

*Deirdre O'Dare*



*Doggone  
Love*

## DOGGONE LOVE

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"Let me adjust those stirrups a notch or two. I usually trot to get out to where I'm going. It'll be a butt-thumping ride if you can't take some weight on your feet."

Eric drew his boot free of the stirrup. Damon's hands were not quite steady as he worked the buckle loose and set it up two notches on the strap. He circled the horse to do the same on the off side. That done he stood a moment, bemused. Without thinking, he put his hand on Eric's solid thigh. The muscle felt hard and warm beneath his hand, and flexed slightly to his touch. The sensation went through him like a jolt of electricity. He jerked back his hand as he felt the flush heat his face. *Damn, what's getting into me?*

"There, that ought to be better." He turned away sharply, half-running to his mount. Swinging into the saddle, careful of the bulge in his jeans, he called back over his shoulder, "Let's get going. We've got some miles to cover..."

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# DOGGONE LOVE

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BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

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DOGGONE LOVE  
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*In memory of a number of beloved canine friends who are no longer with me, thus always beloved but “dog-gone” until I, too, cross the Rainbow Bridge. For Rico, my current fur-kid, who taught me about the wonderful breed of Australian Shepherds. And last, to everyone who has ever loved, sometimes unwisely but much too well, thus learning the overpowering strength of attraction, desire and that deepest friendship, also known as love.*

*Thank you as always to my special friends at Amber Quill/Amber Heat who continue to provide avenues for me to stretch my creative wings and explore new territory in the stories I share through them with friends and fans.*

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Damon Carhart winced. He'd heard the hoof connect with a dull thud. That sound barely preceded the pained yelp from his best stock dog as she cart-wheeled through the air. She hit the ground—hard.

“Aw shit, Dixie Belle, why did you try to turn that damned ornery paint like you do cattle? Horses don't heel well, babe. You know better.”

At the moment, if he'd had a rifle, he'd soon have had a dead horse. It might have been stupid, but the paint gelding's kick was worse than stupid. It was plain vicious. Damned horse had a mean streak.

He swung off the ATV, hurrying over to kneel at the

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injured dog's side. She whimpered when he touched her, not a good sign. Still, a quick check didn't reveal any broken bones. He smoothed a tender hand down over her head, talking in a low, calm voice. Meanwhile, his thoughts ran in urgent spirals.

*How do I get her back and into the truck with a minimum of pain? Without aggravating whatever injuries she has?*

A trip to the vet was definitely the first order of business, in spite of the other work he had planned for the day.

Damon believed in taking care of his animals—all of them. That included about a thousand head of purebred Brangus cattle, ten good horses, and the six Australian Shepherds who helped him manage the cattle with only occasional hired help.

Rosalinda and Julio Mendez didn't count. Hell, the old Mexican-American couple had been on the ranch since when he was knee high to a Quarter Horse. They really didn't do a lot any more, but he kept them on out of respect. They were almost family. Rosa had damn near raised him after his mother took off. In spite of her arthritis, Rosa still kept the house up for him and usually cooked his supper. Julio puttered around the headquarters doing odd jobs. He was too stove up to ride anymore, but handy with fence tools, and a fair mechanic.

Ranching in the twenty-first century was a far cry from the style Damon had grown up with. Twenty years had made a big difference. And going back further, from the tales of his father and grandfather, raising cattle had once been a great deal more labor intensive than even in his boyhood. Now with his ATV, horses and dogs, he managed all but the annual branding, ear-notching and weaning chores pretty much by himself.



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Ranching was still a hard life, though, often lonely and always busy. He made a decent living, but he'd never be rich. In fact he was land and livestock poor. His net worth looked good, but the cash flow was sometimes touch-and-go. Money problems, on top of the memory of how his mother had left and the one bad relationship he'd suffered while still in school, had decided it for him. Marriage and ranching didn't mix.

Not too many women could be the helpmate partner he needed anyway. Most of them would look down their pretty little noses at the old-fashioned house he lived in, the far-from-new pickup that was his sole highway vehicle, and the few hours he'd be able to spend with them. These days he'd heard they called it "quality time." That seemed to equate to wining and dining, trips to upscale resorts and similar trappings of celebrity seduction. He didn't have the time, the cash, or the disposition for all that.

Still pondering the immediate transportation problem for Dixie, he started to gather what he could find. He decided to rig an impromptu stretcher with a piece of plywood wired to the rear carry rack of the ATV. He placed Dixie up on the board and strapped her down with his belt and a couple of scraps of rope he found in the ATV's saddlebags. It wasn't ideal, but he got her home. She only whined a little.

Back at the headquarters, he eased board and all into the back of his pickup. The dog watched him anxiously, but just gave a faint whimper or two at the jostling. It was a good forty-minute drive to the vet clinic at the nearest edge of Gila Vista. That troubled him. He'd rather have Dixie in the cab,

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but the board wouldn't fit. He didn't want to risk bumping her around any more than he could help. Luckily it wasn't a particularly hot day, but it wasn't cold either. He figured she'd be okay. It was the best he could do.

He drove fast, but carefully, trying to ease around the worst of the ruts and potholes on the gravel road out to the highway. As usual, the just-ended summer rains had played hell with the road. And, as usual, the county hadn't gotten around to grading it yet. He swore as he hit one bump so hard his hat bumped the cab roof.

He made it to the Caliente Veterinary Hospital in thirty-five minutes, near record time. A regular customer, he pulled around to a back door. That one wasn't used by the town customers who brought their pampered pets into the reception area up front. He was in no mood to deal with dogs that looked like dust mops on stubby legs or ill-tempered cats and their fussy female owners. As he strode down the hall, someone stepped out of an examination room into his path.

"Hold on a minute. Just where do you think you're going? Customers are supposed to check in with reception up front. We can't have every Tom, Dick and Harry traipsing through here."

Damon almost bowled over the shorter man. The other man caught his balance by grabbing a door jamb.

"I ain't Tom, and I damn well don't have a hairy dick. Where's Doc Palmer? I've got an injured dog out in my truck, a working dog. She needs care right away."

The husky blond man folded his arms, feet apart,

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effectively blocking the hallway. “Dave Palmer had a family emergency. He had to go home to Texas for a few days. I’m taking over until he gets back.”

“Who the fuck are you anyway?” Damon had no desire to deal with someone who was not used to handling working animals—or their owners. This guy might be good with the ladies and their lap dogs, but so far he didn’t impress Damon.

When it came to Dixie, only the best would do. The red merle bitch was no longer a pup, but he counted on at least one more litter from her. A few more years of her companionship would be nice, too. She was as much a pet as a working dog could be. Truth be told, he loved her like the family he didn’t have.

“I’m Doctor Vann, Eric Vann. I’ll be glad to take a look at your dog. What’s the problem?”

Damon glowered at the young vet’s surfer-boy appearance. “Are you familiar with stock dogs? She made the mistake of trying to heel a cranky gelding. He kicked her. She knows better, but we all do dumb things sometimes. Accident happened about an hour-and-a-half ago out on the range. I got her here as quick as I could. Right now I’m most worried about shock.”

Spinning on one heel, Damon headed back out. He was half-surprised that Dr. Vann followed. Dixie lay quietly, but her eyes looked clear. She was still alert. *So far, so good.* As Damon watched, the other man approached, held his hand down for her to sniff and then touched her neck very softly.

“Let’s get her inside.” Without Damon saying a word, Dr.

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Vann moved to unlatch the tailgate. Together they lifted the sheet of plywood. They carried it inside, dog and all. At that, Damon revised his opinion up one notch.

At least the young doctor wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. He didn't shrink from the manure crusted on one edge of the board. His manner with Dixie seemed calm and sure. Working in tandem, they slid the dog easily from the board onto an examining table.

Damon steadied her while Eric gave her an injection of tranquilizer to keep her quiet. Then he proceeded with the examination. After he listened to her heart and respiration, he gently ran his hands over her body, finding a tender spot on her left side. He looked up at Damon, a frown creasing his brow between eyes the color of a cloudless Arizona sky.

"I can't tell for sure, but I think she may have some cracked or broken ribs. I want to do an x-ray to be certain. That might also reveal if there are any internal injuries."

Damon shook his head to regain his concentration on the matter at hand. He could not imagine why, but as he watched the vet's gentle but capable hands move carefully over the dog, he had a sudden vision of those hands on his own body. A strange sizzle of awareness flashed through him. Hell, if he didn't know it was impossible, he'd have called it arousal, but that was loco. He wasn't attracted to other men!

"All right," he answered, forcing his voice past a sudden frog in his throat. "Whatever you think is needed, I want done. She's my best dog, the mother of the two next best ones. I was planning on getting at least one more litter from her. She's

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only about seven.”

Eric nodded. “Aussies are great dogs, and I can tell this one is special. Lots of smarts in those eyes before the drugs took over. I guarantee I’ll do my best, and we’ll pull her through. By the way, I guess you’re a regular customer of Doc Palmer’s, but how about a name? I’d like to call you something besides ‘Hey, you.’”

“I’m Damon Carhart—my ranch is out the Caliente Creek Road, just at the foot of the mountains. Doc Palmer has dosed my colicky horses, done pregnancy checks on my cattle, pulled calves, and doctored snake bites. He’s generally helped me keep my critters in good shape, patching up the ones that weren’t. As much as he’s done, he’s almost a partner. I probably owe him that much anyway.”

Eric stuck his hand out. “Okay, I’ve heard about you. I just opened my practice in Gila Vista, mostly small animals, although I get an occasional horse. Things are a bit slow so Dave, who’s an old buddy of my uncle’s, asked me to fill in for him when he had to go to Texas unexpectedly.”

Damon took the offered hand. Again that strange sensation washed over him. The doctor’s hand was firm, warm, a solid clasp, but with no excessive squeeze or crunch. For a few seconds, he looked down into the other man’s face. Now that he really looked, he saw more character there than he had recognized at first.

Eric’s skin was a healthy outdoor shade, just beginning to show a trace of weathering. A pair of sky-blue eyes, steady and sure, gazed up at him. The face overall was square but

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well-balanced. He had sandy eyebrows and a little crook in an otherwise straight but strong nose, as if it might once have been broken.

He wasn't particularly handsome, Damon decided, but pleasant looking. *Probably the kind of guy you'd like to have for a friend.* There was strength and calm assurance in his stance, as well as his approach to handling the dog. Damon felt a twinge of shame over his first impression—sometimes he was a mite too hasty in his judgments.

*Dixie's in good hands after all. Thank the Powers that Be for that.* “Like I said, whatever she needs, let's do it. Somehow I'll cover the bill. Right now this dog is the most important thing...making her well and sound again.”

Eric nodded. “Understand. I'll do my level best, Damon. You can count on it. I'm in this business because—well, animals can't talk. They can be shunted aside, ignored all too often, so they need advocates, people who'll take the time to listen to what they can't say. Does that sound crazy?”

Damon shook his head, half-grinning. “Not to me. I reckon I listen to my horses, my dogs, even my cattle. Hell, they're better company than a lot of people I know.”

Eric nodded, a fleeting grin crossing his face. Kicking the lock to free the wheels, he rolled the exam table down the hall to the x-ray room. He didn't protest when Damon followed.

Damon knew the normal practice was that the owners were sent back to the reception area while their animals were treated, but this was not a normal dog and he was no normal owner. Doc Palmer let him come in most of the time. Maybe

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he'd mentioned that to Eric.

A few minutes later, they had digital prints of the x-rays. In them, the two cracked ribs were clearly visible. Eric studied the photos carefully for a few minutes. Finally he pointed to a darker, shadowy area beneath the cracks.

"Looks like some bruising there along the lung, but I don't see any sign of penetration or lacerations. She seems to be breathing clearly, so we'll hope that's all the damage. I'd like to keep her here for observation until tomorrow, though. If she goes into distress, we can treat her at once. An attendant is on duty twenty-four seven as you probably know, one of the vet techs. I'll likely be camping in the office myself."

Damon hesitated, then nodded. "Makes sense to me. I hate to leave her, but that's probably best for her. I'll give you my cell phone number so you can call if any complications come up. I'll check in the morning before I come in to get her to be sure she's able to come home."

Eric summoned one of the assistants and together they settled Dixie in a cage, with water and a soft bed for her to lie on. Damon approved of the care his girl received. She was getting the royal treatment, for sure.

When Damon headed back out to his truck, Eric followed. Damon pulled a small notebook from the visor. He scribbled his cell phone number on a page. Ripping it out, he handed it to the other man.

"Here you go. Be sure to call if there're any problems. Dixie is—well, she's almost like family to me. She was whelped in my kitchen, part of the last litter my old boyhood

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dog produced. The line has been in the family for quite a while.”

Eric folded the page before he slipped it into a pocket of his scrub shirt. “I’ll keep a close eye on her. I know ranching is a hard life, lonely sometimes. You can get real attached to some of the horses and dogs that share the work.”

“Are you ranch raised? You sound like you’re speaking from first-hand knowledge.”

Eric grinned ruefully. “No, I wish I had been, though. I was a town kid, but my favorite uncle is a small town vet. He works with a lot of ranchers and farmers. As a kid, I spent every spare hour with him. From the time I was seven or eight, I knew what I wanted to do with my life. My dad never understood—wanted me to be a lawyer like he was—but Uncle Jared helped me. He said I had a gift for it that shouldn’t be wasted.”

Damon hesitated. “Listen, I’m sorry I was rude there at first. No call for it. I apologize.”

“No problem. You were worried, and I understand. I was a little taken aback to find you there in the hall and overreacted myself. Friends?” Eric held out his hand again, this time with a smile.

Damon shook hands and couldn’t keep from smiling back. “Friends,” he agreed. Again the funny tingle zinged up his arm, setting off reactions that didn’t seem right at all. He hoped the other man didn’t notice the sudden pressure against the zipper of his Wranglers. He turned away quickly and got into the truck.



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*Must be time to go visit Emmy Jo Duncan down in Casa Cerritos again.* Somehow though, the thought of Emmy's lush femininity didn't seem as appealing as it usually did.

\* \* \*

When he got in from checking the stock in the farthest pasture that evening, Damon called the clinic. He told himself he'd rest easier if he knew how Dixie was doing, but he was disappointed when Dr. Vann didn't answer the phone. Instead, it was one of the techs, Jessie Crandall. He knew her family. Though young, she was well-trained and totally dedicated to giving good care to the animals. He suspected she had a crush on him, too, but she was much too young to interest him.

"Hi, Mr. Carhart. Bet you're calling about Dixie, aren't you? She seems to be doing real well. Dr. Vann was called out on an emergency, but he told me to keep a close eye on her. She's eaten a little and is resting quietly now. Don't worry about her. She's going to be okay."

He thanked the girl, in spite of the vague distress that continued to nag at him as he hung up. He knew the hours until the clinic opened the next morning would drag.

He slept badly, missing the small sounds Dixie made as she stirred on her rug beside his bed. Some of the old ranchers grouched that he was spoiling a good working dog by letting her sleep in the house, but he ignored that. Who he chose to let sleep in his room was his own damned business!

When Damon had finished breakfast and the morning chores, he called again. Another assistant answered this time.

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She assured him that Dixie was able to come home. He lost no time in getting to town to pick her up.

Again, Dr. Vann was out of the office. *How can he manage things for Doc Palmer if he's off gallivanting around?* Even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew it was stupid. Ranch vets did as much work in the field as they did in the clinic. Actually it would make sense to have two or more doctors in the practice so one could be there most of the time.

This time Dixie rode in the cab with him. She sat up to look around until they hit the highway. Then, with a sigh, she curled up and tucked her head down against his thigh to go to sleep. He had some antibiotics to give her to insure no infection developed and some pain pills if she seemed to be uncomfortable. She'd spend the next few days in the house, whether she wanted to or not. Rosa would be happy for her company. He suspected the elderly Hispanic woman had a secret weakness for the aging dog anyway. He'd caught her slipping tidbits to Dixie more than once.

Damon kept busy for the next several days, which was pretty much the story of his life. He could put in thirty-two hours a day instead of sixteen and still never catch up. Friday evening found him in his makeshift office struggling with the most hated part of his work—the bookkeeping, paper pushing part. He actually jumped when the phone rang. Who in the hell would be calling him on a Friday night at nearly eight?

“Carhart Ranch.”

“Damon? This is Eric Vann. I just wanted to see how your dog was doing. Is she feeling more like her old self now?”

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Damon took a slow, deep breath. “Yeah, Dixie’s recovering just fine. I gave her one of the pain pills the first night when she got a little restless, but none since. She’s been trying to sneak out and follow me every morning. Rosalinda, my housekeeper, has to watch her like a hawk when I leave.”

“Can’t keep a good dog down, I guess.”

He heard the humor on the other man’s voice. “Yeah, Aussies are not couch potatoes. They feel pretty strongly about their duties, and Dixie is my self-appointed protector. She just knows I can’t manage on my own. Say, are you still holding down the clinic for Doc Palmer?”

“He got back today and sent me home. I guess that’s one reason I called...because I figured I might not hear any more about your dog otherwise.”

“Well, if you haven’t got anything pressing, why don’t you come out tomorrow and get in a little riding? I’m going to be moving cattle between pastures. With the dogs—most of ’em are Dixie’s pups—there isn’t a lot of heavy wrangling, but it’s great weather for riding. I can probably persuade Rosalinda to fix dinner for us, too.”

“That sounds great! I haven’t been on a horse in longer than I like to admit, but you’re right, this early fall weather is too fine to waste indoors. Thanks, I know I’ll enjoy it.”

As he hung up the phone, Damon shook his head. *What did I go and do that for? I’m perfectly able to move those cattle without anybody tagging along. Eric—Dr. Vann—said he wasn’t ranch raised, so he’ll probably have no idea what to do.*

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The next morning, Damon was saddling up his favorite gelding, a blaze-faced dun, when a whirlwind roared into the ranch yard. As the dust settled, he saw the motorcycle, a sleek black Harley. The rider dismounted and took off his helmet, revealing a head of sandy blond hair.

*Eric rides a Harley?* It took him a moment to absorb this surprising bit of information. He hadn't pegged the young vet for a biker type, but then he'd been wrong in his judgment about the man once already. Maybe he'd better try for an open mind. *I think I'm getting to be a sour old codger ahead of my time, stuck in my narrow rut out here. Time to snap out of it.*

The vet slithered out of his leathers and draped them over the bike. When he turned to start Damon's way, Damon noticed how his faded jeans clung to muscular legs, how totally masculine he looked in them and a matching western cut shirt. He wasn't wearing a hat, but, to be reasonable, Damon had to admit a cowboy hat and a cycle helmet would hardly work together. Maybe he could scare up an old one because Eric was too fair-skinned to go bareheaded in the sun all day.

Without quite realizing what he was doing, Damon had stopped and just watched as Eric strolled toward the barn. He moved with an easy gait, just short of a swagger. *Cocky sucker, isn't he?* Given the way his Levi's molded his body, cocky now took on a whole new meaning. Damon grinned. *We'll see if he's still feeling that good when Ole Red gets through with him.*

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Almost every rancher had a horse like Ole Red, a savvy, old cowpony who separated the real cowboys from the wannabees with uncanny skill. The old horse would never seriously hurt anybody, but he'd left many a drugstore cowboy to limp back to the ranch in pinching boots after scraping him off with a low hanging limb, doing a little buck-jump at an awkward time or balking suddenly after starting off at a lope. If Eric managed to stay on board the full day, Damon would give him an honorary cowboy degree for sure.

Eric did not comment at first when Damon indicated the rangy chestnut waiting at the hitching rack, but Damon saw him look the gelding over. "I can saddle him if you'll point me at the gear. And you don't have to give me the kid-and-old-lady horse. I've ridden."

"Old Red is no kid horse. He's one of the savviest cowponies you'll ever see. Just give him a slack rein and let him work." *He's just smart enough to tell if you know what you're doing.*

Damon kept an eye on the other man, but it was soon clear he'd tacked up a horse before. He settled the blanket, then the saddle in place, cinched it up, dropped the halter and put on the bridle, then went back to give the latigo another tug. One of Ole Red's favorite tricks was to puff himself up when cinched. That way the saddle stayed loose. When the rider went to climb on, the saddle usually rolled to dump him on his ass.

When Eric swung up and settled in the saddle, Damon could see the stirrups were a little long. No surprise since he

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judged the other man to be about five-nine, which resulted in legs a bit shorter than those of someone Damon's six-two. He crossed the dusty ground to stand by Eric's left knee.

"Let me adjust those stirrups a notch or two. I usually trot to get out to where I'm going. It'll be a butt-thumping ride if you can't take some weight on your feet."

Eric drew his boot free of the stirrup. Damon's hands were not quite steady as he worked the buckle loose and set it up two notches on the strap. He circled the horse to do the same on the off side. That done he stood a moment, bemused. Without thinking, he put his hand on Eric's solid thigh. The muscle felt hard and warm beneath his hand, and flexed slightly to his touch. The sensation went through him like a jolt of electricity. He jerked back his hand as he felt the flush heat his face. *Damn, what's getting into me?*

"There, that ought to be better." He turned away sharply, half-running to his mount. Swinging into the saddle, careful of the bulge in his jeans, he called back over his shoulder, "Let's get going. We've got some miles to cover."

\* \* \*

Before the day's chore was over, Damon had to acknowledge Eric might not be a real cowboy, but he was certainly no stranger to riding and even to working cattle. Of course, the dogs did the biggest part of that, but they still needed a bit of direction at times.

Eric was never in the wrong place. He even anticipated a small problem a time or two and turned Ole Red to put a cow

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back into the herd or urge a lagging calf across a ditch. Finally the last gate was closed behind the herd as they settled to graze in the new area.

The sun was dropping low over the jagged line of the distant mountains on the west side of the Caliente Valley as the two men headed back to the ranch. Eric reined Ole Red in along side Damon's dun.

"Thanks for inviting me along, Damon. I've enjoyed it more than I can say. It's been a while, but it felt real good to be in the saddle again."

Damon grinned. "I have to admit I had my doubts, but you put them all to rest. You're a damn good hand, Doc."

Eric's eyes were bright and warm, lit with a trace of mischief. "So you might have me out again?"

"Well, there's still one test. You've gotta get outside a plate full of Rosalinda's sour cream enchiladas before you leave."

Eric laughed. "That sounds like a real challenge, but I grew up with Tex Mex cuisine. I think I can handle it."

After they unsaddled and took care of the horses, Damon led Eric into the house. They only had to follow the tantalizing odors to the kitchen. Rosalinda, a tiny, stooped Mexican woman, with her thick, iron-gray hair twisted up in a bun, looked their way as they paused in the doorway. She dusted her hands on her old-fashioned apron.

"Aye, *que bueno*. You are just in the right time. *Señor* Doctor, it is good that my Damon persuaded you to stay to eat. Brandi is setting the table in the dining room. Go on in and get

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settled. She will serve you while I finish dishing things up.”

Damon shot a sharp glance at his housekeeper. “Brandi?”

Rosalinda looked nonplussed for a moment. “*Oh, me siento*. I forget to tell you. My grand-daughter, she has come for a visit from Los Angeles. She’s a good girl. She say she help me. Well, she say I am too old to be working so hard, but I say, ‘Who is old? I will swat your bottom if you don’t stop the smart mouth stuff,’ and she grins. She’s a good girl. They just talk sassy these days, not like the old times.”

At that moment, the subject of their conversation appeared in the arched doorway to the dining room, which Damon rarely used. He halted mid-stride. *This exotic creature is elfish Rosalinda’s grand-daughter?*

Brandi stood several inches taller than her nana, with extra height added by the four-inch heels on her platform shoes. Her short flounced skirt left a lot of bare brown leg visible, and her ample breasts threatened to burst free of the silky camisole style top she wore. She fluttered inch-long lashes as she flashed a dazzling smile at the two men.

“Hi. I hope you don’t mind me showing up without your approval. I figured it would help if I made myself useful. You will let me stay, won’t you, Mr. Carhart?”

Damon swallowed. She was one hot looking young woman, but her come-on stare made him uncomfortable. “Your grandparent’s home is theirs to share as they wish. Family is welcome, of course, Brandi.”

Even as he said the words, the thought occurred to him that she looked like the street was where she belonged. As an



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afterthought, he glanced at Eric to see how he was responding to this red hot bit of femininity.

Eric smiled, completely relaxed, and apparently unmoved by the sexy young woman's sudden appearance. "Lead me to the feed trough," he said. "Those scents, on top of a day outdoors, is enough to build up quite an appetite."

Brandi turned to lead them to the table as if she were the hostess in a classy restaurant. She swung her pert hips in a way that flipped her skirt up to reveal even more leg. She certainly behaved as if she had seduction in mind, and it seemed she didn't care which one of them she ensnared. During the meal, she spent an equal amount of time leaning over both men, sliding dishes in front of them, removing the empties, keeping their glasses filled with chilled *Dos Equis*, and generally making sure they didn't have a chance to forget her presence.

They finished up with a cup of steaming coffee. Eric belched as he pushed his chair back from the table. "I know this is not Japan, but that meal deserves a good salute. I think I'll steal your cook, Damon."

Damon grinned. "You can try, but Rosalinda is pretty well-rooted here at the ranch."

Brandi cleared the table only to return with a carafe to refill their cups. "How about some dessert?"

"Couldn't hold another bite," Damon said.

Eric seconded that opinion.

"Oh, that wasn't quite what I had in mind," she responded, her hot gaze raking over both men. The cute wiggle she used

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to punctuate her words was suggestive enough to leave little doubt what she *did* have in mind.

"I think I can make you a suggestion you won't refuse. Besides, I'd like to show you just how thankful I am that you're willing for me to stay here. To tell the truth, my mama threw me out. She said I was old enough to make my own way and that I needed to quit playing around and find a real job. I didn't tell Nana all the gory details...just enough to make her feel sorry for me. I needed to get out of LA for a while, to be honest. I was about to get busted, even though I really didn't do a thing."

Damon hesitated. She was tempting, no question about that, but with her grandparents just a couple of hundred yards away? What would they think? Was she trying to force the issue to where he'd have to marry her? Those and other questions danced through his mind.

He slid a glance at Eric. The other man was watching him with a slightly mocking smile as if to say, Your call, bud. Abruptly recalling his recent inappropriate responses to Eric, Damon made a sudden decision. "Okay, Brandi, what do you have in mind?"

"Some after dinner entertainment to begin with. Do you have a stereo?"

Damon nodded. "It's in my bedroom, though. That's about the only place I have time to listen to it. Even that is pretty seldom."

"Oh, that's fine. So long as there's a little room where I can dance. I've been a dancer in a couple of clubs. I think

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you'll enjoy my performance. I've been told my routine is hotter than *jalapeños*."

With a few misgivings, Damon stood to lead the way to the master bedroom. It wasn't huge, but there was room for a queen-sized bed, a dresser, a couple of chairs and the entertainment center where he had his TV and the stereo. The floor was smooth tile under a couple of throw rugs. He moved them aside to give Brandi a space at the foot of the bed. Dixie, curled up on one, made a grumble of protest at being disturbed. She settled herself on the far side of the bed with an aggrieved thump.

Brandi looked quickly through Damon's CDs. She made a little moue of disgust, but finally selected one and popped it into the machine. While watching her, Damon had settled into one of the chairs as Eric took the other.

The CD she chose was an old one by the Miami Sound Machine. Damon wasn't sure where he'd gotten it. Maybe an old roommate in college? He hadn't listened to it for years.

Brandi started off slowly, just sauntering around in a little figure eight pattern that brought her close first to him and then to Eric. She had quite a strut. After maybe three circuits, she stopped in the empty space between the foot of the bed and the entertainment center. She did a slow shimmy that seemed to start with a snaky movement of her neck that worked its way clear down to the floor.

*Damn, does the girl have a bone in her body?* There was something in that sexy slither that brought to mind sweaty bodies and tangled sheets. Somehow he kept visualizing a

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solid male body on those sheets, instead of the lush feminine one parading before him, though. He carefully didn't put a face on that body, but its shape bore a strong resemblance to Eric Vann.

He slid a quick glance at Eric. The other man relaxed in his chair, a cup of coffee lifted in a hand that seemed as steady as a brain surgeon's. Hmmm, was the blond unmoved by the woman, by the whole sexy ambience or was he just concealing it well?

*If I picked up my cup, I'd probably spill it in my damn lap.* Damon exhaled a sharp sigh. He was torn by confusion and conflicting urges. *What the hell is going on? I feel like I woke up in the wrong body or the wrong world.*

All at once Brandi was right there, gyrating inches from him, her breasts bobbing as she moved, so close he could imagine he smelled her moist pussy. At that thought, his cock twitched as his mental images shifted to include both a male and a female form on that bed. Six legs and six arms tangling, while the scents of sweat and sex perfumed the air.

Brandi bent forward, rubbing those big tits right across his face. Then she whirled around and bent forward, pert ass elevated in front of him. She was wearing a thong under that short skirt, and it didn't conceal very much. The temperature in the room seemed to shoot up to desert summer heat level in an instant. Before he had a chance to react, she danced away to perform the same maneuvers for Eric.

The grin Eric had worn as he watched Brandi display herself for Damon faded as she moved on to him. He set his

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cup down and gripped the arm of the chair hard with one hand, while the other moved down to rub the growing bulge in his faded jeans.

*Okay, he isn't immune after all.* Damon wasn't sure if he was pleased or dismayed to learn that. Well, any guy under the age of ninety could hardly be unstirred by the blatant sexuality of Brandi's moves.

*Holy shit, this babe is hotter than jalapenos. I sure hope she's over eighteen, but she did mention dancing in clubs. I don't guess they'd allow minors even in the shadier parts of LA.*

Knowing she was Julio and Rosalinda's granddaughter didn't help either. It almost felt like he was ogling a kid sister here. *Still she started it, and assuming she's legal, what can anyone say?*

Brandi spun around, dipped to the floor in a backbend and, all at once, her blouse was gone. Her bra was a fragile wisp of beribboned lace. Every move she made threatened to spill her voluptuous breasts out of that minimal confinement. He could see the darker rosettes of her areolas through the sheer fabric, while her beaded nipples thrust against the scalloped edges of the cups.

*This babe can roll her shoulders, shimmy from there to the floor, bend and twist and throw in enough bumps and grinds to keep your mind exactly where she wanted it.* She was damn good as an exotic dancer. He'd have to give her that. In another minute she was back, edging into his space.

"Ever have a lap dance, cowboy?"

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He managed to shake his head. “Don’t think so.”

“Oh, you’d remember. You’ll definitely remember this one.”

With that she proceeded to rub her soft, lush body all over him. She wrapped herself around first one outstretched leg and then the other, bent over his shoulder from behind to trace around his ear with a warm tongue. All the time she kept moving to the driving beat of the music, which seemed to take on the rhythm of accelerating thrusts—of the pounding deep fucking her body seemed to invite.

Deftly she unsnapped his shirt and peeled it off his shoulders, running her hands over the planes of his chest, trailing long, deep red nails against his flesh. She gradually pressed harder until they scratched, just not quite hard enough to really hurt. Just when he was sure he couldn’t take much more without going off like a skyrocket, she moved across to Eric.

Somewhere in her dance she had slipped off her skirt. Now she wore only the minimal bra and her thong. Damon found watching her perform for Eric was almost more stimulating than having her dancing all over him.

Somehow they all three wound up on the bed. Eric and Damon had now both lost their shirts. Brandi ditched her bra. Then Damon found his jeans much too confining. He kicked them off, noticing Eric had the same idea.

That left the three of them clad only in their skivvies. Brandi’s g-string was red, a triangle of lace at her crotch with a string around her waist joining the one that came up through

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the crack of her ass. Eric wore a brief pair of dark blue Jockeys. They were snug enough to leave very little to the imagination. Damon's own were just plain old tighty-whities. He felt drab and out of date when he compared himself to Eric. Out here alone for too long, he had let himself go, no two ways about it.

While his thoughts and attention had drifted for that short moment, Brandi had not been idle. She pushed Eric back on the bed, laughing in a throaty chuckle. "Looks like you're going to be first, doctor-man. We'll let cowboy watch until he's ready to join us."

"Don't count me out yet," Damon protested. "I'm right here and as hot to trot as the next guy."

Brandi giggled. "I like that, hot to trot. Bouncing like riding a horse at a trot is one way to do it, all right. But that's over too fast. We've got all night, so no use rushing anything."

Damon was too startled by her evident awareness of horseback riding to respond right away. Seemed there was more to this Brandi than he realized. He'd figured her for a city girl, but then she was the grandchild of one of the best old vaqueros he'd ever known. Had she ever visited before? He tried to recall, but nothing came to mind—maybe while he was in the Army or away in school.

There was also more to Eric Vann. A whole lot more. A twitchy sensation began to build as he watched Brandi start to work on the young vet. Was it because he wished he was in Eric's place...or Brandi's? All at once he wasn't quite sure.

Brandi began peeling off those navy blue trunks to reveal a

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dick many a stallion would be proud to claim. It stood up like a flagpole at military attention, a bead of pre-cum sparkling like a gem at the dark, ruddy tip.

Brandi knelt beside Eric's legs and bent forward to swipe her tongue around the head of that impressive cock. Damon's twitched in sympathy, or that was what he told himself. Brandi's position, from where he sat at the edge of the bed, put her fetching ass right at his level. He reached out to run a finger down along the red band that disappeared between her cheeks. She must be shaved because he couldn't see or even feel one strand of curly dark hair there. Heat and moisture aplenty, though. She gave her hips a wriggle, inviting him to explore further.

But as luscious as she looked and felt, her new position was blocking his view of Eric. He really wanted to witness the other man's response to her teasing. He stood to switch sides of the bed, settling across from Brandi with Eric sprawled between them.

The blond vet's chest rose and fell quickly with his accelerated breathing. The glare of the ceiling light shone on the pale golden hair that dusted his chest before it arched down to the tangled mat at the base of his cock. His eyes had gone half-shut as his face drew tight with the building tension of passion.

Damon could not peel his glance away, only shift it back and forth from Eric's cock, half-engulfed in Brandi's mouth to Eric's face, where subtle shifts in his expression continued to chart the progress of his rising state of arousal. Hardly



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realizing what he was doing, Damon freed his own cock from the restraint of his shorts and began to stroke it slowly, in the same rhythm as Brandi sucked Eric.

Abruptly Eric sat up, catching Brandi's shoulders and pushing her back. "That's not an all day sucker, sugar. As you said, we have all night, so let's not rush things. Besides, Damon's feeling left out."

"I am?" Damon glanced down, seeing his own cock stiff and dark with the engorging blood. He gave a rueful grin. "Well, maybe I was."

He'd been so caught up in a mixture of fantasy and voyeurism that he had hardly been thinking at all. Now, all at once, he was totally in the moment. First he took in Eric's knowing smile. Then he looked at Brandi, sitting back on her heels with a slight pout on her wet lips. He was pretty sure she wasn't used to anyone else calling the shots. That Eric had stopped her clearly surprised her.

"There's got to be a way we can all participate here," Eric said. He reached out to tweak one of Brandi's ripe nipples, rolling the plump berry between his thumb and forefinger. With his other hand, he caught Damon's cock, wrapping his strong fingers around it and giving it a slow, intense stroke right down to its base. Electricity sizzled along Damon's nerves.

*Has anything ever felt quite so good?*

It took a minute and some shifting of bodies, but shortly they were all laying down, with Damon in the middle. Brandi lay on his left, her head toward the foot of the bed. Eric

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reclined against both the pillows, propped against the headboard on Damon's right. His smile had become nearly a smirk. "Sandwich time."

Brandi turned to put her face even with Damon's crotch. Her eyes widened a little at the length and girth of his cock, but she hesitated for only a moment. She started out with a long lick up the underside of his shaft from the base to the head. One of her full breasts rubbed against his belly. He half-rolled toward her, going tense for a moment when he felt Eric's body pressing tightly against his back.

"Easy, bud. Nobody's going to do anything you won't like." The words were whispered close to his ear in a husky breath, clearly meant only for him.

After a moment he had to acknowledge that the pressure of Eric's muscular body against his felt incredibly good, even right. When Eric's dick, still moist from Brandi's mouth, began to slide between his buttocks, it felt even better. Eric reached around over him to rub slow circles on his chest. Every hair and both nipples rose at that teasing caress, which sent more energy buzzing along his nerves.

*Wow, this is crazy. Wild. Amazing. Some sandwich.* Damon closed his eyes to let pure sensation take over. It wasn't long before he could not really tell where he left off and the other two began or whose hands and lips and body did what where. He was on fire, he ached, he itched, he burned. It was sensational. Sex had never felt like this. Not ever.

It might be the beer—he'd drunk a bit more than he normally did—or it might be the long abstinence or it might

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be...oh hell, he really didn't care. With that awareness, he just let go and let it happen. And, boy, did it ever.

They finally wound up sleeping for a short time, jumbled together like a basket of puppies. Before daybreak, Brandi dragged herself out of the pile, dressed and disappeared. A few minutes later, Eric also got up and left without saying speaking.

Damon wanted to wake up and try to talk to both of them, but his mind was too fuzzy. Alone, he dragged a corner of the disordered bedding up as the pre-dawn chill hit and fell into a restless sleep. Sometime before he awoke, Dixie crawled up on the bed, curling up at his back. She very rarely got on the bed, but maybe she sensed he needed some kind of comfort. His whole world had just been turned inside out.

When he finally awoke about eight-thirty, he felt both drunk and hungover, more than a little troubled at everything he'd done—even the parts that were not clear. Especially those parts.

Did he really remember the incredible feeling of the blow job Eric had given him or had that only been a wishful hallucination? He was pretty sure he'd jacked off the other man, or at least almost to the point of climax and then had been unable to resist tasting the shining drop of pre-cum poised over the slit in that amazing cock.

They'd both fucked Brandi, but after that, they'd spent more time and attention on each other than on her. She'd flounced off to the bathroom at one point, muttering uncomplimentary things in Spanish about the *muchachos*

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*mariposas*. He recalled the term was slang for gays, and that had given him a jolt.

When she came back, they'd included her in the action again. Eric had eaten her, while Damon sucked her tits. He remembered that part clearly.

Still, it was Eric's touch and taste and feel that stuck with him now, while Brandi blurred into the other encounters he'd had over the years, until she almost disappeared.

\* \* \*

It was a good thing the morning after fell on a Sunday, a day when Damon normally tried to do no more than the necessary chores, just catch up on odds and ends around the headquarters. Today he was in no shape to do much else. Rosalinda always went to town to go to mass and sometimes talked Julio into going with her. Either Brandi had joined them or she was hiding out in their adobe house. He really didn't want to know. About a gallon of coffee cleared the worst of the cobwebs out of his head.

Around noon, he finally felt like eating a little. He'd just sat down at the table on the back porch with a couple of tortilla and cold bean burritos when he heard the distinctive roar of a motorcycle.

*Eric? Oh shit, what I am going to say to him today? I don't know how to deal with this. I'm more concerned about what he thinks than I am about Brandi, though. She knew perfectly well what she was doing from the git-go. Maybe he did, too. I wonder? He couldn't have planned what happened last*

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*night...but he must have felt some of the same sizzle between us that I did—right from our first meeting there at the clinic.*

*Gawd, what am I going to do about this?*

Eric came around the house with a jaunty step. He carried his helmet under his left arm, but had not taken off his leathers. He climbed up the three back steps, then slouched into one of the battered chairs.

“You look like hell, bud. Do you think Brandi mixed some *mescal* in with that beer? It hits a person hard sometimes.”

Damon returned his steady gaze. Eric looked fine, not the least bit hung over, and as cheerfully insouciant as ever.

“I’m okay,” he said after a moment. “Headache is gone and I’m back to normal.” *As if I’ll ever be normal again—unless I find I dreamed all that stuff.*

Eric nodded. “Ever been on a motorcycle? I rode your horse yesterday, so today it’s my turn to take you for a ride. You need a break. An hour or two away from the ranch won’t hurt.”

“I’ve been on one a time or two. My old man wouldn’t let me get one back when I was a wild, crazy kid. He said they were too dangerous. And I reckon he was right. Took a spill with a buddy while I was in college and picked gravel out of my leg for weeks.”

“I promise to keep us upright. All you need to do is hang on and go with the turns just like you would on horseback. Come on. I brought a helmet for you.”

Damon hesitated, feeling like a fool. He wanted to refuse, but the temptation was too strong. Maybe all that sizzle last

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night was a fluke, brought on by the potent combination of booze and Brandi and... Maybe he could sit on the bike, wrap his arms around Eric and not feel a thing. He had to find out.

*Or maybe I don't know myself after all.*

That was one scary thought, but in a way it made a weird kind of sense.

He stood, wolfed down the last bite of tortilla and tossed a grin back at Eric. "You're on. Lead me to this iron horse. Let's ride."

The Harley was a thing of beauty, different from a good cowpony, but with some of the same feeling of power and energy. Eric helped him with the helmet. "Let me get on first. Then you just swing on behind me. We can talk through the two-way once we get going."

Gingerly, Damon swung his leg over, settled on the buddy seat and put his feet on the second set of pegs. Eric revved the motor. The next thing Damon knew, they were flying out the gate to head off up the road toward the hills. It was exhilarating to feel the wind pushing against him, to see the scenery rushing past, not like in a car or truck but right there, up close and personal one could say. Reach-out-and-touch close without the insulation of metal and glass.

It was also intimate. Damon's legs bracketed Eric's hips, his crotch close against the other man's butt. The vibration of the powerful machine rocketed through his bones, stirring blood and nerves alike. It was not hard to keep his balance, but he wanted to wrap his arms around Eric and hold on tight. That would not be real safe, probably, at least if Eric felt any

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of the same stirrings he did. Driving at a good speed on a gravel road took full attention. Damon told himself he'd better keep his cool, at least for now.

"Why don't we pull off up at the overlook and talk for a while? I think we need to get some things straight between us. Something tells me you're surprised how last night turned out. I'm not. It went even better than I could've hoped, but I want to make sure you're okay with everything."

Eric's disembodied voice through the radio jolted through Damon. Then he realized he needed to get things out in the open, too. "Sure, works for me. Some things you can't talk about under these Darth Vader covers. I need to see your face and look you in the eye."

"That's the plan."

The overlook was an extra wide place on the point of a hill looking out over the valley. It was scenic enough, but to Damon, nothing new. Still, on an early fall afternoon, it was a nice place to be, above the everyday concerns. It felt somehow remote, a place out of time and out of the routine of daily life.

Eric stopped the bike, cut the motor and kicked the stand down. Damon swung off first and fumbled out of the helmet. He felt a little claustrophobic in the damn thing to tell the truth. It felt good to breathe freely again. Eric flipped his off with a practiced hand, then slung it onto the handlebar. Damon hung his on the other side. Together they walked over to the low stone and cement wall that edged the half-moon shaped space.

Damon stood, one foot propped on the edge of the wall,

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waiting to see what Eric would do. Eric sat down straddling the wall, facing Damon. For a long moment he studied Damon in silence, his gaze probing, but somehow gentle. Finally he spoke.

“I wasn’t expecting this or looking for it, but it hit me almost at once, the day you came in with Dixie, all bristled up and defensive.” He grinned. “Like John Wayne, you know?”

He looked out across the valley for a moment, then returned an intense gaze to meet Damon’s. “I’ve known most of my life that, if not totally gay, I was at least bi. I can get excited about a woman now and then, but it isn’t the same. I’ve known for years that if I ever found a soul mate, it would have to be another man.”

He exhaled sharply, almost a sigh. “I thought with one of my roommates in vet school that I’d found the one, that things would work out. We’d be together, go into practice and work side by side. It didn’t happen. He had other plans and after a year he let me know. After that, I knew I had to be patient, wait and see... There’re times it’s lonely as hell, you know?”

Damon nodded. “Yeah, I know. Somehow I always expected to live my life alone. My mother almost died when I was about six. She was pregnant and had a miscarriage during a bad storm. The road was washed out so bad that Dad couldn’t get her to the doctor. When she got well enough, she left. I knew right then I could never ask a woman to share the ranch life, although ranching was the only thing I ever wanted to do. But I know about being lonely. Most of the time I might as well be a monk, too. Sex is something I don’t have time



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for...”

Eric hesitated for a moment, a slight frown creasing his brow. “I know it’s far too soon to make plans, but I want to get to know you. I think we may have something here, something too good to let it slip through our hands. Maybe last night was a fluke, but, for me, Brandi was just a catalyst—everything she did meant less by far to me than being with you, holding you, feeling you come apart with pleasure. And her being there let us get together. Yeah, we were both a bit drunk, but there was more to it than that. I’m sure about this, but how about you?”

Damon took a deep breath and let it out. What he was about to confess was going to turn his idea of himself on its ear, yet he knew he had to be honest. Eric was too important to blow this off just from pride or some misplaced sense of what was right or wrong.

“I never expected the right person—the one I didn’t think I’d find anyway—would be male. I never let myself think of that. Oh, I remember a couple of friends when I was in high school. I guess I felt an attraction when I look back, but at that time, in this community, we could never have come out with it. The idea scared us spitless. We backed off before we got even close to expressing any feelings, much less acting on them. I put all that in a box and taped the lid down real tight.”

Damon shook his head, feeling the rueful half-smile twist his face. “Yeah, I felt whatever it is between us that first day, too. Scared me all over again. If I hadn’t been three-quarters plowed last night, I’d have run out of that bedroom like a

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fresh-branded calf about the time the three of us hit the bed. I'm still scared, Eric. You're going to have to help me, work with me. Like a timid virgin, I guess." He laughed a little at his own awkward joke.

"I'm good with scared and hurt animals, Damon. I can hear them, feel them, sense their needs. People are just critters on two feet with the ability to talk, although often not much more flare for expressing what they really feel. I'm not saying you're the same as that injured dog or the horse tangled in barbwire, but I'm trying to tell you I can be as sensitive to you as I am to them."

Damon moved the half step that put him touching close. He bent down slowly, settled a hand on Eric's shoulder, then lowered his face to the same level. Eric's eyes were very blue, the exact same shade as the sky near the distant horizon. His mouth was firm, warm, tasting faintly of mint and coffee. His lips meshed with Damon's perfectly. For a moment they seemed to hang there suspended, as if their melding lips were supporting them. In a flash, Damon knew he wanted more, a great deal more.

He straightened. "Let's head back to the house. I don't know about you, but riding that damn hog of yours is about the most potent foreplay I can imagine. I was getting horny as hell, even before our talk here, even after last night."

"I kind of figured on that," Eric said. "You're on. I can get us back down to your place in record time with an inducement like that. No chili pots invited this time. We'll see how much heat we can generate, stone cold sober, just you and me."

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Time did funny things when you were flying that high. Damon knew they broke every record getting back to the ranch, but it also seemed to pass in slow motion. Finally they were both inside, Eric stripping off the leathers while Damon watched, trembling with a mixture of eagerness and uncertainty.

Under the heavy black cycle gear, Eric wore a pair of ragged cut-offs and a sleeveless muscle shirt. The sheer masculine beauty of his physique shocked Damon into a moment's silence. Eric didn't have the exaggerated muscles of a body-builder or heavy lifter, but his form was sculpted in smooth, strong lines, golden tanned skin stretched cleanly over legs, arms, shoulders...

He stood with his feet a bit apart, knowing Damon was admiring him. He grinned. "Like what you see?"

"Yeah, I sure do." Damon's voice sounded husky and strange, a little raw.

"Let me take a look at you then."

"You saw me the other night, every bit of me."

"No better than you saw me. We weren't looking all that much. For one thing, Miss Sassy Salsa was always in the way and kind of hard to ignore."

Damon had never been conscious of the process of undressing the way he was with Eric's bright gaze on him. He jerked the snaps loose and dragged his shirt off. He didn't have the nice even tan Eric did, but he didn't have to apologize for a lack of muscle. His belly was tight and hard,

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his arms were roped with muscle born of hard work. He dropped his shirt on a chair and reached for his belt buckle. That was when he started feeling clumsy. Getting that buckle open had never been a problem before. All of a sudden, everything seemed to be backwards and his fingers stumbled over the familiar task.

It was then Eric took pity on him. He crossed the few steps between them and stilled Damon's hands with his own. "It's okay, Damon. There's no hurry. Let's get something to drink and then go on into the bedroom. We can just sit and relax for a bit if you want to."

"I want to wait, yet I want to get with it right now," Damon admitted.

He met Eric's steady gaze, unsure still what he would see there. The warmth, the tenderness surprised him. He realized suddenly that was one of the things about the other man that drew him. There was nothing feminine about the blond vet, but he was not afraid to be gentle, to reach out with simple kindness and caring, not only to the animals he tended but to people in need as well.

Now Eric clasped Damon's hands in his. "I understand, Damon. This is new to you, not something you've had time to get used to, to think about and practice and learn to accept. You asked me to help you, to work with you. I will. You just have to let me."

Eric released Damon's hands and then put both arms around him. Hesitantly, Damon returned the embrace. They stood for several minutes, just holding each other, bare, warm

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torsos pressing together, heartbeats falling into a matched rhythm. It felt comfortable. It felt right. Tension drained out of Damon's muscles and he felt himself relax.

Finally Eric drew free. He took one of Damon's hands again and headed for the bedroom. Damon let himself be led. They paused at the foot of the bed. This time Damon's hands were sure as he unfastened the buckle, lowered the zipper and kicked off his jeans and boots.

He grinned. "Now who's overdressed?"

"I'd say we're about equal. I don't have anything on under these cut-offs."

The breath left Damon's lungs in a rush. Only that one layer of faded, worn denim between his hands, his mouth, and Eric's dick. His heart accelerated to a gallop. "I— Take them off. I need to touch you."

They were old button-style Levis. Eric flipped the first button open and then the rest, all with one smooth twist of his wrist. When he let go, they fell to the floor. His cock sprang free, as ready and eager as a cowpony from the roping box. Damon wrapped his hand around it, held gently for a moment, feeling the quiver as the blood throbbed through it. He'd never felt anything quite so alive.

As if his legs had lost their muscles, he sank to his knees. He didn't have to stoop much then to bring the ruddy tip to his mouth. Gingerly he put out his tongue to touch the very tip, tasting the salty flavor of sweat and pre-cum. He could feel Eric tighten slightly, forcing himself to remain still.

Holding Eric's cock in one hand, he reached with the other

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to grasp one firm cheek, squeezing. Two of his fingers slid into the crack of Eric's ass, drifting slowly downward.

He hesitated, unsure of what to do next.

"Go ahead," Eric said his voice a little lower and rougher than normal. "Explore. You aren't going to hurt me. It feels good. Anything that you do will feel good."

Damon took the whole head of Eric's cock into his mouth, still moving his tongue to test the textures of different areas. That freed a hand, so he used it to fondle Eric's balls. They were heavy, the skin soft, yet bristled with short golden hairs. They tickled Damon's palm as his fingers shifted over their roundness, the hollow beneath, and memorized the shape and feel.

As if of their own accord, the fingers of his other hand delved deeper between Eric's buttocks, found the tight, puckered hole and circled it. A tiny shudder flashed through Eric's body. Damon felt that tremor through both hands and the cock in his mouth. The realization that his touch had so much power amazed and excited him. Damon pulled back, letting Eric's dick slip out of his mouth.

"What do you want? What should I do?" Damon wanted to give him the most possible pleasure. This was Eric, his friend, his lover. That last notion felt strange still, but good nevertheless.

"I told you, whatever you feel like doing. Oh, I'm dying to have you fuck me, but if you aren't ready for that yet, it's okay."

Damon thought about the feeling of Eric's shaft rubbing

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between his buttocks last night. The memory of the sensation sparked through him like an arcing wire. “I’m not sure, but I could lie behind you like you did me last night, get used to how that feels.”

“That would be good.”

Eric turned toward the bed. Damon followed, kicking off his shorts as he walked. Eric lay down facing away from him. Damon stretched out, shifting over until he could put both arms around Eric and press against his back from shoulders to knees.

His cock wasn’t fully erect, but it slid into the crease of Eric’s ass as if it was going home. It worked its way forward until the tip nudged against the back of Eric’s balls. Damon’s balls cushioned against Eric’s muscled thighs. New sensations, powerful, thrilling sensations, danced along his nerves with dizzying intensity.

He moved, very slowly, very gently, not really thrusting, but just sliding back and forth. Eric’s buttocks and the muscles of his thighs flexed against Damon’s prick. The friction and shifting pressures soon had him iron-hard.

Eric moaned low in his throat. “God, Damon, you’re killing me here.”

“Want me to stop?”

“Hell, no! I’ll kill you if you stop.”

Damon reached down and wrapped his hand around Eric’s dick again. Within a few strokes, he was hard, too.

“I’d try—fucking—but I’m afraid of hurting you. I want to but...”

## DOGGONE LOVE

“There’s a tube of lube in the left front pocket of my cut-offs. With a little of that on your cock, I guarantee you’ll slide right in.”

While Damon retrieved the lubricant, Eric shifted to drop his legs off the bed, leaving his ass elevated. When Damon returned, Eric was open and ready for him. Still Damon hesitated a long moment. There was a certain finality about this. Once it was done there would be no going back. *Am I sure? Do I want to accept this reality about myself?*

In a flash the last uncertainly faded away. *Yes.* There had never been anything that felt more right, more necessary. He put one hand on each side of Eric’s hips and eased down, feeling his way slowly into the waiting cavity. He kept expecting Eric to flinch or tighten, but that didn’t happen. Smooth slick muscles clasped around him, just enough resistance to heighten the sensations. In and back out, not quite all the way, and in again. Suddenly, gentle was not enough. He thrust harder, plowing deeper.

“Yes, yes,” Eric growled. “Come on, Damon. Fuck like you mean it!”

He did. He let his building need drive him harder, faster, pounding deep until his balls smacked against Eric’s thighs. The pressure built as they tightened and clenched with the urgency to shoot their contents.

All at once, everything let loose. A burst of cum shot free with a force he could feel. Eric’s inner muscles tightened spasmodically as they milked him dry. By then Damon’s legs were shaking so hard he could barely stand. Somehow he



## DOGGONE LOVE

managed to pull out before he collapsed onto the bed beside Eric. After a few breaths, they both crawled forward to get fully on the mattress. Eric turned over, putting his arms around Damon.

“That was amazing, bud, wonderful. I’ve never felt anything like it. Where have you been all my life?”

Damon shrugged, not sure how to handle the effusive praise. “Waiting out here, I guess. I’d begun to think I was turning into a hermit, but maybe I was just waiting.”

Dixie chose that moment to hop up on the bed. She edged around until she could nuzzle between them, giving each of them a lick across the side of the face. Damon swatted at her without malice. “Go on, old girl. I’m busy right now.”

Eric laughed. “Looks like we still have a female trying to come between us, but if it’s only Dixie, I can handle it. After all, we owe her something for the part she played in getting us together.”

*This is real. I think it’s really going to work. I’m not alone. I’m with someone who understands me.*

A new sense of joy and satisfaction washed over Damon. “She did, didn’t she? Dixie, m’lady, I bet there’s a big juicy bone with your name on it in the refrigerator. When I catch my breath, we’ll go see. One good turn deserves another because I’m getting used to this doggone love really fast.”

## DEIRDRE O'DARE

Deirdre O'Dare, who also writes milder (roughly PG-13 rated) romance as Gwynn Morgan, has loved reading and writing since early childhood. Writing came naturally to Deirdre/Gwynn, who scribed her first simple verse at age eight. An avid reader, she devoured hundreds of books while growing up and later as an adult. Somewhere along the way she found romance and then romance with more explicit and detailed love scenes. "Ah ha," said she, "I think I have found my niche!" In the last decade after leaving her "day job" as a civilian employee of the U. S. Army, she finally settled into romantic fiction writing as a second career. Deirdre has a growing number of shorts and novellas, all published by Amber Heat.

With Irish and Welsh ancestry on both sides of her family, Deirdre has always been enthralled by the history and customs of the Celtic peoples as they have come down to us. The Mother Goddess idea particularly resonates with her as well as the notion that physical expressions of love between consenting couples are both a divine gift and a sacred duty to honor the Mother. Deirdre admits her favorite heroes are cops, cowboys and Celts.

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***Don't miss Treading Dangerous Ground,  
by Deirdre O'Dare, at [AmberHeat.com](http://AmberHeat.com)!***

*Seasoned Starfleet officer Jayce Hightower takes care of his troops. That includes supporting green soldier Balt Donovan through his first exposure to combat. What Jayce has not expected, however, is that the striking young man will soon come to dominate his dreams, stirring unfamiliar and disturbing desires.*

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