



Deirdre O'Dare

*Rescued
By Love*

RESCUED BY LOVE

...Dan's lips, only a few inches from Garrett's, drew him like a magnet. He bent, closing that small distance. Garrett's nose grazed Dan's and slid past. His lips brushed a stubbled cheek and found Dan's mouth, warm and amazingly welcoming. Dan's uninjured arm lifted until he could weave his fingers into the thick hair at the back of Garrett's neck. Garrett rested on one elbow, but his other hand curled around Dan's bare shoulder, kneading the solid muscle, feeling the subtle shivers of excitement beneath the hot skin, excitement mirroring his own. When he shifted closer, his cock bumped against the fiberglass covering Dan's thigh. That jolted him back to awareness.

"Whoa. What the hell are we doing? I hadn't planned to come on to you, Dan. If this isn't something you want, tell me now and it won't go any farther, tonight or ever."

"Do I look like I'm trying to fight you off? It's okay, Garrett. There's something here, a need that's pulling both of us. I'm not in any position to do this right, but whatever we can do, I'm more than willing."

A quick glance revealed the pale blue sheet was tented over Dan's erection. At least the cast didn't offer a barrier there. Garrett reached down, brushed the sheet back and clasped his hand around Dan's cock, which had already found its way up through the open fly of his shorts. For a breath or two, Garrett simply held it, savoring this new experience,

while he took in the male beauty of the organ, dark with blood and throbbing with the same urgency he felt in himself.

“I’d like to taste you, suck you.” His voice came thick and hesitant.

“*Trés bon*,” Dan murmured. “I’d like that, too...”

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Treading Dangerous Ground

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BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

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RESCUED BY LOVE
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Dedicated to the heroic SAR dogs and their handlers who so often go unsung. A few came to public attention during 9/11 and more recent natural disasters, but every day the amazing teamwork of these volunteers saves lives and averts tragedies. It would be impossible to sing their praises too highly.

Also to all of the loyal and loving “fur kids” that enrich our lives whether they do great deeds or are simply there with their unconditional love as our companions and most faithful friends.

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PROLOGUE

Durango, Colorado
Autumn, 2006

Warm, gentle pressure on his knee called Garrett Turner out of the blinding fog of despair. He looked down into Mandy's glowing amber eyes, letting her love lead him into the sunshine once more. She always knew when he was starting to sink into depression. Every time it happened, she came to lead him back to solid emotional ground.

"What would I do without you, girl?" He stroked her head with a tender hand before scratching behind her ears the way she liked. "You're my rescuer. I didn't rescue you—you've

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rescued me.” Mandy had been with him almost six months now. He could no longer imagine life without her.

He still didn’t know what had led him to the local animal shelter that day early last spring. At the time it had felt like some outside entity simply took charge, dragging him out of his house and the bleak ruins of his life. Lord knew he’d needed that. The minute he entered the long kennel building housing female dogs, Mandy spotted him. Within a few heartbeats, her attention focused his gaze on her.

A ragged, gawky, half-grown pup about six months old, she didn’t look promising. In spite of that, they both recognized she was the one he was meant to take. If there was such a thing as love at first sight, it sprang to life in a moment between the broken, lonely man and the homeless, abandoned young dog.

Garrett took her home that day, the first dog he’d owned since childhood. He named her Mandy after a favorite song from his parents’ generation. The tawny pup gave him a purpose, a reason to get out of bed every morning, and by gradual steps, a new lease on life.

He’d been just short of twenty when a drunk driver had hit his parents’ car head-on, killing them both instantly. A bitter irony, they’d been out to celebrate their twenty-second anniversary that night. Since the twins were only twelve, he gave up college plans midway through to stay home and serve as their surrogate dad. It wasn’t always easy, but he really believed the results would make his efforts worthwhile. They were slated to graduate from college with honors. Meanwhile

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his website design business kept him occupied and supplemented the insurance his parents had left for the family's support.

Then the unthinkable happened. Coming back from a ski trip with friends, an avalanche had swept the twins' SUV off the road. By the time the storm ended, allowing the dirty snow covering the vehicle to melt, it was too late. Jason, Janice and two of their friends were dead. After that, Garrett didn't live. He merely existed until Mandy came into his life.

Now nearing a year old, Mandy had grown into a beautiful dog. Most of her ancestry had to be Golden Retriever. In fact, she could easily pass for a purebred Golden. She was one fine-looking dog, but her fierce, courageous heart and loving loyalty outshone her physical beauty.

"Yep, you were my rescuer, baby girl." Mandy leaned against his leg, her eyes blissfully half-shut as he located and scratched every single itchy spot around her head that she couldn't quite reach.

Rescuer. The word echoed in his mind. Mandy was a very smart dog with strong retrieving instincts and great eagerness to please. *Rescue. Search and rescue. What if?*

With a sudden burst of energy and enthusiasm, the first real fire-in-the-belly feeling he'd had in months, Garrett crossed the room to his computer. He typed "rescue dogs" into the search box. For the next twenty-four hours he submerged himself in study of the fascinating subject.

He shed tears over the heroic dogs who'd died searching out victims in Oklahoma City and at the Twin Towers. He

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rejoiced over lost children found and survivors dug from ruins. There was no doubt in his mind. Mandy could learn to do this. Then it would be up to him to learn how to work with her. He discovered there were schools that trained both dogs and handlers. It was past time he began to live again. Together they could form a team that might save others from the kind of last cruel loss he had endured.

CHAPTER 1

Southeastern Colorado
Late afternoon
May, 2008

Daniel Boudreaux cast an anxious look at the lowering sky. Out here on the prairie, shelter was not always easy to find, but from the sky's appearance, he'd need some soon. Not that he hadn't gotten soaked before or ridden in the rain, but the look of the clouds spelled trouble. They appeared bumpy, bubbled or cobbled on the underside, dark and sullen. A distant grumble of thunder reached his ears as a gusty wind kicked up, buffeting him with dust and bits of vegetation.

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He accelerated, forcing maximum speed out of the old Indian. The vintage motorcycle had been in the Boudreaux clan a long time. Family legend said his grandfather Hebert had come home from a stint in the marines in World War II and bought the machine, far from new even then. He'd spent the better part of a year wandering around the country with it to get back on an even keel after the trauma of war. Then Pop had come home from Vietnam, dug the old bike out of the barn, tuned it up and taken off. He'd been gone longer, almost three years. Now it was Dan's turn.

He'd joined the National Guard to help pay for the specialized education he wanted and wound up going to Iraq. Why he had survived almost unscathed when a roadside bomb took out a half-dozen buddies in his platoon, he didn't know. He'd been just far enough back the blast threw him to the ground, but clear. Still, feeling bits of his friend's shattered bodies falling on and around him was a horror he would never forget. So far he had not nearly outrun it, although he'd been on the road almost six months.

Today he was somewhere in the vast nearly-empty area including the Oklahoma panhandle, north Texas and southeastern Colorado. High plains country. But exactly where in that region, he couldn't be sure. As often as possible, he kept off the freeways, taking winding country roads and old, cracked, two-lane blacktops tending to corner abruptly around farms and meander over the rolling terrain. The solitude was a welcome relief from too many people crowded into tents and barracks, while the challenge of driving strange, unpredictable

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roads kept him from dwelling too much on the haunting past.

Just as the first cold raindrops splattered on the visor of his helmet, he saw an old barn, not too far off the road. A rusty, narrow cattle guard in the roadside fence marked the trace of a lane leading to the barn. He turned down the lane, found one door of the barn hanging open, and rode right inside. As a shelter, it wasn't much, but he thought it would be better than being out in the full force of what sounded like the start of a nasty storm.

The pitch of the wind changed, becoming higher, shriller, rising to an almost continuous ululating scream. The force caused the rickety building to wobble, wood creaking as beams and rafters shifted, rubbing against each other. He dismounted and put down the kick stand on the bike. He'd just started to cross to where an empty five-gallon plastic bucket lay against the wall, thinking to use it for a seat, when something made him look up.

As he watched, too shocked to move, half the roof peeled away overhead, like the lid coming off a can. He found himself staring up into a swirling maelstrom of purple-black cloud with a gigantic finger coming down toward him like the hand of an avenging god.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion after that. The nearest wall of the barn shuddered and then started to lean inward. He made a frantic dive toward the bike and fetched up against it, his face to the dusty floor. The taste of dust and long-dry manure was about the last thing he knew.

Jesus and Mary, I'm going to die with a mouthful of old

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cow shit...

* * *

Garrett kept his attention welded to the TV screen as the latest disaster began to emerge in the news. A series of unusual weather patterns had spawned a swarm of tornados along the western edge of the plains. The phenomenon was wreaking havoc. One little community in the Oklahoma panhandle had been all but obliterated as the twisters' paths of destruction wandered the rim of the prairie, just beyond the influence of the Rockies.

He rested a hand on Mandy's head where she lay in her usual spot, right beside his easy chair. "Wake up, old girl. I think there'll be work for us in this mess. What do you say we get loaded up and head across to the prairie side? We might as well put all that training we have to work."

An hour later, they were heading out of Durango, in the well-outfitted truck Garrett had acquired and stocked once he and Mandy had completed their intensive initial training. This would be the first big disaster they'd taken part in. So far Mandy had found two lost children and the body of a missing coed from the local college, but the only disaster work she'd done had been practice exercises.

From the looks of the wide areas of devastation, there would be enough work for as many search and rescue teams as could be brought in. Garrett knew at least two other teams from his southwestern corner of the state would be headed east, too. The state SAR organization would have a command

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post set up by the time they arrived in the devastated region the next morning.

Mandy clearly knew something out of the ordinary was happening. Instead of curling up in the back seat of the king cab truck to sleep, she stayed in the passenger seat, watching the dark highway slide by as Garrett drove through the night. Finally she lay down, but he could tell she wasn't sleeping soundly, just napping a bit.

"You need to get your rest, girl. We're going to be working hard tomorrow and likely for several days after that."

She made a little sound, kind of between a whimper and a faint growl—one of her efforts to talk back to him. Maybe she didn't understand everything he said, but it was easy to believe she did.

* * *

They put in an intensive first day, searching ruined buildings in two small towns that had taken direct hits. Mandy did a great job. Garrett was ready to burst with pride. For a young dog on her first big challenge, Mandy worked like a champ. Finally, on the second morning, he was given a rural area to patrol, looking for any ruins or rubble that might possibly hide a survivor or a body. A lot of people were still not accounted for, and with the scattered farms and ranches, it would take some time to check on them all.

He almost drove right past the low tumble of gray wood and rusty corrugated metal off to the side of the road, but Mandy suddenly whined. Garrett tapped the brake and looked

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in the direction she was staring so intently.

“That looks like it’s been there half a century, Mandy. Are you sure we need to go check it out?” She whined again. “Okay, girl, I’ll take your word for it.”

He shifted into reverse and backed to where he could turn into the overgrown lane leading out to the pile of refuse. Mandy was out of the truck as soon as he stopped. She started with a careful patrol, circling the whole pile before she began to work her way toward the center.

The wreckage presented a challenging agility course. The dog balanced on tilting pieces of lumber, twisted among bent and jagged scraps of metal roofing. Up close, Garrett could see the structure had been a fair-sized building, probably a barn, but it looked as if it had been abandoned for some time. Who knew when it had fallen in on itself. Then he saw a glint of brighter metal beneath the rusted roofing panels and gray wood. About that time, Mandy reached the spot and gave several sharp barks. That was her “I found something” signal, a distinct vocalization unlike her other sounds.

It took him far longer to approach the spot than it had taken Mandy. He narrowly missed getting a nasty gash when he slipped on a shifting board and jammed his leg against the edge of a sheet of roofing. Finally he was close enough to see the shiny metal was the chrome on a motorcycle. This glimpse hinted the cycle was holding most of the weight of a central beam that had fallen, pinning a person beneath it.

Now the issue was to discover if he had a body or a living, but probably gravely injured, person to deal with. Mandy

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wiggled down beneath the jumble until she reached the man. Garrett could barely see his face. He looked like he had fallen or been knocked down face to the ground, close to the motorcycle. From the color of the bit of skin Garrett could see, the man was still alive. The gray hue of death did not mark his weather-browned cheek. Mandy sniffed and then licked the exposed patch of skin. The man stirred, moaning faintly.

He's alive! Now how do I get him out of this mess? Garrett pulled out his cell phone, checked his GPS unit and called his location in to the command post. "I've got a victim. Not sure the extent of his injuries, but he's trapped in the wreckage of an old barn. We'll need some extraction tools, probably a chain saw and some wrecking bars to get him out. I'll do what I can and try to evaluate his condition."

The command post responded. An ambulance and some construction workers with tools would be dispatched shortly. The first step done, Garrett maneuvered his way closer to the trapped man, being careful not to shift anything in a way to add to the victim's injuries.

Mandy had crawled down underneath the roofing still attached to the beam crossing the trapped man's body and rested on the motorcycle. She moved in still closer, making small whining sounds, gently nudging him now and then or licking his face. For some reason, she had really tuned in on this victim and seemed frustrated Garrett could not free him.

He didn't have to tell her stay, even though he didn't want her to risk coming back out. The wreckage was too unstable and full of hazards like jagged metal edges and nails sticking

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out of pieces of wood. Mandy meant too much to Garrett to see her injured if he could prevent it.

When the crew arrived, they proceeded in a methodical way, starting from the outer edge nearest the victim and working their way in bit by bit. It took almost an hour to get the debris removed to the point where the man was freed. He became semi-conscious a couple of times and seemed to realize he was going to be rescued, but between shock and dehydration, he wasn't able to talk coherently.

Finally the EMTs lifted him onto a stretcher and loaded him up for the trip to the hospital. They used a back board and took every care to avoid adding to his injuries. Probably his biker leathers, the heavy black jacket and chap-style pants had helped prevent severe wounds from the wind-tossed wreckage. Both garments were abraded and cut in many places.

After the ambulance took off, Garrett collected the beat-up motorcycle. With the help of a couple of the construction workers, he loaded it into the back of his truck. He wasn't sure it could be salvaged, but the classic old machine certainly deserved the effort if it could be repaired.

As he searched on through the afternoon, Garrett's thoughts occasionally wandered to the man they'd found. Mandy had done her part. She was one hell of a dog. He glanced over at his partner where she sat with her face turned to the window.

"If we have time this evening, we'll swing by the hospital in town and see how he's doing, girl. That bike has a Louisiana plate. Unless he just got the scooter, it looks like

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he's a long ways from home."

She thumped her feathery tail softly on the seat, although her attention was fixed out the window, scanning the still winter-brown hills.

* * *

As he heard the hollow sound of his footsteps in the corridor of the small hospital later that evening, Garrett remembered how much he hated the places. They were almost as bad as morgues. True, there were times when medical care was needed and a hospital was the place to get it, but that didn't make them any more comfortable.

It was well after normal visiting hours, but when he explained to the charge nurse how he'd found the victim and led the rescue, he was allowed to go down to the room where the man was. He wasn't sure what he expected, but he wanted to see for himself the stranger whose life he and Mandy had saved.

The man in the bed looked drawn and dark, his sunburned skin and mahogany hair contrasting with the white bedding. He had an IV in his left arm and a cast on the other. Another cast covered his right leg from foot to hip and wrapped around his waist as well. Right after Garrett entered the room, he opened his eyes.

He must have felt Garrett's intent scan. "I've looked better, I know, but I reckon I could also look a lot worse. I think you're my guardian angel, you and that dog. Where is it?"

Garrett chuckled. "I didn't think they'd let Mandy come in.

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If she had, she'd probably be in bed with you about now. Seems like she took quite a shine to you."

The man shook his head, a smile twisting his lips. "That'd be all right. What I recall, she's a real pretty girl. Looked damn good to me anyway. I'd begun to think dirt and rusty roofing would be the last things I saw. I guess my scooter's a total loss? I'd hate to be the one to lose that bike. It's been in my family a long time."

"Maybe not. I picked up the pieces. They're in my truck right now. I'm no expert on motorcycles, but I could see it's a classic. I figured maybe it could be fixed up to run again. Those old machines were made strong. Thing weighs half a ton."

"It saved my ass, for a fact. I'm not sure the tornado hit directly, but the wind did. The roof peeled away overhead and then stuff started falling. I dove for the ground by the bike and it sheltered me to some degree. I figured I was dead, but then after a bit, I woke up. Couldn't move much, though. When daylight came, I saw I was pinned under a big beam, prob'ly the ridge pole."

"That's right. It was one big ole beam, about a six by six or so. Took chain saws to cut the thing apart so we could get you out. By the way, my name's Garrett Turner, and I think I said my dog's named Mandy."

The man held out his left hand, the one without the cast. "Can't shake properly, bud, but I want to tell you thanks. I'm Dan Boudreaux. I hail from just outside Chalmette, Louisiana, but after Katrina, the folks moved over near Houston."

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Garrett took the offered hand in both of his. The other man's skin was rough and a bit weathered. It was a working hand, not the soft hand of one who had a desk job. Though not a big man, Dan had a wiry toughness, the physique of a man honed down to solid muscle and bone by a hard life. That toughness had no doubt contributed to his survival.

There was something special about the man, a vitality and an appealing mixture of strength and vulnerability as he lay there, down but far from out.

I'd like to get to know this guy... The sudden thought caught Garrett by surprise

"From what the charge nurse said, you're in good shape all considered, Dan. I'm glad. Until they got you free, I wasn't sure how badly you were hurt because I couldn't get close enough to really check. Even afterwards, it was iffy. Lucky thing—a couple of broken bones and severe dehydration can be fixed up pretty easily. Still, I'm glad we found you when we did."

Dan nodded. "So'm I. From what they say, I can be released in a day or two. I'm going to have to figure out what to do then. I guess maybe I could get a bus ticket home, although I don't have a lot of cash on me. I could call home, but I hate to worry them. I check in now and again, but mostly I'm just bumming around right now. Needed to put some bad shit behind me."

Garrett read more in the simple words than he figured Dan wanted to risk saying aloud. A shadow in the Cajun's deep-set eyes betrayed memories too stark and painful to share.

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Sensing that, Garrett wasn't quite sure what prompted him to offer, but the next thing he knew, he found himself saying something that surprised even him.

“Why don't you come home with me for a few days? I live over on the western slope, little town called Durango, a nice place. It's still kind of country and old-fashioned. I've got a bigger house than a man alone really needs. Me and Mandy would be glad for some company for a while. Maybe we can get that bike of yours back on its wheels by the time your casts come off and you can be on your way again.”

Dan looked at him keenly for a moment and then away. He hesitated, as if not sure about accepting a stranger's hospitality. “If you're sure it won't put you out,” he said finally. “I'd be much obliged. Trying to get on and off a bus with this junk on me would be a pain in the ass. I'd have to leave the old Indian with you anyway, I reckon. Won't fit in a ditty bag, even in pieces.” He grinned wryly. “Damn, life sure can take some weird turns, can't it?”

Garrett nodded, briefly drifting back to his own dark memories. “It can at that. You take care, Dan, and we'll see you in a day or two when we get ready to head home. Right now I think I owe Mandy a steak. Then we could both use a good night's sleep.”

Dan smiled, a genuine smile this time, one going clear to his eyes. “You buy your girl a full steak dinner for me, Garrett. The best is none too good for a dog like that. She looked like an angel to me when she kissed my face in there under the wreckage.”

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Garrett nodded. “She’s one special dog, for a fact. Mandy saved me when life was awfully dark. I guess that’s why I finally realized what we needed to do with ourselves. We went through the SAR school together last year. This is the first time we’ve worked a major disaster, but she’d done a championship job. You’ll get to meet her soon.”

* * *

Two mornings later, Garrett pulled up at the hospital. After a few minutes, a nurse’s aide wheeled Dan out to the truck. It wasn’t easy, but they got him settled in the cab, pushing the passenger seat back as far as it would go to accommodate his bulky casts. From her spot in the back, Mandy watched with concern, offering encouragement with an occasional squeak and whine.

Before he pulled out to start the drive home, Garrett let Mandy come up between the bucket seats. “Mandy girl, this is Dan. He’s ours for a while. Kinda like in China where if you save somebody you’re responsible for them for the rest of their lives. We got ourselves a pet Cajun. Dan, this is Mandy.”

Mandy ducked her head, nuzzling against Dan’s shoulder. She then swiped a quick lick across the side of his face before she backed away.

Garrett laughed. “You damn flirt, Mandy. Is that infamous Cajun charm getting to you?”

Dan laughed, too. Then he shook his head. “Some girl you got there. I think I’m envious.”

“Mandy picks her own friends. She picked me to get her

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out of the shelter when she was just a pup. I think she laid some serious *juju* on me that day. I guess I'm daddy or her main man, but I don't fool myself I'm her one and only. I don't own her. If anything, she owns me."

Any awkwardness that might have sprung up with two strangers in a truck was banished by the manipulations of one golden dog. She sat back in her place with a doggie smile and listened while the two men began to talk easily, as if they'd been friends for years.

Garrett glanced across at his passenger. Again he was struck by some undefined qualities about the Cajun that intrigued him. He sensed the other man kept locked within himself an inner pain as keen and brutal as Garrett's own. Dan had obviously known some terrible loss or tragedy; the shadow of it lingered behind his dark eyes. He wasn't going to roll over and play dead, or even feel sorry for himself, but secret agony lurked in him.

He's a damn good looking guy, too. Bet the ladies won't leave him alone—and maybe even some of the men.

A sudden shocking notion crossed his mind then, a "what if" he had never really considered before. He found most women hard to relate to. The good ones were all taken, it seemed, married while he was struggling to raise the twins. And the rest...well, the less he had to do with them, the better. Could another man be the partner and companion he longed for? He knew he needed more than the world's best dog, but there were no shelters for people up for adoption or folks seeking friends. How did you find the right one?

CHAPTER 2

What with the stops they had to make before they got home, Garrett got pretty good at helping Dan in and out of the pickup. The folding wheel chair he'd rented did yeoman service and made it possible, although not easy. It was almost dark when they pulled up in the drive of the gracious old Victorian house in Durango.

Garrett still felt a pang to drive up and know there was no one to come out to greet him. Besides him and Mandy, only memories lived there now. But at least this time he didn't make the return alone. Dan Boudreaux might not stay for more than a few weeks, but for a while, Garrett would not be alone. Even Mandy, dear as she was, could not completely make up

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for the loss of human companionship. Raising the two kids had left him little time to pursue a social life and, since their death, he really hadn't wanted to. Maybe he'd been foolish because he was starting to feel a real lack in his life.

"Nice place," Dan commented, looking up at the imposing bulk of the old house. "You must rattle around in there like a baseball in a boxcar."

Garrett nodded, giving the other man a crooked grin. "Pretty near. When Mom, Dad, the twins and I were all there, we seemed to trip over each other, but then it got way too empty..."

"I wasn't sure when you said you had plenty of room, but I see now you weren't bullshitting me."

Mandy followed Garrett, bounding out of the truck to go off sniffing around the yard, checking to be sure everything had remained secure in her absence. Garrett got the wheel chair, helped Dan slide from the truck cab into it, then rolled up to the back porch. It was just one step above the patio and the kitchen door was level with the porch, making it the easiest way to get in.

He stooped to retrieve the key from under the door mat and unlocked the back door, reached inside to flip on a light, and took Dan inside. In spite of the memories it held, Garrett still loved the big, old, country-style kitchen. Apparently Dan did, too. He looked around the homey, spacious room and whistled.

"Oh, man, I love this kitchen! It's a cook's dream. That was what I was planning to do when I got out of the Guard—

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take my pay and enroll in chef school. Maybe I still will someday. Always loved to cook, but I wanted to be able to do more than make the Cajun stuff I learned from my folks. Having a place like this to work in would be great.”

“Well, I’m not sure how much cooking you can do with those casts on, but you’re free to try anything you can. I make do, but I’m no gourmet cook. I can grill a mean steak, make a good pot of beans and a pretty fine beef stew, a few Mexican dishes—the simple ones—but that’s about my limit. I eat out or get carry out a lot, even those damn frozen meals, just ‘cause it’s too much trouble to cook for one.”

Dan didn’t reply, but Garrett thought he was mulling things over. Since they’d stopped and eaten at Alamosa, they really didn’t need to have supper.

Garrett only had to think a minute to decide where he’d settle Dan. He chose the big bedroom with the attached bath downstairs, the one his parents had used. He’d always felt kind of foolish for not taking it over, but it hadn’t seemed right, so he used another room that could be a den or an office—which it was, but served as his bedroom as well. If he wanted to stay up late or get up in the middle of the night and work on his computer, it was right there.

Now he wheeled Dan into the rarely used bedroom. “I’m gonna settle you in here for the time being. Room’s got its own bath, so after you get a little steadier on your feet, you can probably make it by yourself. For now, though, I figure it’d be best if I help you.”

Dan grimaced but nodded. “Yeah, I guess it would be

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really dumb to fall on my ass and break something else, wouldn't it? I'm not used to having anybody hold my hand, but life hasn't left me much choice right now."

"I bunk right across the hall, so if you need anything you can holler."

Garrett pulled the dust cover off the bed and folded the sheet and light blanket down. He helped Dan get out of the baggy sweats he'd been able to don over the casts and lent a shoulder to help the smaller man into bed.

This was the first time he'd seen the Cajun almost undressed. Man, he had a physique—not the body-builder kind of muscle, but a tight, sculpted body, none the less. Masculine and yet almost beautiful. *I wish I could draw or paint. This guy deserves a portrait of some kind.* Dan's chest and arms hinted at strength beyond the norm and with only a pair of loose boxers for concealment, he looked to be pretty well endowed as well. The heat of Dan's body felt like a furnace where Garrett touched him, almost burning.

All at once, Garrett had to concentrate on keeping things under control. He'd be embarrassed sick to get a full-fledged hard-on when he was supposed to be serving as a male nurse here. His worn jeans were snug enough it would be hard to hide, too.

But the more he fought it, the more his reaction struggled for expression. *Oh shit. Well, maybe he's tired enough not to notice. I'll just finish helping him into bed as quickly as I can and hurry out with an excuse about needing to feed Mandy.*

Dan settled back on the pillows with a gusty sigh. He

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looked everywhere but directly at Garrett, the only hint he might have noticed anything. Maybe he was just a bit embarrassed himself, unused to the intimacy required by his temporary helplessness. *He doesn't seem to be turned on, but then he's still pretty doped up and probably hurting in spite of the meds.*

"I'll bring you a bike bottle for water and if you need anything else, just yell. I'll be up a while catching up on my email and stuff, so don't worry about bothering me."

Dan stretched out with a sigh close to a groan. "Man, it feels good to lie down. I guess that smash-up took more out of me than I figured. Would you mind leaving a light on? Just a small lamp would be enough. In a strange place, I kinda like to be able to look around and get oriented..."

"No problem." Garrett switched on an old-fashioned lamp on the dresser before he headed to the door. "Good night, bud. If you need anything at all, don't be shy about asking. I don't read minds for shit."

"Garrett?" Dan's soft word stopped him short. "I just wanted to say thanks. I've got no way to repay you, but I sure appreciate what you're doing for me. I was between the devil and the deep there, trying to figure what would be best. You just solved it for me, like it was nothing."

"It's good for me, too, Dan. I've been alone in this big old house way too much the past two years. A fellow can go a little crazy that way. Mandy saved me, but sometimes I need more company than just the world's best dog."

Hearing her name, Mandy padded up to the door. She

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hesitated, as if she wasn't sure she should come in. Garrett looked at her a moment. "Come on, girl. You can tell our pet Cajun goodnight."

Dan put out his good hand, which Mandy sniffed and then licked once. She pressed closer to the bed and reached as far as she could, her nose twitching. Dan murmured something to her in French. Garrett couldn't translate the phrase, but he figured it was some kind of sweet talk. Mandy's tail wagged twice, then she turned and followed him out the door.

* * *

For the next two hours Garrett submerged himself in the words and pictures flashing across the wide screen of his monitor. He answered some email and did a couple of minor website updates for clients. Before sitting down, he'd taken the blocking panel out of Mandy's dog door so she could come and go as she wished. She'd made a foray or two outside, but always came back quickly to sprawl in her usual place under his desk.

He felt heavily tired, but still too wired from the past few days' efforts to relax. They'd saved a number of trapped people and seen a lot of mangled bodies, past any hope of rescue except for burial. Some of those would haunt him for a while, bringing back memories he didn't need, but their successes outweighed the losses. For that, he was deeply thankful. It felt good to make a difference. He and Mandy had, working together as a team.

Saving Dan was the highlight of the whole effort. There

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was something very appealing about the young Cajun. Garrett had a sudden intuition they could become real friends, if not even more. He sensed Dan had his own ghosts and baggage, but that just meant there were two of them.

Maybe in time we can share enough to understand and sympathize with each other. The old saying misery loves company might work.

In the long haul, he knew what he really sought was to find a new outlet for his need to care about someone, help and protect and yet be cared for in return.

He'd shed his shirt and jeans, preparing to go to bed, when muffled sounds across the hall caught his attention. Something wasn't right. He hurried over to see what the matter was. Dan tossed and flailed around, in danger of hurting himself with the heavy cast on his arm. He mumbled and moaned, clearly caught in the throes of a bad dream.

Garrett leaned down over the bed and caught the smaller man firmly by the shoulders, leaning his weight into holding him still. "Hey, man, it's okay. You're all right. Nobody's going to hurt you any more."

Dan heaved and struggled, crying out a desperate plea. "*Non, non, s'il vous plais, non!* Oh, my God, no!"

Whatever scene he was embroiled in must be horrific indeed. For a tense minute, Garrett wasn't sure he could restrain the other man's frantic movements, but finally Dan relaxed slightly. The next moment his eyes opened. For an instant he stared around wildly. Then awareness returned as he seemed to remember where he was.

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He shook his head, tears welling in his dark eyes. “Sorry, Garrett. I haven’t done that in a while. I was back in Iraq, the day my outfit walked into a roadside cluster bomb.” He shut his eyes a moment, his face drawn into a grimace of agony. “I wish to God I’d quit seeing that over and over.”

Garrett didn’t know what to say. He could feel the other man’s anguish, knew it as a relative to, yet not the same as, his own pain. How could he help? He did the only thing he could, gathered Dan into his arms and simply held him. What could he offer but the comfort of another warm body, a gentle touch? It was much the same as he’d done for Jason and Janice after their parents died, when one or the other would wake from a nightmare of loss and grief, urgently in need of consolation.

He murmured vague words of comfort, much as he might speak to Mandy when she got nervous during a thunderstorm. “It’s okay. Let it out, let it go. Nothing you can do now...nothing I can do. We have to go on living because Someone Up There decided it wasn’t our time to go. It’s not your fault, and nothing you could have done would have changed it.”

Garrett wasn’t sure that was true, but he couldn’t visualize the fierce and vital man he held doing anything cowardly or wrong that would result in others being hurt or killed in his stead. He sensed Dan was not the type to save his own ass at the expense of anyone else. Somehow Garrett would bet his last dollar on it.

After a while, Dan’s breathing slowed and evened. Garrett

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started to slip free and lower him back onto the pillows. At that moment, Dan's eyes opened again.

"I wasn't asleep, just trying to do like you said—let go of it, back off and get free. I think I'm all right now. Sorry about that, but thanks. It helped...you helped."

For a long moment they looked at each other, black eyes and hazel, probing the depths of each other's souls. All at once Garrett realized he was only wearing his Jockeys and Dan had on only a pair of baggy boxers and his casts. Although the casts made it an awkward embrace, an embrace it was, warm skin to warm skin, two muscled masculine bodies intimately close. This was not a kid he held, not a brother or sister, but another adult male. Shock and a surprising sizzle of desire zinged along his nerves.

Dan's lips, only a few inches from his, drew him like a magnet. He bent, closing that small distance. Garrett's nose grazed Dan's and slid past. His lips brushed a stubbled cheek and found Dan's mouth, warm and amazingly welcoming. Dan's uninjured arm lifted until he could weave his fingers into the thick hair at the back of Garrett's neck. Garrett rested on one elbow, but his other hand curled around Dan's bare shoulder, kneading the solid muscle, feeling the subtle shivers of excitement beneath the hot skin, excitement mirroring his own. When he shifted closer, his cock bumped against the fiberglass covering Dan's thigh. That jolted him back to awareness.

"Whoa. What the hell are we doing? I hadn't planned to come on to you, Dan. If this isn't something you want, tell me

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now and it won't go any farther, tonight or ever."

"Do I look like I'm trying to fight you off? It's okay, Garrett. There's something here, a need that's pulling both of us. I'm not in any position to do this right, but whatever we can do, I'm more than willing."

A quick glance revealed the pale blue sheet was tented over Dan's erection. At least the cast didn't offer a barrier there. Garrett reached down, brushed the sheet back and clasped his hand around Dan's cock, which had already found its way up through the open fly of his shorts. For a breath or two, Garrett simply held it, savoring this new experience, while he took in the male beauty of the organ, dark with blood and throbbing with the same urgency he felt in himself.

"I'd like to taste you, suck you." His voice came thick and hesitant.

"*Trés bon*," Dan murmured. "I'd like that, too."

Garrett shifted to kneel by Dan's side. He reached for the waist of the Cajun's boxers and pushed the fabric aside. The denim blue half body cast completely covered Dan's right leg from foot to waist, but the part around his hips left the front and back open. *Damn thing has to be uncomfortable*. Yet at the moment Garrett was pretty sure the other man was not thinking about discomfort at all, at least not that discomfort. There was only one thing they both desired right now. The most intimate touch they could manage.

Stooping, Garrett brushed his lips across the tip of Dan's cock. The hot skin felt like velvet to his touch, velvet drawn tight over a quivering shaft of living steel.

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Dan sucked in a sharp breath. “*Sacre bleu*. Don’t stop, man!”

Garrett chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’m not about to.” This time he swiped the tip of his tongue across the moist slit, taking up the glittering drop of moisture poised there. He tasted the salt in that bead of pre-cum, and a unique flavor that had to be just Dan.

Then slowly he eased his mouth down over the head, savoring the taste, the texture and the pulsing vitality. He ran his tongue around the groove beneath the head, feeling the pebbled surface as the tiny nerve buds leaped to his touch.

He steadied the base with his hand as he slid down the length, taking as much of it in his mouth as he could. Then he drew back, sucking and tugging with his lips. Dan bucked his hips as much as he could within the restraining weight of his cast. Garrett glanced up to see the other man’s eyes were closed and his face drawn taut in a grimace of arousal.

Bet he’s not thinking about nightmares or the horror of Iraq now. All he can do is feel, enjoy. I’m glad I can give him that much relief.

With that thought, Garrett let himself stop thinking, too, and gave over to the incredibly potent thrill of pleasing another, giving the maximum pleasure he could. He felt every tiny throb and shudder, heard every gasp and groan, and delighted in it all. In an accelerating rhythm, he bobbed his head to simulate the thrusts and withdrawal of a good fuck. That was what Dan needed, and this was the next best thing. He sensed when Dan neared the moment of climax and

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prepared himself for the sudden flood of semen. It came in a burst as Dan groaned and mumbled something in French in a guttural exclamation.

Garrett didn't withdraw until Dan's cock began to subside and the fierce pulsing faded to a slight tremor. As he sat back on his heels and shifted to get his legs untangled, Dan's eyes opened, sleepy now and weighted with the relaxation following his climax and ejaculation.

"Man, what you just did was amazing. I feel completely drained, but in a good way, totally unwound. But how about you?"

Garrett grinned. "It'll keep. Right now what you need is some sleep. I don't think you'll have any more nightmares tonight." He cuffed Dan's shoulder in a fond manner, just rough enough to be a man's caress and not too sentimental.

Dan gave him a drowsy smile. "Okay. I'm not sure I could stay awake long enough to do you any good right now anyway, but I owe you one."

"I won't let you forget. You're my prisoner here for a while, you know."

Dan chuckled sleepily. "Could be in a worse jail, I reckon. Not too many jailors provide a blow job like that."

Garrett sensed the other man had fallen asleep even before he left the room. Mandy had laid just outside the door in the hall the whole time. She got up and followed him into his room, coming to stand between his knees as he sat for a moment on the edge of his bed. She looked up with wise golden eyes, so sweetly serious he had to wonder what she

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was thinking. “Are you okay with this, girl? Can you share me with our refugee? He’s partly yours, too, you know, and I believe we both find him pretty special.”

She had no answer, at least none he could read from her, but she snuggled her head against him for a moment before she settled onto the rug at the bedside with a sigh that said plainly she was glad to be home.

CHAPTER 3

Garrett found sleep illusive, even though he was tired. At last he got up and went into the shower, thinking maybe that would relax him enough to go to sleep. A cold shower might be what he needed because his cock was already half hard, just remembering the expression on Dan's face as he came and the lilt of his Cajun accented French, first the tender words he'd spoken to Mandy and then his muttered exclamations of ecstasy.

After a moment's thought, he rejected the idea of cold, knowing it would wake him up even more. Finally, standing in the warm spray, he let his thoughts go where they would. He found himself stroking his aching erection, focusing on images

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of Dan as he did so. He'd never been affected as intensely and quickly as he had by his guest. The sudden burst of lust had taken him by surprise. He hadn't gone into Dan's room with anything like that in mind. His only thought at the moment had been to calm the other man's nightmares and bring him a measure of peace and comfort. But something had happened as he held Dan, something powerful and beyond resistance.

So far it seemed like Dan was agreeable, a fact in itself surprising. The Cajun had been a soldier after all, and Garrett was pretty sure the military still did not tolerate open homosexuality. Or had Dan's travels been driven by an effort to come to terms with things he'd discovered about himself and been troubled by? There was so much they hadn't yet said, so much he didn't know.

Garrett wanted to learn all there was to know about Dan Boudreaux. Such a compelling and intense interest in another person was new to him also. Not since the twins' death had he really cared about anyone, and as long as he'd been responsible for them, he hadn't had the time or energy to go deeply into any relationship.

Closing his eyes, he stroked harder and faster, feeling his cock throb, his balls tighten and an illusive release getting closer, closer... His climax came suddenly, a burst of cum erupting into his hand. When the spasms ceased, he rinsed off and stepped out of the shower, suspecting he could sleep now. After toweling off, he padded back to his room and threw himself down on the bed. Mandy grumbled softly, a half-asleep complaint at being disturbed in the middle of the night.

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Garrett chuckled.

“Mandy, girl, you’re going to have to get used to things being different. I don’t know how it’ll all work out, but we may become a household of three for a while instead of just you and me. I think I could get used to that. How about you?”

She thumped her tail a couple of times, which he interpreted to mean she was good with it whatever way things went. Her heart was certainly big enough to encompass as much love as was needed. From the looks of things, Dan needed some love, maybe a whole lot of it.

* * *

Dan awoke, started to stretch, but had to stop. The weight and restriction of his casts held him almost immobile. *Shit, I’ve gotta live with this cement suit for days yet.*

In spite of that frustration, an inexplicable feeling of well-being pervaded his senses. The drugging despair that had dogged him since the ghastly night in Iraq seemed to have finally eased its hold.

He still remembered, but the strangling pain was less, the guilt and horror veiled and dimmed to a bearable level. What...why...when? His body might be held prisoner, but his mind knew no such restrictions. His thoughts and recollections ranged free. Then he remembered the surprising end to his nightmare last night. Garrett—his rescuer in many more ways than one, and now an entirely new form of sustenance. Garrett’s hands and mouth and the incredible sensations they had aroused. *Wow, that was some blow job.*

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The grin that swept over his face at the memory felt strange but good. He hadn't had much to smile about for many months.

The soft pad of four feet and the slight click of claws on the hardwood floor interrupted his reverie. A golden furred head poked through the cracked door, nudged the portal wider and the dog entered. She approached the bed slowly, her tail a gentle flag, waving as if in the lightest breeze. The question was clear in her amber eyes. *Am I welcome? Can I come get a scratch? I'd like to be friends if you'll let me.*

Reaching with his good arm, Dan beckoned the dog closer. Her nose, cool and damp, nudged into his palm in a gentle caress. Her tongue flicked out and swiped once to warm the cool spot. Then she lifted her head and rested her chin on the edge of the bed. He made an awkward job of it but managed to scratch her ears.

“Well, Mandy girl, are you ready to make me at home here? You're quite a gal. If I was a lady, too, you might be jealous, but I think we can get along. I won't ever try to take your place with your boss, you know. I recognize true love when I see it.”

Mandy gave him a doggie grin and after a final quick lick, she turned and trotted out the door. A moment later, Garrett showed up, carrying a laden tray.

“I'm not the world's greatest cook,” he said, with a rueful shake of his head. “I can usually manage not to burn toast too bad and sometimes fry an egg without busting it, but that's about the extent of my culinary art at breakfast time. You

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definitely don't want to try my oatmeal.”

Dan grinned at him. Garrett was usually so sure and confident that this show of uncertainty made him more human. “When I get back on my feet, I'll do you up my best Cajun meal. Meanwhile, if you have coffee, chicory or not, I'll be okay.”

“Coffee I do. And a pretty damn good job if I do say so. My dad was a coffee connoisseur and taught me how to fix it right when we camped out years ago. I can brew it over a campfire, perk it on the range, or even use one of those confounded machines, so long as it doesn't sit more than twenty or thirty minutes. Check this out.”

He stooped to set the tray across Dan's lap and then helped him scoot up and settle his back against a pile of pillows. He hadn't lied. The toast was not burned, just tawny and crisp. The eggs look well beyond edible and the sausage patties, neatly cut into quarters, emitted a rich aroma that had Dan's mouth watering. He tried the coffee first, taking a cautious sip to test the temperature. It was just right, hot but not scalding.

Garrett waited, looking at him expectantly. “Is it okay?”

“Better than okay...pretty damn fine. I could learn to like this life of ease.”

Garrett smiled, something wistful yet exultant in his expression. “I hope you do.”

* * *

From that point they fell into a kind of routine, gradually growing more comfortable and easy with each other. Mandy

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helped, always injecting just the right twist of humor when things started to get tense. Still, Dan fretted at his forced immobility and his incapacity to return the sexual favors Garrett bestowed frequently enough to keep his frustration level well under control.

Garrett shrugged it off, until Dan began to wonder if the other man was really attracted to him or not. That first time it had seemed so, but he began to wonder. It wasn't the sort of thing he could just come out and ask, however much he might worry, speculate and debate with himself. Mandy was no help at all with this issue. For all the love and wisdom shining from her amber eyes, such human problems were beyond her ken.

The nightmares had not stopped entirely, but Dan was able to get some control on them. He didn't wake up in a screaming, sweating panic now and could usually pull himself out of the dream-horror before he relived the whole scene. He knew he'd never completely forget the tragedy, but this time of forced quiet, peace and rest was working some healing magic on both his body and his bruised soul.

Days became a week, two and then three. They made two visits to the local orthopedic expert. Dr. Sidartha was the only such specialist in the southwestern corner of Colorado. He took x-rays and verified the bones were healing well, even the badly shattered thigh.

"Just a couple more weeks and we'll get those casts off," he said. "You'll have to have a brace on that leg for another month or so because the muscles and ligaments are going to heal slower than the bone, but at least you can be mobile

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again. Come back in two weeks.”

Dan could have sworn it was the longest two weeks of his life, but the hours and days passed and finally the wait was over. He swore it was the last time he'd allow Garrett to help him into the wheel chair, wheel him out to the truck, and then do most of the work of getting him into the passenger seat. Being as helpless as an infant did nothing positive for his ego.

Once out of the concrete strait-jacket as he'd dubbed the two casts, Dan didn't walk out of the doctor's office after all. They insisted on wheeling him back out. But he did stand on his good leg and use a crutch to maneuver himself from the wheel chair into the car almost on his own. Even though his freed arm felt weak and rubbery as hospital Jell-O, he stubbornly accomplished that much by himself. Back at Garrett's house, Dan also hobbled his way into the kitchen. With the brace laced firmly in place, his leg held his weight with just a bit of wobble.

A few days of exercise'll fix that. At least it damn well better. I'll be double-damned if I'll stay an invalid the rest of my time here. I've got things to do.

* * *

Once Dan was more or less on his feet, Garrett tried to give him some space. He spent a lot of time out in the side of the garage that had been his dad's work shop. His first task was to spread out all the parts of the shattered motorcycle and see which ones looked like they might be salvageable. Then late at night he went online and searched eBay for sources of

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parts to replace those that were not. He was able to get quite a few of them, just going ahead and paying the buy now price to get them on their way.

They still took meals together, but Dan no longer had his off a tray in the bedroom. They usually ate with little conversation, both of them nursing unasked questions they really didn't want to have answered. Garrett knew Dan pattered around, used Garrett's exercise equipment in the rec room downstairs and read some. He was pretty sure the Cajun was not quite ready or able to tackle a long trip on his own, and for sure the motorcycle was not ready to roll, but in a week or two he'd have a good part of it put back together.

The third day after he got the casts off, Dan asked if Garrett would drive him to the nearest supermarket. "I'd like to do a little cooking in that fine kitchen of yours before I head out of here. If that's okay with you..."

"Man, you're more than welcome. You know the limits of my chef skills. We've had chuck wagon stew or chili for more suppers than I care to count the last few weeks. I'm sick to death of it and you prob'ly are as well, but just too polite to say so. I was hoping you'd complain so I could tell you to cook! And now you're volunteering? That's an offer I won't refuse. Even Mandy is tired of my slop."

They made a trip to the biggest store in Durango. Dan turned out to be a choosy and careful shopper, but they left with the truck bed half full of bags—some of it things Garrett could not even positively identify. Dan grumbled about the lack of critical ingredients such as crawfish, but allowed he

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could substitute and make do for the dishes he planned. “At least ya got Tabasco,” he said cheerfully. “Like paint for a carpenter, that pepper sauce can cover up a lot of mistakes.”

It was all Garrett could do to stay out of the way. Curiosity nagged at him and the delicious scents drifting out of the kitchen through the open windows provided a potent lure, but he managed to stay busy. He unpacked several cartons of the parts he’d ordered and began the painstaking assembly of the vintage scooter. It had been a beauty, and he’d do his level best to see it regained a functional level. He wasn’t too familiar with motorcycles and most of the guys he knew who had one preferred the Harleys, but he remembered an uncle raving about the Indians, classic machines from the early twentieth century. It wasn’t that much different than working on cars as he’d done with his dad or small machines like snowmobiles, so he felt his way along and figured he’d get the job done sooner or later.

Mandy paced back and forth, going frequently to peer through the back door, sometimes sliding in through the doggie door only to slip back out soon, returning to keep an eye on Garrett. It was clear her loyalties were becoming divided. She was and always would be Garrett’s dog first and foremost. The intense training they’d shared had strengthened the special bond between them even more, but her stomach responded to the tempting odors of cooking and something about Dan Boudreaux definitely drew her. It seemed to go deeper than just the fact he’d been one of her targets, one she’d played a big part in saving.

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Garrett set down the fender he'd been sanding after he smoothed out a dent. He stooped to scratch her ears. "It's okay, Mandy girl. I'm feeling kind of antsy, too. It's not going to be easy when our star boarder decides to head on down the road. I expect he will, and there's likely not much we can do about it, but yeah, we're going to miss him, both of us... But we can't nail his foot to the floor. "

* * *

"Come and get it."

Garrett almost knocked everything off the workbench when Dan's cheerful yell sounded through the back door. Mandy had been dozing to one side. She leaped to her feet and her flying tail barely missed sending the freshly painted front fender onto the dusty floor.

She beat Garrett to the kitchen door.

He took a quick trip to the sink in the utility room to wash up and then followed his nose into the kitchen. Two places were set at the small table, as prettily set as he could ever remember his mother doing for special meals. Dan had found the good china, the stemmed glasses and the matching set of tableware. Garrett skidded to a halt.

"Holy mackerel! Look at this. What's the occasion? Is it somebody's birthday or something?"

Dan actually blushed, a ruddy stain coloring his tanned face. "Naw, nothing like that. Did I do wrong to get out the good dishes and stuff? I just saw it and everything looked so nice. I wanted this to be a special meal, my way to start saying

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thanks for all you've done for me. I really can cook. I told you, that's what I was planning to do for a career."

"Well, the smells say you did a bang-up job. What are we having?"

"The names of the dishes prob'ly won't mean a lot to you. They're mostly Cajun French, and translated they just don't sound the same. So just eat and enjoy. Oh, wait, I hope you aren't allergic to shellfish. Damn, I never thought of that. A lot of people are."

Although Garrett was briefly tempted to say he was, he couldn't dampen Dan's obvious enthusiasm and delight. "Nope, far as I know, I can eat anything. Let's have it."

The first course was a spicy, thick soup. Garrett recognized the crunch of celery and the flavors of garlic and peppers. There were bits of sausage and some tiny shrimp in the mixture also. It was followed by a dish of shrimp and shellfish in a rich, highly flavored sauce, which Dan called what sounded like ay-tu-fay with the last syllable accented. The Cajun served it over a bed of fluffy rice and it came with a side of "wilted greens," somewhat like stir-fry vegetables, and warm French bread.

Garrett dug in with a will, smacking his lips. "Oh, my gawd, my taste buds think they died and went straight to heaven. If you want a job, I'll hire you in a minute to cook for me!" He could barely remember his manners enough not to simply wolf it all down, hardly pausing to breathe.

Dan ate, too, but he spent more time watching Garrett, offering seconds, and looking anxious. There could be no

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doubt he meant this to be a very special meal.

The repast finished with dessert, rich again. It was a scrumptious concoction with caramel, chocolate, pecans and cream cheese—smooth, sensual and slid down as smooth as greased silk, leaving a lingering sweetness on the tongue that contrasted just right with a cup of strong, slightly bitter coffee. After the last bite, Garrett tried to swallow a belch and failed. “’scuse me. I heard that in Japan a good burp is considered a compliment to the chef. Please take it in that vein.”

Dan nodded. “S’okay. I think you enjoyed it, no?”

Garrett grinned. “*Trés bon*. That’s about the only French I know, but I think it fits. That was one fine meal.”

They rose together and bumped into each other reaching to clear the dishes. “I thought the cook was one job and the clean-up was another. I’ll be glad to do that part.”

Dan shook his head. “But this is my treat.” He turned back to face Garrett. “Hey, you’ve got chocolate on your chin.” He grabbed a napkin and scrubbed at the spot, licked a corner of the napkin and dabbed again.

Garrett caught his breath, frozen by the intimacy of the innocent gesture. Dan’s expression was serious, intent. But he was so close. Garrett could count the individual lashes rimming Dan’s dark chocolate eyes, see the tiny fine lines at their corners, which were just starting to develop from the sun. The shorter man’s lips were parted and the tip of his tongue slipped between them as he concentrated.

“Lose that damn cloth and come here.” The order emerged in a sound so close to a growl that Mandy looked up with a

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start from the frying pan Dan had put down for her to lick clean.

Dan's gaze flew upward to clash with Garrett's. "What?"

"You're driving me crazy. Quit trying to mother me and come here."

Garrett found Dan's mouth hotter and sweeter than the dishes they had just shared. He opened at once to the probe of Garrett's tongue and answered it with similar darting thrusts. His lips molded against Garrett's as if they had been created for the purpose.

Garrett was hard before ten seconds had passed. He wrapped his arms around Dan in a crushing embrace. The heat of the other man's body felt so good, so right, so essential. In a dim corner of his mind, Garrett recognized his stomach might be satisfied, but there were other appetites just as eager and needy.

"Bedroom," he managed, in between avid kisses. "I want to get naked and feel every inch of you with every inch of me."

Still embracing and kissing, they stumbled together into Dan's room, losing clothes as they went. By the time they got to the bed, their shirts were gone, trousers falling down around their knees and only shoes, socks and briefs remained in place. Dan sat back on the bed, kicked off the loose sweat pants, and started fumbling to release the cords that laced the brace on his leg.

Garrett hopped from one foot to the other, kicking off his athletic shoes and peeling the socks off his feet before he

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could get out of his jeans. By the time he was done, Dan had the brace off and tossed it to the floor beside the bed. This time there were no casts in the way...nothing but smooth, hot skin.

One he'd shed his clothes, Garrett collapsed onto the bed beside Dan and they rolled to face each other. He ran eager hands over as much of Dan's tight, compact body as he could, wishing he had at least two more to do the job. Dan zeroed in on Garrett's cock, folding one hand around it and starting to stroke slowly all the way from the base to the head. A shudder ran through Garrett's whole frame at that caress. Had he ever felt anything so wonderful?

Dan paused. "Did I do something wrong, hurt you?"

"No way. Don't quit! No, it just felt so damn good it made me shiver."

When Garrett reached for Dan's cock, the Cajun shook his head. "No, not yet. This first time is for you. I've wanted to do this from the first night, but you'd never let me. With that damn cement suit on, there wasn't much I could do about it. I was beginning to think you weren't into me after all."

Garrett's prick twitched in Dan's grasp, blood surging through it and the first drop of pre-cum beading the tip. "What do you want me to do?"

"Kneel over me, here like this." Dan urged Garrett into position, straddling his body with his cock inches away from Dan's mouth. "Yeah, right there."

If Dan's hand felt good, his mouth felt fantastic. He swirled his tongue around the head of Garrett's cock, licked

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the length twice from just behind the head to the base and then slowly took first the head, then better than half of Garrett's whole length into his mouth and began to suck. Garrett leaned down to brace his hands on the headboard, not sure he could trust his legs to support him as the surging pressure built until he could no longer contain it. He came in a powerful spurt, thrusting into Dan's mouth as everything exploded.

Shaking too hard to stay upright, he sank to one side and collapsed, unable to hold his own weight any longer. He opened his eyes after a moment to see Dan's smiling face, just inches away. His lips still glistened with moisture.

"Man, oh, man. That was fierce."

"Good. Rest a few minutes and get ready for act two."

Garrett laughed. "Did you sneak some Spanish fly or something into that stew? I shouldn't even be able to get hard so soon after a meal like that, but it hasn't slowed me down a bit."

"Cajun cooking has a reputation for being an aphrodisiac, but I never took it seriously before. I didn't put anything unusual into it, but it does seem to pack quite a wallop for us."

Quicker than he would have thought possible, Garrett's dick came to life again. They lay face to face, languidly caressing each other's bodies, kissing and talking sporadically. The next thing Garrett knew, their cocks were doing a sensual dance, rubbing together and fencing in erotic patterns.

After a few minutes of that, Dan rolled over and shifted to drop his legs off the edge of the bed. Face down, he rose on his arms and looked at Garrett with an avid eager gaze. "Come

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on and fuck me,” he said. “I’ve been dreaming about that since the first night, when you gave me that incredible BJ. I knew there was no way while I was in that damn cast, but now there’s nothing to interfere.”

Garrett turned over and got to his feet, moving to stand behind Dan. The other man’s smooth tight ass beckoned, cheeks hardened by the long hours on the cycle and yet still rounded enough to tempt.

“You sure about this? I’m pretty big and I don’t want to hurt you.”

Dan laughed. “You know the old song from the seventies...or maybe it was the sixties? Dad used to sing it for Mom when he’d had a few beers. Something about ‘make it hurt so good.’ That sounds perfect to me. Just do it, man.”

There was a jar of body lotion Dan had brought home from the hospital on the nightstand. As lube went it wasn’t the best, but Garrett figured it would do. He pumped a couple of squirts into his hand and rubbed it around the head of his cock. Then he sprayed a dollop at the top of the crack of Dan’s butt and rubbed it down around his anus. Tentatively he slipped in one finger and then two. They slid in easily, slicked by the lotion. He felt Dan deliberately relax his inner muscles in preparation. He didn’t need any other hints.

Withdrawing his hand, he put the tip of his cock at the entrance and began to ease in. Dan was tight, hot and perfect. It only took a few strokes before Garrett was on the brink of losing control, harder than he had ever been as the pressure built, lifting and tightening his balls and creating tension

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almost a pain deep in his groin.

“Oh, man,” he groaned. “Oh, my God, but that feels good.” He withdrew almost fully and slammed in deep again. That was all it took. He came in an explosive rush, so hard and so violently he thought he was going to split apart. He managed to pull out and stagger to one side before he collapsed across the bed.

“Yeah, that was *trés bon* for sure,” Dan murmured as he rolled onto his side. “Every bit as great as I imagined it would be. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me,” Garrett protested. “I sure got as good as I gave, if not better.”

They lay quietly for a little while. After a few minutes, Mandy came padding in to check on them. She nuzzled their bare feet, hanging off the bed, and gave each foot a lick before she went to the next. Dan let out a whoop, startled by the warm, wet tongue sliding up his sole from heel to toes.

Garrett chuckled. “I think she’s trying to tell us something, maybe that we ought to get up before dark. Anyway, I have something I want to show you.”

“Okay, might come back later, but I guess we can let her have her way for now. She gets fed about this time, doesn’t she?” Dan reached down to scratch behind Mandy’s ears. She leaned close and her eyes drifted half-shut.

“This dog is a bottomless appetite. She’ll eat anytime she can find something edible, but yeah, I usually dump some kibble in her dish about this time.”

They joked as they retraced their steps to the kitchen,

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picking up and putting on clothes as they went. Before they got to the back door, they were both dressed again. Dan paused there, struggling with his brace. Garrett knelt in front of him and helped him draw the lacing tight.

“You know, we’re doing this the hard way. There’s a hook and loop fastener down the inside I hadn’t noticed.”

“What the hell? Aw, shit, I know I’m not totally dumb, but how could I miss that?”

Garrett arose, opened the door and held it wide. “Your surprise is in the garage. It’s not a done deal yet, but I’ve been working on it while I gave you some time and space to get back on your feet and ready to move again. My inclination was to hover and I knew that would bug you bad.” He led the way to the garage, reached in and flipped on the lights. Then he stepped to one side to offer a good view.

Dan sucked in a quick, hard breath. “Oh, man. *Sacre bleu!* It’s my bike, isn’t it? But it never looked that good before. Last time I saw it, it was in pieces in the back of your truck, looking more like a pile of scrap than... I couldn’t bear to look after that or even think about it, thinking Pop would kill me for wrecking it. How did you accomplish this so fast?”

“I’ve been fooling with it since about two days after we got here, ordered parts on eBay and seeking advice from some buds of mine who ride. It isn’t quite ready to roll yet, but another week will have it there.”

Dan took a couple of steps closer, then stopped. “I—I don’t know how to thank you, but damn, are you that eager to see me go? I mean I couldn’t blame you. You’ve gone way out

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of your way for a stranger and everything, but I thought...”

Garrett laughed, shifted closer to Dan’s side and slung an arm around the shorter man’s shoulders. “If you’ll cook, you can stay here as long as you want. I told you I rattle around in this big, old house like a baseball in a boxcar. I just thought maybe you’d want to go on with your travels. I planned to have this ready when you were.”

Dan nodded slowly. “Okay, so long as we’re both on the same page here. I know I want to try to get into a cooking school, become a real chef, licensed or diploma-ed or whatever it is, and someday maybe have my own restaurant, but there’s no big rush on that. You’ve got your SAR stuff with Mandy and your computer business. I don’t know if or how we can fit all that together, but I’d sure like to try.”

Just then Mandy nudged between them. She slipped through and turned around to sit and look up at them, pink tongue lolling in a triumphant doggie grin. Her wise golden eyes moved from one face to the other. Garrett knew she could not speak the words, but he would have sworn she nodded and said, “Well, I think this job is done. One rescue completed in the best possible way. That’s my specialty—rescue by love.”

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 *Saved By Sam*, by Deirdre O'Dare,
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