

A man with a serious expression, wearing a black cowboy hat and a white mesh arm sling over his right shoulder. He is shirtless, showing his chest and midriff. The background is a dramatic sunset or sunrise sky with orange and blue clouds, and a silhouette of a tree is visible on the right.

COWBOY FIRST AID

Deirdre O'Dare

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"I'm not your mommy." Although Tracey heard the acerbic bite in her words, she didn't repent. Sometimes these damn randy cowboys were just too much. This one could be half dead, but he was flirting up a storm. "Anyway, I'd have to go from the top of your hard head to the bottom of your feet. You're probably busted in a thousand pieces."

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BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

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ISBN 1-59279-459-9

Cover Art © 2005 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

First, this one is for a real Tracey, who loaned me her name. I hope you enjoy living this tale vicariously with your namesake. <g> (You did volunteer!)

Second, dedicated with deep appreciation to the real EMTs and the very important work they do. You folks live a scary adventure every day and many owe their lives and survival to your skills and dedication. Probably few remember to say “thank you,” so for all of us, I say, “Thank you! You are appreciated.”

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Tracey turned a page, willing away the distracting sounds of the rodeo. Mayhem might be in progress just across the fence in front of the ambulance's bumper, but so what? She'd always had the ability to lose herself in a book. It had made the less-than-happy parts of childhood bearable. Since then, reading had filled many hours of waiting once she became an EMT.

A sudden change in the pitch of the crowd's noise jerked her attention out of the latest Tony Hillerman mystery. Much as she longed to see what trouble Jim Chee would get into next, she'd probably have a job to do here real soon.

"Oh, shit. Oh, sheee-iiit!"

Her partner's exclamation had her hastily marking her place before she looked up to see what was wrong. What she saw looked pretty scary. A bareback rider hung across the rump of the pickup man's horse. The bronc he'd just left continued to buck, kicking viciously at

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the pickup horse. When the pickup horse, tired of taking the abuse, also began to buck, the hapless rider dropped. He vanished into the tangle of hooves and a cloud of dust.

After the two horses moved on, the dust settled. Then they could see a crumpled form on the ground. The cowboy did not move. Not a good sign. Tracey gulped. She knew rodeo was a rough sport, but she never quite got used to just how brutal things could get in a hurry.

Her partner, Derek Beausoleil, commonly known as Bo, started the motor. He eased the ambulance through the gate someone jerked open to admit them. A crowd had gathered around the fallen rider. Leaping from the vehicle, Tracey and Bo elbowed their way through to reach the victim.

“Stand back. We’re EMTs. Give us room to work.”

Fortunately, rodeo folks knew enough to back off. Accidents happened. The next time it might be any one of those who now gathered to watch. Tracey dropped to her knees, heedless of the damage the mud would do to her clean scrubs. As she did, the cowboy stirred, groaning softly.

Good, he’s not dead. At least not yet. Although cowboys were hard to kill, that didn’t mean they were indestructible. Getting kicked and trampled might be all in a day’s work, but there were times it was one kick or stomp too many.

The rider’s face was buried in the dirt. They’d have to move him quickly, even if it caused further harm. She looked across at Bo, kneeling on the other side of the fallen rider.

“We’ve got to move him. I hate to, but he’ll suffocate with his face buried like that.”

Bo nodded. With the confidence born of long practice, they shared in supporting the man’s body, neck and head while they rolled him onto one side as gently as they could. The injured rider jerked, as if he was trying to sit up. Then he subsided with another groan. She put a hand

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down on his right shoulder to still him. Bo was already feeling quickly over his arms, legs and along his back for obvious broken bones.

“Hang on, cowboy. Don’t try to move yet,” Tracey said. She kept her voice low and even, knowing how most injured people responded to a show of confidence and calmness. Any hint of panic tended to be echoed right back. That simply added to the problems.

“I’ll get a backboard,” Bo said. “We need to get him out of here as fast as we can. Not only does the show need to go on, he needs to get to the hospital. I don’t think his back is broken, but we don’t want to risk it.”

Tracey murmured an assent, watching the downed rider. In a moment Bo returned with the board. Again, working in tandem, they eased the board under the cowboy, strapped him down, and then shifted him onto the gurney for loading into the ambulance. In less than five minutes, they were out of the arena, going code three, lights and siren, when they hit the highway just outside the parking area.

Bo drove, which left Tracey to tend their patient. Inside the confines of the ambulance, she could tell he was a well-built man though compact, wide shouldered and lean flanked. She settled the oxygen mask in place over his face, turning on the flow of life-giving air. As she checked his vitals, she began to relay the critical numbers by radio to the emergency room at River Bend General.

The hospital was about three miles from the rodeo grounds, a time-devouring distance with the holiday weekend’s heavy traffic. Too many motorists did not yield to the ambulance as they should. Bo would be challenged to make it safely but speedily along the route. She didn’t envy him that job at all.

As she bent over to take the blood pressure cuff off the cowboy’s arm, her chest was right above his face. Just when she began to shift back, his eyes popped open. For a moment his gaze plumbed the cleavage revealed by the drooping vee neck of her pullover top. Then

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he stared up at her face with a perplexed look.

He had beautiful eyes, the rich dark brown of the best quality Dutch chocolate, rimmed with a picket fence of curling black lashes. The start of squint lines lightly etching the skin at their outer corners lent a hint of humor to his expression.

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The darn cuff seemed to be caught on something. She tugged, but it wouldn’t come free. She had to lean over again to see what was wrong.

How an injured man could move so fast she didn’t know. Somehow he had the oxygen mask down and a hand twining into her hair, tugging her down to him, before she realized what was happening. Then, heaven help her, for a second or two she was not aware of anything in

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the world except the feel and taste of his mouth against hers. Even as her lips began to respond, she jerked away.

“Damn it! What in the blazes do you think you’re doing?”

Either he had passed out again or he was playing possum. Whatever the cause, he did not respond. Seconds later, Bo braked to a stop at the emergency entrance of River Bend General. A nurse and a couple of aides rushed out, rolling an ER gurney. The five of them slid the injured rider smoothly from one surface to the other. Once they were relieved of their patient, Bo started back for the rodeo grounds. Before they were a third of the way there, the ambulance from Station Two came on line.

“We’ll take it from here, Station One. We just pulled in at the arena. You guys have put in a shift-and-a-half already. Take it on in and do your paperwork. There’s only a couple more events left anyway.”

Bo grinned. “Can’t argue with instructions like that, can we, Tracey?”

She shook her head, suddenly aware she was tired, dirty and more than willing to call it a day. They’d made three runs during their shift, which, for a rodeo day, was not unusual. Still, there were many days they never rolled once, so this was a three hundred percent increase in work. Busy beat boredom, but this was pushing it.

* * *

A half-hour later she was headed home in her midsize pickup, having showered at the station and changed into civvies. Later she could not have explained why, but some impulse had her detouring to pass the hospital. *Well, it won’t do any harm to see how our latest patient is doing*, she rationalized.

Parking just out of the ambulance path to the emergency door, she slipped in to check with Sondra, the charge nurse of the ER’s three to eleven shift. Another classmate of Tracey’s, Sondra had chosen a different career path than hers, Kim’s or Jana’s. Tracey figured buxom

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Sondra hoped to catch herself a doctor, but then maybe she really had a calling. At any rate, she seemed to be a darn good nurse and she obviously enjoyed the work.

Tracey wasn't sure she wanted to be an EMT for the rest of her life, although it paid pretty well. As a single mother of two, that was an important consideration. Since her older sister Tess lived close by and didn't mind taking Shannon and Shane, even on short notice, everything worked out pretty well.

She sighed. Sometimes she felt it would be nice to find the right guy and marry again. If only she could be as lucky as Tess had been with her husband, Steve. He had busy law practice so successful Tess could afford to be a stay-home mom for their three children and almost a surrogate mom for Tracey's.

Sondra popped her bleach-blonde head out of the nearest cubicle. "Whatcha doing, Trace? Aren't you off duty now?"

"Yeah, I was on my way home, but just thought I'd stop to see how our last patient was doing. Bo and I weren't sure whether he was hurt real bad or just shaken up, and the breath knocked out of him. If he isn't busted in ten pieces, though, he's one lucky cowboy. Two horses tramped all over him. At least it looked that way."

Sondra whistled. "Guess he's lucky then. Dislocated shoulder, some bruises, couple of cracked ribs and a mild concussion. He's raising a fuss about wanting to leave. Doc Blue wouldn't release him though, 'cause he said he has no place to go but the travel trailer he shares with a buddy."

She came out of the cubicle. "Just finished helping Doc set a broken arm for a kid about six or seven, near Shane's age. Mother said he fell out of a tree." Laughing ruefully, she shook her head. "You should've heard that little brat mouthing off while Doc put the cast on his arm. I wanted to tape his mouth shut! Thank the powers-that-be I don't have any rug rats. I'd be locked up for child abuse within a week, the little

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monsters. They're all so sassy anymore."

Although Tracey knew Sondra was just talking, she felt a sneaking sympathy. There were times she'd gladly trade Shane and Shannon for anything that didn't talk back. Then they'd do something so totally sweet and loveable she'd feel ashamed for a week.

Just then, the injured cowboy came out of the next cubicle. He had his left arm in a sling with his torn, muddy shirt barely wrapping around his body, the left sleeve dangling. Through the unfastened front, a rib belt showed white against his tanned torso.

"You can't lock me up in here, Doc," he said, glancing back as the curtain swung to pass young Dr. Blue Horse, the resident who had the evening shift in the ER. "It's illegal, no writ of *habeas corpus* or nothing."

The young Native American doctor glared at the cowboy. "You'll have to sign a release then, because I won't be responsible for any adverse consequences, Mr. Horton."

The cowboy made a production of looking around the room. "Who in hell you talking to, Doc? I don't see my dad anywhere around here. My name's Skip, or Steve if you gotta be really formal. All them three-dollar words are confusin' me."

Skip turned around, skidding to a stop just short of running smack into Tracey. His gaze quickly raked over her face before dropping to her breasts, outlined by the sleeveless sweater she wore over her faded jeans.

"Oh, my Gawd, it's the bossy angel. I wasn't sure if I dreamed about it or not, but I wouldn't forget that face, much less those..."

"Don't even go there," Tracey growled hastily. "You were way out of line, cowboy, and you're digging yourself deeper, real fast."

"Sugar, if you'd give me a place to stay the night to make Doc Brave Moose here happy, I'd do anything in the world for you. I just don't do hospitals. They're no place to be even when you're sick. I

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ain't sick, just banged up a little. Please? In the morning I'll get out of your way and go on down the road."

If I say yes, I swear I'm certifiable. This is crazy. But the house is so empty with the kids spending this month with their dad. Damn it, I am not going to do this. I'm not.

In spite of her internal arguments, she heard herself say, "Okay," even before her silent lecture was done. "Since you asked so nicely. You can use my son's room tonight 'cause he's out of town. In the morning, though, you're out of there. You may not do hospitals, but I don't do cowboys."

He smiled, those chocolate eyes caressing her from tousled bangs to sneaker-covered toes. A melting sensation flowed down her body, leaving tingles and expectations, completely inappropriate and unwelcome—or so she told herself.

Sondra winked at her from behind the cowboy, where Dr. Blue Horse could not see. The doctor looked shell-shocked, as if he were not quite sure how to deal with this latest development.

"Are you sure you want to do this? Don't let yourself be railroaded into something just trying to be kind." The doctor's words sounded both harsh and anxious.

Tracey shrugged. *I wouldn't exactly call it kindness. Between that kiss and the way he looks at me, I'd call it plain old-fashioned lust. Which is crazy, but still...* "I don't guess it can hurt anything, Doc. If the patient has any problems, I can deal with them or bring him back here. The kids are doing their month with their dad, so I've got a spare room. If the arrangement is satisfactory to you from a medical standpoint, it's a go."

The doctor shrugged. "Oh, why not, if it makes everyone happy? I just don't like for a concussion patient to be alone and unobserved. You know the rules, Ms. Walker."

"You know I don't care for formality. It's Tracey, Doc. I promise

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I'll keep a good eye on your patient for the next twelve hours or so." She turned back to look at Skip, trying for a stern expression. "Sign the papers, cowboy, and then we'll go."

Once the administrative business was done, she didn't wait or look back to see if he followed, but started for the exit, her tennies squeaking on the glassy-waxed tile floor. The rhythm of his booted feet kept pace close behind. Once outside, they both paused for a moment as the shocking heat hit, a staggering contrast to the artificial chill inside the hospital. Out here the air held a flavor of dust and exhaust, but even that was preferable to the sickly artificial pine scent of the hospital's strong cleaners.

"Whew," Skip said. "You just saved my life, darlin'. I hate them places so bad. If I never set foot in another hospital, it'll be too soon." He shook his head.

Tracey indicated her dusty tan pickup. "There's my wheels. Get in and we'll get out of here."

She wasn't going to pamper him, even though she could see by the way he moved that he hurt all over. *Serves him right. If he stayed, he'd get pain meds all night, in spite of the concussion.* The best she could offer would be some Tylenol. With the kids, she didn't keep anything stronger around the house.

Cradling his left arm against his body, Skip set his left haunch on the bench seat. He slid a bit sideways, drew his legs in, and finally closed the door. He huffed out a ragged sigh.

After she started the truck, she slid a glance at him. "Do you feel like eating? I wasn't planning on cooking tonight. It's too damn hot anyway, but we could stop for a burger or something if you're hungry."

He shook his head. "Nah, I'm not really hungry. I could do with a beer or two, but I know the doc would have a shit-fit at that. If you have some kind of soda pop, say Coke or Dr. Pepper, that'll be fine. Long as it's cold and wet, I can handle it. Hot an' wet, too." He grinned

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and winked at her.

Tracey elected to ignore that innuendo. Five minutes later, she pulled in under the carport at her little cinder block house. Ozzy poked his head out of the doggie door, but ducked back in when he saw it was her. Her ex had rescued the nondescript mutt several years earlier. He'd been a puppy then, abandoned at a rest area along one of the Interstates. Dan brought him home, insisting the kids needed a dog. He named the mutt Ozzy for Ozzy Osborne, one of his favorite musicians.

Tracey had not been so sure, especially when the pup grew up to fit his huge feet. He also became the homeliest dog she'd ever seen. He looked like he was assembled from a collection of mismatched canine parts. Once he was part of the family, though, she couldn't have banished him any more than give up one of the kids.

Unlocking the back door, she swung it open, sensing Skip was close behind her. She knew the instant he saw Ozzy, hearing his muffled gasp and then sudden silence.

"Oh, my Gawd, that has got to be the ugliest dog I ever saw! Sorry, but it's a fact."

Tracey laughed. "I know, but he's absolutely sweet. The kids adore him. I think he'd gladly die for either of them. That has to be worth something. Ozzy, meet Skip Horton, one lucky cowboy."

Bending stiffly, Skip kneeled down and scratched behind Ozzy's floppy ears with his right hand. "Awright, old pard. Reckon we all look like the Good Lord made us so it ain't your fault. You've got an angel to vouch for you. I'll have to take her word."

Tracey huffed. "Cut this angel crap. I'm no more angelic than—well, than the honky-tonk angels down at the El Paso Club."

She busied herself getting down two tall glasses, filling them with ice, and opening a three-liter bottle of Dr. Pepper. That way she didn't have to look at Skip, acknowledge either the way his gaze caressed her or the slow painful way he straightened after petting the dog.

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She set the glasses down on the dining table, keeping a safe distance away from him. The urge to finger comb that thick tumble of wavy, brown-black hair back from his forehead or run a hand down the sleek, muscular chest revealed by his half-opened shirt was getting uncomfortably strong. She had to clear her throat before she could speak.

“Let me show you the room you’ll use, and where the bath is. I’ve got to do a couple of loads of laundry and a few other chores, so that way you can lie down or even go to bed whenever you want to. I expect you probably need to rest.”

What was there about this cowboy that had her alternately stammering and babbling? She was feeling like a stranger in her own house. He stirred up hungry urges that had lain dormant for months since her divorce.

She compared the two men. Skip wasn’t quite as big as Dan had been, or nearly as noisy. He was dark where Dan had been blue-eyed and blond. They both had a sweet line, but she’d heard plenty of them over the years. What made him special?

For Pete’s sake, he’s just another effing cowboy! I pick up the pieces of them all the time, every damned rodeo. I’d be the worst kind of fool to get involved with this one. Like he said, tomorrow he’ll go on down the road.

Still, everything he said, every move or glance reminded her she was a woman, he was a man, and together they could readily ease this itch building to a crescendo in the female hollows of her body. *A damned awkward time for my hormones to kick in.*

She stalked down the hall to shove open the door to Shane’s room so hard it banged back against the wall.

“This is my son’s room. Shannon’s room has the bigger bed, but I don’t think you’d be comfortable with Disney princess stuff and ruffles everywhere. The bath is right across the hall.” She pointed to the half-

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open door. "I'll lay out some towels for you in a few minutes."

He glanced over her shoulder as if taking in the Dale Earnhardt NASCAR décor and the model cars lining the waist-high shelf that ringed the room. "How old is this kid?"

"Shane is eight, going on twenty. He's his dad's kid—loves everything on wheels. Dan's a trucker. He takes off a month in the summer to have the kids up to his folks' place in Oklahoma—a farm. That's where they are now."

Skip shook his head again. "Can't see a man breaking things off with you. What went wrong?" He had the grace to look embarrassed then, as if he realized the question was much too personal. "Sorry, I reckon that isn't any of my business, but I can't help wondering."

"I found out he had a girl in every truck stop, more or less. Two of them showed up with child support claims the same week three years ago. That was two too many. I decided traveling and marriage just don't work together. Dan loved his work too much to quit. It's best this way for all of us."

Damn right it was best for all of us. So why did she suddenly feel tears burning in her eyes, tears she'd die before showing? Why did her lips tremble and an ache build in her throat? She would never play second fiddle again or be only one of a harem, damn it. *No way!* She gulped and sniffed, fought to keep those searing drops from falling.

"Hey, sweet thing, I didn't mean to upset you." Skip's tone was gentle, the soft western drawl sweetening his words. He slipped his right arm around her and drew her against the solid warmth of his body. "It might be for the best. Breaking up is still hard, though, just like the song said. I've been there myself. It's pure hell."

For a long moment, Tracey leaned against him. She absorbed the sweet, warm essence of man, sweat and dust, with a hint of citrus-y aftershave. For a moment she had to enjoy those scents and feelings, totally masculine, completely seductive.

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His hand made slow sweeps up and down her back. She felt a soft pressure as if he pressed his face into her hair. "I reckon being a single parent can be real challenging. Having to do it all yourself. I'm sorry, sugar. You don't know how sorry I am. You're too good a woman to have to suffer that."

She jerked away, angry and scared at the same time. "Oh, quit the sweet talk, cowboy. You don't know a thing about what kind of woman I am. Sure, it sounds good, but I know it isn't real. What's the point? From the minute you came to in the ambulance, you've been putting moves on me. I'd have to be a fool to play that game. My Mama didn't raise any dumb puppies. Go drink your soda and then lie down like a good patient."

She didn't wait around to see what he did, but hurried out to the utility room. She began to stuff dirty clothes into the washing machine with furious haste. *Damn randy, flirting cowboys. This one is half dead and still trying to put the make on everything with tits.* But her tits were tight and aching, nipples jutting against the restraint of her bra. She could feel the moisture seeping through her panties where the seam of her jeans rubbed the tender nub that ached for masculine attention. *Why me, why now?*

* * *

An hour and two loads of laundry later, she'd calmed down enough to recognize that the house was silent as a tomb. *I'm supposed to look after him. Geez, I guess I'd better go check.* A moment of panic tightened her chest. What if he'd slipped into a coma or something?

She tiptoed quietly down to the open door and peaked in. He lay atop the NASCAR bedspread, his booted feet dangling over the end of the bed. Twitching, he groaned softly, clearly uncomfortable.

Seeing his boots, guilt assailed her. Of course he couldn't pull them off one-handed. *Damn, now I feel like a four-square bitch!*

"Wouldn't you like to get those boots off?"

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He jumped, his eyes flying open at the sound of her voice. "I couldn't get them off one-handed," he admitted. "I didn't want to dirty the bedspread, so I just hung my feet off the end."

After entering the room, she grasped his right foot, twisting and tugging until the tight boot came free, bringing the sock with it. Then she got the other one off as well.. He gave a sigh as he wiggled his toes.

"Better?"

"Oh, yeah. A lot better. They were starting to get awful heavy."

"How about your jeans?"

Even in the dim glow of Shane's nightlight, she saw him flush. He shook his head, then groaned again. The motion must have hurt. "No! I mean, well, I think I can manage that myself."

Tracey grinned. His reaction led her to guess that, as had become a fad with a bunch of the cowboys, he wasn't wearing underwear. They said it was just one more layer to chafe and bind when you were riding and didn't offer any real protection. Once the jeans came off, he'd be revealed in all his glory. *Ha, so much for the randy cowboy act.* She barely restrained her chuckle.

Ignoring his comment, she went to the side of the bed and reached down. He jerked when her fingers brushed his belt buckle. She winced along with him as he shut his eyes while a pained expression crossed his face.

"No, please. Not right now. I'll get up in a little while, and maybe even need something to eat."

She decided to quit teasing him. "How about a couple of Tylenols? I bet your head aches like a son of a gun."

"No, I'm okay. What I really need is someone to lie here beside me, make me forget about the aches and pains. There's nothing wrong that a little sweet loving couldn't cure."

For a crazy moment she was tempted to do just that. The itchy ache between her thighs was back, stronger than ever. Her breasts felt like

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they were trying to burst out of the cups of her bra. The idea of masculine hands on her body was so appealing it was scary. Or in this case, one masculine hand. *Lord, lady, you're pathetic. About to rape a poor concussed man who hardly knows what he's saying!*

"Maybe later," she mumbled, spinning around to head for the door. "I'm going to run down to the drive-in on the corner. Pick us up a couple of hamburgers before they close for the night. I'll be right back."

* * *

When she returned, Skip was sitting in the living room, slouched in the beat-up recliner that had been Dan's. The one she had not quite been able to get rid of. It was so obviously a man's chair, she'd bet he'd made a beeline straight to it. He had the remote in his hand. Apparently he had just found the local channel that was broadcasting clips of the rodeo.

"Hey, I placed second in the go-round. All right! Lucky that stupid dust-up went down after the whistle had blown. Let's see, that makes me third for the rodeo in bareback. If I don't miss any shows, I might squeak into the finals."

She glared at him. "Are you some kind of nut? How are you going to ride with your arm in a sling?"

"I won't. It's just temporary. Nothin's broke, just dislocated. It'll be fine by next weekend."

She snorted as she stomped past him into the kitchen. "Damn idiot cowboys," she muttered. "They've got less sense of self preservation than Shane." Somehow the idea of this particular cowboy suffering more injuries before those sustained today had healed really galled her. Was it just because he'd been her patient? *Yeah, right.*

Grabbing a couple of plastic plates out of the cupboard, she slapped the hamburgers on them, dumped the bags of French fries beside the burgers and threw a couple of packets of ketchup on each plate. She

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retrieved the glasses and poured them each another Dr. Pepper. With a plate in each hand, she went back to the living room. She looked around for a place to set Skip's plate before she noticed he was sound asleep.

The remote sat perched on his knee, his limp hand still resting across it. His head lolled on the recliner's cushiony back, neck at an angle that had to be uncomfortable. His mouth was not quite open, but his lips were parted. A soft snore issued from them. Tracey shook her head, then giggled. *So much for both his macho posturing and my dirty, little dreams of seduction.*

The scent of the warm burgers reminded her she had not eaten since mid-morning. She and Bo had grabbed a couple of donuts and some coffee after their first run to the hospital. Her stomach growled, as if she needed further reminding. She put Skip's plate on the coffee table before she plopped down on the couch with her own in her lap.

She wolfed the food down with the enthusiasm Ozzy usually showed. She had started to eye Skip's cooling burger with longing when she realized he was waking up. He shook his head, then scrubbed his right hand across his face.

"Errunng," he said, or at least that's how it sounded. The noise of his own voice seemed to bring him fully awake. He looked around a moment as if confused. She could see when recollection returned as he registered where he was. His gaze slid to her. "Did I sleep long, hon?"

She shook her head. "No, maybe thirty minutes. If you're still hungry, your dinner is right there on the corner of the table closest to you."

When eating one-handed and balancing a plate on his knees proved to be a challenge, she wound up helping him. Perched on the arm of the recliner, she held the plate with one hand so it wouldn't drop. She tore open the ketchup packets and squeezed some over his fries, handed him the glass of soda when he asked and watched him eat.

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Somehow after the plate was clean, she stayed there. Her right arm rested along the top of the chair, where a few sweat-spiked strands of his hair tickled the sensitive skin inside her elbow.

He'd dropped a bit of ketchup on his chin. Unthinking, she reached to wipe it away as she would for Shane. The stubble of his beard was rough under her fingertip as she stroked across the indentation below his lip. Before she could draw back, his right hand came up to capture her wrist. He licked the ketchup off her forefinger and then treated the other four fingers to the same attention. At the silky glide of his tongue, matching tongues of fire coursed down her spine, straight to her cunt. Blood pounded through her body, carrying need and desire to every cell.

She sucked in a desperate breath, willing herself not to respond. It was no use. He looked up at her while she knew the blaze of arousal was shining from her eyes. Expecting a gotcha grin, she saw instead a look of mingled awe and delight on his face.

"Angel...sugar, don't tell me you don't feel it too. I know you do. You want me just as bad as I want you, as I've wanted you ever since I woke up in the ambulance and found those gorgeous tits in my face."

She tried to shake her head, but found the motion turned into a nod. "We can't. You shouldn't. It won't work."

"Yeah, it will. Where there's a will, there's a way. We'll make it work. Come on. Let's see if that bed will hold two. Close enough together, I reckon it will."

Tucked against his side, her arm around his taped body, she walked with him down the hall. His bare feet made no sound on the carpet. She felt the heat of his body in every pore, every cell.

This time, he didn't flinch when she reached for his belt buckle, but something made her pause. He looked at her, a strange intensity in his expression.

"I'd rather you go first, sugar," he said. "Let me watch you undress

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before you have your way with me.”

For a panicky instant she wondered. *Can I do this? Do my stretch marks still show?* Her waist was thicker than it used to be. She was pretty sure she’d put on plain white cotton underwear today, the kind that did not show through the thin cotton of her scrubs. They were about as far from sexy as a granny nightgown. She knew what Dan would say. It wasn’t flattering. *Oh, hell, I don’t care. I need this.*

Her hands shook a little, but she didn’t hesitate. First she peeled her sweater over her head to drop it on Shane’s desk. Then she unfastened her belt and lowered the zipper of her jeans. With a little shimmy, she shook them loose. As they slipped down to her ankles, she heard Skip’s sharply indrawn breath.

“Oh, Lord, sugar. That’s so sexy, that little wiggle you just did.”

She stood there in her white cotton bra and panties, feeling like a fool until she saw the look in his eyes. The heated admiration in his gaze melted her hesitation. Shyness and embarrassment vanished like an ice cube on a River Bend summer sidewalk at noon. It had been a hell of a long time since a man had looked at her like that. She absorbed it like the desert took rain.

Reaching awkwardly up behind, she unfastened the bra. There were times she’d hated her breasts. At about twelve she’d gone from 32A to 38C almost overnight. They jiggled. They forced her to get tops a size or two larger than her jeans or skirts. They got in the way—but right now, she didn’t care. His gaze caressed them as she slowly dropped the bra away. In spite of nursing two babies, they didn’t sag badly at all. Her nipples hardened under the near-tactile intensity of his regard.

He sat up, beckoned her closer. “Come here, darlin’. I need to feel you, taste you.”

She kicked free of her jeans before taking the three steps to reach him. With his good hand, he lifted first her right breast and then the left, rolling his palm across the rich roundness. His thumb came up to

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brush the nipples, making them swell and harden even more. Then he leaned forward and sucked one into his mouth while he continued to fondle the other. She wavered, weak and unsteady, as sensation built and shimmered inside.

Her knees threatened to buckle. She eased closer to the bed and braced her legs against the edge of the mattress, but this put her against the bulge in his jeans, which was getting harder and hotter with every moment.

“Your turn,” she grated. “Or mine. I want you to be bare, too.”

They struggled together to get his shirt off, what there was left of it. The rib belt had to stay and so did the sling. Again, the contrast of white fabric with the rich burnished tan of his skin made her pause and savor. He didn’t have a bodybuilder’s sculpted muscles, but his torso was hard, sleek, taut and strong. He made her think of a roper’s horse, toned and tuned to the edge of perfection.

“Now those damn jeans,” she said, giving him a little shove onto his back. He grinned now.

“Okay, angel. You can have ’em, and the rest, too.”

She loosened his belt and slid the zipper down over the pulsing heat of his cock. He arched a little to lift his buttocks from the bed as she caught the jeans by the front pockets and started to pull them down. His cock sprang free, almost hitting her in the face. It matched the rest of him—impressive and brimming with life.

She hesitated a moment to look at him before she finished pulling the jeans down his legs and over his feet. “Cowboy, you look good enough to eat.”

He grinned and winked. “Sugar, you go right ahead if that’s what you want. I don’t think I’m in a position to fight you off.”

She jerked his jeans free and tossed them aside, sinking to her knees on the latch hook racecar rug beside the bed. With a fingertip, she traced the jagged scar that ran up the outside of his left thigh. Matching

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ragged sighs burst free from them both.

“Bet that was a bull’s horn, wasn’t it?”

He nodded. “I was just a young-un, green as grass. That ole shorthorn threw me higher than a kite, then hooked me as I came down. My daddy nearly whupped me to within an inch of my life. Bulls were to make more cattle, not to be rode by rodeo-crazy fool kids, he told me. But he cried while the doctor stitched it up. I didn’t have to do chores for a couple of days, either.”

Tracey shook her head to clear away the melancholy. Cowboys got hurt. It went with the territory. Even kid wannabees. *Hell, I’m not taking this one to raise. I just need to get some and it looks like he does, too.* His cock stood at attention, quivering a little with each beat of his heart.

She stroked up his legs, rubbed along the inside of his thighs and wove her fingers into the thicket of dark auburn curls that surrounded the base of his cock. Then she wrapped her hand around his penis. She drew her clasped hand the full length, from the base to the indentation below the head. He sucked in a breath with a harsh gasp.

With her other hand, she reached down and hefted his balls, rolled them slightly in her fingers and then tickled the smooth patch of skin behind them. He groaned and bucked a little, raising his hips off the bed. Still holding his cock, she leaned down to swirl her tongue around the head, and lapped the drops of pre-cum that moistened the slit. He tasted salty and delicious. She licked along the underside of the head, feeling the slight roughness of the skin as the nerve endings there leaped to her caress.

“Gawd, sugar, you’re going to kill me!”

She looked up at him, feeling saucy and bold. “What a way to go, huh cowboy? Beats-well, beats just about anything, doesn’t it?”

He rolled his eyes and groaned again. “Pure bliss, sugar. Just pure bliss.”

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She eased down over him, taking in as much of his cock as she could. Even relaxing her throat, she knew she couldn't take all of him.. That was okay. Right now she just wanted to tease a while. Later, she'd get up on the bed and straddle him, take them both the rest of the way.

She'd always loved being on top, while Dan had hated it, as if he lost some of his manhood by allowing her that superior position. But with that shoulder as well as the cracked ribs, Skip was in no shape to try the missionary position or any other, except her on top. She grinned inwardly. *A cowboy at my mercy. Who would've guessed?* For a moment dizzy delight obscured every other emotion.

Every time she felt his muscles tense like he was about to come, she backed off, eased almost free of his cock and tickled his balls again. His eyes were closed now and an expression of combined delight and agony tightened his features.

"Darlin', if you don't put me out of my misery in a minute, I can't be responsible for what I do. You're torturing a helpless man!"

Tracey laughed. "Okay, okay. Swing your legs up on the bed and I'll see what I can do to fix that."

As soon as he obeyed, she rose, set her left knee on the bed at his side. Then she swung on up to settle the other one on the far side of his hips. She shifted a little bit, swinging her butt from side to side, staying just out of reach of that iron-hard cock that thrust up for her.

She leaned over and brushed her hands across his flat tan nipples, and felt them pebble beneath her touch. With his good arm, he reached up to draw his fingers through her hair. She'd taken the elastic out of her ponytail and let the wild mass fly free. Now it spread, crackling with static, a cloud of fiery filaments.

"No wonder you're hot, with this hair. It's like living flame."

She leaned down further, seeking his lips in an open-mouthed kiss. Her hair surrounded their faces, shielding the light and tickling sensitized skin. He held her head down and kissed her back with fervor,

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hungry and eager. Their tongues danced a game of pursuit and retreat, matching rhythm with their racing hearts and the blood pulsing through two aroused bodies.

Balancing herself with one hand, she reached down between them and guided him into her. If she hadn't been so wet, it would have hurt. He was that big. She was slick and ready though, pussy starved for the erotic invasion she'd missed for too long. She eased slowly down his length, taking him into her core, then rising almost clear before dropping back again. Gradually increasing the pace, she let the urgency build until her desperate need grew too strong. Then control was forgotten.

Her whole body went tight, every muscle drawn to its maximum, holding for the shattering release. She clenched her hands into the pillow on either side of Skip's head as she rode him hard, clinging like a jockey perched on a charging racehorse. Her breath came in raspy gasps. So did his.

It has to hurt his ribs. The thought almost distracted her, but she was too far gone to stop. She could only hope he was also, so the pain would not overcome his arousal.

A quiver deep inside began her climax, which surged out in convulsive waves, as her channel contracted to squeeze and release him until every drop had been milked from him. He coughed out a hoarse grunt as he came, a surge and spurt, then a very slow softening and shrinking until his cock no longer stretched her.

She shoved herself off of him and collapsed at his side, her arms trembling now from the strain of holding her weight off his chest. Small aftershocks still rippled through her in the aftermath of her climax. *That was one real big O.* She hadn't quite realized just how much she'd missed sex. How could she have forgotten?

Nothing like it in the world, but it helps to have a lover who's extraordinary! Be careful, gal. First thing you know you'll want to keep

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him. Remember, cowboys don't keep well. If he was tame, he'd disappoint you. Enjoy this for what it is but don't try to make a new partnership here. This is just a one-night stand, an antidote for your long dry spell. That's all.

Intellectually she knew, but the lecture did not set well. Something in her soul was protesting, arguing with her. *Moms don't do one-night stands. Well, Shane and Shannon will never know. No harm done. If I'm lucky even Tess won't find out. Ha, fat chance. Damn big sisters know everything.*

And what they don't know, they make up. Comes with knowing you all too well. Even Tess can't fault me this time, though. She's been telling me to get out, start dating again. This beats hell out of a dinner and movie evening with some self-proclaimed hot stud from the fire department!

* * *

Tracey awoke after an indeterminate time, briefly puzzled over the sticky warmth that seemed glued to her. *Where am I and what's this?* After a minute she opened her eyes as memory flooded back. *Skip. Me. Mind blowing sex. Wow.*

She shifted a little to draw free of the arm that bound her close to his side. He mumbled something as he came awake. "Don't go away, angel. I was sleeping so good with you here beside me."

A glance at the racecar clock on Shane's dresser told her it was two in the morning.

They'd slept at least a couple of hours. "I ought to go and let you rest," she said. "I feel like a real sorry excuse for a, ...well, I was supposed to be taking care of you."

"You did a bang up job of that, hon. So good I feel like I ought to pay you back."

"Pay me back? What are you talking about?" She pulled away to sit up, gazing down at him with a warring mixture of dismay, desire and

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confusion wrestling in her mind.

“Get up here and put a knee on either side of my shoulders, sugar. I’ve been told I give pretty good moustache rides. That’s an event I bet you haven’t tried for a while.” He grinned, pure sass in his face.

She gasped. That was something else Dan wasn’t big on. He was happy to let her go down on him, but when it came time to return the favor, he always had an excuse.

“Oh, no! I’m all sticky and...not now, Skip. Let me go wash up first, at least.”

He shook his head. “No way. I want to taste woman, not some kinda soap.”

She stood, hesitating. He reached to wrap his hand around her left leg, just above the knee, tugging until she almost lost her balance. Or maybe it was the heat and urgency in his eyes that made her dizzy and unstable.

“You know you want to, darlin’. Don’t be shy. I want to get up close and personal with that sweet pussy of yours. I can make it good for you, guaranteed. Come on.”

Someone else nodded, swung a leg over and settled down, coppery thatch just above his face. It couldn’t be her, it just couldn’t be. “I’ll smother you,” she protested. “I don’t know how to do this right.”

“There’s nothing to know,” he assured. “I’ll take care of you and of me, too. No worries.”

With his good hand, he combed through the glistening curls, parted her labia and spread her wide. She felt the whispery tickle of his breath on her damp flesh and then the delicate sweep of his tongue. Up, down and back again, around but not quite touching her clit.

Shudders tore through her as she gasped in an urgent breath then let it out slowly. Silkier than they looked, the bronze tinged hairs of his moustache tickled as he moved beneath her, almost as if a feather stroked through her slit. She shivered, feeling the tightening spiral of

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arousal begin to coil inside.

He built a rhythm slowly, strokes growing gradually quicker and firmer, tongue thrusting into her between long sweeps back and forth. The sensations were exquisite, torturous, overwhelming in their intensity. Her legs began to tremble from the combined stresses. She clutched at the headboard, fearful of putting too much weight and pressure on his face, yet wanting to grind her flesh into his. His lips closed over her clit and he suckled gently, drawing until she thought the small bud would burst.

Her climax came abruptly in a shattering wave, surging through her body like an earthquake, melting the muscles in her arms and legs to jelly while those inside contracted and released in spasms. She wasn't sure, but she thought she screamed at the first instant. The waves went on and on. She tried to draw away.

"Please, no more. No more. It's too much. Oh, God, I'm going to fall apart!"

He chuckled as she struggled off of him, collapsing to sit on the edge of the bed, slumped against his hip. Her juices shone wetly on his lips and moustache, reflecting the soft glow of the nightlight. He looked as pleased as a well-fed tomcat, grinning up at her.

"Don't reckon I need to ask," he said. "That expression of sated shock on your face says it all. Sugar, I'd love to do that for you every chance I'd get. Never saw a woman who deserves special loving any more than you do."

"It was wonderful," she admitted, "but it scares me half to death, too. I could get addicted to that really quick. Then where would I be? You said you were going on down the road tomorrow. Actually that's today now."

"What if I changed my mind? Or you did—you already told me I was out of here after one night."

She shook her head, holding her gaze away from his. If she looked

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into his eyes, she'd be lost. It wouldn't even take a minute. "I can't. I don't do cowboys. They're just like truckers, maybe worse. Plus they're always getting busted up. Any rodeo could be the last one. I can't go through that kind of thing again. As mad at Dan as I was, as hurt and betrayed, it still like to tore me apart for him to leave."

"Won't you even give us a chance?"

His low-spoken words gentled her, like a spooked horse or an injured dog. She held her head down, her hair veiling her face. It was hard, but she had to argue, had to explain. Maybe she did owe him that much. "The sex is great. I'll admit that right up front, but that doesn't change anything. You rodeo. It's your life. That means travel, danger and risk, everything I can't deal with. I have two kids to think about, too. They need a stable home, going to the same schools every year, knowing I'm there for them, even if their dad isn't."

"Tracey, I understand. I know it's got to be me who makes the changes. It never seemed worthwhile before, but all of a sudden, I think maybe it is."

It was the first time he'd used her name, talking directly to her as a person. That was different than the casual endearments like he might use on any buckle bunny or honky-tonk angel. The wall she'd been building brick by brick started to crumble. Her hands, resting in her lap, clenched into fists. *No, I can't. Even being tempted is too dangerous.*

"If it means never seeing you again, never making love with you again, maybe the road is not all that tempting. My folks have been after me to quit and settle down before I get crippled up too badly. I've got an agribusiness degree, Tracey. There's a lot of things I could do for a living besides riding bad stock. Give us a chance. Give me a chance."

She looked at him at last. She had to. "You mean you'd quit, just like that? How do you know you won't regret it in a few weeks, a month, next year? That you won't suddenly wake up one day and hate that you're tied down, missing the excitement and the freedom?"

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His grin was lopsided but still sweet. "Guess life doesn't come with any guarantees, hon. I only know I've never felt this way before. I've never had the least urge to change my life, but something tells me this is for real. This is the right time and you're the right woman."

A sigh gusted out of her. "I'll have to sleep on that," she said. "In the hard light of day, I'll have to see if it still makes sense, if it feels real to me. You know I want to believe. I'm still scared, though. This has happened too fast."

"So long as your sleepin' is done right here beside me, sugar, I'll go along with that."

"There's a bigger bed in the next room, the one I usually sleep in. We might both be more comfortable with a little more space to stretch out. Would you like to try that?"

He nodded. "I sure would. I want to wake up beside you this morning and a whole lot more mornings besides. Come daylight, if it looks like you need a little more persuading, well, I'll see what I can do about that."

She shook her head, a giggle slipping out past her control. "Cowboys! You're all incorrigible. Still, a girl can't help being swept off her feet. If I'd guessed a little first aid would lead to this, I might have tried another job." Without looking back, she started out the door.

He came up behind her, slid his right arm around her waist to rub warm bare skin to hers as he nibbled at the back of her neck. His growing erection nudged between her buttocks, causing a little shiver of pleasure to course through her.

"No, you wouldn't, darlin'. If there was ever an angel made to provide the kind of first aid a cowboy really needs, it's you."

DEIRDRE O'DARE

Deirdre O'Dare, who also writes contemporary romance as Gwynn Morgan, has loved reading and writing since early childhood. She started writing—simple verses and paraphrases of Nancy Drew and Zane Gray—before she was out of grade school and finally settled into romantic fiction in the last decade after leaving her “day job” as a civilian employee of the U.S. Army. She lives in Arizona and frequently sets her stories in the Southwest she knows and loves, but now and then another locale calls to her creativity and she strays, even as far as prehistoric Greece and places that exist only in her imagination.

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