



Rock Bottom

*A Torquere Press Arcana
by Julia Talbot*

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Prologue

Arches National Park was a sucktastic place to get lost.

Well, not lost, really. Mitch knew exactly where he was. He was just north of Broken Arch, in Clover Canyon. Now, that? Was just off the map enough to get away from the tourists, and he'd climbed just enough rock to get away from the canyon floor, and now he was stuck.

The irony of it all was that, for once, it wasn't his fault. That older lady passing out from dehydration on his last hike? His fault. Gus kicking him out when he lost yet another job? His fault.

Torrential downpours and a flash flood that left him scrambling up a scree of sandstone to stay alive? So not his fault. He'd checked the weather, the Doppler, and the wind before he'd started out.

Sighing, Mitch curled up in his slicker, watching the water rise from the notch of rock he'd squeezed into, and patted his pockets, hoping for that granola bar. He could eat half of it while he thought about how he'd managed to hit rock bottom so damned fast.

Chapter 1

"Get the damned fluids hooked up, will you?" the EMT snarled at his partner. "She's kinda shocky."

Shocky. Yeah, so was Mitch. Shit, one minute he'd been leading an easy, one mile hike through Canyonlands' Green River Overlook area. The next he'd been dealing with an unconscious forty-three year old woman and her hysterical best friend.

The red rock seemed to stretch out for miles before they got to the blacktop road to meet the emergency services folks, even though Mitch knew it was less than a quarter of a mile.

"How could you be so stupid, Mitch?" Chuck asked, his boss having heard on the police band radio and shown up minutes later.

"She said it was water, boss. I didn't sniff it."

Because really, who needed vodka and tonic to get their nerve up for a hike? In over a hundred heat. In Utah. In August.

"She could have died!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Mitch shouted right back. "Am I supposed to police the tourists now, boss? Taste their water? Test the cigarettes to make sure they're not funny ones? Shit, this is Utah! You can't even get beer here!"

Jesus. How was he supposed to do his job that way?

"No. You're just not doing the job for me at all anymore, Mitch." That asshole just stared at him, eyes completely

hidden behind dark glasses, 'Jeep Naked' cap pulled down over his sunburned forehead. "You're fired."

His jaw literally dropped, and Mitch stared right back. "You're joking, right? I'm not the first guide to have someone drop on a hike."

"No, but you're the only one who will do it working for me. I'm sorry Mitch, but it's just the start of the season. This can't happen again."

Oh, for fuck's sake. So he was going to be the sacrificial lamb that kept the rest of the guides on the straight and narrow for the next three months.

Yay.

"You'll send me my check?" he asked, scrubbing his hand over his stubbly face.

"Yeah. I'll send you a check." Chuck paused, peeking at him over those sunglasses finally. "With severance."

Mitch bit back his instinctive thanks for nothing and nodded. "Thanks. You want me to drive these folks back?"

"No, I brought Marcie."

Chuck's wife was already gathering up the fluttery tourists, and the ambulance was leaving, so all he could do was ask for a ride.

"Can you take me as far as the visitor's center?"

"I can take you back to Moab. Come on."

The drive back into Moab was silent and tense, and Chuck just gave him an, "I'm sorry, Mitch," when the man dropped him off at home.

Yeah. Yeah, so was he.

* * * *

Gus found Mitch in the trailer they used as a home base in Moab, sitting on the couch and eating doughnuts. He would have had to drive over to Loma in Colorado to get beer, so he settled for chocolate as his binge.

"Hey, babe. I heard about Canyonlands," Gus said, pushing his feet off the couch and sitting next to him. Gus was the one good thing he had, all sun-bleached hair and tanned skin, with green eyes the color of mossy water.

"I figured." Word spread fast in a small town, and Moab was pretty damned small.

"I'm sorry, man." He got a light kiss, Gus' hand sliding on his thigh. "You want me to make you hot dogs?"

Gus had learned in a hurry that hot dogs were his default comfort food.

"Sure. I'm sorry, too. I know you were counting on me having this job and all." They'd fought about it, a few weeks ago. About how Mitch had to pull his weight this summer, not go running off after every prospecting or rock-climbing or rafting adventure he could find.

"I was. We'll get you something."

Famous last words, as it turned out. But that night he'd gotten kisses and snuggles and finally sex with all the windows open, the cool night air making them both sleep like babies. Gus had just squeezed him and told him it would be all right.

And Mitch had believed him for awhile.

Chapter 2

"Where is he?" Gus asked, trying not to snarl. Jesus, sometimes Mitch made him buttfuck crazy. Instead of trying to find a job, the man had run off to Grand Junction to go on a bender, heading off to Quincy's, of all places.

Ammie, the newest in a long line of gum-popping, bleach-blonde bartenders, popped her gum. "Out back with DJ, honey."

Shit. Oh, Gus was gone kill the man. DJ was the biggest pothead going, and if Mitch was back there toking ... well. Something was gonna blow. Gus went out past the pool tables and the skanky little bathrooms, slapping the back door open.

Sure enough, DJ and Mitch were out in the little blacktop lot, sharing a spliff.

"I can't trust you for ten seconds, can I?"

Mitch blinked slow at him, bright blue eyes huge and cloudy. "Oh, hey, baby. DJ just stopped by while I was shooting pool and wanted to hang."

DJ gave him a slow grin, waving the doobie at him. "Want?"

"No. Thanks, but I got over that whole college boy, snowboard bum thing ages ago. You ready to go, Mitch?"

The blinking speeded up, and he could tell Mitch was catching on. "Uh. Sure, baby. Thanks, DJ."

Mitch wandered over to him, reaching out, but Gus let those long, tanned fingers slide off his ribs, turning aside. The smell of green made his eyes water.

They walked back through the Q, silent as ghosts, until they got to his pick-up out front. Once Mitch settled into the cab, though, the apologies started.

"I'm sorry, baby. I really just came to play pool. I figured no one would be in this early. DJ just caught me on the way out. You want supper? We could go to the Rockslide."

"No. No, we can't. Did you drive over?"

"No. I got a ride with Buddy."

Well, at least they didn't have to worry on how to get the Jeep back to Utah. "Good. We're going home."

"Oh." Mitch let his hands hang loose between his knees, those strong shoulders all hunched over. "Pissed you off, huh?"

His teeth clenched. "You were supposed to be applying for jobs."

"I was! Buddy took me to Red Rock Adventures. They need rafting guides."

"You could have just called Tim." Hell, they'd both worked at Red Rock. Several times.

"I wanted to talk to Joann."

Who was Tim's wife, and much more of a charity, hard-luck sympathizer than Tim.

"She was out, huh?"

"Yeah." Mitch sighed, hand scrubbing over short brown hair. "She's having a baby, did you know?"

"Nope. But then, I haven't seen them since last May." Neither of them had, since Mitch had lost two of Red Rock's canoes in the spring run off, taking them out without asking.

"Right." Scrunching down even more, Mitch eyed the dashboard. "I suck, huh?"

"Jesus Christ! Will you stop that? This is why you never get anywhere, Mitch. You just sit around and ponder how you suck, instead of doing something. You're just self-defeating." The last few words were a full volume shout, echoing in the truck. Gus sighed, swallowing anything else he might have said. He wasn't a therapist. Fuck knew navel gazing wasn't his thing. He was just a guy.

"I'm sorry," Mitch said, voice soft, tentative.

"Yeah, me, too."

Mitch fell asleep not long after that, leaving Gus about forty-five minutes too long to think about things on the way back to Moab.

* * * *

"You want me to move out now?" Mitch blinked, trying to get his pot-fuddled brain to comprehend what Gus was saying.

"I do." Gus had that stone faced thing going, just staring at him with those mossy-green eyes. They looked still as pond water, just flat. Real. Gus meant it.

"Baby..."

"No." Every muscle in Gus' body seemed to clench up. "No, don't 'baby' me. I'm sorry, Mitch. I am. But I told you, I needed you to have that job. I've given you too many chances. You need to stand on your own."

"I am. Right here. Birks and all." He couldn't help it. Flippant was the only way he knew how to deal with scared

down to his toes. How was he supposed to make it without Gus? It wasn't the fucking money. Mitch always landed on his feet. But he needed Gus deep down.

"Oh, babe. Don't. You have to go."

His shit was all packed up and sitting by the front door. Had been when he'd gotten home from the last round of, "Gee, we wish we had something for you, Mitch." His backpack, his sleeping bag, his little box of DVDs and all...

"Gus, please."

Gus just turned his back, arms crossed, emanating a whole world of get out.

Finally, Mitch did the only thing he could. He just grabbed his stuff and left, hopping in the Jeep and driving for the Colorado line.

It was time to get drunk.

Chapter 3

The water rose until it was lapping at his toes.

Mitch sort of watched it for a long time, almost detached from his body, doing that whole, hey, that's a flood thing.

Then he started laughing. The sound echoed crazily off the canyon walls, the water making it sound kinda slushy.

How had he gotten to be such an idiot? That was the question. Because only an idiot would sit there and let the water creep up over his ankles when he could still go up. Tired as he was, Mitch knew how to climb.

On his own two feet, just like Gus has said.

He took off his slicker and rolled it up, tucking it back in his pack. The balance it took to do all that had him shaking, reminding him how long it had been since that granola bar. Shit. Shit. Okay, he could do this.

Hands stretching out to hold any fissure in the rock that he could, Mitch started to place his feet, his climbing sneakers slipping and sliding, but finally holding. Okay. Time to work his way up.

* * * *

"Gus! Man. Where's Mitch?"

Jesus, if he heard that question one more time, Gus was gonna explode.

It didn't help that he didn't *know* where Mitch was, and that he wanted to.

"I don't know, man," he answered, thinking about the shock in Mitch's blue eyes when he'd finally broken down and asked the man to leave.

"So why did you kick Mitch out?" Alan asked, nudging him over to sit next to him at the bar.

Sighing, Mitch looked at his empty pint glass and wondered why in Hell he'd gone to Grand Junction in the first place. He shoulda stayed home and balanced the fucking checkbook or something.

"He wasn't paying his way."

"That's cold, man."

That came from DJ, who always got Mitch in trouble, and Gus glared at him. "Yeah, well, he needs to grow up. You're not helping."

"What? I haven't seen him in a couple weeks."

"Yeah, but when you do you push weed at him." Gus hated to sound like the morals police, because God knew he did and had done his share of stupid shit, but sooner or later a man had to just get his shit together.

"Sorry, man." DJ shrugged, wandering off to the little electronic dartboard.

"Dude, you've got to lay off DJ. He's harmless," Alan said, ordering them another beer.

"Shit, I know that. I just..."

"You broke up with Mitch, man. Not the other way around. You need to stop moping and get the fuck over it."

"Look, if you're gonna be an asshole, you can leave me be." God, he was popular these days, huh?

"He got a job, did you know?" Alan glanced over, smiling a little, the scar next to his lips pulling up.

"Who?" Gus figured somewhere he'd lost control of the whole conversation.

"Mitch, you idiot."

Gus turned and stared, daring Alan to lie to him. They'd been friends too long for the man to bullshit him.

"Yeah. Waiting tables at the Rockslide. Can you believe?"

"No shit?" Mitch. Waiting tables. "How long?"

"About three days."

"Well, we'll see if it lasts, huh?" It never did with Mitch. He always screwed up.

"You're a downer, man," Alan said. "I just thought you ought to know he's trying."

Then he was alone, Alan taking his beer and leaving, just like he'd asked.

Maybe he should find out where Mitch was hanging. See what was up. He just hated to get both their hopes up, assuming Mitch even wanted him anymore.

Only to have them dashed.

Chapter 4

"So, you can start tomorrow?"

"Yeah. You bet," Mitch had agreed, even though the thought of working a noisy, crowded bar and restaurant where the average server was ten years younger than him made Mitch kinda want to puke.

"Great. We'll start you at supper. It's actually slower Monday through Thursday than it is at lunch." The manager, who was also younger than him, shook Mitch's hand, waving him toward the register. "Kristy will get you a shirt."

There. That was done. Mitch had left the restaurant and grabbed his cell phone, ready to call Gus and share the good news. Which was when he'd remembered that he wasn't welcome anymore.

He'd just gone to his little hotel room and watched the tinny little TV, feeling sorry for himself.

Now that seemed preferable to climbing the canyon walls in the pouring rain.

Mitch pushed up to the next safe fissure, needing to lean a minute. Needing to sit and breathe. Jesus, he was fucking tired.

"Come on, man," he said aloud. "Get your ass up and moving. You got a job. You'll get fired..."

The sound would normally echo off the canyon walls, but the water sorta muted it. It muted the scrape of his flesh, too, when he made another push. A few more feet. Maybe ten. Then he could sit at the top and figure the best way off the rock.

Rock Bottom
by Julia Talbot

Every muscle strained; Mitch thought he could hear them creak and groan as they nearly snapped. But he inched his way up. Yeah, almost there. Almost. And when he got out he would call Gus and beg the man to take him back.

There. His hand hit the top of the fissure, his feet scrabbled, and finally Mitch pulled himself up and over, just as the water hit the bottoms of his feet. One shoe went floating away, but Mitch didn't give a shit.

He'd made it out.

That was all that mattered.

* * * *

Gus went to supper at the Rockslide.

Oh, he knew it was probably mean. That wasn't why he wanted to go. Like he didn't want to lord it over Mitch or anything, that the man was waiting tables. No, he just wanted to see Mitch again, and see for himself that his ex could be responsible.

His ex.

Mitch didn't feel like his ex. Gus thought of Mitch as his. Still.

"Hey, Gus!" Kristy called out. The little blonde had been a rafting guide one year with them, up in Glenwood. "How's it going?"

"Good. How're you?"

"Busy as a one legged but kicker." Pushing back a hank of hair, Kristy shook her head. "I'm down one waiter, and it's damned full."

The place had the roar of a happy crowd, that was for sure. "Who's out?"

She bit her lip a little, looking worried. "Mitch, Gus. It's Mitch."

His belly went cold, that same old embarrassment and dread filling it up. "I'm sorry, honey. We broke up, you know?"

"I know. But he did really well the first week, Mitch. I'm ... I'm kinda worried about him."

"Hey, Gus. You heard from Mitch?" That was from Kevin, the shift manager. "He went hiking."

Hiking. It just figured. "No. I haven't. Where was he headed?"

"Out to Arches. Two days ago. He should have been back this morning."

Arches. Gus finally left off being furious long enough to get worried himself. "It's been raining hard back that way."

"That's why I'm worried," Kristy said. "I know Mitch. He would call, at least."

"Shit." His hands went all numb, his ears ringing. "I need to go ... I'll. I'll have him call when I find him, okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, and if he's okay, you tell him we're docking his pay, but he's welcome back," Kevin called after him.

Gus lit out of there like his ass was on fire, hopping into his truck and taking off for the Utah line. For once in his life he hoped that Mitch was just doing his usual fuck-off impression, because if he wasn't ... well, something was very wrong.

* * * *

Rock Bottom
by Julia Talbot

Mitch stared at the sky, willing his arms and legs to move.

He'd been out of the wash for at least an hour, if the sky was anything to go by, but he was simply exhausted. What went up had to go down, at least in Utah, and he'd gotten halfway down the outside face of the cliff he was on before his knees gave out. The ledge he lay on felt way too narrow, making him cling to the rock wall, but it held him.

Of course, without water or food, he wouldn't last long.

He'd tried to hold out his canteen and gather up some rainwater, but that had ended badly. His canteen bounced down the cliff, the sound of it clunking against rock like the sound of nails driven into a coffin.

Shit, he was a drama llama.

Time to get his shit together. How worthless did a man have to get before he realized that he'd hit rock bottom and that contemplating tilting your head up in the rain and drowning like a turkey was just stupid?

Leaning, Mitch stared down at the valley floor, calculating distance. Then he nodded to himself, gave himself the little 'you can do it' pep talk he gave hikers on his guide jobs, and swung his legs off the ledge.

Wasn't anyone gonna come get him. He had to go down there all by himself. Come on, legs, Mitch thought. Don't fail me now.

They didn't, at least for awhile.

The creaking moan of rock sheering off sounded when Mitch sat maybe fifteen feet from the canyon floor. Fuck! Fuck,

Rock Bottom
by Julia Talbot

His hands slid free, the sheet of rock coming down with him, and Mitch went into freefall, his body instinctively turning in midair like a cat's, trying to land on his hands and knees. Which would break both. At the last moment he twisted, landing on his side, putting his hip and shoulder at risk, but he could crawl with either one of those busted up.

The impact stunned him, and the secondary bounce impact left him whooping for breath, his chest heaving, his eyes shut against the driving rain.

Shit. Oh, shit, that hurt.

Wheezing, he lay there, his hands and knees shaking, his cheek sore as anything where he'd scraped it.

Water ran over his cheek and into his mouth, making him laugh weakly. Well. At least now he could catch a drink.

Chapter 5

When he found Mitch's Jeep, Gus had a little moment of jibbering. Then he got his shit together and grabbed his pack, making sure he had his survival blanket and water bottle, his climbing kit and his gloves. Then he set off his GPS beacon and headed out to the best places for climbing.

If he didn't find Mitch that way, he had options. But Gus wanted to do something *now*. He didn't want to wait for a rescue crew.

Hell, he couldn't even blame Mitch for this one. He'd seen all the weather reports. The storm had taken everyone by surprise.

Hiking the canyon floor beyond the beaten trails proved pretty tough. Water ran freely, and silt shifted under Gus' boots, making the way treacherous at best. Deadly at worst. Mitch was out in this, and God knew where the man had gotten trapped.

Searching for Mitch's tracks proved impossible, so Gus went by instinct. Broken Arch was one of Mitch's favorite places. He'd start there and work north, where the good climbing was.

The canyon was still one of the most beautiful places Gus had ever seen. Even dark with rain and shifting dangerously under his feet, the deep red sandstone formations climbing almost to the sky in jagged spires took his breath away. Arched curves carved into the rock through years of erosion almost looked like eyes, staring at him.

A slight noise caught his ear after maybe an hour of searching, the sound of cloth over stone, and it didn't come from his own clothes. Gus turned in a circle, his heart pounding, his hands clenching and unclenching.

"Mitch! Mitch, buddy! Is that you?" Oh, please, let it be Mitch.

"Gus?" Weak, but there, it was Mitch's voice, coming off from the north.

Gus waded through a stream of water that nearly rose to his knees, sloshing his way to the opening in the rock where he'd heard the noise. Oh, Jesus. Yes. Mitch.

Pale, torn up, blood on his hands and on his temple, Mitch leaned against the rock wall, half smiling at him.

"Hey, baby. Long time no see," Mitch said, just eating him up with those eyes.

"Yeah." Sagging a little, Gus stared back for a long moment. Then he kicked his ass into gear, wading over to grab Mitch and drag him out of the water built up with every passing second. "I've got dry clothes for you, honey. Got some water and some trail mix and a survival blanket."

"My hero," Mitch said, leaning heavily on him. "Always pulling my ass out of the fire."

"Or in this case, the flood. Come on, babe. We got to get to a little higher ground. It's a long walk back to the Jeep."

They got Mitch changed into relatively dry clothes and got him wrapped in the survival blanket. He could only take a little water without getting nauseated, but that was enough to get the man going again. The clammy skin and shaky limbs

worried Gus half to death, but he couldn't carry the man, so half-dragging him, half-walking would have to do.

"Stop. Stop, Gus. Baby ... I got to sit a minute."

Fuck, he hated how weak Mitch sounded. How the man was about to shake apart. "No. No, babe. If you stop, you won't get back up."

"That's what you always think of me, huh? Well, I got news for you, baby. I made it out of Little Neck Gorge just fine. I climbed all the way, even stopping for breaks."

"Oh, babe. I don't think..." Well, what could he say to that? Gus wasn't a liar. He'd always seen Mitch as kind of a quitter. "I'm glad you didn't give up. Don't quit on me now, okay?"

"Not gonna." Mitch wilted even more. "Please. Just two minutes."

"Okay. Two minutes. I'll time you." He smiled a little, easing Mitch to the ground.

"Cool. Time away. I think I'm ready for that trail mix, now."

Gus helped Mitch down two handfuls of the trail mix, and another couple swallows of water. That pale, clammy skin actually took on some color, Mitch perking up a little.

"Two minutes are up, yeah?" Mitch said, grinning up at him and holding out one hand. "Up. Help me up?"

"Yeah." His own muscles were starting to fatigue, and the rain came down harder every second. "Upsey daisy."

They took almost two hours to stagger back to the vehicles, and by the time they got there, Jimmy Begay was

there with his park ranger truck, barking orders into a walkie-talkie.

"Jimmy! Help me out, man!" Gus shouted when they were in range.

Jimmy's head snapped around, and he shouted something into his walkie-talkie before slogging over to grab Mitch's other side, hauling him right to the Jeep to sit him down.

"Got your locational," Jimmy said. I've called the boys back in. One of them can drive Mitch's Jeep back, if you want to take him back in to the hospital."

"Yeah. We'll go to the clinic." Gus dug through Mitch's clothes, pulling out the keys to the Jeep. "Just take it to the trailer, yeah?"

"No problem, man. Good to see you whole, Mitch."

"Thanks," Mitch said, smiling weakly. He moved like an old man when Gus and Jimmy hauled him to the truck, and Gus bit his lip, holding back all the crap he wanted to say. Now was not the time.

They stayed quiet on the way into town, Mitch dozing off and on until Gus shook him awake, afraid that he was shocky. When they got to the clinic, the nurses whisked Mitch away, leaving Gus plenty of time to sit and think. And that wasn't necessarily a good thing...

* * * *

"Stop poking me, will you? I'm fine."

Three hours, two bags of fluid, and a couple of shots including a tetanus booster later, Mitch felt pretty put upon. He just wanted to go home. Wherever that was. And he

needed to call the Rockslide and apologize, make sure he still had a job.

Yanking the IV out of his arm, he swung his legs over the side of the gurney bed thing and started to get up.

"Mitch! You have to stay still!" Alice Forney exclaimed, bustling over to push him back down. "You had a rough day, honey."

Her pale eyes danced for him, like she knew how frustrated he was, and she was laughing at him.

"I need to go home..." Okay, that was silly. Where was home? A rented room? Shit.

"Well, you can't. Not unless you have someone to keep an eye on you for twenty-four hours."

"I can do that," Gus said from the doorway, arms crossed but a smile on his face.

"Really?" He stared at Gus hungrily. The man looked tired and skinny, but so good. "That would rock, baby."

Alice cleared her throat, her cheeks going pink. "Well, then. You take him home, Gus. Make sure he drinks plenty of fluids. Clear. Water, Ginger Ale ... No orange juice or booze."

"Yes, ma'am. What about food?"

"He should stay away from anything too heavy, but solid food is fine. Eggs, toast. Some protein. Like a turkey sandwich. Okay?"

"Can do. Come on, babe. As cute as the hospital gown is, you need real clothes."

"Cool." Yeah. Clothes. Food. The trailer, where he felt more at home than anywhere. With Gus. Worked for him. He was feeling way better.

Of course, when he tried to get up again, he was shaky as Hell, and his bandaged hands hurt like a motherfucker when he caught himself on the table.

"Fuck."

"You okay, babe? Maybe you should stay," Mitch said, grabbing him under the arms and holding on.

"No! I want to go home. I just need to find my land legs again, you know?"

Alice clucked, moving the little IV stand and coming to help get him dressed. Her big, square hands were so impersonal that he just couldn't be embarrassed. "You might bathe him, too, Gus. He stinks."

"Thanks, honey. Great bedside manner you got there." Mitch winked, though, because he got to go home, and Alice was a real decent lady.

Gus got him outside and into the truck. Mitch slept the ten minute ride to the trailer, but his Jeep was there when he woke up, so he couldn't have been happier.

"There you go, honey," Gus finally said, easing him down on the couch, mossy green eyes staring into his. "Better?"

"Oh, yeah. All I need now is the phone."

Gus' brows snapped together. "What for?"

"I need to call work. I got a job..." Maybe. He might not have one now.

"I called them, already. That's how I knew to come get you. They told me you'd gone hiking."

Mitch waited, figuring Gus would holler at him the way the man always did. It didn't happen. Gus just grabbed him and held on tight, that lean body shaking a little.

"Scared the fuck out of me, Mitch."

"I scared the fuck out of me, too, baby." Wrapping his arms around Gus, he squeezed, loving the warmth of Gus' body, the solidity of it. "There was this one place, in the wash, where I almost gave up."

"I'm glad you didn't," Gus said, the words muffled against his shoulder. "Want some ginger ale?"

"Yeah. And I could murder a grilled cheese sandwich. Come on, I'll help." He tried to push up off the weird plaid cushions of the couch, but Gus pushed him back down.

"Hey, you have an excuse, you know?"

"Uh. 'Kay." It felt weird, to have Gus waiting on him hand and foot, getting him a blanket, even in the steamy heat, getting him a drink and food and...

"Would you just come sit with me, baby?" he finally asked, needing to touch. It had been too long.

"Oh. Oh, sure. Okay." Settling next to him, Gus patted his leg awkwardly. "Sorry."

"For what? You came and found me." Leaning on Gus felt like Heaven, the heavy blanket sliding to the floor. All Mitch needed was Gus' skin and hands and sweet smile.

"I think I went a little crazy," Gus admitted, grinning wryly. "But I remembered all my safety shit, unlike someone I could mention."

"Hey!" He pinched Gus' thigh. "I had my pack and all. But I lost it in the first wash. It came on so fast, man. Like boom."

Just remembering the roar of the water after the intense silence of the canyon made him shudder. He'd thought he was a goner.

Rock Bottom
by Julia Talbot

"I got you, babe. Just sleep, okay?"

"Okay." Mitch chose to trust that Gus was gonna be there for him. No matter what. He let himself drift off to sleep, feeling damned good. All things considered.

Chapter 6

Gus woke up sticky hot and a little scratchy. The couch wasn't great for napping at the best of times, and when a warm, heavy body lay atop his it was even worse.

When he figured out who that warm heavy body belonged to, it was a little better.

Damn, it was good to have Mitch home.

Even if it was just for a little while.

He ran a hand down Mitch's back, frowning at the dappled bruises he found there when he raised up to look. Man, Mitch had been through the ringer, with scrapes and shit all over him. But the man had kept on, and Gus was damned proud of him.

"Mmm." Mitch shifted, body rubbing all along Gus'. "Oh, that feels good, baby."

"Yeah?" Grinning, he stroked a little more, putting some effort into easing those sore muscles.

"Shit, yeah. Been too long..." Moving up a little, Mitch kissed him, and Gus didn't have what it took to pull away. Even if it was a really bad idea. Mitch tasted like ginger ale and man, soft and hot inside when Gus pushed his tongue in to get more of the flavor.

Mitch seemed to think it was a really good idea, kissing him harder and deeper, long body starting to move on his in long, lazy pulses. That cock he knew so well started poking at his belly, right through their clothes.

"You must be feeling better," he said when they broke for air.

"Told you I just needed to rest. No permanent damage."
He got a wild grin before Mitch dove right back in, one hand coming up to cup his head and hold him still.

Gus gave in to the feeling, his own cock rising up so fast it almost hurt. Yeah, it had been too long, and he pushed up, rubbing on Mitch like there was no tomorrow.

"I got what you need, baby," Mitch murmured finally, pulling away to push him up on the arm of the couch, sliding down to spread his legs. Those bandaged fingers fumbled a little at his zipper and button, but his cock finally sprang free, right into Mitch's hands. Then into the man's mouth when Mitch bent to take him in, lips and tongue working him.

Jesus, he loved Mitch's mouth.

Mitch loved to suck him, too. Gus had never met anyone who loved to blow him like Mitch did. The man ate him right up, tongue moving under head, rubbing that sensitive spot until Gus thought he might scream. Then Mitch moved on down, lips sealing about the base of his prick while Mitch swallowed.

He wasn't gonna last long. Not the way Mitch worked him; not as long as it had been since he had even jacked off. His balls drew up, his eyes rolled back, and Gus lost it, coming hard into Mitch's mouth. Weeks worth of tension slid right off his spine, making him grunt and collapse back against the couch, breathing hard.

"Oh. Oh, honey. I needed that."

Mitch grinned up at him, nodding. "I hear you."

"What do you need, babe?"

"I need a shower. I, uh, came in my pants."

"Oh." Wow. It had been ages ... "Well, let's go get a bath, huh? And maybe some food."

Mitch's stomach growled, making them laugh. "Definitely some food."

Yeah. They would worry about the rest later.

* * * *

The shower did him wonders. So did the big club sandwich he and Gus put together in the little kitchenette, bumping hips and grinning at each other.

Oh, his skin gave him the occasional twinge, and his hands drove him so crazy that he finally tore the bandages off, but all in all, he was a happy puppy.

"You want some ice cream, babe?" Gus asked, poking his head in the freezer, where his voice echoed weirdly.

"Oh, I would. Do we have any cherry vanilla?"

"This is me, babe. Of course we do." Bowls clanked and spoons rattled, and Gus finally came on back to him, handing him a bowl.

"We could eat in the bedroom," Mitch suggested. "Where the window unit is."

Gus gave him a look, a little worry lurking in those pretty eyes. "I'm not sure..."

Oh. Right. He was just there because he was ragged and hurt. Not for real.

"Just for tonight? Hell, I'll come back and sleep on the couch if you want, later."

"Okay. Yeah, okay, babe." They wandered to the tiny bedroom together, shoulders rubbing, and settled in to eat

the frozen concoction, both of them sighing happily. His sheets. His bed. Well, theirs. But it felt right; so right.

"Wanna watch a movie?" They didn't get cable, but they had plenty of DVDs.

"Sure. I got to get up at seven, though, so we can't stay up too late," Gus said, sounding almost apologetic.

"That's okay. I have to drive back to the Junction to go to work."

They chose *Die Hard*, and laughed and snarked all the way through; they both knew it well enough now not to even have to pay attention.

It wasn't until they settled down to sleep, his arms around Gus, that sweet mouth on the curve of his shoulder, that Gus said it. "You know you can't stay. Not yet. I need to know..."

"I know. You need to know I won't do it all over again." Mitch stroked the back of Gus' neck, nodding. "I know, baby. I get it. This time I really do."

Somehow, he knew he did, this time.

Now all he had to do was prove it to Gus.

Chapter 7

"Can I get you some more Coke, man?" Mitch asked his table full of bankers from over at First National. They were nice guys, even if they were suits, and they tipped great for lunch time.

"Yeah, that would be great."

He grabbed up glasses, hustling back to the drink station for refills, grinning at Katie, who carried a huge tray full of salads. He'd been back at work for nearly two months now, and he hadn't missed a day. After two weeks, Kevin had switched him to days, and while it wasn't the best work a man like him could do, it paid the bills.

"Hey, man! Long time no see!" His buddies Alan and DJ both said it at the same time, waving to him from a booth across the way. "They said this was your section," Alan went on. "Is that cool?"

"Sure." Wow, look at Alan's deep tan." Be right there, guys."

He hit all his other tables first, because God knew he didn't want anyone accusing him of fucking off with his friends, and then headed over. "Hey, guys! How goes?"

"Good, man," DJ said, looking him up and down. "You don't look nearly pale enough to be inside all day..."

"I'm not. I mean, not all the time." Mitch bounced a little. "I've got weekend raft trips at Red Rock, man. How cool is that?"

"Oh, excellent." Alan grinned, handing him the menu.

"What's excellent," DJ asked. "Now he can't hang out with me this weekend. I scored some great stuff, man."

"Oh." Well, shit. This was gonna be fun. "What do you want to drink, guy? I'll go get that and come back."

He kinda ran off, not wanting to hurt DJ's feelings or anything. But the thing was, he really wasn't up for going out and smoking some weed. Oh, he wasn't making moral judgments. No, sir, he'd done his share of that. He just knew it would fuck his shit up if he went and did it, and he was on the way out of the hole he'd dug himself.

The drinks didn't take near long enough to pour, but by the time he finished topping off DJ's Sprite he figured he was solid enough to say no. Mitch went on back, smiling a little too big.

"So you gonna come when you get off work Saturday, Mitch?" DJ asked, pulling at his apron.

"I don't think so, dude. You ready to order?"

"Uh. Sure." DJ glanced at Alan, eyebrows up.

"I'll have the calzone, man," Alan said, nodding. "You seen Gus lately?"

"Huh? Oh. No. DJ?"

"The burger, man. With onion rings." DJ was still looking from him to Alan, brows lowered.

"Cool." What was he supposed to say?

"He's missing, you, man," Alan said, "Asking about you."

"Well, I've been meaning to call him..."

He had. Mitch was just waiting until he got something done first. When he'd woken up in their bed after the whole canyon

thing, he'd smiled and stretched and thought he was a man who'd been let back into Heaven.

That had all come crashing down when he'd gone to the closet for his clothes and they still weren't there. They'd be in a duffel somewhere in Grand Junction.

He'd waved goodbye to Gus by noon, driving off in his stinky-wet Jeep, knowing that Gus loved him but that he had something to prove.

"Yeah? Well, maybe you ought to. When you get off work."

"He could come see me." Mitch didn't mean to sound petulant. In fact, he thought he managed not to. It was the truth.

"Uh-huh. Dude, he kicked you out. Harshed your mellow. I bet he's a little afraid to." DJ grinned. "Hell, if you're going to turn into like, a monk, you could at least chat with the guy who made you.'

"I'm not turning into a monk!" Though he had to admit, he sure wasn't getting laid.

"So call him, man. And go get that chick in the back another Coke."

"Oh! Shit. Thanks, Alan." Man, he'd almost forgotten he was at work. Waving, he hustled off and went to get the lady more drinks and put in the guys' orders.

He'd think about calling Gus.

Later

* * * *

Gus had picked up the phone maybe a hundred times.

He wanted to talk to Mitch in the worst way, but he felt like maybe he didn't have the right.

Hell, the guys said Mitch was getting his shit together, was working days and weekends, and looked tanned and happy and healthy.

Wasn't that what he wanted? Shit, what if it was him that screwed Mitch up; what if he kept the man down, living at rock bottom?

He was chopping onions when the phone rang, scaring the shit out of him, making the knife slip just enough to nick his finger.

"Goddamn it!" Mopping blood, Gus hunted the phone, which he had put down somewhere the night before. Ha! There. Under the couch cushion.

"Lo?"

"Hey, baby," Mitch said on the other end of the line.
"How's it going?"

"Okay. How are you?"

"A little tired."

The onions really started to stink, making his eyes water.
"So, what's up?"

"Uh ... Did I call at a bad time?"

"Nah. I was just making supper."

"Oooh. What's for supper?"

Gus wasn't much of a cook, but Mitch had always liked his simple meals. "Hamburger steak."

"Cool. Look, Gus ... I. I was wondering."

"What?" His heart started speeding up, tat-a-tat.

Rock Bottom
by Julia Talbot

"I was wondering if we could get together this week. I have Monday and Tuesday off. I could buy you supper."

"Oh. Oh, sure. I'd like that. Could you come down here? I know it's shitty of me to ask, but I only have Monday this week." His mind raced, thinking about what Mitch wanted.

"I can do that." Mitch paused so long that Gus thought he'd dropped the call, but finally he heard a deep breath.

"Thanks, Gus. See you Monday."

"You bet, babe. See you then."

Gus hung up and stared at the paper towel around his finger for a long while, just ... A little scared.

And a lot excited.

Chapter 8

Mitch rubbed his hands down the legs of his one pair of dress pants, hoping his unruly hair had stayed down where he slicked it. He was going to take Gus out, talk to the man for the first time in weeks, and he was nervous as Hell.

Finally he just went for it and knocked on the trailer door, trying for a casual smile.

"Hey, honey. You look like you swallowed a frog," Gus said when he opened the door.

Blinking, then laughing, Mitch nodded. "It feels like it. Thanks for noticing."

"You're welcome."

They stood there and stared at each other for a minute, Mitch noticing the way Gus' hair had grown out a little too long, how it had gotten really blond like it always did at the end of the season.

"So. You ready to go?"

"Yeah. Sure. Just let me get my keys."

"I still got a key, man." That might not be the best note to start on, but it popped out before Mitch could stop it.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive?"

Mitch grinned a little. "It's Utah. I couldn't drink with dinner if I wanted to. Come on, baby."

Gus went right with him, sliding around to the passenger side of the Jeep, which he'd cleaned out and scrubbed down, putting a new seat cover on. The bright blue Hawaiian hibiscus pattern got him some jokes at his rafting job, but Mitch liked it.

"Looks good, honey."

"Thanks. I've been working on her after I get out of the restaurant."

"Cool."

The silence stretched until they got to the Chuckwagon. Then Gus burst out laughing. "Steak! Excellent."

"I know you like it. I mean, if you want to go somewhere else..."

"Hell, no. I want steak and I want pie." Patting his leg before hopping out of the Jeep, Gus stood outside the front door and waited on him.

They got a table near the back, which they used to do so they could play footsie, but Mitch hoped tonight it would be good for talking. They ordered, got a basket of yeast rolls and butter, and started munching, both of them grinning. It felt easy. Good.

Mitch hoped he wasn't about to make it hard.

The steaks came, perfectly cooked and as simple as the wagon wheel and checkered tablecloth décor. Fluffy baked potatoes and apple pie with ice cream finished it off, and they both sat back, patting their bellies.

"That was good, man," Gus said, toes just touching his under the table.

Oh. Hello! His cock went zero to sixty in maybe five seconds.

Clearing his throat, Mitch reached into his pocket, not for his cock, but for something else. See him. See him stay on track.

"I wanted to give you this, baby," he said, handing the check over.

Gus looked at the little piece of paper, frowning. "Eight hundred dollars. What's this for?"

"All the rent I missed this summer. Before I moved out, I mean. I should be able to get you the rest later."

"Shit, Mitch. I kicked you out. You don't have to pay me for when you weren't here." Those scarred rock-climbers hands turned the check over and over. "I don't think you need to pay me for when you were."

"Sure I do. I want to make sure you know I can do it."

"Babe..."

"Hey, I'm not guilt tripping, or twelve-stepping or anything. I'm just giving it to you. Hell, knock yourself out and go buy a canoe or something."

He knew Gus would put it away for the proverbial rainy day, but what mattered was the fact that Gus knew now that he'd been at a steady job all this time, and had managed to save some cash up.

"Okay. Okay, honey. Sure."

Mitch pushed his toes against Gus', his cock gone down some, but not completely deflated. "I didn't mean to lower the mood, baby. I just wanted to ... You know."

A smile broke out on Gus' face. "Yeah. I know. Can we go home?"

Shit. Was that good or bad? "Of course."

"I want to say thank you," Gus said, eyes meeting his, dark green and serious. "And I can't here."

"Oh ... Right. Let me pay the bill."

It was unbelievable how hot it was to pile into the Jeep and kiss each other, right there in the parking lot. How long had it been since they'd done shit like that? Too damned long.

"Home, man. Home," Gus said, panting, hands on his shoulders.

"Home."

They both got back in their own seats, and Mitch gunned it, heading back to the trailer fast enough to get them a ticket. Luckily, he knew the back roads well enough that they missed out on that, sliding into the gravel drive like falling rock into a mudslide, the Jeep rocking on its springs.

Tumbling out, they ran hand in hand up the little steps and pushed inside, Gus turning him to kiss him, lips slamming down on his.

So good. It had been so damned long. Mitch didn't dare hope this meant anything, but he wanted it enough that he shoved all the doubts aside. His hands wrapped around Gus' upper arms, holding on tight.

Pushing him back, Gus took them down to the couch, that damned scratchy cover making him laugh, and damn. Damn. His hands found skin, sliding up under Gus' button down shirt, his calluses catching on the tiny hairs along Gus' spine.

"Mitch. Honey. I need you to be naked."

"Then let me get to my clothes."

"Oh." Grinning, Gus lifted up, just letting him tear at cloth and get the nakedness going.

Skin on skin. Perfect. Mitch wrapped his leg around Gus' hip, pulling up so he could rub and rub, his cock finally

pressed against that flat belly. Hot, wet, his prick knew just what it wanted, and he hoped to Hell Gus knew, too.

"Want in you, honey. I ... I bought condoms." Gus sounded almost guilty, but they'd been apart long enough that it was only the smart thing to do. No harm, no foul.

"Fuck me, baby. I've been waiting so long."

"Oh, God. Yes." Gus just seemed frantic, wanting to touch him everywhere, wet fingers sliding into his body like they were meant to be there.

Mitch spread and arched into the touch, his moans low and constant, his body shivering and shaking. Gus' skin felt like it was on fire, so hot under his hands, and Mitch got addicted to it all over again in seconds.

They rocked, Mitch pushing on Gus' fingers. "Come on, baby. Inside me. Come on."

"Now." The sound of the rubber snapping into place had them both gasping, both moving into place, Gus' cock pushing right into him.

Goddamn.

The sweat rolled off their skin, the sound of them rubbing together exciting and obscene. Mitch reached for his cock, trying to pull at it, to get some friction going as the stretch and burn made him squirm.

"You with me, honey? You ... I'm so close."

Deep inside he could feel Gus moving, could feel that pretty, thick cock rubbing and making him crazy. He nodded fiercely. "I'm with you. Just touch me, baby."

"I can do that." That hand found him, slick and good, pulling on his cock.

Rock Bottom
by Julia Talbot

Mitch wasn't sure if he lasted minutes or if he lasted hours after that, but when he shot it made his ears ring, made him buck with it, hips moving wildly.

"Mitch!" The sound of his name was like fucking music, Gus groaning and moving in him and shooting so hard that Mitch could feel it in Gus' belly, rippling all the way down.

They slumped down on the couch, breathing hard, sort of murmuring silly words to each other. That was just like old times ... And not just the silly words. It had been a long time since he and Gus had burned so hot for each other.

It made all of the damned hard work worth it.

"You gonna stay the night, honey?" Gus asked, and Mitch nodded.

He didn't have to be back at work until Wednesday. He could steal a little time for them now.

The next bombshell he dropped might not go over as well as the check.

Chapter 9

Gus woke up with Mitch plastered to his side, lips pressed against his neck. That was how a man should wake up every morning. Every fucking morning.

Leaving little kisses along the way, Gus started sliding down Mitch's body, hoping there was morning wood waiting for him. There hadn't been a lot of the time after a long night of partying.

Paydirt. Look at that. His ministrations had brought Mitch right up, that sweet cock hard and heavy, sort of waving at him. That thought tickled him, his chuckle sending a wave of warm air across Mitch's skin.

Stretching, Mitch hummed for him, body shifting on the sheets. "Feels good."

"Does here, too. You smell good." Mouth-watering, in fact.

"Smell like you." Grinning down, Mitch pushed Gus' hair out of his eyes. "You need a haircut."

"After the season is over, honey." Gus couldn't wait anymore. That pretty cock just looked too tasty. He opened his mouth and too Mitch in, lips sealing tight around the shaft so he could suck hard.

Mitch moaned and pushed up, those balls swinging right under his chin.

Grabbing those lean hips, he pulled Mitch up harder, offering more. The taste was all salt and bitter, all sweat and male. All Mitch. Closing his eyes, Gus pulled at that cock with his mouth, needing more. His hand cupped Mitch's balls,

making the man crazy with it, feeling that touch vibrate all the way through Mitch's body.

"Christ! Gus! Baby..."

"Mmhmm." Yeah. He wanted it all. He pushed his nose down to Mitch's dark pubes, his hand squeezing the tiniest bit.

That was all she wrote, Mitch coming for him, right into his mouth. Gus took it all, thinking maybe he should have used a rubber, but Hell, they hadn't for a long time until last night. Just the knowledge that Mitch was so willing to do what he asked made him feel pretty damned safe.

"Mmm. Damn, baby. Need a hand?"

"No. I need more than that. Unless you're too sore?"

"Fuck, no. Get *up* here." Pulling him right up, Mitch reached over to the little clock table and handed him the condoms and lube. "Now."

Twice is less than twenty-four hours might just kill him, but Gus wasn't going to say now. One finger inside told him that Mitch was pretty ready for him, hot as a fire and still open. The condom took a little work to get into place, but Gus managed, finally sliding right home.

"Oh, Jesus fuck, Mitch," he said, panting already. "So damned good. Missed you so much, honey."

"I missed you too, baby." Hands on his shoulders, Mitch held on for the ride, squeezing down on him, making him tighten up fast, making him want to blow.

Gus held on just long enough to take a string of hard kisses, letting Mitch taste them together, letting his orgasm ride up his spine until he wanted to scream. Then he let go,

shooting deep into Mitch, filling that damned condom until he figured it might break.

"That's the way to start the day, honey," Gus said, kissing the side of Mitch's neck. "Tell me you'll stay now."

Mitch pulled back, bright blue eyes serious as they stared into his. "You're asking me to move back in?"

"Yes." All the way, yes.

"No."

He had to let that sink in a few beats. "What? Why not?" Gus pulled away sat up, stripping off the condom and flinging it at the trashcan.

"No just until the end of the season. That's like, three weeks, baby. Then you can come up the Junction and we can do it. I ... I need to prove to you I can do this."

Gus stared, but he could tell from the stubborn set of Mitch's shoulders and chin that the man meant it, one hundred percent.

Well. He'd been the one to ask Mitch to go, to be sure he could stand on his own two feet. "You want me to come, though, right? You want me with you?"

"I do. I want you. Hell, I'll come down on my days off. I just. I have things I need to do. For us."

Running his thumb down the side of Mitch's cheek, Gus sighed. Then nodded. "Okay, babe. Three weeks. Then I'm coming after your ass. Ready or not."

Mitch laughed, the sound light and carefree and good, just like it should be. "You got it, baby. I'll be ready."

* * * *

Mitch knew he was being all mysterious when he asked Gus to meet him at the Ale House instead of at the apartment they used to keep in Grand Junction. That was just it. They used to have it and now they didn't, and Gus was gonna think the worst, at first.

"Hey, man!"

Oh, dude. It was DJ. Just who he didn't need. He'd hung out with the guy a couple times in the last few months because they were buds, and you didn't just dis your buds, but it was always on Mitch's terms. He found out he did a lot fewer dumb things that way.

"Hey, DJ. How's it hanging?"

The guy had such a sweet smile. It was hard to be dismissive. "Good, man. You want to score some with me?"

"Nah. I'm meeting Gus for lunch. But we can hang next weekend if you want. I hear that Rasta band is playing down at the Club."

"Sure. Cool. Have a cold one for me."

"I will."

DJ walked off just as Gus walked up the other direction. "DJ didn't want to join us?" Gus asked, squeezing his shoulder.

"I kinda didn't ask. Told him we'd hang next week. Hey, baby."

"Hey." That smile told him how glad Gus was to see him, how far they'd come in a few months. "What are we doing here?"

"Having the appetizer sampler and a burger. Then we'll go back to the house."

"Yeah?" Gus raised an eyebrow. "You clean it for me? That bathroom was skanky when we left for Moab."

"I cleaned the bathroom, yeah..." Mitch waited until they ordered drinks before dropping the big bomb. "I kinda ... We, uh. We don't have the apartment."

Gus went very still, a heavy red flush creeping up his throat. "You lost the apartment? How? If you gave me all that money instead of paying the rent here..."

"No! No, the lease was up, so I got us something else."

"Honey, I don't get it."

"You will. Just trust me, okay? Can you do that now?"

Every doubt Gus had ever had about him flashed across that tanned face, those green eyes meeting his, searching them. "I want to."

"Then eat your lunch and let me show you after."

Mitch dug in on the fried mushrooms and cheese sticks, and his very lack of concern seemed to make Gus feel better. Bless him, Gus didn't bring it up again, just chattered about the rafting season and how he'd only sent one kid overboard this year and shit. It felt good, to know that Gus really did trust him more now, because even a month ago the man would be badgering him with questions.

"Okay, so you'll follow me?" Mitch asked, tossing his keys in the air and catching them.

"Uh-huh. Lead on, babe."

Score! Hopping into the Jeep, Mitch drove on out toward the Colorado National Monument, the concrete sidewalks gradually giving way to high desert scrub and red rock. About halfway to Fruita they turned off at a little gravel road,

bumping back in until they parked in front of a little frame house with a scrabbly yard and a bunch of ranch fencing.

"What's this, babe?" Gus asked him, jumping out of the truck to slowly turn in circles and look.

"I ... I know it looks run down, but it's solid, and we're both pretty handy ... It's rent to own, baby. I figured we'd try."

"You got us a house?" Oh, look at that *smile*.

"Well, there's no guarantee. But I put the deposit down and have been making payments. Is that cool?"

Gus whooped, grabbing him in a bear hug and swinging him around. "That's more than cool, honey. That's amazing."

"You ready to come home?" he asked, grinning and hugging Gus right back.

"Hell, yes. I love you, honey. I just needed..."

"You needed me to meet you halfway. Not to give up." Mitch hadn't gotten that at first. It was the whole canyon thing, where he was up to his neck in flood water that had gotten through to him. Sitting on rock bottom taught a man a lot about survival. And follow through.

"That's it." Gus kissed him hard. "You've done that and more. I'm sorry."

"Fuck that. Let's just go from here, okay?"

Gus laughed, the sound loud and raucous and full of joy. "You got yourself a deal, babe. Rock solid."

Which was better than rock bottom, any day.

Epilogue

Arches National Park was a sucktastic place to get lost.

So it was a good thing he and Gus had invested in that GPS dealie for the treasure hunts up on Grand Mesa. The trail they usually took the Boy Scout hike on was blocked, and they needed a fast detour.

"Anyone need a break? Need to sit? Everyone got water?" Mitch asked while Gus dealt with finding them a new way back to the bus.

They'd been running their own outfitting business for two years, and they hadn't lost one tourist yet to dehydration or heat exhaustion. It was kind of amazing.

"My water bottle won't come off my belt," some kid said, and Mitch went over to help out, shaking his head at the mess the kid had made of his lanyard.

He met Gus' eyes over the top of the kid's head and winked. Gus grinned, nodding, holding up the GPS unit to show him they had a route.

"Okay, guys, time to get going."

Some days it was harder than others. Some days Mitch just wanted to lie in bed and watch cartoons and smoke some weed.

Most of the time, though ... Well, most of the time these days he thought about Clover Canyon, and about what sorts of things might change a man. When he looked at it that way, he figured he might never really get lost again.

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