



Sentries Shorts
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Cover by TL Bland

Fox Tails

Nick dropped the knapsack full of salt, magnetized iron, knives with silver edged blades, and sacrosanct oil onto the floor next to a chair. He sat on the same chair, leaned his elbows on his knees and rested his

chin in his hands. Barely moving, he tracked Todd's movements around the large room. A couple of dozen round tables covered with white cloth, and chairs stacked beside them, dotted the room. Todd went from table to table, looking under the clothes and moving the chairs around.

Todd stopped and turned, staring hard at Nick. "Are you going to help?"

Shaking his head, Nick said, "No."

Glaring, Todd let his hands drop to his sides, tilted his head and sighed. "The party starts in a few hours. We're the only sentries in Elk's Ridge." He waved at Nick in a 'get up' motion. "So, let's get at it."

"There's no ghost."

"Yes, there is. How do you account for all the weird things the owner told us has been going on around here lately?" Todd asked.

"I'm a *psychic*. If there was a ghost here, I'd know it," Nick reminded his mate. "I've never been wrong before."

Todd huffed an annoyed noise. "There's a first time for everything. How do you explain—?"

"I don't know. If there was a ghost, it's gone now."

"It could come back," Todd countered. Nick nodded, conceding the fact Todd *could* be correct, but said nothing.

It was New Year's Eve and Nick had much better ideas on how to spend the afternoon with his mate than chasing ghosts around. On a good day that wasn't his favorite thing to do.

Elk's Ridge had become their home. The town had taken them in during the war between New Colorado Protectorate and West Caldera Protectorate. Like many other owner/slave couples they'd fled north to Yellowstone Protectorate and landed quite by accident in Elk's Ridge.

Now they had a house and a small farm to care for when they weren't busy being sentries and chasing after supernatural threats.

This so-called ghost wasn't so much of a threat as it was an annoyance. Every New Year's Eve the town of Elk's Ridge hosted a huge celebration. That celebration would begin in a few hours in this room. It took up one entire floor of a hotel and the proprietor insisted the place had become haunted recently.

He'd told them yesterday—when Todd had cheerfully volunteered their services—things had been disappearing, food was disturbed, and items were moved. It was more poltergeist behavior than a true haunting, but thanks to Todd and his quick-draw mouth, Nick had only had a day to research the building, employees and land. Research that had turned up a big, fat nothing as far as useful information went.

"I'm hungry... and cold. Can't we go home and get ready for tonight's celebration? There's nothing here." Nick tried not to whine, but judging from the arched eyebrow and the look he was on the

receiving end of from Todd, he'd failed miserably.

"Not until this place is deemed safe for the guests tonight. It's our duty as sentries." Todd pulled a bottle from the shelf behind the bar and held it up. "How do you explain this?"

The cork had crumbled and pieces of it were floating in the whisky inside. The bottle's label was scratched, but none of the liquid seemed to be missing.

Nick shrugged. "Okay, you don't see that every day, but it doesn't prove a ghost. And, let's revisit the fact I can't sense any spirit in this building."

"The sooner we finish here the faster we can get home and I can *warm* you up," Todd said and smirked. He leaned down and looked under the bar. "There are more bottles down here like this."

"Really?" Nick got up and crossed the room. Joining Todd behind the bar he bent down and looked for himself. "This is weird, I'll give you that."

"Are you sure you don't sense anything?" Todd asked. Nick shook his head and Todd held one hand up, his forefinger and thumb an inch apart. "Not even a little bit?"

"Not so much as a twinge," Nick said. "Let's go home now so you can warm me up."

Todd slid one arm around Nick's waist and tugged him close. "The faster we get this place clear, the faster you'll get *warmed* up." Todd's voice was deep and smooth, his breath hot against Nick's ear. His hand slipped down Nick's back and gave his rear a quick swat. "If you want more of this," Todd's thigh pressed between Nick's legs and against his groin, "we need to get rid of a ghost first."

Scratching and something falling off a shelf under the bar made them both stop. Grumbling, Nick went one way. Todd was far too excited about searching in the other direction. Crouching down as they walked to search underneath the bar, they each made a complete circle around it, examining it entirely until they were back where they'd started.

Todd held up a pair of heavy drinking glasses. "Explain this." He tipped them back and forth a few times before he replaced them to the shelf under the bar. "They weren't stacked nicely like the rest of the glassware and one was on the floor."

"Explain the scratching," Nick countered. "Ghosts don't make noise."

"They sometimes knock things over," Todd said. He crossed his arms over his chest and tapped his foot.

Nick stepped close enough to rub one hand up and down Todd's thigh. He leaned in and pressed a sting of light kisses along Todd's neck before saying, "I don't sense any ghost."

Todd put one hand on Nick's chest and moved him back a step. "What about tonight's celebration? Hmm? How embarrassing will it be to have everyone from town here and weird shit starts to happen? *After* the sentries deemed the place clean." He slid one arm around Nick's waist and pulled them together. Todd kissed Nick, lightly at first, but a few seconds later Nick was moaning into the kiss as his tongue slipped over Todd's. When Todd broke their kiss he smiled and said, "You'll get more after

we have cleared up whatever is causing the problem, remember?"

Banging came from the kitchen and cut off Nick's impending complaint. The kitchen was off the ballroom and there was a swinging door separating the two rooms. Letting go of Nick, Todd sprinted to the door saying, "It may not be a ghost, but there is something."

Nick silently cursed whatever was keeping him from the warmth of his mate's body and trailed after Todd. The kitchen was dark and it took them a few minutes of fumbling to find the Faraday lanterns evenly spaced along the wall. Todd prowled close to the large double oven and cook top. He pressed his cheek to the wall, looking behind the appliance.

Cans of food rolled on the floor near an opened pantry and a bag of sugar had been ripped open. It lay on its side, contents still pouring out onto the floor. Nick righted it and rolled the paper down to close the bag. He leaned it carefully against the back of the pantry shelf.

Todd must have heard the scratching at the same time Nick did. It came from a cupboard under the sink. Holding his finger to his lips, Todd dipped his head at the origin of the noise and moved quickly in that direction. Nick nodded, keeping his steps light and fast as he closed in from the other direction. They each took hold of a handle. Nick met Todd's gaze steadily, took a deep breath and when Todd nodded, they pulled the doors open.

"Whoa!" Todd jerked to the side, lifting one foot when something red and white flashed by him.

Nick punched the air with his fist. "Ha! Not a ghost!"

"Alright, fine! You were right. What do you want, an extra blow job?" Todd spread his arms wide.

"Yes."

"We still have a problem to solve before tonight's New Year's celebration. Wild animals can't be running loose in here," Todd said and shut the cupboard door. "How the hell did they get all the way up to the third floor anyway?"

"I think the more appropriate question is how do we get them out?" Nick asked. He sighed, shut the other door and leaned back against the counter. "I wonder if there's just the two of them."

Todd looked at him. His shoulders sagged and he groaned, not in the *having hot sex* way either. "There's at least one more in the other room, if that's what pushed the glasses over and chewed up the corks in the whiskey bottles. Waste of good whiskey."

"Our only other explanation is a ghost, which I would sense," Nick reminded him.

"That you don't even sense a tiny bit," Todd said. "Let's deal with what is in here first." He strode to the kitchen door and moved the bar that would stop the doors from swinging into place. "You're the animal expert, any ideas?"

"I know about livestock." Nick looked around the kitchen. "Let's find some meat, fresh or dried."

“Good idea.” Again they split up. Todd rifled through the refrigerator while Nick searched the pantry. After a few minutes Todd straightened and held a covered platter in one hand. He gave the refrigerator door a shove and it swung closed. “Fish. They like fish.” Looking around, he added, “Now we need something to trap them with.” The platter was handed off to Nick. “Here, put your knife skills to good use and cut this into smaller chunks. I’ll find something to make a trap with.”

“I don’t like fish, why do I have to cut it up?”

“Because making a trap is my job,” Todd said and smiled that cocky smile of his.

“We are going to catch them alive, aren’t we?”

Sighing and dipping his head to one side, Todd rolled his eyes. “Yes! We’ll just catch them and turn them loose. Problem solved.”

“Uh-huh.” Nick found a cutting board and a butcher knife and went to work on the fish, dicing it into bite-sized chunks. He heard Todd rummaging through the kitchen; items were moved, doors opened and closed. After a few minutes the room became suspiciously quiet. Nick turned around to find Todd grinning at him. He raised his eyebrows and stood there watching his mate.

“All we have to do is get them into here,” Todd said and pointed inside a wooden crate. He dropped the lid and continued, “We close the lid and *viola*, back outside they go. Celebration continues and most importantly our awesome reputation remains intact.” Setting the crate at his feet he held up both thumbs.

“Uh-huh.”

Todd waved Nick’s doubts. “Oh, ye of little faith.” He carried the crate to the corner of the kitchen with the most shelves. “They ran this way.”

“Plenty of places for them to hide.” Nick shrugged and scooped up the pieces of fish. He laid trails of fish fanned out in front of the crate Todd had set down on its side. They backed up so they both stood behind the crate.

It didn’t take long for a small canine with pretty red fur, brownish legs and a white tipped tail to slink cautiously toward the fish. Nick wondered if Todd was holding his breath too, afraid to move and scare the little creature.

Sniffing the fish, the fox’s tail flipped side to side. It pawed at the pieces then jumped sideways. Todd snickered and Nick swallowed a full out laugh. “It’s just a kit,” he whispered to Todd.

Nick put a few more pieces of fish inside the crate. The little fox inched forward and gobbled up more of the fish then it stopped and looked up. Todd and Nick froze. Staring up at them the fox swished its tail and yipped. A second kit, smaller than this one, crept out from under the shelves. The two little fuzz balls wrestled, rolling over one another, then both grabbed a morsel of fish and played tug-o-war, the smaller of the pair winning the prize.

“C’mon, we’ll get you out of here,” Todd coaxed in a soft voice. He held a piece of fish out. The larger of

the fox pups darted forward, grabbed the fish and scrambled off. It ran in a zigzag around the room, crashing into pans and toppling things stored on lower shelves.

Nick couldn't help it; he doubled over and burst out laughing. That seemed to incite it further and made the second one join in. They apparently thought it was great fun to run close to Todd or Nick, snatch a snack and dart away, tails wagging, making squealing sounds.

Finally the larger kit ran headlong into the crate. It turned a circle and almost scrambled out, but Todd was faster by a mere second and managed to get the lid on the crate. The other fox darted around, between their feet, then it sprinted just out of touching range. It sat and looked at them.

Todd and Nick gazed back. The crate rattled in Todd's arms. He balanced it with one hand and braced his other against the top of the crate.

Nick leaned down, holding out more fish. "We're not going to hurt you. We'll take you outside." Slowly he sat down, cross-legged, and threw one piece to the floor. Never taking its eyes off Nick, the kit slunk forward, sniffed the fish swishing its tail a few times.

Scooting back a few feet, Nick repeated his actions. The fox smacked at the next piece of fish, jumped up, paced to the side and belly-crawled close enough to grab the food. Todd stepped silently until he was a foot or so from the fox and set the crate down, careful not to dislodge the top.

"When I lift the lid, you throw some pieces inside. That will keep the one inside busy and hopefully get the other one into the crate," Todd whispered.

Nick nodded. He stood slowly and stretched far enough to grab more of the fish from the cutting board. The loose fox cocked its head to the side, watching. It whined softly and Nick smiled down at it. "Hungry?"

Todd's plan seemed like a good one. Until he cracked the lid so Nick could get his hand and the fish in far enough.

The crate's lid ejected out of Todd's grasp and a red and brown blur scrambled up Nick's arm, leapt to the floor and chirped happily as it bounded in a circle around Nick. Jerking his arm away, Nick gasped, slipped on the remains of a piece of fish and landed on his ass.

"Oops," Todd said and laughed.

Nick grumbled, "Oops?" He pushed off the floor just as the kits chased each other around him and ran across his legs.

There was scratching on the opposite side of the swinging door, and loud yipping and barking. Both the kits ran to the door. Tails wagging, noses pressed to the space under the door.

"We get one in this crate and the other two will stay with it," Nick said.

Todd nodded. "I think you're right." He whistled and the two young foxes turned, ears forward, heads up. "Play time's over boys...girls...kids."

He took the last bits of fish and tossed it into the crate then grabbed a salt shaker and rolled it along the floor at Nick. Stopping it with his foot, Nick met Todd's gaze and grinned. He gave the shaker a push. It rolled back toward Todd.

The foxes jumped in opposite directions then scrambled after the glass shaker, their nails clicking against the wood floor. One kit 'caught' the shaker, pushing at it with its nose then leapt straight in the air and landed with the shaker underneath it.

Todd grabbed another shaker and rolled it neatly into the crate. Two heads, with black tipped ears straight up turned and watched. At the same time they took off, running so fast in circles around the crate they slipped and slid on the polished wood. Todd's shoulders bounced and his entire body vibrated. He gave the crate a shake and the kits' attention riveted to it.

Moving silently, Nick snatched up the lid and crept closer to Todd and the crate. A third shaker went into the crate, this time followed by two little foxes tumbling over each other.

"Ha! Gotcha!" Todd lifted the crate off the floor and Nick slapped the lid into place.

"We need more food for the other one," Nick said. He hurried back to the refrigerator and pulled a plate of chicken out. Grabbing a few handfuls, he stuffed it in his pockets.

Nick peeked through the slats in the crate; two sets of deep brown eyes looked back. "I'll get the door." Crossing the kitchen to the door, Nick slid the bar free and looked back at Todd. "Think the other one will follow?"

"I think it'll follow you," Todd said. He tucked the crate under one arm, holding the lid securely in place with his free hand.

Nick opened the doors and stepped out into the main room, holding the door for Todd. Walking as fast as possible, and still keep quiet, they crossed the room. All the time Nick was aware of the larger fox. This one was heavier and he could easily tell it was female. She watched them from near one of the round tables. "Todd, look. I guess we were both right." Nick sidled up and whispered in Todd's ear.

The female was a deep gray with a vibrant white tip to her tail.

Todd nodded. "She almost looks like a spirit with that coloring. Come on, sweetheart, follow us and we'll get you and the kids somewhere better for you than here." He looked at Nick. "Give her a smell."

Nick crouched down and rubbed his hands on the floor in front of him. When the fox took a few steps forward and sniffed, he extracted some of the chicken from his pocket and dropped it in front of him. Bushy gray tail arched over her back, waving side to side, the fox took a few more steps toward him. Nick stayed perfectly still while she crept forward and nibbled at the meat. Smiling he took a few more pieces and set them down, pushing them over the floor to her. She paced back and forth a few times before snatching the morsels.

"Poor thing is probably hung over from all the whiskey she broke into," Todd said. "Let's see if we can coax her down the service entrance." He jerked his chin to the door leading to the back stairs. They'd

checked all the exits before going into the room and knew it would lead straight outside.

As he had with the kitchen doors, Nick held the service entrance door open for Todd to get the crate through. The two kits must have smelled the adult fox; now they were crying and yipping, sounds Nick knew was one fox calling to others. He threw a few pieces of meat down the steps ahead of Todd. Walking carefully so he didn't step on them, Todd made his way down the stairs.

The female fox eyed Nick for a minute then darted after Todd, barely stopping to snatch up the scraps Nick offered her. When they reached the exit, Nick pushed the door open and Todd slipped outside. The crate was jostling around in his arms, but he grinned and headed toward their wagon.

They wasted no time securing the crate in the wagon bed. Nick peered through the crate slots once again. The kits were curled together in a corner, watching him. When something poked his leg, Nick looked down. The female sniffed his foot, putting one paw on his boot.

Todd held his fingers to his lips and mouthed the words, "don't move." Nick watched as Todd moved to where the horses were hitched and untied them. He tossed the reins to the seat and jumped up. Todd twisted around and waved with his fingers for Nick.

Nick took the rest of the chicken meat from his pocket and tossed it to the wagon bed near the crate. Watching the female, he backed toward the front of the wagon. When he started to climb to the bench seat and take his place beside Todd, the fox bounded into the back of the wagon. Todd clucked softly and turned the horses, guiding the wagon down the street.

"Any ideas where to take them?" Todd asked.

"How about the woods along the edge of our farm? There's a creek there," Nick said. "They'll have plenty of food and space and no danger of getting shot at going after someone's chickens. They certainly don't seem too afraid of people."

"They've been living in a hotel for three weeks, why should they be? I'm surprised no one saw them before now." Todd turned and looked between them before saying softly, "Nicky."

Nick followed Todd's gaze. The female fox had her front legs on the back of the bench seat. She sniffed first Nick's arm, then Todd's before backing away and sitting beside the crate. The day was cold, but clear and sunny. Todd held the reins in one hand and put his other arm around Nick, rubbing his shoulder for a few minutes. Nick scooted closer, relaxing against Todd's side and sighing happily.

"Okay, you were right," Todd said. He leaned to the side, giving Nick a quick kiss.

"I love being right."

Todd chuckled. "We're still sentries and that means protecting all sorts of families."

It didn't take them more than a half hour to find a suitable spot on their farm to release the little family of foxes. There was a thick covering of snow on the ground so they'd have to leave the wagon on the road. Nick swung his legs over the bench seat to the back of the wagon and untied the crate. The entire time he was closely supervised by the gray fox. She darted in, licked his hand when he loosened the

ropes and ran in circles yipping when the crate was handed down to Todd.

They carried the crate into the woods, and set it close to the creek bank. Laying it on the side, Todd removed the lid and stood back. The female ran into the crate as the two younger kits came barreling out. Todd took Nick's hand and squeezed while they watched three bundles of fur romp and roll over one another.

Letting go of Nick, Todd scooped up a handful of snow, patting it into a ball. He launched it and it landed just in front of the kits. They scampered after it, jumping up to bite at the spray of snow.

Todd hooked one arm around Nick's neck and nudged him back to the wagon, but didn't get in. Instead he turned Nick and leaned him against the side of the wagon. "Now, Nicky, I believe I promised to warm you up." He cupped the back of Nick's head, fingers threading through Nick's hair while he pressed soft kisses to Nick's cheek and down his neck.

Nick slid both arms around Todd, hugging him close. "Guess we'll be a little late for tonight's celebration," Nick said softly.

Todd stepped away, and climbed into the wagon. He held his hand out for Nick to use to pull himself up and onto the seat beside Todd. "That'll be going on until morning. In the meantime, we cleared away the 'ghosts' and gave a family a new home. The good people of Elk's Ridge can have their party in peace, other than the ruckus the drunks cause." He slapped the reins gently against the horses, and the wagon rolled forward. Taking the reins in one hand again, he slipped his palm between Nick's thighs, fingertips rubbing along Nick's hardening cock. "Now, Nicky, time for our own celebrating."

That was one celebration Nick was looking forward to. He leaned in, nipped at Todd's ear and whispered, "Drive faster."

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Heart, Home and Hearth

It was a cool, clear night. The type of evening Nick Ruger liked best. He stretched and breathed in the sweet scent of lilacs and grass mixed with the faint aroma of horses in the field. This was always Nick's favorite part of the day. It was when he and his mate, Todd, would spend some time, just the two of them, sitting outside in one of the big, wooden lounge chairs Todd had built so many years ago. He'd made it special for the two of them. There was a wooden cup holder and basket securely attached to each arm. Perfect for holding Nick's observing journal or books as well as whatever they were drinking at the time.

The Rugers had lived in this house, and on this farm, in Yellowknife, for a decade. The property had been left to them by the doctor who had built it; he wanted this place, built with his wife, to go to a family who would love it as much as they had. In that ten years Todd and Nick had built a deck on the back, expanded the gardens around the house and added to the barn to accommodate Nick's four-legged patients when needed. The rest of the farm land they leased to one of the neighboring farmers.

No matter what was happening in their lives, or what direction things took, Todd and Nick Ruger had each other and their home.

Nick stuck his hands into the pockets of his dark green pullover sweatshirt. It wasn't the same one Todd had given him their first night together, but it looked and felt just like it. This one was probably the fourth or fifth one Todd had bought for Nick.

The horses were feeling frisky this evening, chasing each other around the pasture. Every now and then one of them kicked out their hind legs and bucked for a few paces. Even the moderately warmer weather after the harsh, cold, longer than normal winter they'd recently endured was enough to lift spirits of man and animal alike.

He liked watching their horses, and caring for them. Todd built things; he worked with wood and made sure their home was always in the best shape. Nick liked caring for the grounds. The gardens as well as pastures were tended by Nick. As with everything else they were the perfect complement to one another. Nick always got a warm, comforting feeling from those thoughts.

"You going to stand there staring at the horses all night? Are they doing something naughty?" Todd peered over Nick's shoulder, at the same time nudged Nick's elbow.

Todd held a large, topless egg shaped mug in each hand. One was offered to Nick.

Nick smile and inhaled deeply. "Thanks."

Todd had introduced Nick to coffee, and always made a damn fine brew. Todd hooked one foot around the leg of the nearest lounge and dragged it closer to them. He settled on the lounge, pushing back until he rested against the back. Todd held his mug of coffee with one hand and waved at Nick to join him with the other.

Nick sat on the edge of the lounge and carefully inched back until he was nestled against Todd's side, leaning into his strength and warmth. Watching for the long ripples of light stretching from the horizon upward to fill the sky. The cool colors in greens and blues mixed with the sprinkling of stars and swirled across the night sky.

"I love watching the lights," Todd said between sips of coffee. "They always amaze me. We could hardly see them from New Colorado."

"Solar flares."

"Huh?"

Nick pointed to the sky. "The lights, they're caused when particles are pushed out from the Sun by solar flares and—" One of Todd's fingers finding the space between two of Nick's ribs and rubbing back and forth fast, stopped Nick's words. He sucked in a sharp breath and swallowed a yelp.

"They're pretty lights and you don't have to dissect everything. That habit could get a guy's library privileges revoked and make his books vanish," Todd teased.

At least Nick hoped he was teasing. "You wouldn't."

Todd set his mug in the holder and reached across Nick, sliding his arm around Nick's waist. "Try me."

Nick opened his mouth, but he never got the chance to speak. Todd twisted to the side, pulled Nick hard against him and pressed his mouth to Nick's, his tongue slipping in and cutting off Nick's words.

A minute later Nick had forgotten what he wanted to say. Todd broke their kiss then whispered a soft, "Shh." He moved his arm from across Nick's middle so he could catch Nick's hand in his own.

Nick shifted a bit so he could watch Todd's profile more easily. No matter how old they got or how many years went by, there would be things Nick would always remember. One such treasured memory was his first meeting with Todd, long ago and many miles away. That day was full of so many firsts, but the one foremost on Nick's mind was Todd taking his hand and leading him away from the group they were to travel with and to privacy at the back of their wagon.

Todd was power, confidence and he seemed so sure of everything. All the things Nick wasn't, but aspired to be. He'd so easily slid his hand over Nick's. Todd's fingers were warm and strong, using just the right amount of pressure to be loving and possessive at the same time.

Nick smiled every time he'd think of Todd's fingers twining with his, curling ever so slightly until Nick had no hope of escape, not that he wanted to escape. Nick could feel every twitch and movement of the muscles of Todd's arm, how'd he'd flex and tense ever so slightly as he stepped closer to Nick, fingers curling even more, grip tightening.

The day had been warm and slightly muggy, but goose-bumps rose on Nick's skin and he'd shivered and smiled shyly. A tingle of excitement worked its way through Nick, as always it was a cozy, comforting tendril that was a constant in Nick's life. Home for Nick wasn't just where Todd was, for Nick Todd *was* his home.

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"I could start a fire," Todd offered.

"You already did."

"Did I now?" Todd went for innocent, but knew Nick wasn't buying it; the chuckle that rumbled through him was proof of that. Nick could read Todd more easily than he could any book.

Even though Nick was an inch or two taller, he had a particular talent for wedging himself under Todd's shoulder and against his side. Ten years in this house and more years than that together hadn't dampened Nick's desire for physical contact in the least.

Todd lifted the hand that rested on Nick's shoulder and stroked the top of Nick's head. It was no secret Todd loved Nick's hair. It was lustrous, with enough length to let Todd's fingers get a good hold. There was enough curl to make Todd want to run his fingers through just to see the strands separate and spring back together. Some would twist around one another, but somehow it didn't tangle. Even the color, a

deep chocolate, Todd found soothing and sensual.

Nick didn't do much to his hair other than wash it, sometimes get it cut, yet it was a part of him Todd was especially drawn to. More than the texture he loved, Todd also loved its scent. Fresh from being outdoors and uniquely Nick.

Like his personality, Nick's hair was a mass of contradiction, literally and figuratively. There were bangs constantly over his face and being brushed back from his eyes, but they were never messy, and always graceful. It constantly seemed too long until it was cut then it seemed like it grew back longer and fuller than before. Just when Todd thought it couldn't get better, it surprised him and was twice as wonderful. He moved his fingers in a lazy pattern through Nick's hair and caressing his skin.

"We could take the horses out for a ride before bed," Todd murmured.

"Hmmm, a ride sounds good." Nick sat up and rolled so he was more on top of Todd than next to him and grinned. Todd had built these chairs for the two of them, they were sturdy and stable and the couple had done much more than lounging on them over the years.

The pleasant warmth in Todd's belly and groin ignited completely. His cock went from a casual full feeling to hard in the span of a few breaths. The way the material between Nick's legs strained made it obvious to Todd Nick was having the same reaction. Todd sat up and leaned forward, skimming Nick's neck with his tongue, then teeth. At the same time he slipped his hands under Nick's clothes. With his palms pressed to Nick's skin, Todd pushed them up until his fingers brushed Nick's tight nipples.

Nick groaned and shuddered. "It's cold out here."

"You're getting soft. We used to spend months outdoors." Todd rolled one of Nick's nipples between thumb and forefinger and smiled when another quiver rippled through his mate.

"But now we have a big, *warm* bed and fireplace in our bedroom." Nick sat straighter for a second then arched his back as Todd slid his hands back down Nick's torso, dragging his clothes back into place as well.

Todd grabbed Nick's waist and urged Nick to the side so they could both stand up. The instant Todd's feet hit the ground he straightened and pulled Nick firmly against him. "I don't think we'll need that fireplace tonight." He dropped one hand lower, massaging Nick's buttocks.

Ten years in one spot hadn't diminished anything, in fact what they had continued to grow daily. He kissed Nick, long and deep, feeling Nick's heartbeat against his chest, beating in time with his own. Nick was the fire in Todd's soul and the heart that kept him going.

Nick broke their kiss and embrace first, saying in a low voice, "We should go inside now, or you'll have grass stains on your knees in about three more minutes."

"Fair enough." Todd took Nick's hand in his own again and tugged him along toward the house, their home.

Just as they reached the door Nick's grip tightened and he put the brakes on. Todd was forced to stop

and turn to face him. Nick stepped close so he straddled one of Todd's thighs, rocking against Todd and stealing another kiss while he mumbled, "Not getting soft."

"Oh, hell no, you're not." Todd reached behind him and fumbled at the door handle, finally getting it open. They practically fell inside, separating just enough to make their way through their home and to their bed.

Take What's Yours

A look at Todd and Nick ten years down the road!

Todd Ruger dumped sand out of his sock, brushed off his foot and pulled the sock then his boot back on. The most sought after sentry in New Colorado Protectorate and here he was with sand stuck to his toes.

Stretching his legs, he leaned back in the somewhat rickety wooden beach chair, hoping it didn't collapse leaving him sitting on his ass on the sandy ground. He really didn't want sand *there* too.

Gaze wandering to a boardwalk and the string of booths sitting farther up the beach, Todd watched his mate. Nick was tanned skin, messy dark hair, long legs and defined muscle. Right now he wore a pair of loose, lightweight cotton shorts that ended just above his knees and a sleeveless, light gray, close fitting shirt. Of course, he was wandering around without shoes. A hint of burn accentuated the rounded part of his shoulder. Todd never tired of watching Nick.

He could've, however, done without the sand between his toes.

Sand and sun, that's what Nick had asked for when he'd said he wanted to see the ocean and since Nick rarely asked for anything Todd was more than happy to comply with his request for an ocean visit. Even though Todd was more in favor of heading to the ocean west of their home in the far northern Rockies, they'd headed to the southernmost point of New Colorado Protectorate, the Gulf of Mexico because Nick was the most spoiled slave and doted upon mate in North America.

Possibly on Earth.

No, Todd decided probably in the entire freaking galaxy.

There was a line of cabanas that looked more like shacks as far as Todd was concerned, stretched along the length of the beach to his right. He couldn't believe the ridiculous amount of money the proprietor wanted, but Nick loved the cabana—shack—so it was well worth every penny. Each little building had its own area of beach made private from the neighboring ones by tall rock formations and plants.

Straight ahead, and close enough to the water that Todd wondered how they were protected during a storm, was the boardwalk lined with booths. Mostly they were for food and refreshments, but there were a few with clothing, jewelry and odds and ends. It was near one of the booths Nick patiently waited his turn for service. His dark brown slave collar accented perfectly his tanned neck. The collar was nothing more than something symbolic at this point, but Nick refused to give it up.

It was hard to believe ten years ago today Nick had reached adulthood and Todd had gone to the small slave village, not too far north of where they were now, where Nick had grown up to claim him.

His slave.

His love.

His life.

Nick might be the slave, but it was and always had been Todd who'd been owned. Twisting the woven leather band around his left wrist that matched Nick's collar, Todd smiled, watching how the sea breeze lifted Nick's shaggy dark hair away from his neck for a few seconds before it waffled back into place.

This trip celebrated two events: Nick was thirty-two today which led to the second event: a milestone anniversary of ten years for the Rugers.

Nick shifted his weight enough to glance in Todd's direction. A shy smile, dimples peeking out, a quick spark in his eye and a duck of his head were offered to Todd before Nick turned away, facing the man behind the booth. Todd couldn't hear the exchange, but he could fill in the blanks in his head. Nick nodded briefly, motioned with one hand to their shack—cabana—and took a bowl from the man, balancing it in one hand. With the other he scribbled on a piece of paper, the bill they'd get when they checked out no doubt.

Grinning, Todd stood and stretched again. It'd probably taken him eight years to get Nick to sign both his given name and the surname he'd acquired along with Todd's ownership. Ambling closer he watched as Nick lifted a spoon to his mouth, and licked what Todd now saw was ice cream with pineapple and chocolate slathered across it. A bit of juice trickled from the corner of Nick's mouth and dribbled down his chin. Chuckling, he wiped the back of his hand over his face then licked off the juice.

It was too much. Ten years, and Nick still did this to him with the most innocent of gestures. Crossing the distance to the booths and Nick, Todd didn't stop until he was close enough to Nick he could curl the fingers of one hand around the jut of Nick's hip bone. The feeling of how the soft, thin cotton of Nick's shorts slid over his firm skin made Todd's heart rate pick up.

Leaning close Todd let his tongue swipe along the corner of Nick's mouth, getting a taste of half melted vanilla ice cream, fruit and chocolate. At the same time he squeezed his hand, fingertips pressing firmly into Nick's flesh.

Breath catching, Nick leaned his head away and looked Todd in the eye, squinting slightly. "Who *are* you and *what* did you do with *my* master?"

Todd snickered, shrugged and pressed a soft kiss to Nick's temple. They could both count on one hand how many times in the last decade Todd had been this openly affectionate in public. He was a private person, kept their lives private as well as the feelings between them. Nick was and probably always would be far too shy to even sneak a chaste kiss in public. There was the occasional fooling around in the back of a closed carriage or a secluded alleyway, but rarely was there touching, kissing and caressing out where anyone could see them.

Today Todd felt like having anyone and everyone see them. He loved Nick with everything in him and wanted the world to know and see.

Dipping his chin in the direction of Nick's hand holding the spoon halfway to his mouth, Todd looked at the server. "Can I get one of those too?" When he moved his thumb in small circles over Nick's side his mate simply stared at him, frozen dessert forgotten.

"Sure can."

When the man held out a second bowl, Todd leaned around Nick and took it in his free hand. "We're in the same sha—cabana."

The man chuckled. "I figured that out, sonny. How long you two been together?"

Nick flushed crimson and stuffed the spoon into his mouth.

"Ten years today," Todd said, smiling so broadly it almost hurt.

"On the house then. It's so nice to see a couple stay together even when they don't have to." The man tore up the small piece of paper he'd written the charges for their orders on. "You two young fellas have a good stay here and enjoy yourselves."

Eyebrows wagging, Todd rubbed his hand up and down Nick's flank a few times before letting his palm rest again over his hip. "Oh we intend to, probably won't be leaving our cabana too much. Is there delivery service?"

Nick coughed down his ice cream and yanked the spoon from between his lips, hand going up to cover his mouth.

The man snickered, his smile was warm and sincere. "There certainly is. Just hang your order outside your door, someone goes around every three hours collecting them and delivering orders."

"Thanks." Todd grinned and patted Nick's back then took his elbow. "You going to stand here all day or come sit down and eat?"

"I...um..."

Todd shook his head and laughed, guiding them back to the somewhat unstable chairs and small, round only slightly less wobbly table between them. Settling on opposite sides, they ate their frosty snack.

Nick stretched his legs, barefoot thumping against Todd's calf. He scanned the area and sighed contentedly. "This is nice. I like it here."

"That's the point, Nicky." Leaning forward to reach across the table, he dipped his finger in the melted remains of Nick's ice cream. Todd swiped it through then lifted his finger to Nick's lips, smiling as he smeared the cool liquid across then let the tip of his finger slid into Nick's mouth and over his tongue.

Nick blinked at him and Todd used the moment of distraction to reach under the table with his other hand and grab Nick's ankle, hauling his foot up and onto Todd's thigh.

"No." Nick's voice cracked.

Todd snickered and scratched his thumbnail along Nick's arch. "Yes."

Squirming, Nick tried jerking his foot away. "Don't you dare!" His mock warning didn't carry much weight when he made a giggle-choke noise between the words.

"Ha! Or what? You're mine, so that means your foot is mine to do with as I please."

"Or...I'm gonna...I'll..." Nick suddenly lunged across the table and jabbed one finger into Todd's ribs. "You want what's yours? You have to catch it."

The surprised noise Todd made was in no way unmanly or a squawk. Nick laughed, reclaimed his foot, and was on his feet dashing across the beach in seconds.

"Oh *hell* no! Don't think those giraffe legs of yours are going to help you outrun me!" Tossing his spoon onto the table and shoving his chair back, Todd was up and chasing Nick, kicking up sand as he ran.

Nick turned, ran backwards and waved at Todd. "Like to see you try *old* man." He did a one-eighty and sprinted to the line of cabanas, disappearing around the corner. Lately reminding Todd he'd turn forty soon was something that delighted Nick to no end.

"Not too old to catch you and whip your ass," Todd shouted back and lengthened his stride, turning on the speed.

Sliding in the sand, Todd nearly lost his footing as he rounded the string of small buildings. Todd had to weave around the natural dividers and walls between the cabanas. There was somewhere in the middle, Todd counted them off as he ran by. He'd lost sight of Nick, but was sure he was lurking somewhere near the large rock walls that sectioned off the chunk of beach behind their cabana.

"You'd better be—" Todd's words choked off and he skidded to a stop sending a small spray of sand up and to rain back down in all directions.

Nick was completely naked, wearing only his dark brown braided collar—Todd swore the guy could get out of clothes faster than a cheap whore—and kneeling in the sand, head pointed toward the surf. His upper body curled over his lithe, muscular legs, until his forehead touched the sand with his hands pressed against the sides of his head, hiding his face.

Turning his head toward Todd, Nick pulled one hand away long enough for Todd to see his smirk. The way Nick's shoulders twitched and his ribs hitched every few seconds told Todd his mate was probably trying and not succeeding at stifling some serious laughter.

"Oh, you think this is funny?" Todd stalked closer, walking a slow, deliberate circle around Nick as he peeled off this shirt.

Nick shook his head, bits of sand sprayed out of his hair. Lifting one hand, he peeked up at Todd. "No. Never." Lips curling into a devilish smile he added, "You should take what's yours."

Hopping on one foot then the other to get his boots and socks off, Todd let them drop near the pile of clothes Nick left closer to the cabana than the ocean. "I intend to."

The sand was hot between his toes and he wondered how the hell Nick could stand having a good part of his body plastered to it. Crouching in front of Nick, Todd slipped his fingers through Nick's hair, gripping and releasing a few times before taking a good hold. "You ran."

"You chased." Nick spread his fingers apart and peered through. Todd backed up a few paces and crept around forcing Nick to inch along in the sand on his knees in Todd's wake until his head was aimed at the cabana. It was quite likely Todd's dick was going to explode from desire.

Letting go of Nick's hair, Todd snorted and paced around him a few times, stopping behind him. Leaning down he pulled one hand back and cracked Nick's ass a few times, smiling at the soft, deep sounds escaping Nick's lips.

Hooking one finger through Nick's collar, Todd pulled back, until Nick was still kneeling, but his torso was upright. He was already panting and not entirely from the pressure Todd was exerting on his throat. Leaning over Nick's shoulder, Todd made sure he was close enough Nick felt his warm breath on his skin but not so close he'd actually touch.

That drove Nick crazy and produced the reaction it did every time. Nick fidgeted and squirmed.

"Still," Todd ordered, voice pitched low. "Silent. You don't do or get a thing until I say you do."

Nick's movements immediately ceased. His only noise was his harsh breathing. Todd barely pressed the tip of his tongue to the skin of Nick's neck and pulled it up along a slow, leisurely path. Nick shivered, his hands bunched into fists and flexed open, but he made no sound.

Todd let go of Nick's collar and moved around to stand in front of him, reaching out and gripping his hair once more. He backed up again, and again Nick shuffled along on his knees, following. When they got far enough from the ocean and close enough to the cabana they were almost inside, Todd slid down, his thighs pressed against Nick's and wound one arm around his waist.

He pulled Nick tightly against him, brushed his lips over Nick's a few times before deepening his kiss, thrusting his tongue into his mate's mouth. His other hand roamed over Nick's back, feeling warm, sun-kissed skin and firm muscle. Nick inched closer until there wasn't even the tiniest amount of space between them. His arms curled around Todd's waist, fingers massaging the muscles of his back.

Hand going up and fingers twining in Nick's hair again, Todd pulled his head back, exposing that long, delightful neck. He licked and kissed up and down pressing against the groove and nibbling along Nick's Adam's apple.

"God, I love you," Todd breathed the words along Nick's skin.

"Yeah, I know...me too...love you."

Standing, arm still around Nick's middle, Todd tugged him up and backed them into the cabana. Once inside with the door shut he snapped his fingers and Nick dropped to his knees, breath hitching, hands folded in front of him, head bowed waiting. Todd moved away, he had to get some control or he was going to cum faster than a schoolboy with his first crush.

When his knees hit one of the arm chairs in the sitting area, he reached behind himself and gripped the sides, lowering slowly into the chair. Fumbling with first his belt then his pants, he got the pliable leather band undone and off, leaving it dangling from one hand.

Nick looked up for a second, biting his lip when he grinned. A shudder ran through him rippling the muscles of his chest and abdomen. He exhaled a breathy, "Todd."

"C'mere." Todd's voice was rough and thick. Nick barely glanced up before standing gracefully and closing the distance between them, lowering himself to kneel between Todd's legs. He held both wrists together, hands out in front of him. "First get my pants off, then I'll think about what you want or get."

Nick ducked his head and smiled softly. With trembling fingers he drew down Todd's zipper then gripped the soft material of his pants in both hands and eased them over Todd's hips. Shivering, Todd gripped the arms of the chair with both hands and lifted his hips far enough Nick could slide his pants off and toss them to the side.

Again holding his wrists out and pressed together Nick sank back on his heels. "Please, master."

Todd snorted, leaned forward and slowly wrapped the belt around Nick's wrists, pulling it tight. "You know what I want."

Smiling, eyes twinkling Nick leaned forward, blowing a line of hot air along Todd's engorged cock from tip to his balls. He all but forgot how to breathe, his cock twitched and precum glistened along the slit.

Nick spent a few minutes running just the tip of his tongue up and down the length of Todd's cock. With each upstroke he swiped his tongue over Todd's slit, taking in the pearly bits of precum oozing up and dribbling over the sensitive head. Each lick downward and Nick wrapped his lips around Todd's balls, kissing softly and sucking with barely enough pressure to be felt.

Shifting closer and rising up higher on his knees Nick finally turned his head to a better angle and slipped his mouth over Todd's cock. At first he used the barest hint of pressure, but as Todd's hips jerked side to side faster, his hands gripped the arm of the chair with enough force they cramped, Nick sucked harder and harder.

Todd didn't even try to hold back the moans he panted out. Lifting one foot he rubbed his toe along the soft skin behind Nick's balls, pressing up until Nick's hips twitched and he jerked in harsher, more desperate breaths.

Pressing one hand against the side of Nick's face, Todd pushed his thumb in, stopping Nick's ministrations. "Bed...now."

Nick leaned away from him, grinned and stood, crossing to the small bedroom off the main room and

threw himself down on the bed, bouncing around.

Todd took a few minutes to simply watch him through the doorway. Nick was always so energetic and full of life it was impossible not to watch and enjoy the world through his eyes.

By the time Todd was into the room Nick had arranged himself face-down on the bed. His fingers gripped the slats of the headboard, his legs were spread wide enough his toes pointed to each corner of the end of the bed.

Wasting no time, Todd snatched the small bottle of oil he'd left on the night table and poured some into his hand. Setting it to the side he rubbed the oil between his palms and over his thumbs and fingers before liberally covering his cock. Inching across the bed on his knees he settled between Nick's thighs.

Using both thumbs he started at the lowest point of the crack of his ass, pressed his thumbs between Nick's round, firm cheeks and pushed up. When he reached Nick's entrance he pushed against it, rubbing the pads of his thumbs around it, circling and teasing the sensitive skin.

His other fingers pressed against Nick's balls, stroking softly and reaching to his perineum, massaging until Nick was gasping for air, hips shifting back and forth. Applying pressure to both areas had Nick trying to push his ass into Todd's hands and press down against his fingers all at once.

Taking his hands away earned Todd a deep, throaty moan from Nick. Leaning over Nick's back, Todd whispered in his ear, "Nicky, I said *<i>silent</i>."*

Nick groaned again, biting it off, turning his head and burying his face in the mattress. Todd chuckled and kissed his way down Nick's spine. Giving his cock a few extra rubs with his oil slick hands he gripped Nick's hips. Lifting up and pulling his cheeks apart at the same time, Todd pressed his entire length into his mate's body letting out a long, low moan. He eased his body over Nick's back, fingers gripping his shoulders as he moved, pulling partially out and pounding forward.

The exquisite feeling of Nick's glutes pressed against his groin and the slight roughness from the hair on Nick's thighs sent jolts coursing through Todd. Sheer want consumed his brain, all he could process was the raging heat surround his cock. Hips pistoning faster, Todd shoved in and out of Nick with more force.

Breathing in hard through his nose and blowing out short, quick breaths from his mouth, Todd groaned and licked across Nick's shoulders. As his orgasm rolled through him, Todd let his teeth catch and scrape over Nick's shoulder blades, finding the perfect place to bite down gently.

Heart pounding against his chest, he felt how Nick's heart hammered in response. He skimmed his lips over the salty sweat beading on Nick's skin. "Oh...gah...Niiickhheee..." He turned his head and let his cheek rest against the side of Nick's neck, waiting for his breathing to slow.

Easing out of Nick, Todd used the heels of his hands to massage the heavy muscles of Nick's back, his fingers skimming lightly along his sides. As he moved his hands along, he let his fingertips slide under Nick, brushing over his nipples and dipping between his ribs. Nick's fists gripping the headboard slats went white, his body arched and writhed into Todd's touches.

Shifting until he could get one finger into Nick, Todd moved it in small circles until he was slipping across Nick's sweet spot making him shiver and his breath hitch. Pulling his finger out only long enough to flip Nick onto his back, Todd pressed his forefinger back into Nick, this time using the thumb of the same hand to press against Nick's sensitive spot from outside as well as caress him from the inside.

Nick's back arched, his neck muscles corded and he panted desperate breaths. Todd gripped Nick's cock with his free hand stroking slow, twisting as he went. When Nick's legs bent enough his heels dug into the end of the mattress and his back arched higher, mouth opening and closing, head pressed back, Todd knew he was near his breaking point.

Squeezing Nick's cock harder, moving his hand even slower he ground out, "Cum, Nicky."

That was all Nick needed. All bets were off, his mate gasped, letting a loud, deep moan escape then another and another. Hips shoving up into Todd's fist one second and down onto his hand the next he pumped hot, white strands across his belly and over Todd's hand.

Todd worked his mate through his climax until Nick collapsed onto the bed, gulping in huge breaths. A fine sheen of sweat covered him, making every cut and groove of his arms and legs show. Tanned, shiny skin slid with ease over his ribs giving his entire torso the impression of writhing and shimmering.

Flopping down beside him, Todd eased one arm under Nick's neck and pulled him close mumbling, "You got sand everywhere." He loosened the belt and pulled it away from Nick's wrists, letting it drop off the end of the bed to the floor.

"Hmm. Didn't hear you complaining." Nick pulled himself to a sitting position and scooted to the end of the bed. He tugged at the sheets until Todd lifted his hips far enough Nick could pull them off.

"Nick, what...?"

"I'll shake them out." He reached down and grabbed Todd's foot, fingers threatening all sorts of things, none of which could be good.

"Nick," Todd warned.

Snickering, Nick let go and flicked at Todd's ankle. "Get up."

"Did that." Todd let his eyes drift shut, snapping them open in the next second when something smacked into the side of his head. "What the—?" He sat up and grabbed the soft material draped over his skull.

Nick was hopping around pulling some shorts on, grinning at Todd. "Come on, let's take a swim. Or are you too *old* to do that?"

"Nick, I don't want..."

Todd didn't get to finish that sentence. Nick had his arms in a strong grip and was hoisting him to his feet. "We need to clean up."

“Pest,” Todd grumbled, pulling on the shorts as he chased Nick out of the cabana and into the serf. Nick tackled him from the side, laughing, fingers digging into Todd’s ticklish side. They hit the wet sand together and rolled into the oncoming waves.

Apparently, Todd was destined to get sand *there* after all.

The End

This was originally published on the [M/M Romance Group on Goodreads](#) and is part of a summer challenge and is available in an anthology, [Don't Read in the Closet](#). It's an amazing group, come check it out and join us!