room, huh?"

"Sure, man. No problem." Bless him, Dave was being so accommodating that Tate kind of wanted to hit him with a shovel, at least now that he was having a few second thoughts about the wisdom of letting Dave stay with him. He liked the kid just fine, but was he really going to do anything? What the hell?

"Cool. Well, here it is." The guest room was just about as rustic as the living room, with mis-matched lodge pine and an old quilt, the little bedside table leaning to one side.

Dave followed him to the doorway, peering in. "The bed looks comfy enough. I appreciate it, Tate. Look, if you want me to just go to bed or whatever, tell me, but I thought we might watch a movie or something."

"A movie. Sure. I got westerns and action movies."

"Well, yeah. I didn't expect you to have Sleepless in Seattle."

Tate stared a moment before he started laughing, throwing his head back with it. Damn, he was being an ass. "How about an Indiana Jones thing?"

"Hell, yes," Slapping a hand against the door frame, Dave nodded. "You got popcorn?"

"Yep. Beer, too." He'd even offer the good stuff instead of the piss he usually did. 'Course the only person who came around to drink his beer was his brother-in-law, and that man didn't deserve more than Milwaukee's Best.

"Cool. I could just sit, you know? I'm good at that."

"Well, then, sit. I'll get that movie in and get the snacks." Tate felt better already, happy that the kid just wanted to sit and buddy up, not make out like mad fools or something. Maybe this was what it felt like to get old. Maybe his sister was right. He was out of touch.

All of the flirting in the restaurant must have been pure beer and sugar-driven bravado or something.

Time he got back to the couch, Dave was dozing, head lolled back against the high rise of Tate's old sofa. It was a comfortable old bitch of a couch, so he could relate, especially with his stomach still as full as it was.

Tate clicked the button to start the movie, figuring he'd be polite and wait for Dave to wake up before shoving beer and popcorn under his nose.

Dave started awake when the sound came on, blinking at the room at large. "I'm up."

"Cool. Have a beer."

"Popcorn smells good."

Tate offered that over with a little smile, and Dave settled the big bowl between them on the couch. They both reached in at the same time, their fingers meeting over the popped kernels, and Tate felt a little rush of warmth in his belly.

"You know, I always wondered how a guy like him got all the girls," Dave said. "Is it that arrogant thing? Women like that, secretly?"

"So do men, for the most part." Tate shrugged. "Take charge is sexy, I guess. Kinda. When it ain't annoying."

"Yeah, I guess that makes as much sense as anything." Dave scooted a little closer, trapping the popcorn bowl between their hips. "It keeps trying to run away from me."

"Well, we can't have that." Tate decided not to say anything else, lest he make a fool of himself. He liked the warmth of Dave's body close to his, liked the way that Dave was easy and quiet and not all pushy.

"Nope. This works."

It worked for Tate, too. Hell, it worked so well that he fell clean asleep, and he woke up with Dave drooling on his shoulder, his arm a screaming ball of agony when he moved it the least little bit. Man, that was one heavy soldier there. They ever did get up to anything more strenuous, he'd have to remember not to let Dave fall asleep on top of his body.

He might smother.

"Dave. Dave, honey, I have to get up." He had to pee in the worst way, and he might as well take some aspirin while he was at it. That would save him all the aches and pains later

Lord, it was hell getting old.

"Huh?" Dave started awake, just like he had before they even watched the movie, blinking. "Did you call me honey?"

"I call everyone that. Could you get off my arm?"

"Oh, shit! Sorry." Dave sprang up, standing, joints popping all in his knees and shit. "I wasn't trying anything funny, I swear."

"I know that, you goof." If Dave had been trying something, they'd both be hard and not so asleep. He figured. Maybe.

"Oh." Grinning, looking sheepish enough to baa, Dave shrugged. "I just wanted to make sure. I think I'll head to bed now, if that's cool with you."

"Sure. Let me get you a towel for the bathroom, huh? I got extra toothbrushes, too. My sister always makes sure I have a bunch."

"Oh, that would rock." Dave followed him to the bathroom, hanging out while he dug in the linen closet right next to it.

Tate handed over the towels and the toothbrush, then stood there, shifting from foot to foot. "Well. Night, man."

"Night. Wait." Dave's hand landed on his upper arm, holding him in place.

"Whut?"

"Come here." Dave reeled him in, hand sliding up over his shoulder to cup the back of his neck. Then the man bent and kissed him. Hard. Good enough that his toes curled, and his belly went tight as a board.

When Dave let him go, he actually stumbled, reaching out to catch himself on the door frame.

Dave smiled at him, a gentle curling of those pretty lips. "Night, Tate."

"Yeah." Tate stood there watching Dave's butt disappear into the guest room. "Good night."

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Chapter Three

"Tate! Wake up, honey! I brought you some breakfast tacos and a sweet roll!"

Dave was in the bathroom when the voice came ringing through the house, and he almost stayed in there and hid. Tate wasn't in the house, though. Dave had checked. So he wrapped a towel around his waist and went out to head the woman who was shouting off at the pass.

"Hi." He smiled when he almost ran into her in the hall, holding the towel closed. "Tate's out doing the feeding."

The woman, who looked maybe three or four years younger than Tate, but was obviously related, stopped and stared, her mouth literally falling open.

"Well, I'll be damned. Who are you?"

"I'm Dave." He held out the hand not clutching the towel. "I slept in the guest room."

"Oh, well, hey there. I'm Darla, Tate's sister. I, uh, I brought breakfast."

"Look, I'm sorry if you and Tate had plans..."

"Nope. I just stopped by for coffee and a chat." Her blue eyes sized him up frankly, from his bare toes to his wet head.

"Well, I didn't want to go back to base last night, you know? I'm on a three day. Tate was good enough to let me stay."

"Military man, huh?" She sniffed before nodding sharply.

"Well, that's good, I guess."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask why that was good, but he thought better of it. A lot of people had serious issues with Army folks invading their town on the weekends. He'd seen it more than once. A lot more.

"You mind if I go get some clothes on?"

"Knock yourself out, Stud."

"Christ."

Darla turned back toward the main part of the house, and Dave slipped into the guest bedroom, wishing he'd washed his clothes or something. There was no way Tate's clothes would fit him, if that skinny-butted cowboy even had any.

Sighing, he ran his hands over his buzzed hair, and pulled his dirty clothes back on. He'd say thanks to Tate and call Ram or one of the other guys to come get him, take him back to the Patio. That might spare some awkwardness.

"...need to talk about the taxes. They're starting to call me, too. They're two months overdue, honey." Darla's voice came from the back patio, clear as day.

"We can talk on it when I ain't got company, Dar. You let it be. I'll call them tomorrow and make a payment, okay?"

"You'd better. I swear, it's getting to where I can't hold my head up in town."

"Oh, bullshit. What town? Organ? Cruces is too damned big for anyone to care. You just don't want your friends all thinking I'm a bum."

"Tate..."

Dave stood in the little hall right by the kitchen and kind of agonized. He sure didn't want to get in the middle of some

old family argument. But he did want to get to the phone, as he couldn't find his cell anywhere in his clothes.

Finally he just cleared his throat and headed into the kitchen, sticking his head out the patio door. "Tate, man, I'm sorry to interrupt, but can I use your phone."

"Morning, Dave." He got a smile from Tate, a stare from Darla. "You're welcome to, but you don't have to run off. I want that second date."

"Hey, I don't want to get in the way."

"You're not." Tate pulled his wallet out of the bread box, which made Dave chuckle, and pulled out a twenty. "Here, Dar. For breakfast. Thanks."

Darla took the money, her mouth pressed into a hard line. "We ain't done, Tate."

"We are for now."

Sniffing, Darla snatched the money out of Tate's hand, wheeled on her heel, and left.

Tate sighed. "Sorry about that, man. She usually ain't so rude. She's just all het up."

"Well, it must have been a surprise, me being here, huh?"

Laughing, Tate nodded. "Yeah. Lord knows it's been awhile."

"Well, and we didn't do anything." Somehow that seemed important, that Tate not get bitched at for something he didn't even do.

"You kissed me." Those blue eyes burned right into his, and the look in them made him shiver a little.

"I did."

"I liked it."

Oh, damn. "I did, too. A lot."

"Well, good."

Dave laughed, feeling a lot easier in his bones. "So. Breakfast?"

"Hell, yes." Tate got everything laid out and gave him a coffee. "Might as well eat it up, huh?"

"Why waste?"

They ate their tacos and cinnamon rolls, the silence more comfortable than not. Dave wasn't used to much quiet when he ate. Army guys were blow-hards. They liked to hear themselves talk, and that wasn't nasty. It was just the truth.

Good thing Dave had grown up around cowboys. He remembered the whole strong, silent type thing from when he was a kid. It made him smile a little.

"What are you grinning at, son?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about cowboys."

"Well, if you got more than one, now might be the time to let me know."

"Nope." Heck, he didn't even know if he had one. They were only on their second date so far, and God knew it wasn't going so great. "Thanks for breakfast, man," Dave finally said, patting his belly. "It was good."

"No sense in letting it go to waste, so you're welcome. Anything in particular you want to do on our date?"

"Are you sure you want me to hang out?" He couldn't help but ask again.

The rough wooden legs of Tate's chair scraped across the floor, screeching like a barn owl. Tate frowned like thunder,

his arms crossing over his chest. "Said I did, didn't I? You sure don't hesitate to call me a liar."

"No! Tate, I don't think you're a liar." Jesus, he'd forgotten how proud cowboys could be, as proud as they were, too. They took offense like grass caught fire after lightning. "I want to stick around and get to know you, man. You're just prickly as a cactus, is all."

"Me? You're the one that's always trying to run off." One corner of Tate's mouth kicked up, through. "Well. We might as well go to the springs, I guess, since I can't give you clean clothes to go into town."

"The springs? The guys keep telling me about this place on the base side of the mountain." It was a popular pick up spot, though, and would probably be crowded on a Sunday.

"Well, this is sorta like that, yeah, but it's private. My land goes on up a ways."

A private hot springs pool. Shit, yeah, he could go there. "Lead the way."

Tate laughed, nodding. "Let's get some water and some snacks, huh? I ain't got any swim trunks. For me or you."

Woo. Dave suddenly thought that was a very good thing. Like, the date was looking up.

* * * *

If the day kept on like it started, Tate was going to be exhausted well before it was over. Jesus, Dave was a bundle of nerves, poised on the edge of running like a greyhound or a thoroughbred.

Tate wasn't sure what had happened to the man in the past to make him think he was so unwelcome, but someone must have let him down hard. Rock hard and rock bottom.

Lord knew, Tate knew about the tough side of life and love better than most. He could relate, even if it did pique his pride.

His old pick-up bumped over the barely-there track, sending the crown of his hat rubbing up against the roof. The trip went better on horseback, and Dave said he could ride, but Tate didn't want to test the man's ability with such a long ride to begin with.

"Man, you have more land than I thought." Dave was looking out the window, a little smile on his face, staring at the scrub and cactus like it was something special.

It was. Tate would fight to the death to keep his land, no matter what the tax man said.

"I lease some of it out, and the BLM actually owns some of it, but I have right of access." The spring was still on his land, and he owned both the mineral and water rights. Made everyone want to get to know him, from realtors to geologists.

Too bad for them that Tate was so antisocial.

"It's pretty."

"Not all green like where you grew up, though, huh?" He'd been through Greely once, remembered it being right nice, if smelly.

"It's not all green. And we got tornados."

"Most we get here is dust storms, usually." He'd settle for that. Tornados could jack your shit right up. "Hold on."

The turn into the little cut out for the springs was hidden, a sharp turn that he'd never bothered to level out. Some things a man wanted to keep for himself, and he'd bet even Dave would never find it again without his help.

Darla sure as hell couldn't.

Dave didn't even blink. No white knuckles for him. 'Course military transport wasn't known for being gentle. Damn, he'd like to get his hands on one of their Jeeps. That would rock.

Finally, Tate pulled off into a little depression that was shaded by a tall rock, parking the truck and grabbing the pack of shit he'd put together for their day. "We walk from here, man. You ready?"

"Sure." Smiling easily, Dave climbed out and held out a hand. "Want me to hold the pack?"

"I ain't helpless." Still, Dave was a hell of a lot bigger than him, and probably in better shape, so Tate handed it over.

"Nope. Just a grumpy bastard."

He gave Dave a sideways grin, happy that they were starting to tease. That meant they were moving into second date territory, for sure, and since they was about to get naked together, that seemed like a real good thing.

Dave shouldered the pack and they headed up into the rocks, the foothills giving way to a steeper slope. The air was cool and dry, and the hot springs would feel just fine. Just fine. The sun shone down, beating against his hat and making sweat bead up along his hairline.

"How often do you come up here?" Dave asked, keeping pace with him easily, not the least bit out of breath, even with the altitude.

"'Bout once a month. Maybe less if the weather is real hot. You know how it is. No sense wallowing in hot water when it's a hundred degrees."

"It's going to feel good today."

"Yep."

It took a good fifteen minutes to hike back in to the pool, and Tate sure was cursing his occasional cigarette by the time they got there. The smell of sulfur wafted up from the water, making his nose twitch and his eyes itch. The water bubbled just a little around the edges, that hot springs foam hard and obvious.

"Wow. It's bigger than I thought it would be." Dave set the pack down in a safely dry area and put his hands on his hips, surveying the spring.

"Not much more than a hip wader," Tate said, "but it's bigger than a hot tub, huh? Come on. Water's looking good."

Grabbing a water bottle out of the pack, Dave handed it over. "Hydrate first. That was a pretty good haul to get up here."

"Oh, bullshit. You ain't hardly sweating. I'm the one who got all wheezy." Made him want a cigarette. That was how it went; you got in a bad way, you wanted to do exactly the thing that got you in trouble in the first place.

"Hey, it worked me hard enough that I'll be glad to soak." Dave drank down half a bottle of water, throat working, catching his eye. Lord, there was a bead of sweat, rolling down, right there.

Tate had the sudden urge to lick it off.

Grunting, he put his head down instead, starting on his shirt buttons. He toed off his boots, got his button-down off, and unbuckled his belt. When Tate glanced up, Dave was watching him like a hawk, eyes like green fire.

Licking his lips, Tate undid his jeans and slid them down over his rapidly hardening cock. "You're not coming in?"

"Huh?" Dave jerked, meeting his eyes. "Oh, sure. Sorry, I was just..."

"Just watching. I don't mind, huh? I want to see, too, though." God, he did, with a sudden, urgent need. Funny, how his brain hadn't even made a decision to like Dave, but his body was all for the man.

Dave's cheeks heated, but the man slipped off his T-shirt and jeans, boots coming off before the pants. That big old body was cut, scattered with hair but not monkey hairy, and put together like one of them Greek gods.

His own cheeks might burn right up, and his cock was gonna explode.

"Better?" Dave asked, and Tate tried to clear his throat to talk. Didn't work, and he had to drink some water.

"Better. Well, in you go." Gingerly lowering himself to the side of the pool, Tate slid into the water, ignoring the grit that clung to his ass and the weirdly heavy feel of the water. No, he concentrated on the heat, on the way it melted the tightness in his muscles, and on how Dave looked, standing above him like that.

Dave's cock was hard as stone, and curving up toward that flat belly.

Muscles slid under tanned skin when Dave plopped down in the pool, making little waves that slapped against Tate's belly.

"Oh, man, that's like heaven," Dave said, rubbing his hands up over his arms and shoulders, getting them good and wet. They kind of ... glistened.

"Feels good, huh? I love it." His mouth was so dry that he reached for his water again. He must be getting old and desperate if just seeing Dave naked made him go from so-so to whoa, in the space of a few moments.

Maybe he would have felt that way with any pretty guy.

Maybe not. Dave was the one who was staring at him, the one who'd noticed him after a lot of time spent getting ignored. So maybe they hadn't gotten off on the best foot. So what?

Letting his feet float to the surface, Tate hummed, letting go of all the damned thinking. Really, it wasn't good for a body.

"Oh, good idea." Dave's toes popped up next to his, the man just floating, elbows propped on the lip of the pool.

It made that pretty cock poke up above the water line, and didn't that make his mouth water?

"You look good," Tate finally said, his voice sounding old and rusty.

"Yeah? Thanks. Body by Army, I guess. Yours is all hard work, I can tell. You have the best scars, too."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if Dave wanted to play connect the dots, but he didn't. Not yet. This was only a second date, after all.

"Thanks, I guess. You get scarred up, working with cattle and barbed wire."

"Yeah. It works for you." Looking completely at ease, Dave reached down and stroked his cock a couple of times, just boom boom and let go. Who knew, maybe the man was truly unselfconscious. He lived in the barracks in the Army, right? Or was that like, only Gomer Pyle or something? Which was the Marines. Lord, he was addled.

"Thanks." Was that his voice, all strangled and froggy? Turning over, Tate reached out for the edge of the pool and let the water support him on his belly. That way he didn't poke up like Dave did and embarrass himself.

"No problem." Was that Dave's hand on his ankle? It sure felt like it, wet fingers ghosting over his skin.

"So. Uh. What do you do?"

"Huh?" The question seemed to surprise Dave, who moved back, the water sloshing around them.

"Just making conversation, honey. I have no idea what you do to be all you can be."

"Oh. Well, my MO is in guidance systems."

Guidance...

"Like missiles."

"Yeah. Just like that."

"Huh."

Dave's hand was back soon enough, sliding up his calf.

"What about you? You make your money off cattle?"

"Horse training mostly. Like I said, I lease off some land, some irrigation rights. One man grows alfalfa, another does chiles."

"Hatch green?"

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, man. My step-mom does amazing things with that stuff."

"Mmm." Listen to them, having a conversation. Dave's hand stayed on his skin, and he thought for sure the water was going to start to boil, as hot as he was, his skin tight, his cock aching.

"I bet Darla does, too."

Tate chuckled, remembering one year that Darla had put up green chiles without roasting them. "She blew the door off her freezer with them things one year."

"No shit? She didn't do them on the grill first, huh?"

"Nope. Man, chile season here, we all cry for days."

"I missed it this year, huh?"

Tate nodded, his nose dipping in the water. "Yeah. We've hit a nice Chinook though, huh?" The weather had been pretty cold and rotten for a good while.

"You know it. Patrol was so much easier this week." His legs floated apart, and Dave moved between them a little, that big body rubbing along his calves.

"Good deal." His breath caught, and Tate pulled away, drawing his legs up under him.

"Am I getting too forward for that second date, man?" Dave asked, coming up behind him, the heat intensifying until Tate could hardly stand it.

"I dunno. I'm just..." About to make a fool of himself? About to come all over? "It's too much, maybe."

"Maybe it's not enough, Tate. Maybe you just need to get off." Pushing right up against his ass, Dave reached around and grabbed Tate's cock, pulling at it as casually as he had his own. "Maybe you just need some friendly help."

"Friendly." Oh, God. Oh, Jesus Lord, please. His cock jumped, his hips starting to jerk, just from that simple touch. Fuck, it'd been ages. So long, since it had been anything but his hands.

"I'm nothing if not friendly, Tate." Dave whispered it against his ear, sounding purely wicked, and Tate leaned back against that solid man and moaned, feeling like a two-dollar whore.

"I like friendly."

"Good." Those lips found a spot to settle right under his ear, Dave kissing his skin.

"Watch out, honey. That water doesn't always taste so great."

"You do, though."

Someone was determined, stroking him in a nice, hard rhythm, Dave's thumb rubbing under the head of his cock. Made him groan, made him grab the rock at the side of the pool and hold on as the world started spinning a little.

Dave kissed and licked along his neck, his shoulder, that hand rubbing on him, pulling at him. He wanted. Right now. Wanted to come and not worry about what that would make this besides a date.

"I got you, Tate. Stop thinking and just let it go."

Well, when a man got an invitation like that, he was a fool to turn it down. Tate let himself come, let it all flood right out of him in a rush of need and relief that left him dizzy.

"Oh, honey."

"Good, huh?" Dave pressed up against his ass, rocking him against the hard edges of the pool, and he wasn't sure he was ready for that. Oh, melted as he was, he coulda done it, could have let Dave slide right between his cheeks, but a man had to set some boundaries, right?

Tate turned around, reaching down for Dave's cock, wanting to give something, because he wasn't selfish, just cautious. His fingers closed around Dave's prick, the length and girth of it surprising him, even though he'd seen it with his own eyes.

"Oh, yeah, Tate." Dave started humping, the water moving with every thrust of those lean hips, that fine ass. Tate kind of hung on, hoping it was good, wanting to make Dave come just like he had.

"Feels good, huh? Like that?"

"I do. Oh, God. I like it."

Smiling, Tate pulled harder, tickled as anything that he was making Dave hot, making the man need. He could feel it, could see it when Dave started shaking, when the man was ready to blow for him.

Dave came not long after, that wide chest heaving, Dave's face flushed a deep red from the steam and the exertion.

Hoo yeah.

"Better, man?" Tate felt better than he had in maybe a year. Maybe longer.

"You know it. This was the best idea, I swear. I like your pool, Tate."

"Good. Getting a little shrunken, though. Want to get out and have us a snack?"

"I don't know. Did you bring us a blanket, so we can eat naked?"

Christ on a crutch. Dave wasn't one for modesty. Really. Tate swallowed, thinking of eating his cheese and crackers while watching Dave dangle all over.

He had brought a blanket, though.

"I did. Come on, man. Get out before you start to disintegrate."

"Melting! I'm melting." Dave planted his hand on the side of the pool and strong armed right out, all that muscle rippling and flexing.

"Uh-huh. It's a terrible thing." His eyes tried to stray below the glory trail on Dave's belly, but Tate snapped them back up, not willing to make a fool out of himself anymore than he already had.

They spread the blanket on the rough dirt at the side of the pool, close enough to dip a toe in if they wanted. Tate set out the food and drink. Weren't nothin' fancy, just peanut butter sandwiches and cheese and crackers, stuff that wouldn't go bad in the heat of the little cave. They had coffee and water, and a couple of Cokes.

"You okay, man?" Dave asked, reaching over to cup one of Tate's shoulders with his hand. "You want me to put some clothes on?"

"No. No, you're fine. It might make me silly, but I can live with you naked."

"I don't want to embarrass anyone, man."

"Shee-it. You're fucking beautiful, honey." He met those pretty green eyes, letting Dave know he meant it. "I've just been out of the game."

"I think you can safely say you're back in it now." That warm hand stayed on his skin, Dave's fingers starting to move, rubbing a little in tiny circles. "Unless you decide you never want to see me again."

Tate snorted. "You'll get tired of me before I ever get sick of you." That was always the way of it. He was old and stuck in his ways, and no one wanted to hitch their wagon to that. Hell, he couldn't even blame the few guys he'd been with over the last few years.

He would run away from him, too.

"Sure, babe. Sure. Whatever you say." Winking, Dave pulled back far enough to feed him a bite of cheese. "So, how long has your family lived around here?"

"Didn't I ramble about all that the night I was drunk?"

"Nope. We talked about me being from Colorado. The snow and all."

"Oh, right. Well, Mom and Dad lived down near El Paso until I was eight or so. Then they came up here, bought this plot from a cousin." Come to think of it, old Jared had been a worthless drunk, too.

"Huh. You'd think your people had been here for generations."

"Yeah? Well, what about you, Colorado man?"

Dave grinned easily, leaning back on his elbows, body stretched out like a banquet. "My people came to Greely from Iowa in the 1860s or so. Well, some of them. The other part is Mexican."

"Well, there you go." He had no idea what he meant by that, but it seemed like the thing to say. If Dave was from Las Cruces, being half Mexican would mean he'd been there for a few hundred years, family wise.

"You're uncomfortable. I should put some clothes on."

"You're always jumping to conclusions." Staring over, Tate leaned up on one elbow, cradling his head in his hand. "You sure like to be in control, don't you?"

Dave blinked. "Well, sure. Doesn't everyone?"

Tate just shook his head and grinned, thinking maybe his old ass did have something to teach Dave after all. "No, honey. Sometimes patience really is a virtue."

"Right. I'll keep that in mind."

Popping a piece of peanut butter bread into Dave's mouth, Tate proved his point.

It was awful hard to talk when you had peanut butter stuck to the roof of your mouth.

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Chapter Four

Dave hummed, scrubbing his armpits, letting the water wash over him and get rid of the crusty sweat his winter uniform had started to leave on him after he did anything remotely physical.

Southern New Mexico in January could be a bear. Warm enough to wear shorts one day, cold enough to snow the next.

Ram had let him come to supper and stay the night, which rocked, because a private shower was worth its weight in gold. Not that anyone really gave Dave hell like they did some of the newer kids, but it was still a crap shoot, whether or not you were gonna get icy hot in your shampoo or something.

He blinked soap out of his eyes before pushing down over his belly and his pubes, getting everything squeaky clean. And if there was a lingering throb down there from his last date with Tate, well, so be it.

The man was going to drive him insane. They were seeing each other at least once a week, sometimes more, but they'd never done more than hand jobs.

Not even a blow job. He'd tried a few times, but Tate had held him off, those cheeks bright red, hands fumbling with his, or patting his face.

"Not yet, honey," Tate would say, reaching for his crotch, jacking him off until he came. It was both satisfying and incredibly frustrating.

He wanted to taste. To lick and suck. He wanted to fuck Tate's skinny cowboy ass.

Bad.

How many more dates that could take kind of boggled his mind.

Dave stroked himself, thinking of that lean, scarred body, about how Tate had fallen asleep with him on the couch the last few times he'd stayed over, about how he'd snuggled up to that ass that he wanted so much and pushed, his cock trying to slide between Tate's cheeks.

Not that it had ever worked. Tate slept in his boxers.

His hand moved lazily, his other arm coming up to brace against the wall, holding him upright so he could jack his prick. Dave could almost smell Tate, the heat and musk and man of him, and it made his balls draw up, made his hips jerk. He was so ready, and he didn't have to worry about Ram's wife or kids, as they were out at some movie...

"You gonna be in there all night, man, or are you going to come get a beer?"

Ram's voice made him jump, as it came from right outside the shower curtain, and his cock deflated like a punctured beach ball.

"Shit, Ram! Give a guy some privacy!"

"Nope. No jacking off in my shower." One big hand slapped the curtain. "Come on. I'll be in the kitchen"

He waited to hear the clack of the door closing before he left the shower, suddenly feeling all shriveled. So much for his big pleasure in the shower. He should have gone to Tate's. He

would have if it wasn't such a bitch to get back to base in the morning, coming over the pass like that.

Sighing, Dave turned off the water and grabbed a towel, rubbing down fast and shrugging on a T-shirt, pulling on a pair of work-out shorts that he'd brought with him.

Rubbing the towel over his head, Dave headed for the kitchen, smiling at Ram, even if it was strained.

"Hey, sorry I surprised you, man," Ram said, handing him a Natural Light. "I just didn't want you getting all busy in there."

"Obviously."

Ram gave him a look that he couldn't quite decipher. "No one gets busy in my house without me. So, you want chili or pizza?"

"Uh. Pizza." Ram made terrible chili, full of weird shit like ground chicken or turkey or whatever. Zucchini. "Tate makes great chili. Did I tell you?"

"Dude. I bet you've told me all about Tate at least three times over." The words came out light and teasing, but the set of Ram's shoulders told a whole different story.

"Hey, I'm sorry if I'm bothering you, man. I can't help it."

"Yeah? Well, why? He doesn't sound like all that, considering that he won't suck and all. There's plenty of guys here who would hook up with you in a heartbeat." Ram turned and clapped him on the shoulder, blue eyes glinting.

Dave couldn't help but notice how different those eyes were from Tate's. They called Ram the Ice Man. Sometimes it really did show in those pale eyes.

"Shit, Ram, we've talked about this before. I don't want to play hide the sausage on base, okay?"

Not to mention the fact that getting to know Tate was taking effort. Real, honest to God effort that involved long games of Scrabble, trail rides, and tons of little Mexican food places, where he and Tate would try out the sopapillas and margaritas.

It was a huge, and nice, change from the soft serve friends you made in the military.

"You like him," Ram said, sounding accusatory.

"I do."

Ram's fingers clenched so hard around the edge of the kitchen counter that tile and pressboard creaked and popped. "Better than me?"

His mouth dropped open, the beer in his hand thudding down on the gold-speckled Formica tabletop. "What? You're my buddy, Ram, not my boyfriend. It's a whole different thing."

"Doesn't have to be." Letting go of both the counter and the beer, Ram reached for him, big hands closing around his upper arms. Dave's body flew forward, like gravity had no effect on him, at least until he slammed against Ram's broad chest.

Ram's lips smacked down against his, hot and damp and tasting like beer. For a long moment, Dave was completely dumbfounded. Then he tore himself away, palms flat against Ram's chest.

"Ram! What the fuck? You're married, man!"

"So? She has her damned kids, and she'll get my pension. It's not like she gives out anymore." Ram licked his lips, staring at Dave's mouth like he couldn't look away. "Why shouldn't I get to have you?"

The kitchen suddenly seemed tiny, and the beer in his belly was going sour, one grain at a time. Breathing in deep, Dave took a step back, hands up, palms out.

"We're not going to go there, Ram. I want us to stay friends, yeah? So I'm going to forget this whole conversation."

"Dave..."

"No! I'm flattered as hell. If you were free, I have no doubt we'd be doing it. But you're not and that's that."

Ram stared at him, the seconds ticking away loudly on the little clock on the stove. Then those big shoulders bunched up next to Ram's ears. "Sure man. Sure. No worries. So. Chili or pizza?"

Shit, Dave wanted to bail. He wanted to call Tate and tell the man what had happened, maybe get a little free advice on how to handle it. Hanging around seemed like a terrible idea.

Though, really, chili would be worse.

Dave tried a grin on for size. "Definitely pizza."

* * * *

Tate whistled, feeling good in his bones.

The last tax payment had gone in this morning, and the horse he'd sold to pay for it was going this afternoon.

The little bay was a three year old he'd bought for trail rides, and she'd never really gentled to his touch, so he didn't have any heartburn about losing her. She liked Darla fine, so she'd make the little gal he'd sold her to a good saddle horse.

The whole tax thing was a damned weight off his shoulders, and when Tate got back inside the house, he called Darla, wanting to rub it in a little.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sis. Guess what I did?"

"Paid the taxes? I know. Adam at the tax office called me about two minutes ago."

"Yeah? What the hell? You sleeping with him or something?"

"Shit, no. You know better than that, Tate." She paused, and Tate could almost hear the wheels turning. "I got a call from Anne, you know, Mom's cousin?"

"The real estate lady." She made him nervous, with her perfect hair and her manicured nails, all of that being way out of his league.

"Yeah. Tate, she thinks now would be a perfect time to sell..."

"No." It came out flat, dry, cracking over the phone line like a dry twig. "Ain't I paid you for your half?"

"Well, sure. That's not what I mean at all."

"Didn't I sell off twenty good acres to people who built cracker box houses and put up trailers?"

"Tate."

Tate sighed. It was always going to be a bone of contention with them. Darla didn't mean no harm. She just

thought he ought to sell his place, get a smaller plot of land somewhere up the valley toward Hatch. Somewhere greener, with better irrigation. Someplace not Jackass Flats.

"I just think you need a new place, Tate. That dusty old mess you got is dragging you down."

"It's mine, Dar. That's all a man needs."

She sniffed, which signaled the end of that line of questioning, but Tate could hear the next one coming. "How's that little Army boy?"

"Dave. His name is Dave, hon." Tate was going to let it roll right off. Things with Dave were going surprisingly well. The man was letting him take his time, letting Tate set the pace. That went a long way with him.

"He's not going to be around forever. You know that. Right"

"Well, sure I do, Dar. He's a military man." Tate wasn't stupid. Or even optimistic. He knew that Dave would move on in eighteen months, if they lasted that long. Hell, some stud on base might finally get jealous and snap the man up.

Didn't mean Tate hadn't decided to open up and try a little, finally.

"Well, you just be careful, huh?"

"I will, Darla. Hey, when are you going to the grocery?"

"Uh..." She did like to be useful. It would derail even the heavy rants. "I'm going in the morning."

"Cool. I need dog food and toilet paper."

"Tate, you don't have dogs."

"Uh-huh."

"Then what the hell..."

"Would you just do what I ask?" Jesus, did he really have to explain everything? She probably thought he was feeding the coyotes instead of trying to woo the stray dog that was camping in the alfalfa field down the way.

"Sure, Tate. Oh, there's the bus. I got to go."

"Say hey to the kids for me."

"You bet."

"Bye, hon."

Lord. Tate hung up, just wanting to be left alone for a bit. Oh, he knew it was bad, hitching his wagon to an Army feller. Any fool knew that. It was his own damned decision, though.

The knock on his kitchen door had him sighing, wishing he'd already romanced that dog into coming home with him and being an early warning system.

"Coming!" Swinging around, Tate headed for the door, hoping it wasn't the real estate cousin. He wouldn't put it past Darla, sending her the very day he paid his taxes.

The back door yielded Dave Lopes, not some strange cousin. A very tired looking Dave, sporting a huge black eye.

"Lord, honey. Training run get a little out of hand or something?"

"Or something," Dave agreed, hunching his shoulders a little. "Can I come in?"

"Shit! Sure. Come on, sit down. You want a cup of coffee?"

"That'd be great. Thanks." Dave came in, sinking down at one of his kitchen chairs, rubbing the back of his neck like the weight of the whole world sat on it.

"So, what's an Army boy like you doing on my doorstep at..." Tate checked his watch. "Eleven in the morning on a Friday?"

"I'm on administrative leave. Pending the investigation."

His eyebrows went up, his body rocking back on the heels of his boots. "Well, hell, honey. What did you do?"

Dave frowned. "Not a goddamned thing. Well, except turn Ram down a few nights back."

"No shit?" Well, he'd said all along that the big master race guy was in love with Dave. Or at least lust. The told you so stuck in his throat, though, because Dave looked so damned dejected.

"No shit."

"So what? Ram hit you, you got into a brawl?" Did they do inquests for two soldiers beating the snot out of each other?

"No. No, that wasn't it at all. I mean, Ram wasn't even there today."

Tate squinted at Dave a moment before going to get coffee. Dave distracted him with a touch to the small of his back, and Tate bent to take a short kiss hello. Oh, better.

How could he have missed that to begin with? It was one of the best things about being with someone long term, even if they'd never gotten to a base past first, really. Tate did love a good kiss.

Wait, were hand jobs second or third base?

Baseball had never been his game.

When he reached up and cupped Dave's cheek in one hand, though, reality crashed back in. Dave hissed a little, pulling back, and Tate touched the bruises lightly.

"Why don't you tell me what happened, honey?"

"Can I have some coffee?" Dave grinned a little crookedly.

"You bet. Didn't I offer?"

"Well, yeah, but you never got it for me."

"Oh." Tate turned and got the chipped, green mug that Dave loved, filling it with coffee and that weird mint chocolate creamer. Man had a sweet tooth. "There. Just like you like it."

"Thanks, babe." Dave had started calling him babe a while back, and Tate figured he could live with that. Dave sighed. "Anyway, I was on detail today, working with a flight safety analysis, you know?"

Hell, no, he didn't. About all he knew about White Sands was how they'd sent a missile with a nuclear payload into Mexico once. Into a cemetery. It had taken weeks to move all the contaminated soil to someplace in Nevada. Still, Tate nodded, for the sake of speed.

"Well, I was out checking frequencies when two sergeants pull up and order me to abandon my post. They have some kind of clearance to do some kind of flight-assisted technology check, blah blah. Except they didn't have any of the clearance codes they needed, no written orders, no nothing."

"Huh. So what did you say?"

"Said I was going to call it in to the LT at HQ."

Was that even English? Sure wasn't cowboy talk. Tate hauled out his little-used war movie lingo memory and thought he'd worked that out. "So did you call, uh, HQ?"

"No. This would be the part where they started to beat me up."

"Shit! Just like that?" That was against the rules, Tate was pretty sure. Hell, even in cowboy law if you was gonna beat someone up in the name of a friend, you had to own up to it first. "You think Ram put them up to it?"

"I'd like to think he wouldn't do something like that to me. I think they did it for him, though." Dave sighed, sipping at his coffee before scrubbing a hand over his face, which had stubble on it for the first time Tate could remember.

"Well, sure. You boys are friends." They had been, any road. Tate had a feeling that friendship would be over now. "They blame you for this? The brass?"

"Not exactly. They just want me off my shift until they figure it out." He got him a wry look, Dave's green eyes twinkling. "It's a closed, remote post. I think they're worried I'll end up worse than bruised."

Tate growled, surprising himself a little. "Well, that's a good thing. Drink up, and I'll make some toast and eggs."

"It's almost too late for breakfast, Tate."

"Quit yer bitchin'. It's homemade, isn't it?" He'd heard Dave bitch more than once about Army food.

"It is. Hold up." Dave grabbed his arm and pulled him around the table again, yanking him down until he sat sideways across Dave's lap. "I need another kiss, man."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Tate grinned, his mouth meeting Dave's nice and hard, his lips opening up to let Dave in.

Their first couple of kisses they'd shared had made Tate short of breath and happy, but they'd been clumsy affairs, all where-do-I put-my-head kind of numbers. Him and Dave,

they'd gotten a lot better at kissing since then, with long hours of practice on the couch to thank for it.

Dave tilted his face, lips sliding across his in tiny motions before that tongue snuck out and tasted him, pressing at the seam of his mouth and begging entrance. Tate gave it, tasting coffee and a little tang of copper, a tiny bit of antiseptic. When Dave let go of his mouth, he was breathing hard, slumping against that broad chest.

"Good deal, honey. You sure are good at that."

Dave stroked his back, up and down, just a rhythmic touch that soothed. "I'm getting there, where you're concerned."

"You sure are. Wasn't too certain how we'd do at it."

That got him a smile. "Me either. It's good, huh?"

"It is." They were probably ready for more, but Tate just didn't know how to take the next step.

Dave shrugged, helping him back to his feet. "Ram kissed me the other night."

"What?" Well, now. Look at him, getting all jealous and shit. Huh.

"Yeah. He grabbed me and planted one on me. I was talking about you..."

A flush of pride hit him right in the belly. To counteract it, he told Dave about Darla. "She says you're an Army man, and I shouldn't put all my eggs in your basket."

"What does she know about your eggs? I'll make toast, huh?"

"Sure, honey." Tate bumped Dave with his hip when the man stood up. "You staying here tonight?"

"I am if you'll let me. They gave me a pager at HQ. They need me, they'll call."

"Fancy, schmancy." He found the eggs, handed the bacon and the bread to Dave. "You want a Mexican scramble?"

"Hell, yes."

Dave loved Tate's Mexican eggs. Said they tasted just like his step-momma's. They weren't all that; it wasn't like they was huevos rancheros or nothing. Just eggs with cheese and salsa and some ham and shit. Still, it tickled Tate to death to be able to give the man something.

"You know, we're like an old married couple," Dave said, pushing pieces of bread into the toaster.

"How's that?" Tate stared over his shoulder, his lips pursing together.

"I come home from work. You make food. We kiss a lot but never have sex. We watch a lot of movies..."

Lord, that boy thought too much.

"Well, I done told you my reasons for going slow, honey."

Dave nodded, serious as a heart attack. "I've always said they were valid and treated them that way, haven't I? Doesn't mean it's not occasionally incredibly frustrating."

"So why not take that Ram feller up on his offer?" Tate was genuinely curious, not a bit of sarcasm in the question. If Dave was having the problem a lot of young, healthy men had with the whole blue balls thing, why wasn't he taking it where he could get it?

"Because I'm with you. That means something. He's married. That also means some—Shit." Dave pulled a buzzing

beeper out of his pocket. "I've got to call in. You mind if I go to the guest room?"

"Not a bit. Hand me the bacon." That wasn't something that thrilled him like it did a lot of the little military wives he'd met. That whole top secret thing didn't fly with him. Shit, he was a cowboy. He knew from closed-mouthed, but he still wanted to know that if something happened to his man, he'd know what was going on.

Chopping and mixing filled his time until Dave came back out, looking grim but resigned.

"Well?" He handed the bacon back over to Dave, smiling to try and ease the tension.

"I'm on leave until Monday. I have a hearing then, where I'll give evidence against the guys who attacked me."

"Wow. The wheels of justice move fast in the Army, huh?"

"Too fast, I think."

"What's that mean?" Hell, he would have been happy to get it over with.

"It means they're covering something up." Sighing, Dave put the bacon back on the flame, rolling those broad shoulders. "It just feels bad, is all."

"Well, take a load off here with me for the weekend." Hell, it was mid-March, the weather was fine, and they could go to the springs.

"Sounds like a plan, Tate. Thanks for letting me stay."

"Shit, honey. Where else would you go?" Tate winked.

"Don't let that bacon burn, now."

"Don't worry, old man, I'll save your bacon."

Tate laughed along with Dave, but the truth was, the man had given him a new lease on life. Dave had already saved his bacon.

More than once.

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Chapter Five

Dave watched Tate ride, admiring the way the tight Wranglers stretched across that skinny little ass.

Somehow, he didn't think he'd appreciated Tate's ass enough. Maybe it was not having to worry about Ram shutting him down when he talked about the man, or maybe it was getting the shit kicked out of him but good, but Dave felt kind of liberated where Tate was concerned.

Maybe it was the way Tate kissed him these days.

Something told him it was time to make his play, to at least try to move on to blow jobs, if not penetration.

Hell, Tate was pretty old school. Penetration might never happen, at least not with Dave on the giving end. That was okay, though. He didn't mind bottoming one bit, if it meant that he could have all of Tate.

Tiny rocks shifted under the feet of the gelding he rode, the slippery trail reminding him to pay attention. Skamp lived up to his name, and God knew Dave didn't want to go ass over teakettle into the canyon below.

No, sir. He had a date with a hot springs and a naked Tate.

He almost wished they had brought the truck. Tate loved to ride, though, and horseback riding gave him the added excuse to touch. Nothing like massaging out a little soreness. Dave had packed an extra water bottle to wash the sulfurous stuff off their cocks, just in case someone wanted to suck, and he'd picked up a tube of lube at the Pic Quik the day

before, tucking the little tube in his front pocket to keep it nice and pliable.

They rode through the heat of the day, which in March was about seventy degrees, but it was windy, and the horses kept spooking a little when scrub brush swept against rock, making screeching noises. It took most of Dave's upper body strength, just to keep Skamp in line.

Tate pulled up near the cave with the springs, turning in the saddle to peer at him. "You still with me, honey?"

"What, did you think the wind blew me away?"

"Nah. You just been quiet."

"Yeah, well, Skamp hasn't, has he? He's been a handful today."

"So has Jezebel." Tate grinned, pulling at the brim of his hat. "We'd best hobble them. I don't think tying them to the scrub alone is going to hold them, huh?"

"Probably not." They'd feed and water the horses, then leave them, and hobbling sounded good. He didn't want Skamp showing up looking for water and finding his bare ass.

The only one he wanted biting his butt was Tate.

They hit the pool and got stripped out of their clothes, sliding into the steamy water. Tate moaned, and Dave stared, loving the flush that rose up on Tate's thin cheeks.

"So, you got the taxes paid off, huh?"

"I did. Late as all hell, but I did it. Got a schedule set up for this year, too, so I can do it a little at a time."

"That rocks." He knew it had been weighing on Tate, and more than once he'd almost offered some money to help, but

Tate would have turned him down. The man had pride by the bucketful.

"Yeah. I was ready for everyone to stop hounding me." Tate stretched, his little brown nipples rising above the water, and the man glanced over at him, a frown pulling at his forehead. "They did a number on you, honey. Your ribs are a mess."

That was so not going to help with the seducing, was it? "I'm fine, babe. I just need a soak and some TLC."

Definitely some TLC. Once he'd made up his mind, there was no changing it, and Dave had made up his mind that he and Tate were going to take it to the next level. Life was too fucking short not to.

Tate grinned over. "Well, I'm great at the care, so long as you tell me what you need, honey. Otherwise I'm clueless."

"Yep. You're a cowboy." Dave moved in, letting the water push him this way and that, his hands settling on Tate's hips. "Cowboy up?"

Blinking, Tate stared for a long moment, then just started laughing, the sound bouncing off the walls of the little cave. "Oh, Dave. Man. That was bad."

"I know it. I can't help it." That laughter didn't ease him at all. It made his body tighten, not relax, made his cock harder than it had been in a long while, and that was saying something. There had been nights that he'd gone to bed in the guest room with a hard on that felt like one of those Viagra ad, see a doctor things.

"Sure you can. Let me help." Tate slid one hand up behind his head, pulling him down for a kiss, and oh ... Oh, God.

Yes, please.

That kiss just rocked his world. He'd known something was different about this time, and he was right. Tate wasn't holding back, wasn't worrying or tentative or any of the things the man had always been. This was a full-on, no holds barred kiss that left him gasping, left him flailing out to try and find some purchase against the slippery walls of the spring pool.

Goddamn. Give him some more of that.

Dave pushed up with his legs, driving Tate back toward the ledge, needing to be able to press down, get more leverage. His cock ached. He was damned hard, and he wanted nothing more than to hump himself into oblivion, but Tate was more special than that. The man deserved more.

Once he got some purchase, where he could kiss and touch at the same time without floating away, Dave went to town. His lips stayed on Tate's mouth, but his hands moved, one cupping Tate's left ass-cheek, one sliding up over belly and chest to reach Tate's hard little nipples, squeezing each one in turn.

"Jesus, Dave," Tate gasped when they broke for air. "Jesus Christ. You trying to kill this old man?"

"Nope. Killing you is the last thing on my mind, I promise. I want to feel you all over."

Tate chuckled, sending a burst of warm, damp air dancing against his throat. "Seems to me you are."

"Oh, cowboy, I haven't even started yet."

Tate stared at him a moment, wide-eyed. Then that smile he loved crinkled up the corners of Tate's eyes, and Tate

leaned in to kiss him again, whispering against his mouth.

"Well, come on and get going, then."

Score. Dave moaned, pushing his leg up between Tate's, feeling that hard cock against his hip, the softness of Tate's fuzzy balls against his thigh. The water made it all a little less intense, diluting the sensation, and Dave was glad as hell. He would have shot twice by now otherwise. His cock pressed against Tate's lower belly, and Dave was surprised the damned water wasn't boiling around them, as hot as that was.

"Need you." Dave murmured, ignoring the twinges his bruised face and ribs were giving off. "Any way I can get you, Tate."

"How about this for now?" Tate squeezed a hand between them, pushing down to grab Dave's cock, fingers closing just a little too tight in his eagerness.

"Oh, damn. Tate." Dave ignored the sting, waiting for Tate to find a rhythm, and sure enough that hand started moving up and down, Tate's hold still tight but not hurting.

"Good?"

"Real good. Don't stop. Been dreaming of this, you know?"

"Yeah?" Tate paused a moment, blinking water off his pale lashes, and Dave let his hips float up, a gentle reminder to keep moving.

"Every time you send me to bed in the guest room with a hard on, yeah." He wasn't making accusations or anything. He understood.

"Well, I won't make you stay there tonight." Tate gave him a game grin. "Can't promise I'll be able to do ... that. Okay?"

"Never asked you to, did I? I just want to feel you, babe. Want to feel this." He reached for Tate's cock in turn, moving them around a little, getting their dicks lined up together.

"Oh. Better, huh?"

"Better." Tate grunted, rocking against him, opening that lean hand to take him in, too.

That had him gasping and groaning, moving faster and faster. Fuck a duck, it might just kill him. The water sloshed around them, the smell a little rotten egg, but it didn't slow them down a bit.

Didn't even scratch the surface of the need riding him.

Dave pushed into their joined hands, needing more friction, finally deciding that he wasn't going to get it in the water.

"Tate. Can we ... I need to move to the blanket, huh?"

"Yeah. I forgot about your bruises, honey."

Man, he'd always thought that a gay guy saying honey was like waving the flaming queer flag, but Tate said it like a cowboy, all drawl and sideways eyes, and it made his balls ache.

He hoisted himself out of the water and held a hand down for Tate, not wanting anyone to slip on the slick rocks. The ground felt grainy under his feet, and his nipples drew up at the touch of cooler air.

Tate followed, touching him, hands glancing off his back and ass. It was so damned good to have Tate initiate the touches, to have that sweet man want him back.

They sank down on the blanket together, and his bruises protested. Dave took the bottom, not wanting Tate to get all sore and all.

Smiling down at him, Tate bent to kiss his mouth again, lips tasting like salt and hot springs, hands braced on Dave's chest. The angle rubbed their cocks together like a wet dream, and Dave went with it, grunting happily. Most of the guys Dave had been with had been desperate, quick and dirty and rough. Tate had a careful gentleness about him, like Dave was a colt that needing taming.

It was as cute as it was frustrating.

Dave grabbed Tate's ass with both hands, pulling the man down against him harder, showing Tate the rhythm he wanted to achieve. He figured he'd meet the man halfway, somewhere between easy and slow and pushy as hell.

"Greedy," Tate said, laughing against his lips, and Dave nodded.

"I am. Told you. Been waiting."

"Well, let's do this, then." Tate leaned up on one hand, arm straight, and reached down with the other, getting a hand around them again. Those hot blue eyes held his, and Tate stroked, watching every move Dave made.

Dave bucked and moaned, feeling the rough calluses on Tate's hand, blunted just a bit by the water they'd just left. The ground felt cold compared to Tate on top of him, even through the blanket, and his ass had a rock digging into the left cheek, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that this was Tate touching him, Tate loving on him, Tate about to make him come.

His eyes widened, and Dave's whole body arched up, a low shout escaping him as he came. He could feel his come on his belly, could feel the way Tate spread the slick stuff all over his cock, stroking until Dave thought he might die from the sensation.

"Tate. Wait. Here, let me." He pushed Tate's hand away and started stroking the man's cock, telling his fingers and hand to work, even when they didn't want to. Damn, it was tough to move when you'd come like a ton of bricks, but Tate was still panting, still moving on top of him, not shooting as easy as Dave did.

That was okay. That was just fine. He could pull until doomsday if he had to, but he didn't think that would be necessary. No sir, not with Tate humping his hand, making these hot little noises shaped like, "Yeah, please, Dave."

Hot damn. His name. That sounded so good.

Tate finally came for him, hard and long, the sounds devolving into little grunts and clicks. Those blue eyes went cloudy, then blinked closed, Tate slumping against his chest and panting.

"That was just the ticket, honey. I swear."

"I thought so, too." Dave held on to Tate's cock loosely, not ready to let go yet.

"Good. Man, my ass is kind of cold."

"Well, come here." Dave wrapped them in the blanket, thinking how it was a shame they hadn't gotten to use the little tube of lube he'd put in his pocket. It would keep, though. Maybe tonight. Hell, he hadn't even managed to give Tate that massage. Getting naked with the man had made

him lose all track of his plan. He reached out and snagged the water bottle he'd so carefully filled. "Want some?"

"Sure. Thanks."

They sipped at the water, both of them letting the silence lengthen, until finally Tate glanced up and met his eyes.

"Next time we need to do this in a bed, okay?"

Dave laughed, nodding his agreement. "You got a date, babe. Definitely."

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Chapter Six

It took a pretty hefty dose of self-control for Tate not to go kick that Ram boy's ass. Oh, he knew all about how Dave said he didn't think Ram had put the other boys up to it, but every time Tate saw the bruises that Dave sported on his chest and belly, and on his back right where the kidneys lived, well, it pissed him off something fierce.

Ram deserved to have an ass whooping.

Tate whistled while he thought about it, whipping up some scrambled eggs and sausage for supper. Somewhere he had some of them frozen pancakes, too.

"Dave, honey? Would you check the freezer out back, see if I got any Krusteze or Eggos?"

"Sure, babe."

That whole babe thing rocked. So did hand jobs at the hot springs. Tate could tell that Dave wanted to get down to more business than that, and most likely tonight, but he wasn't sure he could, physically or mentally. He hoped to hell Dave understood like the man always had in the past. If he didn't, it would make for a passel of awkward.

Still, Tate wasn't a spring chicken anymore, and he knew from the occasional bout of overenthusiastic jerking off that one a day might be all he was good for.

He could blow Dave. Wasn't he curious as hell about what the man tasted like? He sure was. They could settle in for a movie, he'd do his thing, they could sleep. Christ, it was hell to get old.

"Hey, where are you?" Dave tapped him on the shoulder with something freezing cold and damp. "No pancakes, but you did have waffles."

"Cool. Sorry, I was woolgathering."

"No shit. I could do a naked hula and you wouldn't notice."

"Naked ... Lord. That would be something." All that twirling and flopping.

"You should have been at this one place in Hawaii. There was this fire dancer. Thank God he didn't have any pubic hair."

Tate stared a moment, then burst out laughing, feeling it start way down in his gut and work up. "Goddamn. I tell you what, Dave. You've got some damned fine stories."

"Yeah, what military man doesn't?" Dave sobered a little, staring at the coffeepot.

"It'll all work out fine." Tate reached over and squeezed Dave's shoulder. "You'll see."

"Yeah. It just sucks when you know you've got that kind of jerk in the unit, you know? Like I'll have to be watching my back every minute, no matter what happens at the hearing."

"Don't bend over in the shower." He let the lame joke die, though, flipping sausage and dumping Eggos in the toaster. "Get the syrup and all for me?"

"You bet. You want the butter or the tub margarine?"

They'd had this huge argument back when Dave had first started to stay over about cold butter, and how Tate keeping his out on the counter was unnatural. Dave had insisted on buying this tub margarine with yogurt in it, so he could have

soft spread without worrying about buttery death, as he called it.

Weirdo.

"Butter for me. Bell is over by the fridge,"

"Maple or Mrs. Butterworth?" They'd had a big talk on that, too, with Dave insisting that the artificial shit in the syrup he favored was going to kill him.

Tate figured his occasional smoke and more than occasional beer would get him first.

He could compromise, though; he was getting better at that.

"Maple. That way we taste the same."

Dave gave him a pleased smile and dropped a kiss on his cheek before getting all the stuff out, including plates and cups of coffee.

"Ta da. Breakfast for supper."

"Thanks, babe. So what about you? You hardly ever tell stories. I thought cowboys were great spinners of tales."

"Oh, I ain't been around the world like you, honey." Tate settled at the table, slathering butter and syrup on his waffle. "I could tell tall tales about coyotes and that time I ran into a rattlesnake when I was rock climbing up behind Dripping Springs, but it would probably just bore the shit out of you."

"I doubt anything you did would bore me, Tate." Those pretty green eyes stared right into his, Dave getting his romance groove on.

"That's just because you want to fuck me, honey." It was true, so why pussyfoot around?

"You know, it could be because I like you, too. Heck, we like the same movies, like the same books. We compromise well on breakfast food. What's not to like?"

That smile could make a man forget caution. It surely could. Dave had this open face that hid nothing of what the man was thinking. Maybe that was why Tate was falling for Dave so hard, even when he knew it was a bad idea to love on a military man who was so much younger than he was.

"I like you, too, honey."

"Good. I mean, I won't deny that I want us to have sex. I don't care who does who. I didn't know..." Red stained Dave's cheeks, the blush possibly the funniest thing Tate had ever seen.

"Didn't know what?" Tate asked around a mouthful of egg.

"Well, you're a cowboy, right? And kind of a different, uh—generation?"

"Uh-huh?" He raised a brow and waited, watching the blush deepen.

"I didn't know if you'd let me. Do the doing. Or even do that at all."

Oh, good God. Tate laughed. "Cowboys've been butt fucking since there was cowboys, Dave. You're from feed lot country, you've never seen bulls hump each other?"

"Yeah, yeah. Rub it in. I just didn't want to assume anything." Dave finally tucked into his supper, eating hearty, probably to keep his mouth from flapping open.

"I'd let you, honey. Just not tonight." He winked, mopping up the rest of his syrup with his last bit of waffle.

"No? I got lube?"

Those ears got any redder, Dave was going to explode. Poor guy. Tate just nodded. "I know. I saw, even if you was all careful to hide it. Got me horny, just thinking on it."

"So, why not tonight?" Dave paused, fork halfway to his mouth, waiting for his answer.

"Because I'm tired. I'm an old fart, honey. You hitch your wagon to me, you'd best know that now. I'm happy to jerk you or blow you, if you need some more lovin', but I ain't up for fucking."

"We'll work up to it, then." Dave gave him a grin that had the pure devil shining out of it, those green eyes twinkling.

"We will. Hell, I want to see what you look like naked without all the water and shit. In a bed."

"Now?"

Had he ever been that young? Maybe he was just slower in general, less energetic. It was the cowboy way, right? Laid back. "No, not now, you dork. I want that beer and that movie."

"Ah, foreplay." Dave finished up his supper and rose, taking Tate's plate and utensils and going to wash up. Those big shoulders looked a little stiff-set, the movements a little too careful.

"Yeah, well, you look like you overdid it a little today, anyway. You're one big old bruise."

Rolling his head on his neck, Dave stacked the last of the pans in the drying rack. "I am, You're right. We should have a quiet night."

They settled in on the couch only moments later, a shoot 'em up flick on the TV, both of them with a beer in hand. Tate

had gone to brush his teeth after supper, because he hated the taste of sweet with his beer, so he felt all minty fresh, not a bit worried about kissing on Dave if the need should arise.

Or should something arise.

"So, what are you going to do about this inquest or whatever, honey?" His curiosity was more idle than not, but he did worry about Dave getting his ass kicked out on some lonely stretch of White Sands road. It just didn't bode well.

"I don't know. I guess I need to talk to Ram first, one on one. Make sure he didn't put them up to it. After that I'll know what I'm dealing with, you know?"

"I could talk to him." Shit, he still wanted to kick Ram's ass. That was a little more than an idle urge.

"Nope. You only talk to me." Dave leaned back, one arm stretching behind Tate on the back of the couch. Those long, strong fingers fell against the nape of his neck, stroking. "In fact, you should tell me a story. Maybe the one about the rock climbing."

Tate pondered that. "Nah. There's not much to that one. How about I tell you about the time I decided that I wanted to take up bull riding."

"No shit? How old were you?"

"Eight. Darla told me I should start with riding the maverick calves, as they'd be like wild bulls."

Dave's chuckle echoed against his chest. "Oh, God. That was bad, huh?"

"Even better, she told me if I got on backward and held onto the calf's tail he couldn't buck me off."

Dave cracked up, pulling him close with that hand on his shoulder. "She liked to put you in the blender, huh?"

"She did. Little shit calf turned me every which way but loose, with me terrified to let go for fear of a couple of old cows. They was real close by, and stomping mad."

"Oh, man." Dave started loving on him a little, nuzzling his temple. "How long did you get grounded?"

"I didn't. My daddy beat me until I couldn't sit for putting his livestock in danger."

"I'm pretty lucky. I escaped most of the whole beating thing as a kid."

Tate shrugged. "Well, it didn't kill me, did it? Darla neither. We're not scarred for life or nothin'." At least not because of that. They had their issues, but it had never been because of their mom and dad.

"I'm not making judgments, babe. I said I mostly escaped it, huh? There was this time down in New Mexico. I took off up a snowy mountain by myself."

"Oh, honey, I can just see you as an intrepid explorer. How old were you?"

Dave laughed. "Five. My mom beat me half to death, all the way down. She said I was lucky I was wearing a red coat, or they would have lost me forever."

"That would have been a shame, you know?" They'd had kind of a rocky start, but Tate knew he was better off for knowing Dave, no matter what happened.

"You think?"

"I do." Tate let himself lean, let Dave take most of his upper body weight. It was a little shameless, the silent plea for a kiss, but it worked.

Warm, firm lips pressed against his, Dave tilting Tate's head back against the back of the couch and moving in, deepening the kiss. Slow, easy, undemanding, Dave let him feel it, from the stubble of the day's growth of beard, to the heat of Dave's tongue tracing his lips.

"Taste good," Dave told him, kissing him again, getting a little greedier with each touch of mouth on mouth.

"Mmmhmm." There was a time for talking, and a time for just holding on and letting it go, and Tate figured he'd moved past the coherent part of the day. He just wanted to feel, to push his hands up behind Dave's head and touch the surprising softness of the short brown hair, the muscles that corded in Dave's neck.

Dave pulled him even closer, until one of his legs kind of draped over Dave's thighs, and Tate chuckled, feeling like he was trying to mount a horse, or something. The stretch and burn felt like when he was caught in between the ground and the saddle without enough bounce.

"I think that might be ambitious, honey," Tate said when they broke for air. "Not exactly saddle sore, but I don't bend that way, usually."

"Shit. Sorry." Dave backed off, easily letting Tate slip back down to the couch. "We could always go get horizontal."

"We could." He'd promised something along those lines, hadn't he? Somehow he was settled in his bones about it, too,

not worrying a bit about asking Dave to come to his bed, finally. "Come on, hon. We'll go."

Dave blinked at him a moment, like the man couldn't believe he wasn't being banished to the guest room. Then his hand was taken and pulled, Dave popping up like a jack in the box.

"Well, come on, then, man. I love your bed. It's way bigger than the one in the guest room."

They went to Tate's room, the big old bedstead with the quilts looking the same as it always did, though somehow more inviting now he had someone to take to it. Tate broke away to go to the bathroom, closing the door in Dave's face for just a moment to do his thing and wash up. They still hadn't progressed to leaving the door open for that, which he guessed meant the romance was still alive.

Dave took his turn in the head, then came out and stood there, watching him like a hawk. Tate took his shirt off, turning the fabric over and over in his hands. "You, uh ... You going to get naked, too?"

"Sure." Shrugging, Dave spread his hands and grinned. "I was just going to watch you, first."

"Yeah, well, it's making me uncomfortable as hell, so get on with it, honey."

"Okay, okay. Sheesh." Still grinning to beat the band, Dave pulled off his T-shirt, exposing that broad, muscular chest and six-pack belly. There was something to be said for a body built by the Army, even if all the crap that came with it did have its drawbacks.

Tate reached out to touch a little, dropping his shirt on the floor before combing his fingers through Dave's chest hair.

"That's much better, Dave. I swear, I was feeling old and skinny."

"You're not old, and you're just lean." Dave was doing a little touching of his own, fingers sliding over Tate's shoulder and down his chest to pinch one nipple.

"You called me old man when we met."

"It was just a sign of respect. I grew up with cowboys, remember?"

"Uh-huh." Tate could laugh at it, now, his embarrassment more or less faded since that first meeting. He didn't drink near as much these days, except for the social beer or two with Dave.

"Now the jeans, babe."

He had an attack of the no, not wanting Dave to see how not hard he was. Well, he was a little, and he was sure feeling good, but he felt like his cock was betraying the lie when he said he wasn't old.

"You first."

Those pretty eyes took on a soft, sympathetic expression. "Don't worry about it, Tate. It's no big, okay? I just want to snuggle and feel good, huh? Not go to bed alone."

"Sure. Sure, okay." Tate took his hands back and put them on his button, opening up his jeans slow and sure, stripping them down his legs along with his shorts. There wasn't no shame in his ass, he knew. It was still nice and tight and tiny, cowboy style.

Dave took every opportunity to tell him that.

"Nice ass, cowboy."

His cheeks heated, even though he'd been expecting just that, and Tate gave it a little wiggle when he turned to toss his jeans over the chair next to the bed. "Okay, now you, honey."

"Yep. Now it's only fair." Dave stripped down, looking buff and hard and a little damp at the tip of that sweet cock. Made his mouth water, for sure. Fuck being all tied up inside about his own dick; he'd just touch Dave's.

His hand was out, his fingers wrapping around the hot length before he even thought about it, using it as a handle to drag Dave to the bed.

"Hey! Watch it. I don't want to lose that."

"Well, no. I don't want you to, either."

They settled into bed, and Tate thought about it for, oh, three seconds before he pushed Dave down to lie prone, The he slid down that muscle-y body and stared Dave's cock right in the eye, so to speak, licking his lips.

"This okay, honey?"

"Okay?" Dave sounded like he might strangle on something. "More than, babe. I ... wow."

Look at that. Dave's cheeks were flushed red, the little vein in his temple standing out, and the man went up on his elbows to stare down at Tate, frowning in concentration.

It was cute as hell.

Tate bent and licked a little, experimentally. Hot, salty, super soft at the head, Dave's cock was a damned delight, making Tate moan a little, making him want to taste more. He worked his lips down around the head, tongue slipping

against the slit a moment, then he licked down the underside, feeling Dave's heartbeat against him.

"Beautiful, babe. Just fucking beautiful." Dave was tense as all hell, muscles tight and trembling, and Tate appreciated the effort it took for Dave not to overwhelm him, not to fuck his mouth like there was no tomorrow.

That was what he would have wanted to do.

Closing his eyes, Tate went to town, sucking in earnest now, his lips sealed tight. He reached up to touch Dave's balls, the skin wrinkled and fuzzy, the feeling of it the most ridiculous thing in a man's body. Tate thought balls were hilarious, but Dave's were sensitive enough that he wasn't laughing.

No, sir. Not one bit.

Testing them with the palm of his hand, Tate rolled those heavy balls, the sac moving gently under his touch. He slid his fingers back a tiny bit more, finding the little strip of skin between balls and ass and pressing, and Dave liked to come up off the bed.

"Jesus, Tate! Again, right there."

He could do it again and again, if it got him that reaction. Tate pressed, rubbing his fingers in little circles, letting Dave have everything and anything. Breathing in deep through his nose, he sank down as far as he could on that solid cock, sucking like a Hoover.

Tate would be willing to bet that Dave didn't even think he could, or would, do something like that.

Dave grunted, thrusting three short, sharp times, and came right over his tongue and down his throat.

Damn. Oh, damn, there was nothing like that, was there?

Tate licked his lips and pulled off, smiling up at Dave with a swollen mouth. "You okay, honey?"

"I am so okay you have no idea." Dave flopped back on the bed, grinning like a newborn fool. "What about you?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm good." He had a warm glow in his belly and a lingering stiffness in his cock, but it wasn't nothin' urgent or needful. It just felt good.

"Are you sure?" Staring up at him, Dave reached out a hand. "I could help you out."

"You can. Just snuggle on down with me, here, and let me hold on all night. That will be my reward, huh?" That would be all he'd need to get his night right. Lord love him, Dave could wear a man out.

"Mmm. I can do that."

"You want me to go brush my teeth again?"

Looping an arm around him, Dave shook his head, pulling Tate in close. "Nah. We're good. You rock. For an old guy."

He pinched Dave's ass hard, listening to that relaxed, happy laughter and smiling. "And don't you forget it."

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Chapter Seven

Dave sat on his bunk and stared at his boots, which needed polishing in the worst way.

He had his first interview of the damned inquest today, but he knew it wouldn't be the last. Not if someone had decided to make an example of him. Damn it, all, no one would even look at him these days; none wanted to meet his eyes.

The drill never ceased to amaze him. Whoever the scapegoat was got ostracized, the guys pulling away from him for fear of getting tainted. Guilt by association. Anyone who thought the witch hunts in the Army had ended back in the sixties was just fooling himself.

Sighing, Dave reached into his kit for his polish and shit, intent on making everything sparkle and shine. Might as well go out in style.

A shadow fell over him, and Dave looked up to find Ram standing there, which seemed to be completely unrelated to his boots. A little unlikely, too, since Ram lived in married housing.

"Hey, man. What's up?" Dave asked, not knowing what else to say.

"Hey." Ram shifted from foot to foot, his desert issue boots creaking a little. "I, uh ... I just wanted to say good luck. And to tell you that I didn't have a hand in it. You know that, right?"

"Well, I hoped you weren't that much of a douche bag." He summoned up a weak smile, tilting his face up to meet Ram's

eyes. "I mean, it doesn't help that they did it because they thought that was what you wanted."

"I know. It sucks. You're not ... You're not hurt, are you?"

"Nothing as much as my pride." Maybe his feelings. Ram was supposed to be his friend, and he had to have told those guys something. "What did you tell them, anyway?"

"Huh? Oh..." Ram's cheeks went red hot. With that Nordic coloring, it was hard to hide anything. "I, uh, told them you came on to me."

"What? Jesus, Ram." He dropped his boots and stood, his chest bumping Ram's in a male dominance gesture as old as the hills. "You really are a douche bag. How could you lie like that?"

"I was mad as hell at you, man. And damn it, Royce overheard me bitching about you. On my cell. I was talking to Kayla."

Kayla was Ram's sister. He told her every damned thing that went on, which had never bothered Dave in the least. What had always bothered him was Ram's tendency to air dirty laundry in public.

People overheard all sorts of things, and took them the wrong way.

"So then Royce got his ass kicking squad on, huh? Well, thanks ever so, man."

"I'm sorry, Dave." Ram did look downright miserable, but for the first time since they'd met, sorry wasn't good enough.

"Me, too. I have to get these boots cleaned up, okay? Besides, you'd better go. Anyone sees you here will know you

were lying to Royce, huh? Not like I could make you come here against your will."

"Dave, don't." Ram held out a hand, all pale and covered with freckles, and suddenly Dave wanted Tate to be there, with a fierce, hot need that surprised him. Those dark brown hands were capable and arousing and all the things Ram's hands weren't right now.

"Sorry, man. I have to. You really screwed me."

"Yeah. Look, if I can do anything."

"I'll call." Or not, because, you know, Ram could offer to go talk to the inquest board and tell them they had it all wrong, that there was just a mistake at work here.

"Okay. Okay. Sorry, man." Ram slipped out, not once looking back, and Dave figured he'd just lost his best friend on post. Strangely enough, it didn't matter to him near as much as it once had.

The whole Army gig was starting to lose its luster.

* * * *

The damned horses were full of piss and vinegar this morning, and Tate figured someone was going to get killed. It might be him. He'd dodged two bites and one kick, and he was limping when he made his way back to the house, Skamp having stepped on his foot hard enough to make him bellar.

Christ, some days he wondered why he bothered.

Then he would look up at the Organ mountains and watch the sun break over them, and damn ... Tate would remember why he loved New Mexico, loved the land.

The phone started ringing just when he got in the back door, and Tate grabbed it on the way to the freezer, hauling out a bag of frozen peas.

"Hello?"

"Hey, babe."

Dave's voice sounded flat and unhappy, and Tate swallowed back his immediate growl about how Army life must not suit him. It wouldn't serve anything but his need to protect Dave, anyway.

"Hey, honey. How's it going?"

"Okay, I guess. Had that first interview this morning at oh-nine-hundred."

Tate checked his watch. Nine forty five. "That was fast, huh?"

"Yeah. It was just a preliminary fact-finding thing."

"Oh." Huh. That sounded kind of ominous. "Well, are you still on leave? We could go somewhere."

"Yeah?" Sounding distantly curious now, Dave cleared his throat. "Where?"

"I could meet you at the base and we could go on up to the monument, maybe the space center in Alamogordo." He wasn't sure Dave had ever been to White Sands National Monument, despite being stationed a half hour away.

"That sounds cool. You could meet me at the gate?"

"You bet." There was a little park and ride area out there, with a picnic table and coyotes who came begging for food. Tate knew it well, having stopped there more than once to nap on his way back from Alamogordo or Tularosa, when the beer caught up with him.

"Okay. I'll get a ride out there and see you in..."

"How about a half hour?" It took twenty to drive over the pass to the gate, and he'd need ten to get his boots off and get cleaned up.

"I'll give you forty. That way I can change into civvies."

"Sounds like a plan. Have you eaten?" He could bring some trail mix and shit until they hit town. There was nothing to eat out at White Sands.

"No. I missed mess this morning."

"Then I'll bring some shit. We can have a little picnic on the dunes, huh?" That should cheer Dave right up. The man loved being outdoors as much as he did.

"You rock. See you soon, babe."

"You know it." Tate hung up, knowing he had a ton of shit to do, knowing he didn't care. He eased off his boot and iced his foot up, that extra ten minutes giving him plenty of time to sit a moment and call Darla.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sis. Just gonna let you know I won't be here when you come to work with that barrel horse today. Going up to the Sands."

"Ah. Got a date with Dave?" He could hear the faintest tone of disapproval. Not that Darla disliked Dave. She just hated that he was seeing an Army guy.

"I do. Look, if you could do the afternoon feed, I'll owe you one, huh?"

"Dinner at the Casa Luna?" Darla loved that silly little Italian place. It had been a Las Cruces institution since the

sixties or something. It wouldn't be a hardship; they had great red sauce.

"Sure. See you tomorrow. Okay?"

"Have fun."

They hung up, and Tate went to find a pair of old flip flops, knowing they'd hurt less than his boots. His toes weren't hurt, just his arch, damn it.

Half hour later he was pulling up at the gate of the base, turning his truck off at the picnic table rather than pulling up to talk to the little baby in camouflage who was working guard duty. Lord, they grew them younger every year.

The gate opened, and Dave came jogging out, wearing jeans and a long-sleeved tee, sunglasses firmly in place. One hand lifted, Dave waving, grinning a little when he got close.

"Hey, Mister. Give me a ride?"

"That's the idea, honey. Hop on in."

Dave slid into the passenger seat, leaning his head back against the headrest. "So, how's it going?"

Tate had the sudden urge to take a kiss hello, but the whole don't ask, don't tell thing loomed high in his mind, so he didn't. They needed to get off base first, maybe. The whole desert area outside the gate from Alamogordo to Organ belonged to the Army.

The kissing thing would just have to wait until they got to their picnic. "Not bad. You hungry? I got some coffee in the Thermos, and a trail mix bar Darla made. Ought to tide you over until we get set somewhere."

"That would rock." Dave grabbed the Thermos, and the scent of Folgers filled the cab of the truck, acrid and hot.

"So, what are you looking at, honey? Twenty to life? Dishonorable discharge? Death before dishonor?"

"Wow, have you been watching movies, or something?" Dave glanced over at him, eyes like slices of emerald. "They told me I did the right thing about disobeying the order, actually. What they were concerned about was the use of unnecessary force. In other words, what did I do to get my ass kicked?"

"Well, shit." That didn't seem fair, somehow, since Dave was the kickee, not the kicker. "What did you tell them?"

"I told them there was a misunderstanding between a friend and me, and that his friends took it the wrong way." Sighing, Dave tucked into the trail mix bar after unwrapping the mummy-like plastic wrap.

"Oh." That seemed ... way more fair than Tate would have been.

"Yeah." He got another one of those sideways looks. "Ram came to see me this morning."

Tate's hands clenched on the steering wheel. "Did you kick his ass?"

"No, but it was a near thing. We were in the barracks, you know?"

"Uh-huh." Maybe it was time Tate called in some favors with his old cowboy buddies, figured out where Ram went when he wasn't on base. Payback was a bitch.

"Anyway, it's good to see you, babe." Dave's hand landed on his leg, fingers stroking over the denim of his jeans.

Hello and howdy. Tate wasn't one for grand declarations of passion, but Dave could make him go from zero to sixty these

days with no warning. His cock was all happy to see someone, that was for sure.

He reached down briefly to touch Dave's hand. "Good to see you, too, honey. You know I'd rather spend the day with you than mucking stalls."

"Hey, you know I'll help you muck tonight."

"Tomorrow. Darla is doing the late feeding today." Maybe they could get them a hotel in Alamogordo tonight, just be close and all. Maybe they could even stop and get some lube and some condoms at the store.

"Yeah? Well, cool. You know I'll help out however I can." Dave patted his leg, almost absently he thought, but it still made him want to whimper, it felt so damned good.

Time they got to the visitor center at White Sands, Tate thought he might embarrass himself with the swelling at the front of his jeans, and damned if Dave didn't seem completely unaware. That kinda made him feel like a perv.

So he just thumped himself and got out of the truck, sighing a little when his cock subsided.

"You didn't have to do that, babe. I was enjoying the show."

Tate gave Dave a sideways look over the hood of the truck. "Shoulda said that before I gave myself a whack, honey. We could have pulled around back."

"We can wait for the picnic. You have to drive into the park, yeah?"

"We do." That could be a thing. A good thing. Something to look forward to.

"Cool. We'll do it then. Come on, babe. Let's go pay our entry fee and look at the cheesy tourist crap."

There was a marked lack of cheesy tourist stuff. Oh, there was a little shelf with Black Hills gold and scorpion paperweights, but there was also maps and some antique wagons and shit that Tate wished he had for his house.

"You think they'd notice if we hauled this out to the truck?" he asked, hoping for at least an appalled look.

All he got was a grin. "I'll hold the door, if you run fast."

The cute little gal who sat behind the desk and wore a "volunteer" name tag gave them an impartial glare. "No taking the wagon, cowboy."

"No? Damn. It would go with all the shit in my living room."

"It so would," Dave agreed, winking at the girl. "He has all these antlers."

"Dude, so does my papa, huh? Must be an old man thing."

If he hadn't been deflated already, it sure would have taken the wind out of his sails to hear that. Lord, he'd bet the girl thought he was Dave's daddy.

Tate turned on his heel and left. They had their ticket to put in the car window already, and he needed a smoke before they drove on in to the park. Flip flops kicking up the pea gravel, Tate wandered out to the edge of the parking lot and pulled out his smokes, lighting one up and blowing out through his nose.

"Tate! Are you all right, man? She didn't mean anything by it, you know?" Dave came trotting across the lot, looking for all the world like an anxious Labrador retriever.

"Sure." He turned his back and took another drag. "I guess she coulda thought I was your uncle, huh? Your daddy's younger brother?"

"Come on, babe. People say dumb things. Doesn't mean we have to take them to heart, huh?" Dave's hand landed on his shoulder, thumb rubbing in circles. "Don't let her ruin your day. I want to have a good time."

Sighing, he tossed the butt down and stubbed it out, nodding. "Yeah. I know; just took me off guard, is all. Lord knows it's the truth. I am old."

"Stop it. We've talked about this before." One big hand landed on his ass, popping his butt with an audible swat, and Tate jumped about a mile.

"Christ, honey. What did you do that for?"

"I had a drill instructor who used to whack us all the time. Told us it snapped us out of negative thinking by giving us something else to worry about."

"Well, I ain't got a lot of padding back there, so watch it." Damn. Tate rubbed his sore ass, thinking that if he bruised up, he'd have to make Dave kiss it all better for him, which actually did have the effect of cheering him right up.

Huh. Go figure.

Grinning a little, Tate checked the sky. Still clear and blue, the breeze nice and cool. Screw it. Might as well have a good day to spite everything. "Come on, honey. Let's go have some fun, huh?"

Dave grinned back, massaging his sore butt a moment before heading to the truck. "You know it, babe."

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Chapter Eight

Dave decided about noon that picnics on the dunes were the way to go.

Oh, the gritty white gypsum got into everything from his shoes to his pants legs, but that really didn't matter. What mattered was how Tate's eye lines creased up when the man smiled, how that hot dimple appeared when Tate laughed. Heck, he about had a stroke when Tate threw his head back and laughed.

It got warm out there fast, even with the cool breeze, but if you dug a few inches deep in the sand it cooled off enough for bare feet, and the air conditioner was working well enough in the truck for the rest of the time they spent wandering and admiring.

"How's your butt?" he asked, giving Tate a look out of the corner of his eye while he finished off his cherry fried pie. Heart attack in a paper wrapper, man, but so good.

"Sore." Tate tried for pitiful, but fell a little short. Maybe somewhere around hang dog, but Dave wasn't going to tell him that.

"Well, I'll give you a massage later."

"Yeah?" One blond eyebrow went up. "I was thinking of making you kiss it."

His whole body tightened fast, and Dave stared at Tate, his mouth hanging open a little. Fuck, that had possibilities.

"Sure. Okay, babe. I can do that. I mean, I can kiss you all over."

Those blue eyes burned right into his, brighter than the New Mexico sky above. "You can. Anytime. Though I probably ought to bathe first, huh?"

"If I'm going anywhere near your feet, then yeah." They both crumpled up their wrappers, and Dave took them to the trash can, stretching good and hard as muscles protested sitting on the ground. They'd opted for an old blanket out of the back of the truck rather than sitting at any of the rickety tables.

"Not sure how I'd feel about you kissing my feet." Tate got up, too, long body moving, arms going up over that blond head.

Dave couldn't resist going over and tickling Tate's ribs a little, earning a yelp. His hands stayed on Tate's hips after, and he just pulled the man close, bending to take the kiss he'd wanted all morning.

"Mmm." Tate wrapped both arms around him, keeping him in place. "That's better, huh?"

"You know it." Dave kissed that mouth again, letting his tongue trail along Tate's mouth, tracing the seam of Tate's lips, asking to be let in.

Opening right up, Tate tilted his head back, hips coming forward to rub against Dave's, and suddenly he was all ramped up, ready to just throw Tate down and do the nasty. Only the thought of how much that would chafe kept him from having at it.

"We could go sit in the truck a minute," Tate suggested, pretty much reading his mind. "Take the rough edge off."

"We could."

Moving in perfect unison, they gathered up their shit and put it in the back of the truck, rinsing the sand off their hands with water from Tate's water bottle. Then they hopped up in the truck, and Tate turned the key so they could get some air.

One hand braced on the wheel, Tate turned to stare at him, the corners of the man's mouth turning up. "Might be a little more awkward this way."

"Less grit, though, huh?" He pushed one hand behind Tate's head, pulling the man over for a kiss, putting everything he had into it.

Tate hummed for him, opening up and letting him in, reaching for him and holding on. Dave hadn't even known he was needing like this until now, hadn't realized he was in such a bad way for Tate until the kiss went deep and toothy and desperate.

The man was so not old, it wasn't funny.

They kissed until Dave saw stars, and he wasn't the only one gasping for breath when they pulled apart. Tate's mouth looked bruised and swollen, and Dave had a sudden, hard-seated urge to see it wrapped around his cock, moving up and down while he humped.

"Don't think I don't see you looking at me like that, honey. I know what you want."

"Yeah? What's that?" His thumb slid over Tate's lips, his fingers stroking one lean cheek.

"My mouth. Not sure I can get around the wheel and shit to give it to you, though."

"I can handle your hand if you kiss me like that again."
Those kisses made up for a lot. A lot.

"Then get your ass closer."

Dave scooted over as far as he could, his hand dropping to Tate's fly even as the man freed him from his, pulling out his cock and stroking nice and hard. He got more of those addictive kisses, too, Tate taking his mouth, tongue pushing in and out just like they were fucking.

Goddamn, a man could get used to that, could get to where he wanted it every day. Dave moaned, pushing up into Tate's touch, the rough rasp of calluses making his toes curl. Yeah. More. Please.

He got his hand down Tate's pants, too, and started pulling. He wanted Tate to be right there with him, balls tight, cock ready to explode. God knew that was how he felt. The sun beat down on the cab of the truck, making him sweat, but the air conditioner blew just right to make it evaporate, and that tiny touch of cold made his nipples draw up hard, adding more sensation to the mix.

"Oh. Fuck, honey. That feels good." Tate pushed into his hand, too, and soon they were rocking together, grunting and groaning. They were steaming things right up, both of them panting with it, their mouths meeting again and again.

Tate thumbed the tip of his cock, pressing against his slit, and Dave all but shouted, his back arching, his balls drawing up even harder against his body. He was gonna blow, soon, which seemed ridiculous this fast. Was still gonna happen, though.

They kissed one last time, Tate's teeth sinking into Dave's lower lip, and that was all it took. All she wrote. Boom. Dave came so hard his teeth rattled, shooting all over Tate's hand and wrist.

"Dave! Oh, God." Tate's hips punched up as much as they could, smacking Dave's wrist against the gear shift. "More. I just need a little more."

"I got you, babe. I so do." He did, too, even if he wanted to collapse more than anything right then. His hand moved, almost blurry fast, up and down. "Come on, babe. I need you to come for me."

"Uhn." Tate made this amazing noise, grunting and shooting for him, hot and wet and good. The smell of come filled the cab of the truck, their scents mingling, and it made Dave's cock throb one more time.

He let go and leaned back against the headrest, leaning at a damned awkward angle. Not that he gave a damn, really. He felt too good to care.

Chuckling, Tate let him go, hand sliding away with a gentle pat. "Better, honey?"

"Hell, yes. Still feel old after necking in the truck?" he asked, feeling ten feet tall and bulletproof after making Tate come.

"We did a hell of a lot more than just neck." Tate laughed, the sound deep and rich and not a bit bitter. "Made me feel like a spring chicken. Makes me want to go to Alamogordo and get a room. Screw the museums."

Blood rushed north and south, heating his cheeks and his balls. Dave stared. "Are you sure? We could stop and get the stuff..."

"We could. We'll have to get some real food, first." Tate winked. "Keep my strength up."

"I'll even buy you a sit down meal," Dave agreed, doing up his jeans. "What are we waiting for?"

"For me to find my handkerchief," Tate said, rummaging. "I'm not gonna walk around all wet."

"Oh." That made sense, he guessed. Too bad he hadn't thought of it before he put himself away.

Sometimes age and experience really did win out over youth and enthusiasm.

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Chapter Nine

Tate wheeled his defective damned cart around the aisle at the feed store, trying not to mow down the hot little momma in her pink ropers and her Rocky Mountain jeans. She had three little tow-headed babies, all like little stair-steps in a row.

Cute, cute, cute.

"Tate! Hey, buddy. How's it going?"

The voice was familiar, but just barely. The face, when Tate turned to see who had hailed him, hadn't changed a bit.

"Herschel! Lord love a duck, son! How are you?" Tate held out a hand, letting Herschel's palm smack against his in a hard handshake before pulling the guy in for a man-hug.

He hadn't seen Herschel in a month of Sundays. The man was a few years younger than him, and had been a rodeo hound for an age, traveling all over the country with those itchy feet of his.

The man smelled like Old Spice and caliche dust. It brought back a ton of memories best left back in his twenties, when he'd had the energy for a rodeo man.

Herschel pulled back to grin at him. "I'm good, man. How are you?"

"Good. Real good." What could he say? Life was looking up these days. "How long are you in town?"

"Oh, I'm here for a good few weeks. Sissy broke her ankle in a gopher hole. Needs some help around the place."

"Shit. I didn't know..." Not that he would know, really. He'd lost touch with Herschel's sister Frannie about three years ago.

"No reason you should. Look, I got to take a load of feed out to the ranch, but I'd love to meet you for a beer later."

"That would be grand." He didn't have any plans tonight, as Dave was going to stay on base or some shit, and it would be a hell of a lot better than staring at the antlers on the wall.

"Then give me your number so I can call you." Herschel grabbed a pen off the little boy behind the counter and waited for Tate to rattle off his cell phone number. Then Herschel clapped him on the shoulder. "Cool. I'll call when I'm done offloading. I can buy you Mexican food, too."

"Sounds good, man."

They went their separate ways, Tate with a smile on his face. He did love a good Mexican restaurant, and a good beer. He liked Hersch, too. It had been a long time.

By the time he got home and did the feeding and picked up the fence rails that had fallen off of Darla's barrel racing pen, Tate had almost forgotten Herschel. His phone rang, and it made him jump. When he flipped it open, he automatically looked for Dave's number, and he was stumped a minute when it wasn't listed.

Oh, yeah.

"Hello?"

"Tate? Hey, man. Where are you taking me?"

Tate grinned, the cheerful sound of Herschel's voice making him happy. Hersch's sister lived way up in Dona Ana,

so Tate figured it was best if they met in downtown Las Cruces. "How about Esparza's? You remember where that is?"

"Just off the downtown mall, yeah?"

"You know it. I'll see you there in half an hour?"

"Sure thing."

Sometimes simple was good.

Tate met up with Herschel at the little Mexican café, shaking hands with the man again over the top of chips and salsa.

"So what all have you been up to?" he asked, dipping a chip in and pondering whether he wanted the green chile burrito or the gordita plate.

"Been doing some announcing. Mostly in West Texas, but I been doing some on the Turquoise Circuit, too."

The Turquoise Circuit hit New Mexico and Arizona, which he could so see. Herschel was a West Texas boy by birth, but he was a red rock man by choice, always had been. Some folks were just meant for the desert.

"Not riding?"

"Shit." Herschel's gray eyes danced for him, full of the devil, lines crinkling up around them. "I'm getting' old for the game, Tate. I busted up my ankle real good about a year and a half ago." Laughing, Herschel leaned back in his chair, lean belly flat as a board. "Like Sissy, I guess. We're a pair, me and her."

"How's she doing?" Hersch's sister had always disapproved of what two cowboys got up to when no one was looking, kind of like his own Darla, but she'd never been evil to him or nothin'. She was just what she was: a tough old desert bird.

"Right as she can be, I guess. How's Darla?"

They sat and caught up over enchiladas and burritos, and they had just ordered sopapillas, laughing over the story of an old roping buddy of theirs and a great big horny toad, when Tate heard, "Dude, Ram, get out of the way. I need a menu."

His back went right up, and Tate stiffened, even while he told himself that there had to be more than one Ram in the world. It was downright silly to think that Dave's old buddy would show up at the same place he would, now wasn't it? Still, Tate turned his head slowly, looking to see if the Ram in question was a Teutonic blond.

Damn.

He hated being right. Or whatever. Tate turned back to Hersch, his mouth set in a grim line.

"What's up, man?" Herschel was nothing if not perceptive when it came to reading him.

"Oh, just don't like that blowhard, is all. He's one of them Army guys who can't do right by people."

"Which one? The blond?"

"Yeah. No worries."

"Okay. So, uh ... He an ex?"

"Huh?" His eyes snapped up to meet Herschel's. "No. No way. I mean, I'm seeing an Army feller, but not that one. Never have."

"Well, then." Those eyes took on a knowing look. "He making trouble for your feller?"

"Some, yeah." Thank God Hersch understood. Tate had been half afraid that supper and a beer was going to lead to

the man making a pass at him, and they'd worked through that years ago.

"Want me to kick his ass?"

Tate thought about that. Good and hard. Grinned. "Nah. I'm trying to rise above, you know?"

"You're a better man than I am." Hersch stared at him a moment. "So, tell me about this new guy."

What was there to tell? Tate shrugged. "His name is Dave. Saved me from making a drunk fool of myself a while back. He's over to White Sands."

"Sounds non-committal."

He grinned a little, fighting the urge to snarl. "Oh, I got it bad. I just know better. Ain't no more sense in getting attached to a military man than there is a rodeo one."

"Ouch." Herschel winked, though, pouring honey on his fried bread. "But I guess that's true enough. Well, good luck to you, buddy."

"Thanks, man. What about you?" He was determined to ignore the damned raucous crowd of guys up at the door, who couldn't seem to decide whether to sit down and eat or stand up and be assholes.

"Oh, I been with a few here and there. Never have found someone to tie me down."

"Well, good luck on that, too."

"Thanks."

They both wiped down from the sopapillas, quiet now, the steam sort of gone from their reunion. Tate finally pulled a couple of twenties out of his wallet. "Well, son, I ought to head home. You good to drive?"

He knew Hersch would be fine. They'd only had one beer a piece.

"I'm good. Look, Tate, I'm glad as hell you have something good, okay? I'd like to meet him, even."

"Yeah?" Well, damn. That might be fun, and it warmed him right up again. "Sure, okay. You got my number. Let me get yours and I'll give you a call, huh?"

"Sure." Herschel scribbled his number on a napkin, handing it over, the spidery scrawl making Tate grin.

Which was when it all went to hell, naturally.

"What's the matter, cowboy? Dave not enough for you? Gotta play the field a little?"

Tate looked over his shoulder at Ram, who was suddenly alone and standing maybe two feet away. Way too close to be sitting on his pockets, waiting for the big gorilla to make the first move. Unfolding, he stood and stuck his thumbs in his pockets, knowing it made him look deceptively casual.

"Not that it's any business of yours, son, but Herschel is an old friend. You know, friend. The kind of guy who'd have your back, instead of stabbing you in it."

"Oh, that's real clever, asshole."

"My name is Tate, son. Not cowboy or asshole." He stepped forward just enough to let his chest bump against Ram's. "You want to take this outside?"

"I do, actually."

"Maybe not such a good idea, buddy," Herschel drawled, standing and coming to stand shoulder to shoulder with him. "He won't be a match for you."

"Nope. But I bet his buddies are waiting out back. They the same ones that beat up Dave, Ram?"

Ram's cheeks went pink, and those well-shaped lips flattened out. "You got no idea what you're talking about. Army people take care of their own."

"Uh-huh. I've seen your idea of tender loving care. Come on, boy. Let's take this outside and settle it, huh?"

Herschel's hand pressed against the small of his back when he walked out behind Ram, letting him know his friend was there, ready to help out if he needed it. That meant a lot, especially when Tate knew there were three assholes waiting outside, wanting to clean his clock.

They got out around the back of the restaurant, and suddenly all of the cooks who had been hanging outside, smoking, were gone, disappearing like smoke.

No one wanted to be a witness, but that was okay. That suited him to the bone. Tate squared off against Ram, letting Hersch worry about any friends that might be hanging around.

"You really want to do this, son?" Tate asked, giving Ram one more chance to back down.

"I do." Ram nodded, face set, fists clenched. "Dave deserves to know you're cheating on him."

"I. Am. Not." That was that. Tate took the first swing, not giving a shit if that made him the aggressor or not. His fist connected with Ram's chin, right on the little cleft in the middle. The sound of his skin and bone smacking against Ram's was huge, echoing around them.

Ram grunted, staggering back half of a foot before coming at him, swinging like a rusty gate. Tate ducked the first blow, took a glancing hit on the shoulder with the second one, but the third one connected hard with his ribs.

Goddamn, that man packed a punch. That big hand was like a sack of quarters.

Tate decided to cowboy up and take it, though, going for Ram's ribs and belly, landing sharp little jabs before dancing away. If he could just keep those huge hands from connecting, he could hold his own.

"Oh, I don't think so," Herschel said behind him, and the sound of a scuffle came loud and clear, but Tate didn't let it distract him.

Ram did, and Tate took advantage of it right off, whacking the man over his right eye. It maddened the victim, making Ram roar and swing wildly at him.

He could hear Herschel laughing, could hear flesh smacking flesh dully, and knew that his old buddy was doing all right. Tate concentrated on his own damned fight, with Ram connecting twice more, splitting his lip and leaving his ear ringing.

They never did find out who would have won, because the sound of sirens sent the Army boys scrambling, and Tate grabbed Herschel's arm, dragging him to the parking lot out front.

"You okay, buddy? You need a ride?"

Herschel grinned wildly, his lips all lopsided and one eye going black. "Nah. I'm good. Call me tomorrow. You owe me another beer."

"You know it."

They high-tailed it out of there, tires squealing getting away just in time to avoid the cops. Damn.

He should have known hooking up with Herschel would lead to fighting. It was just like old times.

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Chapter Ten

Dave parked his truck in Tate's drive, out behind the kitchen, and damned if a mangy looking dog didn't come slinking out, barking at him a few times before running off.

Huh.

He climbed out, feeling stiff and sore after sitting in front of a committee for three hours. Damn, damn. His shoulders were like frozen rope.

All of that talking head action, and they still hadn't solved anything.

Oh, sure, he was off the hook, had been for weeks. They were still trying to decide what to do to discipline everyone, though, and what to do about why he'd gotten his ass kicked in the first place, even though they never came out and said any of that between the governmentese and the legalese.

Rolling his head on his neck, Dave got out and went to knock on the door. He had a key now, but since he hadn't called first, well. The door might just be open, anyway, and then it didn't matter if you had a key, it was okay to knock and come on in.

He tested the knob and headed inside, calling out. "Tate? Babe? You in here?"

There was no answer, save the dog barking again, once, the sound sharp and kind of hilarious. Scared dog takes a stand.

He hit the front room, then the hall, and he heard the shower running. Well, no wonder Tate hadn't heard him.

Dave stripped down, grinning a little about how he had to knock to get in the door, but he could just take off his clothes and leave them on the floor. He wandered into the bathroom, loving how the steam billowed around him, and he rapped on the shower door, listening to Tate curse.

"Jesus, Darla. Can't you..." Tate poked his wet head out of the shower and blinked. "Dave. Hey, honey. Much better than Darla."

"Can I come in?"

"You bet. Come on." Tate moved back, giving him room to kind of skate across the slick tile and get under the water, his hands falling on Tate's shoulders.

"Oh, damn. Better. You look..." Frowning, he reached up to trace Tate's lips, then his chin. "All bruised. What's up?"

"Nothing. I mean, it was just a little bit of feeling my oats." Those blue eyes wouldn't meet his, though, and Tate started hunting the soap, real intently.

"Uh-huh. What happened?" He was ready to go kick some ass, but only if Tate hadn't earned the whooping.

"Ram started it, honey."

"Ram?" Dave actually took a step back, staring at Tate through the falling drops of water. "What the hell?"

Shrugging, Tate blew out a gusty sigh and started rinsing off. "Saw him at a restaurant. Was out with an old rodeo buddy of mine and he accused me of cheating on you. Me. Can you believe it? So I took him outside and kicked his ass."

Dave stared for another minute, at least, the time ticking away with every pulse of the shower head. Then he started chuckling, tickled as all hell. "You beat up on Ram."

"I did. He called me out, honey." Tate touched him the, fingers sliding along his chest, tracing the patterns his bruises had made all those weeks back. Tate never seemed to forget anything. The man was focused.

"So, who were you cheating on me with?"

Laughing, Tate pinched his nipple. Hard. "I told you. An old rodeo buddy of mine. He wants to meet you."

"No shit? Well, I'd be happy to if it won't be weird."

"Shouldn't be. Hersch is a good guy."

"Cool." Okay, he was in the shower with a wet, naked Tate and they were talking about Ram and some ex of Tate's.

That just seemed wrong.

"We can talk about it later, huh?" Dave put his hands on Tate's waist and pulled the man close, slow, so as not to slip and slide on the shower floor. Goddamn, the man felt good against him, all lean angles and hot skin, just slippery enough to make it fun.

They rocked together once skin slapped skin, Tate's cock rising against his belly, hard and hot and right. The worries of the day just washed right away under the stream of hot water and soap, Tate's touch easing him like nothing else.

Sometimes that seemed really weird, because Tate really wasn't an easy man.

"Feels good, honey. Glad you stopped by."

"Me, too." He washed Tate's back, trying to avoid the places that made Tate hiss a little, finally settling on grabbing that tiny little cowboy ass and pulling Tate even closer. Like he was trying to crawl into that tanned leather skin.

"Kiss me some more, Dave," Tate said, grinning up at him and breaking his train of thought, which was getting pretty distracted.

"You got it." Angling his head, Dave took another kiss, then another, the tiny sting of soap making him wrinkle his nose.

Tate held on, hands on the back of his head, pushing against him in a slow roll. Tongue pushing into Dave's mouth, Tate took control of the kiss for a moment, tasting him thoroughly.

So hot. So good. Dave took back the control a moment later, pressing against Tate hard, his cock rising between their bellies. Tate slid a little, grabbing his upper arms and grunting.

"We could go get horizontal, honey. I don't want to fall down."

"Sounds like a plan."

They rinsed off fast, drying off with Tate's almost-threadbare towels, and Dave made a mental note to buy new ones the next time he went to the Wal-Mart. PX towels just didn't seem right.

Tate's bed was as inviting as ever, and Dave sank down on it, letting Tate be on top. He wanted to do all sorts of bad things to the man. It always surprised him, because it seemed like such a slow burn and then, all of a sudden, it was hot and needy and now.

Tate straddled his hips, grinning down at him, hands on his chest. "What are you wanting, honey? I'm not sure I'm up to gymnastics."

"Have I ever asked you to be a gymnast?" He let his hands slide down Tate's back, the fingers of his right hand lingering at Tate's hole.

"Nope. Just letting you know I'm a little sore."

Hmm. "Get the lube, will you?"

Tate raised a brow, but dutifully got the lube and rubbers, handing them over to him. Dave set them aside and turned Tate on his side, letting the man slide down until they were spooning.

"This okay?" he asked, pushing Tate's top leg forward so he'd have access.

"Yeah. Better."

It worked for Dave, too, because he could rub his cock against Tate's balls while he got his fingers wet, could love on the man front and back with ease. The only problem came when he had to slip the condom on, because he had to shift back to give them enough room.

He had two fingers buried in Tate's ass, pegging that sweet spot that he'd found in the hotel in Alamogordo, and Tate was grunting, wiggling like the man was ready for plenty of acrobatics, and Dave couldn't wait anymore.

Working his fingers free, Dave squirted out a little more lube, rubbing it over the condom before muscling up behind Tate, rubbing along the hot crease and pushing his cock against Tate's wet hole.

"Now, babe?"

"Uh-huh." Pushing back, Tate took in the first few inches, and Dave moaned, letting his head fall forward onto Tate's shoulder.

Felt good. Too damned good. He had to have more, so he shoved his cock in the rest of the way, making both of them grunt and groan, making Tate shudder from the impact.

They moved faster, his hand coming around to rest on Tate's belly, just above the straining cock. Jesus, he loved the slide of flesh, loved the heat and friction they generated. Even more, he loved the specific sounds Tate made, the little guttural groans and gasps, and the way Tate's brown fingers moved on top of his, shoving his hand down to cover Tate's straining cock.

"Uhn. Oh, shit, Dave. That's. God Almighty. More."

"More of what, babe?" He smiled against the nape of Tate's neck, pushing his hips hard enough that they smacked Tate's ass, working his hand up and down in front.

"Everything. That. Yeah."

He gave more, gave as much as he could in the position they were in, which was really better suited to slow, lazy fucking. Still, it worked for him, made him pant and writhe. He was sweating now, and he laughed a little, thinking they'd have to take another shower after it was all over.

"Come on, honey. Faster." Tate was a demanding fuck sometimes.

"I can't really go much faster, babe. Sorry." He tried. He really did. It helped a whole hell of a lot when Tate squeezed down with his thighs, clenching his ass.

That made things speed up good and hard.

Dave pulled at Tate's cock, pushing down briefly to cup those fuzzy balls, and Tate cried out, coming hard against his wrist, just moaning and shaking with it.

That was all it took for him, too, and Dave came, the feeling pulling up deep from his belly, almost painful. It ran up and down his spine like lightning, and the last drops of his orgasm made him feel a little scoured, like he'd used up his entire quota of energy for the damned evening.

He kissed the back of Tate's neck, licking at the sweat.
"Better?"

"Yeah. Not gymnastics at all." Tate laughed belly bouncing under his hand.

"You sorry you beat up Ram?"

"Hell, no."

"Well, truth be told, neither am I."

Tate nodded, snuggling back against him. "I didn't figure you would, way things are going lately."

"Yeah."

"Rest a bit, Dave. Then we'll have some hamburgers, okay?" Tate patted his hand, almost gentle, almost sweet.

"I can do that." He let his eyes droop closed, let his head rest on Tate's shoulder. He could lay it all down for a while.

Tate was a pretty damned good defender, after all.

* * * *

Tate woke up feeling groggy and sticky, his hand cramped up in the weirdest position.

What the hell had he...?

A soft snore hit the back of his neck, and Tate made a little 'ah' noise. Dave. Bless his heart, the man had looked tired as all hell when he showed up in Tate's shower.

Damn the Army, anyway, this whole thing was wearing on Dave like a bad shirt.

His stomach growled, reminding him that he'd meant to have another shower and a hamburger.

Sighing, he slid out from under Dave's arm, wincing when his bruises protested and his back popped. A man his age should never pick a fight with a knuckle-dragger half his age. The soft flannel sleep pants felt good when he pulled them on, and Tate headed for the kitchen, letting Dave sleep a bit.

The hamburger sat in the sink, and he pulled it out, glad that he'd bought an extra half pound to make for later. This way he had enough for Dave, too.

Speak of the devil, the man walked in a few seconds later, rubbing the back of his neck, jeans hanging low on his hips. "Hey, you. What can I do?"

"How about making up the garden, huh? Onion's by the sink; the rest is in the fridge."

"Sure." Dave got a cutting board out, found his good knife. The acrid scent of chopped onion filled the air moments later.

He started the burgers in his little grill pan, which had been a gift from Dave after the man had seen him fire up the charcoal grill about the third time, just to cook a hot dog.

"Smells good," Dave said, chopping madly.

"It does." He salted and peppered the meat, watching Dave out of the corner of his eye. "Bad day, huh?"

"Another round of meetings. They keep saying the same shit, Tate. It's like they don't want me to go back to work."

"Well, maybe they don't. I mean, it wasn't like they were just messing with you, honey. They were trying to get you to

let them do something illegal, even when they were wailing on you."

Dave gave him a look. "You're saying there's more to it than a witch hunt? More than me being gay?"

"I'm saying maybe it was awfully convenient, Ram deciding he was all over you when he did."

"Huh."

He could see Dave turning that one over and over in his mind. "Maybe. You want ketchup and mustard?"

"Just mayo. Want some pickles, though."

"Kay."

They made the food up and sat down to eat with some iced tea and chips, and Dave was awful damned quiet for a good long while.

"You think they're going to make me a scapegoat for something?" Dave finally asked.

"Maybe. Maybe they just want to get you out of the way, now that they know you won't play. You want my advice, you just lay low, let them figure out what they're gonna do."

"I'm not sure that's me, Tate." He got a grin, Dave's green eyes sparkling a little, life coming back into them.

"Well, then maybe joining the Army was a bad decision for you, honey," Tate said, only half teasing.

"Maybe. I mean, I always thought I was good at following orders." Dave gave him a sideways grin. "You must bring out the cowboy in me."

"Yee haw." Licking mayo off his lip, Tate patted his belly. "That hit the spot. You want to watch a movie?"

"Okay. You need any help with the feeding?"

"Nope. I did that before."

"Oh, cool. Hey, did you know you have a dog?"

Oh, Lord. Tate nodded. "He's a stray. I been luring him down to the house with food."

"Cowboys need dogs." Dave winked, washing up the few dishes, leaving the grill pan to soak. It was all so domestic that Tate grimaced a little.

"I like him all right. Come on, honey. Let's go watch a shoot 'em up."

"Hell, I'm in a good enough mood tonight that I might watch Lonesome Dove with you," Dave said, patting his ass.

Tate actually stopped and stared, his mouth falling open a little. Shit, Dave hated that movie.

It had to be love. It really did.

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Chapter Eleven

A week passed before Dave could get a hold of Ram.

Every time he called, whether at work or at home, someone ran interference. Shit, he couldn't even blame the man for not wanting to see him, but they had to talk. Dave needed to know what was going on with the job, not just the personal shit, and see if Ram would tell him what all this crap was about.

Maybe Tate was right. Maybe it wasn't about him being gay at all. That might just be his own issue entirely.

He finally ran Ram down at the bowling alley, where the man was eating one of the post's infamous chili dogs, sharing a beer with the very men who had beaten Dave up.

Ignoring the rumblings, Dave strode right up to Ram, planting his feet, hands on his hips. "We need to talk."

"We do?" Ram raised an eyebrow, fingers twirling his beer bottle.

"We do. Come on." Dave jerked his head toward the back room before walking off, knowing Ram would follow. Sometimes he was just good at giving orders.

They stood toe to toe when he turned, meeting those angry eyes head on.

"Your boyfriend is an ass, Davey," Ram finally said, sneering a little.

"From what I hear, you started it. That's not what I want to talk about."

"No? What do you want, man?" Ram's posture went super-defensive, arms crossed, shoulders hunched.

"I want to know what this is really all about. Who wants to get rid of me, Ram?"

"I don't know what you mean, Dave." Something flickered in those blue eyes, though, something guilty. Maybe even remorseful.

"Jesus. What have I ever done? Who would be out to get me?" He couldn't understand it. He'd come to White Sands on compassionate reassignment, been denied work in his MO, and now he was being drummed out?

"You're too smart for your own good, man," Ram finally murmured. "It came from on high, Dave. Someone you pissed off in another life, maybe. I just know what I was told to do."

"What did you get out of it?" His hands clenched into fists. "We were friends, man."

"I know." Sighing, Ram ran a hand over his cropped hair. "I get to keep my married housing, and they don't tell my wife about me liking dick. I'm sorry, Dave."

"Me, too." Damn it. That still left him without the answers he really wanted, and without a friend, now.

Dave turned on his heel and headed out, determined to go to the office of the head of his inquest and get those answers. Now.

* * * *

Tate was a little worried about Dave.

The man was supposed to call him, had been supposed to for three hours. They were supposed to get together with Herschel, have a few beers at Ace's Place.

After everything that had happened, he was worried as hell that Dave was lying in a ditch somewhere, slowly bleeding to death or something. He'd tried calling twice, and each time Dave's cell had gone straight to voice mail, which wasn't helping the gnawing worry in his gut.

He finally had to call Herschel at about five in the afternoon to call things off. "I don't think we're gonna make it, Hersch."

"What, did he duck out on you?"

"I think there's trouble. He hasn't called at all, and he was raised up right, man. If he was going to ditch tonight, he'd at least tell me."

"Well, shit, man. If you need me to come help..."

"I'll call. Thanks, Hersch."

"No problem, man."

He no sooner hung up with Herschel than someone knocked on the kitchen door. His heart kicked into high gear, and Tate trotted over to answer it, disappointed as hell to see Darla.

"Hey, Tate. I was just coming to use the corral. Hope that's ... What's wrong?"

"I haven't heard from Dave, is all. I was supposed to." Damn it, what was she frowning over now.

"Well, I hate to say I told you so, Tate, but he is an Army man."

His eyebrows rose a mile. "Whoa, now. I've known him how long? Nigh on six months, and this is the first time he hasn't called? I'd say the 'I told you so' shtick is uncalled for."

Darla sniffed. "Say what you want. I just worry about you. Now, I'm gonna take Sassy out."

"Wait." Tate grabbed her arm, spinning her almost into a two-step. "Will you call the base? Call his barracks? A girl calling, well, that wouldn't look so bad."

Darla stared at him a moment, lips pursed. Then she nodded. "Oh, okay. I swear, you boys." She took the number from him and hauled out her cell, which was real decent of her, as it showed on caller ID as a girl.

"Hi. I was looking for Dave Lopes. Oh. Uh-huh. No, he was supposed to call me about supper. Mmmhmm. Just tell him Darla called. Okay, thanks."

That was fast. Tate waited, rocking up on the toes of his boots.

"He's in a meeting. Has been all afternoon. Like with the bigwigs." She gave him a little, shamefaced grin. "Guess I owe you an apology, huh?"

"More like you owe him one, but it'll do." Tate sighed, making sure he had his phone in his pocket. "Come on. I'll help you out with Sassy. Give you some critique."

"Yeah?" Her eyes, just as blue as his, lit up, and she punched his arm. "I'd love that. Been awhile."

"It has." Suddenly he had a little guilt about how wrapped up he'd been in his own shit, before and after Dave. Looked like it was time to make that up a little. After he helped Darla

out, he'd call Hersh and tell the man to meet him for that beer, anyway.

"Come on, baby girl. Let's ride."

Tate was still worried about Dave. Would be until he heard news. He had to remember that life went on, though, even if Dave was what had reminded him of what was important.

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Chapter Twelve

Dave drove.

He wasn't sure where he was going, because he didn't know what to do, really.

When he ended up at Tate's door, it was nearly two a.m., and he was kind of afraid to go in. Everything had changed in the space of one day, and he wasn't sure he could even explain, let alone figure out how all this might impact his relationship with Tate.

Fuck, he was out of a job come the end of the month. He didn't even know where he was going to live.

He sat with his hands on the steering wheel, staring at the little dust motes that danced in his headlights. The dog he'd seen before came slinking down off porch, tail daring to do a little wagging, and Dave turned everything off and climbed out, kneeling to hold out a hand.

"Hey, boy. I forgot to bring your treat, huh? Come on, Toast. Come see me."

Tate had said the silly mutt was the color of burnt toast, so that ended up being his name.

Toast came over slowly, head down, back end flying. Dave stroked the long ears, feeling just like this guy. Beaten dog.

Oh, woe was him. Grinning a little, Dave got off his ass and headed inside, using his key to open the door and stopping to grab a dog biscuit just inside and hand it out to Toast. When he turned, Tate was standing in the pass

through that led to the rest of the house, wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts.

Jesus, he about jumped out of his skin.

"Shit, Tate. Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"No worries. I couldn't sleep."

They stood there for long moments, staring, before Tate came into the kitchen and started putting together the stuff to make coffee. Folgers. Filters. Everything was carefully pulled out and set aside.

Dave couldn't tell if Tate was pissed or what. He just knew the man was studiously not looking at him now.

"I'm sorry I flaked earlier. I couldn't get out of the meeting I was in to call." That was like the understatement of the year, but really, he wasn't sure Tate would want him to elaborate right now.

"I know. I had Darla call the base. I figured the shit had hit the fan."

"Yeah." Dave watched the water go into the pot and the little switch click on to red. "Could you come over here?"

"Shit, yes." Tate came over and grabbed him, hugging him hard. "I just wasn't sure if you'd want me to. Know you got to be furious."

"I am, yeah. So mad I'm shaking. They gave me two choices, Tate."

Pulling back, Tate stared at him a moment before nodding. "Somewhere even more remote or a discharge, huh?"

"Yeah." God, it was good that Tate understood. He didn't want to have to explain it all. The hard parts were hard enough.

"So. Did you ever figure out what you did?"

"A lot of stuff, I guess." There had been that complaint he'd filed at his last posting, there was the whole gay thing, there was the not following a direct order. "Mainly it's because my last colonel hated me."

Tate blinked, and Dave smiled a little.

"Hey, I can't complain. It got me posted here, and I got to meet you."

Instead of grinning back, Tate stiffened, stepping away. Those cowboy shoulders went tight as a board. "When do you leave?"

"What?" Okay, it was late, and he was tired. Maybe he wasn't speaking cowboy.

"Well, you said you got to meet me. Past tense. So, when are you going?"

"Tate, I'm really tired, so I'm not in the mood for games. I took the discharge."

Tate's mouth dropped open, almost comically. "No shit?"

"No shit."

He could actually see the softening of Tate's whole bodyline. "Are you going back to Colorado?"

"Well, you said yourself that Greely is awfully stinky." Shit. Maybe Tate wanted to get rid of him. He'd thought things were going real well, despite all the shit at work, but maybe they had crossed signals.

"It is." Now Tate was grinning, hugely, in fact, bouncing a little on his toes. That did great things for all that lean muscle, outlined by the moonlight streaming through the

window. "I just didn't know if you had anything here that would make you stay."

"I think I might beat you." He was sick to death of arguing with people, so he shook his head and went to the fridge, peering inside while the scent of coffee filled the room.

"Ah, go easy on your old man, honey. I can't help but worry a little. I ain't no prize; all I got is a little place out on Jackass Flats, huh?"

"That's not all you have, and if you think so, then you have problems I can't help with. You want an omelet?"

"Sure." Tate grabbed his ass on the way by, going to get two coffee cups. "Grab the milk, huh?"

"Yeah." Milk, eggs, ham, cheese ... "You got any onion or tomato?"

"No, but I got Pace."

That would work. It had tomato, onion, peppers. Dave pulled that out, too, heading for the stove. Tate handed him a cup of coffee with milk and sugar, just like he liked, and Dave finally unbent a little.

"I'm sorry if I'm snarling, babe."

"You've had a rough day. I get it."

They chopped up stuff together, Tate whipping up six eggs in a bowl, Dave shredding cheese. Two fucking a.m., and Tate was right there, rubbing shoulders with him, helping feed him.

Jesus, he loved this man.

Dave kind of stood there, holding the knife in lax fingers, his mouth hanging open just like Tate's had earlier. Holy shit. Love. Dude.

"You okay, honey?" Tate asked, running a hand over his back.

"Huh? Yeah. I'm actually really good." He dropped the knife on the cutting block and pulled Tate close, laughing when eggs sloshed around.

"Well, glad to hear it, honey." Now Tate was laughing at him, but Dave didn't care.

"Do you really want food?"

Tate tilted his head. "Well, we could put it all back in the fridge for later. Now it's all made up."

"Hey, that's a good idea. Then we could just go to bed, now, huh?"

"We could." They moved as one, putting everything back in the fridge, Tate turning off the coffeepot and pouring the black sludge into one of those stay-hot carafes.

Then Tate took his hand and led him to the bedroom, that big lodge-pine bed looking like home these days. Scary as that sounded. It was amazing how things grew on you, from antlers to knotty pine.

Tate started stripping him down, and Dave realized he was still wearing his uniform, wrinkled and gross as it was. He sat down so Tate could take off his boots, unlacing the stiff, desert-issue monsters and dropping them to the floor.

"Better?" Tate asked, stripping off Dave's socks, and Dave flexed his toes.

"Better. Man, I hadn't realized I was still in all my gear."

"Well, now it's gone." It was, too, Tate pulling his pants and briefs down over his legs with those words, leaving him naked as a jaybird.

"Thanks, babe. Good thing I left a bunch of civvies here, huh?"

"Uh-huh. You want to brush your teeth and all? I got coffee breath."

He had a toothbrush and a razor there, too, which kind of made him smile when he thought about it. Sometimes it was damned good to be him. Dave nodded. "Yeah."

So domestic. They went and brushed and took turns washing up and doing their business, and when they met back at the bed, Dave finally got the kiss he'd been craving since their last one.

Since he'd stood there and decided he loved Tate this much, right now.

Tate opened up for him, lips soft and warm. Those callused fingers caught against the hair on his thighs when Tate propped up against them to lean in, chest touching his. He pulled a little at Tate's upper arms, tugging, and Tate straddled his lap, just like that, boxers rubbing at Dave's bare skin.

"Should take these off," Dave murmured, plucking at the fabric.

Tate nodded, rising up so he could tug then down, which got them all stuck at Tate's thighs. That was okay for now; it bared that fine ass and Tate's prick, which stood hard and ready for him.

"Want you," Dave murmured, licking at the corner of Tate's lips.

"Anything you want, honey." Tate turned a tiny bit and kissed him again, full on, the kiss gaining bite at the end, bruising them right up.

"You should be careful what you promise, man." He might just ask for everything, and that might be dangerous.

"What? In for a penny." Tate's hand slid up around their cocks, pulling them together, the rough skin of Tate's fingers a warm contrast to the super-soft skin of their pricks.

They were both fiery hot, both wet at the tip, and Dave reached between them, too, rubbing his palm over the tips.

"That's sweet, babe. Feels damned good."

Tate nodded roughly, the movement jerky as hell, hand tightening on them. Pulling hard, Tate grunted, moving to kiss him again, licking at his lips. They rocked, both of them starting to pant, starting to sweat.

Hips pushing up, Dave tried to get more, tried to go faster, and Tate's balls pressed against him, soft and furry, making everything even more amazing. Oh, Lord. More. Please.

Humping hard, Tate gave him everything, cock and balls and mouth and skin. Hands moved, sweat ran, and Dave tried to make it last, but too soon he was coming, shooting, his come on their bellies.

Didn't take long for Tate to come for him, too, all over the place. It was the fucking perfect end to a shitty day, making everything else go away. Everything but his cowboy.

"Damn, Tate. I needed that way more than an omelet."

"Well, I'm glad I could help." Tate rested against him for a moment before wiggling. "My shorts are cutting off my circulation. Want some ice cream?"

Snorting, Dave let Tate slide off his lap. "Ah, the romance is gone. Good thing I love you, huh?"

Dropping the boxers on the floor, Tate held out a sticky hand. "Definitely a good thing. Come on. I got rocky road."

A man couldn't beat that. Dave took Tate's hand, letting himself be lead to the kitchen. He felt better than he had in months, like a huge weight had been taken off his shoulders.

Dave couldn't wait to see what happened next.

* * * *

Tate woke up the next morning with Dave snuggled up to his ass, one arm over top of his ribs. Dave's hand rested against his chest, right over his heart.

It should have been stifling. Maybe schmucky. It wasn't.

Dave had said the big I love you. Dave had never said that before. Even for ice cream.

Tate stretched a little, Dave's hand sliding away, and he rolled out of bed to pad to the bathroom, then head for the kitchen to toss some frozen biscuits in the oven and make up the breakfast they hadn't had when Dave got in.

Poor guy, getting a discharge order. 'Course, Dave could have taken the transfer, and that would have been worse, in Tate's book. A lot worse.

Oh, sure, Dave would have to figure out what he wanted to do, and Tate knew that more than one military man had gone a little nuts once they were out on the economy. He could help with that.

Hell, he fully expected to put the man to work doing all sorts of improvements around the place.

The phone rang just about the time he was pondering finding his robe to keep the bacon splatters at bay.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Tate," Darla said, sounding cheery as all hell. "How's it hanging? Did you hear from Dave?"

"I did. He showed up last night." Wasn't really his place to tell Darla about Dave's personal stuff, but he kinda went on. "He had a bad day, but I think he'll be okay, huh?"

"Well, that's good to hear. Least he didn't just flake out on you."

"You know it. Is it my turn to say I told you so?"

"Shut up. Look, I'd like to call in that supper, if you don't mind. At the Casa Luna. You think Dave will want to come?"

"Sure. I mean, if he doesn't have anything to do with the whole Army thing. You bringing the kids?"

"I am. Friday?"

"Sure. Is everything okay, Sis?"

"Just want to catch up with you, is all.."

"Okay, honey." He shrugged. Who knew what Darla wanted to chat about? She was an odd duck.

"See you there at six."

"You got it."

He hung up, banging pans around for a few minutes before getting everything going and tossing some food out the door for Toast.

That silly dog had just moved in, taking over his porch. Tate had put blankets out, along with water and food, and Toast was a permanent fixture now. Looked like he was

collecting a rag tag family of his own, whether he wanted one or not.

Oh, who was he kidding? He'd been wanting a long time. That was why he used to drink.

Dave finally saved him, and the bacon, from all of his damned thinking by wandering out and handing Tate his robe.

"Hey, babe. Some of those bits you're trying to burn off might be important."

"They might at that. Morning, sunshine. You feeling better?"

"I could sleep another ten hours, at least." Dave shrugged, but the lines carved around his mouth and eyes were not as stark as they'd been the night before.

"Well, you can have a nap after breakfast. I won't put you to work until tomorrow."

"Put me to work?"

"Fences. Roof. I need help." He grinned, watching Dave carefully.

"My MO makes me skilled labor, Tate. I'm expensive."

"You're also a civilian now. Welcome to the work force."

"I can live with that if it keeps people from politicking me to death. You gonna flip that bacon?"

"Yep." The robe helped keep the bacon grease from splattering all over his delicate parts. "You given any thought to where you might live once they kick you off base?"

"Some. Not sure you have enough room for me, Tate." One dark eyebrow went up. "I mean, I don't have a lot of shit, but I'll need a room for some of my crap."

"Uh-huh. Did I ask you to move in?" His heart was just pounding at the thought, though.

"Nope. You were about to, though. Now, you could put me to work building out your bathroom and all, putting in an extra room down at the end of the two guest bedrooms."

"I could. Hard to do when I can barely pay my taxes." It wasn't like he had too many more horses he was willing to sell.

"The great thing about being in the Army is that you don't have a lot to spend your money on, babe." Dave came over and started stirring up the eggs, getting them ready to go in the bacon grease. "I can finance some home improvements, just to have a room with no antlers."

"Cowboys like antlers," Tate said, grinning from ear to ear, remembering Dave's first reaction to his house.

"And leather and horseshoes. I know. Good thing I grew up with cowboys, huh?" Turning the heat off under the food, Dave pulled him close, holding him still and staring down into his eyes.

"Really good thing. Good thing you love me, too." That still kind of rocked. As in rocked his world.

"It is." He could see that Dave was trying to be anything but expectant, and that it wasn't working.

"Well, I guess if I'm giving up part of my little piece of Jackass Flats, I might ought to tell you I love you, too, huh?"

Whooping, Dave picked his skinny ass up and spun him around. "You might at that. So does that mean I'm moving in?"

"Only if you promise to build out that room."

Dave nodded, pressing a kiss to Tate's lips. "Well, then, cowboy. You got yourself a deal."

"Woo." He had himself the best end of the deal, he figured.

Dave might just be the best thing that had ever happened to this old cowhand.

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Epilogue

"Tate! Want me to get you another beer, babe?"

His cowboy was manning the grill, with a lot of help from Herschel and a group of guys wearing starched shirts and summer Stetsons. Two of those hats belonged to Dave's cousins, down from Greely and having a ball.

"Yeah. That'd be good." Tate smiled over at him, blue eyes twinkling in the bright, late afternoon light. The man looked amazing, maybe ten years younger than he had that cold winter night that Dave had met him, and damned if he didn't like to think he had something to do with that.

Maybe a lot to do with it.

Dave went and got them both a Bud, pulling them out of the cooler and laughing when Toast tried to chase the dripping ice water.

"Here you go. Those burgers almost done?"

Tate nodded to the little table next to the grill. "Just set it there, honey. The hot dogs are done, if you want to tell the kids."

Darla's kids were running amok with some of the spawn of the rodeo crew, charging around in the little patch of grass he and Tate had put in.

The whole place looked a little different these days, which was why they were throwing this shindig in the first place. It had taken them nearly a year, but they'd built out the master bath so it had a big old tub and separate shower, now, and they'd added two rooms on. One for Dave to have a

study/entertainment room, one for them to have a bigger guest bedroom.

Dave had a good many family members who loved to visit.

"Looks good, man," Herschel said, coming to stand next to him.

He'd met Herschel two weeks after getting drummed out, and he liked the man a lot. Simple, direct, down to earth. He could even forgive the man for having Tate first, since it hadn't lasted.

"Thanks, man." He glanced sideways at Hersch, a grin kicking up one corner of his mouth. "Don't suppose you want to collect the rug rats?"

"Sure. Hot dogs ready, huh?"

"Yep."

"No problem." Herschel swooped out into the yard making monster noises and scooping up the two tow-heads that belonged to Al and Gina, their closest neighbors. They'd gotten to know a few of the guys and gals who owned the little cookie cutter houses at the end of the nearest development, which had lead to Tate giving him a look and saying something like, "I ain't *that* social, honey."

They weren't that social, but the housewarming party was going well, and everyone was having a damned good time, so it worked for him.

"Not bad, Army. Not bad." Darla came to stand next to him, nudging him with one elbow while she watched Herschel romp around with her kids.

"Not Army anymore and you know it." He grinned. His MO had been radio and electronics, but he'd found civilian work in

construction. Las Cruces was a growing market, and if he couldn't find something in town, El Paso was a whopping forty five minutes away.

Darla loved to tease him about her earlier assumptions about him, though. Sometimes he thought maybe she still didn't like him much, but she accepted now that he wasn't gonna run off, and she had admitted, more than once and out loud, that she liked the way he treated Tate.

"Takes a little Army to round up all these folks for one party, though. Oh, Jesus. There goes Clay with that fake sword."

She left him doubled over with laughter, watching one of the older teens cutting a swath through the crowd. That was a disaster waiting to happen. In fact, it was such a danger that the little crowd of cowboys around Tate moved in to stop it, or at least to admire the sheer, "Hey, y'all, watch this," value of it.

That gave Dave a chance to slide up next to Tate again, sipping at his beer and trying to look casual. "You having fun, babe?"

"I am." Tate tilted his head, working the cowboy hat, and Dave had to swallow back a little moan.

"Well, you're looking good."

"Yeah?" Tate preened a little. "You want that burger now?"

"What I really want is to sneak away," Dave said, reaching out to put the base of his cold beer bottle against Tate's neck.

"Well, if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. You'll have to wait until this crowd heads out, huh?" But Tate

was looking at him like he was on the menu, and that so wasn't helping mute Dave's interest.

Not one bit.

"There's kids around, honey. Best put that beer bottle to use somewhere else."

"Yeah, yeah. Gimme a burger."

Dave figured he could wait, and that the best part about this whole arrangement was that he *could* wait. After everyone else was gone, he and Tate would be home alone, and they could eat the leftover banana pudding and have a nap and then go to it like a pair of bunnies.

There was nothing he looked forward to more than nights like that.

Who would have ever thought that he'd be happy living with an old cowboy out on Jackass Flats?

Sometimes life worked out just like it was supposed to.

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