



MIA DOWNING

BACK
from the
PAST

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

BACK FROM THE PAST

By Mia Downing

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Photo Description

He stands naked in hip-high water in a lake, gazing down as his hand dips beneath the surface in a ripple of muscle and grace. Damp, dark hair drips from his head, his dark-eyed gaze one of contemplation. He's perfect in form, chiseled through the waist, his abs rippled, his chest broad and firm. However, as beautiful as he is there's a vulnerable air about him that begs one to question how he got there.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This summer has been so incredibly hot. Sure, we used to get the occasional day or two of scorching heat, but lately it's been unrelenting. For weeks now, I've been heading to the river every evening to find some relief, and yesterday I saw him. I know I should've walked away. I know I shouldn't have watched... but I couldn't help myself. He's still as beautiful as he ever was. When did he get back?

Why?

I'm heading back to the river again today. Maybe I'll have the courage to ask him why he left me without warning... why he broke my heart.

Sincerely,

Bookbee

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, cowboy, military, homophobia, illness/disease, reunion, disability

Word count: 12,772

Dedication

I'd like to thank Christi, Kim, Lynne, Emma and Lee for cheering and the beta reading. And thanks to Diana Carlile for the line edits and amazing cover. Thanks to the people behind the scenes in this amazing event for making it happen so seamlessly

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Gregg Madison wiped the sweat from his brow as he stepped over a pile of horse manure. He yanked off his shirt as he turned off the main path, ducking under a low-hanging branch. The shortcut to the lake had become overgrown over the years, now that he and his brothers were older and too busy to make the trek to sneak in a quick swim. His summers as a teen had been spent diving off the little dock or jumping from the tire swing into the cool water, the only respite in the midst of a long Texas heat wave, much like the one they were in now. Each night over the past few weeks he had vowed to bring a pair of shears for the low-hanging branches, and yet he never did.

In the distance, firecrackers crackled, the product of neighbors celebrating the Fourth of July a day early. A huge party occurred every year in honor of Everett Addams, the town's mayor, to celebrate his birthday. With chores done, most of Gregg's family and the ranch hands were off celebrating. He had elected to stay behind, partly to keep an eye on a mare ready to foal, and partly to lick his wounds. Ten years hadn't changed how he felt about the date, not one bit.

He scrambled down the slight hill, sending a spray of rock and dirt from under his booted feet. God, he could almost taste the water, and he licked his parched lips as he tossed his sweaty shirt on a branch, kicked off his boots, and removed his socks. And then he heard a splash.

With a swipe of his hand, Gregg parted the branches. A dark head surfaced a dive's length away from the dock. The guy started swimming, his strong arms slicing the water in perfect, freestyle strokes, propelling that familiar body up the lake toward Gregg. There was no mistaking the width of those shoulders, or the strength of those large hands as they cut through the water.

His heart pounding in his chest, Gregg gulped in a huge breath of air. He fought the onslaught of memories that had fueled his fantasies for a decade. Heated flesh singed his, the hard cock against his leg as insistent as the tongue

probing his mouth... Gregg shook his head to clear it. Everett had hired a new hand to help out, and since the lake was nestled between the two properties, it had to be the new guy.

The swimmer reached shore and rose from the water like a Greek god cast in tanned skin. He shook his head, the spraying water droplets sparkling in the light of the setting sun. No way could Gregg deny who stood not fifty feet from him in waist-high water.

Jase Addams had finally come home.

Gregg's gut tightened and he leaned a palm against a tree to steady himself, unable to tear his gaze away. Jase turned, giving Gregg a profile view. God, ten years and the attraction hadn't faded, his dick now throbbing in his jeans. Every muscle had been honed to military perfection during Jase's years in the service, his body now that of a man instead of an eighteen-year-old boy. The tattoos on his firm, right bicep were new additions and unclear at this distance. Jase always talked about getting a tattoo despite his father's beliefs. Good for him for doing it. Jase hadn't stood up for much against his dad. It was nice to see he'd finally followed his desires in one avenue at least.

Jase glanced down into the water, his right hand dipping under in a motion way too suggestive, one that brought images of how that silky hardness had once pressed into Gregg's hand. Gregg half-moaned and then smothered the rest of the noise with his fist against his lips. He grabbed his shirt off the branch with the other hand and turned, ignoring the swirling mix of angst and desire in the pit of his stomach. No way in hell could he sit there and watch Jase stroke himself, not when that's how it all started.

"I know you're there," Jase called. "Might as well come out."

Gregg froze, reluctant to step out through the branches to reveal himself and his hard-on. What the hell did one say to a former lover, especially one who had up and joined the Marines without any warning? Damn him—without even saying good-bye? The hurt he'd kept at bay for so long slammed into him, catching his breath in his throat. Fuck Jase. Gregg swallowed and turned, ready to creep away. Jase didn't know it was him, anyway.

“Gregg? Come on, man. I swam over here to talk to you. Come out.”

So much for anonymity. Gregg shoved aside the branches and stepped out onto the graveled shore, the pebbles digging into his bare feet. He let his shirt dangle in his hand so it covered the slight bulge he had going in his jeans. The remembered pain had taken care of most of it. “How did you know it was me?”

Jase shrugged. “Tommy said you were the only one using the lake regularly, and I’ve been spying on you for the past five days, trying to get up the courage to say something.”

“Oh. I didn’t see you.” Gregg’s heart hammered a little, since he’d swam nude and jacked off at least twice during that time frame. Had Jase witnessed that?

That smile that used to come so easily lifted the corners of Jase’s mouth. His gaze flitted to Gregg’s jeans and then the smile broadened. “I’m a better spy than you are. Uncle Sam taught me well.”

Gregg rubbed the back of his neck, willing away the creep of heat there. “Yeah, well, the horses don’t like to be spied on.”

“Ranch life seems to agree with you.” The glance Jase cast over Gregg’s body sent a flush of warmth wherever those brown eyes touched. From his bare feet, up his jean-encased thighs, over the shirt he clutched in his hand to his abs and chest, lingering on his lips...

Gregg shivered, unsure what the intensity of that gaze meant until the brown depths finally met his and held. For a split second, Gregg saw everything he’d ever wanted to see—hunger, longing, and a touch of sadness. Then Jase ducked his head and Gregg wondered if he’d imagined the whole thing.

“It doesn’t matter if it did or not. You know I couldn’t leave.” The anger he’d held at bay for so long bubbled up. That had been the argument so many years ago. Jase had wanted out of their narrow-minded town, out of Texas, away from his father. But Gregg’s family had needed him then, and Jase had left despite the agreement they’d reached.

Jase stared intently at the swirls he made with his fingertips on the surface of the lake. “Yeah.”

Gregg cleared his throat. “You back for your dad’s birthday?”

Jase shrugged. “Sorta.”

Jase’s father’s birthday was on the fifth. Since the Addams owned half of the little town, they always held a big picnic in his honor on that day. Jase had always said it was just an excuse for the town to extend the holiday since the crusty bastard didn’t give two shits about anything but making money.

“How long are you home for?”

Jase shrugged again and stared out at the water. “I’m not sure.”

“A day, an evening, a week? Until he kicks you out?”

That got a smile. “He’s already threatened.”

“Probably the minute you slammed the screen door, right?”

Jase nodded, then finally met Gregg’s gaze. “No one knows, but he has cancer. Liver.”

Gregg sucked in a breath, his skin going cold despite the heat. It was rumored Everett had been weaned on whiskey and had cut his teeth on a Longhorn skull. He’d earned every penny of his fortune the hard way, which Gregg admired. But as far he knew, the man had nothing nice to say about anyone except Jesus, his mother, and his deceased wife, in that order. His sons had suffered under his cold and harsh rule because coddling didn’t grow boys into men. Gregg didn’t think anyone even breathed without Everett’s permission. So the idea that he was just as human as everyone else scared him a little.

Gregg found his voice to ask, “Is he dying?”

Jase nodded again. “Unless he can get a transplant, and then the prognosis would be good. I’m a match for a live donor. I’d give him some of my liver, and it would regenerate to what he needed it to be, cancer free. It’s the best solution, and he won’t take it.”

“Why not?”

“He just won’t. You know my dad. Once he makes up his mind, there’s no discussing or convincing.”

“Is Tommy a match, too?” Tommy was two years younger and worked at the bank in town.

“No, his blood type is wrong. But I’m the same. It’s just a matter of setting up the appointments for the rest.” Jase looked lost, more eighteen than twenty-eight at that moment. “I came home to convince him.”

“The Marines let you leave?”

Jase frowned. “I’m not in the service anymore.”

That made no sense. Wouldn’t Jase have come home when his enlistment was up? Deep down, that’s what Gregg had waited for all of these years. For Jase to be done proving he was a man, to realize he was already man enough for Gregg. “Then—”

Jase cocked his head. “You want to swim? You came down here to use the lake.”

Would swimming calm the growing pit in his stomach? Damn, he wanted answers on so many levels. But Jase made it sound like he wasn’t going to disappear any time soon. Gregg could afford to be patient, and that trait had gained him many good things in life. “Sure.”

Then Gregg realized he’d need to strip. His dick had gone soft, so that wasn’t an issue, but the thought of Jase’s eyes on him again... Gregg tossed his shirt over a fallen tree and peeked at Jase as he stood in the hip-high water. Years of honest ranch work had honed Gregg’s body, but he wasn’t hard and ripped like Jase. He had part of a four-pack of abs where Jase had a full six.

Thankfully, Jase took that moment to swim a few strokes away from shore, giving Gregg time to shuck his dusty jeans and sweaty boxers. The humid, hot air was still cooler on his bare skin than clothes. He dove shallow from the shore, knowing the water got deep quick over on this side, the spring-fed water cool and inviting.

Gregg surfaced and wiped the water from his eyes. “Damn, that’s good.”

“Yeah.” Jase treaded water a few feet away. “So your family... I asked Tommy and he said they’re good?”

“Yep.” It felt good for Jase to check up on them from afar, at least.

“Peanut still riding?”

His sister’s nickname always made Gregg smile. “She’s a madwoman. Did the barrels at the last rodeo.” Gwen had been born with cerebral palsy. She walked with a cane but her horse, Dragon, had become her legs. God help the man or woman in her path when she was on a tear.

It hadn’t always been that way, though. She’d fallen in love with horses at five, and Gregg had made it his duty to find out everything possible about making riding safe for her. He volunteered with a local program that specialized in riding for the disabled and learned the ropes. He chose and trained her horses for her. Eventually, he went to school to earn his certification to teach therapeutic riding and to learn how to run a program competently. Now their family’s dude ranch offered what no one else did—a ranch getaway for the entire family, despite any disabilities.

“How old is she now? Sixteen?”

“Eighteen.” Jase had helped choose Gwen’s first horse and train it, and she had worshipped the ground Jase walked on. She’d been eight and bawled like a calf stuck in underbrush when Gregg told her that Jase had left.

The memory of his sister’s pain made him brave enough to say, “You broke her heart when you left, you know.”

Jase heaved a huge sigh. “I’m sorry. You think a dozen roses and dinner at Troy’s Steak House will fix it?”

“No.” A part of Gregg wanted to know where was his steak dinner—screw the roses—but he shifted that aside. “But you could sure try.”

“I’ll stop by the ranch tomorrow.”

“She’d appreciate that.” So would he.

Gregg ducked down and swam a bit, and Jase fell into an easy pace beside him. They swam the length and back, finally stopping at the dock and small boathouse where the water was waist-high. The lake was shared by the Addams and Madison properties, the dock and boathouse sitting smack dab along the property line. The lake was probably the only thing Everett ever openly enjoyed and could often be found fishing at dawn in his silver rowboat.

If that dock could talk... How many couples had stared up at the Milky Way at midnight, shared their first kiss, loved for the first time? Gregg eyed the worn boards and the neat pile of Jase's clothes atop his sneakers. He'd often come and sit on the dock and just think. And remember.

But at times, the memories were too much. Jase's touch, that first time they kissed, his hard flesh against his... Gregg cleared his throat, embarrassed. "You were here, watching me this week?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you come out, say hi or something?"

"Uh." Jase rubbed the back of his neck, his muscles flexing and rippling in a way Gregg liked too much. "You were *busy* the first time. I figured that wasn't the best time to make an appearance."

The back of Gregg's neck went hot and prickly. He wanted to make excuses—it'd been late, no one would have seen, he was damned lonely—but knew it wouldn't matter. "Please tell me you didn't watch." *And didn't hear me call your name as I came...*

Jase waded closer, inches away so Gregg could smell the familiar notes of spice and citrus. Jase's jaw worked for a moment, his lips pursed as if it pained him to think whatever he contemplated. He finally snapped his gaze to Gregg's. "I missed you, too."

Gregg's breath caught in his throat as he took a step back. "Not enough to come home."

"That had nothing to do with you."

“I find that hard to believe. We cross over the line from friends and—*boom*—you up and leave? Without a word? That wasn’t what we had planned. I figured you’d serve your four years and return smarter, not return ten years later because your old man—of all people—needed you.”

Jase raked a hand through his damp hair and heaved out a huge breath. “Does it matter how I got here, as long as I’m back?”

“Hell yes, it matters. Damn you. I thought...” Gregg bit his lip just in time to catch his slip. They’d never said anything about love, even then. They’d always been close friends. Both knew early on they were gay, so it made sense in their tiny town that they’d turn to each other. But Gregg had loved Jase from day one. He just didn’t know it until it was too late. “You should have said good-bye.”

Jase hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Like I said, it doesn’t matter. Let’s just move on, okay?”

“Fuck you, Jase.” Gregg dove under and swam toward the other end of the lake, his hands pounding the water with every stroke. His lungs burned and he welcomed it, embraced the sting of his muscles as he stretched his arms out and kicked his feet. Anything to kill the pain.

Gregg turned his head for a breath just as Jase grabbed his ankle and pulled him under. He struggled in a flurry of bubbles, his free foot connecting with a hard thigh. Jase released his leg, his fingers digging into Gregg’s bicep. His other arm wrapped around Gregg’s chest, hauling him back and at the same time, lifting his head out of the water.

A rush of hot, humid air filled Gregg’s lungs and ignited a bellow of pain and anger. Jase had always been bigger, stronger, taller, the football star to his smaller, more wiry, cowboy frame. The hard muscles of Jase’s chest pressed into his back and Gregg lunged forward, trying to break the grip. Unsuccessful, he tried turning, shoving Jase’s shoulders, pushing his legs for leverage against Jase’s thighs. Gregg’s right foot slipped, and where there should have been shin he met with a swirl of water in empty space.

Gregg froze. Jase also went still, the water just deep enough for him to stand on tiptoe and not go under. Gregg lifted both feet this time, found purchase on Jase's thighs and trailed his toes down the corded lengths. His left foot hit knee. His right slipped off right below the knee. Oh, shit, nothing, not even when he kicked out, hoping Jase's leg was just bent, out of the way... nothing. His gaze snapped to Jase's, searching the depths of those brown eyes for an answer.

"It's been nine years," Jase said softly, his arms still wrapped around Gregg. "It's okay."

"What the hell?" Gregg croaked out. "Your leg."

"Why don't we get out and sit on the dock." Jase tugged Gregg's arm and he sank into the water, doing a sidestroke with Gregg in tow.

"But your leg." Oh God, what an asshole to make Jase do all the work. Gregg shrugged out of his grip and swam on his own, his mind spinning. Jase was so active, so full of life. Jase used to run, ride, play football... "You out-swam me!"

"I've always been faster than you. Some things are never going to change." Jase laughed as they reached the end of the dock. "It doesn't define who I am. Hell, you teach enough people with disabilities to know that. I never expected this reaction from you."

In a ripple of muscle and tanned skin, Jase pushed his palms on the dock and launched himself up, turning slightly in the air to settle his bare ass on the worn wood. He winced and leaned to the side, arranging things.

Gregg vaulted up to the right of Jase, his movements nowhere as fluid, water dripping from his body. As badly as Gregg wanted, he refused to look down, instead taking in the tattoos on Jase's bicep. "Semper Fidelis" encircled his arm in flowing script. Just above, a fire-breathing dragon flew in a blaze of red scales, ridden by a...

"Peanut?"

“What?” Jase glanced over his shoulder, checking the beach, then turned back with a furrowed brow.

Gregg pointed to Jase’s arm. “Why is the peanut dude riding a dragon?”

He always loved that soft smile, the one that hinted of all the warmth Jase hid. “It’s not a peanut *dude*. Think about it.”

Gregg studied the intricate design again, the pink bow on the peanut’s head. Peanut. His sister, and her horse, Dragon. That realization stirred every ounce of bittersweet agony. Jase had spent just as much time helping to train Dragon and assisting Gwen as Gregg had. He’d spent more time at the Circle M than at home. Gregg swallowed the lump in his throat, longing to trace the outline of those broad wings with his finger. “You cared.”

Jase shook his head. “I still care. Your sister was a huge role model for me during my recovery. She had overcome so much, achieved so much, and never complained. I had loved helping you train Dragon for her. That summer was magical for me.”

“Not magical enough for you to return.” That sounded every bit as spoiled and petty as Gregg felt.

Jase sighed and stared out at the water, looking much older than twenty-eight. For the first time, Gregg noticed the dark shadows under his eyes and a deeper furrow in his brow. “I couldn’t.”

The finality in that statement gripped at Gregg’s heart and squeezed. “But—”

Jase shook his head. “It’s the past. It’s over. It changes nothing.”

“It changes everything. A part of me has been waiting for you to come home to tell me to move on, to even tell me to fuck off. So... get on with it.”

“Shit.”

Gregg drew in a ragged breath, wishing he could take back those words, but at the same time, needing to hear them. “Do it.”

Jase's jaw clenched and he ground his teeth, just like he used to when stressed. His lips straightened into a firm line, his narrowed, brown eyes taking on a dangerous sparkle. "I can't," he said hoarsely.

Jase leaned in and brushed his lips against Gregg's, his mouth softening despite the tension radiating off his body. A shudder swept through Gregg, and he closed his eyes, inhaling Jase's citrusy scent. He savored that sweet, gentle caress of Jase's slanted mouth, the light pressure enough to send shocks along Gregg's upper lip. Damn it felt good, way too much like the fantasies that had fed his dreams for a decade. Only real.

Just when Gregg thought Jase would pull away, he leaned closer, his hand cupping Gregg's jaw. Those lips grew more insistent, Jase's tongue tentatively tasting the seam of Gregg's mouth. Desire heated his skin like it had baked for a day under the sun. His balls tightened and his cock stirred again.

Something buzzed from across the lake, the noise loud and too familiar.

Gregg ended the kiss and rested his forehead on Jase's, trying to catch his breath. "That's my alarm."

"You set an alarm?"

"I have a mare who looks ready to foal, and she's had issues in the past. I want to check her every hour. She usually waits to foal until the middle of the night..." He pulled away, avoiding Jase's gaze. Damn, he didn't want to leave. The alarm stopped but he knew it would start in again, very soon, reminding him of life and his duties.

Jase nodded slowly, his caressing thumb sending shocks along Gregg's jaw. "But you're worried."

"Yeah." That word hurt to say when Jase was finally touching him. "You know mares. They choose when it's most inconvenient."

Jase's hand slid down his jaw, his fingertips lingering for a heartbeat on Gregg's chin then falling away. "Go."

The damned phone buzzed again, and Gregg sighed with regret. "Will you stop by tomorrow? To see Peanut?"

“Of course.” Jase’s Adam’s apple bobbed in the shadows of dusk. “Just because I didn’t contact you, doesn’t mean I didn’t miss you.”

It was so hard to believe. Growing up, he’d spent every day with Jase since kindergarten, when Everett bought the ranch next door after the boys’ mom had died. They’d been almost inseparable until Jase left. Whatever kept him away... It had to be bad, right?

Gregg ignored the tightening in his gut as he cleared his throat. “See ya tomorrow.”

Gregg slipped into the water with a small splash and dove shallow. He surfaced and rolled in the cool water, taking in Jase’s form on the dock. He looked like the Jase he knew and loved, only missing part of a leg. In fact, the stump wasn’t any more interesting than the ones he’d seen over the years with his work at the ranch.

“Hey,” Jase called with a lift of his chin. “You fixin’ to sleep in the barn?”

“Yeah.”

“What if I came by later and kept you company?”

Gregg fought the surge of desire stirring the heat. How many nights had they spent in the hayloft? Talking, dreaming, sleeping, sharing a stolen kiss out of sight of prying eyes... Damn, he had missed Jase. Even if he just came and they talked... that would be enough. “Just like old times.”

“Yeah. I’ll bring a sleeping bag.”

“Later, then.”

Jase walked back to his dad’s place fighting the extra spring in his step, using the flashlight app on his phone to light the darkening path. Crickets chirped in the still, humid air, their trill quieting as he passed them, only to start up again once he was gone. He’d had a crush on Gregg since he was fourteen, but had run to the Marines at eighteen, afraid of the pain and turmoil those feelings would eventually cause. Now he was back, and damned if he

didn't want to give in to the swirl of emotion that made him want to give a fist pump from sheer joy.

And damn if it still wasn't just as risky now as it was a decade ago.

As sternly as Jase had lectured himself to not get involved again, to leave the past in the past... it hadn't worked. He'd only gone down to the lake to swim, never dreaming he'd catch Gregg there that first night, swimming in that lazy sidestroke he liked to use. He'd hunkered down in a secluded location and relished the simple act of Gregg toweling off like a starved man.

The next night he returned at the same time, and then the next, telling himself it was just to swim, not to watch Gregg stare sadly out at the water only to lie back on the dock and stroke his hard cock to orgasm. Desire and jealousy had stirred in Jase then just as it did now. Who did Gregg think of as he arched his back and came?

Jase kicked a rock out of his path. That jealousy was what made him call out to Gregg earlier. As potentially dangerous as it was to be involved with Gregg, he couldn't resist the urge. Finally seeing Gregg and connecting with him... damn awesome. Kissing him... fucking awesome. He closed his eyes for a moment, hearing his dad in his mind, lecturing him about the foul language. *Once a Marine, always a Marine* is what he'd say in retort. But hearing that admonishment from his father always stung.

No matter what Jase did, he never felt like a man in his father's eyes. Joining the Marines would have been up there, if not for the real reason why he went. It was just a sham, covering up Jase's failures. Then he had to go get his leg fucked—*er, sorry Dad*, screwed—up and amputated—more failure.

His career as an occupational therapist in Washington, D.C. slanted the path straight to hell a little, so it was inclined like a slide to Satan instead of a free-fall drop. Helping wounded soldiers acclimate to life was noble as far as his dad was concerned. Nothing truly took away the pain and humiliation of having a gay, crippled son.

Jase rounded the corner of the barn. Ahead, the main house loomed dark, with only the porch light shining. His dad would be in town at the celebratory

picnic taking place in his honor, with Tommy as his escort. The picnic would be followed by fireworks and had been held a few days early because the fifth was a Monday and a Monday holiday in his honor just wouldn't do. Everett did not tolerate excessive celebrations, nor did he tolerate partying on the Sabbath.

The small motor home Jase had purchased when he sold his home in D.C. was parked between the barn and the main house. He'd bought it when he made the decision to come home to beg Dad to take his liver, figuring it would be easier on everyone if he had his own space. What he hadn't counted on was Everett pitching a fit about it, because family stayed with family, not in some rolling bed on wheels. That had been said with a sniff that implied sin and debauchery took place all across America in that bed. Jase snorted. He wished.

Actually, he didn't. Not at all.

Jase opened the door and climbed in, heading to the back to the tiny bedroom and the closet just outside. Clean jeans and a shirt were in order, and he shoved them in a duffle. His hand settled on the handle of a built-in drawer and his heart hammered. Should he? It had been so damned long. After a second's more hesitation, he opened the drawer and pulled out some condoms and lube. Better to be safe than sorry later. But his fingers trembled around the bottle of lube, and all of that guilt and excitement mingled to gnaw at his stomach lining.

"Fuck it," he muttered and chucked it in. He whipped out his phone and texted Tommy that he was going out and to call his cell if they were looking for him. His father would never admit to needing him. Tommy responded with a quick "K," and that was that. No battle, no third-degree, probably because he hadn't mentioned it to their dad.

That done, Jase went back outside to the beloved Jeep he'd hauled across the country behind the camper. Tonight was about seeing an old friend again, nothing more. If they got a healthy foal out of it, all the better.

Jase pulled the Jeep over to the far side of the barn, away from Gregg's house. His headlights illuminated corrals of horses in the distance, their coats gleaming in the light, the fencing neat and orderly like it had always been. The Circle M was known far and wide for their excellent care for both the horses and humans who inhabited the ranch.

Jase had kept up with the Madisons through the internet, spying from afar as their unique business venture grew in popularity. He told himself he was just keeping tabs on things back home, but he'd printed a few of the articles where Gregg was featured, proud as heck his childhood friend was making a difference in the world. A dirty part of him had wanted the Gregg in the photo to turn around so he could get a view of his tight ass in those jeans. Or be able to lean in and smell the leather mixed with sweat, or to make those blue eyes sparkle again like they were in the photo...

The Jeep now parked, he climbed out and grabbed his duffle. He rounded the corner, noting the main house still looked much like his own, dimly lit by just a porch light. The new barn glowed with light, though, and he went in through the large open doors. There appeared to be ten stalls on each side, divided up in the center by closed doors probably for the office or the tack room. Everything was neat and tidy—the wood stained, the paint crisp, every tool hung or hidden. The barn smelled of fresh hay, one of his favorite scents, one that his mind could conjure anywhere, be it in a hospital or the back of some military vehicle.

“Hello?” he called.

“Hey.” Gregg's voice drifted down the cement aisle. “I'm in with Tasha.”

Jase left his duffle on the floor by the big doors and ventured down the aisle. All the stalls were empty but tidy. The last generous stall was bedded knee-deep in straw, and in the corner a bay mare pulled hay from a rack.

Gregg was at her rear end, his hand on her dark brown hip as he glanced at his watch. He had changed into beige shorts and a blue sleeveless T-shirt, his sandy hair a little damp, and his shoulders and hair were flaked with tiny bits

of hay. His biceps bulged a little as he shifted and cocked a hip, his sneakered feet crossing to display firm calves and thighs.

Jase swallowed despite his mouth going dry. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s fine.” Gregg removed a thermometer from under her tail and checked it. “Everything’s normal and she’s not the least bit interested in popping out a baby at this moment, as you can see.”

The mare snorted as if in agreement and Jase laughed. “She’s beautiful.”

“She’s my dad’s prized broodmare. Her last colt sold for a bundle.” Gregg wiped the thermometer with a rag from his pocket and put it back in the container. He gestured toward the stall door. “Shall we?”

They exited and Gregg slid the door shut behind them. He stashed the thermometer and rag on a shelf in front of the mare’s stall, squirted a bit of antibacterial gel onto his hands from the same shelf, then scribbled something on a clipboard filled with columns.

“Okay, that’s done.” Gregg hung the clipboard on Tasha’s door and shoved his hands in his pockets, his shoulders rolling slightly. He smiled that crooked smile Jase had missed so much, one that was about as far from sexy as tousled hair flecked in hay.

“When do you check her again?”

“Midnight, then we all take different shifts so none of us are going days without sleep. I’ll do six.” He removed a hand from his pocket and gestured toward the door. “Ready?”

They fell into step next to each other and Jase grabbed his duffle from the floor. Gregg hit a light switch so the aisle went dark, except for a light coming from Tasha’s stall. “We’re really going to hang out in the hayloft?”

Gregg laughed. “Yep.”

He turned left and climbed the stairs, Jase falling into step right behind him. Not smart. How had he forgotten what Gregg’s ass did to him? Now that he’d given in to his attraction to Gregg, a trip up the hayloft stairs was all it took to get hard. He fought the swirling of heat, his balls growing heavy as his

cock stiffened. Quickly, he thought of his dad and the voice of disapproval, an instant cure for anything sexual. So when Gregg reached the landing, the evidence had disappeared. Gregg opened a door and stepped aside so Jase could brush past him.

Jase steeled himself for dusty bales and cobwebs but was met instead with a comfortable leather sofa and other contemporary furniture in a small, neat apartment. Off to the right was a small kitchen area, and in the far back a door opened to a dim bedroom. “Oh, wow.”

A light flicked on, and Gregg crossed the room to flip another switch by the desk. “Not what you expected, huh?”

“No, not at all.” Jase set his duffle down on a chair and stepped into the living area. A sweet flat screen TV occupied one wall, flanked by two bookcases. Those held photos in decorative frames, a few books, and a few old trophies. He picked up a picture of Gwen bent over Dragon’s neck, hugging him. She was still just as pretty, her blue eyes shining from under the brim of her hat.

Jase returned the photo to the shelf and turned. Gregg was in the corner leaning over a desk, looking at a small monitor. He frowned. A quick dial adjustment and the pregnant mare flickered onto the screen from her stall, still eating hay.

Jase gestured to the screen. “You can watch her from here?”

“Yeah, but I still go down and check her when it’s time. There’s a monitor in the main house, too.” Gregg nodded with satisfaction and smiled at Jase. “My parents built the barn after you left and added in an apartment, too. They figured I needed my own space when I hit my twenties.”

For some reason, the idea of Gregg in his own place and entertaining random guys—or worse, boyfriends—drummed up jealousy. He had no right, but it still stung. “Still awkward for relationships, though. Right?”

Gregg froze and then shrugged, his eyes averted. “Not really.”

That only fueled the fire. Jase tamped that churning down right quick. *You have no right.* “Do they know? Your parents?”

“Yes.” Gregg adjusted another knob and sound kicked in. The mare snorted and then munched along to a soft, mechanical hum. Gregg sighed, pulled a rolling desk chair over, and plopped down on it. “They found out when they read a letter I had written to you. I’d left it in the living room.”

Oh God, to be eighteen and face that hell alone... It was why Jase had left. But Gregg had a different life, different parents. “Were they mad?”

Gregg’s lips thinned, and his eyes narrowed. “They were more concerned at how upset I was, to the point they were relieved to finally understand what the hell was wrong with me.”

He hadn’t wanted to consider that. He had figured Gregg would rebound quickly, move on, and forget him. Jase had stepped into the hell of basic training to help him along, though his nights had been treacherous. “Gregg. I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” Gregg cocked his head. “You never answered my letters, once I found out from Tommy where to send them. You never called, even when you would have needed a friend.” His blue eyes flicked to Jase’s prosthesis, hidden under his jeans. “You just turned tail and left.”

“I did what I had to do.” It was getting harder and harder to believe that, though.

“I think you owe me an explanation.” Gregg pointed. “Sit.”

Maybe he did.

Jase dragged over the second chair, sat at the desk and picked up a paper clip, the metal cold under his fingers. He played with it a little, letting it bite into the pad of his thumb as he weighed his options. So hard to admit the truth, especially when he’d never voiced this aloud, to anyone. Ever.

“I left because my dad found out—somehow—that I had been messing around with guys. Only, he didn’t know it was you.”

Gregg's expression softened to one of understanding. He wheeled his chair over so his knees brushed Jase's, his hand sliding to Jase's thigh. "You could have come to us. My parents would have understood. Maybe they wouldn't have approved, and we sure as hell wouldn't have been welcomed as lovers, but they wouldn't have turned you away."

How he wished he could have done that. Jase stared at the monitor, the mare now taking a long sip of water from her bucket. She'd be a wonderful mother, strong and protective, and she'd love her baby no matter what. If only humans were that simple. "I love my dad, you know I do. But he's a bastard."

That got a quirk of a smile. "No shit."

Half of Texas probably knew Everett was a hardheaded bastard. "He's very religious, and if I were to label him, I'd say he was homophobic."

"Again, no shit. We go to the same church, Jase. He owns half of the town and has no problem voicing how he feels. You knew how I felt about your relationship with him. I think it's noble as hell that you'd come back and offer him part of you liver, and it doesn't surprise me one bit he said no." Gregg touched Jase's thigh softly, the pads of his fingers hot through the denim. "But I still don't get why you thought you had to run."

Big, deep breath. Jase fought to keep himself in the now instead of fading into the very vivid memories. "He was livid. He told me if he ever found out who I was screwing, he'd ruin their lives with every penny of his fortune. He'd run them out of town and out of Texas. My *problem* was nothing that religion and service to our country couldn't fix, once he purged the sin from the area."

Gregg blinked rapidly, his chest rising and falling in short breaths.

Jase shrugged. "I know that's not true, but he was serious. The next day, he ripped apart my room looking for proof, for names, for someone to blame. He had the power even then to ruin your family. You were just getting the dude ranch off the ground. He could have made all of those plans virtually impossible."

"No." Gregg shook his head.

“Yes, he would have. So I made him a deal. I’d join the service, I’d pray every day. He thought that would be enough to make me straight again.” Jase twirled the paper clip on the desk. So many thoughts to gather, to sort, to share. “I didn’t come home after I lost my leg because it was too soon. I was still afraid, even though I wanted my friends and family more than anything. I missed you every day. But a part of me felt like a failure. Maybe a childish part believed him. I was defective for being attracted to you and all I needed was an ass-whooping from a drill sergeant to make it all right.”

“It didn’t work.” Gregg’s hand cupped Jase’s thigh, the touch more soothing than intimate.

Jase barked out a bitter laugh. “Of course not. I tried dating girls but they didn’t have what turned me on.” And if he were perfectly honest... Jase drew in a ragged breath, met Gregg’s gaze head-on, and whispered, “And the guys... they weren’t you.”

“Jase,” Gregg whispered back.

This time, Gregg leaned in to kiss him. Those firm lips brushed his softly, and just like the hand on his leg, it was more soothing than sexual. Jase closed his eyes and let himself sink into the experience. Gregg’s hand on his thigh, the other now sliding to cup his jaw, Gregg’s thumb brushing his cheek. The faint scent of fresh hay and spicy deodorant offered another layer of comfort, one that Jase relished and hadn’t realized he’d missed.

Gregg pulled away. Breathing ragged, he rested his forehead on Jase’s. “So. What made you brave enough to come back?”

“I figured Dad wouldn’t broadcast my return, and when I first showed up, Tommy neglected to tell me Dad wouldn’t take a donation from me. He had just said to come. I figured he’d want my liver and I could use it to negotiate.”

Gregg snapped back and leaned into his chair, his eyes wide. “Wow. That’s... wrong on a few levels.”

Yeah, it was. “You know my dad. He understands deals and negotiations. He lives for them. He’s never going to accept that I’m gay. But I had sort of

banked on him choosing life over my issues.” Now Jase had no clue what to do.

Gregg nodded. “Did he come out and say that’s why he didn’t want your liver?”

“Uh, no. He just looked at me with that stern, no-nonsense glare and said, ‘No. End of discussion.’ I figured he didn’t want a gay, crippled boy’s liver. It has to be as much of a failure as I am.” Jase steeled himself for the pity but instead caught a glint of anger in Gregg’s eyes.

“Jase. You’re not a failure. Like I said, the fact that you’d come back and offer... amazing.” Gregg raked a hand through his hair, scattering the bits of hay all over his shirt and the desk. He brushed them off and sighed. “I think you need to talk to him, even if you’re not planning to stay. Clear the air, find out why. I can just imagine how tense the house must be.”

Jase didn’t want to contemplate that conversation. Not tonight. “I bought a motor home. I have my own space.”

Gregg quirked a brow and a smile grew. “Nice, dry bed?”

Jase grinned back. It had been an inside joke between them since preschool. Gregg had company one weekend and had complained about sleeping with his cousin, who had wet the bed. “I splurged on a great mattress.”

They sat in companionable near-silence disturbed by the sound of Tasha’s munching. Gregg cleared his throat. “You want to watch a movie?”

“Yeah.”

Gregg rose and gestured to the couch. “Let’s go. I’ll make popcorn, you pick something out. I’ve got beer, too. I hope you like the small brewery stuff.”

“Yeah, I do.” Jase grinned and went to do as asked. Damn, it felt good to be home.

Gregg finished recording stats on Tasha's clipboard and turned to Jase. He leaned against the opposite wall, hands behind his back. That stance puffed out his already muscular chest, the ripples of muscle there and along his stomach visible through the material of his T-shirt. "No baby tonight."

"No?"

"I doubt it." Gregg shifted a little, afraid to ask *what now*. How long Jase would be in town was iffy, and he didn't dare ask about the future. Gregg wanted more time, more closeness, be it quiet companionship, or a kiss, or... sex. He just wanted more Jase.

Earlier, they'd put in a movie, but it had turned out lame. The conversation, though, seemed to flow fine, talking about everything and anything—family and friends, Gregg's experiences learning to become a therapeutic riding instructor, Jase's struggle to learn to walk again. They skirted personal relationships and sex as if they were both taboo topics. Not that Gregg had much to talk about anyway. A few dates, some groping in a dark, Houston bar, a few one-night stands. But as Jase had said, none held his attraction or attention because they weren't Jase.

He didn't want to know who Jase had screwed or loved. Well, a sick part of him did, but he was realistic. Jase had walked away, never expecting to return. No way in hell had the man been celibate.

And what guy wouldn't want to tap that? Six feet of sheer muscle and strength, intelligent brown eyes and a killer smile. That Jase had kept himself in tip-top shape said a lot for his drive and ambition. And coming back for his dad like that despite their issues... pure loyalty and inner strength. Jase had been born and bred to be a Marine on so many levels. He just didn't recognize the qualities he had that made him a cut above the rest.

"So," Gregg ventured, breaking the silence. "What now?"

Jase's Adam's apple bobbed and he glanced to the main house where the lights were still dim. "Are you kicking me out?"

"Hell, no!" Maybe that sounded a bit too forceful.

But Jase grinned, those even, white teeth flashing in the dim light. “Do you have ice cream?”

“You know it.” Jase loved ice cream. Funny that Gregg didn’t crave it like some guys, but he’d always kept a half gallon in the freezer, just in case. He usually ended up sending it the main house but ice cream inadvertently ended up in his freezer the next shopping trip.

“Then... sundaes?”

“Done deal.” Gregg led the way down the aisle and up the stairs. Behind him, Jase sucked in a breath and Gregg froze. He turned at the top of the stairs, concerned. Jase was fine, though he shot him a pained wince. “You okay?” He wanted to ask about his leg, but figured it was rude.

“Damn it.” Jase shook his head and shifted his hips. “I’m sorry if this is too much of an echo of the past, but you can’t climb the stairs in front of me. Your ass is too fine. It’s true, damn it. Every time I watch you climb the stairs, I get wood.”

Gregg’s heartbeat amped up a notch and his dick immediately jumped to attention. Sure enough, a tell-tale bulge pressed against Jase’s zipper, heading off to the left in a ridge of hard-on. “You didn’t get wood earlier.”

“I did. I just hid it well.”

Oh, shit. He didn’t need to know that. Or did he? Gregg met Jase’s gaze and went immediately rock-hard. Those irises had dilated so his eyes were almost black with lust. Desire for him. Gregg licked his lips and Jase’s gaze darted to follow the sweep of his tongue, his expression becoming hungrier by the second.

Outside, a horse whinnied and another answered. Gregg blinked and fought for composure. For a moment, vulnerability made his confidence falter. The chemistry between them crackled and burned, promising explosive sex. A part of him wanted that, badly. But a part of him feared the next day, or the next week, when Jase would leave again.

The cicadas buzzed a little louder in the distance, as if spurring Gregg on to make a choice. When they climbed those stairs, Jase would be his. Jase cocked his head as if he sensed Gregg's dilemma but he balanced on the step, waiting patiently.

Gregg swallowed and made his choice. "Still coming up?" He'd be damned if he missed this opportunity to hold Jase again. He wasn't strong enough to say no, even if he wanted.

Jase's grin could light up the darkest cave. "You bet."

Gregg opened the door, conscious of Jase's gaze on his ass as he brushed by. Gregg shut the door and then deftly locked it, the sound of the lock causing Jase to turn with a questioning glance. Gregg never had to lock the door before, seeing as he'd never brought home a guest before. Not this kind, anyway. Then realization must have dawned because Jase's gaze got even hungrier as he perused Gregg's form with a slow sweep of his head.

Before he lost his nerve, Gregg crossed the floor and embraced Jase, cupping his jaw in his hand as their mouths met. Jase moaned, and immediately the kiss turned hot and wet, lips parting, tongues clashing. Gregg's chest tightened, the furious pounding of his heart mixing with a rush of adrenaline. The rasp of Jase's tongue against his sent a tingle of electricity straight to Gregg's cock. The blood surged and his entire shaft tightened. Jase tugged Gregg closer, wrapping his right arm around him so their hips collided.

Jase broke the kiss and slid his mouth to Gregg's ear, his tongue hot along the outer shell. Shivers of delight danced along Gregg's spine and he tugged Jase's T-shirt from his jeans, wanting to spread a few shivers of his own. Jase used one arm to yank his own shirt off over his head and returned to kissing Gregg's neck, then his jaw, then finally his mouth again.

It had been too long since Gregg had enjoyed the hardness of a man's body. Jase's form had filled out since the last time, and he savored exploring each valley and hill of flesh. The hair on Jase's chest was crisp and not too dense but thicker than when they were teens. Gregg teased the pucker of Jase's

nipples with the pads of his fingers, loving how Jase moaned and arched under his touch.

Gregg had to taste Jase's skin again. He ended the kiss to explore with his mouth, starting at Jase's collarbone. Gentle kisses made a path between the swell of Jase's pecs, then off to the side to taste his right nipple. The nub hardened even more as his tongue rasped over the tip. Jase rocked his hips against Gregg's, his erection insistent.

"Stop," Jase groaned. "It feels good but I want your shirt off, too."

Aware they were in the entryway with a set of windows facing the main house, Gregg decided it was time to move the action. "Bedroom?"

Jase dropped a kiss to Gregg's lips and smiled. "Yeah."

Jase held Gregg's hand as they headed for the bedroom, excited and a little nervous. It had been eons since he'd had sex, and that meant he had to make a decision—prosthesis on or off. He was leaning toward off, but it felt awkward and odd, yet exciting, all at the same time.

Gregg rounded the bed and clicked the light on the side table. The soft glow caught the glitter in Gregg's eyes, now turbulent and dark with lust. He yanked his shirt over his head, his chest and stomach nicely muscled from honest work, not from living at the gym like Jase. Jase got his boots and jeans off, then sat at the edge of the bed to remove his leg.

Gregg sat next to him and unlaced his sneakers. "I had wondered if it needed to come off."

"Does that bother you?"

"Hell, no." Gregg leaned over and cupped Jase's erection through his boxers. He palmed the length, stroking from root to tip, then back again. "It would bother me if this weren't hard, though."

"No problem there." Jase's cock went from hard to diamond-hard, his shaft straining against the cotton fabric, wanting more of Gregg's touch.

“Good.” Gregg turned Jase’s chin with his free hand and kissed him hard, his tongue plunging between his lips with firm strokes. Jase leaned to the side a little, taking Gregg with him as he tucked his prosthesis out of the way, under the bed.

As soon as Jase righted himself, Gregg broke the kiss and shoved him back on the bed. “Let’s get you out of these boxers.”

Insistent fingers wrapped around the waistband of Jase’s boxers and tugged. Jase lifted his hips, and as the material slid down, his cock bobbed free. The boxers sailed through the air to the other side of the bedroom and Gregg’s mouth settled over the head.

Jase hissed and bucked, surprised by Gregg’s boldness. In the past, Jase had led the way. But Gregg wasted no time in swirling his tongue around the tip of Jase’s cock, sweeping the slit for pre-cum, exploring the sensitive knot of flesh on the underside. Jase sank a hand in Gregg’s hair and closed his eyes, reveling in the soft suction, the gentle licks of tongue, and the caress of Gregg’s hands along his thighs.

“Fuck, no, too fast,” Jase said in between pants. Already his balls were tightening, threatening to put a halt to the pleasure. Damn it, he wanted to last.

Gregg lifted off Jase’s shaft with a long, slow lick. “You can come again. We have all night. I get tomorrow off from work. I don’t care how we do this. We don’t even have to do intercourse. As long as I get to love you, I’m happy.”

The word “love” tugged at Jase’s heart. He swallowed as Gregg busied himself again with languid strokes of his tongue on Jase’s cock. He wondered if Gregg even knew he’d said that. Love. “Would you top me?”

Gregg planted a hot kiss above Jase’s navel. “I’ll do whatever you want. I can make you come like this and be just as happy. I think you’d like some lube, though.”

“In my duffle.” Gregg sprang from the bed with lightning speed, and Jase had to laugh at his eagerness. Jase called, “There are condoms, too.”

Gregg returned with both, his hard cock bobbing with each step. “Thank God you had something. I didn’t.”

For some reason, Jase didn’t want Gregg getting the wrong idea. “My roommate had left a brand-new box in the motor home. The lube is mine, though.”

“Let’s put them to good use.” Gregg squirted out a generous dollop of lube into his palm and his hand covered Jase’s cock again. “Much better.”

Jase grabbed the lube and did the same, his hand finally settling over Gregg’s shaft. So damned good to stroke Gregg again. They lay back and kissed slow and deep, Jase’s tongue exploring Gregg’s mouth in languorous strokes. With every pump of Gregg’s hand, Jase panted and writhed, bucking harder into his strong grip. He slid his hips closer to Gregg until his cock and Gregg’s hand brushed his own fist. Gregg moaned and they synchronized their strokes, matching each sweep in intensity.

As much as Jase wanted to wait... he wanted to come with Gregg more. Now. His breathing came in ragged pants and he broke the kiss to get more air. He clutched Gregg closer, mashing their chests together nipple to nipple. Jase licked and sucked Gregg’s neck, relishing his earthy scent, loving the slide of his tongue over Gregg’s flesh.

Gregg hugged him back, his grip fierce as his hips ground into Jase’s. This is what he’d craved, what he had missed, those strong arms clutching him tight, welcoming him. Jase’s cock tightened in Gregg’s firm grip, his skin all over his body tingling with energy.

“God, yes, Jase. Yes,” Gregg whispered against Jase’s neck. “Come for me.”

That was all it took, the sound of Gregg’s voice launching him over the edge of bliss. Jase’s hips jerked and pleasure exploded from his balls and the base of his cock. He came in hot, satisfying streams that covered their hands and his chest, Gregg’s too. Spent, he rocked gently a few more times despite the flush of pleasurable fatigue.

Gregg followed him in ecstasy just a heartbeat behind, his low moan one of pleasure. His lips sucked at Jase's neck as he shoved his cock into Jase's grip, his orgasm spilling hot and thick along the same path Jase's had taken.

Finally, Jase collapsed into the mattress in a haze of pleasure, unable to do more than pant and hope to hell his heart wouldn't hammer out of his chest. He nuzzled Gregg's neck, then worked his way across Gregg's stubbled jaw to his lips, kissing him softly this time.

"That was amazing," Jase said when they ended the kiss and their breathing returned to normal.

"I missed you," Gregg murmured. "Not just that, but all of you."

Warmth flooded Jase's veins, bathing him in a simpler kind of pleasure. He just wanted to relax into the sensation of being one with Gregg and never let go. But eventually, they'd need to clean up. "I know. Same here."

They languished a moment in companionable silence before Gregg rolled and rose from the bed. He padded to the bathroom and ran some warm water. He returned a few minutes later with a damp towel and tossed it to Jase.

Once clean, Gregg settled back onto the bed, his head on Jase's shoulder. Jase sighed as Gregg brushed his hand over Jase's bicep, tracing the wings of the dragon.

Gregg asked, "Not to kill the mood, but now what?"

Jase cocked a brow in Gregg's direction, trying to lighten things up. "More sex?"

"Well, yeah. But at some point we need to discuss the future. I'm not letting the past repeat itself."

Jase sighed and rolled so he could study Gregg's expression while he talked. This wasn't going to be easy. "I don't know what to tell you. I have a few job offers, one in Houston, another in Seattle near my cousin." Jase propped himself up on an elbow. "It all depends on Dad, but I could stay."

"He doesn't need to know about us."

Jase sighed, wishing they could keep it a huge secret. Jase bit his tongue on what he wanted to voice—if his dad didn't take the liver, they wouldn't have to hide for long. Guilt gnawed at his conscience and Jase wished he was a better man.

Instead, Jase said, “Eventually, he'll figure it out. If he does, he can and will make your life miserable if he chooses. He can foul up the permits you need, or screw you out of loads of feed, or he can make sure the farrier and vet are too busy to come out this way. All he has to do is drop a few dollars, spread some rumors that have nothing to do with sex and the Circle M will be in trouble.”

“I'm going to sound like a two-year-old when I say this, but screw it. It's not fair for him to rule your life and mine like this.”

And suddenly it was almost the same discussion they'd had a decade ago. Jase couldn't stay, Gregg couldn't go, and there seemed to be no middle ground in between. Not unless his dad could be made to see things differently. And just like when he was eighteen, Jase felt the walls closing in.

“Life isn't fair.” Jase kissed Gregg gently on the lips, and suddenly found the words he wanted to say. “I promise I'll stand and fight this time, though. I won't run without telling you. I'll face the problem head on and see where the journey takes us.”

“Thank you.” Gregg kissed Jase and his hand roamed over Jase's body. Despite having one hell of an orgasm not that long ago, Jase's cock began to stir as Gregg's hand caressed lower, and lower, and lower...

Jase's shaft stiffened in Gregg's fist and the grin Gregg shot was purely devilish. “Now, more sex?”

Who could pass up an offer like that? Jase grinned back and began his own exploration, starting at Gregg's stomach. “You're on.”

Jase pulled the Jeep up behind his motor home just after six thirty in the morning. They had checked the mare one last time, then showered together

due more to time constraints than intimacy, though it had been damn fun. He'd kept his emotions in check, focusing on how good it felt to stroke Gregg to orgasm under the hot spray, instead of the bittersweet pang he'd felt when he woke to stare into Gregg's eyes. Then he'd kissed Gregg good-bye, promising to stop back later in the day to visit with his family.

Jase felt a little foolish now though, because the longing—both for sex and companionship—had caught up with him. Those feelings weren't supposed to surface. He should be feeling damned satisfied and want nothing more than a long nap, but all he wanted was to crawl back into Gregg's bed. He'd almost consider trying to ride again if it meant spending more time with Gregg.

Gregg hadn't offered yet to set Jase up to ride, and he was a little glad for that. Jase didn't know why the idea rankled wrong with him—his disability warring with Gregg's ability to get him riding again. But for some reason, it did.

Jase parked the Jeep and opened the door to the motor home to be surprised by his father, seated at his dining table. His dad sat up a bit taller in the bench seat and Jase couldn't help but pity him a little. Jase figured his dad would sleep in after the party. Despite being a morning person, he slept in more and more lately, the fatigue from his cancer evident in that and the naps he now took as well. That fatigue lined his face and shadowed under his brown eyes, and for once, Jase realized his dad was old. And just as vulnerable as everyone else.

“Dad,” Jase said. He stepped up the stairs and shut the door. “Need something?”

“Home a little late.”

No one did disapproval like his father. The eighteen-year-old boy would have shrunk from the hard edge, but the adult Jase squared his shoulders and owned it. Damn straight he was late. But respectfully he said, “The Madisons have a new foal on the way. I went over to take a shift, hoping to catch the birth.”

“You always had a soft spot for that.”

“I love horses. Always have, always will.”

“That Madison boy can get you riding again, you know.” Everett waved a hand toward Jase’s legs. “With your bum leg and all.”

Wow. Jase blinked back the surprise. “I think that’s the first time you’ve mentioned my prosthesis.”

Everett grunted and glanced out the windows.

Jase sighed and ran a hand through his short hair. He could hear Gregg in his ear almost, begging him to clear the air, to make things right, but he just couldn’t do it. His dad came to him. It would be better to see what he wanted first. “Do you need something?”

Everett turned back, his brows furrowed. “Why did you offer me your liver?”

That surprised Jase more than if his dad had jumped up and hugged him. But the answer came easily with no thought. “It’s what a good son does for his father. You taught me to do what’s right. I know we don’t see eye-to-eye on a lot of issues, but I try.”

Everett thought for a moment, his white brows furrowing deeper between his eyes. “Even though I kicked you out.”

Jase curled his fingers around the strap of his duffle and held on tight, digging his fingers into his palm. “It didn’t stop me from being your son.”

“I see.” Everett shifted in the seat, his face grimacing in pain. Jase fought the pity and schooled his face to blankness, knowing full well Everett wouldn’t want to see it. “Would you still consider the donation, then?”

Surprise, surprise. “You’d take part of a liver from a gay, crippled son?”

“Boy, I know I’m a bastard on a good day, but even I know that calling you a cripple is not politically correct.”

“Answer the question, Dad.”

Everett huffed and set his jaw, his fingers drumming on the table top. “I’m going to accept the offer of part of a liver from my son, the Marine.”

“Why now?” Jase tossed his duffle down the hall and slid into the bench seat opposite his father. “I came home over a week ago and your answer was a definite no. What changed?”

Everett sighed. “I went to that damned picnic. Your brother let it slip that I have—that I’m not up to snuff.”

“I see.” Wow, that took balls. But Jase knew how stressed Tommy was about the whole thing, and he’d need support to deal. It wasn’t a secret anyone but a true, close friend would keep. He doubted even Gregg would keep the news to himself. “And how did people take the news?”

“They were happy I had a potential donor. They were proud of my son for returning.” Everett jerked his head. “Well, everyone but Zane Ashby. He’s fixin’ to run for mayor as soon as the dirt hits my coffin. I told him he had a better chance of being hit by lightning while riding a Brahma bull.”

So there was Everett’s motivation. He wasn’t ready to relinquish his reign over his town. Whatever it was, it worked in Jase’s favor. He folded his sweaty palms on the table in front of him, hoping he appeared calmer than he felt. “You realize I’m still gay, don’t you, Dad? The Marines couldn’t beat it from me and prayer didn’t oust the devil, either.”

Everett’s brown eyes flashed and his mouth thinned to a firm line. “I don’t like it one bit. It’s wrong. Immoral.”

“And who are you to judge? When I die it will be me and Jesus to sort my sins out. I doubt you’ll get an invitation.” Jase sighed even though his heart hammered a million miles a minute. There was no way he was winning this battle, not the fair way. The thought of Gregg and his family made Jase buck-up and be strong. “Can we make a deal?”

Everett’s eyes widened. “Sorta rude to offer up a deal to a man with cancer.”

“Just as rude to threaten to ruin your eldest son and his lover’s lives because they’re attracted to each other.”

“I would have, too.”

Jase closed his eyes for a dozen heartbeats. It was wrong to hate his father, but he'd be damned if he didn't right at that moment. "Dad, if you want my liver, anyone I'm associated with is off-limits to your hatred. The Marines allowed me to serve as long as I kept my mouth shut about my preferences. I'm willing to do the same for you."

"Leave the Marines out of this."

"I'm serious, Dad. If you want to climb up on your soapbox and preach about my depraved sex life, go for it. I don't care. But I absolutely forbid you to slander anyone I'm associated with. In this day and age, who will vote for you for mayor next year if you're talking poorly about your son who just donated over half of his liver? I was afraid at eighteen because I thought it was you against me. Yes, then you could have ruined Gr—"

Oh God, he'd almost slipped. Jase swallowed quick and amended, "*His* life. But ten years have made people a lot smarter and a hell of a lot more understanding. They may not approve of my sexual choices, but they sure as hell won't approve of how you treat me after going under the knife to save your life."

Everett huffed, his chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. Jase could almost see the wheels turning behind his eyes, weighing the possibilities. Never would his father approve of his sex life, but he'd damn well better keep his mouth shut for a change. "Where will you live?"

"The Madisons will take me in after the surgery if you won't. And I have the motor home. I have a little money and a few job offers. I just don't know if it's worth staying in this area."

Everett heaved a huge sigh and drummed his fingers in a pattern that sounded like a galloping horse. It was something he'd always done, and Jase had worked out that distinct pattern as a tell for what Everett was thinking. This was his most thoughtful rhythm. "That Madison boy... he always had it bad for you."

Jase clutched his folded hands tighter together, his knuckles going numb under the pressure. "Excuse me?"

“After you left, he rode over here, asking after you. He looked like someone killed his horse when I told him you’d up and enlisted.” Everett shook his head, disgust curling his upper lip. “I figured you were gone, there was no reason to lecture the boy. His parents could deal with it on their end. I had a town to run.”

As bad as Jase hated to do it, he nodded and said, “Thank you for doing that.”

Everett nodded and slid his hand over the table, palm to the side. “Deal, then? I’ll try to look the other way. You don’t rub it in my face.”

Jase wanted to scream at him, to beg him to just accept him for who he was, to love him just because they shared the same DNA. He tamped down that desire, knowing it wasn’t going to get him what he wanted. A life in this area, hopefully with Gregg. And to be fair... at least this was a baby step. Maybe someday his dad would take a bigger one.

Jase took his dad’s hand, wrinkled and clammy, in his. “Deal.”

Everett gave his hand one last shake and slid from his seat. He paused in the doorway. “I’ll see you at breakfast, son.”

“Sure thing.”

Everett left and Jase slouched into the bench seat. “Wow,” he whispered. So many changes in his life. Tomorrow he’d put a call in to the doctor about further testing for the donation screening. He’d also look into the therapy department hiring in Houston. Maybe look into that parcel of land the Donovans were selling off. But today...

With shaking hands, Jase dialed the phone.

Gregg picked up on the first ring. “Hey.” His voice was husky and warm, and Jase’s insides warmed a little.

Jase gulped and whispered, “It worked. My deal worked.”

“Hold on.” Gregg must have shifted the phone and walked a few paces because his voice was louder and sharper, despite being a hushed tone. “You talked to your dad?”

“Yes. He agreed to the Addam’s version of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’. He’s taking the liver and he’s not happy, but it wasn’t a fight.”

Gregg let out a whoop. “Jase. I’m so psyched, buddy.”

So was he. Jase’s mind became cluttered with tasks and chores. He needed to make a list. “Look, I’m going to be busy for a bit. I have to line up that job and talk to doctors.”

“I don’t care, as long as you’re staying. Just tell me you’re staying.”

Jase realized then that was the approval he’d been waiting to hear. Gregg wanting him to stay despite the pain they’d been through... “I’m staying.”

“Then welcome home, Jase. Welcome home.”

THE END

Author Bio

Mia Downing started creating heroes at age four, but her heroes back then rode ponies to rescue the princess, and only kissed her on the cheek. Today, Mia's heroes still rescue those in need, but the price of their toys and the expertise of their seduction leads to a lot more than a peck on the cheek. When Mia isn't busy creating new stories for her readers she fills in as an underwear model for a prestigious lingerie company. She also lives in Connecticut with her family, and enjoys horses and knitting.

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