

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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THE PRICE OF SILENCE Kate Pavelle

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

By Kate Pavelle

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.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Wearing only a cowboy hat, boots, a sleeveless plaid shirt and pair of light blue briefs, a dark-haired young man lies on his back, giving a flirty look to the viewer. The shirt is open, showing off his chiseled body. His head is propped on a bale of hay and his feet are braced on the rungs of a wooden ladder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I would love for you to give this guy a story (take the reins). I'd be glad if it had a lot of first-times, coming out and definitely a HEA.

Sincerely,

Patrick

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: healing, PTSD, perseverance, horses, ex-military, blue collar/mechanic, college student, sweet no sex

Word count: 9,959

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

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Tim's whole body shook from the rumbling of the semi's big wheels on the old brick pavement. He tried not to press his curious face against the window as he soaked up the sight of pristine white houses with their black doors and black shutters and shy pansies in planters by their stoops.

"I shouldn't even be here," the trucker said. His name was Joe, and he was making a delivery of reproduction period furniture to an address in a historical part of Watertown, Connecticut. Thus the old road. "The vibrations from the truck will turn these roads to shit if everyone just drives up like we do."

"Not much we can do," Tim said in his slow, even voice. "Not unless you want to hump the dressers over the stone road on a dolly." He adjusted his cowboy hat and narrowed his eyes as he looked around some more. The trees in the yards indicated a verdant spring was under way and the air's bright, clean luminescence threatened to blind him.

"You sure you won't ride with me after we unload?" Joe asked as he navigated the large truck down the road, bumping over pavement buckled by old sycamore roots.

"I saw some stables off Route 8," Tim said, his voice wistful. "I can get work in these parts, I figure. And the city's right nearby."

"Whatever you say, cowboy." There was a smile in Joe's voice, a smile disguised by his bushy beard and the bill of his Harley Davidson baseball cap. "Just, this ain't Wyoming. People here might have different expectations. Just sayin', us army types do pretty well at truckin' and shit. You might come to like it."

Tim shrugged. He didn't think of himself as an *army type* anymore—no more than he thought of himself as *gay*. Those were just words, semantic designations used to keep people in their little pigeon holes. He still would have been fixing army trucks, had it not been for an unfortunate encounter

with an IED. If he were an “army type”, like Joe suggested he was, Tim wouldn’t flinch at slamming doors or the occasional backfire of an engine. The concussive force of the explosion forced all kinds of issues into his unwilling mind: insomnia, poor concentration, short temper. He was diagnosed with PTSD and a traumatic head injury, declared unfit for duty, and sent home.

His eardrums grew back eventually, but the army’s doctors and shrinks could do only so much to fix what was wrong with him otherwise. Tim’s family drove him crazy by treating him like a cracked spun glass figurine, and it got to where he couldn’t take being protected and coddled anymore. The open road called his name. Wyoming had been home once, but Tim had learned that the low population density and conservative culture kept both his employment and his dating opportunities to a minimum. He hit the road, drifting from job to job for almost two years now. His skill with horses and engines kept him in gas and food money, but no place on the face of this earth had called his name. Until now.

Sweat ran down Tim’s face and he felt all prickly and knew he smelled bad. Unloading a truck full of furniture in the heat of the day tended to do that. He wiped his face with a red bandanna and grinned at Joe.

“All done?” Tim asked.

“Yeah, delivered and signed for. You sure you want to stay in this Yankee town?” Joe scratched the hair that was plastered under his baseball cap. It was black with sweat and made a contrast with his greying beard. The sleeve of his rolled-up shirt slipped some, exposing an old tattoo.

“I like it here,” Tim said. “I don’t know why. It just... it’s old. Older than the West. The stones are old, the trees are old. The cemetery we passed looked like it had been there forever. I’ll be fine.” The air of stability intrigued him, enticed him. There was a soothing, calm quality to the air itself and he thought that this would be a right fine place to settle down and stay forever. This was the *somewhere special* he’d been carefully not looking for, just as he’d been

carefully not looking for someone special to spend his time with. Tim squished the latter thought like a bug as soon as he realized it was there.

One thing at a time.

“Well then, take care.” Joe clapped Tim on the shoulder with his left hand and extended his right. Tim took it, shook it, and smiled. He had been running from himself ever since the army disgorged him, and he had been running away from home ever since his family started acting awkward. He didn’t want to pretend and hide, and he didn’t want to jump at every little thing either. So far, no place until this one resonated with him in a way that would not make an issue of his issues. This quiet little town might allow him to take a stand on his own behalf. Drifting wasn’t so terrible; there was adventure, occasional money and the occasional hook-up.

Yet here, in the luminous air of this little town on the East Coast he could see a bit clearer than before. The old cobblestone streets whispered to him, and the ancient sycamore trees opened their branches in a wide welcome.

Tim kept to the berm of the road, being mindful of cars. Route 63 North was a busy, thoroughfare, and he basked in the comforting ebb and flow of its Thursday traffic and the travel patterns of the small town’s inhabitants. At a quarter past one, the last stragglers hustled from their business lunches to assume battle stations behind computer screens, all serious and diligent. Suburban moms rushed to the gym or the store, finishing their errands before the yellow school bus that ferried their progeny pulled up to the neighborhood bus stop.

Ornamental trees were done blooming with the exception of the odd white dogwood. The early May temperatures didn’t make it safe to set out plants yet, not for another two weeks at the very least, but Tim felt the sun on his shoulders and the resultant trickle of sweat down the back of his neck. He was grateful for his hat, and for the canopy of thin, chartreuse leaves that sheltered patches of the asphalt road.

By the time four o'clock rolled around, he had visited three stables north of Watertown. He was told he was in *horse country*, yet the white-fenced plots seemed small compared to the open expanses of Wyoming. The people in the barns certainly didn't wear cowboy hats, and the saddles they rode in were different and smaller than what he was used to. Only the horses were the same as out West; running together, curious and social with their tails and manes fluttering in the wind. Tim smiled and his heart leapt every time one of the animals came to the white railing to check him out. The horses were as friendly as ever, the owners, less so.

They did not need an itinerant stable hand.

Their eyes glanced at his cowboy hat.

They seemed mistrustful, cautious. Not many drifters decide to settle in Watertown, Connecticut. Their clients at the fancy farms consisted of young girls, mostly, and nobody wanted a twenty-five-year-old stranger near their operation without personal references. The army was slow to give those, and Tim didn't want to bother his family back in Wyoming before he was positive that he was dying to get the job. There was no need to alarm them in his weekly phone calls. He edited his adventures appropriately, just so he didn't need to hear an undertone of concern in their voices.

After one more rejection, he had begun to wonder whether the old trucker, Joe, had been right about his prospects here out East, with all these Yankees and their staid expectations. Out West, he would have been hired as a ranch hand already. Tim considered approaching a garage or two, see if they needed a mechanic, but he hesitated. Horses were so quiet and comforting. He had missed the sweet smell of horse sweat while in the army, and he missed it whenever his hands were covered with grime and oil, earning a few hundred bucks to tide him over. He would keep trying for a horse job.

The fifth and the sixth establishments were pretty much the same, and Tim got the same negative reply; those two were off Route 8 and a bit larger than the ones closer to town. Shadows lengthened and the trickle of sweat on Tim's neck cooled as temperatures dropped off, reminding him that early May was still a bit too cold to sleep outside without a sleeping bag.

He assessed his situation and decided to strike out for the nearest supermarket. The ready-to-eat section was usually full of hot food, and the value was better than relying on a diner. With enough provisions to restock his backpack, a new razor and a small bottle of shampoo, Tim asked around before he set out on Route 8 North. He was told the Breezeview Motel was right outside of town, cheap and reasonably clean. An hour hike would get him within forty bucks of a bed and a shower. Once he washed his clothes and cleaned up his image, he would visit the local library to better investigate his employment options.

Two miles out of town, everything changed. The houses became sparse and less polished and dandelions nodded their yellow heads by the road, almost closed in the crepuscular light. Tim adjusted the straps of his backpack and tilted his cowboy hat back to see better. He figured he was more than two-thirds of the way to the motel when he heard sound of an engine from behind. A loud pop split the air; Tim jumped across a ditch and hit the ground. He covered his head by instinct and, gasping for breath, he fought against the onslaught of old images and emotions.

The weedy grass scratched his face. Worn-out feelings flooded his mind as his body readied itself for a fight. Adrenaline spiked; blood roared in his ears. He breathed in and out, slowly, until he convinced his mind that the moist growth under his cheek smelled nothing like the dry dust of the faraway desert. He was in the present, right here, right now, and the soil under his hands was moist and loamy—there wasn't even a hint of the dry, scratchy sand that he'd have to clean out of the engines and shake out of his socks. When his breathing settled down and he decided he knew where he was, he lifted his head and looked down the road. A white pickup truck stood by the side of the road. Its hazards were turned on, and Tim thought he could make out a logo on its passenger side door.

He let out a pent-up exhale. Tim was used to being passed on the road, but walking after dark carried its risks. An accidental tire blowout and a subsequent loss of control of a passing vehicle was one of them. The truck

ahead of him was almost new. The dent in its rear right fender said much about the owner's driving habits. Tim felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth, and realized that the thought of a haphazard driver in a new truck amused him. He rose to his feet and stood up slowly, making sure his balance was all there, before he jumped back across the ditch.

He was almost behind the liftgate of the white pickup truck when the driver's door cracked open. The driver tried to push it ajar, but the heavy door stayed closed. The vehicle's shredded tire made it list to the side as though it were a wounded bird. The driver tried again, and Tim watched with interest as a sneakered foot pushed the door all the way open. After another try, a short, stout woman rolled out of the cab.

"Hey, are you okay?" Tim stayed by the liftgate, giving her space. His two years of drifting had taught him that drivers didn't like being surprised, especially not while exiting their vehicles on a remote stretch of a road. Sure enough, the woman turned on a dime. Her eyes were startled as she sucked in a lungful of air. Tim remained still, his hands visible. He tipped his cowboy hat in greeting, and smiled.

"Looks like you blew a tire, ma'am," he said.

"Looks like I did," she replied. "I hope I didn't hit you back there. I didn't, did I?"

"No, I'm fine, ma'am."

"Oh, good," she said with a relieved exhale. "Let me call the triple A. I can never get the lug nuts off these wheels, the way they get tightened in the shop."

She had a calm, disarming air and Tim spoke up before thinking first.

"Could be, I could help," he offered. "It's worth tryin'." He felt her eyes on him, assessing him from head to toe and back. She must have been around fifty, and her brown hair was pulled back into a practical ponytail. She wore jeans, sneakers, and a padded corduroy barn shirt.

"Okay," she said. "I'm Amy. And you are?"

“I’m Tim Sherman, ma’am,” he said.

“You don’t seem local, Tim,” Amy said as she aimed a flashlight at the toolbox mounted in the back of the truck bed.

“No, ma’am. Here, let me get it.” Tim climbed into the truck and opened the toolbox. It took some digging before he unearthed a jack and a wrench.

“You don’t have to call me ma’am,” Amy said, and Tim thought he heard a bit of a smile in her voice.

“Yes, ma’am.” He cracked a grin at her exasperated sigh.

The lug nuts were every bit as stubborn as Amy had feared, and her one hundred and eighty pounds did nothing to budge the stubborn treads. Tim added his own one hundred and fifty-eight, and when they both stood on the arm of the long wrench while holding onto the truck’s sides and bounced up and down, there was a creak.

“Watch out!” Tim yelled, but Amy bounced again, all excited, and the lug nut gave. The arm of the wrench followed the law of gravitational attraction, dumping both of them into the ditch by the road.

Tim stiffened, expecting another flashback. Nothing happened; only the woman’s warm, soft body kept him from getting soaked by the cold water of the ditch runoff. “Are you okay?” he asked as he got off Amy and scrambled to his feet.

A wry chuckle was his only reply. He bent over and grasped her small hand and heaved Amy to her feet, and then they scrambled up the muddy slope back to the truck.

“Looks like we did it!” she crowed, brushing her dirty hands down the back of her soaked jeans, as though she could get her garments dry again. “Let’s do another one!”

And they did—in fact, they removed all the stubborn lug nuts and Tim replaced the wheel with a spare.

“See? We did good. It took us only twenty minutes,” Amy said, smiling in the dark. “So where were you going, anyway, since you’re not local?”

“Uh...” Tim hesitated. “There’s a motel up the road. I figured I’d sleep there tonight, and then figure out what to do next.”

“I see.” Amy put away the tools and locked the toolbox in the back of the pickup truck. “How about you come with me, then. The guest bedroom is already taken, but there is a pull-out sofa. You can stay with us tonight, and we’ll get the ditch mud off you at the same time.”

Tim’s heart leapt at the offer, but he didn’t want to seem too eager. “I wouldn’t want to impose, ma’am.”

“Bullshit,” Amy said. “And stop calling me ma’am. It makes me feel like an old lady.”

Tim took a survey of the family scene inside the old farmhouse. Amy worked on her laptop, Amy’s older daughter Janice was looking through the local movie listings with her boyfriend Jeff, and sixteen-year-old DeeDee was doing her homework in the kitchen. He suppressed a sigh. It felt domestic. Normal. It almost reminded him of his family on the horse ranch out West. Nobody here knew who he was, though, and that was a comforting thought because it felt like a chance at a fresh start.

Amy had a son, too. His sister Janice grumbled about her brother being late again; something about having to hold his dinner in the oven. Tim tuned her out, thinking hard. There were horses on the property; he could see two low buildings further back from the house, illuminated by outdoor lighting. The long driveway was cordoned from the road by tall trees and outlined in thin lines of telltale white fences gleaming in the dark. He noticed the mud tray with boots by the back door and sighed in satisfaction. Tim had landed at a place with horses. It seemed too small an operation to promise a job, but maybe he could socialize with the animals in the morning. If he helped with the morning chores, he could at least smell their comforting scent and feel their soft noses. Tim closed his eyes in recollection of the warm whuff of an equine exhale against his hair, something that he used to take for granted when

a horse would say *hello* in exchange for a carrot or a piece of peppermint candy.

At eleven o'clock, Amy helped Tim pull out the sleeper sofa and gave him the bedding for it. Janice and Jeff were out at the movies and DeeDee was glued to the computer screen, earphones on, absorbed in YouTube videos. Just as Tim finished making his bed, a car roared up the driveway. Judging by sound alone, Tim guessed that its engine was older and probably domestic. Moments later, a guy in his early twenties sauntered through the front door. He carried a backpack and he called out a hello as he came in, suppressing a yawn.

“About bloody time you showed up, Ari,” Amy called from the kitchen. “What kept you this time? Your dinner’s in the oven!”

Ari didn't answer his mother. Instead he stood still, his eyes on the stranger in the family room. Tim felt the man's eyes give him the once-over and scrutinized him right back. Ari's hair was straight and silky, a bit darker than Amy's. He seemed about three inches taller than Tim's five ten, but skinnier. Where Tim's upper body packed muscle worthy of a welterweight boxing champion, six-pack included, Ari was tall and slender, with shoulders that were straight but narrow. He wore navy chinos and a button-down with an air of self-assured competence despite the white-and-pink stripe of his shirt. It coordinated with the purple frames of his glasses.

Tim stood still, observing him, fascinated. He had never met a man who would wear a pink shirt and purple glasses before. He was... pretty. Not just pretty—Ari was downright gorgeous, with the bow of his upper lip just plump enough to keep his lips from being strict and narrow. His eyes seemed dark and deep and mysterious behind the severe frames of his purple glasses, and Tim was beset by a desire to strip the stupid, pink shirt off the guy and see him topless, with just the purple frames and the kissable mouth. He was wondering if the pale skin of his body ever flushed pink, when the newcomer broke the silence. “Who are you?”

It took Tim a moment or two to find his words. “My name’s Tim Sherman. I helped your mom change a blown tire, and she let me sleep over.”

Ari rolled his eyes. “Not another accident, I hope. Is she okay? I’m Ari,” he said and extended his hand.

Just about that time, Amy walked into the room. “Oh you two just met, good! Be nice, Ari. Tim was very kind to help me out. He’ll sleep here since Jeff has the guest room.”

“Mom, if you let Jeff bunk with Janice, Tim could take the guest room,” Ari said in a voice that hinted of a well-worn argument. His mother didn’t even bother giving him a look.

“Not in my house,” she said. Her voice sounded like a broken record.

Tim had set his phone to wake him up at six. He slipped into yesterday’s clothing, still muddy from the ditch, and brushed his teeth. His timing was good; he heard a shower running upstairs, and Ari was already in the kitchen.

“Good morning,” Tim said as he turned his chin in Ari’s direction. Ari stood against the counter with an air of infinite patience, watching the toaster glow red on the inside.

“Hey,” Ari said, his voice barely audible. “You want any toast?”

“Sure,” Tim said, and watched Ari extract two white slices of bread from a bag, drop them into the other two slots, and press the toaster’s lever down. He did all of that so slowly, it was like watching grass grow. Ari didn’t appear to be a morning person. “There’s herbed cream cheese, and I nuked some sausage patties. You want any?” Ari’s voice was as slow as his actions, and as soft as a vernal breeze. He gave the impression of a man struggling through a thick fog.

“Sure,” Tim said, and watched Ari walk over to the refrigerator and pull out a box of pre-cooked turkey sausage from the freezer drawer. Ari unwrapped two sausage patties, put them on a plate, and microwaved them on high for one minute.

“You want any coffee or juice?” Ari asked, almost whispering.

“Sure. Coffee. Black. I’ll get it myself.” Tim stepped around Ari and reached up for a mug, taking it off an open shelf.

“I can do that for you.” Ari’s voice was still just a whisper, but his handsome face had a stubborn set to it. “Here’s the cream cheese. Here’s your toast. I always make a sandwich out of it and eat on the go.”

Tim followed Ari’s example, feeling awkward at the man’s helpful demeanor. “I can do stuff for myself,” he growled. “Really, you don’t have to do everything.”

Ari shrugged and lifted his glasses to rub his eyes before he broke the silence again. “How come you’re up so early?”

“I figured I’d help with the chores. I grew up on a horse ranch.”

Ari nodded. “Okay.” He ate with deliberation, consuming his sandwich in heavy silence and finishing his coffee. He waited for Tim to finish as well before he moved toward the back door, and as he sat there, the coffee must have started kicking in, because Ari’s movements got faster and faster, and his speech became louder and more animated.

“You got shoes?” Ari said, now all wired with caffeine and excitement.

“Hiking boots.” Tim pointed to the only pair of footwear that he currently owned.

“Okay! That will do. Although we have all kinds of spare boots in the basement.” Ari was definitely excited now. He adjusted the purple frames of his glasses, and slipped into his leather boots.

When Tim reached for his cowboy hat and put it on, Ari pressed his lips together and looked like he really wanted to say something, but then he bit it back. His animated manner made it almost impossible to suppress his reservations and Tim expected a comment on his hat, because everyone seemed to have commented on it. In the end, Ari only smiled.

They bounded two hundred feet across a yard that was mostly grass and muddy tracks, with a graveled parking area where Amy parked her horse trailer. An assortment of farming equipment was lashed down under a green tarp right next to it. The land was flat, and the pastures surrounded the house and the barn like a big horseshoe. The barn itself was an old structure with a fieldstone base and small, glazed windows for each stall, above which rose a wooden clapboard barn stained dark brown. The roof was old and the grey slate shingles looked a bit chewed up.

Ari slid the barn door open, letting the sun in. A brown Labrador ran out to give Ari a perfunctory greeting before he turned to Tim and nosed him right in the crotch.

“Ow,” Tim said with a *whoosh*, covering his groin. “Does he always do that?”

A smile split Ari’s animated face. “Oh yes. Don’t take it personally. Her name’s Hershey, and if you feed her, she’ll never stop bugging you.”

There were six stalls on the left side of the barn, and all were occupied. The right side had a tack area, feed bins, and a workshop full of aging tools.

“First we give them grain,” Ari said. “Once they eat, we turn them out and clean the stalls, water their buckets and fill mangers with hay for later.”

“Okay,” Tim said. “That shouldn’t take long. When we’re done, if you go out, do you think you could give me a ride to the library?”

Ari spun toward Tim with an air of unabashed curiosity, letting the empty grain scoop dangle off his fingertips. “What do you want at the library?”

“Job hunting. I don’t figure your Ma will want me around forever.”

“No, probably not. Although she won’t kick you out, if you help around the place. We’re all too busy holding down jobs that keep the horses in hay, or going to school.”

Tim put the handles of a wheelbarrow down and crossed his arms. “That’s good to know. Although I wouldn’t want to impose.” Tim became distinctly

uncomfortable with Ari's attention on him and his plans, and decided to change tack. "What are you studying?"

"Accounting," Ari fired off as he poured grain into a bay horse's feed bucket.

"Why accounting?"

"If I want to keep riding hunters, I need a flexible day job," Ari said. He spoke fast and gesticulated as much as work permitted, and Tim wondered whether Ari's movements would slow down to his earlier snail's pace once the caffeine wore off. "The business needs an accountant, too, but I can also build a customer base and do the books for other small businesses, and still take care of this place and train the horses and ride." He went on in that vein for a while, and when he came up for air, Tim had a chance to chime in.

"Horses are expensive," he said as he nodded in agreement with Ari. "My family still has a ranch out West—they breed them and sell the young ones. The vet bill was always enormous."

"The vet and the farrier, the feed, and liability insurance," Ari clicked off the main items. Then he paused and eyed Tim up and down. "So you can ride?"

"Yeah. Ranch stuff—roping, cutting, a little barrel racing. None of this fancy stuff you do, though. At other places around here, the owners sounded like they didn't think I was up to snuff."

Ari shrugged. "Their loss. The horses need to be exercised. Do you think—"

"Shit yeah!" Tim grinned from ear to ear. "I would absolutely love to ride them for you. Just understand that it will be a bit rocky to start with, yeah? I haven't been riding regular for a while now, and..." Tim looked uncertain before he spoke again. "And I've never used one of these little saddles before."

DeeDee was at school, Janice and Jeff were up getting their breakfasts, and Amy was poring over the week's schedules.

“You can’t maintain your riding schedule until your finals are over, right Ari?” she said. Her reading glasses threatened to fall off the tip of her nose as she checked the calendar. “I’ll take your two lessons today—the Ternam sisters—and you have the Intermediate class. I have the Beginners class, and two private lessons. Denine will be using the arena to work on her dressage routine between noon and two o’clock...?” Amy’s tone of voice indicated that she did not expect to see Ari around horses that day.

“That’s right,” Ari said as he stuffed notebooks into his backpack.

“I know my way around a barn,” Tim offered.

“I heard.” Amy sighed. “Look Tim, I love what you’re offering here, but please understand I can’t pay you. I can trade you room and board for a while in exchange for doing some chores, and Jeff is leaving tomorrow so you can have the guest room. It’s just, some of the maintenance has been neglected since my husband—” She paused as a cloud passed over her brow. “Well, for a while now.”

“I’ll do it if I can, no problem,” Tim said. The lure of riding and the prospect of staying in the established old town with its sleepy streets and wide sycamore trees would have made him agree to just about anything.

“It’s secure. Mom’s almost your size and she uses this saddle all the time,” Ari said later that day.

Tim knew Ari did his best to sound calm and reassuring, as though Tim was a brand new student, but Tim didn’t think much of the small, slick-looking English saddle. He checked the girth again.

“Okay,” Tim said, and used the mounting block, settling uneasily in the strange saddle. He cautiously straightened up, and found that it helped his seat. The ground looked a lot further down than he remembered and he wondered if falling would make him think of concussive blasts and gritty desert sand. He banished the thought and forced himself to inhale, then exhale. He pressed his heels down. “Okay, I’m ready,” he said, sounding a lot more confident than he let on.

“We’ll walk for a bit just to warm up.” Tim saw Ari nod, and gently squeezed Blossom with his calves. They rode around the large oval in silence.

“I’m glad the weather’s holding up,” Ari said. “I ride even when it rains. When I start working, I’ll be setting money aside to build a covered arena.”

“Oh yeah?” Tim fell into a comfortable warm-up rhythm, feeling the six years of hiatus fall away from him bit by bit. “Do people here ride inside a lot?”

“The larger stables have indoor arenas,” Ari said. “Since my dad died, his benefits cover mine and DeeDee’s entry fees and college tuition– if we’re careful. We all have jobs.”

“Even DeeDee?” Tim asked. The girl he saw the night before seemed young to his eyes.

“She works two shifts a week in a grocery store.”

Tim didn’t mind the silence. He was busy absorbing the sensation of being astride a horse again. It was old and familiar, yet new again because he didn’t know the horse or the equipment. The helmet irritated him and made his head feel heavier than his hat would have, possibly because the strap rubbed under his chin.

He realized he hadn’t worn a helmet since Iraq. The thought would have made him freak out if he were on the ground, but the rocking motion of the horse under him was soothing. He focused on keeping centered and upright, and his worries over a flashback resulting from a possible fall were pushed out by his single minded focus on following Ari’s directions. Ari proved to be a pleasant teacher, even though he nixed the idea of wearing just the hat, and Tim found that he didn’t mind that Ari was in charge.

“Let’s trot for a while, see how you feel.” Ari broke their silence ahead of him. He didn’t tell him how to make Blossom trot. It was a test, then. Ari wanted to assess Tim’s riding skills, and Tim was happy to oblige. It took him two tries before Blossom moved faster. He felt a bit less attached to the saddle, as though the horse’s gait threatened to bounce his butt right up. Yet, it wasn’t

long before Tim found his seat and moved with Blossom, straight and fairly secure.

“Watch me post,” Ari called back, and Tim watched the taller man rise and fall in the saddle in rhythm with the horse’s trot, using the natural bounce to his advantage. Tim tried it and found that it wasn’t hard, and it sure beat busting his balls against the pommel. As he made his way around, he felt the familiar wind in his face and could not help but grin. He picked up the way Ari rode his horse to the middle of the oval and halted, keeping an eye on him.

“You’re doing well,” Ari called out. “Go around a few times and when you’re ready, slow down to a walk.”

When Tim spared a glance in Ari’s direction, he was surprised at how the other man was transformed. He looked taller and stronger, yet at the same time he condensed his very being into a power pack of commanding presence. The horse beneath him knew it and showed him full deference. Heat began to coalesce in the pit of Tim’s belly. Ari’s confident air filled him with heady want. The timing for getting hard was far from ideal, since Tim felt the horse’s every move under him, every undulation. Arousal warred with pain, and he wished he could find an excuse to dismount and disappear somewhere private to compose himself. He never expected this sudden assault upon his senses, never on horseback, and never from the Ari of the pink-striped shirt and purple glasses.

Half an hour later, they untacked their two horses, brushed them, and turned them out into the pasture by the road. Then they tacked up the next two and rode those for an hour, and by the time they were done with all six, Tim’s legs felt bowed, his quads trembled like jelly, and his unwelcome state of arousal was but a memory.

“How are you doing there, cowboy?” Ari asked with a grin.

“Dandy,” Tim groaned. “I haven’t ridden in a while. I used to do full-day rides, but that’s some years ago. And I never had to do this posting shit.”

Ari shrugged as they both walked toward the fence to watch the horses socialize. “Some people say Western’s easier, but I don’t think so. To be a good rider takes practice, and the saddle doesn’t change that one way or the other.” His tone was surprisingly free of prejudice, and took Tim by surprise.

“I thought you’d be more invested in promoting English,” Tim said. “I know that my cowboy hat turned some prospective employers off.”

“Probably,” Ari agreed. He leaned his elbows against the fence and stretched his back until it cracked. He cast a sly look at Tim, who was just then observing the graceful curve of Ari’s lower back and ass. Their eyes met and Tim knew he had been caught looking. This could go either way, now. Ari could get mad and stalk away, and Tim would end up sleeping in that little motel north of the town. Or... it was all so very far-fetched. Yet Tim watched Ari watch him. The weight of Ari’s look across Tim’s broad shoulders felt like a caress. He flexed. Ari grinned.

“Will you just lean against the fence on display like that all day, or will you help me clean the stalls?” Ari said with a grin full of mischief and promise.

Tim straightened. “Lead on.”

Ari was interesting. He was quiet and gentle, and he seemed entirely dead to the world in the morning. As soon as the coffee hit, though, the morning fog was torn away in a hurricane of activity. Ari became animated and talkative, and the smooth-shaven skin under his jawline presented an enticing area that Tim wanted to explore with his mouth. He wondered whether Ari would taste sweet, like pink-striped shirts and purple glasses, or whether he’d have a salty, musky bite to him like every guy that ever worked with horses. The only way to find out was to follow Ari into the barn and grab a pick, and follow his lead at cleaning the stalls.

They were done in less than an hour, and Ari looked around before he pulled the phone out of his pocket and checked the time.

“I have a class in not too long,” he said, eyeing Tim with a look that was half hope and half challenge. “I can drop you off at the library on my way, and pick you up on the way back.”

“Sounds good.” Tim voice came out harsh and gravelly, struggling under the weight of Ari’s scrutiny.

“We still have a bit of time to go up and get some hay. You know, for later,” Ari said and his smile was knowing, full of mystery and spice and just a hint of intrigue. “If you’d care to follow me?”

Tim watched Ari climb up the ladder to the hayloft above the empty stalls, pulling himself up with lanky arms that were whipcord strong. His whole body was thin and tall, solid and lean. Slim hips gave way to long, strong legs, and Tim unglued himself from his spot, suddenly propelled forward by a yearning to know how pale Ari’s skin was with his jeans pulled down to his knees. Oh yeah, he was definitely following Ari up to the hayloft.

They tossed down a single bale of hay—the six horses wouldn’t need more than that for the moment. The hayloft was small and warm under the roof, and pleasant despite the inevitable dust.

“I used to come here when I was in trouble and was hiding,” Ari said. “Then after Dad died, I’d come here because he always used to find me here. I was hoping he’d find me again.”

Tim leaned against the wall of bales that were stacked up behind him. “I’m sorry.” There was little else to say. “Was he sick?”

“Nah. He died in Iraq. His helo crashed in a dust storm.” Ari was staring at the floor through his purple framed glasses, the lenses of which were now speckled with dust. “I didn’t mean to bring this up and change the mood, y’know. I... sorry. That’s just dumb. It’s been six years. You’d think we’d all be over it.”

Tim crossed the short space between them and put his hands on Ari’s shoulders. He squeezed gently and waited until Ari looked him in the eyes.

“You don’t get over the people you love. You’re not supposed to forget your dad, just like I’m not going to forget my buddy who died right next to me.”

“Died?” Ari asked, confused.

“I was there, too,” Tim said as he ran his fingers through his hair. He wanted to push his hat back in a habitual, nervous gesture, but he never put it back on after he removed his riding helmet, and now he missed its familiar weight.

“But you made it back all right,” Ari said, and Tim felt Ari’s curious eyes on him again, scanning him from head to toe. This time, Ari’s eyes were empty of the previous heat and sultry promise. It was cold and calculating, assessing damage. Looking for injuries.

“No big scars, if that’s what’s bugging you,” Tim said. “My head got knocked about in an explosion a bit, and I was sent back. I’m okay... mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Yeah.”

Tim wasn’t going to explain that the pressure wave of the explosion burst his eardrums and scrambled his brains for awhile, nor that it had turned him into a coward. He was supposed to be with his unit right now, out there somewhere, he was supposed to be back with the guys as soon as his eardrums grew back and his hearing returned. He was supposed to be driving with his caravan and fixing the trucks that broke under the brunt of the heat and the cold and the uneven roads, meticulously removing sand from all their moving parts. He’d been willing to try, but when the army doctor dropped a dictionary behind Tim’s chair, and Tim jumped and turned in sheer panic, eyes wild and unseeing, the older man just nodded and patted Tim on the shoulder.

“You’ll take some time to heal up, son,” he had said to him back then. That had been well over two years ago, and it had been almost two years since Tim had left his family’s ranch out West to escape their pained concern, his feeling like he was moving through molasses, and a sense of constant and impending doom.

Ari's arm settled around his shoulders and he felt the bales of hay prick his back. Ari ran his hand up his shoulder and cupped it around the nape of his neck.

"Tim." Ari was very close now, and Tim's wide, unfocused eyes caught a flash of purple frames and pale skin. "Tim, I'm going to kiss you now, and if you don't want to be kissed, you need to let me know, all right?"

Tim let his hands drift up Ari's slender hips and anchored them at his belt. This was an open invitation—almost right away he felt Ari's body press into him, thigh against thigh and groin against groin, chest against chest. Ari wrapped his long, slender fingers in the curl of hair in the nape of Tim's neck. He couldn't rightly see Ari's lips, but he felt the dry softness brush against his shut mouth. Ari kissed him, nice and gentle, and then leaned away and scrutinized Tim's expression.

"Was that okay?"

"Yeah," Tim rasped, barely able to produce a sound. "Again?"

The corners of Ari's mouth tugged up in a hint of a smile as he neared him again, and their lips made contact, and stayed. Tim kissed back then, feeling Ari's lush cupid bow, tasting the corner of his mouth, feeling the way Ari parted his lips in a silent invitation. Tim reciprocated, eyes shut, feeling his way with his tongue along the contours of Ari's mouth. Their tongues touched in a delicious, electrifying contact and Tim pulled Ari against him, running his hands up Ari's long, whipcord back. Ari tasted of cotton-candy shirts and honest sweat, of blossoming trees and Christmas cookies and of a solid ground under his feet.

"Stay," he heard Ari whisper into his mouth. "Don't leave, okay? Just stay here with us."

And Tim wanted to stay. The trees still held their branches open wide in a generous welcome, and the streets still breathed an old, solid air of stability and home. He wanted to know Ari, to learn everything about him and make it his. Make Ari his.

“I think I can,” Tim whispered, and the dry smell of desert sand was suddenly very far away.

“If you weren’t my sister, I’d shut you up for being nosy,” Tim sniffed into his cell phone, trying to act all hurt and offended, but failing miserably. The air was still crisp and luminous despite the few stratus clouds up above. He felt a gentle breeze stir the hair on his forearms. The wind current cooled him off, and he pressed his back into the sun-drenched stone façade of the Watertown Public Library.

“So is there a guy involved?” Cassie asked again. “Or, is it just because you like the place, or what?”

“I like the place even without the guy,” Tim said, enunciating every word in a way which let his sister know that this is not as random and half-assed a decision as it might have seemed a few minutes ago. “The guy’s nice. Real nice. Like, I want to keep him nice.” He was going to elaborate on the softness of Ari’s lips, on the mischievous glint in his eyes, on the graceful figure he cut on horseback as he jumped over obstacles, but thought better of it.

“What are you going to do for money?” Cassie sounded concerned. Even a child could calculate that a man could not survive on partial disability benefits.

“I have two interviews lined up. In fact, after I hang up, I’ll walk over to the auto shop and see if they like me enough.”

“I thought you wanted to work with horses.”

“Cass, I do. I get to work with horses, but not for money. This place is so horse crazy, every teenage girl wants to shovel shit in exchange for free lessons, or for reduced boarding fees. It’s not like out on a ranch.”

“So you’re willing to fix cars just so you can stay with this really nice guy and play with his horses.” Cassie summarized the situation well enough, and Tim grinned as he imagined her arching her eyebrows all the way up to her hairline and the dubious smirk on her face.

“Pretty much,” he admitted. “Hey, I’ll call you next week, okay?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow or the day after,” Cassie said. “I want to know all the latest developments. So does the whole family.”

Hancock Auto Service was just few blocks over from the library, and they were one of two garages in town. Will Hancock was a dry, wizened man with huge hands and black grease under his fingernails. He cleared his throat, and said, “You must be Tim Sherman, the guy that called.”

“Yes, sir,” Tim said and when they shook hands, Tim thought he’d lose his limb all the way up to his elbow.

“Call me Will, everybody does.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Will.” Tim felt all self-conscious, because this wasn’t just going to be some short-term job he planned to leave as soon as he had five hundred bucks in his pocket. He wanted to stay here for a lot longer than that. The older man looked him straight in the eye. The no-bullshit glare seemed to strip Tim’s usual defenses and he blinked, trying hard to maintain eye contact.

“So tell me what you can do and where you’ve been,” Will said as he led the way into the shady recesses of the three-bay garage. “And tell me what your plans are. I have no use for a fly-by-night who’ll up and disappear as soon as I get him trained.”

Tim never made it to his second interview. He cancelled by phone and then returned to his work, putting a new alternator into an old Honda. He felt Will Hancock’s watchful presence from afar, and the other two mechanics were keeping an eye on him on the sly. It didn’t bother him as much as he thought it would have, because a three-week probationary period sounded like a fair deal for both sides. By then Tim would know whether he could stand being in a garage again, whether he could bear the loud hiss of pneumatic wrenches and the clanging of metal that came with taking cars apart and putting them together again. By the end of the day, his back was stiff with the ache that came from bending over an engine for too long a stretch at a time, and his mind was ready to buckle under a stimulus overload. Yet he persevered,

thinking of the horses in the pasture, of the warmth of the quiet hayloft and of the soft brush of Ari's lips against his own. He would endure all this clamor and noise of the engines and tools, the occasional shouts by the other men, and the ringing of the telephone if it meant he got to stay and have at least a chance to taste those lips every day.

When Ari picked him up a little after five, Tim's hands were black with engine grease. He scrubbed down with orange soap and said good night to Will, who was closing down for the day. He sank into the old passenger seat and sighed, breathing the air that Ari had just exhaled.

"Hey," Tim said, cracking an involuntary smile. "Thanks for picking me up."

"No problem." Ari's informal reply was accompanied by a shy smile. As soon as they were out of sight of the garage, Ari took his right hand and cupped it over Tim's knee. The gesture was slow and hesitant, as though Ari was unsure of Tim's reaction, and Tim found this unexpected shy streak incredibly endearing. He covered Ari's pale, long-fingered hand with his own. The black fingernails of a mechanic stood in direct contrast with the clean hands of an accounting student and Tim felt a pang of anxiety. Suppose Ari didn't like the dirt, the grime. Suppose it widened the chasm between a blue-collar army washout and an up-and-coming professional who rode horses in competitions. Suppose...

Tim's line of thought was interrupted when Ari lifted his hand to his lips and brushed a dry kiss onto Tim's rough, grimy skin. "Congratulations on the job," he said. "Does that mean you're staying?"

Amy was back from her shift at the hospital and had dinner on the stove by the time they got back. "Set the table, boys," she called out. Chore by chore, Tim was integrating himself into the rhythm of the household. Halfway through dinner, she looked at Tim and said, "You look a bit worse for the wear."

Tim stilled and swallowed his bite, trying to disguise his discomfort. It wasn't the physical labor that bothered him. "The work isn't that hard. How was your day?" he said, hoping to divert attention from himself.

Amy frowned. "Nicely played. You look like there's a stone mask over your face and something's bothering you."

Tim shrugged. "It's a good job. Will Hancock seems like a fair man."

"But?" she persisted.

"It's loud in there. It's not like being in a quiet barn full of horses."

"And loud is a problem?" she asked.

"Is it because of that explosion you were in?" Ari cut in. His voice was soft, as though he hoped the tone would blunt the inquiry.

Tim closed his eyes. When he was ready to speak again, he opened them. "If you don't mind, I'll go check on the horses."

It was dark already, but Tim had no desire to abandon the hayloft. It was nice to hear just the shifting of horses and the occasional whicker. Their smell was peaceful, too. Nice and comforting and nothing like the garage with its grease and oil and gasoline. The garage smells reminded him of the caravan, and the cacophony of unpredictable noises had made him jump and twitch over and over earlier in the day. The stress of the extra sensory stimulus set him on edge. He wondered how the next day would go. He'd have to stick it out. He was here to stay, and in order to stay with Ari, he had to pull his weight. Maybe get an apartment so they could have privacy. The mask born of stress and pain began to crack into a smile at the thought, and suddenly he really wanted to feel the warmth of Ari's hand on his own, like in the car.

Tim was about to sit up and get going when the small door in the side of the barn creaked open.

"Tim?" Ari's voice carried through the darkness. "You up there?"

“I’m coming down.” A fuzzy warmth blossomed in Tim’s chest at the thought of Ari actually caring enough to look him up. The last two years played out according to Tim’s rules, true, but it had been a lonely time.

“No, don’t. I’ll come up.” Ari’s head appeared as he climbed the ladder only moments later. It was dark in the barn, but Tim could still discern Ari’s contours against the night.

They settled on the dusty wooden floor. Ari draped his long arm across Tim’s shoulders and pulled him in until they felt each other’s body heat. They listened to the horses shifting underneath the hayloft. An occasional car passed by the house out on the road, and few strains of music made their way from the house.

“That’s DeeDee, playing her violin,” Ari said. His words broke the silence like a glass and the fragments scattered, sharp, unwelcome. Tim recoiled at having to explain. He didn’t want to talk about it. Ari was sweet, but Ari would not understand, his well-meaning mom would never get it, and his boss would figure he was a coward to jump at every loud noise behind his back.

“My mom is a nurse,” Ari said. “She works with a lot of military types who are coming back with invisible injuries.”

Invisible injuries.

Is that what Tim had? People around him could understand a poked-out eye, or a missing leg, but could they ever understand how he felt inside? There was anxiety and fear, and a sense of loss, and a bone-deep sadness that came from fighting not to jump at every sound of a dropped book, or a sound of metal shearing. Tim laughed, forcing the air out of his lungs.

“I’m just scared of loud noises, is all. I’ve turned into a coward, I guess. And once my hearing came back weeks later, everything was so loud. I just couldn’t stand it.” He draped his arms over his bent knees, and set his head down on them in the dark. “I guess I failed.”

“You were hurt. My mom knows people who were hurt like you, and the place where she works, they can help.” Ari’s voice was soft, like talking to a spooked horse.

“I don’t wanna talk to shrinks. That just makes it worse.”

“You don’t have to. There is this thing called Rapid Eye Movement Therapy. My dad’s buddy said it helped him a lot.” Ari stirred next to him, and his warm hand traced soothing circles over Tim’s shoulder blades. “Mom says she can help you just check it out, so you don’t have to...” Ari searched for words for a moment. “So you don’t have to be in pain. Invisible injuries can hurt as much as anything that’s obvious to the rest of us.”

They sat in tense silence for a while.

“You don’t have to do it,” Ari amended. “Not unless you want to.”

Tim straightened his back up, inadvertently shaking Ari’s hand off. He missed the contact right away.

“I want to stay,” Tim whispered. “I want to have a job, and I can’t just stay here and not pull my weight.” He paused. “Do you want me to stay, Ari?”

“Yeah,” Ari said. “I thought that was obvious.”

Tim reached out in the dark, until he felt Ari next to him. He slid his hand up to Ari’s neck and fingered his dark, slightly overgrown hair. “I want to stay,” he whispered. He felt like he was shouting. He cupped his hand around the nape of Ari’s neck and pulled him closer. His intent was obvious, and Ari cooperated by melting halfway into a breathless kiss. Tim pressed harder, and Ari yielded, leaning into the wall of prickly hay behind them and inviting Tim into his embrace. Limbs tangled, they shared air and gasped their pleasure. Tim felt Ari’s glasses press into his cheekbone. They were purple, and Ari still wore one of his pastel, pinstripe shirts. Even in the dark, Tim could feel their colors through the way Ari tasted and smelled. Like cookies, like horses. Like home.

“Okay,” Tim said once they came up for air. “I’ll talk to your mom. Since I’m stayin’.”

THE END

Author Bio

Kate Pavelle was born in Prague and has lived in the United States since her teens. When she came to America, she was told she could become whatever she wanted to be, so she decided to become an Apache Indian. When that didn't work out, she turned to writing. Her family's defection from behind the Iron Curtain, a short stint as a homeless political refugee, and the process of immigration and assimilation has provided her with many a story to share in both written form and oral storytelling format. Kate's writing is sustained by the love of her husband and children. Despite his devotion to her dreams, her husband will not allow her to brain-tan deer hide in the driveway anymore.

Kate's first novel, Wild Horses, came out with Dreamspinner Press on July 1st, 2013. The second book in the Steel City Series, "Zipper Fall," is scheduled for release in late August.

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