

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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CREST RIDGE VACATION

A.L. Boyd

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

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By A.L. Boyd

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

Two men clad only in jeans are standing face-to-face surrounded by large boulders. The shorter man with a tattoo on his bicep has his hands on the boulder behind the taller man. The taller of the two men is looking down into the face of the shorter man as they are about to kiss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

See the guy on the right? The one with the tattoo? He's an arrogant prick, and I've hated him since high school. The thought of him has given me nightmares ever since he humiliated me in front of our entire senior class. Ten years later and I can't believe I've run into the douchebag during my mountain vacation. I may be taller than him now, but he still knows how to make me feel small. Will I ever discover why he was so mean to me? Please help!

Sincerely,

Anna

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: military, celebrity, enemies to lovers, law enforcement, vacation, sweet no sex, closeted, HFN

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CREST RIDGE VACATION

By **A.L. Boyd**

The knock on his door startled Rob as he dozed on the couch. No one knew he was here. Why was someone knocking? He had bought this house in secret and used it to hide away from his fans and the paparazzi. He'd only told his agent that he would be vacationing in New Mexico without giving any specifics. His vacation had barely started here in his new home-away-from-home. The house sat in the middle of a five hundred acre ranch next to a national forest, so it wasn't likely the next-door neighbor was popping by just for a chat.

The knock came again, a little louder this time, followed by, "National Guard here. Anyone home?"

Rob's heart sped up as he stumbled his way to the door, and cracked it open. "This is private property, what's the Guard doing here?"

"The Crest Ridge fire is headed this way, and your house is directly in its path. Mandatory evacuations are in place. We are here to inform all residents and escort the evacuees out of the fire zone."

That voice! Rob knew that voice. The Sergeant Major, high school. Crap! Crap! Crap! Just hearing that voice made his heart beat even faster and his palms sweat. Memories of high school humiliation resurfaced from hearing that voice.

Trying to keep calm, Rob replied, "Mandatory evacuation? When did that happen? I just got here this morning, and there weren't any signs or anything like that on the roads." He opened the door wider and looked out at the Guardsman on his doorstep. Driven by his memories, he started to look up, but dropped his gaze until the muscular man came into his line of sight. Shorter than him now, but the sight of that face transported Rob back to high school and memories of Sergeant Major Johnson. That dark brown hair, always cropped short by military school rules, was now slightly longer but remained within regulations. Those hazel eyes, as sharp and piercing as ever, weren't

even looking at Rob as the man was busy inspecting the exterior of the house. Rob knew he'd had a growth spurt in college, but he couldn't believe he was now taller than his high school tormentor.

They had both been seniors at a military prep school. The difference was that Johnson had been at the school for all four years, but Rob, then known as Owens, R. K.—as the nametag on his uniform read—was a new transfer-in for his senior year. Technically, he'd been forced to go. Military school wasn't his cup of tea. Being a new cadet, Rob was a recruit-at-training, better known as a RAT; Johnson, on the other hand, having been there three years already, was an old cadet.

The insignia on his National Guard uniform displayed the rank of Staff Sergeant, but he still carried an unmistakable air of authority, even if he no longer held the school rank of Sergeant Major. “Evacuation orders were posted about an hour ago when the winds changed and drove the fire in this direction. We are here to ensure the safety of the residents. Please prepare to evacuate.” Johnson's words jerked Rob back to the present. What was his first name again? Dale? No, Dane? Yeah, Dane, that's what it said in the yearbook. Not that Rob had ever been allowed to use that name. New cadets were not allowed to fraternize with the old cadets.

A female voice screamed out from behind Johnson, “Oh my God! You're Robert Owens, the actor! What are you doing here?! Holy cow!”

At that, Johnson's eyes finally reached Rob's face and narrowed in recognition. “Owens,” he snapped. And just like that, Rob felt like he was back in school being bossed around again by Johnson. Sharply, Johnson turned toward the woman and ordered, “Private Briggs, no time for autographs. We have an evacuation to deal with. Go check in with the evacuation center. Inform them that we have arrived at our last stop and will be returning to the staging area.”

She immediately snapped to attention with a quick, “Yes, Sergeant.” and hurried off to the vehicle.

Johnson turned back to Rob and said, “Owens... um... good to see you, but really, we need to get moving. I see you’ve got your place set up in accordance with the Firewise guidelines, and you have a good, defensible space for the firefighters. The winds, though, have become erratic and unpredictable. For your own safety, you need to go and let the firefighters do their job.”

“I’m still packed. It was a long drive, and I fell asleep after I got here.”

“Good! Grab your gear and let’s get moving,” Johnson commanded.

“Yes, sir!” Rob snapped, thrilled when he saw that flash of anger cross Johnson’s face as he’d said “sir”. Johnson had hated that at school. Rob also hated how even now he felt like a kid when Johnson ordered him around.

Just like back at school, Johnson bristled and tapped his stripes as he said, “Ain’t no sir here.” Then Johnson and Rob said at the same time, “These are sergeant’s stripes, RAT, and you best not forget it.”

Rob was actually surprised when Johnson laughed and said. “Man, Owens, just like in high school. I think you always called me ‘sir’ on purpose to rile me up.”

Rob turned to him with a hint of a smile. “Yep, it was fun to watch you get mad.”

Rob noticed the expression on Johnson’s face slip slightly, less confidence, more uncertainty as Johnson said, “Hey look, I know we... uh... we didn’t get along very well at school, but—” Johnson was cut off as Private Briggs rushed back to the porch.

“Check-in completed. Dispatch reports that the roads are smoky but passable, Sergeant. We’re ready to move out.” Just like that, Johnson switched back into his arrogant know-it-all attitude as he snapped out orders.

“Owens, let Briggs here drive your car down. The road can get dicey with all the smoke. You ride with me.” Johnson marched out the door, leaving a stunned Rob and Private Briggs in his wake.

Rob sat in the Humvee staring at the smoke as it rolled past his window, but he wasn't thinking about the fire roaring away nearby. He was back in high school. Hazing incidents in military school were sometimes hidden under the guise of "tradition". And Rob had been the recipient of several "traditional" hazing rituals.

The zoom broom. For being caught smoking in the communal latrines, Sgt. Major Johnson had instituted the zoom broom punishment. With his pants pulled down, Rob was ordered to bend over and grab his ankles, bare-assed. Five swats with a broom to his naked backside without falling over. Saber swats, push-ups, running the box—

"Hey, Owens." Johnson's voice dragged Rob out of his memories. "Look, I know—"

"We're not in school anymore, you can call me by my first name. Rob or Robert, but stop calling me Owens," Rob snapped. Every time someone called him by his last name, Rob felt as if he were back at the school he'd hated for so long.

"Sorry, Rob. Um... As I said, I know I was hard on you at school. For a while now, I've thought about trying to contact you. I've wished I could talk to you, to... um... to explain some things. But I don't have time right now with this fire deal. Will you be going back to California, or are you sticking around for a few days until they lift the evacuation?"

"Uh... D-D-Dane, right? That's what's in the yearbook."

Dane nodded. "Yeah. I know you never got to use it, but yep, it's Dane."

"Well Dane, I was up here on vacation and sort of trying to hide out from the paparazzi, but with all the media attention this fire's going to get, I'd better head out. I don't have anywhere else locally to go. Checking into a local hotel would be just asking for more attention."

Dane looked over at Rob, and uncharacteristically, gently, said, "Yeah, I read about what happened with your boyfriend. Sorry to hear about that. Must suck to be humiliated like that in public."

Rob looked over at Johnson now, wondering what was going on. Was Johnson apologizing or setting him up for more humiliation? But he replied icily, “Well it’s not quite the same as being carried across campus naked for the whole school to see.”

Ten years ago, Dane had humiliated Rob publicly so many times that Rob had lost count. Now he’s “sorry” that Rob had been humiliated yet again in public? Rob’s ex-boyfriend had dumped him in front of the cameras at a movie premier and was then photographed the next day on a date with his new flame. Dane, well, he’d done far worse. The zoom broom and saber swats weren’t even half-bad since most new cadets were on the receiving end at least once. They were considered an initiation, and mild in comparison to the time Dane and the rest of the squad stripped him naked, taped his hands and feet, and carried him fully exposed across campus before dumping him in the female latrine.

“I-I said I wanted to talk about some things,” Dane stammered, “And... that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Please, just... just give me a chance to explain?” They pulled into the main staging area for the evacuation, and Dane found a parking spot. Rob was still trying to find the door handle when Dane’s hand on his forearm stopped him. “Here’s my business card. It has my personal cell number on it. Please think about what I’ve said and give me that chance.”

Rob grabbed the card and roughly shoved it into his shirt pocket without even looking at it. “No promises, Dane.” He had been frequently bothered by Dane’s actions during high school, and now Dane managed to cross his path on his vacation, dredging up all those bad memories once again. No, he wouldn’t make any promises at all to Dane.

Dane couldn’t believe his eyes. Owens, Robert K. That short, scrawny boy was all grown up now. Instead of the shaved head he remembered, the black hair was longer but still respectably short and well styled. Rob had put on muscle and looked fitter than he’d expected—even after he’d seen every one of Rob’s movies. But the thing that most amazed Dane was how tall Rob had

grown. Dane probably would have to stand on his tiptoes just to look into those golden brown eyes. Dane knew he'd been rough on Rob in school. He had his reasons, and now he was ready to admit them to both himself and to Rob. He needed to apologize—if only Rob would let him.

The Humvee door opened, and Private Briggs hopped in. “Hey, Sarge, you know him or something?”

“Yep, we went to school together.”

“He went to that military school in Wells? Wow! Did you know he was gay then?”

“No, not then. Not at that school. He was sent by a judge. It was there or juvie. He wasn't happy at school.” Dane sighed as he remembered Rob's sad face back then. “He doesn't seem much happier these days either. We have work to do now, Private. You want to drive for a while?”

Rob's parents had never been very affectionate, even before he came out to them in his freshman year. Seeking the attention that he never received for being a well-behaved, straight-A student, Rob finally told his parents he was gay. He'd told them because he wanted some kind of acknowledgement from them. He'd been willing to do anything to get them to talk to him, even if it was yelling at him. Yelling was better than the silence. Being good in school and getting straight As hadn't worked—nor had telling them he was gay—which was why he'd rebelled and gotten into trouble. Drinking and smoking, joyriding after curfew—things that should have gotten his parents' attention. It didn't. Instead, he got caught by the local police.

The judge made a deal with his parents—military school and no record, or juvenile detention and a juvie record. Boom, off to the military school it was. His parents were friends with the judge, and figured it would be beneficial for him and would also “cure his homosexuality”. He believed that a big plus for him being away at a boarding school—in another state—was that his parents wouldn't have to look at, or talk to him.

As they put him on the bus to send him off for the year, his father told him, “I don’t want to hear from that school. If you get into trouble there, you’re on your own. If they kick you out, don’t bother coming home.”

The abandonment by his family initially hurt Rob so much that he didn’t realize until years later that it was the best thing his parents had ever done for him. At the time, all he thought was that it was the cause of the pain and humiliation of his entire senior year. He never went home for school breaks, and his parents never came to any of the school events—not even his graduation. He didn’t have an answer for the other cadets when they asked him why he was spending his break at the school-appointed, host-family home instead of his own.

But even with all the embarrassment, he’d made friends at that school. The most important being Jess. Even though Jess was an old cadet, she was in many of the same classes as Rob. They were allowed to study together. If anyone ever questioned why the two of them spent most nights in the school library during night study hall, Jess would say “This is a tutoring session, move along. We need to study.” In between all the studying, Rob and Jess developed a friendship that was still going strong ten years later.

Rob was glad to be back on vacation again. He had returned to California for a few days, but was back at the ranch, and his vacation, as soon as the evacuation restrictions were lifted. At least while he was back in California, the paparazzi had found a new scandal to follow. Rob’s love life was no longer on the front page of every tabloid in town. But being back in California hadn’t helped Rob relax.

Now that the fire had died down, and the smoke cleared from the air, Rob started hiking around to different parts of his new property and the surrounding national forest. The realtor and the previous owner had told Rob about all the natural attractions near his new mountain retreat—the cliff-face in the forest with occasional waterfalls during the rainy months, and the hiking trails through the trees to the north.

Two weeks passed, and Rob still couldn't get his conversation with Dane out of his mind. Was Dane playing some game? Why would he want to talk now after all the harassment at school? The wondering and worrying made Rob's nightmares come back. Hazing incidents were relived, his loneliness reinforced. *Decide, Rob. Call Dane, don't call him? Let Dane "explain" or wonder forever?*

Looking back, Rob recognized that not all of his interactions with Dane Johnson had been bad. He remembered how, every few weeks, Dane would run his fingers through Rob's hair. It seemed it was almost a caress at times, before Dane would attempt to grab his hair instead. If Dane could hold and pull on his hair, it meant that it was too long, and Dane would say "Barber shop time, cadet." The times when he couldn't grab a handful of hair, he'd gently pat Rob on the back of the head and give him a, "Good job, cadet."

Rob recalled that Dane, in his own way, had shown more affection than Rob's parents had. That was why the hazing incidents had bothered Rob more. Rob had shrugged off being abandoned and ignored by his parents, but to be embarrassed by someone he thought might care a little about him was the worst thing Rob had ever experienced.

Rob decided to call his best friend, Jess. She knew everything. She'd been the one to rescue him from the female latrine that day in school. Even though she was one of those old cadets, she hadn't treated him the same as all the others had. From that day on, she was always there when he needed advice. Without Jess, he might have never made it out of high school.

Rob set his alarm to wake him up at four a.m. because Jess was stationed overseas in Korea or Okinawa. Rob could never keep her duty assignments straight. Either way, Rob was going to have to call her at some ungodly hour in order to actually reach her at a decent time. They usually communicated by e-mail when Jess was overseas, but this time Rob couldn't wait for a reply. Besides, it wasn't as if he would be getting much sleep with the nightmares anyway.

Groggily, Rob started dialing the international prefix 011 and then Jess's number. Three times he messed up on a part of the number and had to delete

and start over. Finally, after concentrating closely, he got through and her phone rang.

“Deputy Johnson,” came the dispatcher’s call over his radio.

“Johnson here,” he responded.

“I know you are about to go off duty, but you are the closest officer we have. Can you do a welfare check at the old Perkins place? We got three 911 hang up calls from there.”

“Welfare check. Perkins place. Got it. I’m on the way. Johnson out.”

“Why don’t you just call him, Rob? It can’t hurt just to listen to him. Maybe he truly is sorry for being a jerk,” Jess was saying.

“I don’t know, Jess. Maybe it’s better that I just go back to California and return to work, but I like it here. You have to come for a visit. It’s very pretty here.”

“Well, send me photos. I’m not going to be back stateside for at least another six months, but I’d love to visit then.”

“You’re welcome any time, Jess, you know—” Rob started, but stopped at the loud banging on his front door. Groaning, he muttered, “Now what?”

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, Jess, someone’s banging on the front door. Hold on while I go check.”

“Ok, just don’t hang up. We still have some talking to do.”

Rob grabbed his robe and struggled into it as he walked through the house, phone still in hand. The knocking on the door was louder this time, followed by “Sheriff’s office.” His heart started pounding as he recognized Dane’s voice again. What was he doing here this time? It was almost as if the man was stalking him or something. That thought made Rob angry.

Rob yanked the door open and gruffly said, “What now?” without even stopping to look through the peephole to double-check.

“Wow, Owens, is that any way to open a door? Did you even check to make sure I wasn’t some crazed, stalker fan or the paparazzi?” Dane said as he looked over the rumpled man in front of him.

“I told you to cut out that Owens crap. My name’s Rob. What the hell are you doing here at four thirty in the morning?”

“Well, Rob, I’m one of the county deputy sheriff officers, and you called 911 three times this morning. I’m doing a welfare check to find out why.”

“I didn’t—Oh, shit—Hold on.” Rob pulled away from the door, leaving Dane on the doorstep, put his phone up to his ear, and said, “Jess, you’re not going to believe this.”

She was laughing. “It’s him, right?”

“Yep, did you hear?”

“Yeah, you probably screwed up the international prefix and called 911 on yourself again, right?”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Well, put Johnson on the phone. I’ll talk to him.”

Rob walked back to the door and motioned to Dane to come in. As Dane stepped into the room, Rob handed him the phone and said, “Jess wants to talk to you.”

“Jess?” Dane looked confused as he took the phone then said, “Hello.”

“Johnson, are you picking on Owens again? After all these years, I figured you’d be over that by now. Shame on you!”

“Uh... Who’s this?”

“Come on, you don’t remember me? I’m Jess. Jessica Jones. Your old squadron commander. Really, Johnson.”

“Oh Jay-Jay! Hi, been a long time. What are you doing now?”

“Stop calling me Jay-Jay, it’s always been Jess—except for you. Why are you always so stubborn? And don’t you try to change the subject on me, Dane. I told you to quit picking on Rob.”

“I’m not picking,” Dane protested. “He’s the one who called 911 and initiated the welfare check.”

Through her laughter, Dane heard her say, “Yeah, he did that the last time he tried to call me. That international code can be tricky sometimes. Just don’t go too hard on him.”

“I won’t. Just needed to do a follow-up on the calls.”

“Good. Now be nice to him. He’s already upset over you wanting to talk to him. He’s worried you’ll pull another one of your stunts. Now put Rob back on. I’ll say goodnight and you boys can have your chat.”

“Okay, Jess. Bye.” Dane handed the phone back to Rob. “She wants to talk to you again.”

Rob took the phone back. “Hey, Jess.”

“Rob, since he’s there now, you might as well listen to what he has to say. No more worrying about the crazy stuff, okay? It’s suppertime here, and I’ve got a hot date. Gotta go. Send me an e-mail after he leaves and let me know how the talk went. Okay? Bye now.”

Jess hung up the phone before Rob could agree or even say good-bye back to her. Dane cleared his throat, and Rob realized he was standing in his living room wearing nothing but his boxer briefs and his robe, which was hanging open. Standing in front of him, Dane was staring intently as Rob hastily tried to tie his robe shut again. The look on Dane’s face was a mix of wonder and surprise. *Is he checking me out?*

Rob was blushing as he said, “Um... About those calls. I didn’t... I wasn’t trying to call 911. It was an accident. If that’s all—”

Dane cut him off. “I understand. Look, I realize it’s probably not the best time, but since I’m here, how about that talk?”

“I guess so. But let me go put something else on and start a pot of coffee.”

Dane nodded, “I’ve got to call this in as a false alarm and sign off duty for the night. Meet you back here in five?” he said as he gestured towards the sofa in the living room.

Rob nodded and shuffled off to his bedroom to change, while Dane went out to his patrol car to report in. After putting on a fairly clean pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, Rob went into the kitchen to make coffee. He looked up when he heard the sounds of Dane returning from outside.

Rob’s breath hitched when he saw Dane, who had removed his uniform shirt plus his tactical vest and belt. He was standing in Rob’s living room in his uniform pants and a sleeveless Under Armour compression T-shirt that clung to every curve of his chiseled frame. A tattoo was visible across the upper part of his left bicep. Rob wanted to reach out and touch the strong chest. Run his hands down those tight abs towards the—*whoa, Rob, remember who you’re dealing with here.* Rob was already hard just from looking at that beautiful body, but he needed to get it under control. Instead he said, “Hey, how do you take your coffee?”

Dane turned to him with a smile and said, “Stout and black is just fine with me. I’ve still got a bit of a drive to get home. That ought to keep me awake.”

Rob placed the cup of coffee on the kitchen table in front of Dane and said, “You’re a deputy?” as he turned back to get his own cup.

Dane looked confused. “Yeah. Didn’t you look at the card I gave you? It’s my official business card. My duty with the National Guard is only weekends or declared emergencies. I still need a job that pays the bills.”

Sheepishly Rob replied, “Sorry, I’m not even sure where the card went. It’s probably still in the pocket of the shirt I was wearing. It might be in the laundry, or it might have gone through the wash already.”

Dane sighed sadly, shaking his head slightly. “You weren’t going to give me a chance?”

“Not at first, but Jess talked me into it. I was going to look for your card later today and work up the nerve to call. But you’re here now, go on, explain it to me.”

“Rob, I know I hurt you. Embarrassed you. Harassed you. I’m sorry. Really sorry. I was actually the one who was embarrassed. Ashamed even. Seeing you in the movies and on the news—how out and open you were—made all those old emotions resurface. Back then, I wasn’t prepared to admit that I was gay and attracted to you. Seeing you in person again reinforced those feelings, and made my attraction to you even stronger than before.”

Rob had been staring into his coffee cup but snapped his head up at that last comment. “What! You’re gay? And—and attracted to me?” Rob couldn’t believe it. All the humiliation, all the punishment because Dane liked him. “Seriously—” Rob didn’t finish, watching a single tear roll down Dane’s face.

“We were still kids. I didn’t know how to deal with it then. I couldn’t tell anyone that I was gay. Even now, I’ve never—” Dane shrugged, avoiding Rob’s gaze. “For a long time, I was too afraid. My dad would have killed me. The Army wouldn’t have—well, you know how it was. Things were different then. Even *you* weren’t out at that school.”

Rob nodded at that comment. “Yeah, well my parents sent me there hoping it would ‘cure’ me of being gay, but it didn’t. They disowned me after it became public knowledge. Told me they never wanted to talk to me again—couldn’t be associated with my immorality.”

“But you had the guts to come out. I didn’t. I’m still not sure if I can go through with it even now. I haven’t told anybody—I don’t have anyone to talk to about it. I’ve always felt alone. I guess my defense mechanism has been to push people away by any means necessary.”

This arrogant prick was really covering up being scared? He was afraid to admit he was gay and had liked Rob since high school? Rob couldn't think of a single response.

Dane noticed his stunned expression and stood. "Look, I know this is a lot to take in. I just wanted you to know. It's been a long day for me, and I need to get home. If you ever want to talk to me again, I guess you know where to reach me now." Dane chuckled a little as he continued, "Just don't make it a habit of 'accidentally' dialing 911, though." Dane dropped another business card on the table. "Just in case you don't find the other one." And walked out the door.

Rob had been thinking about Dane ever since his early morning confession. Rob couldn't walk into the kitchen anymore without seeing Dane's toned body and intriguing tattoo. He'd left the card on the table right where Dane had dropped it. Every time Rob thought about tossing it in the trash, he was reminded of how sad Dane looked that morning. He wondered if all Dane really needed was a friend who understood.

Rob still hadn't made the hike out to those cliffs the former owner had bragged so much about. He needed some help with the map reading. Military school had provided some training, but not enough for him to be sure about going off on his own. Maybe he could invite Dane on a hike. Test the waters. See if they could become friends.

A week passed before Rob finally plucked up the courage to make the call.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Dane, it's Rob."

"Rob. Hi. Didn't expect you to call. Is everything okay?"

"Fine. I called because I need—well I have—you're good at reading maps, right?"

"Yeah, I can read a map. Why?"

“I want to go out to the cliffs everyone tells me are close to my land, but I can’t figure out how to get there. I can’t find Red Cliffs on the map. Do you know where it’s at?”

Dane laughed. “Oh, you’ll never find Red Cliffs on the map. That’s just what the locals call it. When the water runs over the edge, the mineral deposits leave red streaks on the rocks. On the map though, it’s called Crest Ridge. That fire a few weeks back was named Crest Ridge because it started there by those cliffs. I’m off in an hour if you want me to swing by and show you how to get there.”

“Um...” Rob was stuck for words again. This was the reason he’d called Dane. Why did he still get tongue-tied around this man? There was silence on the line for a moment as Rob tried to think of something to say.

Dane spoke first. “Hey, Rob. If you want to go out there, I’m a great guide. I’ve been there hundreds of times. The Perkins family used to let me hike all over that place.”

“Oh. Okay. I mean, it would be okay if you came by to show me on the maps. Thanks.”

“Great. See you about six? That will give me time to swing by my house after work and change my clothes.”

“Sure, six it is. See you then.”

God this was a stupid idea, Rob thought as he paced the room. He’d grown more nervous over the past couple of hours while waiting for Dane to show up. He considered making something for supper, but he had only been to the store once since he’d arrived. Cooking for one was generally too much of a hassle, so he didn’t usually cook much of anything that didn’t come pre-packaged. Dane had said he was going to go home first. Maybe he’d eat before he came over. Besides, he was only supposed to show Rob how to get to the cliffs. This wasn’t a date or anything like that. Why was Rob nervous about it then? Was it worth getting better acquainted with the man who used to torment him in school?

Just before six p.m., a train whistle, announcing an incoming text, sounded from Rob's cell phone.

Missed lunch, stopped to pick up pizza. On the way now.

Rob laughed in relief. Fifteen minutes later, Dane showed up with a pizza box and a six-pack of cola. "The little deli in town has an awesome pepperoni and green chile pizza. I remembered you like green chiles." Then he gestured to the sodas. "No beer tonight, I'm still on call. Can we eat first? Since I missed lunch, I'm starved, and I don't want to get pizza sauce all over the maps. We can go back over some of the basics while we eat."

"Sure, let's go to the kitchen. I've got the maps all spread out on the dining room table."

The kitchen had a small island with pull-out stools, and as they sat down around it, Dane asked, "What do you remember about map reading?"

"Well, I remember that each little box on the map is one mile long and one mile wide."

"That's a good start. Those boxes are called sections and contain six hundred and forty acres each. Your ranch is almost a section. Do you remember what different terrain features look like when drawn on the map?"

Sheepishly, Rob shook his head. He'd never paid that much attention in the orienteering class because his classmates always helped him.

"Okay, well, the cliff—"

Rob listened quietly as Dane continued to reteach him Map Reading 101. Rob watched that beautiful face light up as Dane talked about the maps. Dane's expression was more relaxed than Rob had ever remembered seeing it at school. It was as if Rob was finally seeing the real Dane for the first time, and not the severe mask he usually wore.

They finished off the large pizza, and Dane reached out to pick up the empty box. "Hey, I'll finish cleaning up since I brought the mess. Why don't you go look over those maps?"

Rob moved into the dining room and sat down at the table with the maps spread out in front of him. He was so lost in concentration that he never heard Dane walk up behind him. He started a little when Dane ran his fingers through Rob's hair just as he'd done many times before in school. This time, though, there was no grabbing and pulling of hair. Softly, Dane said, "I always liked your hair longer. I liked running my fingers through it, but the school rules had to be followed."

With a sigh, Dane moved his hand to the back of Rob's chair, leaned over his shoulder, and found the location on the topo map needed for Rob's hike to the cliffs. They were so close together that Rob could feel the heat from Dane's body, his arm and shoulder brushing Rob's back while Dane continued describing the trail and terrain.

"Here's the ranch house. This house has been here long enough that it's one of the few man-made features that show up on the topos." Dane moved his finger and pointed again. "Up here is Crest Ridge. By counting the sections, you can see it's about two and a half miles as the crow flies, but the trail is longer." Lightly tapping the map about halfway between the two points, he continued, "You have to skirt this big hill. That adds another half-mile to the trip. Then you still have to come back. It's a full six miles round-trip. Are you up for a six-mile hike?"

Rob nodded "Yes, I'll be fine. I need to go to town tomorrow for supplies, then I'll head out there the day after."

With a concerned look on his face, Dane said "Rob, it's not a good idea to be hiking alone. Things happen out there. What will you do if you fall and break your leg? Then there's the issue of the wildlife. Because of the recent fire, the animals are moving into the unburned areas. You could run into something dangerous like a rattlesnake or a mountain lion. I'm on call until tomorrow afternoon, but after that I'm off duty for three days. If you want me to, I can be your guide."

It felt right to have Dane standing so close behind him. Rob was starting to think they could be friends. Maybe more than friends. Dane was gorgeous and not as unapproachable since he'd shared his secrets with Rob. He nodded and

said, “I think I’d like that, Dane. Thanks for coming to help me with the maps.”

Before Dane said good-bye, they arranged to meet on Friday morning. After Rob went to bed, and finally fell asleep, the dream about Dane came back. It was no longer a nightmare of teenage Dane humiliating him as he was carried on the embarrassing nude trip across campus; this time it was a good dream about adult Dane and his incredibly toned and sculpted body.

Rob was sitting at his desk in his old room at school when Dane walked in and sat on the edge of the desk facing Rob. Dane reached out and ran his hands through Rob’s hair. A gentle, caressing touch as he let the hair flow through his fingers. “I like the feeling of your hair running through my fingers, but I really love being able to do this.” Dane then gently grabbed hold and pulled Rob over for a kiss.

Dane was wearing that skin-tight sleeveless T-shirt again, and Rob reached out to trace his tribal design tattoo. Rob pulled Dane closer, until the shorter man could straddle his chair before settling in Rob’s lap. Rob ran a hand up to Dane’s head to pull him in for another kiss—

Rob woke in the middle of the night, confused and aroused. He tossed and turned the rest of the night, trying to get his muddled thoughts in order.

The next morning, Rob drove in to town to pick up his supplies for the hike. He headed first to the local diner for breakfast, since he didn’t have much to eat at the house. Just as he walked into the diner, he saw Dane and an older woman sitting down at a nearby booth. As soon as Dane saw him, the relaxed expression slid from Dane’s face.

Rob watched how Dane’s face transformed from relaxed to stone-faced and emotionless in a heartbeat as Dane waved Rob over to their table.

In a cool manner, Dane said, “Hi Rob, didn’t expect to see you this morning.”

“Well, since I needed to get those supplies for our hike, and I don’t really have much left in the pantry, I decided to try the local fare.” Rob noticed Dane’s quick wince at the mention of “our hike”, before that emotionless mask covered Dane’s face again.

“Let me introduce you to the woman you hung up on.” As if to change the subject, Dane said it quickly, while gesturing to the heavy-set older woman on the other side of the booth. “My aunt, Elizabeth Johnson, is the 911 dispatcher who was lucky enough to answer all your ‘accidental’ calls. Aunty, this is Robert Owens. We went to school together.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Johnson,” Rob said, as he shook her hand.

Rob noticed how stiff and uncomfortable Dane was acting and was about to take his leave when Dane scooted over to the far edge of the booth and patted the empty space. “Might as well join us, Rob. We haven’t ordered yet.”

All through breakfast, Dane kept his distance and avoided any conversation directly related to their time in school, or how they’d become reacquainted all these years later. Small talk about the weather, local sights, and Rob’s job were the main topics of conversation. Rob was again reminded of the aloofness Dane had presented during their high school days. It was as if Dane was two different people. Here now, in the diner, was Public Dane, the arrogant prick who showed little emotion. Last night, however, Rob had finally seen Private Dane, the gentle, caring man whom he wanted to know and understand better.

After leaving the diner to finish his chores, his train whistle text tone blew.

I’m sorry. I know I was being an asshole again. I need to work on that.

Dane’s text left Rob more confused than ever. However, Rob didn’t have much time to think about Dane’s actions, when his phone rang again. Looking at the caller ID, he saw his agent’s name.

“Hey, Steve.”

“Rob, I know you didn’t want to be disturbed on your vacation, but this just couldn’t wait.”

“Steve, I—”

“Wait, Rob.” Steve cut him off. “Just hear me out. I know you really wanted a break, and you wanted to stay in New Mexico for a while. This deal I need to tell you about will keep you there. It’s for a new TV series, and the film company is based in Santa Fe. The director himself already called me to see if you would be available.”

As Dane watched Rob walk away from the diner, he couldn’t believe he’d finally met his goal and told Rob everything. Yesterday he’d laid all his cards on the table and walked away because he didn’t want to push; just let Rob decide what to do next.

After seeing Rob again, Dane knew his feelings for Rob were stronger than ever. He needed to make up for the hurt he caused Rob in the past, but he didn’t know how, and he still had his own issues to deal with. Ever since he’d met Rob in high school, he had never thought about anyone else. At the time, though, he didn’t want to be attracted to Rob—or any other guy for that matter—instead of cultivating a friendship, he pushed Rob away.

There were things about himself that Dane wanted to change, and he knew there would be many difficulties ahead of him. Apologizing to Rob had been his number one challenge for years. Dane had taken a chance and contacted the Alumni Association to see if they had a record of Rob’s current address. They’d told him that it had never been updated, so he’d started gathering the addresses of people he knew had been Rob’s friends at school. He didn’t want to use the fan mail contact address, because he didn’t want his personal mail to Rob read by anyone else. By a stroke of luck, Dane hadn’t needed that information after all. He hadn’t had to go into “crazy stalker fan” mode either, and dig through all those entertainment and tabloid websites. Accidentally running into Rob once during the fire evacuation could be considered a

miracle, but then to “accidentally” run into him a second time felt like—fate? destiny?—whatever it was, Dane wasn’t going to take it for granted.

At least Rob hadn’t completely shut him out. He’d called Dane back, asked for help, and accepted Dane’s offer to guide him to Crest Ridge. Then back at the diner, Rob seemed to sense his discomfort in public and hadn’t pressured Dane. He finally believed Rob might accept him as a friend, and at that moment, a friend was what Dane needed most.

Epilogue

One year later, Rob and Dane were back at their favorite spot. Crest Ridge was the place they’d made peace with each other, became friends and, eventually, lovers. This year at the cliffs, there had been rain, instead of fire. They played, well, skinny-dipped, under the waterfall for a time, before making love and falling asleep in the grass at the edge of the creek.

Rob woke up a short while later, pulled on his jeans, and leaned back against one of the many large boulders near the stream. As he watched Dane sleeping, he thought about all the changes that had happened over the past year. Rob took the role on the TV series so he didn’t have to travel. The bonus that staying local gave him was the opportunity to get to know Dane better.

Dane finally told his family about his feelings for Rob and officially introduced Rob as his boyfriend. His Aunt Elizabeth turned out to be the most supportive of his family, but Dane was surprised that his mom and dad hadn’t turned him away. Now he could be Private Dane—as Rob called him—more often.

Public Dane still existed and had that don’t-ask-don’t-tell attitude when they went out in public. He was still coming to terms with himself and wasn’t sure about outing himself to the world yet. When they went places, they introduced each other as old friends from high school. Every once in a while though, Dane would do something that would surprise Rob. The other day they went to the little deli in town to pick up one of those famous green chile and pepperoni pizzas they both liked. For no apparent reason, right before they

walked through the door, Dane grabbed Rob's hand for a second and smiled brightly up at him. Dane dropped Rob's hand almost immediately after, but at least it was a start on the public affection.

Rob watched as Dane finally woke up, ran his fingers through his already rumpled hair, and slipped into his jeans. Dane finally must have noticed he was being watched, and walked toward Rob. Before Rob could move, Dane blocked Rob in by putting his hands on the boulder on either side of Rob's body, then rose up on his tiptoes and gently kissed him.

"I love you, Rob. I'm really glad you came back into my life."

"I love you, too," Rob replied, as he leaned down for another kiss. He remembered a year ago when he'd asked himself if it was worth getting to know Dane better, and he only had one response. *Yes, it was worth it.*

THE END

Author Bio

A cartographer by day, A.L. Boyd spends most of her free time with her horses, gardening, or reading. She never intended to be a writer, but stories like this one sometimes just pop into her head. The writing came about as a way to get the stories out.

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