

Deirdre O'Dare



*Saved By
Tam*

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...With a jerk of his head and a gesture, Craig sent Roy to the foot of the bed. "On your knees."

Roy hastened to obey, almost losing his balance in his haste to get down. Keenly aware of the vulnerability of his position, Roy rested his forehead on the smooth, cool fabric of the bedspread. Every nerve was drawn taut with expectation. He was ready and eager to be used however Craig chose to. *I just hope he doesn't back off at the last minute.*

Roy should have been ready, but the sting and crack of a hard hand striking his buttocks caught him by surprise. He gave an involuntary gasp, almost a whimper. His cock jumped in response to the burn. *Yes, oh, God, yes. Hurts so good...*

"How are you at sucking cock? Do you give a good BJ?"

Roy nodded. "I...I think so. I try to.."

"Well, we'll see. If you give a really good blow job, maybe you'll earn a reward."

Craig pushed him back enough to slide between him and the bed, and settled on the edge, legs extended on either side of Roy. That put his powerful dick right in Roy's face, right where he wanted it, where they both wanted it.

"What's your word?"

The sharp question took Roy by surprise. His head jerked up as he looked up at Craig's stony face. "Word?"

"Your safe word...the one to say if something gets to be too much."

“Oh, yeah. Daniel, I guess. That was my stepfather’s name. I hated his guts. It’s not anything I’d say normally.”

Craig nodded. “All right. Get busy sucking...”

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Treading Dangerous Ground

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BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

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SAVED BY SAM
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In memory of the many courageous and faithful K-9 officers both human and dog who have fallen in the line of duty. I intend only honor on your sacrifice with my portrayals of Sam and Craig. Especially to Bandit and Rico, two four-footed heroes. May you find peace and contentment on the other side of The Rainbow Bridge.

Sincere thanks to the K-9 team of Officer Mike Mitchell and Goliath of the Sierra Vista Police Department. They were an inspiration for this story. Goliath was my first experience with the Belgian Malinois breed and a most impressive example!

And as always, heartfelt thanks to my wonderful editor E.J. Gilmer for her patience and eagle-eyed reading of my work to make it all it can be, and to Trace Edward Zaber for support, friendship and fantastic covers! The Amber Quill family rocks!

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CHAPTER 1

Roy Dunham gave a lackadaisical swipe to the shiny surface of the bar. He glanced up at the clock, then issued the time-honored warning. “Last call for alcohol.” It was a few minutes short of one o’clock in the morning. Most of the regular crowd had already tipped their last glass or bottle and left. A couple of die-hards were going to wait until the last minute. It had been a slow midweek night. His tips barely made the shift worthwhile.

Oh, well, there’ll be other nights.

He stepped out from behind the bar, starting across to turn off the flashing neon advertising sign and flip the one on the door to read “Closed.” At that moment, the door swung

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inward. A tall, impressively well-built man in the dark blue uniform of the San Pablo police department entered the bar, a sleek, tawny dog at his left, pointed muzzle even with his knee. Roy stopped in his tracks.

Gawdamighty, that's the most gorgeous hunk of manhood I've ever seen.

The officer could have posed for a recruiting poster for some Viking's crew, an epitome of Norse masculinity. He wore his sandy blond hair buzz-cut close to a well-shaped skull. Chiseled features with high cheekbones and an angular jaw set off a pair of brilliant blue eyes. Below that, broad shoulders barely fit through the bar's front door. His body was a perfect wedge, tapering from those impressive shoulders down to lean flanks and long legs. The man's military posture set off his uniform, well-fitted navy blue shirt and trousers, glossy black leather belt, holster and other gear, and the shiny bronze badge on his chest.

"Everybody, stay right where you are. My dog located drugs in a car out in the lot. The man who was heading toward it fled when he saw us. I think he came back inside."

Roy stood his ground. "Nobody's come in for the past half-hour, officer." The man might look like a Teutonic god, but his arrogant tone grated. "This is a quiet, orderly place. We don't tolerate drug dealing, violence or anything but law-abiding behavior."

The gas-flame blue eyes flickered to him and as quickly away, in clear dismissal. When the policeman barked a harsh, guttural word, the dog left his side. It began to move around

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the room in a zigzag pattern, dark nose twitching.

Roy stepped back a couple of paces to edge behind the bar. The dog and the cop both ignored him. After the dog sniffed and then passed the three remaining patrons, the cop gave them a nod. "Get out. It's closing time, whether you're done or not."

For a moment, Roy considered raising a protest, but then he decided it wouldn't do any good. Besides, the Tavasci Brothers, who owned The Sundown Club and several other bars around San Pablo, didn't like trouble. They wanted business to be quiet, orderly and completely within the confines of the law. Crossing a cop was not in their standard operating procedures.

Like many families on the fringes of organized crime, Phil and Emil Tavasci operated a number of legitimate businesses, which they kept squeaky clean. They were good employers if you were loyal, reliable and played by their rules. Roy had known worse over the years, for sure. Knowing that, he tried to do the best job he could. He needed the work, a steady job, while he got back on his feet after leaving the Navy hospital. He relied on his pay to keep a roof over his head and food on the table. It was a point of pride to support himself.

He went back to his evening clean-up routine, keeping an eye on the officer and the dog, but with no particular concern. He felt sure no one had come in recently. The muffled sound from the direction of the storeroom at the rear of the bar caught him by surprise. When he wheeled to face the doorway, he found himself looking into the muzzle of a large

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caliber pistol, probably a .44 magnum.

Obedient to the stranger's silent hand signals, Roy edged back until he found himself between the stranger and the cop. *Maybe he'll get distracted in a minute and I can disarm him. Yeah, right. Me and how many Marines?* That wasn't much of a hope, but he could hardly argue with a man holding such a business-like weapon on him.

From their reactions, the officer and his patrol dog both saw the swarthy man at the same instant. The policeman barked another command. The dog froze, staring intently at the intruder, almost quivering with tension as it awaited the command to attack. Stopping mid-reach in going for his own sidearm, the cop's gaze riveted to the pistol in the man's hand. In a heartbeat, the intruder closed on Roy, snaking an arm out to get him in a choke-hold.

When Roy bent back slightly to take the pressure off his throat, he felt the cold metal of the pistol barrel resting against his neck. The man steadied his weapon on Roy's shoulder.

Oh fuck! What do I do now? Roy had served two enlistments in the U.S. Navy, but he'd been a medic, not a fighting man. The intruder was several inches taller, and as he pressed close behind, Roy could feel the man had a wiry toughness that hinted at considerable strength. *Somebody's going to get hurt here, and it's a good chance it may be me.*

The dog crouched, tail tip twitching with suppressed energy, his fight drive building to an explosive level. The cop hissed another quick command. The dog leaped. Roy felt the jolt an instant before the fiery heat as gunpowder exploded

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short inches from his ear. The sound deafened him for a moment. He saw tan fur scatter and scarlet drops spray, but the dog kept coming.

Another shot. This time the policeman stumbled, halted. Within instants, a dark patch bloomed on the left leg of his navy blue trousers. He steadied himself and drew his gun. At that moment, the dog hit the apex of a running leap. The animal grabbed the man's gun arm, teeth crunching in a steel-trap snap on the bare, brown forearm. The impact spun both the gunman and Roy around. The pistol went flying as the man screamed. He released Roy an instant later.

Roy staggered a couple of steps, sinking onto the nearest bar stool. *Sweet Jesus. It's a wonder I didn't piss my pants.*

Limping, the cop advanced. At another command, the dog released the strange man's arm, now bleeding profusely. He was clutching at the torn flesh, cursing and whimpering. The policeman fumbled for his handcuffs. He snapped them on the man's unbitten arm first. Then he hesitated, as if not quite sure what to do next. With a muffled whine, the dog sank to the floor, all fight gone.

When he looked down in surprise at the sound, Roy saw gouts of blood, not just from the bitten man but more, draining from the long furrow along the dog's left side. *Whoa, this pooch just saved my ass and prob'ly the cop's, too. I need to help him.*

If there was one thing Roy knew, it was treating gunshot wounds. *Been there and done that.* He reached behind the bar and came back with a handful of clean towels. Kneeling on the

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floor, he pressed two of them in a wad into the dog's wound to staunch the blood. He wasn't sure how deep or serious it was, but it was spurting blood. Slowing that flow was the most urgent need. After a moment, he tied three more towels together and bound them around the dog's body to hold the makeshift compress in place, easing the improvised tie under the animal's heaving ribs as gently as he could. To his surprise, the dog tolerated his attention, stayed quiet. Roy could almost believe the beast somehow understood it had saved the day and was now going to be saved in turn.

By then, the policeman had handcuffed the suspect to the rail along the edge of the bar, leaving his bleeding arm free. After that, the officer sat down on a nearby stool with a thump.. With an expression of disbelief, he stared down at the hole in his dark trousers, at the patch getting bigger and darker still, where blood welled to stain the fabric. Roy could see the shock in the man's face then, a paleness and tension that dimmed his masculine beauty.

"Hey, you're shot, too." Roy grabbed some more towels and made a second hasty compress. The wound was high in the other man's thigh, to the inside. The bullet appeared to have missed the bone, but must have clipped at least one artery because the blood was coming in spurts. Roy jammed the wad of towels against the cop's leg, bearing down hard.

The officer drew a sharp breath that hissed between his clenched teeth.

"I know, it hurts like hell, but I need to slow the blood. Have you got back-up coming?"

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The officer nodded. "I called before we came in. They should be here any minute. How's Samson?"

"Samson?"

"My dog. I saw he was hit. Is it bad?"

Roy shrugged. "I'm not sure. I think it just sliced along his side, but it was bleeding too much to see for sure. That's why I've got him bandaged. That should hold until we can get him to a vet. Does the department have one they use?"

"Yeah, I take him to the St. Francis Animal Clinic. They have a vet on duty twenty-four/seven."

Roy tossed one bundle of bloody towels aside and made a fresh compress. The man was weaving in his seat, starting to weaken from loss of blood. *Tourniquet—I hate to do that, but better than bleeding to death.* He took his web belt off and bound it around the cop's thigh, almost into the crotch. He had to get that blood flow cut off fast.

"You're going to have to go to the ER yourself, you know," he said, careful to keep his tone conversational. "You've lost quite a bit of blood already. I can't tell the extent of the damage yet. Can you hang on a minute while I call 911?"

"No need."

At that moment, Roy registered the dying wail of sirens and, in a breath, three other officers came barging through the door en masse. One was a sergeant. He took in the scene with a quick scan and began to issue orders. One of the other cops helped the wounded officer out through the door and into his cruiser. They took off with red lights and siren. Before the

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sound faded, more lights flashed and a couple of EMTs came in. They took charge of the prisoner, but the second officer went with them. Once they were gone, only Roy and the sergeant remained.

The sergeant turned to Roy. "What happened?"

Roy related the incident as well as he could. "The dog saved us both. I'd be glad to take him to the vet. I can lock up in a minute or two and my car is right outside the back door. If you can help me move him—I think we can get a big serving tray under him and carry him on that."

"I'll take care of Sam," the sergeant replied. "He's a big favorite down at the station. Can't let any more harm come to him than we can help. But I'd appreciate it if you could give me a hand. Are you the one who bandaged him and also Officer Rommel?"

Roy nodded. "I was a medic in the service. I've had a little experience dealing with gunshot wounds. After the first shock, the old training kicked in and overcame my panic. I've been in the middle of a few good battles, but never quite that close to the action. For about five minutes, I was deaf as a post. The guy shot about two inches from my right ear."

The sergeant gave him a wry grin. "Let me shake your hand then. I'm a veteran myself and I know what you medics went through. Saved a lot of guys' asses over there in the sandbox. My name's Sheldon, Len Sheldon."

Roy took the offered hand. "I'm Roy Dunham, Sergeant Sheldon."

After that they worked together to slide a large serving tray

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under the injured dog. Again Roy was amazed by the dog's calm behavior. He might have been in shock and had to be in pain, but Sam hardly made a whimper. He seemed to realize they were trying to help him. He started to get up once, but Roy put a hand on his neck and pressed him back down. The tray was barely big enough to support the main part of the dog's body. His head, legs and tail hung off the edges, but it worked. They eased him into the back seat of the sergeant's cruiser. Roy stood on the sidewalk and watched the car pull away.

He'd agreed to go in to the police station the next day and give a statement. *Maybe then I can also find out how Officer Rommel and Sam are doing.*

He really hoped they'd both recover. Although he'd thought the cop too high-handed at first, he realized now that he'd have been in real danger if the officer and the dog had not come in once the guy had spooked and run. It looked like someone had forgotten to lock the back door after a delivery today and the drug dealer or whatever he was had managed to slip in. There would be hell to pay over that, but the delivery had not been made on Roy's shift, so he'd only reap a small bit of the blame.

It took all the energy and will he could muster to finish cleaning up and then lock the bar for the night. He hadn't been as tired or as strung-out since he'd come home from the war, spent some time in the psycho ward, and then mustered out. Home might not be fancy, but he'd be damned glad to get there tonight. Maybe his friend Frank would be there so he'd

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have someone he could tell the adventure to.

Lately, though, Frank was spending more time with Kerry, an old girlfriend he'd hooked up with again, but that was okay. At least they never made him feel left out. Still, now that Frank was out of the shadow of his criminal step-brother, the one he'd helped the female FBI agent bust, the two of them were getting very close.

Roy hated to be relying on him too much, anyway. At one time they'd helped each other, but Frank, over time, had become the one to provide the strength, and Roy, in desperation, had been unable to resist accepting all Frank offered. There were still too many demons in Roy's closet that wanted to sneak out when he wasn't paying attention, and Frank was always able to chase them back in again.

But he knew Frank deserved to have his own life, since he'd found the girl he'd always secretly loved. Kerry was a pretty special woman. Roy had to admit that. He liked her a lot, even wished he'd had a sister like her. A lot of women scared him, but she didn't. She might be tall, gorgeous and pretty damn tough, but inside she had a good heart.

He thought about Kerry and Frank to keep the heebie-jeebies at bay as he drove home, although Officer Rommel's impressive looks popped into his thoughts now and then, too. He wasn't much of one for religion, but he said a prayer that both the blond officer and his courageous dog would be all right.

* * *

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Three weeks later

Roy was still careful when he came on shift at four each afternoon. He made sure the back door was locked and checked to be sure no one was hiding in the restrooms. Sometimes he felt a little foolish to be so paranoid, but better to be cautious than dead.

Sunday afternoons were pretty slow. Someone had to be there, but he didn't need a cocktail waitress or a second bartender like Friday and Saturday often demanded. Keeping half an eye on the two men at the bar and the couple at one of the small tables, he also watched the baseball game on TV. It wasn't a very exciting game, but it was better than watching a fly drown in a discarded beer glass and a hell of a lot better than remembering the shots and the blood.

The door always squeaked a little when it opened. If there was a crowd, music playing and people talking, you didn't hear it, but when it was quiet, the sound seemed shrill and loud.

Roy turned toward the squeal, everything going on hold for a moment as the tall, broad-shouldered figure filled the doorway. He wasn't wearing a uniform now, but Roy would recognize that body anywhere. Officer Rommel looked just as good in jeans and a sport shirt as he did in uniform, and he only limped a little bit as he crossed to the bar.

"Officer Rommel, it's good to see you up and going."

"Please, call me Craig. I know Rommel's a famous name, but I'm only a very distant relative of the late general. Still

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when anyone says Officer Rommel, I tend to look and see if his ghost is standing around.”

Roy chuckled. “Okay, Craig. Call me Roy. I’d say we’re well past the preliminary getting acquainted stage anyway.”

“I hope so. We shared more in a few minutes the other night than I’ve experienced with guys I’ve known for years. From what the doctors said, your quick action to slow my blood loss could’ve saved my life. And I know you saved Sam’s. He’s going to be a little longer healing up than me, but he’ll make it and should be able to come back on duty in about six weeks. The bullet took a chunk out of three ribs and tore some muscles up big time, but he’s coming along. Again, the blood loss was the most critical element, and you took care of that.”

Roy looked down at the floor, trying not to fidget like a kid who’d just won the spelling bee. “It was just my training that kicked in. I served as a medic in the Navy, assigned to a Marine unit in Iraq. It’s just basic first aid. Start breathing, stop bleeding and treat shock. If the victim is breathing, blood is the next thing to take care of.”

Craig eased onto a stool, taking the weight off his injured leg. “I wanted to thank you for the plant you sent me at the hospital, too. Never expected anything like that. Oh, some of my brother officers—I expect the married ones—went together and sent flowers. I think it was the lieutenant’s wife who did it, but you didn’t have to... It was really nice, though. I took it home with me. It may die because I don’t know one thing about plants, but it’s okay so far.”

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“I had to do something. I was a little ashamed of myself. I’d figured you were just another cop with an attitude when you barged in here that night and kicked out the last patrons, but I soon learned otherwise. I—it was the only way I knew to say thanks for saving my ass. No telling what that guy would’ve done if he’d waited until everyone was gone—probably cleared out the till and maybe left me dead. I had no idea that back door wasn’t locked. The boss reamed the day man a new asshole and chewed me some for not checking the door. You can bet we do it now.”

Craig grinned. “I’ve been told I come on pretty strong. Maybe I need to watch that, but you get so used to dealing with scumbags, pretty soon you’re that way with everyone. Is it too late to say I’m sorry?”

Roy looked up then and met the intense blue gaze head on. “No need. You were doing your job, you and Sam. That’s some dog, by the way. I heard the crack when he bit into that guy’s arm. God, almost made me puke, even though he deserved it. And Sam got his prey. He’s a real trooper.”

“I heard the perp went to jail in a splint—both bones in his arm were broken. It took about fifteen stitches to close the wounds, so they have to be able to access it to change the dressings. Cast will come later. He’ll be behind bars a lot longer, though. There were about five keys of pot in his car, plus a big packet of crystal meth. He’s either a dealer or a mule, delivering the stuff. That plus felony assault on an officer and a few other things should earn him a good spell of hard time.”

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They fell silent a minute, both thinking about the incident. Roy spoke first. "Can I get you a drink? This one's on the house, or on me. Name your poison."

Craig shrugged. "Sure, since I'm off duty for another week. I'll take a Heineken if you have it." Craig's gaze met Roy's. He held the eye contact for a long moment, and something about that steady look set off a spark of awareness. Tingles shot through Roy's whole body.

"The reason I stopped by was to invite you over to my place for a barbeque. If all goes well, I should be able to bring Sam home the end of the week and I was planning a small celebration on Saturday evening. Just a few buds, not all cops either, so you won't feel like a misfit. Grill some steaks, play some poker and have a few brews, just kind of chill out."

Roy considered the surprising invitation while he got Craig's beer. He had to admit he was tempted. Craig seemed to be single, which didn't mean he was interested in anything more than a limited friendship, but then there was that look. *Is he trying to tell me something? It sure felt like it for a minute there. Aw, what the hell. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

"If it's Saturday, that would work out fine. Next week is my once-a-month Saturday off. Most of my Saturday afternoons are spent right here."

"See, it was meant to be. I'll draw you a map how to get to my place. I live out on the west side, a newer complex over there. I'd rather have a house now with Sam, but I've only been here a year. When I came, I wasn't sure I'd be staying. Now it looks like I will, so maybe I'll start shopping for a

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house with some space around it. But for now, Arroyo Apartments is home base.”

They filled some time with casual talk, while Craig drank his beer. All too soon he got up to leave. Still he shook hands and his smile seemed very genuine as he told Roy goodbye. “See you next Saturday, Roy. Take it easy and don’t let any dope dealers sneak up on you.”

CHAPTER 2

The week seemed to drag by. Roy found himself thinking about the blond cop a lot. He had to admit there was something about the man that drew him strongly, a lot more than just the fact he was one good-looking but very masculine guy. After the things he'd been through growing up, Roy had a built-in sense for people with a past. Something told him Craig Rommel was one of them, just as he was.

He also knew it was past time he loosened his hold on Frank. Deep down, Frank was not really gay. He was okay with being bi, but now that Kerry had come back into his life, Roy was pretty sure his friend wanted very much to build a long-term relationship with her. Frank was taking great pains

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to make sure Roy didn't feel abandoned, and Roy appreciated that, but it was time to pull away, to slide back to a plain, old platonic friendship, which was how they had started out. Yet he was honest enough with himself to recognize he wasn't ready to go it alone...not now and maybe not ever. He'd never had a real family and he understood now how much he craved a connection with someone special. Maybe Craig was the one to make him feel complete.

While the other cops were not reluctant to help Craig and back him up, Roy had sensed a subtle distance there, perhaps more Craig's choice than theirs. Craig was part of the brotherhood that all cops shared, but he was also an outsider. It seemed to be more than just the fact his partner was canine instead of another human, though that could be a part of it. Canine officers were kind of a breed apart. The bond they formed with their dog was a tangible thing, and had to be maintained in order to work as the perfect team they were. The cop was the alpha member, but he had to earn and deserve the absolute loyalty and obedience the dog gave him. No question that Craig and Sam had that bond. Roy looked forward to seeing the dog again, too.

Finally, Saturday arrived. With a case of nerves so acute he almost turned around and went back home, Roy headed his little Ford across town, following Craig's map that he'd all but memorized. When he arrived at the Arroyo Apartments, he was relieved to find that, although newer, they were not a big cut above the complex he called home. Craig had a ground floor unit at one end of a building housing half a dozen units.

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It came with a postage stamp-sized back yard with a side gate, which must be convenient for Sam. Craig, standing over a smoking grill, looked up as Roy approached the gate.

“Hey, come on in! I’m just about ready to throw the steaks on.”

Sam lay close to Craig’s feet. He looked up as Roy came into the yard. The dog got up and shook himself before he paced over to check Roy out. Roy saw the shaved streak along the dog’s left side where his wound had been stitched, but it looked like everything was healing well. He held his hand down for Sam to sniff, careful not to reach over the dog’s head in a gesture that canines found threatening. The dog’s tail fanned in a slow wag as he looked up with a doggy grin.

“He remembers you,” Craig said. “I figured he would. He has a library of smells filed away and he never forgets one, I can guarantee. He’d know you anywhere. He’s not really stand-offish, but he is a little choosy about his friends. Looks like you made the grade. I was counting on that, though. Sam’s a good judge of character.”

“Guess I should be flattered.”

“Honored,” Craig amended. “In fact, I’d say you’re one of his special people. He knows you helped him when he was in a bad spot. Just like you did for me, and I expect he sensed that, too. It’s hard to know what they comprehend and perceive, but these Malinois are exceptional dogs. This fellow was bred in one of Europe’s finest kennels and trained by a top police dog trainer in Hungary. To me it’s an honor to be partnered with him.”

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"I envy you," Roy said, which was true. As a kid he'd never been able to have a dog. Maybe it was a good thing because that would have been just one more thing his stepfather could have held over him. Since he'd been grown, he'd either been in the military or in some situation where having a pet was just not possible. So he did envy anyone who enjoyed the loyalty and unconditional love that a good dog gave. He stooped to stroke Sam's sleek neck and scratched him behind the erect ears. Sam leaned against him for a moment, relaxed and enjoying the attention. Then he padded back to settle beside Craig.

Leaving the grill, Craig crossed to Roy's side and clapped him on the shoulder. "How do you like your steak? I've got some great New York strips and a couple of porterhouses. Sergeant Sheldon likes his well done, in other words, burned to a cinder. Pete Logan and Jeff Tatum are almost as bad. Please tell me medium at the most. I hate to destroy a good piece of meat."

Roy grinned. "Medium rare is fine for me. Not quite mooing, but definitely not shoe leather."

"A man after my own heart. What a relief." Craig chortled as he headed for the open patio door, returning moments later with a big bowl full of meat and a pair of tongs. "I knew there was a reason I liked you, besides your skill in first aid. Drinks are in the tub of ice over there. Help yourself."

Roy selected a bottle of Corona. He popped the lid with a practiced flip and lifted the bottle to his lips. Maybe a little alcohol in the blood would ease the rest of his jitters. Now that

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he was here, he could hardly take his eyes off of Craig. In a pair of jeans worn soft by long use and a close-fitting polo shirt, the cop looked good enough to eat.

What he didn't know was whether or not the other man was the least bit interested. First in *any* relationship...and second in one with Roy. How did he go about finding out? It would have to be in private so no one would be too embarrassed if things didn't quite come off right. That meant hanging around after the party was over. Well, he didn't have to be anywhere until two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Should be plenty of time for whatever happened—if anything. Meanwhile he'd just try to enjoy some rare sociability, a good steak and getting to know the other friends Craig had invited.

For a pleasant evening, the time passed at a ponderous pace. They ate and drank beer, laughed and joked, played poker and kidded one another as men do. Playing for pennies as they were, no one was going broke. Two of the cops were married, and they both confessed they couldn't afford to lose much or their wives would have hissy fits. Neither one seemed to be embarrassed or dismayed by the fact or even admitting it. In some ways Roy envied them, although he knew family and marriage were not for him.

They were a great bunch of guys, but only one really held Roy's interest. He both wanted and dreaded a few minutes alone with Craig so he could—maybe—find out if the other man was even half as intrigued as he was. The chance finally came, late in the evening, as the rest left one by one.

"I'll help you clean up," Roy offered. "No one's waiting

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up for me to get home.”

“You don’t have to,” Craig said. “I was going to leave most of it for tomorrow. I’m not on duty until three o’clock.”

Roy grinned. “It won’t look any better in the morning. In fact, it’ll probably seem worse. This way, it’ll be done.” He found a trash bag and began to stuff empty bottles into it. With a grimace of disgust, Craig emptied an overflowing ash tray into a coffee can with sand in the bottom. Roy had noticed the blond cop didn’t smoke. That was a relief. He couldn’t stand the smell of stale butts. It was one of the worst things about the bar.

Craig turned to face Roy. “Here, I’ll take that.” Roy tied the bag shut and handed it to him. Their hands somehow tangled over the process. The bag fell to the floor between them as both jumped back with a start at the zinging awareness that shot through their nerves from the accidental touch.

“Whoa,” Craig said. “Did anyone ever tell you you’ve got an electric personality?” His smile took the sting out of the words. “Felt like I stuck a finger in a light socket there. Wow.”

For a half-dozen heartbeats they stood and stared at each other. They were both still feeling the voltage generated by that one brief contact. Roy had touched Craig much more intimately, high on the thigh, when he did the first aid, but that was a very different situation. Now they were on equal footing. Now they were alone, with no one else around to barge in on them. Now they were facing the potent truth of the attraction between them.

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Craig moved first, settling his hands on Roy's shoulders. "I noticed your earring and some mannerisms the other night, little things about you. I could hardly define what I saw, but I picked up on them and started to wonder. I know the earring thing is iffy anymore, what with everyone getting pierced here, there and everywhere, but it used to have a meaning. I'd probably wear one, too, but it's not allowed with the uniform."

Roy returned the taller man's steady gaze. He felt the first sparkles of dizzy delight begin to dance behind his breastbone. They sent a new zing of energy south in an instant. *Yes, he's interested. He did notice, and it was more than gratitude that made him ask me over.*

"I've worn it ever since I got out of the Navy. Like the police force, they didn't allow it with the uniform, and I wasn't supposed to advertise my preferences anyway."

"The Sundown isn't a gay bar, is it? I never got the impression it is."

"It's not. I wouldn't work in a gay bar. It's never wise to mix work and pleasure, and I'm not sure I want to hook up with the guys who hang out in bars anyway." Roy grinned and shuffled his feet a little. Craig made him nervous, but it was a good nervous. "It's just a job, but as jobs go, it's okay. I don't want to sponge off anybody. My friend Frank promised I'd never be homeless or in need as long as he was up and going, but I'm not going to be a user."

"Frank? What kind of a friend is he—a fuck buddy, a real mate, or just a friend? I mean I don't want to horn in on

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somebody else's turf, even if I really like your looks, your style."

"Just a friend. He's bi and, yeah, we've been together that way, but now he's found Kerry again, the first girl he ever cared about. I think he'd really rather swing that way. And I want him to if that's what he needs."

Roy paused a moment and then went on, sensing Craig wanted and deserved the whole story.

"I met him when he was in the Marines and I was a Navy corpsman assigned to his unit in Iraq. We both grew up with some bad shit and sensed that common ground, I think, so we started to hang out together. When I got out, I was pretty fucked up for a while—saw some really bad stuff go down and it brought back what I went through as a kid. I was in the psych ward for a while. When I got out of the hospital, he was there for me. He'd already retired on a medical due to his wounds but it doesn't slow him down much."

Thinking of some of the things Frank did, Roy shook his head. For a man still carrying some lead and those patch jobs of steel and plastic in his body, Frank was damn tough.

Awareness flared in Craig's eyes. "Wait a minute. Your bud is Frank Ogden, the guy who's hooked up with that FBI gal, Agent Satterfield. If I was into women, I could go for her myself. She's a knock-out, but always had that 'hands-off' air about her. I never quite knew what to make of him."

"I'm a free agent, my own man. Frank'll always be my friend, almost like a brother, but we aren't really a couple. We realized it would never work that way." It was important that

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Craig understand this. Roy sensed the honor and principles the other man lived by, an innate part of who he was. He would never cheat on a partner or try to take anything that wasn't his.

Craig smiled, a bright, fast, dazzling smile. "Great! That makes us good to go, right? How about spending the night? Any place you need to be before tomorrow?"

Roy shook his head, then nodded, so overcome for a moment that words would not emerge. "No...err...I mean, yeah. It's all right. Like really all right!"

With a whoop of delight that had Sam scurrying in to see what was going on, Craig gave Roy an exuberant, crushing hug. For a moment, Roy thought he was going to be picked up and swung around in a circle, but Craig didn't go that far. Sobering, he released the embrace and raised both hands to cup Roy's face.

"I know you're older than you look. My first impression that night was, 'What's this kid doing working in a bar?' You looked about sixteen, but I know you're older. How much older?"

"I'll be thirty in September. Your face is young-looking, too, but a man doesn't get the assurance you have without some experience and surviving tough times. I'm guessing early thirties."

Craig nodded. "Thirty-two this past May. I did a hitch in the Army and then went through law enforcement training. I worked with a dog a few months as an MP. A chance to become a K-9 officer was a dream come true for me."

"You and Sam make quite a team. Maybe you and I can,

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too. If you'll get your handcuffs out and put them on me, I'll do anything you want."

Craig's grin and eyes both sparkled. "You know, I think that's an outstanding idea. I wasn't ready to ask, but since you brought it up, why the hell not!" He turned and started down the hall Roy was pretty sure led to the bedroom. Roy lost no time following him. It occurred to him at that moment he'd gladly follow Craig Rommel through hell, high water, or just about anything.

When they reached the bedroom, Craig stopped in the middle of the room, near the foot of the king-sized bed. Roy noticed the elaborate carved headboard at once. It looked like something from old Europe, craftsmanship and exquisite care lavished on elegant dark wood. A second look revealed the hooks and rings cleverly embedded in the design of twining vines and leaves. It was a bed made for seduction, for bondage and discipline as well. A shiver of pure excitement flashed through him.

Craig turned around one time. When he again faced Roy, his face was set in a stern, somber expression. "You're under arrest, boy. I don't bother with strip searches. Get out of your clothes."

Roy hurried to comply with the order. He peeled off his black T-shirt, emblazoned with a vivid sunset behind a dark bottle of Tecate. Loosening his belt, he lowered the zipper on his jeans and let them slide down his legs. He kicked off his athletic shoes as he stepped free of the jeans. That left him only in his dark green briefs. He glanced at Craig.

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The other man stood with his arms folded across his chest, his face inscrutable. His posture told the whole tale. He would give no mercy, would not weaken or give in.

Good, that's what I've been wanting, needing. Frank could never do it, not even when I asked.

Roy rolled down the briefs, sliding them past his growing erection, and let them drop to his feet.

"Hands behind your back."

Roy complied, turning to put his back to Craig. The metal cuffs were cold and implacable on his wrists. He felt the faint strain on his shoulders and arched his back a bit to ease it. Craig circled to stand in front of him. Fisting a hand in Roy's hair, he tipped his head back. Then he covered Roy's lips with a savage kiss. Bruising, just short of brutal, Craig's mouth crushed Roy's lips against his teeth.

"Open." Craig growled the word in a tone that made Sam back away from the doorway where he'd stood, watching the two men with a puzzled expression. Roy complied, giving Craig complete access to his mouth. The fierce thrusts of Craig's tongue made Roy tremble. A tumble of erotic images swept through his mind. *This is going to be so damned good.*

After a moment, Craig noticed Sam. "I need to crate him for the night," he said. "Don't go away."

Sam's crate was in the second bedroom, right across the hall, a room that was in effect the dog's own. Roy watched the whole brief ceremony, touched that, even while caught up in passion, Craig took care of his canine partner.

The crate was large and comfortable, a secure haven where

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Sam obviously felt safe and at ease. At the command, he went in, turned around once and lay down. Craig shut the crate door, made sure the water bowl was full and that a couple of Sam's toys were there where he could reach them. Then he turned back to Roy, a lupine smile on his face. Craig shut the door when he left Sam's room.

Craig paused in the doorway of his room, sweeping his gaze over Roy from head to feet. He nodded at last. Then he began to undress, scattering his clothes on the floor. From the tidiness of the room, Roy knew this was a change from his common habit. That puzzled him, but only for a minute.

With a sweep of his hand, Craig indicated the mess. "Pick them up. Put them in the basket."

With a jerk of his head, he indicated the wicker basket just inside the half-opened closet door.

It was awkward to pick things up with your hands locked behind your back, but Roy managed to comply. He would crouch and twist, capture a garment in one hand and then carry it to the basket. When he was done, he turned to await further orders. Now Craig was also nude and Roy couldn't take his gaze off the other man. Dressed he was gorgeous, but naked and aroused, he was magnificent.

Craig's cock stood erect, thrusting out of the golden tangle of hair in his crotch. Almost maroon with darkening blood, it made Roy think of a mahogany night stick. A droplet of pre-cum glistened on the tip, shining like a diamond in the glare of the overhead light. Roy ran his tongue across his lips. He could just taste that cock, the sharp, salty flavor of man and

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sex. It was all he could do not to blurt his eagerness, but he sensed that the roles they were playing forbade him to take the initiative. He waited for Craig to make the next move.

With a jerk of his head and a gesture, Craig sent Roy to the foot of the bed. "On your knees."

Roy hastened to obey, almost losing his balance in his haste to get down. Keenly aware of the vulnerability of his position, Roy rested his forehead on the smooth, cool fabric of the bedspread. Every nerve was drawn taut with expectation. He was ready and eager to be used however Craig chose to. *I just hope he doesn't back off at the last minute.*

Roy should have been ready, but the sting and crack of a hard hand striking his buttocks caught him by surprise. He gave an involuntary gasp, almost a whimper. His cock jumped in response to the burn. *Yes, oh, God, yes. Hurts so good...*

"How are you at sucking cock? Do you give a good BJ?"

Roy nodded. "I...I think so. I try to.."

"Well, we'll see. If you give a really good blow job, maybe you'll earn a reward."

Craig pushed him back enough to slide between him and the bed, and settled on the edge, legs extended on either side of Roy. That put his powerful dick right in Roy's face, right where he wanted it, where they both wanted it.

"What's your word?"

The sharp question took Roy by surprise. His head jerked up as he looked up at Craig's stony face. "Word?"

"Your safe word...the one to say if something gets to be too much."

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“Oh, yeah. Daniel, I guess. That was my stepfather’s name. I hated his guts. It’s not anything I’d say normally.”

Craig nodded. “All right. Get busy sucking.”

CHAPTER 3

Craig's cock jerked with every heartbeat. With his hands locked behind his back, Roy bobbed around trying to catch it. Finally Craig either got impatient or took pity on him. He caught his prick and held it steady until Roy closed his mouth over the dark head. For a moment, he just held the head in his lips, savoring the feel and taste, the heat and powerful maleness of it. Then he ran his tongue around the groove behind the head, teasing the nerve buds that clustered there. Craig gave a moan of delight.

“Oh, my God, that feels so good!”

After he teased with his flicking tongue a few more seconds, Roy began to work his way down Craig's thick rod.

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By gradual degrees, he took it deep into his mouth, until the tip bumped the back of his throat. He'd long ago lost the gag reflex and now relaxed his throat muscles to take even more of that impressive length. The blond cop was one well-hung guy, no question about that. He began a slow rhythm, sucking deep and then sliding back until only the head was clasped by his lips. Within a few strokes, Craig began to move, thrusting as Roy sucked, growing even harder and thicker with each repetition.

At last, with obvious reluctance, he withdrew and pushed Roy back on his heels. "You're right. You suck cock really well, but right now I want to fuck that nice ass of yours."

"Yes," Roy said. "Oh, yeah, I want that, too. I want to feel that big cock of yours, clear up to your balls."

Roy tried to get up enough to rest his body on the bed, but his legs had gone to sleep. Without the use of his hands, he was almost as helpless as a turtle on its back. Seeing the problem, Craig caught his arm and lifted him off the floor. Roy fell forward face down onto the bed. Again he felt the slick coolness of the bedspread, almost like water under his face. The fabric held a faint trace of Craig's unique scent, a combination of sweat and maleness, the juniper odor of his shaving lotion and a hint of Sam as well. He inhaled the scent, as if to fix it in his senses.

After he retrieved a tube of lube and a condom from the dresser, Craig caught Roy by the hips and lifted, helping him to get his legs under him so he rested on his chest and his knees. That put his butt at the right level for Craig's height

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standing beside the bed. Craig traced a finger down the crease, probed gently and then more firmly at Roy's rectum. Roy shivered, involuntarily clenching and releasing the muscles there. Roy heard the sounds as Craig rolled the condom onto his erection. He rubbed lube on the tip and then around Roy's ass. After what seemed forever, he stroked his cock along the same path his finger had taken. Then with a quick, hard thrust, he sheathed himself deep.

At the same moment, he smacked Roy on one buttock and then the other, not really hard, but a stinging slap. At that, Roy almost came, but he fought it. He wasn't going to mess that nice bedspread and earn a real punishment. Still, he surrendered himself to the incredible sensations of Craig's cock deep inside him, pushing against his sensitive prostate and filling him to the very max.

Yeah, oh, yeah. Oh, God, I've needed this so much.

Craig grasped Roy by his hips, fingers digging deep into the muscle to steady him against the pounding thrusts. Without that assistance, Roy would have slid away on the slippery bedspread, having no way to stop himself from moving. His hands were getting numb, but he could stand that a little longer, at least as long as Craig's fantastic prick was ramming into him.

It didn't seem to take nearly long enough for Craig to come. Roy felt the shudders rack the other man's body and heard his deep, grunting groan. As Craig withdrew, he smacked Roy on the butt again. With a whimper of ecstasy mixed with the jolt of pain, Roy collapsed onto his stomach on

the bed.

Craig's sudden exclamation startled him. "My God, man, your hands are almost blue. You should've said something. They're ice-cold, too." Craig fumbled with the cuffs, then went for the key in the pocket of his discarded trousers. "I swear, I totally forgot. Are you okay?"

Roy's limp arms slid to his sides when Craig removed the handcuffs. Needles of pain shot through his wrists and then to his fingers as the circulation began to return. "Yeah, I'm all right. I didn't want you to take them off until you were done."

He rolled over, slow and clumsy with his weak, tingling arms unable to provide much help. Craig stood at the foot of the bed, fists on his lean hips, staring down at Roy. He wore a frown of concern. Roy fidgeted, troubled at the evidence of the other man's care. It was both good and bad...bad because he didn't expect a dom to show any weakness or softening, yet good because it revealed that Craig already considered Roy more than just a piece of ass to use and boot aside.

Craig was not Daniel Reeves. That much was very clear. Roy winced, remembering the first time Daniel had fucked him, hard and fast, without any preparation. It had felt like he was getting reamed with one of those tools mechanics used to hone cylinders on an engine. He'd been raw and sore for a week.

Roy had soon learned to keep his mouth shut and to ignore the pain any way he could because if he howled or even whimpered, that only earned him more, worse. Finally the roughness had become almost necessary for Roy to get off.

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Arousal, restraint and pain were inseparably intertwined in his sexual experience. Sometimes he hated it and the memories behind the need, but it was too ingrained now to lose. Roy struggled off the bed and dropped to his knees in front of Craig. He looked up at him, first in silent supplication, but then he had to ask as Craig continued to frown.

“Why are you frowning? Wasn’t it good?”

Craig nodded, a slow smile warming his eyes before it spread to his whole face. “What do you think, man? Do I look dissatisfied?”

At that instant, before Roy could respond to the questions that had answered his, the telephone jangled. Three o’clock in the morning by the clock on the nightstand. It couldn’t be good news.

“Shit,” Craig said. He picked it up though. “Rommel.” Listening, he nodded a time or two and his face went grim again. “I’ll be there. Give me about five minutes to get into uniform. No, Sam isn’t released for duty yet. I’ll be alone.”

“Emergency?” Roy hated to ask, but he had to know.

Craig nodded, already moving around the room to start dressing. “No time to shave and shower,” he muttered. “I hate not to, but it’s too urgent. We’ve got a hostage situation at the county hospital. Somebody seems to have gone berserk. They’re calling in all available personnel. I’ve got to go.”

For the moment he seemed to forget Roy was even there. Roy scooted out of the way and hunkered on the edge of the bed. When Craig was dressed and had gathered his gear, he stopped. He walked over to where Roy sat and caught his

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arms, lifting him off the bed.

“Will you wait here until I get back? We’re not finished yet, and I don’t want you to disappear on me.”

His hands were tight but gentle, clasping Roy’s upper arms and holding him almost touching close.

For a moment, Roy couldn’t find his voice. He nodded and finally cleared his throat to speak. “Yeah, if you want me to, I’ll wait. Anything you want me to do, if it’s possible and legal, I’ll do it.”

Craig leaned down and kissed him. It was gentle this time, a slow savoring of lips to lips. “Thanks.” His voice was soft. “I need something to look forward to. I have a feeling this is not going to be a pleasant situation.”

“Be careful,” Roy said, as Craig’s hands fell away, leaving him feeling somehow bereft. “I bet you feel incomplete without Sam, so be real careful.”

Craig nodded again. “Damn straight. I’ve got something to come back for now anyway, and that makes a big difference.” He grinned as he strode to the door. He halted mid-stride and called back over his shoulder, “There’s a scanner on the fridge in the kitchen if you want to hear what’s going on. It’s set on the regular SPPD frequency, but the emergency channel is marked, too.” Then he was gone.

* * *

For a full five minutes after he heard the door close behind Craig, Roy sat on the edge of the bed. Too much had happened too fast. He was still reeling with it. Was it too soon

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to feel and trust the bond he sensed? Was it just wishful thinking on his part to imagine that he and Craig were going to build something real and lasting?

Growing chilly, he gathered up the clothes he had removed and dressed. If he had not promised to stay, he would have gone home then, but he didn't want to let Craig down. When he gave his word, he stuck to it. Another matter of personal pride. He might have been raised by a man who had no ethics and no scruples, but that didn't mean he had to behave that way.

Still it felt strange to be alone in another man's home, when they were still just past the stage of being strangers. He ambled out to the kitchen. The trash bags lay on the floor where they'd dropped them. He did turn up the scanner, but there wasn't a lot of traffic. He heard Craig go on the air and then check out at the scene. After that, nothing. He switched to the emergency channel, but even it was quiet. They must be using short-range handhelds or trying to keep a low profile. Not knowing what was happening was nerve racking, though. He'd never paid a lot of attention to cops and their business, but that was about to change—maybe it already had, in fact.

Roy decided to make himself useful to pass the time. He cleaned up the rest of the litter from the party as best he could. Hadn't he seen a Dumpster and recycle bins when he had walked around to the back gate? The lights around the complex were bright enough to let him locate them. Once he did, he dragged out three bags and ditched them in the proper containers. When he went back into the kitchen, he heard

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some noises from Sam's room. The dog had become restless. He barked a couple of times, not loud, but just an insistent yip.

Halting outside the door, Roy hesitated. Craig had not given him any instructions concerning Sam. Didn't the dog normally stay in his crate all night? It seemed like that made sense. Craig had checked to see Sam had water, and Roy knew he'd been fed. What was the matter with him? Using caution, he cracked the door and peeked in. Sam stood in his crate, his hackles raised and his posture reflecting a keen level of tension and attention.

He knows Craig has gone without him, into danger. The notion flashed across his mind in sudden sureness. He may even sense Craig's in a bad spot. God, I hope not!

Roy pushed the door back and stepped into the room. Sam turned and looked straight at him.

"Hey, it's okay, boy. I'm here with you. I know you miss your partner, but you're not all by yourself. We have each other."

Sam nudged at the gate, his black nose twitching as he pushed on the latch. He couldn't quite unfasten it, but Roy could see he was trying.

"You need to get out of there, maybe go outside? Is that what's wrong?" Of course the dog could not answer him, at least not in so many words, but his gaze fixed on Roy so intently that Roy almost felt himself mesmerized. He glanced around the room until he located a blue nylon leash hung on a hook just inside the door. Although he didn't think Sam could climb or jump the six-foot fence around the small back yard,

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something told him he should net let the dog loose.

Roy got the leash, clipped it to Sam's collar, and opened the crate. Sam didn't push, but he made it clear he wanted to get out of the crate, out of the room and, as they walked together to the back door, out of the house. Roy kept a firm hold on the leash. He expected Sam to go to his corner as he'd seen him do earlier. Maybe he needed to hike his leg, even if he hadn't had any beer at the party. Instead, Sam headed for the gate.

"Damn it, Sam, I'm not taking you out of the yard. I bet I'm not even supposed to have you out here. What do you think you're doing? Come on...you can do your business in here. I know that's what you do. I saw you this afternoon."

Sam all but shook his head. In spite of Roy's efforts to change his mind, the dog seemed determined to stay right there by the gate until he willed it to open.

"Damn, Sam, I don't dare take you out there. Craig would have my ass big time if anything happened to you. I'm prob'ly taking a major chance just to have you out here."

Sam wagged his tail, thumping across Roy's shins with an impact marginally gentler than a heavy hitter's baseball bat. He reached up and nosed the gate latch, then turned to look back over his shoulder, his eyes full of eloquent pleading. It didn't take a telepath to see what he wanted. Still, Roy hesitated.

Can I hang onto him if we go out of the yard? I know he behaves for Craig, and I think he likes me, but does that mean he'll do what I tell him? Ha, who am I kidding? It's more like

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I do what he tells me! In the back of his mind he knew he was going to give in. Sam was so determined and intense about it that telling him no was just about impossible. Roy stepped up beside Sam and flipped the latch. As the gate swung open, Sam surged through it. Roy kept a tight hold on the leash, but didn't try to stop him.

Sam went right to the spot where Craig parked, now empty since he'd driven to the police station. The dog hesitated a moment, then looked at Roy's little Ford, parked two stalls down. After a brief pause, he started toward it.

"Holy shit, dog. How'd you know that's my car?"

Sam stopped with his nose almost touching the left rear door. When Roy didn't open it at once, he turned and nudged him.

"You want to go for a ride? Come on, guy, it's four-oh-dark-thirty in the morning! I'm not sure which one of us is crazier—you wanting to go or me thinking about taking you!"

He hesitated. *I ought to go back and close up the place at least, but I'm not sure I can drag Sam back there. Guess I'll put him in the car and then go do it.* With misgivings twisting inside, he opened the door. Sam didn't need a gilt-edged invitation to jump in. As an afterthought, Roy hit the lock button before he went back to close the back door, although he didn't lock it because he'd be unable to get back in. The front door was already locked.

I'm dumber than dirt. Craig is going to mop up the floor with me when he finds out what I've done. Oh, shit. But the self-lecture did no good. He got into the Ford, started it and then glanced back at Sam. "Okay, bud, where do ya wanna go?"

CHAPTER 4

There really wasn't any doubt where they were going. Craig had checked out at the country hospital and, lacking any other information, Roy figured he must still be there. He hadn't come back on the air, at least not by the time Roy and Sam went outdoors. There had hardly been a peep on the scanner to give him any idea about what was going on, but Craig was there. Roy began to think Sam somehow sensed his partner was in trouble and needed help. Sam wasn't cleared to go back on duty yet, but he didn't know that and would not care anyway. If Craig needed him, he wanted to be there. Not so odd because Roy felt the same way already.

The county hospital had once been on the edge of town,

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and once had been a tuberculosis sanitarium, or so Roy had heard. Now it was at the edge of the *barrio* district, not the best part of town, and it catered to folks without insurance, undocumented foreigners, those people who could not afford the medical care they urgently needed. There was often trouble at the location, but a hostage situation sounded pretty damn scary. And knowing how Craig felt about his police work, he'd be in the middle of whatever was going down, bad or not.

Roy drove fast but within the speed limits and with care. He got there in about ten minutes. Sam breathed down his neck the whole way from the back seat, as if he was keeping his eye on the speedometer. "You're a police dog all right, aren't you, Sam? Hey, I'm driving safe. Cut me some slack!"

He pulled in behind a couple of cruisers. They sat empty, but the lights revolved on the roofs in monotonous flashes of red and blue. Then he saw a couple of uniformed officers by the main entrance. When someone approached, they stopped the man. As all three gestured, he could hear raised voices, but couldn't make out any words. It looked like the cops were not letting anyone inside.

Sam had his forelegs over the seat back now, since Roy's car did not have the barrier installed to confine the dog to the rear like in Craig's police SUV. The dog's ears were up stiff and his nose twitched. His tongue slid out and dampened his dark muzzle, then retreated.

Roy started to get out, then hesitated. "If I get out, I'll play hell keeping you in the car, won't I, Sam? But we aren't doing

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any good just sitting here. Oh, hell, we've come this far. We may as well really fuck up and see if we can find out what's going on." He grabbed the trailing leash and wrapped it around his hand before he opened the door. Sam did wait until Roy was out of the car before leaping out, but barely. The big dog started for the door at once, almost jerking Roy's arm out of the socket.

"Hey, Sam, heel. Stop. *Alto*. Halt. Quit!" Of course he didn't have the German command at the tip of his tongue like Craig did and nothing he said seemed to even begin to put on the brakes. Sam was a dog with a mission, and if Roy was going to be stubborn enough to hang on, too bad. He'd just have to go, too. A man at the end of the leash was not going to stop one determined canine.

The two cops at the door looked up with surprise as Sam came barreling up to them.

"Hey, that's Sam, isn't it?" one said. "Officer Rommel's dog. Who are you and what are you doing with Sam?"

"I—I'm a friend of Officer Rommel's, the guy from the bar where he and Sam got shot. I was at his place when he got called. Sam started to go ballistic, and I figured maybe he sensed something was wrong. I guess maybe it was a dumb thing to do, but we're here."

Sam halted, sniffed both the officers. Roy could see he knew them. Then the dog sat down, staring fixedly at the closed double door. Roy shifted the leash to his other hand and flexed his shoulder. It was going to hurt tomorrow. He'd be willing to bet on it.

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“Do you have any idea where Officer Rommel is? What he’s doing? Do you think he needs Sam? I know the dog isn’t released for duty yet, but he thought he should be here...convinced me of it, in fact.”

The shorter and younger of the two cops shrugged. “I’m not sure. There hasn’t been much communication the last half-hour or so. I heard some guy didn’t think his wife or kid was getting taken care of right and kind of went *loco*. He got a couple of nurses at gunpoint and barricaded him and them into a room, making demands. I think Rommel and some of the SWAT guys are trying to talk him out without anybody getting hurt. The sergeant just told us not to let anyone in since we really aren’t clear what’s behind all this. The guy may be trying to get drugs or something and just used the alleged family member as a pretext.”

Just then there was a sound inside the doors, muffled voices and noise like some kind of a scuffle. Then a wild-looking man with a red beard and long, scraggly hair burst out, waving a pistol. He had a small child slung over his shoulder and held a plastic bag in the hand holding the youngster, bulging with unknown contents.

“Everybody, stand clear. Don’t move until I get out of here or the kid dies.”

Sam crouched, gathering himself for the move. Before anyone could react, he charged, dragging the nylon leash sizzling through Roy’s hand. The dog slammed into the fleeing man’s back, and as he staggered, dropping the bag, Sam grabbed hold of the arm that held the gun.

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Roy had heard that crunchy crack before. It wasn't as close or as loud this time, but he knew what it meant. The pistol fell from the man's nerveless fingers as he dropped to his knees. The child slid off his shoulder onto the lawn. As soon as the two officers who'd guarded the door lifted the man and snapped handcuffs on him, Sam backed off, turned around and picked up the bag with great care. He carried it back to Roy and looked up with an expectant expression.

"Damn, I don't have his toy," Roy said. "I saw on TV where a K-9 drug sniffer did this. He's giving me the loot as a trade and I don't have his reward."

At that moment, a bunch of people burst out through the door all at once. Sam's head came up as he turned his attention from Roy to the man who led the emerging group. The dog gave one fierce woof of joy, snatched up the bag and headed for his partner. Craig did not have his reward toy either, but Sam didn't seem to mind. When Craig dropped to his knees, Sam butted his head against Craig's chest, wiggling like an excited puppy. Craig embraced him, scratched his ears, and praised him with words and pats.

"How did you get here, buddy? It looks like you saved the day, or am I reading this all wrong?"

One of the officers had led the red-bearded man away and the other came back in time to hear Craig's words. "No, you've got it right. This amazing dog of yours, without anyone telling him what to do, took that guy down. I never saw anything move so fast. He jerked clear of your friend there so fast I bet his hand is smoking."

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At that moment, Craig looked up and saw Roy. A sequence of expressions flashed across the policeman's face, too quickly to give a real sense of what he was thinking. Roy approached cradling his rope-burned hand. It was starting to hurt like all get-out, but the fear curdling in his gut was ten times worse. He'd done a damn fool thing and even if it had turned out well, that was no credit to him. Sam could have been injured because he'd been out of control, without a handler to direct him. Under the blue flame of Craig's intense gaze, Roy felt like he was melting. He hung his head, not knowing what to say.

Keeping a hand on Sam's collar, Craig got up. He shook his head, a frown and a grin fighting over his face. "I oughta whale your hide for going outside of procedures and risking Sam this way, but I think you ought to get a medal, too, both of you. I know Sam and I expect he conned you into this, didn't he? Let me think on it and I'll decide how to deal with you when we get home. Take Sam back and I'll be there as soon as I can."

Meekly, Roy picked up the leash in his uninjured hand. Craig spoke to the dog in a stern tone, but with a strong hint of affection. "Go, Sam. Go with Roy. Behave yourself this time and wait for me."

As gentle as an aged lap dog, Sam fell in at Roy's side and walked, on a slack leash, back to the little Ford.

* * *

The sun was peeking over the jagged edge of the distant

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mountains to open a new day when Craig finally pulled into his parking place. Sitting at the kitchen table, Roy had dozed off, Sam at his side. He hadn't quite been willing to put the dog back in his crate when they'd returned to Craig's apartment, so they'd waited together. Sam heard the familiar vehicle and sprang to his feet, waking Roy in the process.

Sam seemed to have none of Roy's misgivings about how Craig might act. Sam felt secure and was just glad to see his partner and master come home. But Roy was not nearly that settled yet. He chewed his lip, not sure whether to jump up and meet Craig at the door or take a more laid-back attitude and just wait and see.

What if he's still angry or upset over what happened? Will he just glare at me and tell me to get the fuck out and not come back? I mean the good part was what Sam did, and the bad part was what I did to have him there in the first place. Oh, shit. I sure wasn't doing what I had been told...he just said to wait here for him

Sam met Craig in the doorway. Rearing, he put his front paws on his partner's chest. Craig hugged the dog, scratched around his black masked face and then pushed him down. After that, he looked across the room at Roy. "Well? Are you glad to see me or just waiting for permission to get the hell out of here?"

He'd folded his arms across his wide chest trying to look grim, but the grin kept sneaking out. "Oh, shit, come here, guy."

Roy didn't need a second invitation. He damn near flew

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across the room. Craig enveloped him in a fierce hug, then held him at arm's length, studying his face.

"Damn, man, you surprised the hell out of me. I'm not used to having anybody worry about me. It was a shock to see Sam there and then you...I didn't know whether to kick your ass or kiss you or maybe both."

Roy returned the steady gaze, assurance seeping through him in welcoming warmth. "I know I was wrong to get Sam out of his crate, but he started fussing, and I thought maybe he had to go, so I took him out in the yard. Then he went straight to the gate and wouldn't budge. He knew what he wanted to do, what I wanted to do, too. Go find you and be sure you were okay."

Craig shook his head. "Damn that crazy dog. I think he reads my mind sometimes. When he was shot, the city went ahead and got a second dog and asked for a volunteer to be his handler. Joe Lopez took it. He and Pancho are doing great, but they just haven't had near enough time to build a partnership yet. Pancho wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. I was real upset then, wishing Sam was there.

"Joe started to go into the room where the guy was, but he got worried, afraid the scumbag would kill the kid, even with the distraction of the dog. The perp said he would anyway. I think it's his girlfriend's, not his, so he might have. It seems like they'd concocted this wild plan to try and get drugs. She began to squeal as soon as he went down, probably looking for clemency or a plea bargain for cooperating."

"I kind of figured you might be in trouble, or at least

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wishing Sam was there, and he picked it up. I know I didn't have to let him do what he was asking, but it was what I felt like, too. You can punish me however you see fit. It's over and done, but I'd probably do it again if I had the chance."

Craig frowned for all of ten seconds. Then a smile spread like sunshine over his face. "If you really feel a need for it, I can whale your butt, but I'd just as soon not. I can think of better things to do. We have about eight hours until we both have to get ready for work, so let's make the most of them."

For the second time in less than twelve hours, Roy followed Craig down the hall to his bedroom. He wasn't sure what he expected, but it wasn't what happened, for sure.

Craig took one of his hands and led him to the bed. With a gentle push, the taller man sat him down. "I could tell from our first encounter you seem to have a thing about getting it rough, and that's okay. I can do that—and I will sometimes—but right now I want to show you another way."

He reached for the hem of Roy's T-shirt and peeled it up his torso and over his head. "I'm going to unwrap you like a present," he said. "Because that's how I think of you, a gift I never expected to get, a friend, a brother and a lover all in one." He stopped to press a firm but gentle kiss on Roy's lips, half-open in amazement. Then he went on, for a moment gazing past Roy with a thousand-yard stare.

He's got bad memories, too. I knew it. Somehow, I just knew it.

"I was raised an only child by a father cast in the German officer paradigm, a martinet to end them all. Whatever I did

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was never good enough. I finally gave up trying. Telling him I was gay was my ultimate revenge. I thought he'd have a stroke. Of course he disowned me. It's been a lonely road since then. Really it always was. I've had lovers, but they've never stayed around, never really touched me. Somehow, you're different."

Craig set warm hands on Roy's shoulders, slid his palms down Roy's arms to the wrists and clasped his fingers around them for a moment. Roy sat transfixed, unable to move, to do anything but absorb the invading heat of Craig's hands and the strange cherishing tenderness of his touch. Nothing had ever felt quite like that before. Maybe the nearest was that hug he'd shared with Frank and Kerry the day they busted Gary Steadman, the three of them working together. It felt like coming home—even though he'd never had a real home to return to until this moment.

Dropping to his knees in front of Roy, Craig shifted his clasp back to Roy's shoulders and then trailed both hands down his body, shaping every muscle as if to memorize each hollow and hump, every small scar and strand of fine golden hair. Roy shivered. The touch tickled because it was so light, so gentle, and yet it spread fire through every nerve, a sparkle of dancing heat flickering over his skin.

At last Craig reached the top of Roy's jeans. He unfastened the belt buckle, freed the top button on the waistband, then he hesitated for a long instant. Roy's cock swelled, bucking against the restraint of denim and zipper, already anticipating the touch of those strong but careful fingers. With exquisite

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slowness, Craig lowered the zipper. It sounded very loud in the morning silence.

Roy leaned back, resting on his elbows on the bed, widening his knees to allow Craig to lean closer. He arched up to let the jeans slip out from under his butt and down his legs. The fly of his shorts gaped as his cock thrust out through it. The warmth of Craig's breath whispered across the aroused flesh as he bent down to nuzzle around the base of Roy's erection.

"I love the smell of you, the feel and soon the taste. I want it all."

"Yes. Please," Roy whispered. "It's yours. Everything I have is yours."

In answer, Craig captured Roy's prick in one hand and clasped his fingers around it. He slid the hand up to the head and back to the base in a long, slow stroke. Once. Twice. Three times. Roy's balls tightened and twitched, aching with urgency.

Damn, I don't want to come yet...

A few hours ago when Craig had fucked him, he'd been able to hold back, even when Craig had swatted him. This time he wasn't sure he could. It was a new kind of excitement, different without the pain or the shadow of fear. Yet it was no less potent.

As if Craig sensed Roy's wish to prolong it as long as possible, he quit jacking Roy off. After a few torturous seconds, his lips found the head of Roy's dick, his tongue swiped across the slit and then swirled around the head. Roy

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bit back a groan. Moments later, Craig widened his mouth and almost swallowed Roy whole. He started sucking in a slow but steady rhythm that accelerated until Roy was humping, thrusting desperately into the engulfing heat of Craig's mouth.

He came in an explosive burst, his body jerking with the force of it. His fingers clenched in Craig's short-cropped hair, holding him down on him, wanting the waves of sensation to go on and on, yet unable to endure much more. With a final spurt, he subsided, falling back limp and spent onto the bed.

When he recovered enough to focus his eyes again, Roy discovered Craig was looking down at him with a smile that was almost smug. "Now what, buddy?"

"Fuck me in the ass again."

"You sure? That's what you really want?"

Roy nodded. "I'm asking...no, begging. Do it, please do it." He flipped over onto his belly, his legs hanging off the bed.

Craig finished undressing in record time, grabbed the tube of lube he'd used earlier and swiped generous amount along the crack of Roy's ass with one finger, then worked it into Roy's asshole. Moments later, his powerful cock penetrated, thrusting deep into Roy's body, claiming, taking, branding with a fierce yet loving intensity.

Roy didn't come again, but the feeling was just as intense as he felt the spurt of Craig's climax and they both whooped their ecstasy together.

After he recovered, Craig squinted at the clock. "It's just nine," he said. "We can grab a nap and then get up and get

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ready for work. If you want to go on home, I'll understand, but I'd like to wake up with you here beside me, starting today and for a long time to come."

Roy hesitated. "I'd like to move in with you as soon as we can work it out, but will there be a problem for you if I do? Will the other cops think less of you or the city council give you a ration of shit?"

"I've never made a secret of being gay. I don't rub anybody's nose in it, but if we're cool in public I don't think anyone will say a word. Just don't make a habit of coming to my rescue whenever things get a little tense. That would ruin my rep."

Roy looked down, unable to meet Craig's bright blue gaze. "Yeah, in retrospect that was really a dumb-ass stunt. And I could've gotten Sam hurt. I'm sorry. I won't do that again. Maybe if I had my own stuff to take care of...I was thinking maybe I could see about updating my certification and becoming an EMT, or even getting into search and rescue. Tending bar is okay for a temporary thing, but I don't want to make a life career of it. I'm ready to look to the future now. If I went into SAR, do you think could we manage two dogs in one house?"

Craig laughed. "We'll do whatever we have to do, partner. If you got a female dog, I think Sam wouldn't mind a bit, and I've heard they often do real well in SAR. Come on, though. We need to grab some shut eye before we have to go fight crime and serve drinks. Get your ass in bed."

Feeling a sense of contentment like he'd never known,

SAVED BY SAM

Roy slid under the sheet and curled close to Craig's back.

In less than twenty-four hours, my life's taken an amazing new turn, and like the commercial says, I'm loving it.

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 Amber-Allure.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.

Can he overcome the other man's instinctive resistance to the powerful attraction that begins almost at once?

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