

START SOMETHING NEW

J. Rocci

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Author's Note

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Second, this is the second edition of "Start Something New". It was originally published in 2013 as part of Torquere Press's annual Charity Sip Blitz, where the theme for that year was "uniform" and proceeds went to the OutServe - Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. This is a short story and I loved writing it to support a worthy cause, so I thought it was appropriate as a special thank you for my fans.

I cannot say it enough -- Thank you for reading, and I wish you well in all that you do!

START SOMETHING NEW

After a long day riding a desk and chasing down staff actions in tiny, drab rooms, Sergeant First Class Matt Ridley just wanted to kick back and enjoy a cold beer. He was going to watch cooking competition shows on the TV with his five-month-old Labrador puppy, Ironside, napping quietly in a corner. It was a good plan, or so he thought.

What he got was a puppy who'd had an accident in her mangled and chewed up crate while he was gone. So instead of relaxing in his armchair after he changed out of his ACUs, he puppy-wrangled amid much cursing.

He managed to get her sixty-pound behind outside to the hose before she could paint his walls, but that was where his luck ran out. His backyard was a twenty by twenty cube with some grass but mostly clay dirt, and he ended up with the hose turned on himself more than her. He hadn't even gotten that filthy during Basic.

"Get a dog, they said..." He huffed as he wrestled the hose away from her while she tried to play tug of war. "She'll be good company, they said... Keep you from going *crazy*, they said..."

Ironside's little golden face gave him a puppy smile, then she finished shaking out her wet fur, splattering everything around her like an exploding frag grenade. She woofed happily up at him and kicked mud everywhere as she ran back into the house.

"Yeah, I think they're full of shit, too," he muttered, wiping his face, and went to find a towel and a mop. But he was victorious in the end and his house only smelled like wet dog instead of worse. The wet dog smell was bad enough.

Rather than sit around and breathe her stink, he decided that air-drying was in order. She listened to him happily enough when the leash came out and he opened the door.

There was a little fenced-in dog park next to the playground of his development. It was a bit rundown, given that his neighborhood wasn't as fancy as some in the area, but clean enough. Ironside bounded ahead of him, grabbing the slack in her leash up in her mouth so that it looked like she was out walking her human rather than the other way around.

He wasn't the only one taking advantage of the nice day, but Ironside was friendly, if a little rough, so he let her off leash to go play with some of her friends.

Before he could avoid it, Ridley found himself cornered by the Home Owners' Association president, Lauretta, a retired Master Sergeant who had been recently elected to run the HOA Board with an iron fist. Even in civvies, he had the urge to salute as she walked up to him with her little Yorkie trailing behind.

"Sergeant," she addressed him once pleasantries were done. "How's the progress on our ARC application backlog?"

"I've contacted five homeowners, ma'am," he reported. They had a lot of investment properties in the subdivision, so quite a few of the homeowners didn't live there and it made contacting them about their Architectural Review Committee applications difficult.

"Good." She nodded sharply. "Hopefully we can knock a few more out before this weekend. Jennifer finalized the plans today, so I expect to see you at the block party. The Board's put so much work in these last few months, we all deserve some down time."

"Yes, ma'am."

As soon as she'd set her sights on a young couple by the playground, Ridley called Ironside back and moved out.

Joining the HOA Board, much like getting a dog, had been one of those impulse decisions to get out of the house more often, brought on during talks with well-meaning friends and family. This wasn't his first posting to a command staff, but it was the first time he'd decided to live off base since he'd enlisted, to buy his own place and get out there, making plans for retirement.

He hadn't realized that the HOA Board, much like the Army, also had Mandatory Fun he was expected to attend -- which meant that, if he wanted to have any peace at the block party, he needed to follow up on more ARC applications. Otherwise he'd be fielding status questions all night.

Popping back into his modest townhome, Ridley retrieved his HOA binder and flipped to the nearest address. Gathering up Ironside's leash, he headed for the end unit on his left.

He'd lived in the neighborhood for about six months, but he still didn't know his neighbors that well and he'd never met Brett Isaacs in person, but the mangy-looking patch of side yard that greeted him did not seem the kind one would want to install a pergola on.

Yeah, Ridley'd had to look up what the heck that was, too -- it was a basic box frame with evenly spaced beams across the top that you stuck in your yard to picnic under or grow things on. Why a permanent tent frame needed a fancy name, he didn't know.

Sighing, he turned up the short concrete walkway to the townhome, trying to keep Ironside off the tiny front yard. This was the house with the dog that always barked obnoxiously loud when they went past.

There wasn't a doorbell, so he just knocked and waited as the dog inside started barking fit to tear down the door, like usual. His own dumb dog, instead of being cautious, perked right up at that and her tail started going ninety miles a minute.

"Hello, sir," he said when the door finally opened. "I'm Matt Ridley, with the community HOA. Is Mr. Isaacs home?"

"I'm Brett," the man said after a moment, a little slow on the uptake, either like he had just woken up or he was on something. From the bare feet, ratty basketball shorts, and frayed tank top, he obviously wasn't expecting company. He looked familiar to Ridley, but that was probably just from seeing him around the neighborhood.

A huge chocolate Lab with a gray muzzle tried to push around Brett's knees from behind, but Brett just hushed him and the dog went to lie down off in the house. Ridley was a little envious as he stepped on Ironside's leash to keep her from darting inside the door, almost getting pulled off balance as he juggled his binder open.

"I'm here about your ARC application..." Ridley trailed off when there was no recognition on the Brett's face.

"My what?" Brett asked, scrubbing at his face and stepping out onto the tiny stoop so the storm door shut. He absently let Ironside sniff at his hand before petting her head. "I don't think I sent in anything."

Brett was younger than Ridley had expected for a homeowner, and as gorgeous as he was scruffy. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties, with bright, green eyes and thick, blond hair cut short with a little flip in front like most of the younger enlisted were wearing these days. He had

a pert nose and full lips, and Ridley really needed to start talking again before his interest became obvious.

"For your pergola? I know it's been almost a year since you applied, but we have an all new set of Board members in now and we're tying up loose ends from the last members, who... Well, there were some issues. So we're going through the backlog of applications."

"Oh." Brett perked up -- or woke up, more likely. "Yeah, the -- uh-- the side yard. Yeah. That was my ex?" he said sheepishly with a definite New England accent, running a hand through his short hair. "We probably broke up right after he sent it in? Sorry, I'd forgotten all about it."

The male pronoun didn't escape Ridley's notice. He was curious, but unsure if it was a sore subject or if there was another not-so-ex boyfriend in the picture, so he forged on.

"Then I guess you won't need the application reviewed?" he asked, just to be sure.

"Nah, you can trash it."

"All right--" Ridley broke off with a yelp as Ironside, tired of being ignored, got ahold of his fingers on the binder with her teeth and tugged. "Damn it, dog!"

"Sorry," Ridley apologized to Brett for his language, and inspected his hand for teeth marks. Ironside pranced at his feet in a huff.

Brett waved off the apology, looking concerned. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. She just surprised me, is all." Ridley frowned down at her, embarrassed. "She chews on everything, even me."

Brett's laugh was a little awkward honking noise, but he gave a half-shrug. "Labs tend to do that. Ricochet once tore the molding off a door frame when he was bored. The trick is to keep them constantly entertained with stuff they can't destroy."

"She tore up all the supposedly 'long-lasting' toys I got her. I've just been taking her for longer and longer walks in the evening in the hopes of tiring her out," Ridley said ruefully.

"Yeah, I've seen you guys around. Ricochet always goes nuts when you walk past."

"I've noticed," Ridley said with a laugh.

"He's special," Brett admitted, then looked discomfited, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm also -- um -- Yeah, I'm one of the security guards on base. You're a sergeant first class, right?"

That was the reason why Brett looked familiar. Ridley was just used to seeing him in a civilian security guard uniform, tactical vest, and wraparound sunglasses, with a stone-cold expression as he checked IDs.

"Yes, sir," he agreed quickly, Southern manners kicking in. "I recall, I've seen you on gate duty."

"Yeah," Brett repeated with color staining his cheeks. It could have been the summer heat. "I've been meaning to, um, introduce myself since you moved in. But... yeah."

Brett was nervous, Ridley realized. His own palms were getting sweaty around the plastic binder and dog leash.

"I haven't been here that long," he offered and cleared his throat. "I'm still getting used to the traffic. Who knew it could take an hour to go two miles, right? I could push my car faster."

Brett's honking laugh came out loud, like he was surprised, and Ironside jumped restlessly, tugging on her leash. Ridley's binder went flying.

"Aw shit," he cursed and tried to catch it. Brett dove in and caught it before it completely spilled over the sidewalk.

"Sorry about that," Brett apologized, flustered. "I have such a stupid laugh--"

"Not your fault," Ridley hurried to contradict him. "I like your laugh."

"Um--" Brett blinked at him, handing the binder back. "Thanks."

Ricochet barked from behind the storm door, muffled but still as jarring as a live fire exercise.

"Sorry. It's his dinner time," Brett explained, snapping his fingers at the door. Ricochet subsided, sitting in the doorway and glaring at them pitifully, but Ironside was worked up again, her dog tags jingling.

"I should get her home, too." Ridley started to step away, but told himself to man up and be bold. "I'll see you on Saturday, right?"

Brett gave him a blank look. "Saturday?"

"Block party," Ridley said in what he hoped was an enticing manner. He waved to the end of the street. "In the cul-de-sac. Lots of grilling and a local band, and hoses set up for the kids to play. Dogs welcome, of course."

"I'll be there," Brett said with a wide grin. Yup, he'd definitely been nervous before.

"Great, I'll see you then."

Ending on a high note, Ridley headed back to his porch. He didn't hear Brett's screen door shut again until he was halfway down the sidewalk, and told himself not to get his hopes up.

But the weekend suddenly looked promising.

"No."

"Aw, c'mon, man--"

"No." Ridley took the cellophane off his store-bought cupcakes, moving his cell phone out of the way on his small counter as he spoke into his hands-free earpiece. "Not doing it. Nope. Nada. No."

"I just want you to be happy," Dan, his older brother, said cajolingly. "You live right next to Washington, D.C. Take advantage of it."

"I am not signing up for online dating. It ain't happening." He started unwrapping the second cupcake package.

"You'll do fine! Plenty of men and women like a guy in uniform." He could hear Dan clicking around on his computer on the other end. "Look, this site's free; I'll just create a log-in for you, then we can work on your profile over the phone--"

Ridley reached over to the end of the counter and pulsed his blender a couple times.

"Sorry, bro, you're breaking up." Pulse. "Guess we got a bad signal." Pulse. "I'm gonna go now." Pulse. "Let's never do this again." Pulse.

"You are a sad little man," Dan deadpanned when the blender was finally quiet.

"No sadder than you sitting at home on a Saturday night making a dating profile for someone else."

"I don't want to use a website--"

"Neither do I!"

Dan carried on like he hadn't spoken. "I want to go out in public and meet people in person. I want to leave my house for more than Army stuff, unlike some people we know."

Ridley sighed quietly and pushed the cupcake packages to the side, leaning his elbows on the counter so he could rest his forehead on his arms.

"Look. Dan." He said quietly, softly, staring at the floor. "I appreciate it, but maybe I'm not looking to date again? Maybe I'm happy with just me and the dog."

"It's been long enough, Matty," Dan said just as gently, using his childhood nickname. "Put yourself out there. At least go get laid."

"I talked to one of my neighbors." Ridley had no idea why he said that, but he'd been thinking about Brett since they spoke, maybe keeping an eye out when he drove on base and around the neighborhood.

"A single one?" Dan sounded skeptic.

"I think so. He has a dog. He was maybe interested." Ridley shrugged, knowing Dan would know he did. "I think."

"Good Lord preserve us, go take your cheatin' store bought cupcakes to the block party." He could imagine Dan's eye roll. "And for God's sake, just talk to people. Find that neighbor, have a few beers, and a good time. You've survived war zones; you can take on the neighborhood coffee klatch."

"I'm totally a member of the coffee klatch now," Ridley said tartly, but his goodbyes were heartfelt. Dan was just worried. He got that.

Ridley told himself he didn't really expect anything from the party, just some free grub and relaxing in the sun. He frowned down at his polo shirt and khaki shorts, then ran upstairs to change into something less yacht club and more kick-around fun.

The block party was in full swing when he dropped off the cupcakes at the dessert table. They had a couple tents set up for the food, a lot of lawn chairs, and a mariachi band playing. There was a good-sized number of people so far, but Brett was easy to find with Ricochet sitting next to his low-slung beach chair a little apart from the crowd and the noise of the band.

"Hi there," Ridley greeted them, waiting until Brett responded before letting Ricochet sniff at his hands and loving on the old dog. "You got a lot of wisdom in that muzzle, buddy."

"He's been with me since I was in my teens," Brett admitted, grinning at the two of them. "My parents watched him through two deployments, but other than that, we've stuck together."

"You were in?" Ridley asked with a smile. "What branch?"

"Army, of course," Brett said, tilting his sunglasses up to squint at Ridley in the waning light. "There are other branches?"

Ridley chuckled. "Not if you ask a marine."

Brett started going then, with the honking laugh. Ridley still thought it was cute, much like the man behind it.

"I'm gonna go get my chair and my dog. Mind if we keep you company?"

Gesturing at the empty space around him, Brett grinned. "Be my guest."

Luckily, Ironside hadn't destroyed anything in the time he'd been outside. Ridley got her leash on and grabbed his lawn chair, getting out to the cul-de-sac in double time.

Brett and Ricochet both perked up when they approached, Brett less obvious behind the sunglasses. His eyes really did give away most of his expression, Ridley realized.

Ironside and Ricochet sniffed at each other while Ridley held his breath. He loved his pup, but she could be a handful. When she didn't try to play with the older dog, Ridley relaxed and sank into his chair.

"Here." Brett handed him a beer from a company he'd never heard of. "I didn't know what you liked, so I grabbed two that I did."

"Thanks." He took a sip, wincing at the lightly fruity taste.

"Not a big IPA fan?" Brett didn't seem too upset, so Ridley shrugged.

"I just like darker brews, the bitterer the better."

Brett chewed on his bottom lip for a moment. "I have a couple you might like, then, if you wanna come over some time?"

If he was trying to be slick, he was failing horribly, but Ridley gave points for effort. "I'll have to swing by then."

"After work this week, if you're up to it?"

"Definitely. Tuesday?"

Ironside decided that was a good time to go digging in the plastic bag next to Brett's chair.

"Ironside, leave it," Ridley commanded. She stopped rooting and Brett retrieved the bag.

"It's all good. She can probably smell the antlers," he commented and produced a chunk of deer antler. "A guy at work collects them when he goes hunting. They're great for chew toys 'cause they don't splinter, but damn expensive in the stores. You wanna let her try one?"

"Anything that keeps her from chewing on me. Or my shoes. Or my house," Ridley said gratefully. Ironside took the antler from Brett and went to lie down on the grass opposite of Ricochet, already gnawing before she hit the ground. "Thanks."

"No problem. I get 'em free... So, Ironside -- like 'Old Ironsides'?" Brett asked with a grin, referring to the nickname of the Army's 1st Armored Division.

"Exactly like, sir," Ridley drawled back. "That, and I swear she's got an iron gullet, the things she'll eat."

"She's definitely a Lab, then." Brett laughed and if possible, his grin got wider as he said, "I was an Eleven-Bravo," referring to the Infantryman military occupational specialty.

"So'm I," Ridley admitted with delight. "Who'd you serve with?"

They went back and forth for a bit, trading names of commanders and platoon sergeants and drill instructors. Brett had gotten out after his four years were up and Ridley was a couple years ahead of Brett's time, already a Sergeant when Brett entered Basic, but they both knew one guy at Ridley's last post.

After they each got a plate of barbeque and a dozen sides, Ridley found himself relaxing completely into his chair, listening to Brett describe his first CO. It was... nice. Not quite comfortable, but with the promise that it could be. The way they kept looking at each other, hands bumping when they reached for their beers on the ground between them, he felt like they could start something solid if he just got out of his own way and went with it.

Lauretta came over with her husband as people started turning on porch lights and lighting strategically placed tiki torches, filling the cul-de-sac with a warm yellow glow.

"You gentlemen look like you're having a good time. Sergeant," she said with a pleased smile. "This is my husband, Terrence."

Ridley shook the man's hand, even though he had already met Terrence. Brett introduced himself.

"Ah, you're at 8204," Lauretta said when she recognized his name. "The pergola."

Brett hid his face behind his hand with a groan, nearly knocking his sunglasses off his head. "I swear I completely forgot about that. I didn't mean to cause extra work for anyone."

"It was no trouble," Ridley protested. "All I had to do was shred an application."

"Oh, you're not installing the pergola?" Lauretta sounded disappointed. "But that was such a lovely design."

"It's not really my style?" Brett offered with a helpless shrug.

"That's too bad. Let us know what you decide to do instead," she said like it was a given Brett was going to remediate his dying lawn. "Sergeant Ridley here is head of the ARC, so he can help you with the HOA bylaws."

"Great. Thanks!" Brett kept smiling until she and her husband moved on to the next cluster of chairs. Then he asked out of the side of his mouth, "Who was that?"

"HOA President," Ridley muttered back. "Retired Master Sergeant. Like, *just* retired."

"Ah-hah."

"You don't even remember what that pergola looks like, do you?" Ridley asked with a smirk.

"I don't even know what one *is*..." Brett glanced over at him, obviously making a decision to talk personal. "When I got out and decided to stay in the area, I bought this place 'cause the housing prices were way low then. But it still needed some work done, and I was busting my ass, so when I started dating this guy Drew more seriously and he wanted to decorate and fix it up, I was like, 'Yeah, sure. Free labor!'"

"He was the one that picked everything out and had all these plans." Brett looked over at his yard, just visible from where they were seated. "We broke up before he got to the outside. Just as well, I guess, or I'd have ended up with a Cupid fountain or something."

Ridley arched an eyebrow. "No one could be that tacky. Do they even make those anymore?"

"You shoulda seen the inside. I had one room that looked like Liberace's house vomited on it. It had so many mirrors and gold that I almost shot my own reflection one night after a long shift. Our last fight actually started when I gave a throw pillow to Ricochet to 'play with' on purpose, but man, was I glad to chuck those mirrors out." He chuckled to himself. "It was therapeutic."

"I can't say much," Ridley admitted. "I only recently upgraded my own living room furniture from milk crates and shipping pallets, so I really can't throw stones."

"Milk crates?" Brett snorted. "Isn't that considered hipster chic, now? The big salvage and repurpose movement?"

"Maybe if you're in a dorm," he drawled. "When you're thirty-two? It's kinda sad when it's the only table to eat off of in the room."

"You're thirty-two? Really?" Brett looked at him in disbelief.

"Yup," he said, popping the 'p'. He really liked Brett, so it was time for full disclosure. "Been in the Army since I was eighteen; divorced before I was thirty."

Brett's eyebrows climbed higher, but without the sunglasses, the disappointment in his eyes was obvious. "You were married?"

"For about three years." It was Ridley's turn to stare at his lawn, taking a swig of his beer. "We met after I was in Iraq, but before I shipped to Afghanistan the first time. We definitely rushed into it, didn't even stop to agree on whether we wanted kids or what we expected in five years, let alone twenty. Between the stress of deployments, me going on travel, and her career, we probably weren't going to last. When I told her I'd been with women *and* men before, well... Everything I did after that was suspect, according to her. We fell apart pretty quick."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Brett looked sincere when Ridley glanced over at him.

He shrugged. "It is what it is, right? Been a few years now. I've always been more attracted to personality, but when people hear 'bisexual' they think you're either indecisive or afraid to admit you're gay. Me, I'll admit when I like someone." He caught Brett's gaze. "Then I can be very decisive."

Brett ducked his head shyly and murmured, "Good to know," so quietly Ridley almost didn't hear him.

The silence that followed was comfortable, their own little cocoon as the outside world carried on conversations and music around them. Ridley checked for Ironside at his feet, only to follow her leash next to Ricochet, the two of them passed out side by side, over a hundred pounds of dog between them. He opened his mouth to comment on it, but Brett spoke first.

"I really should do something about the lawn, I suppose. In this light, it looks like a horror movie set." He blew out a heavy sigh. "I don't even know where to begin."

Ridley shrugged. "Well, Laretta's about to go around doing inspections with the property manager, so you might want to start by checking the bylaws to see if anything's in violation."

"That HOA book they gave me is over three hundred pages long," Brett grumbled. "I'm not even sure what I want, but I'd rather decide now instead of trying to fix something, only to have to go back and redo it next year."

"I could help," Ridley offered, knowing an opening when he heard one. He swallowed when Brett turned to face him full on. "I mean, I'm not really a creative type, but I can help you do up some simple plans. I can do some grunt work with bricks and all that on the weekends."

Brett's smile this time was softer, more private. Ridley wanted to cause that expression as often as possible.

"I'd like that."

"Tuesday, then. We'll drink some beer and decide where to put the garden gnomes."

"Only if they're armed and wearing camo."

Ricochet let out a loud snore and they both started to laugh.

Tuesday couldn't come soon enough. Ridley was ready to throw his phone out a window, Dan was being so annoying. He'd let slip that he was helping Brett out, and now all his brother could do was text him dating tips and links to gardening articles and clothing sites.

His fashion sense wasn't that bad. He went with a relaxed look -- cargo shorts and a nice T-shirt, layered with an open button down -- clean but not too uptight. At least he didn't wear the button-down flannel shirt and pressed jeans that was the Marine Corps' off-duty uniform. You could always spot a jarhead in the bar on Friday night.

He debated leaving Ironside at home, but she'd been behaving pretty well now that she had that antler to drag around the house. He didn't think she'd try to start something with Ricochet, but at least he just had to walk her back down a couple houses if she misbehaved.

And now he really hoped this worked out with Brett, otherwise walking his dog every day was going to get awkward.

As if making a point, Ricochet started barking his fool head off again before Ridley and Ironside even got to the walkway, so Brett was waiting for them at the door.

"Got pizza," Ridley said, holding up two boxes as he came in, both dogs on his heels. "Veggie and meat, since I didn't know what you'd like."

"Either one. I'm easy," Brett said, then realized what he'd said and blushed bright red. "For pizza. I'm easy about my pizza. I'm -- going to get those beers now."

Ridley tried to suppress his chuckle, but nodded with an amused smile and followed Brett into the kitchen. For someone who was a cool cucumber at work, Brett sure got flustered easy.

His home décor wasn't that bad, given what Ridley had been expecting. With a layout like his own, Brett had a little more space, but that could've just been from the bare walls that were painted in shades of gray to match the couch, carpeting, and pillows. Other than the big furniture,

there wasn't much by way of decoration or personal items. Definitely incongruous to a guy who answered the door wearing ratty shorts barefoot.

It made Ridley wonder what the other spaces of the house looked like -- what Brett's bedroom looked like.

"So, how adventurous are you feeling?" Brett asked over his shoulder.

Smirking, Ridley shrugged. "I like plain beer and I think fruit belongs in cobbles. I'm not really into that new yuppie microbrew stuff."

In the kitchen, Brett exchanged his pizzas for a sweating bottle, unmarked with a plastic and metal pop top. "You'll like this one."

Ridley studied the dark amber contents a moment before taking a swig. It was predominantly yeasty like a beer, but the after flavor was almost like black coffee. It was bitter and full on his tongue.

"Okay. This is good. What is it?"

Brett named off some fancy name that sounded German or Norwegian.

"Dark espresso ale," he clarified and laughed at Ridley's sour expression.

"Bah, microbrew--"

"Nuh-uh." Brett wagged a finger at him. "You admitted it was good! No take backs."

"It wasn't labeled!"

"And you drank it anyway."

"All right, all right. Yes. I like it. You win." Ridley moaned, but had to join in the laughter.

"Told you," Brett said smugly. "I have a friend who brews and bottles his own growlers."

"Seems almost a shame to have it with pizza, then..."

"He'll never know." Brett's grin was conspiratorial. "C'mon. I downloaded an app that'll let us plot out the positions for my attack gnomes."

Ridley followed him over to the kitchen island, standing at his elbow while the dogs milled around restlessly on the linoleum behind them.

If he leant in closer to Brett when Ricochet butted against his knees, well, Brett certainly wasn't moving away. In fact, Ridley was pretty sure that half the leaning was coming from Brett's side. They were close enough that Ridley could smell the light musk of his hair gel, and he realized that Brett was taller than he first thought.

Perfect height for kissing.

Clearing his throat, Ridley focused on what Brett was doing with the stylus and tablet, and when that failed, he started in on the pizza.

They messed around with the app for a while, using little circles to represent lawn gnomes and not really getting anything accomplished. Brett didn't seem to mind, what with how often Ridley caught him staring at Ridley's lips when he spoke.

"See, you gotta set three up here, and another three here," Ridley said as he juggled his half-eaten pizza and the stylus, "and then you force invading squirrels down a killing alley--"

Brett honked out a laugh and took the stylus back. "But if they go over here, they can lay suppressive fire down for the bird feeders--"

"Nah," he crammed the rest of the pizza in his mouth and chewed quick. "We got some ninja-ass squirrels in these parts. I'm afraid to leave the dog outside alone with 'em; they're bigger than the stray cats and meaner." He tried to steal the stylus again. "C'mon--"

Quickly twisting, Brett played keep away, holding the stylus out to the side. They wrestled half-heartedly until Ironside came up out of nowhere like a shark on a surfer, running off with the stylus hanging out her mouth.

"Oh shit," Brett said and they both gave chase. She thought it was the best game ever, running in circles around the living room while Ricochet lazily barked from where he was sprawled in front of the door.

Ridley finally got her down on her side like he'd just roped a baby calf, and Brett managed to pry the mangled stylus out of her jaws. She squirmed enough until they both fell on their asses, then she tried to lick at any body part near her head. Brett busted out with breathless laughter and Ridley had to join him.

"Well, there goes that one," Brett said with good cheer, climbing to his feet to toss the stylus on the granite counter.

Ridley got up with a groan as his knees popped. "Aw hell, I'm sorry about that--"

"No worries. I buy in bulk thanks to my own monster over there."

Turning around, Ridley leaned back against the counter so he could see Brett's face. The younger man just smiled at him, then gave him an appraising look.

"So I'm going to just lay this out here," Brett said and took a bracing breath, "because I know we kinda just met but I really like you, and you're hot, and I want to make sure we're on the same page here so this doesn't get awkward--"

"Brett," Ridley interrupted gently. "We're on the same page. I really like you, too."

"Oh awesome, I thought--"

Brett's lips were soft and warm, and he had just a hint of scruff that Ridley wanted to explore later. He froze for a second in surprise before just melting into Ridley, arms coming up around Ridley's neck to draw him in closer. They lost themselves in the movement of lips and tongues.

Finally, they broke apart, panting inches from each other. Ridley studied Brett's bright green eyes, grinning at the pleased look he saw reflected there.

"So first I took you to a barbeque, then I brought you pizza," Riley drawled. "You sure lucked out."

Brett chuckled. "Yeah, I'm a real classy date, myself, with dog antlers and killer garden gnomes."

"What I'm saying is that I'd like to take you out someplace nice, if you don't mind?" Ridley squeezed Brett's hips absently, but the movement made Brett moan and sway forward, a pretty blush on his cheeks.

"You can wine and dine me anywhere you like, just keep doing that," Brett demanded breathlessly, leaning in. Or maybe Ridley was leaning towards him.

"I'll do whatever *you* like," Ridley said without thinking, his voice dropping lower, not caring what came out of his mouth at that point.

"Me too," Brett whispered across his lips.

Ridley let his eyes slip shut and pressed forward, closing that last bit of space between them. He was harder than he'd ever been in his life, had been for most of the night, and Brett's hand was burning him, branding him, and he didn't want this to stop.

He opened his mouth to Brett and let their tongues intertwine. His hands roved over the soft jersey of Brett's T-shirt, burrowed under to reach skin, dug his fingers into the hard muscles of Brett's side. He opened his mouth wider, all the invitation Brett needed, and Ridley wanted to savor every detail of this, getting lost in the feel of Brett against him. The wet slide of their lips and tongues, the feel of Brett's skin, the way he pulled at Brett's waist until the other man was closer, pulled him in until their chests were touching, and Brett just gave a breathy moan into the kiss.

Ridley tugged until he was trapped between the cold line of the counter at his back and the heat of Brett's body, spreading his legs, letting the cabinets take some of his weight just to get Brett that much closer.

Brett sank into his heat, followed Ridley's direction, covered him and pressed him into the counter and devoured him.

"Wait -- Ridley," Brett murmured in between kisses, hips pushing against his rhythmically, but he didn't stop. Ridley didn't give him time, nibbling at Brett's neck, grinding back with his own hips.

"Ridley, we should -- Un, God -- Bedroom --"

Fingers teasing the waistband of Brett's sweats as they kissed, Ridley slid his hand down past the elastic of Brett's underwear, grasping the searing heat of Brett's cock, knowing that his hand was just this side of chilled from the countertop. Brett gasped, bucked into his grip, dug his fingers into Ridley's shoulder, his side, grabbing for purchase as he muffled his groans in Ridley's mouth.

"Want to see you come," Ridley whispered into the skin below Brett's ear as his hand pumped. He was a talker, always had been, and from the way Brett's cock pulsed and jumped, Brett had no problem with that.

"Yeah. Yes. Fuck." Brett moaned, guttural and broken, pushing Ridley harder against the edge of the counter in his eagerness.

"I want to feel you come," he said as he licked the line of Brett's jaw. "Want to feel it on my skin."

"Oh fuck." The gasp Brett let out just made Ridley's dick stiffer.

Ridley stopped grabbing Brett's ass with his other hand long enough to wrench his own shirt up, glad it was tight enough to stay put on its own, because he tugged with his other hand, the one wrapped around Brett's cock, and slouched just enough -- Perfect. The soft head of Brett's cock slid across his abs, trailing wetly, velvety soft but so hard, so hot.

"I want you to hold me down. To fuck me wide open until I can't sit tomorrow--"

Ridley bit at the flesh below Brett's collarbone, the flash of skin that had been distracting him all night salty with sweat. He bit down until Brett reared against him and fumbled for the buttons of Ridley's cargo shorts.

"Un, God. Want you. Stupid fucking--" Brett growled, finally getting past the zipper and to Ridley's dick. His grip was a little too hard in his eagerness, but that just turned Ridley on more.

While Brett rubbed his palm along Ridley's dick, Ridley brought his lips near Brett's ear again. "I want it to burn and know you've been in me all night --"

The hand on his dick tightened and Ridley ground his hips into Brett, dragged Brett's cock across his skin, rubbing the silken head with his thumb. Brett muffled a harsh sob against Ridley's hair and came with a jerk of his hips. His cock pulsed, liquid heat dribbling over Ridley's fingers and onto Ridley's skin.

His own orgasm took him by surprise, white heat blazing along his cock, his balls, up the small of his back. He arched against the counter, pushing up into Brett's palm, and just let go.

Brett collapsed against him, hot and sticky and panting into his neck, and they both sagged against the cabinets for support. Ridley grimaced as the come began to cool on his skin, holding his sticky hand away from them.

After a moment, Brett's mouth found Ridley's again and they kissed slowly, gently, Brett nipping at his lower lip.

"You mean what you said, or was that just bedroom talk?" Brett asked quietly, leaning his forehead against Ridley's.

"Hell yeah, we're doing all that and then some," Ridley murmured against his lips with a smile.

"Think we can make it to the actual bedroom, then?"

Ridley huffed out a laugh. "Lead on."

Ironside barked from the edge of the kitchen, and they both jumped. Two judging Labrador faces stared back at them. Ridley turned his head to look at Brett, rubbing the tips of their noses together, and squeezed Brett's hip with his clean hand as they started to laugh.

"After I let the dogs out," Brett said, stealing another kiss before pulling away.

Brett stripped off his shirt and hastily wiped off his hand with it. He had a tattoo on his left shoulder Ridley couldn't wait to map with his fingers and mouth.

Ridley watched as Brett tucked himself back in his shorts and chuckled at the other man's grimace of distaste. Brett wrinkled his nose at him, eyes already fond.

"At least I have clean clothes upstairs..."

Ridley looked down at the mess they'd made of his own clothes and conceded, "Good point. I might have to borrow a shirt."

Brett's expression went hot again. "I wouldn't mind that at all."

Ridley grinned and went to wash his sticky hands. Brett opened the patio door to the fenced back yard and the dogs took off running in the yellow porch light.

In just his low hanging shorts and still bare-chested, Brett gathered the empty pizza boxes from the living room while Ridley dried his hands. Ridley took a moment to admire the view as Brett came back into the kitchen. A surge of warmth and want shot through him, at the thought that this damn attractive, funny guy might want to start something with him.

Brett caught his expression and abandoned the pizza boxes in favor of reeling Ridley back in.

Yes, sir, he could get used to this.

End

Since 2006, J. Rocci has published LGBT romance stories, ranging from contemporary to steampunk to fantasy. Rocci currently lives near Washington D.C. with the love of her life and their furry children, and loves giving her characters happy endings. You can find Rocci on the web at:

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