

Deirdre O'Dare

*The
Maltese
Terror*



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...Caleb finished shedding his gear first. Although the suit Nick wore clearly fit a huskier man, it made a tight fit over his parka. He twisted and tugged, but made little progress. Caleb looked at him, one eyebrow arched and a twinkle in his eyes. "Need a little help?"

Nick nodded, biting back a curse. Caleb circled him, grasped the edges of the suit and peeled it down off Nick's shoulders. Once free of the bulk of his parka, the suit slumped around his knees in a stiff brown pile. After Nick jerked down the zipper of his parka, Caleb pulled it off, just as he had the insulated suit, tossing it to one side over a chair. Then Caleb set a hand on each of Nick's shoulders, just resting them there.

For a half dozen breaths, Nick stood stock still absorbing the warmth and weight of the other man's hands, feeling a sparkling tide of awareness flash through him. There was no restraint in the touch. He could have shrugged free at any instant—but he didn't.

Caleb's grasp loosened. "Turn around," he said, his voice hoarse and low.

Nick did. He felt as if he had divided into two, one that stood back and watched with puzzlement and the other that had never been more aware, more attuned to another person in his life. He looked up to meet Caleb's fierce, dark gaze, boring into his with searching force. They were so close he could count every thick black lash framing those eyes, see the fine

creases and weathering that revealed the rancher's exposure to the harsh outdoors. The chiseled lips were mere inches from his. He suddenly wondered how they would taste, how they would feel...

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To Protect and...Seduce?
Treading Dangerous Ground

THE MALTESE TERROR

BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

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THE MALTESE TERROR
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To my muse, my canine “kids” and a friend, Rick, who taught me that sometimes people wind up in the wrong body with the wrong gender. Love is the Goddess’s gift to all of us, and where and how we find it will be different for everyone. Still we should celebrate this One True Thing in whatever guise it may appear, and in my stories of love and union, I attempt to do just that.

As always, my most sincere thank you to the wonderful, supportive team here at Amber Heat and Amber Allure. It is a great joy to be to be part of the family. As I learn and grow in my craft I hope my stories will, in their small way, add to the success and prestige Amber Quill Press is achieving in the publishing world. And of course thanks to the readers who tell me what they like and don’t like and encourage me to give them more. Every piece I write is for all of you.

Thanks also to Miss Lolly and Spencer Love Bug and their people who told me all about Maltese—terrors and otherwise.

CHAPTER 1

Nick LeGrande shrugged, trying to be philosophical. This damned trip exemplified Murphy's Law. Everything that could possibly go wrong had, and some things that couldn't possibly had also. As he trudged along the wide concourse in the Denver airport, he looked out at the leaden gray skies. If he were back in western New York where he'd grown up, he would say they meant snow. Maybe it was different here in the west. He hoped so. The last forecast he'd seen called for sunny, pleasant early spring weather, great for skiing and maybe even some golf.

After what felt like a ten-mile hike, Nick reached the baggage area. His spirits lifted when he saw his luggage had

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made it. He grabbed the familiar bag as the carousel rumbled by. Then he remembered he had a second bag to snatch, the one with Cedric's things. Reaching with a mumbled apology around an aristocratic-looking, white-haired gentleman, he stretched and clutched, snaring a corner of the bag. It almost jerked free of his grip, but he held on, finally lifting it clear.

At that moment, his little, four-footed partner gave a petulant whine, peering out through the screen of the new, lime green pet carrier. Nick readily admitted the color almost made him gag, but beggars couldn't be choosy. It was the only carrier available when he'd made a desperate dash to Pets-R-Us with an hour left to catch his flight.

This was all a new experience for Cedric, one with which he'd become perturbed. Several people turned to stare, a few smirking or chuckling, as the little guy let out a sharp bark, followed by a throaty howl of obvious protest. So much noise from such a little dog!

Although Nick had acquired the Maltese almost three years ago, he'd never before taken the pooch on one of his trips. Usually the teenager next door at his upscale Philadelphia apartment complex had been available to pet sit and water Nick's plants while he was away. Unfortunately, this was spring break and, like many students, young Misty Hayes was headed for Fort Lauderdale. Cedric had to come along, while the plants fended for themselves.

Struggling with the abnormal load of baggage, Nick made his way to the rental counter for the firm he regularly used. Wasn't there a luxury sedan reserved for Mr. LeGrande? The

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bored looking clerk was unable to find one.

“I’ve got a couple of SUVs,” she said, snapping her gum. “Looking at the weather forecast, I’d say that’d be your best bet.”

Nick bit back a growl of frustration. *Is nothing going to go right on this misbegotten trip?* He was supposed to be meeting Jack Connant, one of his firm’s biggest clients, in an hour. To do that, he had to get into Denver and clear across town. Of course Jack always stayed in The Brown Palace, one of the mile-high city’s most luxurious, grand old hotels. They were to have a dinner meeting there tonight before heading off for Vail tomorrow to combine business and pleasure by getting in a bit of skiing and checking out real estate offerings in the developing area surrounding the booming winter resort.

Nick had risen quickly to become one of the second-tier executives and a project team leader in Creating With Nature. CWN, as the employees called it, specialized in laying out overall designs for upscale outdoor and enviro-tourism resorts. Jack said he’d chosen Nick specifically to look over some sites and help select the best one for the latest project Connant Enterprises planned. Nick would do the overall design, of course, assisted by his team’s expert members. No need for false modesty—he was good at what he did. Many said the best.

After pondering a moment, Nick accepted the inevitable. “All right, I’ll take the Expedition.”

At least a lot attendant brought the vehicle to the nearest door and helped him load his gear. Even so, dusk was falling

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by the time he pulled out into traffic to leave the airport. A few flakes of snow drifted down onto the windshield. From the map he'd picked up, he could see the airport sat way out of town. He'd have to haul ass once he reached the freeway if he was going to be on time.

That proved impossible. Construction had three lanes reduced to two or even one, with detours at various spots along the route. Nick found the signs confusing, but he hoped he made the proper turns. By now the snow fell hard, or rather flew by hard, riding a wind strong enough to buffet the heavy SUV. The swirling snow reduced visibility to a couple of vehicle lengths. He'd be late. There was no help for it.

Nick fumbled for his cell phone and slapped on the headset. Then he pushed a speed dial button, hoping to reach Mae Dunkirk, Jack's traveling secretary, who accompanied the real estate mogul everywhere. When she answered, Nick explained the unavoidable delays and apologized, buying himself some time. That done, he gave sigh of relief. Too soon, though. It appeared his troubles had just begun.

Perhaps he'd missed a sign while his attention was on the phone or maybe the wind had knocked it down. Next thing he knew, the SUV was bouncing over a rutted track that could not possibly be the detour for a major interstate highway, not even here in the Wild West! The snow flew past at a different angle now, one that reduced visibility even more. The windshield wipers barely cleared the glass, while a thickening border of compacted snow edged into the open area a bit farther after every swipe.

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“This doesn’t look good, Cedric. We’ve got to turn around and try to find our way back to the highway.”

Cedric made a small growl in response, apparently irritated at the continued disruption of his routine. Dogs were very conservative, Nick now knew, and disliked having to adjust to new things, especially at feeding and bed time. For Cedric, still functioning on Eastern Standard, it was now past the former and rapidly approaching the latter.

Exerting due caution, Nick gently braked to a stop. He really could not see, but he decided to back to the right and then make a forward turn to the left. He’d attempt a hundred and eighty degree reversal to head back in the direction from which he’d come. Surely he’d get back to the highway that way. But in just a few feet, he felt a thump, indicating he’d come to something immovable behind the vehicle. Shifting back into forward, he inched ahead, turning some more.

He felt the wheels spin a little, fighting for traction on the snow that probably had slippery mud underneath. The SUV slithered and shuddered, jolting forward until the hood dropped away abruptly, nosing downward. *Oh shit, there must be a ditch at the side of the road.*

Again he shifted into reverse. He wanted to inch back, but that wasn’t working. Frustrated, he stamped down on the gas. Again wheels spun as the vehicle jolted, slithered and slid. It skidded for what seemed a long time and finally stopped, listing hard to the right. This time it would not move no matter what he did. He could feel the wheels spin in a futile effort to move the vehicle, simply digging in deeper.

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Well, of all the revolting developments. Late for an important meeting and here I am stuck in the wilds of Colorado in the midst of a blizzard. He had a hunch Triple-A was not going to be too keen on hunting for him at this point, but he called anyway. Never let it be said Nick LeGrande was not both resourceful and determined.

* * *

Caleb Storm slammed the barn door, then headed for the house. It might be late March, but from the feel of that wind, they were due for an ugly night. Fine, gritty snow stung his face as he stooped, tilting his hat for its maximum protection. He leaned into the push of the wind and forged on. The hundred yards from the barn to the house seemed a lot longer than normal. He grabbed a scoop shovel beside the porch and took it inside with him. He'd need it in the morning to dig through the drifts that were sure to be left when the wind blew snow this way.

Cheyenne looked up from her bed behind the kitchen range. Her stubby tail thumped a time or two when she recognized him. The rest of his stock dogs bedded in the barn, but he let the old girl stay inside. Matriarch of his pack, she had arthritis in a hip from an old injury, and the cold made her limp. The blue merle Heeler-and Aussie-mix bitch had seen him through many a misadventure during her ten years of life.

She'd been born right here in this room, one of eight pups, the last litter his old bitch Blue Blazes had produced. One of the best stock dogs he'd ever had, Chey was also the best companion a rancher could ask for. A damn site more faithful

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and trustworthy than any woman he'd ever known, for sure, and most men as well.

Caleb kicked off wet, muddy boots, then hung his dripping hat and snow-laden parka on big nails by the back door. Next he headed for the coffee pot on the corner of the old wood-and-coal-burning range. It would take at least a couple of cups to thaw out this evening. Then he'd think about supper.

He'd only finished one when the phone rang. Too tired to cuss, he stumbled to his feet to go answer it. Another old-fashioned thing about this early twentieth-century vintage ranch house he called home was a single phone, on the kitchen wall where it had been for a good fifty years. At least it wasn't a party line any more. He kept saying he'd get new phones, have the wiring put in for a phone in each room, but he never seemed to have the money at the right time. Cell phones didn't work too well here for some reason, so he rarely used the one he had, except when he traveled.

"Storm."

There was a rough chuckle on the other end. "Damn straight it's a storm! Caleb, we got a problem. Some lowlander's got himself stuck trying to get from the airport into town. You know what a mess the highway is right now with all them detours. From what he said, it sounded like he's about five miles down the road from your place, just short of the junction with the back road to Prairie View. Do you reckon you could get down there and pick him up?"

Caleb exhaled a long breath. He recognized the gravelly voice of Sandy Kuntz, the regular night dispatcher at the

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Adams County Sheriff's Department substation. He knew Sandy wouldn't call if it wasn't critical. Still, he had to give her a hard time. That was their long-term tradition.

"What's the matter with the deputies? All in town sucking up coffee and pie?"

"Aw, Caleb, you know better'n that. Nights like this we couldn't cover all the calls with three times the people we have. I'm asking, real sweet-like. Pretty please? I'll buy the coffee next time you're in town."

Sandy was old enough to be his mother, but she was one of the few women he really respected. Tough as rawhide, she still had a good heart, hidden behind her gruff exterior. Somehow there didn't seem to be any like her in his age bracket. *Too bad*. But then, what would he do with a wife anyway?

"Okay, babe. I'll give it my best shot. Got chains on the old Dodge, so I can probably get there and back. Do I need to put this stranger up for the night?"

"It'd be right nice if you did, Caleb. Prob'ly can't get his car out until the storm passes. And don't be trying to sweet talk me, you rascal. I knew you when you were still in shitty diapers. Babe, my ass!"

Shaking his head with a chuckle, Caleb hung up. He crossed the room to get back into his outdoor gear. As an afterthought, he filled a big thermos with coffee. Then he went ahead and fed Chey her kibble. He might be pretty late getting back.

The old truck started hard but, after a few tries, the big V-8 coughed and spluttered into a roaring growl. Caleb eased the

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Dodge in a wide circle and then headed down the lane to the gravel road at the foot of the hill. This was not how he'd planned to spend the evening, but people had died stranded overnight in blizzards. He couldn't let that happen to a fellow human, no matter how it put him out.

CHAPTER 2

There was something really spooky about sitting by yourself in a stranded vehicle when all you could see was a maelstrom of grayish white, Nick concluded. After a few minutes, he noticed it wasn't really dark. There was a faint glow, a little bluer than the silver-green foxfire that sometimes hovered over the lakes and bogs back home. Almost as if the snow carried its own inner light.

Recalling stories about carbon monoxide poisoning, he'd shut off the motor. Without the heater blasting into the vehicle, it didn't take long for cold to settle in. Nick dug his ski parka out of his carry-on and struggled into it. Then he took Cedric out of the carrier. The dog came willingly,

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wiggling all over. Nick tucked the warm, little body inside the parka with him. At least part of him would be warm and the dog would be well-protected.

Nick snorted in disgust. *Triple A was totally useless. Then that woman at the sheriff's department where they referred me didn't sound too encouraging. We're likely to be here all night. Not a cheerful prospect, but I figure we can survive.*

They'd be thirsty, hungry and cold, but it wouldn't be the first time, at least for Nick. He hadn't lived all his thirty-two years in the lap of luxury. The middle of three kids of a single mom, he knew all about life on the hard side. It was not fun, but a person could endure a lot of things. He didn't ever intend to go back to povertyville, though. With any luck, he wouldn't have to. Slouching a bit in the seat, he tried to make himself relax.

Time passed slowly. Nick dozed briefly only to wake up when Cedric squirmed, seeking a less confining position. "Hold on there, buddy, I'm giving you all the space I can." He tucked his hand under the furry bottom, shifting the dog, but keeping him close. He felt a sudden surge of gratitude that events had forced him to bring his small partner along. Cedric's company provided a real boost now.

Some people might laugh, but Nick knew the loyal love of a canine companion couldn't be beat. Nick's main regret about his pet was that he lacked the ability to spend as much time with Cedric as he would like to. The personable little guy had won a way into Nick's heart when he first saw the pup, and only succeeded in getting more entrenched with time.

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At first he didn't notice the light level gradually increasing. When he did, he couldn't figure out the cause. It was definitely not morning yet, so what was brightening the snow and making the blue glow seem more yellow as well as stronger? In a few moments, he saw an approaching vehicle. It looked huge and solid. The big pickup rolled to a stop, angling across the rear of the Expedition. A moment later a figure emerged and made the few quick strides to Nick's door.

Cursing the electric windows that wouldn't work when the motor wasn't running, Nick reluctantly opened the door. A burst of even colder air accompanied a whirl of snow into the SUV.

The man standing there looked huge, tall, solid, and either very bulky or enveloped in all the clothes he could get on.

"You must be the fellow who called in to emergency, right? You picked a hell of a night to get yourself lost."

"As if I had a choice in the matter," Nick replied, feeling a little testy over the stranger's laconic comment. "This state has the most fucked-up freeway I've ever been on in my life. How's a guy supposed to find his way when you can barely make out your hood ornament in front of you?"

The stranger ignored Nick's complaint. "Get your stuff and come on. I'll take you back to the ranch tonight. If the storm clears out early like it's supposed to, you can probably get your car out tomorrow."

Nick stuffed Cedric back into the carrier and then grabbed his bag and the dog's things. Apparently seeing him struggle, juggling three items, the stranger grabbed Nick's bag, the

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biggest one. He tossed it into the jump seat area in the back of the king cab. Then he saw the puke green carrier.

“What’s that? You aren’t traveling with a cat, are you?”

Upon hearing the word cat, Cedric let out a sharp, aggravated bark. The tall man bent over to try to peer through the mesh. “You’ve got a dog in there?” His tone indicated total incredulity at the notion.

“Yes, I’ve got a dog in here. Normally he stays home, but my pet-sitter wasn’t available this week, so he had to come with me.”

“Did you shrink it or what? I couldn’t fit a quarter of one of mine into that overgrown pocketbook.”

Nick didn’t bother to respond. *This guy is sure arrogant.* He followed the tall Coloradan to the looming truck. The man jerked open the passenger-side door. Metal shrieked on metal, but it came free. Nick scrambled into the seat. The heater was going full blast. *Damn, that feels good.*

He set Cedric’s carrier on the floor between his feet, tugged down the zipper of his parka and muttered a swift prayer of thanks. They weren’t going to be sitting in a cold car all night after all.

It took them almost an hour to get to the ranch the Coloradan mentioned. He must know the road because Nick couldn’t see a thing through the snow-speckled windshield.

Suddenly drained now that the real crunch was over, Nick didn’t feel like struggling to make conversation. Except for telling Nick where the thermos was and asking him to pour a cup, the big man also remained silent the whole time. Nick

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excused him with the admission that driving in these conditions was seriously demanding.

Not until they staggered together into the kitchen at the ranch did Nick get a good look at his Samaritan. Nick was five-ten and worked out enough to keep a trim physique, but even the body builder types at his gym couldn't stand up to this man. Nick simply stood and gawked as the rancher peeled off the heavy padded coverall, hung it and his hat on some big spikes by the back door and then kicked off his soaked boots. Standing there in stocking feet, he stretched, his fingertips brushing the ceiling. Next he rolled shoulders almost as wide as the doorway, then flashed Nick a rueful grin.

"Guess we might take time now for introductions. I'm Caleb Storm. I was born in this house thirty-six years ago come July. I've lived here all my life, except the four years I was in the Army. My folks left the ranch to me when they passed on. Only have one sister and she isn't cut out for ranch life. Life story in a nutshell."

Nick nodded. "I'm Nick LeGrande. My trade is a kind of mixture of landscape architect, site planner and crazy dreamer. Home base now is in Philadelphia, but I grew up in western New York. I was trying to get to Denver from the airport when the blizzard hit. I guess I took a wrong turn somewhere, but you couldn't see past the hood half the time. I grew up with snow, but it wasn't anything like this. Do you get these white-out conditions a lot?"

"Off and on. We'll have a real blizzard at least a couple of times most winters, sometimes more. I know it can be

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dangerous, but I work around it best I can. Right now I'm just hoping none of my heifers decide to drop their calves tonight. A wise, old range cow might make it with her baby, but the green young ones won't."

Nick had only the vaguest idea what Caleb was talking about, but then, it really didn't matter. He was too caught up in studying the bigger man to think about anything as esoteric as cattle giving birth. Normally he didn't pay a lot of attention to other men's appearances, but this Caleb Storm was an exceptionally arresting specimen.

His hatchet-sharp face, though rough hewn, was balanced and striking. A pair of keen gray eyes looked as if they never missed anything, however insignificant. *Never try to lie to this man.* The unexpected thought flashed through Nick's mind.

In the flat light of a single ceiling fixture, Caleb's hair was shining blue-black, probably well past his shoulders when he didn't have twisted up in that odd bunch at the back of his head. The wind had torn a few strands free. They drifted down over the bright striped yokes of his western cut shirt.

A sharp, squeaky bark from Cedric recalled Nick's attention to the carrier at his feet. A ragged looking dog with strange, blotchy markings had ambled over to sniff at the carrier. Inside, Cedric was working himself into a complete frenzy. He didn't get to see other dogs too often and this one really seemed to push his buttons. The carrier bounced like a bark boat on a windswept pond as Cedric spun in circles, folding himself almost double to do it. Each bark got a little more shrill.

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“Why don’t you let your dog out? He’s going to bust that pocketbook wide open in a few more minutes anyway.”

Glancing askance at the splotchy dog that still nosed around the carrier, Nick reached down and tugged the zipper open. Cedric shot out like a fluffy, white cannon ball. The bigger dog sat back in surprise, eyeing the flying bundle of fur with suspicion.

Caleb obviously shared the sentiment. “What the hell kind of dog is that? It looks like a dust mop on roller skates, and I’ve seen bigger cats. If I hadn’t heard it make definite doggie noises, I’d never guess it was canine.”

Nick had to come to his pet’s defense. “He’s a Maltese. Although they’re actually related to spaniels, some call them Maltese Terriers. Breed’s been around a long time. Cedric has a pedigree as long as your arm. He’ll slow down in a minute. It’s been a traumatic day for him.” Dropping to one knee, Nick snapped his fingers. “Come here, Cedric.”

Cedric came barreling back across the room and launched himself into Nick’s arms. The speckled gray dog approached with a good deal more dignity. Nick started to lift Cedric out of the other dog’s reach.

“No, it’s okay. Chey won’t hurt it. She may think it’s a puppy and pretty near love it to death, but she won’t hurt the little critter. Maltese Terror, huh? If that don’t beat all.”

With that comment, Caleb began to bustle around the kitchen, which felt almost like a sauna in contrast to the bitter cold outside. He poured two more cups of coffee from the thermos and set one in front of Nick, who’d sunk onto one of

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the mismatched chairs that hovered around the big, round wooden dining table in one corner of the room.

Cedric perched on Nick's knees, looking down at the spotted gray dog with a fascinated stare. That dog had settled on the floor about two feet from Nick and Cedric and stared back at them with uncanny blue-white eyes.

"What kind of dog is this one you have? It looks a little like a hyena."

Caleb gave a snorting laugh. "Hyena? They're not even canine! Cheyenne's Australian Shepherd and Blue Heeler, my senior herd dog now. Age has its privileges. She's the only one allowed in the house—on account of her arthritis. She was born right in this room, one of the last litter my boyhood pet gave us. Hyena? Aren't you getting things crossed up? Might be thinking of dingoes, the wild dogs of Australia, kinda like our coyotes. Heelers come from down under and most of them are said to carry some dingo blood.

"Go on and put your pup down. They'll be all right. They wouldn't hurt a baby rabbit. She prob'ly thinks that dog of yours is a funny kind of lamb. I've got a few sheep along with my cattle, and she believes they're her special charges."

Nick eased Cedric to the floor. The small dog began to dance in circles around the bigger one. Finally Cheyenne stood and shook herself. Then, using her nose, she steered Cedric to her special place behind the stove. Nick could almost hear her saying, "Come on, kid, this is where the dogs hang out here. See, it's nice and cozy."

Apparently Cedric agreed it was a good place. Within

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minutes he was asleep, curled into a ball between Cheyenne's extended forelegs. She rested her muzzle on her right leg and dozed off, too.

Once Nick assured himself that Cedric was essentially in good hands, he turned his attention back to his host. If Caleb was reluctant to have his home invaded by a total stranger, he concealed it well. Another astonishing thing was how comfortable the big man seemed to be in the kitchen. Although he moved at what seemed a leisurely pace, it wasn't long before he had a meal fixed. He started to dish up two plates.

"I'm keeping this light," he explained. "It's pretty late and trying to sleep on a belly full of heavy food isn't a good idea."

The result didn't look too light to Nick. Caleb set a plate full of steaming stew with a fluffy biscuit on the side in front of Nick, resting a hand briefly on Nick's shoulder as he reached around to the table. The touch seemed totally impersonal, yet it sent a shivery jolt of awareness along Nick's nerves.

Wait a minute. What's this all about? I guess I'm just strung out and tired. It can't be anything else.

The stew smelled delicious, but Nick recalled his mother's relentless schooling in manners. He waited until Caleb settled into an opposite chair with his own filled plate. Then Nick reached for his fork, stopping mid-reach in surprise. Caleb had bowed his head over his plate and obviously offered a silent prayer for the food. Only after that did he pick up a fork and begin to eat. Then Nick dug in as well. The food was just as

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good as the aromas, if not better.

“This is great,” Nick complimented, as he wiped up the last bits of gravy with the final scrap of biscuit. “I could hire you for a cook! My culinary talents are barely adequate at best. I’ve gotta admit, I eat a lot of fast food and prepared meals.”

Caleb looked up, a smile softening his austere face. “I was in food service in the Army. Before that, my mother insisted I learn my way around the kitchen just as she and Dad made my sister learn some basics of maintaining an automobile and making small household repairs. When you live in the country, you can’t always afford the luxury of traditional roles. Any person, man or woman, needs to be able to do whatever has to be done. You can’t always go to the café down the street or call a mechanic or a plumber.”

Nick nodded. “That makes a lot of sense. When I was a kid, the older of my two sisters did the household stuff because Mom was generally working. Sometimes she held down two jobs to keep the family fed, clothed and sheltered. Single parenting is no easy task. I usually had an after-school job from about age twelve on. We all pitched in as best we could.” Although he wasn’t sure why, Nick wanted to erase any impression he was one of the privileged class and used to luxury. He sensed Caleb would have little respect for anyone in that category.

Somewhere out of sight a clock chimed twice. *Is it really 2:00 a.m.?* In spite of himself, Nick yawned.

“If you’ll point me at a bed, I’ll put it to good use. I’ve

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been up and on the go for about twenty-two hours now. A warm meal and I'm ready to conk out like Cedric's done."

Caleb hesitated a moment. "That's where a problem rears its head. I only have one bed. I took my old room and made it my office and the room that Sissy used is stacked to the ceiling with the folks' old stuff I've never found time to sort through and get rid of. I guess I can throw a bedroll down out here on the floor and let you have the bed. I expect I'm more used to sleeping on the ground than you are."

His tone wasn't quite condescending but Nick still bridled. "I was in Boy Scouts and I still get out camping at least a time or two every year. I don't want to put you out. Give me a blanket and a pillow and I'll be fine."

Caleb shrugged negligently. "Whatever. It's a king-sized bed. If you aren't uncomfortable with sharing, I guess there's room for both of us." He held Nick's gaze as he spoke, a peculiar intensity in his face, as if he was waiting to see how Nick would respond to the suggestion.

Affecting a level of nonchalance he didn't really feel, Nick nodded. "Sure. Why not? Unless you snore like the roar of a lion, I don't think you'll bother me."

CHAPTER 3

Caleb lay awake, trying not to toss and turn, much too aware he wasn't alone in the big bed. His guest had clearly been exhausted and was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow. Although he'd put in a long day himself, and would face another come morning, sleep eluded him.

Funny guy...different from a lot of the easterners who pass through Colorado for one reason or another. At first I took him for a standard garden variety city wuss type, but I think there's more to him than my first assessment—in spite of that ridiculous excuse for a dog he's dragging around.

The ridiculous excuse currently slept with Chey on her heavy Indian blanket at the foot of the bed. One or the other

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stirred now and then, making faint doggie sounds, a sigh, a muffled squeak or growl in a dream. Caleb shook his head, holding back a chuckle. What an unlikely pair they made. Being a natural nurturer and protector, old Chey had taken the little guy into her care as she'd done with two litters of pups and many a dogie calf and bummer lamb over the years.

His thoughts turned back to Nick. He'd felt the tension that answered his touch when he'd unthinkingly put a hand on Nick's shoulder. He wasn't making a pass; the idea hadn't even occurred to him. Until that point, Nick had given Caleb no reason to suspect he might respond. Now Caleb wondered. He didn't want to embarrass both of them by making an unwanted overture, yet there was some indefinable quality about the other man that drew him powerfully.

Well, it was probably moot anyway. If the storm cleared by morning, Nick LeGrande would get his rented SUV dragged out of the ditch and be on his way. The chance of them ever crossing paths again was about as likely as a temperature of a hundred degrees by noon tomorrow. Caleb let a breath out slowly, not quite a sigh. Sometimes a rancher's life could be damn lonely.

Although he never knew how or why his life had worked out that way, he'd known since his stint in the Army that he found males more attractive than females. If he ever discovered a life partner, it would be another man, but the chances of that seemed to get slimmer all the time. There really were not too many gay cowboys, and the ones he'd run into were mostly not the kind of people he wanted to share his

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life with. There was a big difference between the on-the-edge lifestyle focused on rodeo and the everyday drudgery of a real ranch.

This spread was his family's legacy. He intended to keep and improve it, maybe bequeath it to one of his sister's kids if they showed an interest. That didn't leave time or money for a lot of drinking, drugs and wild parties like the rodeo set tended to indulge in. He really didn't enjoy that much anyway.

Maybe his lone wolf tendencies came down in the genes from his paternal grandfather, a full-blood Comanche. The old man's name had been Storm Walking Over Mountains, which somewhere got shortened to Storm. Caleb didn't mind being on his own—most of the time. Still, with the folks gone, he missed the companionship, someone to talk to and do things with, someone to care about. Turning toward the outer edge of the bed, he willed himself to fall asleep.

Long habit woke him less than four hours later. The faint glow from his electric clock showed him the time—5:45. Snow or no snow, stock needed feeding. He might have to thaw a pipe to get water for them or make some hot mash for an animal that wasn't doing well in the cold. He slipped out of bed as quietly as he could and padded out to the kitchen in his long johns. Yesterday's clothes had dried out overnight, draped on chairs in front of the stove. The big range still radiated heat from the coal he'd added before heading to bed. It didn't take much to get a fire blazing again. He started a pot of coffee and then bundled up to head for the barn.

The wind had died, but snow still fell, soft, fluffy flakes

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now, drifting like feathers from a down coverlet shaken overhead. Actually it was not as cold as he'd expected. That would come after the storm cleared when a clear sky let the earth's natural heat escape so the mercury would plummet. He dug through the usual drift that extended from the tool shed across the open area between the house and the barn, but the rest was swept nearly bare by the wind.

Caleb shook his head. *Don't look like my star boarder will be able to move on today. Not unless it clears faster than it looks like it will right now. Too bad. I expect he won't be happy. Business man, probably has urgent meetings and stuff. Can't say I envy him. Whatever else I have to deal with, at least I don't have to answer to a bunch of bosses up the line.*

With practiced efficiency, he went about the early morning chores, tossing hay to the horses and the sheep, dumping some kibble out for the dogs housed in the barn. He checked the water, but it was okay. Later he'd have to get out the snowmobile and make the rounds of the pastures to see how the cattle fared, but, for now, it was time to go get breakfast. *See if Nick LeGrande is awake yet, too.*

He was. As Caleb stamped into the kitchen and stripped off his outdoor wear, he saw his guest sat at the big table, nursing a mug of coffee held with both hands. Nick turned at the sound of Caleb's entrance, then shook his head.

"Still storming, isn't it? Do you think it will let up today?"

Caleb shrugged. "No telling. These spring storms are unpredictable. Guess we've got an Albuquerque low, dragging in some warm, moist air from the south to bang into a cold

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front pushing down from Canada. It could be gone by noon or hang around another day or two.”

Nick exhaled in a ragged sigh. “Damn. This trip was ill-fated from the start. I might as well have stayed home. Jack Connant is not going to be happy, but then we likely couldn’t get to Vail today, even if I’d made it to Denver. Guess I’ll call in a bit and see what he wants to try to do.”

“Is that Jack Connant of Connant and Hudson Development and Connant Enterprises? Understand they bought a couple of ranches just north of here. Not sure what for, but I can understand folks selling out. Some places have started having water problems. Cattle aren’t worth their weight in gold these days, but feed sure seems to be. What’s a rancher supposed to do?”

“One and the same,” Nick replied. “He’s got a new resort complex planned up in the Vail area. My firm will be designing it for him, once we select the site. He wanted my advice on that part.”

Caleb hesitated, impressed in spite of himself. This guy was no average dude with an attitude. Actually for a city-type stranger, he wasn’t bad, quiet enough, not demanding or raging around trying to use his cell phone, notebook computer and a dozen other gadgets because he was too important to be out of touch for a minute.

“In Colorado, the weather calls the shots. Oh, things keep moving in Denver to a degree and down in Colorado Springs, but out here on the prairie, you have to learn to work with what nature gives you because she’s sure not going to cut you

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any slack. I'm glad you called and glad I was able to come get you. About now you'd be mighty cold, maybe getting hypothermic."

"Yeah, that's how it was in western New York where I grew up, pretty rural, part reservation. We'd get the lake effect storms sweeping in off Lake Ontario there and it might dump five feet of snow in a day or two. All you could do was hunker down and wait it out. I guess that's all I can do now, isn't it? I'm really thankful to be somewhere safe and warm, me and Cedric. Sorry to be a bother, though, leaving you stuck with us."

At the mention of his name, the little white dog came charging down the hallway from the bedroom, Cheyenne close behind him. While Caleb rummaged in the refrigerator for breakfast fixings, Cedric dashed in wild circles around the room, back and forth from Nick to Caleb. Cheyenne, nose down, tried to herd him off to the snug spot behind the stove, but he was having none of that.

Setting a carton of eggs, a package of bacon, a jug of milk and an onion on the counter, Caleb paused to watch the two dogs. It was all he could do not to laugh out loud. He could see Chey was getting totally frustrated because her herding efforts were not getting the job done. Cedric didn't stay still long enough for her to turn him.

Caleb had to admit the old girl didn't move as fast as she used to, but she still knew her business. Finally Cedric skidded to a stop right in front of him. The little dog sat back on his haunches and stared up, as if he'd never seen anything so big.

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Two shoe-button, jet-black eyes stared at him intently. Then the little guy opened his mouth in a doggie grin and let out one sharp bark. That was too much. Caleb roared. "What are you after, squirt? You want some breakfast?"

"I never give him people food," Nick protested, almost primly. "I've got his food in the smaller bag. If you feed your dog in the morning, I'll get some for him now so he won't feel left out. He gets this all-natural stuff my vet recommended. Malties have delicate digestion."

Caleb grinned. "Chey eats when I do, mostly the same stuff. Oh, she gets some kibbles at night like all the dogs do, but a scrambled egg and a couple of pieces of bacon won't hurt a dog. No onion, though. Onion and garlic are bad for them."

With that, he proceeded to fix breakfast, doubling the amount he normally made. He could feel Nick's gaze on him as he worked. It gave him an itchy, unsettled feeling. Normally he didn't pay much attention to anyone else, just went about his business as if he was all alone in the world.

There was something hard to ignore about this fair easterner, though. Nick's eyes were an odd pale shade of gray. His hair looked medium brown, but Caleb would bet the sun brought out glints of red in it. He had nice even features, almost pretty enough to be one of those male models. Yet it wasn't his looks that had Caleb feeling edgy, but something much more indefinable.

Wish I knew if he was interested. The way he's looking at me makes me wonder. I still never quite know how to ask, even

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after knowing what I want for almost half my life.

He cracked the eggs into the big iron frying pan and diced up the bacon to pitch in with a little more verve than he ordinarily employed. Hell, if he had an audience he might as well play to it. And an audience he had—four beady dog eyes, plus two piercing gray ones followed his every move. A strange excitement buzzed along his nerves, tightening his balls and making his cock twitch under the zipper of his jeans. He hadn't felt that in a long time, too long maybe, because it felt damn good.

"What do you do for fun out here in the prairie?" Nick's sudden question made Caleb jump. He glanced over his shoulder before he gave the eggs a final stir.

Then he shrugged. "Not much—watch the sun come up and go down, the clouds go by, the grass grow. I don't have time to do much really. Oh, I go into Denver once in a while and spend the night. I can usually find some fun if I go to the right bars and clubs, but I'm not big on that scene. They have a dance at the Veteran's Hall in Lincoln two or three times a year and sometimes I hit that. Enjoy the music, even if I have two left feet."

Nick chuckled. "I understand that. Even though I'm in a city, I stay busy enough that a heavy social life is hard to fit in. I take in a play or concert now and then, maybe go out to a club every couple of months with some of the people from work. That doesn't seem to be as much fun as it was when I was younger..."

Nick's voice trailed off in a manner that indicated regret or

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maybe disillusionment. Caleb looked at the other man keenly as he carried their plates to the table. There was something there for sure. He could sense it, but would there be time to explore just what it was and how it might work for them? Not likely.

When Caleb set Nick's plate down, the easterner gave a start of surprise. "Good grief, you expect me to eat all that? I never eat breakfast...a couple of cups of coffee and I'm on my way. Maybe grab a donut or a bagel at work if someone brings them into the office. If I ate like this very often I'd weigh three hundred pounds quicker than you can say phat."

"If you get out in this snow and wind, you'll burn all those calories and more." Caleb grinned at Nick's expression. "I've got to get the snowmobile out and go check the pastures. Thought you might like to come along, just for something to do."

Nick shrugged. "Sure, why not? I don't think I've got the clothes for it, though. That parka I had on last night is the only cold weather gear I brought along."

"I think I have one of my dad's old coveralls around. He wasn't quite my height so it ought to fit you well enough. Unless I find something wrong, I won't be off the machine very much and you won't have to get off at all."

Cedric, who had settled behind the stove with Cheyenne, now jumped up to dash across and stand, his forepaws patting urgently on Nick's leg. Nick reached down and pulled Cedric onto his lap. His black nose twitched eagerly as he sniffed the nearest edge of Nick's plate. Seeing that, Cheyenne got up,

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too. She ambled over to stop by Caleb's chair. Although she sat down politely, her avid gaze followed every bite on its journey from plate to mouth.

Caleb glanced at her. "Don't you be begging now, Chey. I'll put the plate down for you to finish in a minute."

When Nick's attention was focused briefly on Caleb, Cedric edged forward and snatched a bit of egg from the plate. Nick gave a whoop of alarm. "Hey, that isn't your stuff, kid. People food is not good for dogs."

"Bull shit," Caleb said. "I don't care what those citified vets say. Dogs can eat the same things we do with just a few changes. I won't chew on ole bones or eat a rabbit fur, feet and all, and Chey won't get any onions, garlic, grapes or chocolate."

This time Nick caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. "You damn little thief. Leave it alone. You never do this at home. What's with you today?" He pushed the plate farther in on the table, out of Cedric's reach.

Caleb held back the chuckle. "That Maltese Terror of yours is going to grow up and be a real dog yet. He's getting the hang of it, showing off for Cheyenne. She's acting out a little, too. She knows better than to beg before I'm done."

With that, he set the plate on the floor, allowing the old Heeler to have several bites of bacon and eggs and a few crusts of toast. She licked it shiny clean. "I've got the best automatic dishwasher around," Caleb boasted. "She never misses a crumb or a swipe of grease."

Nick shook his head. "I don't know. I was told not to feed

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a dog at the table and I never let Cedric lick my dishes. It just doesn't seem civilized."

"Maybe it isn't, but what the hell?" Caleb met Nick's gaze, almost challenging him to respond. "Neither are a lot of other things some folks do as a matter of course. Who's to say what's right or proper or anything else really?"

Nick looked away first. "I don't know," he mumbled. "You may be right."

Caleb got up to clear the table. After that, he fetched the old coverall out of the mud room off the kitchen. It was stiff and crusted with the residue of many long-forgotten chores, but the heavy water proof canvas would keep Nick snug and dry. In a few minutes they were both bundled up like Eskimos and ready to head outdoors.

CHAPTER 4

Nick found Caleb's snowmobile did have room for two, but only if they didn't mind snuggling pretty close. Sitting behind, his knees bracketed Caleb's hips and his crotch was right against Caleb's butt. The layers of clothing somehow did little to dispel his awareness of just how intimate their positions were.

The wind had begun to pick up again, which made their speed seem greater than it was. Caleb steered over the drifts and hollows with practiced skill. Although the cold was sharp, Nick found it exhilarating to skim along as they did. Since he only had to hang on, he could look around. The area was picturesque in a subdued way. The rolling hills, dusted with

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snow like white frosting on a strange cake, faded into the distance. Here and there a stark bush or the stalk of a yucca-like plant stood up, dark against the dominant white and pale grays of the landscape. The black and red coats of Caleb's Angus and Hereford cattle made startling splashes of color in the snow.

Between the roar of the machine and the wail of the wind, there wasn't much use trying to talk, but Nick could partially gauge Caleb's shifting moods by the set of his shoulders and whether his movements were smooth or jerky. When they found one heifer down in the snow, near her obviously dead calf, Caleb shook his head, his strong face marked with poignant sorrow.

He really cares for his animals, like each one is a family member. Nick found that a stunning revelation. He hadn't expected a rancher to feel that way, maybe worry over the lost value if an animal died, but not to be truly sorry.

After a moment, Caleb edged close enough to Nick to explain. There was not much he could do for either of the animals now. The heifer should be all right if the storm broke soon, but right now there was no way to get her back to the barn. Some losses were inevitable. Range cows had to be hardy to survive. If the storm didn't clear by mid-afternoon he'd drag a wagon load of hay out to scatter. That way he'd be sure the cattle had some nutritious feed to keep them going.

Fortunately, there were no other cows down. The rest seemed to be finding some grass under the thinner patches of snow and would be all right for a day or two, unless the

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weather got much worse. They headed back to the house after about a two-hour tour of the ranch.

On the route back, Nick held on tight because Caleb drove faster, swooping up and down over some higher hills and deeper hollows with almost boyish exuberance. That was fun, taking Nick back to some of the more enjoyable parts of his youth. He'd thought the rancher staid and stuffy, practically grim, but this made him approachably human.

When they were back inside, he grinned at Caleb as they both struggled to get out of the stiff coveralls. "I'm sorry about the calf, but the rest was fun. I haven't been snowmobiling in a long time. We used to when I was a teenager. Couple of my friends had machines, and we rode all over every winter while we were in high school. I know a lot of westerners don't believe it, but New York is not all a big city. We have some pretty rugged and remote country. Good deer hunting and plenty of places to camp, fish, canoe or whatever you wanted to do."

Caleb finished shedding his gear first. Although the suit Nick wore clearly fit a huskier man, it made a tight fit over his parka. He twisted and tugged, but made little progress. Caleb looked at him, one eyebrow arched and a twinkle in his eyes. "Need a little help?"

Nick nodded, biting back a curse. Caleb circled him, grasped the edges of the suit and peeled it down off Nick's shoulders. Once free of the bulk of his parka, the suit slumped around his knees in a stiff brown pile. After Nick jerked down the zipper of his parka, Caleb pulled it off, just as he had the

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insulated suit, tossing it to one side over a chair. Then Caleb set a hand on each of Nick's shoulders, just resting them there.

For a half dozen breaths, Nick stood stock still absorbing the warmth and weight of the other man's hands, feeling a sparkling tide of awareness flash through him. There was no restraint in the touch. He could have shrugged free at any instant—but he didn't.

Caleb's grasp loosened. "Turn around," he said, his voice hoarse and low.

Nick did. He felt as if he had divided into two, one that stood back and watched with puzzlement and the other that had never been more aware, more attuned to another person in his life. He looked up to meet Caleb's fierce, dark gaze, boring into his with searching force. They were so close he could count every thick black lash framing those eyes, see the fine creases and weathering that revealed the rancher's exposure to the harsh outdoors. The chiseled lips were mere inches from his. He suddenly wondered how they would taste, how they would feel.

At that moment his cell phone, which he'd left on the dining table when they went out, jangled imperatively. The sound broke the spell that had held them both in a relentless clasp.

"Shit," Caleb said.

"Son of a bitch," Nick said. "I guess I'd better answer that. I left a message on Jack's voice mail this morning. He's probably concerned, maybe pissed." As he crossed the room to pick up the phone, he noticed a wan ray of sunshine peeking in

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through the frosted window above the sink. Was the storm breaking? Coming at this particular moment, that possibility gave him no joy at all.

* * *

Caleb listened to Nick's half of the conversation, fighting the frustration and disappointment rushing through him. They'd been so close. *Damn that lousy phone.*

Observing, he now glimpsed a side of the other man he had not yet seen. In an instant Nick morphed into the consummate professional he clearly was—calm, collected and in charge. He might be speaking to a multi-millionaire whose mere word could raise or ruin a man, but he wasn't cowed.

"I'm not sure when I can get my rental vehicle out of the ditch and running, Jack. If it can be done this afternoon, I'll be on my way, but I may not get back on the road until tomorrow. Apparently the blizzard hit harder out here on the prairie."

Then, after a moment of listening, "No, I'm fine. A rancher took me in for the night. He's been a great host, believe me. Yes, I'll give you a call once I know either way. It just quit snowing out here a few minutes ago. The sun is starting to break through the clouds now."

It seemed to be forever before Nick terminated the call. He turned back slowly to face Caleb. "I suppose I'd better call and see if someone can get the SUV back on the road. Do you think Triple A would come out now, or is there someone local with a tow truck I can contact? I'd just as soon give my business to someone in the area."

"I can probably drag it out with my truck," Caleb said. He

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hoped the reluctance he felt didn't come through too clearly in his tone. "It's a ton-rated Dodge with a 360 V-8 geared for maximum power instead of speed. I moved a semi with it once. Want to go try?"

Nick hesitated. After a moment he nodded. "It looks like it's clearing. I guess the storm has passed. If you have time, I'd appreciate it."

Without much more talk they went out, got into the truck and headed down the road to where they'd left the SUV. It didn't seem to take a tenth as long to get there as the trip to the ranch had taken last night in the blizzard. Since the right front wheel was down the farthest, Caleb suggested they try to drag it out backwards. Nick didn't disagree. He was clearly out of his element in this.

Caleb crawled down in the mud and melting snow to hook a chain on the bumper. They scraped away snow and ice to get the driver's door opened and Nick scrambled in. After a couple of coughs, the Expedition's engine turned over and began to fire. They gave it a few minutes to warm up. Then Caleb got back in the Dodge, shifted into reverse and backed slowly until the chain went tight.

Nick had to have felt the slight jerk. He waved one hand out the window. Then Caleb gave the Dodge a little more gas, slowly building up power so as not to spin the wheels. The tire chains dug into the roadbed, the engine growled and the Expedition began to inch backwards, too. Once it began to move, the effort eased. In just a couple of minutes they had it back up on the road, sitting level again.

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After he undid the tow chain and tossed it into the bed, Caleb walked over to the driver's side of the Expedition. "See that cross roads right down there? You should be able to turn around there without getting off the solid part of the road. I'll wait here. You can follow me back to the ranch and get your gear. Then I'll follow you back down to the highway."

Nick gave him a steady look, then a slight smile. "Sounds like a plan."

In less than an hour they were back at the ranch. Both dogs met them at the door as they came in. Cedric carefully copied every move Cheyenne made. They sniffed both men's pant legs, circled around them and then returned to the back side of the stove.

Nick shook his head, laughing. "I think Cedric has a crush on your old partner there."

"Looks that way," Caleb agreed. He was still surprised how well the two very different dogs were getting along. Cheyenne was going to miss the little dust mop when he left. Maybe she needed an indoor buddy.

As Caleb watched, Nick gathered his things quickly, then hesitated, two steps from the back door. Obviously, the final thing he needed to do was put Cedric in the carrier. Although the little guy watched with sharply attentive eyes, he hadn't stirred from Cheyenne's side behind the stove.

"Come on, Cedric. We have to go."

The little dog all but shook his head.

Nick looked at Cedric, glanced at Caleb and then looked back at his dog. He gave a single nod as if he'd reached a

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decision.

Still his words came as a surprise. "I'm going to ask another big favor, Caleb. I know you've gone way above and beyond already, but it's going to be hard on Cedric if he goes with me. I won't have much time for him, running around Vail with Jack. Could I leave him here and pick him up on my way home, say in about three days?"

Nick looking squarely at Caleb as he spoke. Something too powerful and intense for words passed between them.

If the dog stays here, Nick'll have to come back, maybe even stay a little while. Maybe we'll have a chance to explore the possibilities, see just what there is between us. Caleb felt sure Nick was thinking along parallel lines. It was written on his face, burning from his eyes.

Caleb shrugged one shoulder, as if it didn't matter a bit. "Sure, why not? The little guy isn't much trouble. But don't you think he'll be upset, getting left behind? You know I'm going to feed him the same thing Cheyenne gets, too, none of that wimpy vegetarian stuff or whatever it is you brought along."

Nick grinned. "He'll miss me like a toothache. Hell, he's in love. Feed him whatever you want to. Maybe he needs to toughen up a bit." He walked over, stooped and scratched the small dog's ears. Then he reached to scratch Cheyenne's, too. She gave him a steady look with those spooky eyes of hers, then heaved a gusty sigh and lowered her head back between her front paws.

Finally Nick rose. He picked up his bag and started for the

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door. Caleb was in the way. When he held out a hand, Nick took it. For a long moment their hands clasped tightly, palm pressed to palm, in a touch that said far more than a simple handshake.

“I’ve got your phone number in my cell phone. I’ll call tonight and check on Cedric. And I’ll be back no later than Thursday. If anything comes up, I’ll be in touch. I’d offer to pay you for your time and effort, but I know you’d just be offended.”

Caleb grinned. “Damn right I’d be offended. Hell, if our dogs are in love that makes us some kind of kinfolk, doesn’t it?”

Nick shrugged. “Damned if I know, but kissing cousins doesn’t sound too far off.” He reached up and pulled Caleb’s head down. Their lips met in a kiss that began as tentative, but soon became heated, searching and intense.

Nick drew away first. “I will be back,” he said. “You can count on that. Call it a promise, a threat or a dare.”

CHAPTER 5

The next three days felt like the longest of Caleb's life. When the three days stretched into four and finally five, the only thing that kept him halfway sane was trying to keep up with the antics of Nick's crazy dog. That pup was a pistol. From what Nick had said, the dog was five or six years old, but Caleb's youngest herd dog pups weren't half as wild and goofy.

Huh, they say Aussies and Heelers are high energy. Maybe this little guy needs to work, too. What can a four footed dust mop do? Guess I could send him under the bed to round up the dust bunnies.

By now Cedric had convinced Caleb he would not stray

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very far from Cheyenne, who normally stuck close to Caleb's heels, so he let the little dog tag along when he went out to do chores. The snow was gone today and the mud was drying up fast as warm, spring Chinook winds swept down the prairie. Still Cedric managed to get mud-caked from stem to stern, to which he added a good roll in a fresh cow pie. With a proud doggie grin, he scampered up to Caleb to show off his new look.

Caleb gave his head a rueful shake. "Looks like I'm going to have to give you a bath, mutt. Your human would have a conniption fit if he saw you looking like this." More greenish-brown than white, the little dog danced around Caleb's feet, barking with shrill exuberance.

Cheyenne gave him a nudge, heading him toward the house. She knew the word "bath" and it was not one of her favorites. Usually her baths came with a hose and maybe a bottle of dishwashing soap when she picked up a little too much *eau de barnyard* to be allowed in the house, or once in a while *parfum de road kill*. She knew the boss was tolerant of dogginess, but even he had to draw a line somewhere.

Springtime in Colorado was not exactly tropical. Caleb decided Cedric would get too chilled if he was bathed outside. Wrinkling his nose, he scooped up the small dog and carried him into the house, directly to the laundry tub on the enclosed part of the back porch. He'd just got the water adjusted to a comfortably warm temperature when the phone rang.

Now he had a dilemma. Should he let it ring, even though it might be Nick, saying he was finally on his way? Or should

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he pray Cedric couldn't jump out of the tub while he ran into the kitchen to take the call? Now he cursed the fact he'd never bothered to get an answering machine. He hated to talk to them, but, at times, they could serve a real purpose. Like now.

He opted to leave the dog, keeping his fingers crossed. By the time he picked up the phone it had stopped ringing. He swore, turning back to the porch door just in time to see Cedric come flying through it, splattering muddy water and bits of cow shit every which way in his wake.

"Son of a mother loving bastard!"

Hearing him yell, Cheyenne peeked around the corner, looking anxious and troubled.

"Chey, fetch that miserable little turd!"

For a moment the old Heeler looked confused. Then she seemed to get the message. She scooted down the hall after Cedric. Caleb heard a scuffling sound and then she returned, the wiggling, wet, little dog clasped gently in her mouth. She wore a distressed expression, but she was too well trained to disobey a direct order.

She gave Cedric a small shake and deposited him at Caleb's feet. Shaking her own head, she spat out a glob of wet, muddy fur before she headed for her water dish.

"Yeah, reckon you could use some Scope about now, or Listerine. Sorry, old girl."

Caleb picked up Cedric again and returned to the porch, dunking him in the now half-full tub with a less-than-gentle hand.

He took an old scrub brush, rubbed it across a bar of

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strong-scented, old-fashioned soap and scoured the little dog from ears to tail. A final rinse and Cedric was white again, albeit a very wet white. Caleb found an old towel, which he wrapped around the now shivering little bundle. Carrying Cedric into the kitchen, he deposited the Maltese behind the stove, still well wrapped in the towel.

Chey looked up at him as if to say, “Was all of that necessary?” Then, with a sigh, she lay down on the unoccupied part of her bed. She nudged and tugged until the towel was loosened and then proceeded to lick Cedric all over, smoothing his rumpled fur and slurping off the worst of the excess water.

Caleb looked around the disaster area that was his kitchen. With a sigh as deep as Chey’s, he went to get a mop and a bucket. “Maltese Terror,” he muttered. “Terrorist is more like it.”

He hadn’t quite finished the clean-up when a sound drew his attention to the back door. Nick stood there, now dressed in stiff new Levis and a plaid western-cut shirt instead of his city-style chinos and golf shirt. Scanning the scene, he raised his eyebrows.

“What the hell is going on? I got worried when you didn’t answer the phone, but then I figured you were out doing chores and decided I could find my way back here without help.”

Caleb gave the floor a final swipe and jabbed the mop in the bucket. “We had a small problem.” He proceeded to relate the whole fiasco. Before he was done, he was whooping with

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laughter, as was Nick. They ended up hanging onto each other for balance as they staggered in circles, pounding each other on the back, and laughing until they were almost sick.

“Oh, my God, wish I’d been here,” Nick gasped out between guffaws. “I can just picture the whole thing. I know the groomer always shudders when I bring Cedric in. Now I think I understand why.”

The sudden realization they were wrapped in each other’s arms finally put an end to their mirth. Caleb looked down at Nick, eagerly absorbing the contours of the younger man’s face, familiarizing himself with every line and curve, every subtle difference in color and texture of the suddenly cherished visage.

“You’re back. I was beginning to think you’d changed your plans.”

Nick shook his head. “No. I was getting impatient, too. I think Jack finally noticed my attention span had gotten shorter and shorter. He called off our final golf date, telling me to go home and get to work on his plans. Then he changed his mind and suggested maybe I should consider setting up shop in Denver for a while so I’d be closer to the site as we start laying out the design. I jumped at that idea. It took an extra day to get everything set up, but it’ll be worth it. Meanwhile, I’m finally here.”

Caleb loosened his hold and stepped back. He glanced down at the sopping, splattered mess of his own clothes and saw more than a little had rubbed off on Nick. “I need a shower,” he said. “Looks like we messed up your nice new

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outfit, too. Wanna join me?"

Nick grinned. "You know, that sounds like an outstanding idea. Let me get a bag out of the car and I'll be right there."

* * *

Nick took his time, walking out to the SUV and dragging his ditty bag out from under the disordered jumble of his gear. He'd packed quickly and carelessly when he left Denver earlier in the day. He'd told himself he was eager to see Cedric, but he knew that was a rank prevarication. His urgency had a lot more to do with a big, dark rancher than one small, white dog, although he had missed his pet.

What in the hell am I doing? I haven't showered with another male since college PE classes. I'm not sure, but I think there's going to be more going on than just getting clean, too. Do I want to do this? His mind might have doubts, but his body had already decided and his heart was running hard after it.

Yes, whatever happened would be all right, had been pre-ordained from the minute he'd seen the tall, bulky shape loom out of the blizzard—his personal good Samaritan, a very sexy good Samaritan.

Still, he paused in the kitchen to check on Cedric. His furry friend huddled in front of Cheyenne, hunkering down as she licked him dry. His drying white fur stuck up in spiky points all over his compact body. Nick stooped to scratch Cedric's ears.

"Caleb thinks you're a terrorist, buddy. You weren't a real good dog for him, were you? Well, it's not totally your fault.

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You've never had much chance to be a real dog. Maybe now you can." Nick's knees cracked when he stood up, an unwelcome reminder the years were continuing to slip past, faster than he would have chosen for them to. Maybe it was time he settled into a permanent relationship, even if it was not the one he had dimly visualized in the past.

When Nick reached the bathroom, Caleb was already in the shower, steam from the water fogging the glass so he was just a vague, flesh-colored shape. The rest of the house might be far behind the current trends, but this bathroom was modern and clearly set up for comfort. Caleb seemed to know what mattered. Those things he took care of, promptly and effectively. Nick nodded. He liked that.

Nick quickly shed his begrimed clothes and reached for the shower stall door. He probably didn't really need a second shower today just because there were some muddy smudges on his new jeans and shirt, but the hot water and the hard body standing in that steamy stream tempted him beyond resistance. He pulled the door ajar and stepped in.

As Nick entered, Caleb turned to step aside, allowing Nick to get under the spray. Standing at the far end of the big glass stall, Caleb raised both hands to sweep his dripping hair back from his face. Nick had never cared for long hair on men, but on Caleb, it looked utterly right. At this moment, he looked every inch primitive, an archetypical native warrior, his lean body sleek with moisture, nude as nature meant him to be. His cock hung heavy between muscled thighs. As if Caleb's dick felt Nick's gaze, it twitched, lifting subtly.

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Under the intensity of Caleb's dark stare, Nick felt his own cock stir. His might not rival the length and girth of Caleb's shaft, but he'd never felt himself inferior in terms of male equipment. He worked to stay fit and knew he had a nice physique as well as an even tan, with only a pale band around his lower body where his brief swim trunks fit. If Caleb enjoyed the view, so much the better. Nick was certainly enjoying his view.

Right now, Nick thought Caleb looked like the most magnificent example of humanity he'd ever seen. His knowledge that the rancher was far more than a ruggedly handsome face and a work-toned body made him even more alluring. Here was a real man, a real old-west hero of a man, someone who could command loyalty and love simply because of who and what he was. Here was the man Nick had sought for years without ever realizing he searched.

An overwhelming wave of desire surged through him, but hard on its heels came a welter of other sensations and emotions. Together they spelled certainty, a profound conviction that this man was the one person he'd waited half a lifetime for, the only soul in the whole universe who could fill the empty, needy part of himself he'd carefully concealed all his adult life. At that moment, he had only one thought—to give expression to the sudden, powerful attraction and admiration he felt in the only way he could immediately accomplish.

Moved by the intensity of his discovery Nick sank to his knees in front of Caleb. He reached to take the other man's

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heavy cock into his hand, his touch gentle, almost reverent. He held the solid, hot weight of it, taking in the textures of the skin, the latent power and the deep pulsing of Caleb's lifeblood surging through the veins with each heartbeat. Slowly he drew his clasped hand the full length, from balls to just behind the head and then back.

He heard Caleb suck in a sharp breath before he shifted to spread his feet farther apart, as if bracing himself to withstand powerful forces. Nick stroked again, minutely harder this time.

Caleb gave a muffled groan. "God, Nick, do you know what you're doing to me?"

"No, not really. I've never done this before. Oh, a little horseplay years ago when I camped out with friends, but it wasn't like this. I'm playing by ear, by instinct here."

Nick looked up, trying to see if there was censure or disgust in Caleb's face. He could discern neither.

"Don't stop. Whether you know where we're going or not, I guarantee it's going to be worth the trip."

At that encouragement, Nick bent forward and took the head of Caleb's cock into his mouth. He tasted salt, with a hint of alkaline, but flavored by the raw energy and vitality of the man. He swirled his tongue around, tracing the groove behind the head and feeling the nerve endings there snap to attention at his touch. Nick placed one hand on Caleb's solid thigh. In the muscle he felt the fine tremors that ran through Caleb's body. Nick balanced the rancher's cock with the other hand, while he widened his jaws to take as much of the length as he could. As if from a distance, he felt the hot water continue to

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beat down on his back and cascade over his head.

After a moment, he drew back, letting Caleb slip free from his lips. "When I was a kid, 'cocksucker' was always the worst insult we could hurl at one another. Right now, I can't imagine why. It feels like an honor, a privilege."

Caleb's deep voice held rough edges of emotion. "It's a very intimate gift, one I'd like to give to you, too." He reached past Nick's shoulder to turn off the water. "That'll be getting cold in a few more minutes. Let's towel off and go into the bedroom."

The bath towels Caleb grabbed were huge, thick and heavy, just rough enough to feel invigorating when stroked over the skin. They dried each other, taking that time to explore angles and textures, hollows and hardness. They were alike in masculinity and yet very different in many ways.

Caleb's body was nearly hairless, a legacy of his Native American heritage, while Nick had a great deal of sandy russet hair all over arms, legs, chest, with a thick mat at the groin. Nick was neatly compact, where Caleb was lean and lanky, long muscles taut over strong bones. Caleb had a horseman's hard, tight ass, while Nick's butt held a trifle more roundness, muscles defined, but not as compressed. Alike yet unlike, theirs was a fascinating dichotomy, and each explored the other with relish.

Tossing his towel over the edge of the shower stall, Caleb again settled his hands on Nick's shoulders. For several heartbeats they gazed at each other without speaking.

When he spoke, Caleb's voice sounded rusty and hoarse.

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“We can still stop and forget this if you have any doubts, Nick. I want you in the worst way, but not at the expense of pushing you into anything you don’t feel good about.”

Nick shook his head. “I never expected anything like this to happen, but I’m past the regret and doubt stage. I want the same things I think you do, to come together, to give and take and share in every possible way. It seems to me like fate led me here for that very reason.”

He took the half step that brought him flush against the taller man’s body. Skin sensitized by the brisk texture of the towel, yet still slightly damp, met that of another, also damp and sensitized. Reaching up, Nick tangled his fingers in the dark silk of Caleb’s loosened hair. He tugged to bring the other man’s face down to his, and before fitting his mouth against Caleb’s, he licked off a few remaining drops of water, then slid his tongue between Caleb’s lips.

At that moment, Nick sensed the bigger man’s restraint. He appreciated the fact Caleb held back to let Nick move at his own pace, allowed him to explore and discover, while desire built and passions heated. For Nick, this was a journey to a new frontier, one in which he discovered himself while he explored his soon-to-be lover. Erotic magic emerged with every move, lurked in wait within each tentative caress, sparkled forth from touch, taste and twitch.

Abruptly, Nick tired of this game. He reached to take Caleb’s cock in his hand again. “Why don’t we get comfortable on that big bed?”

Caleb smiled. “I thought you’d never ask, but I wasn’t

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going to rush you.”

“Thank you for that. I admit I’m going places I’ve never been before, but it all feels too right to be anything other than what I’ve always wanted without realizing it.”

A nod indicated Caleb understood. “I know. My real first time was long ago, with an older guy I met in the army. I was scared shitless, but I could no more back off than fly. He knew, without me saying it, that I wasn’t sure where I was going, and he made it easy for me. I’ll try to do the same for you. If anything hurts, doesn’t feel right, or bothers you, just say so. I want this to be about giving, about pleasure, about sharing. I hope it’ll be so good you’ll be coming back for more.”

They led each other to the bed. Caleb pushed Nick down, gently but firmly, with his head at the heavily carved headboard. Then he lay down the opposite way at Nick’s side. Bare of his usual boots his feet looked long and narrow, yet oddly neat, the nails clipped close and the bones defined under tawny skin. Nick studied them a moment, then let his gaze drift up Caleb’s legs to his prick, twitching with eagerness. He wanted to taste it again, to feel that throb in his mouth as he sucked in an accelerating cadence. Sliding down until his face was even with Caleb’s crotch, he rolled up onto his knees.

This time he took the head and half the shaft into his mouth without hesitation. The warm velvet skin slipped and shifted over the hot iron core as he bobbed his head, moving up and down in an age-old rhythm.

He heard Caleb’s breathing quicken and then a soft moan.

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“God, that feels good. Harder, Nick. Faster. Watch the teeth, but otherwise you’re doing everything just right. Oh, yeah!”

Nick almost lost it in a start when Caleb reached up to clasp one cheek and slid all four fingers into the crease of Nick’s ass. Then he realized it felt good—strange, but good. He shifted his knees farther apart, inviting even more intimate caresses. Caleb stroked down between Nick’s legs to the back of his balls, lingering on the sensitive patch there.

Blood pounded through Nick’s dick, swelling and stiffening it. His balls tightened and tingled, drawing up tight against his body.

“Move around here,” Caleb suggested. “Get a knee on either side of my head and let me have a taste of you.”

Nick obeyed. He felt Caleb’s hand on his cock first, giving him a stroke and then another. All at once a warm, moist mouth engulfed him. Liquid fire shot along Nick’s veins. He wanted to scream but he couldn’t with Caleb’s shaft deep in his mouth.

Omigod, omigod, omigod. Oh. My. God.

They both came, so close to simultaneously, that Nick wasn’t sure which one shot off first. He tasted the thick, salty stream of Caleb’s ejaculation at the very instant he felt himself let go. At that moment, he would have sworn he was suspended in anti-gravity, a hundred miles up in space. Soaring, flying, falling, shattering. He managed to roll to one side before his trembling legs gave out completely.

CHAPTER 6

After a few moments, Caleb turned around to lay the right way on the bed. Nick moved back closer to the head also. For a while they spooned together, resting in a close embrace. A calm contentment stole over Caleb as he listened to Nick's breathing deepen and slow. He sensed the exact moment when the other man fell asleep. The surge of protectiveness he felt caught him by surprise.

For years now, he'd poured all that out on his livestock. It felt good to be able to spend a little of it on another human being. A mutual respect was growing, along with a friendship he suspected would only deepen and develop with time and sharing. *I'd say we're going to be a lot more than just fuck*

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buddies. It'll be fun to have a brother and a friend, a real partner. I think we've both been alone long enough to appreciate what a precious gift we've found. Holding to that thought, he, too, drifted off to sleep.

He didn't sleep long. When he awoke, his stiffening cock was nestled between Nick's cheeks, very well aware of the comfort that snug space afforded. He moved a little, sliding back and forth, feeling the heat build. Nick had a nice ass, firm and just rounded enough for comfort. He didn't want to force the issue since Nick was technically a virgin, but fucking that nice ass was certainly a tempting notion.

Well, there'd be time for that. He no longer doubted they'd be a couple for a good long time. That meant he could lead Nick into that ultimate intimacy gently, by degrees, just as Owen had initiated him almost eighteen years ago now. It was definitely something to look forward to.

I was lucky to have a first lover who believed in taking time instead of using force. I've heard of guys who were all but raped the first time. That could be brutal. I can sympathize with women who get abused that way. It would be hell, leave you so scarred you'd always be afraid... There's no way I'd put Nick through that.

He drew back and forced himself to calm down. In spite of his unquenched arousal, contentment still enfolded him.

A plaintive whimper penetrated Caleb's awareness. He rolled to look over the edge of the bed into a pair of beady black eyes, almost lost in a tangle of rumpled white fur. Cedric sat on his haunches, looking up with an anxious expression.

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Caleb could almost hear him. “Are you still really mad at me?”

Behind him, Cheyenne stood, her head cocked to one side and a hesitant doggie grin on her face. Her stubby tail gave several tiny, betraying twitches. Caleb could read her like a book. “Don’t be too hard on the kid, boss. I got him all clean and dry for you. I know he’s a pill, but I kinda like the little shit.”

Nick awoke then and rolled over, leaning up to look over Caleb’s shoulder. “What’s going on? Are they trying to tell us it’s dinner time?”

Caleb laughed. “Cheyenne knows it’s dinner time and past. I rarely lie down before bedtime, about eleven, so she’s wondering what’s going on. Can’t say what your dog wants, but I suspect she put him up to waking us. And betcha he’d do anything she wants him to.”

“Well, I’m glad our dogs get along. I expect Cedric and I’ll be spending quite a bit of time here, so that makes it even better. Don’t know much about ranching, but I think I’d like to learn, especially with a teacher who knows it inside out...and a few other things besides.”

Caleb turned to press a kiss to Nick’s warm, smiling mouth. “Are you flirting with me, bud?”

Nick laughed. “I hadn’t thought of it quite that way, but I suppose I am.”

Swinging his legs off the bed and reaching for a pair of jeans, Caleb looked back over his shoulder. “You did say you’ve set up a temporary office in Denver, didn’t you?”

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Nick nodded. “I sure did, for a start. Really there’s no reason why it can’t become a permanent thing. CWN has been thinking about setting up a western branch office because a lot of our projects are from the Rockies on west. And if they don’t, I could always pull out and hang up my own shingle. Another customer or two like Jack Connant and I’d be set for years. There’s no lack of business these days.”

“What I know about landscape architecture, much less resort layout, would make a damn short book, but it sounds interesting. I’m not sure how we can work ranching and your business together, but maybe we don’t need to in order to be some kind of partners.”

Nick followed Caleb out of bed, grabbing a ragged terry robe from the closet door. “I’d like that—we’ll come up with some system that’ll work. Meanwhile, I need to run out to the SUV and get some more clothes. If it’s okay, I’ll stay until tomorrow morning. I’ve got to go back to Philly, close my apartment, and clean up some odds and ends before I can settle in Denver, but I don’t figure to be more than a week or two at that.”

Caleb stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t want to horn in on your life, Nick. You have plans and responsibilities and so on—things that are part of who you are, just like this ranch is part of me. I’m not asking you to shift gears and head off in a new direction just because we’ve met, found a connection here. You do what you need to, no explanations required. I’ll be right here whenever you’re ready to spend more time together.”

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Nick gazed back at him, a smile that seemed almost wistful on his face. Sometimes he looked very young, so Caleb could see the boy he'd been, not so long ago.

"I think we've found something special. Maybe I'm greedy, but I want to get as much of it as I can, like I missed for half my life so far. I'm willing to make some adjustments to bring our lives together, at least as much as we can. I think I've got more flexibility than you do right now, and I'm okay with this."

Impulsively, Caleb drew Nick close and kissed him again, with more tenderness and affection than lust. "Damn, buddy, you have a good head on those shoulders. How did I get so lucky?"

"Blame it on the dogs. I think they conspired to get us hooked up so they could be together."

Caleb looked down at the two canines, Cheyenne sitting on her haunches with a pleased doggie grin and Cedric at her side, leaning against her shoulder as if about to confide some secret to her. "You just might be right. I wouldn't put anything past that Maltese Terror of yours, but my old Heeler there is pretty sly at times, too."

Laughing together, they walked out to the kitchen, Caleb's arm slung across Nick's shoulders. The two dogs followed close behind, Cedric taking three steps for every one of Cheyenne's. The dogs settled behind the stove, but kept keen eyes on the proceedings as Caleb set about fixing dinner, while Nick got his clothes and dressed.

Once in a while a meal might be late, but for the most part,

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everything was right in their world and promised to stay that way. Life was looking pretty doggone good.

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.

* * *

***Don't miss Doggone Love, by Deirdre O'Dare,
available at AmberHeat.com!***

Solitary rancher Damon Carhart expects to spend the rest of his life alone. Then an injury to a beloved stock dog sends him to the nearest veterinary clinic for help. His crusty old veterinarian friend is away and, in his place, is a young doctor in whom Damon initially has no faith. Once he entrusts his canine friend to Eric Vann's care, however, everything begins to change...

And once desire gets a bite on him, what can he do but go along for the wild ride?

Eric Vann has loved animals all his life, following in an uncle's footsteps to become a veterinarian. He knows if he ever finds a soul-mate it will be another male. When Damon comes in, fierce in defense of his favorite dog, Eric is immediately captivated.

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